

Ownership, Possession, and Consumption: On the Limits of Rational Consumption

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We need a philosophy of consumption for ours is a consumer society. We need to understand, and to understand on a philosophical level, our consumer mentality. That would be an important part of understanding who we are.

By a *consumer mentality* or *consumer orientation*, I understand the conviction that the good life involves having much and consuming much. Someone with a consumer orientation will almost always want more; she will believe that more is better, at least for the consumer herself. This conviction typically leads to a life oriented around acquisition, around the work needed to acquire, around purchasing, around costly leisure pursuits, even around acquiring and maintaining enough space to house the things that have been acquired. Most people probably call this orientation “materialism,” but that word has a different meaning for philosophers.

Thus baldly put, most of us would probably deny that we embrace a consumer orientation. But our lifestyles might testify against us. Very few Americans feel that they have more than enough money. I know almost no one who pursues having and consuming less on the grounds that that would be a better life for herself.

Our consumer orientation receives massive social and intellectual support. We measure the success of our economy in terms of whether we have more than we had last year. Indeed, we have difficulty even imagining a different way to think about the success of an economy.¹ Both social progress and individual success are also usually understood in terms of having more. Almost all of our economic and social theories rest on the assumption that there is no self-regarding limit to consumption. There is, we believe, no point at which the wise person would conclude that she has enough and thus no point at which a society could legitimately say of anyone that she now has enough. More is always better, at least for the individual consumer.

A Brief Case for a Philosophy of Consumption

A descriptive philosophy of consumption would make intelligible the satisfactions of a consumer orientation, including the satisfaction many people find in shopping and in the act of purchasing. It would explain the power of the consumer mentality, a mentality that has shown itself capable of undermining and replacing many other orientations to life the world over. It should also help us to see the limitations and dissatisfactions of a consumer orientation.

But we also need a normative philosophy of consumption. Our consumer mentality is deeply disturbing for many reasons, most of which, though not undisputed, are too familiar to need much rehearsal. Among them:

1. Our consumer orientation continually generates dissatisfaction. We can never get enough. We consume much more than our parents did, yet are less satisfied than they, both with our lives and with our levels of consumption.
2. The consumer mentality is at the root of our ecological crisis. As we hit the resources barrier or the environmental carrying capacity, we will only be able to conclude that what *we* mean by *the good life* is no longer available.
3. Our consumer orientation is patently neither universalizable nor sustainable. As a result, there is a constant thread of bad faith running through our interactions with poorer countries,² the poor in our own country, and even our own children. If we were honest, our message to them would have to be: “don’t be like us; don’t try to live the way we do.”
4. For most people in our society, work is primarily a means to consumption. Increasingly, we are bribed not coerced into dissatisfying work. Moreover, work in our society is normally structured in more alienating ways so that we will produce more efficiently, thereby enabling greater consumption.
5. Given a consumer mentality, it takes a heroic effort for us to share. Since we do not have enough, giving is giving up. Nor will we tax ourselves to provide adequately for the less fortunate; we cannot afford it. We have great difficulty heeding any kind of moral call for distributive justice, especially in a global perspective.
6. Our consumer orientation threatens to rend our social fabric and subvert international harmony. We confront each other over a great divide between the “haves” and the “have nots.” This gulf fuels anger and resentment on the part of the “have nots,” who quite understandably want what we—the leaders and elites—so plainly want and also have.

These points are obvious, widely recognized, and deeply troubling. I will not reargue them here. Instead, I begin with the conviction that we desperately need the intellectual resources to say, “enough already!” Yet, philosophers have been strangely silent about consumption and the consumer mentality. We have had very little to say, except in the special context of environmental ethics.

In this article, I will focus on the individual rather than the social/political level, and thus on private ownership and personal consumption. I will offer self-regarding, prudential, or eudaemonistic rather than moral considerations. On my view at least, there are already very strong moral arguments against a lifestyle of ever-increasing consumption. More interesting, perhaps, is the thesis that the consumer orientation also fails the prudential test. It is deeply irrational, and not only in the sense that it is ununiversalizable, unjust, unecological, ungenerous, and unsustainable. It is also deeply unsatisfying and dissatisfying even to those who succeed in acquiring much. As we get more, we do not become happier or

more satisfied people. A wise person would not live like this, partly because a consumer orientation fails to deliver the satisfactions it promises.

