

PSYCHOLOGY^{AND} CONSUMER CULTURE

The Struggle for a
Good Life in a
Materialistic
World

Edited by

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LETHAL CONSUMPTION: DEATH-DENYING MATERIALISM

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Modern man is drinking and drugging himself out of awareness, or he spends his time shopping, which is the same thing.

—Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*

Humans are by nature consumers. This book, although published on recycled paper, is a product of the consumption of trees; it is up to you—the reader—to decide whether the tome in its entirety, or this chapter in particular, is worth the timber or the energy used to recycle it. Yet, before we burden ourselves with too much lumbering guilt about that, we should recognize that all living organisms are consumers. Plants “consume” nutrients from the soil and photosynthesize solar energy; herbivores derive their sustenance by consuming the plants; carnivores and omnivores in turn consume the herbivores and other carnivores. Humans are thus of necessity consumers; this is natural and should be seen as such. However, from the birth of “civilization” 10,000 or so years ago, as we moved from small groups of semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers to permanent town dwellers primarily dependent on agriculture and domesticated animals for our livelihood, humans have been obsessively preoccupied with conspicuous

possession and consumption, relentlessly striving to accumulate money and lavish materials in vast excess of what is physically necessary to survive and prosper. As Ivan Boesky, the American investment banker, put it, "What good is the moon if you can't buy or sell it?" (Morris, 1986).

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the psychological underpinnings of conspicuous consumption from the perspective of terror management theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). Our basic thesis is that conspicuous consumption is a direct result of the uniquely human awareness of mortality and the pursuit of self-worth and death transcendence that this awareness engenders. For Mary Poppins, "Enough is as good as a feast," but this nominally sensible approach to life has never been embraced or practiced by the human race. For humans, enough has never been enough; and avaricious acquisitiveness has rendered human history a giant plundering shopping spree, one that predates the first suburban shopping mall by thousands of years. For example, Native American tribes of the Pacific coast from Oregon to Alaska held potlatches on special occasions to display their wealth and emphasize their superiority over their peers:

Each individual according to his means, constantly vied with all others to outdistance them in distributions of property. The boy who had just received the first gift of property selected another youth to receive a gift from him. The youth he chose could not refuse without admitting defeat at the outset, and he was compelled to cap the gift with an equal amount of property. When the time came for repayment if he had not doubled the original gift to return as interest he was shamed and demoted and his rival's prestige correspondingly enhanced. (Benedict, 1935, as quoted by Roheim, 1943, p. 12)

During the Gilded Age before World War I, the term *conspicuous consumption* was coined by Veblen (1902) to describe the lavish spending habits of money-besotted families such as the Rockefellers and Vanderbilts. We have been hyper-conspicuously consuming ever since. For example, a report in London's *The Independent* (Moreton, 1997) described three businesspeople having dinner for a whopping £13,000 (well over \$20,000 at the exchange rate at the time), including a £5,000 bottle of burgundy from which each businessperson drank one glass before giving the rest to the waiter! The Neiman-Marcus Christmas catalogue for 2001 continued in this tradition of prolific excess: Featured items included a \$6,700,000 Limited Edition Bell Helicopter for dad; a \$70,000 "Silver Belle" custom Lexus for the wife; a \$25,000 "Seussian Grinch Roadster" model car; and a \$4,000 gingerbread house (a custom-made replica of one's own domicile, of course) for the kids.

But so what? "The business of America is" after all, "business."

Shouldn't people be encouraged to spend and consume wantonly, if for no other reason than it is their inalienable right to do so in pursuit of the life, liberty, and happiness as asserted in the Declaration of Independence, the document that inspired the formation of the United States of America? We think not, for three reasons.

First, money, to borrow a phrase from the Beatles, cannot buy you love, and money apparently cannot buy happiness either. People with often enormous amounts of money are, contrary to commonsense folk wisdom, actually no happier than their less wealthy counterparts, and they are statistically more prone to depression and other forms of psychopathology (see, e.g., Frank, 1999; Kasser & Ryan, 1993; D. G. Myers, 1993; D. G. Myers & Diener, 1995; see also chaps. 2, 3, 6, & 11, this volume).

Second, obsessive superfluous consumption now permeates all levels of American society, creating a culture of mindless greedy acquisitiveness (e.g., The Prayer of Jabez, based on a passage in the Old Testament interpreted by Evangelical Christians suggesting that greed is Godly, has sold four million copies in America; A. Brown, 2001), to the economic detriment of many middle and lower class citizens. Greed and consumption rule in America, and no one even bothers to hide these proclivities. When an American company experiences an economic downturn, who absorbs the blow? Do the Board members forgo their raises, stop purchasing their new yachts, or, heaven forbid, take a pay cut and sell their luxury vehicles or seasonal homes? Or are the livelihoods of thousands of workers diminished or eliminated instead? Driving to work one day, one of us heard a business report on the car radio that went something like this: "Worker productivity rose last month, while wage inflation was reduced; this is good news because it means we're getting more out of American workers while paying them less." We wonder whether this really was good news for the majority of people listening to that broadcast. It is as if workers were an unlimited supply of a disposable resource to be exploited, rather than humans with families, lives, consumption needs, and fiscal aspirations, however modest, of their own.

