

so that their consumption patterns favor accumulation of human capital rather than material capital, then the human future would appear to be unbounded. It may even be worth trading some of our original inheritance, natural capital, for increased human capital, if that is the cost of redeeming human assets out of poverty and degradation.

So I assert that the relation between economic growth, consumption, and the environment is neither clearly an unalloyed good nor a proven evil. Basic principles and the available evidence both suggest a rather more complex — and mixed — assessment. Meanwhile, our consumption patterns *are* changing. More than 70 percent of U.S. economic activity is already based on services, rather than on manufacturing, and the percentage is climbing in virtually all countries. By means of vigorous policy, consumption

patterns can be induced to change even further, in ways that would secure a more environmentally promising future. Note, however, that I do not predict such a future — the issue is still in doubt, and depends on decisions and actions still to be taken, separately, in many regions of the world.

— Allen L. Hammond

Allen L. Hammond is director of the Program in Resource and Environmental Information, World Resources Institute. Sources: Allen Hammond et al., "Natural Resource Consumption," in World Resources Institute, *World Resources 1994-95* (Oxford University Press, 1994); The World Bank, *Monitoring Environmental Progress* (1995).

Consumption and Well-Being

Long before many of us began to think philosophically about consumption, we read our children stories that really were parables of consumption, though we did not fully realize this at the time. Some of these stories told of characters who behave foolishly, like the fox hungering for grapes that hang beyond his reach. Others presented characters we might envy for their discernment and good luck. For example, when Goldilocks visits the three bears she has such a sure sense of what is too much, what is not enough, and what is "just right." What is equally fortunate, the right stuff — although it belongs to the three bears and not to her — is readily available. The porridge is at the right temperature; a chair and bed are at the right degree of hardness. And Goldilocks, faced with an array of material goods, unerringly chooses the right thing.

We — consumers in American society — are not usually so lucky. With respect to many consumer goods, we don't know what is too much, what is not enough, and what is just right. Often the right goods are nowhere to be found. When they are available, we frequently fail to choose wisely. Many of us realize that we need a better criterion for selection than advertising's image of the good life — if we are to make wise consumption choices, if we are to know what should count as overconsumption, underconsumption, and appropriate consumption.

A given consumption practice may be justifiable or defective in one or more of four ways. First, it may be good or bad for the environment. Some consumer choices deplete scarce resources or damage nature, whereas others contribute to a sustainable way of life. Second, consumption may help or harm other people — our fellow citizens, our descendants, or people in other countries. The benefit or harm I have in mind here is sometimes indirect. For example, in buying moderately priced and fashionable sportswear, we may be a factor in the existence of sweatshops in our own country and abroad; in devoting much or all of our income to personal comforts, we may neglect to assist others less fortunate than ourselves. Third, our consumption practices may affirm or undermine values and institutions deemed essential to our community. Widespread choice of private schooling, for example, may weaken public education and social equality. Deciding to buy a house in the inner city rather than in a suburban neighborhood may strengthen urban institutions aspiring to cultural and class diversity. Finally, a consumption choice or pattern may be beneficial or detrimental to a person's own well-being — apart from its effect on institutions, other people, or the natural world.

My main purpose here is to investigate this fourth way of assessing consumption. What role should goods and services play if our lives are to go well? What

kinds of consumption are good for us? Bad for us? What evaluative criteria should we employ to assess the impact on our lives of our present consumption and to evaluate alternative consumption patterns and ways of living?

The consumption norm I offer here will supply general rather than detailed guidance. After all, as Stanley Lebergott has remarked, no principle can tell us that five compact disks, say, is the right number to buy each year, while six is too many and four is too few. Any norm that presumed to set such limits would be arbitrary, even dictatorial. What we require are general principles that will allow each of us to make choices appropriate to the distinctive character of our individual circumstances.

Materialism and Anti-materialism

One way to arrive at a reasonable consumption norm is to assess widely held normative outlooks about the acquisition and possession of commodities and, more generally, about human well-being. Materialism and anti-materialism are two such perspectives. Getting clear on where and how these rival norms go wrong will help us arrive at a better conception of well-being and a more adequate consumption norm.