A note on terminology: In this article, I use *prudential*, *self-regarding*, and *eudaemonistic* interchangeably because I wish to employ a theory-neutral conception of happiness or well-being. On one hand, I need to resist an understanding of prudence as the employment of the most effective and efficient means to *antecedently-given* ends. But I also do not wish to presuppose any full-blown eudaemonistic theory. Nor do I try to offer any account of a well-lived life, only an account of sagacity with respect to the acquisition and employment of consumer goods and services.

A substantial body of empirical research on happiness, understood as subjective well-being, supports the conclusion that a consumer orientation fails to deliver happiness.³ And if these findings continue to accumulate with more research that would mean that the thesis that consumerism fails the prudential test does not depend on some exotic philosophical definition of well-being. The consumer orientation fails even the test of subjective well-being. Greater income does not even make people *feel* happier.

Given the fact that there are undoubtedly environmental and other moral limits to justifiable consumption, the thesis that there are also eudaemonistic limits would be a very desirable theoretical outcome. This article will not, however, be able to do more than point to possible conclusions; it is intended as an invitation to philosophical exploration, not the conclusion of it.

Ownership and Possession

I wish to make a start on a normative philosophy of consumption by exploring a distinction that, if viable, has far-reaching implications—the distinction between ownership and what I will call “possession.” This distinction marks two different ways of appropriating things and two different senses in which a thing can be said to be *mine*. This distinction can be found, I believe, in the writings of the young Marx.⁴ Certainly, that is where I found it. The notion of possession will, I would argue, help to explicate Marx’s idea of unalienated consumption and also the meaning of *needs* in the infamous dictum, “to each according to his needs.” It would also help to resolve the Marxist conundrum over how many consumer goods a healthy society needs to produce. But I will neither argue questions of pedigree nor address the problems in Marx or a Marxist society here. Indeed, I will not mention Marx again.

The distinction between ownership and possession partly supports three theses. (1) Beyond consumption to meet basic needs and social requirement, eudaemonistic consumption must be oriented around possession rather than ownership. (2) Many of the dissatisfactions of a consumer society grow out of pursuing ownership without possession. (3) An orientation to possession rather than ownership would reveal that there are self-regarding limits of rational consumption.

To *own* something is to have a complex bundle of legal and moral rights to the thing (and secondarily, also legal and moral obligations that arise from those

rights). I can acquire ownership of a thing in many ways, but the standard way of coming to own things in a consumer society is to buy them. To own something, it is not necessary for me to be or do anything; indeed, I may own something without even being aware that I do. Even if I come to own something through purchasing it, I need not be anything except one who has money (or credit), and I need not do anything except produce my credit card. Regardless of who I am or what (if anything) I do, when I come to own something, a relationship between it and me is established.

There are a number of interesting philosophical issues about ownership. I will try to avoid most of them. We have theories of ownership. Of course, most people in a consumer society do not pursue extensive ownership simply for the sake of owning a lot. Ownership for its own sake is not unknown, but most of us pursue ownership as a means to consumption including status consumption. We shall return to the different kinds of consumption. But first, the concept of *possession*.

When I come to own something, a relationship between it and me is established. But in order to *possess* something, I must establish my relationship to this thing. For to possess something is to relate oneself to it—to use it, appreciate it, understand it, cherish, and care for it. To possess something, I must *make* it my own. Unlike what I own and could own, what I possess and could possess depends on who I am and what I do with my time, energy, skills, and awareness. Possession, unlike ownership, requires a fit or match between possessor and possessed so that the interaction between them is appropriate to the object and appropriate for the subject.

If the distinction is sound, virtually any consumer good could serve as an example. (Services could also provide examples, though it sounds odd to talk about owning a service.) I can come to own a Nikon camera, a bottle of fine wine, a recording of Mahler's sixth symphony, a personal computer, or a copy of Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* simply by putting my money on the counter. If I had a sizeable inheritance, I would not have to do anything to be able to own these things, and a click on a web site would suffice to actually own them.

So I put my credit card on the counter and buy the Nikon. But before I can possess this camera, I must learn how it works, master its intricacies and develop my skill so that this camera becomes an extension of me. And before I can do that very well, I must develop my ability to see, for I cannot take pictures that I cannot see. Having done all this, the Nikon is in a real and concrete sense more *my* camera than when I bought it. But even so, I now have only the ability to possess this camera—to possess it I must also actually take pictures with it.

Although I can earn the money to buy it in less than an hour, it will take me many weeks of concentrated attention to possess Rawls' *Justice*. Moreover, I am able to possess it as fully as I now can because I have devoted a large part of the past 40 years to the study of philosophy. I could possess it even more fully if I were smarter or knew more about decision theory and political philosophy.

Implications of this Distinction

There are eight clusters of implications that seem noteworthy and also helpful for further explicating the distinction between ownership and possession.

1. Although there can be joint ownership and I can own shares of something (e.g., stock), ownership is standardly a complete or absent relationship—either you do or you do not. But both the ability to possess and the actual possession of a thing come in degrees. I do own my shares of stock, but we can talk about the extent to which I possess my sound system or car or the food on my plate. For some things, complete or full possession is a very difficult achievement, indeed.
2. Some things can be owned but not possessed; others can be possessed but not owned. No one can own the smell of the pinyon pine after a rain or the color of things in the golden light of the late afternoon. By contrast, I fail to see how anyone could possess 50 shares of McDonald's stock. And I wonder whether anyone can possess money.
3. Although money is standardly necessary and often sufficient to own a thing, money is neither necessary nor sufficient to possess many things. Not sufficient because having bought it, I still need to make it my own. Often not necessary either, sometimes not even for things that are privately owned: I have lived in and possessed a few very nice houses in my time, but I have never owned a house. Trainers and jockeys possess the horses they race, usually without owning them. An art student who comes back to a museum over and over to gaze in fascination at a Matisse possesses that painting. It belongs to her, though the museum owns it, of course.
4. Private ownership is a competitive and exclusive relationship, but possession is usually neither competitive nor exclusive, at least within certain limits. In fact, it is often a cooperative good. Since you cannot own what I own, ownership is a competitive good. But you and I may very well possess—as much as we are able—the same painting, camera, set of golf clubs, or musical instrument. The limits within which possession is not competitive are defined by the need of all possessors to have *access* to the objects they possess. For although ownership is not necessary to possess an object, access to that object is. Indeed, extensive access is often necessary for full possession.

Possession of a thing is often a cooperative good in the sense that more for you implies more for me, too. Your possession of Rawls' *Justice* or Mahler's sixth or a good tennis racquet will, if we talk about it, enhance and increase my possession of it, too. Because possession is often a cooperative good, the natural inclination of people who possess things is to want to share possession (if not ownership) of them. I want Buber's *I and Thou* to mean as much to my students as it does to me; I like it when people appreciate our house; I wish I could share the joys of my bicycle with

my fellow Americans. Thus, a society oriented around ownership will standardly be a competitive society. A society oriented around possession would be a society in which people would, *other things being equal*, share and want to share.

5. If our institutions and our social psychology were different, we could possess everything we do or even could possess without (privately) owning much of anything. However, because ownership includes the right to deny access to an object, our institutions would have to be different if we were to possess all that we can without owning anything. Someone may buy a Van Gogh purely for investment purposes and put it in her house or in a vault at the bank. After a while, no one will then possess it. Thus, private ownership can limit and reduce possession of a thing. Because of this, some things are so valuable that they should not be privately owned. I think great works of art fall into this category. I am also glad that some of the Smoky Mountains is not privately owned and that no one owns many of the documents and historical sites from our past.

But our psychology would also have to be different in order to possess without owning, for with us possession, or the desire to possess, often leads to a desire to own. And for some, possession seems to be enhanced by the fact of ownership. Moreover, societies oriented toward ownership rather than possession can easily create people who are unable or unwilling to care for things they do not or cannot own. Examples include the way rental housing is often treated and the littering of public spaces. In fact, one important ingredient in many examples of the “tragedy of the commons”⁵ is a group of people who do not possess what they do not privately own.

6. Ownership is an impersonal, but possession a personal relationship. Ownership is impersonal in the sense that ownership of a thing is “alienable,” transferable to others. Others could come to own anything that I own or could own. Possession, however, is not alienable and it cannot be transferred. Someone else can come to possess what I possess, but it can be “transferred” only by education and initiation, if at all. Yet, it is not accurate to speak of a transferal here—if you show me how better to appreciate Rawls, your knowledge and appreciation of the book is in no way lost or diminished. This is the sense in which we can speak of possessions being shared.

Yet, on a deeper level, perhaps possession cannot be shared at all. In one sense, many different people can possess the same object. But in another sense, the same thing can perhaps never be possessed by any two persons. For possession is personal and thus in my possession of it, an object becomes *mine*, *my* object, an object-for-me. The object functions differently in my experience and activity than it could in your experience and activity. A piano (the same piano in the physical sense) is a different thing for Arthur Rubinstein than it is for Emmanuel Ax (as anyone who fully possesses their recordings knows). Perhaps we could say that the piano is individualized through its

relationship with an Ax or a Rubinstein just as they are individualized through their relationship with it.

7. Ownership is a static, but possession a dynamic relationship. If I own something, I will continue to own it, with no additional effort or involvement on my part. Possession, however, is dynamic: use it or lose it. If I do not continue to play the piano or take pictures with my Nikon, my abilities to relate to them will become rusty, then decay. At first, I only possess them less, but eventually I also become less able to possess them.

Thus, an initial investment—of money, not necessarily of self—suffices to own and ownership lasts indefinitely. Indeed, the economic value of what I own may appreciate without further involvement on my part. But without further investment, my possession will normally decay. To continue to possess some thing, I must continually reinvest in it and reinvest my *self*—my time, energy, attention, abilities, not merely my money—in it. For possession can never be bought with money; it must be continuously bought with an ongoing investment of time and self.

8. Although what I own may or may not, what I possess possesses me. It absorbs my time and energy, demands my care, directs and focuses my attention. It dictates the development of my self. Because I need not be or do anything to own something and ownership lasts indefinitely, I need not be much involved with the things I own. But possession depends on my capabilities and how I choose to develop and use them. Thus, extremely delicate questions are involved in decisions about what I should or will possess, for such decisions involve choices about who I will become and how I will spend my life.

Though I will not do so here, we can ask whether possession is a good thing. Arguably, we should attempt to free ourselves of the desire to possess in order to develop ourselves in other ways. Epictetus, Thoreau, some Eastern philosophies, and many religious orders all oppose having a lot of things. If things are possessed, they absorb us and distract us from our more essential mission; if they are not, there's no point in having them. Besides, having them will present a constant temptation to possession. And it is possession, not ownership that these views oppose—one can be a Marcus Aurelius and have many things so long as you do not become involved with them, that is, become concerned about whether or not you have them, or allow yourself to become diverted from your appropriate task in order to acquire or maintain ownership of them. So long, that is, as you do not possess them and they do not possess you.

The Limits of Possession

The unlimited acquisitiveness of a consumer society reveals that a consumer society is oriented around ownership rather than possession. For both possession and the ability to possess are rather narrowly circumscribed. They are inherently limited in at least three ways.

First, there are limits to anyone's native capabilities and talents. No one has even the natural capabilities that would enable her to possess everything. My own insensitivity to the finer gradations of pitch rendered me incapable of possessing a violin. Those with very poor eye-hand coordination cannot possess a good tennis racket. Those with limited intellectual capabilities cannot possess Rawls' *Justice*.

Second, time is also limited. Time spent in developing the capability to possess and then possessing one kind of thing is time unavailable for developing capabilities needed to possess other things. The time and energy I devote to philosophy decreases the likelihood that I will be able to fully possess a Nikon or a recording of Mahler's sixth. My eye and my photographic abilities, my ear and my listening abilities are relatively uneducated and undeveloped because I have spent so much time studying philosophy. And even if I could possess them fully, I probably would not. I would rather be doing philosophy instead. Although the skills I develop in mastering Rawls' *Justice* will increase my ability to possess Hegel's *Logic*, the fact that my time and energy are limited means that my absorption in Rawls would make it less likely that I will actually do so.

Because time is limited, those who cannot make up their minds about what they want to possess or who are too readily drawn to the newest and latest things cannot possess much of anything to a very full degree. To the extent that advertising must create dissatisfaction with what we already have and entice us to buy something new, it works against possession. Even relatively full possession requires a kind of ongoing commitment or steadfastness.

Third, most of us must work. The more time, energy, attention, and development of talents I devote to my job, the less of these scarce resources I will have left to devote to developing my self in ways that enable me to possess things (other than the tools of my trade and perhaps also the product of my work). Thus, being an effective producer and a "productive member of society" standardly *decreases* effectiveness as a possessor. Good producers may make good consumers, but they often do not make good possessors.

Because the number of things that any person can possess is inherently limited, delicate questions about possession arise. If I rebuild the motor in my car, I will possess my car much more fully. But is that much attention to my car the most worthwhile use of my time, energy, and abilities? If I build my own house, or at least learn how houses are made and something about the psychology and aesthetics of space, I will possess my house more completely. But is it worth it? Should I return to the study of Rawls, or branch out into Hegel or, for that matter, into Miles Davis? These are not questions of efficiency, at least not as efficiency is usually understood. They are questions of who I am and who I will become.

Status Through Ownership and Status Through Possession

What I possess possesses me. What I own—or want to own—may absorb me, too, of course. Continuous reinvestment of self in the ongoing attempt to

own things is also widespread. The pursuit of ownership can also dictate the development of self—I may develop job skills and then work endless hours because doing so promises the means to consume much.

