



“Summary of article by David A. Crocker: Consumption, Well-Being, and Virtue” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. 14-18.

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## **“Summary of article by David A. Crocker: Consumption, Well-Being, and Virtue”**

How should we evaluate current U.S. consumption patterns? Alan Durning asks, "How much is enough?" But the question is incomplete. We must ask, "How much of *what*?" "Enough for *whom*?" and "Enough for *what purpose*?" In search of answers to such basic questions, this essay analyzes the consumerist ideal and three philosophical visions of the good life - utilitarianism, basic-needs ethics, and the capabilities ethic.

### **American Consumerism**

The "shop 'til you drop" ethos pervades our popular culture. One of the essential features of consumerism is the production of new consumer goods and the desire for them. Americans find meaning and self-esteem in buying and having an ever-changing ensemble of consumer goods.

However, even in a consumerist society most people want possessions not just for their own sakes, but also because of what they bring the consumer - including physical well-being, creature comforts, pleasure, and fantasy. Consumption choices express meaning and personal identity. However, if commodities are the means to, rather than the meaning of, well-being, we must ask again, What is worth achieving for its own sake?

### **Utilitarianism**

Following Amartya Sen's approach<sup>1</sup>, utilitarianism may be described as a philosophy that identifies human well-being, welfare, and utility, with the mental state of happiness or the satisfaction of preferences. From a utilitarian perspective, and looking only at the individual, whatever maximizes individual happiness is best. This need not always mean that more is better; consuming the wrong things, or too many things that are enjoyable in moderate quantities, could be less satisfying than consuming less. However, it tends to endorse an open-ended process of accumulation of consumer goods.

Is utilitarianism the answer? Should we identify happiness or preference satisfaction with well-being? While happiness is an intrinsic part of well-being, it is not alone sufficient. