

The Hazards of Consumption

Now that Christmas is disappearing in the review mirror, I hopefully won't risk being a Scrooge by discussing *excessive consumption* and *consumerism*. At any rate, the getting and giving gifts at Christmas and the holidays is not the issue. As long as it is done in the right spirit, most agree that this practice is a moral good. However, every year as the holiday buying season rolls around, we are reminded of the moral dangers of excessive consumption and consumerism. My purpose is not to make anyone feel guilty; I too enjoy the benefits of our many consumer goods. But many goods when taken too far can become evils. So my goal is to get general fix on the moral hazards associated with taking consumption too far.

First, the hazards of excessive consumption and the hazards of consumerism are different. Those associated with excessive consumption focus on ethical economics. Those related to consumerism focus on how culture shapes our character.

The criticisms of excessive consumption follow two themes. The first theme concerns planetary degradation. This familiar argument says that ever-increasing rates of consumption cannot be sustained on a planet possessing finite resources without severe consequences. The result will be a degraded planet less able to support a variety and abundance of life. The estimate that species are disappearing at a rate 1,000 to 10,000 times what might be considered "normal", indicates that this is already happening. The second theme is based upon inequalities. Looking at the present, the benefits of high rates of consumption are not equally shared. The wealthiest one-fifth of the world's population consumes four-fifths of the earth's resources. Looking at the future, it's argued that when populations and economies increase and natural resources decrease, prices will inevitably rise. The negative consequences of escalating future prices will be unequally shared. For example, the rich will be in a better position to deal with higher prices than the poor. As a result the poor will inevitably become poorer, even while the rich may hold their own. Also, future generations will have to pay more for less. The low costs and high rates of consumption one-fifth of the world are presently enjoying will result in higher costs and lower rates of consumption for future generations. In sum, the long-term costs of excessive consumption will be unequally shared between the rich and the poor, and between the present and future generations.

While there are many arguments and counter-arguments to be made here, and the whole topic is extremely complex, what is clear is that the hazards to be avoided with excessive consumption are straightforward: economic shortsightedness and selfishness.

Turning to the criticisms of consumerism, the moral dangers associated with consumerism are more abstract than those related to excessive consumption. A distinction made by the Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor is helpful in explaining these dangers. Taylor is interested in understanding what is involved in the notion of a person as a responsible human agent. Toward that end he uses the concepts of *weak evaluations* and *strong evaluations*. These concepts allow him to discuss the quality of our motives. Weak evaluations are measures of our preferences and desires. Strong evaluations are measures

of moral worth. For example, if I prefer a berry muffin to a cinnamon roll for breakfast that of course does not make me a better person. This morning I may prefer one to the other, but tomorrow my preferences may change. Such choices are superficial. In contrast, strong evaluations determine our moral worth as human beings. That is, when we evaluate our actions and motives as being courageous or cowardly, generous or stingy, gracious or bitter, we are making strong evaluations. Weak evaluations concern preferences, while strong evaluations concern moral character.

The problem with consumerism is that it creates a culture dominated by weak evaluations. We spend our time concerned with mere preferences, while discussions of deeper moral judgments fade into the background. When this happens, we tend to define ourselves by our preferences. This tendency is easily observed in the world of television commercials. Most commercials talk little about the product directly. Rather, they tell a story. This story says that if you buy this car, this beer, this electronic device, you will become this type of person—and you really want to be this type of person. In other words, in a consumerist culture there is a tendency to let the products we buy define our worth as human beings. Carried to the extreme, this makes us nothing more than the sum of our preferences as represented by the products we buy.

These remarks aren't intended to discourage anyone from enjoying their Christmas presents. However, hopefully they point to hazards of letting consumption go too far.

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