But my life may also be consumed by a pursuit of ownership for another reason. In a consumer society, status accrues to persons as a result of the extent of their ownership and their level of consumption. The ability to own many things (which can become manifest only in actually owning them) is, with us, a symbol of accomplishment and worth. Both in my own eyes and in the eyes of others, I tend to take on the value of the things I own; their value rubs off on me and gives me value as well.

I may, then, become absorbed in making a lot of money for at least two, very different reasons. In so far as I am motivated by the desire for status or recognition, I will want to consume expensive things, but perhaps only because I care about the status this consumption bestows. And I may feel slighted, affronted, angry or jealous upon discovering that one of my peers (or inferiors) makes more money than I, not primarily because his greater income enables him to have more, but because I feel unrecognized and unacknowledged, or undervalued. Thus, the busy executive may be very concerned about how much money she makes despite the fact that she has no time to spend it and her financial future is already more than secure.

To the extent that my consumption is driven by a quest for status, I would cease to want more if I could find alternative sources of status. Tom Wolfe pointed out that test pilots and astronauts were paid very little. That did not matter, they were recognized as having “the right stuff.”⁶ But lacking alternatives, we who want recognition will pursue higher and higher incomes. I not only want more; I want more than others. The quest for status through ownership is undoubtedly part of what keeps a consumer society moving.

Unhappily, ownership can never accurately testify to my worth, nor express to others who I am or what I have done. This for two reasons.

First, in a society in which there is unearned income, what I own cannot satisfactorily indicate what I am or have done. My fine house may testify only to my grandfather’s business acumen or to his sheer dumb luck when oil was discovered under his worthless ranch. The pleasing decor of my living room may show only the interior decorator’s taste, the quality of my golf clubs evidences the knowledge of the fellow at the pro shop. Even the success of my business may be due to the manager’s skill.

Thus, there is a tension between the desire to own and consume for status or recognition, and the desire to consume to meet wants. However, much they may be intermingled in a consumer society, the former militates against any form of unearned income; the latter motivates those fortunately situated to support it.

Second, even if there were no unearned income, ownership could still serve to show others only that I have done *something* that is valued by others. But what I own could never tell others whether I am a brain surgeon, a former professional athlete, a corporate executive . . . or a drug lord. Even if there were no unearned income,

ownership would still be impersonal and, as such, inadequate to give me personal identity, reality, or substantiality. And inadequate to say to others who I am.

By contrast, possession is personal. My possessions inevitably say who I am—they reflect and testify to my capabilities, characteristics, interests, and character. Accordingly, there is a kind of status in possession among those who practice an art. Those who train horses respect people who can most fully possess a horse; NASCAR racers admire sensitivity to automobiles; fishermen, photographers, and violinists respect and admire skill with rod, camera, or bow.

Thus, if I seek status that accrues to *who I am*, I must seek it through possession, not ownership. The pursuit of status through ownership is part of the frustration of a consumer society. It cannot do what we want it to do. However, in many encounters, possession cannot be ascertained. It is impossible to tell whether the man driving a Porsche on the Interstate possesses or does not possess his car. However, it is likely that he owns it—or at least is able to borrow enough to purchase or lease it.

Possession-Oriented Consumption

What would a theory of consumption oriented to possession look like? We can begin with two basic observations.

First, the notion of possession helps to explicate one important sense of needs. I have biological needs, of course, and also things that I need to be an acceptable or functioning member of my society—those without a telephone or a refrigerator soon find themselves social outcasts in most circles. But beyond consumption to meet biological need and social requirement, I need the objects with which I can become myself; the objects with and through which I express and define myself; the objects that help me to become objective and real.⁷ I need those things that I can and do, or will, possess.⁸

Thus, a theory of consumption based on possession will strive to grant access to—though not necessarily ownership of—a fine piano to an Emmanuel Ax. For without extensive access to a fine piano, he loses a central part of who he is. On the other hand, regardless of what I might want, I do not need a fine piano and if things are tight, we may even deny me access to a piano—I am largely incapable of becoming myself with a piano, anyway. For the same reason, I also do not need fine wines, food, or clothes, a good camera, a very good sound system, a Porsche, a beachfront home, or even a copy of Hegel's *Logic*, though others may need each of these things.

Second, a theory of consumption oriented toward possession would build on the fact that possession is finite and depends on natural capabilities and also on the development of abilities. Possession thus calls for both self-knowledge and self-development. A theory of consumption based on possession will thus see both an objective and a subjective development as necessary for rational consumption. The objects I need to become myself must exist and exist for me.

But I, the subject, must also be developed in order to be able to interact appropriately with the things I possess or want to possess.