Materialism assures us that having more is being more; it identifies well-being with buying, accumulating, and displaying consumer goods, especially those that bring comfort and convenience. In our own consumer society, materialism is often perceived as a national characteristic. Though we poke fun at our materialist obsessions — "I SHOP, THEREFORE I AM!"; "NOTHING SUCCEEDS LIKE EXCESS!"; "SO MANY MALLS, AND SO LITTLE TRUNK SPACE!" — we do not renounce them. According to Juliet Schor, "Americans spend three to four times as many hours a year shopping as their counterparts in Western European countries. Once a purely utilitarian chore, shopping has been elevated to the status of a national passion." In his poem "The Return," Frederick Turner captures the consumerist nostalgia of American soldiers in Vietnam:

What we miss
are the bourgeois trivia of capitalism:
the smell of a new house, fresh drywall, resin
adhesive, vinyl, new hammered studs; ground coffee
in a friend's apartment in San Francisco, the
first day of the trip; the crisp upholstery
of a new car

.....
It is the things
money *can* buy we remember, the innocence
of our unfallen materialism.

The poem looks gently upon the "bourgeois trivia of capitalism" and the wistful soldiers who recall them. But in other contexts, it is harder to see American materialism as innocent or "unfallen." Consider the consumerist manifesto that retailing analyst Victor Lebow issued in 1955 for an American economy enjoying a postwar boom:

Our enormously productive economy . . . demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption. . . . We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing rate.

Although the "buying and use" of commodities may be essential to one kind of economic growth, we know that commodities fail to give life reliable and ultimate meaning. As political economist Robert E. Lane suggests, it is not what we buy or own that brings us happiness but rather our work, our relations with our spouses and colleagues, and the well-being of our children. Indeed, the world of consumer goods, and a life devoted to their pursuit, may insulate us from deeper challenges and human connections.

Anti-materialism, whether religious or nonreligious, feeds on the very real weaknesses of consumerist materialism. The anti-materialist conceives the good life precisely so as to protect himself from disappointments in the changeable, frustrating world of bodily appetites and worldly possessions. He strives to free himself of all attachments to material goods, or at least to reduce significantly his level of material consumption. In its most extreme forms, anti-materialism forsakes the world in order to lay up "treasures in heaven," where "neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal." More moderate forms affirm the ultimate importance of this-worldly, but still nonmaterial, realities. Some prize inner rationality, self-possession, and self-sufficiency (as in Stoicism). Others emphasize the fulfillment that comes through personal relationships.

Yet these various ideals of independence from the material world may be just as misguided as the materialist effort to elevate the acquisition and enjoyment of worldly goods to life's supreme aim. One obvious concern is that there is a physical aspect of human well-being, a requirement of certain goods and services that meet basic needs — adequate food, clothing, shelter, health care, and so on. The anti-materialist might concede this point and allow for the modest satisfaction of these needs. Still, the resulting ethic might be so austere that it condemns much that makes life worth living.

It is true that we must avoid being obsessed with or possessed by commodities. Yet we must also honestly recognize the positive role some goods and services play in our lives; otherwise, we risk adopting a critique

of consumerism that is blindly at odds with our own choices and experiences. Nutritious and tastefully prepared food consumed with others can be good for both body and soul. Aesthetically attractive dwellings and clothes enable us to shape and express who we are. Marriage rites include the exchange of rings. Although we do well to avoid using presents to manipulate people, we sometimes express parental love and nurture friendships by carefully selected material gifts. We often exercise our civic responsibilities through phone, fax, and email. Air travel — for example, to consumption conferences — brings new ideas and new friends into our lives.

*The good life requires achieving
a certain balance among
the components of well-being.*

Rather than seek the good life by withdrawing to a self-sufficient inner, intimate, or transcendent world, many of us, when we are honest with ourselves, believe that we may realize our well-being when we satisfy *certain* worldly desires and utilize *certain* material means. As we meet human needs, realize our best potentials, press against limits, and cope with bad fortune in humanly excellent ways, commodities can play an important instrumental role.

Well-Being

Although they contain some truth, both materialism and anti-materialism are guilty of exaggeration. Those who endorse one of these views are typically engaged in an overreaction against the other. Sometimes entire cultures vacillate between the two, like a car that uncontrollably jackknives from side to side. If we are to have a reasonable consumption norm, the pair must be rejected together and replaced by a balanced and stable conception of the sources and meaning of well-being.

The conception I will present here derives largely from Aristotle's ethic of human flourishing, and from the work of two contemporary philosophers, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, who have acknowledged their own debt to Aristotle in formulating what is known as the capabilities approach. It also owes much to Partha Dasgupta, Thomas Scanlon, and James Griffin, whose orientations are closer to the Kantian or utilitarian traditions.

According to this conception, well-being refers not to some one component of life, such as pleasure or the satisfaction of basic needs, but to a heterogeneous list of human conditions, activities, inner capacities, and external opportunities. To have well-being, to be and to

do well, is to *function* and to *be capable of functioning* in certain humanly good ways.

The bodily components of well-being include being adequately healthy, nourished, clothed, sheltered, and mobile, as well as being free from physical pain and bodily attack. (The criterion of "adequacy," as applied to clothing and shelter, includes being able to appear in public and not be shamed by one's physical neediness.) In some circumstances, it is true, individuals willingly sacrifice some aspect of bodily well-being, as when a hunger striker allows herself to become malnourished. Such a person forgoes a component of healthy functioning. Notice, however, that she is not thereby *incapable* of being well-nourished. She is better off than someone who cannot acquire food or who, on account of illness, is unable to derive nourishment from the food he consumes. Thus we can say that physical well-being includes certain capacities and opportunities as well as functionings.

Although physical wellness is necessary for well-being, it is not sufficient. We must also include in our definition the mental aspects of well-being. Among these are the cognitive capacities for and activities of perceiving, imagining, reasoning, judging, and deciding. The latter embraces our being able to choose a conception of the good life. Mental well-being also includes opportunities and capacities for enjoying or finding pleasure — whether in other aspects of well-being, such as physical health, or in such things as art and nature. Happiness, although contributory to well-being, is not sufficient, for it may occur with and even camouflage significant deprivation. The severely destitute may expect little of the world and be overjoyed by a "small mercy." Drug-induced euphoria is compatible with morbidity and malnutrition.

Human well-being has a social as well as a physical and mental dimension. We believe we are less than fully human if we lack the deep personal relations of family and friendship as well as participation in wider social and ecological communities. It is largely from these relations that we derive a sense of purpose and self-respect.

A fourth aspect of well-being is what Martha Nussbaum calls "separateness" but might be better termed "singularity": "Being able to live one's own life in one's very own surroundings and context." In addition to social relations, well-being depends on our being distinct from others, expressing our singular identity, and having that which is uniquely our own.

What is the proper relation between these aspects of well-being? I would argue that the good life requires achieving a certain *balance* among them. Although a particular consumption choice may contribute more to one aspect of well-being than to the other three, the wise consumer strives for an overall consumption pattern that promotes balance and harmony among and



"Like it or not, you're here on earth to buy and consume products."

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within the components. Too much or too little of a good thing in one dimension may decrease our overall well-being in one or more of the others. The person obsessed with physical fitness will have little opportunity or capability for intellectual and social activity. The intellectual's books and the hacker's computer may stunt their owners' physical and social development and prevent full flourishing. My private possessions may distract me from civic participation. Within each dimension, the wise consumer avoids the extremes of excess and deficit, and seeks moderation.

The ideal of balance has an additional application in our understanding of well-being. We do well to balance, as it were, the times of our lives. This means, on the one hand, not unduly sacrificing present well-being for our future good, and, on the other, not choosing to obtain certain aspects of well-being now when the likely long-term cost is significant harm or sorrow.

It might be objected that some "one-sided" lives can still go well or be well-chosen. What of the connoisseur whose single-minded devotion to acquisition results in poor health or failed friendships, but who assembles an art collection of unquestioned importance or beauty? What of the musical prodigy who willingly relinquishes some of the pleasures of childhood in order to cultivate her gifts?

There are, I think, several answers to this challenge. One may concede that well-being is not everything. A person's life may be well-chosen and worthwhile precisely because he has sacrificed his well-being, or indeed his life, for a noble cause — clan, country, or culture. But even as we honor those who embrace a higher good at the cost of their well-being, we usually regret that such a choice was required. It is also worth saying that absolute choices between different aspects of well-being are less often called for than we might think. Sometimes, for instance, we may be able to *emphasize* one good over another without *eliminating* the subordinated good from our lives. Similarly, as I suggested above, we may emphasize different aspects of well-being at different times. Wynton Marsalis explains that after many years of playing exemplary jazz together, his ensemble disbanded so that its members could spend more time with their families.

Unfortunately, when consumption choices do disrupt the balance of our lives and lead to a sacrifice of well-being, the sacrifice often arises not for the sake of exalted achievement or another demanding good, but instead from what Aristotle called "weakness of will." In such cases, we may reasonably conclude that the value of a life well-lived exceeds the benefits of a consumption choice that undermines well-being.

Employing the Norm

The conception of well-being I have described provides the basis for a general consumption norm: one consumption pattern or choice is better than another if it does better in promoting a person's well-being. A consumption pattern or choice can be criticized to the extent that it weakens or destroys those capabilities and functionings that are the components of well-being.

Such a consumption norm has sufficient content to rule out the one-sidedness of materialism and anti-materialism, and sufficient generality to permit quite diverse "balancing acts," depending on a person's specific abilities, opportunities, and choices. What promotes, maintains, balances, weakens, or destroys the same aspects of well-being can and often does vary from person to person as well as from society to society. Some people can possess more commodities than others before such possession undermines their bodily health, practical rationality, or citizenship by fostering the vices of imprudence, greed, and political indifference. To live well in an opulent, technologically advanced community requires different goods from those required to live well in a poor and traditional one. As Amartya Sen explains:

To lead a life without shame, to be able to visit and entertain one's friends, to keep track of what is going on and what others are talking about, and so on, requires a more expensive bundle of goods and services in a society that is generally richer, and in which most people have, say, means of transport, affluent clothing, radios or television sets, etc. Thus, some of the same capabilities (relevant for a "minimum" level of living) require more real income and opulence in the form of commodity possession in a richer society than in poorer ones. The same absolute levels of capabilities may thus have a greater relative need for incomes (and commodities).

Wise consumption requires knowledge of ourselves and our society as well as choice in the light of that knowledge.

Given its person- and context-sensitivity, what sort of guidance can a norm derived from the capabilities approach yield with respect to our consumption choices? Certainly we don't need a consumption norm to know that some consumption choices are generally bad for us — high-fat diets, for instance — and others — certain lifesaving medicines — typically good for us. To illustrate the salutary prescriptive force of the capabilities norm, let us suggest its application to the question of housing. Without presuming to give utterly novel housing guidelines, the capabilities norm of well-being will be successful if it clarifies and endorses one strand of our often contradictory everyday judgments about humanely good housing.

Although frequently neglected in the consumption debate, our choice of a dwelling is important, for housing requires a far greater proportion of consumer dol-

lars (31 percent) than any other major category of consumer expenditure. Many people, of course, have no choice but to settle for housing that is clearly at odds with even a modicum of well-being. Others could afford decent housing, but only if they changed their conception of the good life and their overall consumption pattern. Let's suppose, however, that an individual or family has or receives the resources to acquire a dwelling that protects and promotes the four aspects of well-being. What would be the *general* characteristics — compatible with individual and societal variation — of such housing?

First, the capabilities approach suggests that housing options should be assessed with respect to their occupants' physical well-being. The neighborhood should be reasonably free of crime as well as the hazards posed by polluted air and water. Safe, accessible parks and playgrounds should offer opportunities for recreation. The dwelling itself should enable its occupants to be secure from the elements. Physical health requires good ventilation, sanitation, and sunlight as well as adequate space for sleeping, meal preparation, and personal hygiene.

"Livable" housing also protects and promotes the mental component of well-being. In its design and furnishings, good housing occasions aesthetic enjoyment and expresses — through such things as workbenches or studies, gardens or basketball hoops — the inhabitants' specific ideas of the good life. Maintaining and improving one's housing affords opportunities for the exercise of practical rationality.

Further, good housing safeguards and nurtures various forms of sociability and mutuality. Decent housing provides its inhabitants and their guests with opportunities for conviviality. Permitting and encouraging wider social participation, good housing is reasonably close to neighbors, work, schools, and cultural opportunities.

Finally, good housing is sufficiently commodious to provide each occupant with the personal space (and time) that is needed to be able to live one's distinctive life in one's own ambience. Such "separateness" may be best expressed by each occupant's having his or her own room or part of a room.