This brings us to our final reason for why wanton consumption is not a good idea. Human beings' insatiable lust for money and consumption leads to a massively inequitable distribution of the world's wealth and natural assets, fostering economic and political instability, and at present, the very real danger of self-imposed extinction of the human race by fatal depletion of natural resources (see, e.g., chap. 5, this volume). According to a United Nations report issued in 1999 (as described in "Rise and Rise of the Super-rich," published in London's *The Guardian* on July 14, 1999), the world's three richest people are worth more than the combined resources of 36 countries. The richest 200 people in the world have a combined income equivalent to 41% of the world's population. According to the UN, an annual contribution of 1% of the wealth of these 200 people would be enough to give free access to primary education to every child on the planet. Americans

belched one-fifth more carbon into the atmosphere than China (with 4.5 times as many citizens) in 1996; the average American uses 115 times more paper and 227 times as much gasoline as the average citizen of India (N. Myers, 1997). This level of consumption is beyond the carrying capacity of the earth and threatens the integrity of "strategic resource stocks such as topsoil, forests, grasslands, fisheries, biodiversity, climate, and the atmosphere" (N. Myers, 1997, p. 54).

Although it is easy (and fun) to critique contemporary American examples of greed and extravagance, given the long and extensive human history of gratuitous consumption, we cannot just chalk it up to the influence of modern capitalism or corporate culture; rather, it is a consequence of basic universal human needs. Indeed, we argue that if contemporary humans are more extravagantly wasteful, it is primarily because of modern technology rather than because of any new social or psychological developments. We present historical and empirical evidence in support of our terror management explanation of consumerism. Finally, we consider what might be done to foster "life-sustaining consumption," divested of the malignant, psychopathological desire for infinite amounts of superfluous stuff that undermines human happiness, fosters grotesquely inequitable and destabilizing distribution of economic resources, and threatens the very existence of the human species by polluting and depleting the natural resources upon which our survival ultimately depends.

TERROR MANAGEMENT THEORY

Terror management theory was originally derived from cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker's efforts (especially in *The Birth and Death of Meaning*, 1971; *The Denial of Death*, 1973; and *Escape from Evil*, 1975) to generate a broad account of the motivational underpinnings of human behavior by integrating and synthesizing insights gleaned from biology, anthropology, psychology, sociology, philosophy, theology, and the humanities. Our analysis of human affairs starts with the relatively noncontroversial Darwinian assumption that all forms of life are biologically oriented toward self-preservation and that there is a wide variety of structural, functional, behavioral, and (for some creatures) psychological means to adapt to specific environmental circumstances so as to sustain the species or evolve into new and more complex life forms. Fish have gills; rose bushes have thorns; squirrels bury acorns and then find them months later; termites eat wood and dung-beetles eat, well, dung. There thus seems to be no limit to the marvelous variety of ways to successfully adhere to the ultimate biological imperative: staying alive.

Humans are also a natural form of life, subject to the same need to adapt to external circumstances in order to survive and reproduce as other creatures. Accordingly, the important question that must be considered is, what

is the specific nature of human evolutionary adaptations that render us a unique species? Human beings are not especially formidable from a purely physical perspective as isolated individuals; we are not especially large and our senses (especially olfactory and auditory) are not so keen; we are slow and have weak claws and teeth for meat-eating predators. However, we are highly social, vastly intelligent creatures. These attributes have fostered cooperation and division of labor and led to the invention of tools, agriculture, cooking, houses, and a host of other very useful habits and devices that allowed our ancestral forebears to rapidly multiply from a small band of hominids in a single neighborhood in Africa to the huge populations of *Homo sapiens* that currently occupy almost every habitable inch of the planet.

Surely one of the important aspects of human intelligence is self-awareness: we are alive and we know that we are alive; and this sense of self allows us to reflect on the past and ponder the future, and in so doing, secure the present. As Kierkegaard (1844/1957) noted, however, knowing one is alive is tremendously uplifting, but we are also perpetually troubled by the concurrent realization that all living things, ourselves included, ultimately die, and that death can occur for reasons that can never be anticipated or controlled. Human beings are thus, by virtue of the awareness of death and their ultimate helplessness before and vulnerability to annihilation, in constant danger of being incapacitated by overwhelming anxiety. We are destined, like ears of corn, to wither and die, if one is lucky enough to have dodged a predator's grasp, an enemy's lunge, or the benignly indifferent battering of a tidal wave or earthquake. As Leopold Bloom said in James Joyce's (1966) *Ulysses*

Integral parts of the human whole: the necessity of destruction to procure alimentary sustenance: the painful character of the ultimate functions of separate existence, the agonies of birth and death: the monotonous menstruation of simian and (particularly) human females extending from the age of puberty to the menopause: inevitable accidents at sea, in mines and factories: certain very painful maladies and their resultant surgical operations, innate lunacy and congenital criminality, decimating epidemics: catastrophic cataclysms which make terror the basis of human mentality (p. 697)

Following Otto Rank (1932), Norman Brown (1959), and Ernest Becker (1973), we posit that humans, ingeniously but quite unconsciously, solved their existential dilemma by developing cultural worldviews: commonly held beliefs about reality that serve to reduce the potentially overwhelming terror resulting from the awareness of death. All cultures provide a sense of meaning by offering an account of the origin of the universe, a blueprint for acceptable conduct on earth, and a promise of immortality: symbolically, by creating large monuments and great works of art or science, amassing great fortunes, or having children; and literally, through the vari-

ous kinds of afterlives that are a central feature of organized religions. These cultural modes of death transcendence allow individuals to feel like they are heroic participants in a world of meaning.

Thus, whereas cultures vary considerably, they share in common the same defensive psychological function: to provide meaning and value and in so doing bestow psychological equanimity in the face of death. All cultural worldviews are ultimately shared fictions, in the sense that none of them is likely to be literally true, and their existence is generally sustained by social consensus. When everyone around us believes the same thing, we can be confident of the veracity of our beliefs.

But, and here's the rub, when we do encounter people with different beliefs, this poses a challenge to our death-denying belief system, which is why people are generally quite uncomfortable around (and hostile toward) those who are different. Additionally, because no symbolic cultural construction can actually overcome the physical reality of death, residual anxiety is unconsciously projected onto such groups of individuals, designating them as scapegoats: all-encompassing repositories of evil, the eradication of which would make earth as it is in heaven. We therefore typically respond to people with different beliefs by berating them, trying to convert them to our system of beliefs, or just killing them and in so doing asserting that "my God (or political-economic system) is better than yours and we'll kick your ass to prove it."

In summary, terror management theory posits that the juxtaposition of the basic biological inclination toward self-preservation common to all living things with the uniquely human awareness of death creates the potential for overwhelming terror that is ameliorated through the construction and maintenance of culture. Culture provides a sense that we live in a stable, orderly, and meaningful universe, and it confers self-esteem through the provision of social roles with associated standards of conduct that allow individuals to view themselves as persons of enduring value in a world of meaning. Consequently, people's actions are directed toward sustaining a dual component cultural anxiety-buffer: faith in their worldviews and a sense that they are valued components of that meaningful reality.

In the empirical assessment of terror management theory, two lines of initial research have tested and supported hypotheses derived from it. First, we demonstrated that self-esteem does indeed serve an anxiety-buffering function in a series of studies where momentarily elevated or (in some studies) dispositionally high self-esteem resulted in lower self-reports of anxiety, physiological arousal, and vulnerability-denying, defensive distortions in response to graphic depictions of death, threat of electrical shock, and after being told that one has personality attributes associated with an early death, respectively (Greenberg et al., 1993; Greenberg et al., 1992).

Second, if a cultural worldview and self-esteem protect people specifically from death-related concerns, then reminders of mortality should lead to the bolstering of these psychological constructs. In support of this general

hypothesis, a large body of evidence has shown that momentarily making death salient (*mortality salience*), typically by asking people to think about themselves dying, intensifies people's strivings both to protect and fortify aspects of their worldviews and to bolster their self-esteem. The first and most common finding has been that mortality salience increases positive reactions to similar others or those who share cherished aspects of one's cultural worldview and negative reactions toward those who violate cherished cultural values or are merely different. For example, Greenberg et al. (1990; Study 1) had Christian participants think about death or watch television and then rate two targets who were similarly portrayed except for being either Christian or Jewish. As predicted, although there was no difference between participants' evaluations of the targets in the control condition, mortality salience participants had more favorable reactions to the Christian target and less favorable reactions to the Jewish target. In Study 3, following a mortality salience or control induction, American participants read short essays either highly supportive or highly critical of the American way of life and then reported their impressions of the author. Not surprisingly, participants favored the pro-American author over the anti-American author in the control condition; but this tendency was exaggerated following mortality salience.

Subsequent studies demonstrated behavioral effects of mortality salience. Ochsman and Mathy (1994) found that German university students sat closer to a German confederate and further away from a Turkish confederate after mortality salience, relative to a control condition; McGregor et al. (1998) showed that mortality salience produced greater physical aggression against someone who did not share one's political orientation; and Greenberg, Simon, Porteus, et al. (1995) demonstrated that participants were more uncomfortable sifting sand through an American flag, or using a crucifix as a hammer, following a mortality salience induction. The general tenor of this and other related work is that mortality salience increases conformity to and defense of the worldview to which the individual subscribes.

More recent research has shown that mortality salience also intensifies self-esteem striving as manifested by such diverse behaviors as psychological distancing from negatively framed groups, individuals, and animals; contributing to worthy charities; engaging in risky behaviors; and increasing investment in romantic relationships and physical appearance (e.g., Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2000; Taubman-Ben-Ari, Florian, & Mikulincer, 1999). Additionally, mortality salience effects have been obtained by researchers in eight other countries, using a wide variety of operationalizations of mortality salience, and appear to be unique to thoughts of death, as opposed to other threatening or unpleasant stimuli (see Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). We have recently developed a dual-process model of conscious and unconscious defenses to death (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999) that provides an account of the

cognitive processes that underlie reactions to mortality salience, pinpointing heightened accessibility of death-related thoughts outside of consciousness as the cause of these effects.

A TERROR MANAGEMENT ACCOUNT OF CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

How does terror management theory help us to understand humankind's insatiable lust for money and conspicuous consumption of goods and services? For Becker and terror management theory, conspicuous possession and consumption are thinly veiled efforts to assert that one is special and therefore more than just an animal fated to die and decay. Spending eternity in a heavenly afterlife is a quaint and attractive prospect (e.g., Islamic Jihad's Sheik Abdulla Shamni's 1995 [reported by Abu-Nasr, 1995, p. 1A] description of heaven as "a world of castles, flowing rivers, and lush fields" where the blessed "can eat the most delicious food, the most luscious fruits and the tenderest cuts of meat"), but ultimately intangible and empirically uncertain, whereas large piles of gold, enormous mounds of possessions, and lavish consumption are ineluctably real and symbolically indicative of immortal power. The notion that the urge to splurge is fundamentally defensive death denial above and beyond the quite legitimate pursuit of material comfort and aesthetic pleasure is supported by both the historical record and contemporary empirical research.

Historical Record

Money and Possessions in Indigenous Cultures

Psychoanalytic anthropologist Geza Roheim studied the economic behavior of indigenous peoples in New Guinea and Melanesia in the early 1900s to understand the psychological underpinnings of money and avaricious possessiveness. Roheim (1934) found that the primary motive for acquiring money and possessions in virtually all known tribal cultures is ultimately symbolic and ceremonial, in the service of gaining and maintaining prestige, and has little to do with money as a rational medium of exchange of goods and services:

In the life of the people of Duau whom I know, and also in the lives of other New Guinea and Melanesian people, money . . . plays a conspicuous role. The shell-money in question signifies wealth, but even more than wealth it means social prestige . . . the great aim in life for everybody in Duau is . . . in piling up and distributing yams. But however 'rich' anybody may be this makes no difference in practical life, it does not mean less work and more pleasure. . . . In societies of this kind wealth

means magic power and magic power means wealth. (p. 401)

The underlying motive for accumulating money is thus to acquire magic power through social prestige.

However, *prestige* means to assume a commanding position in people's minds, and the word *prestige* is derived from words meaning conjurer's tricks, illusions, deceptions, or enchantment. People lust for money to quench their thirst for power, and all power is ultimately bound to issues surrounding sustaining life and forestalling death, ideally permanently. Again following Roheim (1934): "originally people do not desire money because you can buy things for it, but you can buy things for money because people desire it (sic)" (p. 402). Long ago, people began to measure themselves, not by actual achievement, but by garnering prestige (a conjurer's trick, recall) through the ceremonial acquisition of more symbols than one's neighbors:

The beautiful skins or head-dresses or obsidians displayed at a dance by one rich man excite the interest and envy of visitors of wealth. . . . Such wealthy spectators return home determined to exhibit an even greater value of property the next year. Their effort in turn excites the first man to outdo all his competitors. (A. L. Kroeber, *Handbook of Indians of California*, as cited in Roheim, 1934, p. 402)

Here there is no hint of the rational exchange of goods and services (the typical definition of economic behavior); rather, what we see is the beginnings of a frenzied effort to use deception and illusion to acquire magic power over death through the pursuit of unbridled wealth, a frenzy that continues to this day.

Money and Possessions in Western Civilization

Norman O. Brown (1959) built explicitly on Roheim's work in his examination of the history of money in Western civilization in a chapter entitled "Filthy Lucre" in *Life Against Death*. Brown started by noting that it is very difficult for people today to recognize the true nature of money, because in contemporary societies we make a sharp distinction between the secular and the sacred. Money is now viewed as the rational medium by which we transact our affairs in the material (i.e., secular) world, completely independent of our admittedly nonrational relationship with the spiritual world in the sacred domain. Brown argued that the distinction between secular and sacred is a false and relatively recent one, in that all cultural contrivances are ultimately sacred in nature; all serve the same death-denying function, whether we are aware of it or not.

Money has always been used to buy and sell spiritual absolution (e.g., medieval indulgences) and has always been first and foremost a sacred value, and only secondarily a secular medium of exchange; as Big Daddy knew so well in Tennessee Williams's (1955) *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, what we really

want to buy with it is everlasting life.

The human animal is a beast that dies and if he's got money he buys and buys and buys and I think the reason he buys everything he can buy is that in the back of his mind he has the crazy hope that one of his purchases will be life ever-lasting. (p. 73)

Three examples point to this connection between money and the world of the spirit (and of death).

First, gold's value developed partly through its connection to life-giving myths. Becker (1975) observed that "the great economist Keynes noted that the special attraction of gold . . . was due to [its] symbolic identification with the sun . . ." (p. 78) or that which gives life. In Egypt, gold was relatively ignored until it became a popular means of making replicas of a cowrie shell that was "prized as a token of life-giving powers as an amulet to ward off the danger of death and to prolong the existence of the souls that were already dead" (Becker, 1975, p. 77). According to Smith (1929, as quoted in Coblenz, 1965), "the gold models soon became more popular than the original shells, and the reputation for life-giving was then in large measure transferred from the mere form of the amulet to the metal itself" (p. 24).

A second example pertains to the connections between the priesthood and money. The first mints were in temples and churches; the first minters were the priests:

With the ascendancy of priestcraft it became the priests themselves who monopolized the official trade in sacred charms and in the exchange of favors for gold. The first mints were set up in the temples of the gods, whence our word "money"—from the mint in the temple of Juno Moneta, Juno the admonisher, on the Capitoline hill in Rome. In India the gold fee was the proper one to pay to a god, whose essence was gold. Whence the tradition of the earliest coins being imprinted with the images of the gods, then divine kings, down to presidents in our time. (Becker, 1975, p. 79)

As can be seen, the very roots of the word *money* have ties to the spirit, and thus to death.

A final example concerns the contemporary world's dominant currency, the dollar bill of the United States. Look at the back of a dollar bill. Try to find anything about the use of the dollar as a rational medium of exchange between honest traders, but you cannot. Instead, see the real power behind money: God! *In God We Trust!* Now gaze to the left at the pyramid. There are no pyramids in the United States, so clearly they are not depicted on the dollar as cultural artifacts per se. Why else would there be pyramids on the backs of dollars, except as the ultimate symbol of death-denial and the royal gateway to immortality? Now keep looking up toward the top of the pyramid, broken off and hovering above a bit, apparently levitating, the enlightened (literally) disembodied eyeball. According to Joseph Campbell (1988), this

reflects the eye of God opening to us when we reach the top of the pyramid and attain immortality. Even the Latin phrases surrounding the pyramid and eyeball speak to immortality. Loosely translated, the phrase *annuit coeptis* above the floating eyeball means “He favors new undertakings,” seemingly giving God’s blessing to the nation (and its currency), whereas *novus ordo seclorum* on the banner at the base underlying the pyramid refers to “a new order of the ages,” or something that lasts into posterity (B. Fineberg, February 22, 2002, personal communication).

Money: The New Ideology of Immortality

In the past, people’s zeal for money and stuff in pursuit of prestige as magic power to ward off death was tempered somewhat by the edicts of the church against the desire for wealth as an end in itself and in support of the proposition that people are responsible for the well-being of those around them. Now that “God is dead,” however, in the sense that the Judeo-Christian tradition has waned in power in the last century, the pursuit of money has become the primary immortality ideology for the average American; but now people are unencumbered by a sense of responsibility to the community and unrestricted by moral edicts against massive wealth:

Money . . . buys bodyguards, bullet-proof glass, and better medical care. Most of all it can be accumulated and passed on, and so radiates its powers even after one’s death, giving one a semblance of immortality as he lives in the vicarious enjoyments of his heirs that his money continues to buy, or in the magnificence of the art works that he commissioned, or in the statues of himself and the majesty of his own mausoleum. In short, money is the human mode *par excellence* of coolly denying animal boundness, the determinism of nature. (Becker, 1975, pp. 81–82)

So God isn’t dead after all: God has metamorphosized into money and materialism in contemporary society. We may not trust God anymore, but we do trust cash.