By contrast, a consumer society will standardly construe the problem of consumption as primarily or even exclusively the problem of getting the money to buy the goods and services requisite to the good life. A consumer society will standardly underplay—or simply fail to see—the subjective development necessary for possession. Advertisements promote this mistake. They promise that if we purchase the right things, subjective development will not be needed—your golf game is so weak because you do not have the right clubs.

Members of such societies will standardly see education, training, and most forms of personal development as a means to purchasing more of the good life. We will often lack development of our possessive capabilities and even the idea that education and training are necessary for meaningful consumption. If we have sufficient income, we will own much, but possess little. Our lives will be cluttered with untasted wine and food, unappreciated movies and concerts, over-designed and under-utilized equipment for leisure activities consumed in expansive homes that we scarcely notice.

Part of the insatiability of a consumer society stems from the underdevelopment of possessive capabilities. For example, we may notice that our leisure is not very satisfying, perhaps not even very enjoyable. But we have been told that wants are infinite and promised that more will be better. So we restlessly move on to ever new and grander consumption, never realizing that our consumption is not satisfying because we lack the personal development necessary to possess the things we consume. Or we are reduced to possessing those things that can be appreciated with minimal education, training, and development. We are not satisfied because fulfillment comes through possession, not mere consumption. And we lack the development necessary to possess the kinds of things that could satisfy a being as complicated as a human.

Development of our possessive capabilities would, then, enable us to possess more things, to possess things more fully, and to possess more complicated things. It would lead to more meaningful consumption, consumption more likely to pass the eudaemonistic test.

Consumptive Efficiency and Rational Distribution

The thesis that eudaemonistic consumption must be centered on possession is primarily a thesis about individual well-being. But there would be important social and economic implications if there are indeed eudaemonistic limits to rational consumption that turn out to be explicable by something like this notion of possession. For the concept of possession could provide a critical element in a theory of rational distribution of goods and services.

Development of possessive capabilities might enable us to possess more things, but it could never eradicate the limits to possession posed by natural capabilities, limited time and energy, and the need to work. The number of

things that any person can possess is limited. Thus, a society that produced and distributed goods so as to maximize possession would have a basically different approach to the production and distribution of the goods it produces. It might well produce less than our society, but derive more satisfaction from the consumption of its products.

Though possession is limited, consumption is not. A society that sees itself as attempting to satisfy unlimited wants and needs will tend to concern itself primarily with productive efficiency. More efficient production will enable us to consume more. Hence classical economics teaches that ideally a person should be employed in the position in which her marginal rate of production is greatest and then paid the marginal product of her labor. That will maximize her ability to consume. Doing this, however, might give her more income than would be consistent with *consumptive* efficiency and the efficient allocation of resources on the consumptive side of the economy.

What is a rational distribution of consumer goods? Consider the idea that it would be a distribution that maximized possession of the goods produced. On this view, consumer goods are wasted on one consumer (relative to other consumers) to the extent that she possesses them less fully. Given a certain group of consumers and a group of goods to be distributed, we would allocate consumer goods to each member of the society—regardless of ability to pay—until the depth and fullness of her possession at the margin equaled that of other members of the society.⁹ This would maximize consumptive efficiency and make the most efficient use of the consumer goods we have produced.

As we have seen, we should expect a negative correlation between income and consumptive efficiency thus defined: (1) the longer and harder someone works and (2) the more consumer goods she already has, the less likely she will be to fully possess any additional consumer good. Good producers and other wealthy members of society may make good consumers, but they do not normally make efficient consumers. Thus, relative consumptive inefficiency will be promoted by any system that distributes goods according to ability to pay for them.

I do not claim that maximizing this kind of consumptive efficiency would give us a theory of distributive justice all by itself. It would not. But if we distributed goods in this way, each would get the goods she deserves *as a consumer* (i.e., those goods which she can and will most fully utilize). A system of distribution that maximized possession would guarantee that this object is right for this consumer and that she is right for it. It would get objects into the hands of those who are right for them.

This is *relative* consumptive efficiency. Relative consumptive efficiency would tell us how to distribute a given supply of commodities so as to minimize relative consumptive waste by a group of consumers. But can we also speak sensibly of absolute waste and can we therefore say something about the *absolute* amount of consumer goods that a given individual or society can rationally consume?

Perhaps.

The key here would be the notion of the amount of “objective possessibility” in a given consumer good. Think of a consumer good as a stored potential for future possession. A better consumer good is better because it contains more possessibility or possible possession. More and better music can be gotten from a better piano or a better sound system. That is what makes them better. This means that a good enough piano player or a very sensitive and attentive listener can more fully realize herself with a good piano or sound system. An Emmanuel Ax will get pretty much all of the objective possessibility out of even a very good piano. But it takes an Ax or a Rubinstein to get all the objective possessibility out of a very good piano. By contrast, most of us are incapable of and/or uninterested in getting anything like the total possessibility out of such a piano.

Given this notion of objective possessibility, we could define absolute consumptive inefficiency: absolute consumptive inefficiency is incurred wherever a consumer’s possession of a good does not match the objective possessibility of that good. If I take the same pictures with my Nikon that I would take with a smart phone, the Nikon is over-designed for me and wasted on me, even if we have a surplus of Nikons to distribute and I would possess one more completely than the alternative consumers. The point is that the society has misallocated its resources in producing so many unpossessed Nikons. There would have been more absolute consumptive efficiency if it had produced only smart phones for most of us instead. And if my camera of whatever quality sits unused on my shelf, absolute consumptive inefficiency has been incurred in producing any camera at all for me.

But as we have seen, if a consumer’s possession does matches this objective possessibility, her ability to possess additional things will rapidly diminish, even approaching zero. Because we are finite and lack sufficient time, energy, and abilities to fully possess very many things. So, if we must possess consumer goods in order to rationally consume them, there are inherent limits to rational consumption.

All this is extremely sketchy, of course. But if some more fully developed version of these ideas could be worked out, it would support important theses: A consumer society, because it encourages ownership rather than possession, incurs monumental consumptive inefficiency, both relative and absolute. The institution of private property tends to generate both relative and absolute consumptive inefficiency. We could increase both relative and absolute consumptive efficiency if we could learn to share. Finally, we would increase our absolute consumptive efficiency, both individually and collectively, if we consumed less. If things must be possessed to be rationally consumed, less would be better.

Conclusions

I have not yet made the case, not nearly. But I hope to have planted the seed of the idea that rational ownership of consumer goods must be “cashed-out” in terms of possession, present or future.¹⁰ On this view, the wise person will not

own what she cannot, does not or will not possess (again, with the exceptions of consumption to meet biological need and social requirement). For this reason, I would support what would surely be called a “lower standard of living”—a decreased level of ownership and consumption—for many Americans. Many of us have enough; more will not be better for us. On this view, the surprising findings of the happiness studies researchers make sense. A wise person would consume both differently and less than we do.

It is worth repeating that the limits of rational consumption I have been discussing are eudaemonistic or self-regarding limits, not moral limits. The received view is that although moral limits may restrict rational consumption, it would otherwise be infinite, or at least unlimited for all practical purposes. By contrast, my view is that there are self-regarding limits to consumption. This point may seem of merely theoretical interest because the moral limits of justified consumption are much narrower than the eudaemonistic limits. But I would insist that we are constantly tempted to exceed even the eudaemonistic or self-regarding limits of rational ownership and consumption.

We engage in consumption that is deeply irrational in the sense that it is not even rational for the consumer herself and for the consumer *qua* consumer. If we could only believe it, many of us could have less without being worse off. If this view could be worked out, it would be an important conclusion for a society in the process of deciding how to respond to the environmental and other moral limits of consumption. Given such pressing moral limits, no society should support or encourage consumption that fails even the self-regarding test.

But it is not really a social decision to limit consumption that I envision. I do think it would be theoretically possible to organize a system to distribute goods to maximize possession. It would be possible to hold photography contests and distribute the best Nikons to the winners, driving contests to see who deserves a Porsche, examinations to see who needs a personal copy of *A Theory of Justice*. We could set up judges to decide which consumers should get bottles of fine wine, art works, beautiful houses, or tickets to the Super Bowl. And I doubt that the judgment of such official distributors would necessarily be hopelessly arbitrary. But I would not advocate such a system; the bureaucracy required to distribute goods this way would be immense.

Besides, any such system of distribution is plainly fanciful. It is not a real possibility in our culture. Nor do I expect significant leadership toward a more rational form of consumption from our social elites, or from the politically or economically powerful. They are far too deeply enmeshed in their own consumer orientations. And they believe that their own high-consumption lifestyles are the fitting reward for what they do.

Thus, if an ethic of consumption could be developed out of the distinction between ownership and possession, it would be, as the best ethics always are, an internal ethic. It would be a self-imposed and self-enforced commitment to possess what we own, not to acquire what we cannot or will not possess, and to pass

along to others those things we find ourselves owning but not possessing. I believe we would be happier if we lived by this ethic.