Sometimes two or more components of well-being call for the same housing site or structure. A room with good sunlight, for example, can be both healthy and aesthetically pleasing. A shared bedroom can promote both mutuality and singularity. It will often prove difficult, however, to find housing that satisfies (equally) each component of this complex conception of well-being, for the elements of well-being can conflict with as well as support one another. There may be no neighborhood, for instance, that is both close to one's work and reasonably safe or that has good schools. Moreover, someone might find housing that would

directly secure her well-being but would cost so much that she could not afford necessary food and health care. We must therefore employ practical rationality in order to address the advantages and disadvantages of each specific option, deliberate, and finally judge which abode (and larger consumer pattern) is, on balance, best for us.

In order to focus on the nature of well-being and the effects of consumption on ourselves, I began this essay by setting aside other important questions about consumption choices: those involving our moral obligations toward the environment, societal institutions, and other people. In the course of the argument, I have suggested that the pursuit of higher goods does not necessarily require the sacrifice of well-being. Nonetheless, it is true that consumption choices which are ostensibly good for us may well harm nature, society, or others, and that the norm of our own well-being is not sufficient for assessing these choices. Some of the materials for such an assessment may be found in other essays in this issue.

— David A. Crocker

The author is indebted to architect Amanda Martocchio for her comments on an earlier draft. Other sources: Alan Thein Durning, *How Much is Enough: The Consumer Society and the Future of the Earth* (W. W. Norton, 1992); Stanley Lebergott, "Pursuing Consumption Limits," paper presented at the Maryland conference on "Consumption, Global Stewardship, and the Good Life" (September 1994); Juliet B. Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (Basic Books, 1992); Frederick Turner, "The Return," quoted in Chandra Mukerji, *From Graven Images: Patterns of Modern Materialism* (Columbia University Press, 1983); Michael Schudson, "Delectable Materialism: Were the Critics of Consumer Culture Wrong All Along?" *The American Prospect* (Spring 1991); Victor Lebow, *Journal of Retailing* (Spring 1955); Robert E. Lane, "Does Money Buy Happiness?" *The Public Interest*, vol. 111 (Fall 1993); Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Hackett, 1985); Amartya Sen, *Resources, Value, and Development* (Harvard University Press, 1984); Martha Nussbaum, "Aristotelian Social Democracy," in *Liberalism and the Good*, edited by R. B. Douglass, G. Mara, and H. Richardson (Routledge, 1990); Martha C. Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, eds., *The Quality of Life* (Clarendon Press, 1993); Partha Dasgupta, *An Inquiry into Well-Being and Destitution* (Clarendon Press, 1993); James Griffin, *Well-being: Its Meaning, Measurement and Moral Importance* (Clarendon Press, 1986); T. M. Scanlon, "Value, Desire, and Quality of Life," in *The Quality of Life*, edited by Nussbaum and Sen; T. M. Scanlon, "The Moral Basis of Interpersonal Comparisons," in *Interpersonal Comparisons of Well-being*, edited by Jon Elster and John Roemer (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

A New Economic Critique of Consumer Society

In contrast to growing numbers of scholars in other fields, economists have contributed relatively little to recent critiques of consumer society. With a few notable exceptions — among them John Kenneth Galbraith, E. J. Mishan, James Duesenberry, Tibor Scitovsky, Robert Frank, and Amartya Sen — contemporary economists have been hesitant to entertain questions about the relationship of consumption to quality of life. Their reluctance is not difficult to explain. Most economists subscribe to a model which holds that as long as standard assumptions are satisfied, consumption *must be* yielding welfare; otherwise, it wouldn't be occurring. (Actually the implications of the model are even stronger, as we shall see.) Economists, moreover, are typically unwilling to engage in critical discussion of values and preferences.

In the absence of such discussion, it is easily assumed that the existing configuration of consumer choice is optimal.

To understand the peculiarity of this approach to consumption, we must recall that the field was once very different — that an earlier economics tradition in the United States had quite a lot to say about values as they relate to consumer behavior. Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), a work that exerted tremendous influence, is a classic in this tradition. Over the past hundred years, however, the discipline of economics has undergone a dramatic transformation, and a much more sanguine approach to consumer society has prevailed both within the profession and in society more generally.