In accord with the notion that money, avaricious possession, and conspicuous consumption are essentially aspects of a secular religion—the dominant immortality ideology of the Western world—at a press conference 1 month after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, President George W. Bush responded (in part) to the question “is there anything you can say to Americans who feel helpless to protect themselves?” by stating “the American people have got to go about their business. We cannot let the terrorists achieve the objective of frightening our nation to the point where we don’t conduct business, where people don’t shop” (“Excerpts From the President’s Remarks,” October 12, 2001, p. B4). Bush reiterated this advice a few days later (reported in Carney & Dickerson, 2001, p. 4): “Well, Mrs. Bush and I want to encourage Americans to go out shopping.” Beyond the egregious loss of life, one of the most dis-

turbing aspects of September 11 was the destruction of what were central immortality symbols for most Americans, one economic, the other military. As Becker (1971) observed:

Modern man is denying his finitude with the same dedication as the ancient Egyptian pharaohs, but now whole masses are playing the game, and with a far richer armamentarium of techniques. The skyscraper buildings . . . the houses with their imposing facades and immaculate lawns—what are these if not the modern equivalent of pyramids: a face to the world that announces: “I am not ephemeral, look what went into me, what represents me, what justifies me.” The hushed hope is that someone who can do this will not die. (pp. 149–150)

Empirical Evidence of the Role of Death Denial in Conspicuous Consumption

Could the American Dream actually be just another psychopathological form of death denial raised to the level of civic virtue by cultural ideology? Is there any empirical evidence that bears directly on these claims? Yes. Kasser and Sheldon (2000) asked people to think either about their own death or about listening to music; they then answered questions about their expected financial status 15 years in the future. The results showed inflated fiscal expectations after thinking about death (relative to listening to music), both in terms of overall worth, and especially in the amount participants expected to spend on luxury items such as clothing and entertainment. This suggests that concerns about mortality play a strong, albeit generally unconscious, role in economic aspirations and behavior.

In a second study, Kasser and Sheldon (2000) wondered whether fear of death disposed people to become greedy over-consumers of scarce natural resources. Following either a mortality salience or music control induction, participants engaged in a forest-management simulation. The results were striking. First, people asked to ponder their own mortality reported intending to harvest significantly more of the available acres of forest than their counterparts in the music control condition (62 vs. 49 acres, respectively). Second, mortality salience significantly increased the desire for profit, leading Kasser and Sheldon to conclude: “Interestingly, the results suggested that mortality salience particularly enhanced feelings of greed, or the desire to acquire more than other people” (p. 350). For many in our culture, out-competing others, out-earning them, may be central to feeling of special value. Indeed, in a currency-based culture, how much money you earn and have is an indication of how much you are valued in the culture, and this is spiritual currency as much as, if not more than, it is financial currency. This finding suggests that greedy plundering of natural resources is at least partially engendered by concerns about death.

Another way in which mortality concerns may contribute to consump-

tion is suggested by two studies by Koole and van den Berg (2001) demonstrating that mortality salience increases people's preferences for scenes of cultivated nature over wild nature. Cultivated scenery provides the illusion of order and control over nature and thus may also serve to manage our fears about the realities of existence. By compulsively controlling nature, we create the illusion that we can avoid death. In Becker's (1971) words:

Life in contemporary society is like an open air lunatic asylum with people cutting and spraying their grass (to deny untidiness, hence lack of order, hence lack of control, hence their death), beating trails to the bank with little books of figures that worry them around the clock (for the same reason) . . . filling shopping carts, emptying shopping carts . . . and all this dedicated activity takes place within a din of noise that tries to defy eternity: motorized lawn mowers, power saws, giant jets, motorized toothbrushes, . . . (p. 150)

In summary, the historical record and empirical research provide convergent support for the proposition that the denial of our mortality is at the root of humankind's feverish pursuit of wealth.

SPIRITS IN A MATERIAL WORLD

Cash is king! If worshipping money and conspicuous consumption have become the dominant American religion of the 21st century, what should we do about it? Clearly, death denial plays a role in our slavish devotion to accumulating infinite amounts of money and stuff, to the detriment of our personal and interpersonal health.

If cash is king, should we perhaps kill the king? This would be premature and unfortunate, because surely economic behavior is not driven solely by death denial. Surely money does indeed serve as a rational and efficient means of exchanging goods and services among people engaged in productive activities. Surely fiscal rewards can be a potent stimulant to creative and productive activities. Surely material and corporeal creatures are avid consumers; it is both physically necessary and aesthetically pleasing. The trick, of course, is how to preserve the life-enhancing aspects of economic behavior while disposing of the unfortunate, destructive, death-denying aspects.

From a theoretical perspective, it is important to recognize that all forms of economic organization are ultimately based on an explicit or implicit understanding of human nature and that both capitalist and communist economies are based on fallacious accounts of human nature. On the Right, champions of free enterprise in unbridled pursuit of capital and unfettered consumption presume that people are completely autonomous and entirely self-interested individuals who enter the world with different talents and that anyone who tries hard enough is likely to succeed. Furthermore, this success is purely the result of individual effort, unencumbered and unassisted by other

people and social institutions. The Horatio Alger story of a poor shoe-shine boy becoming rich by hard work and perseverance, and the story of the Marlboro man, the lone cowboy apparently running an entire ranch by himself, are deeply embedded in popular culture and clearly reflect this vision of human nature.