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Notes

¹ Amartya Sen and others are now making a start on an alternative model. See, for example, Sen's classic *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1999). In the past 10 years, mainstream economists have started to incorporate considerations of happiness or subjective well-being into economic theory. See Richard Layard, "Happiness and Public Policy: A Challenge to the Profession," *The Economic Journal* 116 Conference Papers (2006): C24–C33 and the references in note 3 below.

² "Success in the 'American Dream,'" notes Peggy Liu, the founder of the Joint U.S.-China Collaboration on Clean Energy, or Jucce, "used to just mean a house, a family of four, and two cars, but now it's escalated to conspicuous consumption as epitomized by Kim Kardashian. China simply cannot follow that path—or the planet will be stripped bare of natural resources to make all that the Chinese consumers want to consume." Cited by Thomas L. Friedman, in his column, "China Needs Its Own Dream" *New York Times*, Retrieved October 2, 2012 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/03/opinion/friedman-china-needs-its-own-dream.html>. (Accessed March 25, 2015).

³ In an article summarizing empirical studies of subjective well-being, David Myers and Ed Diener report: (1) "Once an individual is able to afford life's necessities, increasing affluence matters surprisingly little." (2) The very wealthy are "only slightly happier than the average American." (3) "Those whose income has increased over a 10-year period are not happier than those whose income has not increased." Myers and Diener conclude: "The findings lob a bombshell at modern Western culture's materialism: *Economic growth in affluent countries provides no apparent boost to human morale.*" (Myers, David, & Ed Diener, "The Science of Happiness," *Futurist* 31, no. 5 (1997): S1–S7). (More recent studies have found that greater income accounts for only about 2–5 percent of the variation in happiness, possibly even less once those from the bottom 20 percent in income are subtracted from the total [see Aaron Ahuvia, "If Money Doesn't Make Us Happy, Why Do We Act As If It Does?" *Journal of Economic Psychology* 29 (2008): 491–507]). An early overview of the empirical research on subjective well-being is Robert Edwards Lane, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000). Since then, there has been a wide-ranging, multi-disciplinary discussion of the relation (if any) between subjective well-being and income. Some recent overviews of the literature include: Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton, "High Income Improves Evaluation of Life But Not Emotional Well-Being" *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 107, no. 38 (2010): 16489–16493; Andrew E. Clark, Paul Frijters, and Michael A. Shields, "Relative Income, Happiness, and Utility: An Explanation for the Easterlin Paradox and Other Puzzles," *Journal of Economic Literature* 46 (2008): 95–144; and Richard A. Easterlin et al., "The Happiness–Income Paradox Revisited," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 107 (2010): 22463–22468.

⁴ See, for example, Karl Marx, "Private Property and Communism" in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, tr. and ed. T. B. Bottomore (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 159–162.

⁵ Hardin, Garrett, "The Tragedy of the Commons" *Science, New Series* 162 (1968): 1243–1248.

⁶ Wolfe, Tom. *The Right Stuff* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux), 1979.

⁷ I intend no essentialist connotations with the phrase "becoming myself." I use this phrase as shorthand for "becoming the person I want to be, could become if I had access to the appropriate objects, and possessed these objects rather than merely having or consuming them."

- ⁸Beyond goods required to meet biological need and social requirement, rational consumption must, on my view, be oriented around possession rather than mere consumption. But “oriented around possession” does not mean that a rational consumer must possess each and every item she relates to. A writer composes her novels on a computer. She could learn to possess that computer and if she did, it would be both more useful and also much more meaningful to her. But I would not say that she is *required* to possess her computer in order for her ownership of it to be rational. And what about the disposable pen she uses to make notes to herself along the way?
- ⁹Again, both possession and the ability to possess are limited for any individual—limited by time, natural capabilities, development and training, and the requirement of focused attention. For this reason, the more things any individual already possessed, the less likely she will be to possess an additional good as fully as an alternative consumer. The “marginal rate of possession” is simply meant to indicate this feature of possession. But it is probably not an idea that could be made very precise. It seems destined to run into the same problems of interpersonal comparison that theories of utility have encountered.
- ¹⁰If something like this account has promise, it could be extended to cover gifts. Possession need not be *my* possession. If I give the item to someone else who will possess it, the gift will certainly pass the eudemonistic test. But a humanly valuable gift must be “cashed out” in terms of present or future possession. Lavish gifts cannot serve as an expression of love, for example. Love must be expressed in other ways if only because extravagant gifts can be given by someone who does not, in fact, love the recipient. Indeed, lavish gifts are often used as a cover for the absence of love in marriages and families.

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