On the Left, communists presume that people are naturally industrious and altruistic, are content with having their material necessities met, and are like lumps of clay molded by their environments. Self-interest is hence an unfortunate byproduct of a dysfunctional economic environment. People are not naturally selfish but become that way through exposure to a specific set of economic arrangements. The goal is thus to foster “equality” by constructing a social order that emphasizes participation in the community and encourages the obliteration of individual differences and self-interested behavior.

However, both the free-market and communist view of human nature are wrong; or, rather, each is only half right. As living creatures, we have individual biological needs that must be actively met to ensure survival; there thus must be an inborn element of self-interest as standard equipment in the human animal: If I’m hungry it doesn’t help me to watch my sister eat a hot-dog, regardless of my sincere interest in her welfare. Human beings are also fundamentally social creatures; we are not biologically constructed to function independently, and the same gregariousness we see in our primate precursors exists in us. Thus, we have a biologically based propensity to affiliate with and care for others.

So a proper understanding of human nature recognizes the simultaneous desire to pursue individual self-interest and competitively distinguish ourselves as superior to those around us (to “stick out”) and to cooperate with others as members of a broader social order that serves our social interests (to “fit in”). Becker (1973), following Rank (1932), called the simultaneous desire to stick out and to fit in the *twin ontological motives*. (See also Brewer’s, 1991, optimal distinctiveness theory for an independent articulation of these motives.) Rank postulated that the fear of death motivates the urge to distinction in pursuit of immortality, as it does the desire to be comfortably embedded in a death-transcending collective. A number of mortality salience studies have supported the role of these two motives in terror management. For example, following a mortality salience or control induction, Simon et al. (1997) told participants (on the basis of recently completed personality assessments) that they were either very similar to or quite different from their fellow students. Participants then completed a social projection measure assessing themselves in terms of their perceived similarity to others. We predicted and found that being told one is very similar to others would instigate a compensatory reaction to differentiate oneself (to “stick out”) in response to mortality salience (and relative to control conditions), but that being told

one is very different from others would result in an increased desire to “fit in” in response to mortality salience (and relative to control conditions) and thus rating oneself as more similar to others.

Accordingly, social institutions in general, and economic institutions in particular, should be constructed so as to balance harmoniously these needs. Institutions that foster the development of one need, “sticking out” or “fitting in,” to the exclusion of, or in opposition to, the other need are doomed to fail because they each amputate half of what we are.

Capitalist economic orders are based on the lopsided assumption that people are solely self-interested, competitive, independent individuals trying to stick out. The result is economic behavior driven by pure greed. The primary goal is the infinite accumulation of a death-denying abstraction: money. Capitalists are more concerned about the “health” of the economy than the health of people or the planet. A healthy economy is one with a low deficit and high gross national product, even if people are miserable and unhealthy and the natural environment is polluted and depleted to the point where it can no longer sustain human life.

Communist economic organization is based on the equally lopsided assumption that people have minimal physical needs and desires that can be directed and regulated by central authorities. By the totalitarian imposition of rigid controls over all aspects of life, individual expression is stifled, motivation is crushed, and innovation is trampled. Decisions are made by a relatively few inept bureaucrats or (even worse) a single monomaniacal leader (e.g., Stalin or Mao), always (at least to date) with disastrous results: stagnant inefficiency and wholesale plundering of natural resources.

CONCLUSION: THE HUMAN MARKETPLACE

So, if Left and Right are both beside the point, how do we get the human factor back into the marketplace? First, we need to expose as psychopathological, and then dispose of, or at least actively strive to minimize, the defensive, death-denying aspects of the money motive in our economic institutions and our economic behavior. Cash is not king; money is not God. You really can't take it with you (although the Egyptian Pharaohs certainly thought they could—little did they know that their stash for the afterlife would later fill museums and rich people's living rooms around the globe), nor (sorry Big Daddy) can money purchase everlasting life. When our desire for money is for the sake of money, we become slaves to the market to the detriment of our psychological well-being. As John Maynard Keynes (1932) observed:

When the accumulation of wealth is no longer of high social importance, there will be great changes in the code of morals. We shall be able to rid

ourselves of many of the pseudo-moral principles which have hag-ridden us for two hundred years, by which we have exalted some of the most distasteful of human qualities into the position of the highest virtues. We shall be able to afford to dare to assess the money-motive at its true value. The love of money as a possession—as distinguished from the love of money as a means to the enjoyments and realities of life—will be recognized for what it is, a somewhat disgusting morbidity, one of the semi-criminal, semi-pathological propensities which one hands over with a shudder to the specialists in mental disease. (p. 369)

This is not a new idea. In fact, Aristotle held similar views: Consider the following passage from the *Encyclopædia Britannica* describing his position on these matters:

There is, for example, no sense in producing or acquiring more shoes than can possibly be worn. This is self-evident. With regard to money, however, which has become exchangeable against everything, the illusion arises that it is good to accumulate it without limit. By doing so, man harms both the community and himself because, concentrating on such a narrow aim, he deprives his soul and spirit of larger and more rewarding experiences. (“Aristotle,” 2003)

This quote is astonishing in that it highlights both how little things have changed since Ancient Greece and how little Western civilization has learned from Aristotle despite the extensive lip service to his great importance and influence.

In addition to making an effort—thus far futile—to dissuade people from the love of money for its own sake, societies must develop economic institutions, even a culture, that cultivate and facilitate the expression of both the basic tendency for humans to pursue their own self-interest (to “stick out”) and the concurrent desire to be a member of a community (to “fit in”). This is in fact what Adam Smith had in mind in his 1776 classic *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*.

Smith is well-known for his argument that human beings are motivated by passionate self-interest: the unbridled pursuit of basic animal as well as culturally constructed desires. According to Smith, the best economic order is one that maximizes individual freedom so as to allow this basic motive to be satisfied directly. When everyone acts in their own “enlightened” self-interest, they will naturally produce goods and services that are responsive to the needs of the community. This is of course the famous notion of the “invisible hand.” If someone makes bicycles and someone else bakes bread, and people need and want bicycles and bread, then it makes sense for one person to make bikes and the other to bake bread. It makes sense too that those who make the best (in terms of quality relative to price) bikes and bread prosper more than those who make poorly designed or shabbily constructed bikes or tasteless bread.

Less well known, however (especially by conservative pundits who have not read his work directly), is Smith's assertion that people are not solely motivated by self-interest; additionally, they are also amenable to reason and imbued with sympathy: a sincere concern for the well-being of others. Accordingly, for Smith (1776/1937), enlightened self-interest can only properly exist (in the sense of being morally justified) when complemented with concern for and sympathy with others. Smith also argued that governments are responsible for ensuring that human sympathies are not dampened by the "mean rapacity" of "monopolizing spirit of merchants and manufacturers," in which case the average citizen "generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human being to become" (p. 460).

The truly humane marketplace thus requires a delicate balance of "enlightened" self-interest, reason, and sympathy (empathy with and compassion for our fellow human beings).¹ The primary goal of the humane market should be the satisfaction of individual and collective needs and desires as determined by people through the democratic process, rather than by "market forces." A healthy economy would produce maximum satisfaction of genuine needs and desires within a social context that provides value and meaning to as many people as possible. The human marketplace would be limited, not by capital constraints, but by technology and resources (a quantitative measure of human stupidity is the difference between what we are technologically able to accomplish in the world and what we actually choose to do), accompanied by concern for preservation of the physical environment upon which our survival always ultimately depends.

Unfortunately, the United States is perhaps the most imbalanced of all societies because it is so focused on the mythic value of individualism. In most places in the world, even relatively individualistic cultures like Germany and the Netherlands, there is a sense that citizens are part of a family or community and that the needs of all people must be met. Americans may be the only people who widely embrace a "dog eat dog" attitude regarding their own ingroup. A prominent example of this is the resistance to

¹Van Vugt (2001) recently studied consumption of scarce resources as a function of self-interest and community involvement. Van Vugt hypothesized that because people are motivated by self-interest as well as social concerns, they should behave in accordance with whichever motive is activated by external circumstances. In a field study of British households with water meters where some families paid a variable tariff (charges related to use) and others a fixed tariff (charges unrelated to use), he predicted and found that consumption was lower when people were charged for what they used, presumably because self-interest motives are directly engaged under these conditions; however, although consumption was generally higher when charges were unrelated to use, it was only under this condition that this tendency was blunted in households with high community identification (e.g., people who felt strongly attached to their community, felt they had many friends in their community, and felt that their community was a great place to live), presumably because social concerns are more likely to be effective under these conditions. A second study replicated this effect in a simulated natural resource crisis in a laboratory setting. Van Vugt concluded, and we agree, that these findings suggest that effective social interventions should be designed in order to constructively engage both motive systems—self-interest and social identity.

implementing national health insurance, despite the ample resources to do so. Although Americans are undoubtedly more collectivistic than they think they are, a substantial shift toward a communal orientation regarding one another is needed to even approach the sort of optimal balance we have been discussing.

A final pie in the sky possibility is that the human race will grow up before it destroys itself and everything around it. If we did not need to deny our puniness and ultimate mortality, our most destructive and acquisitive propensities would cease to serve any psychological function and, like many dysfunctional habits, might eventually be abandoned. Then perhaps human beings could become consumers of life instead of their lives being consumed by consumption.

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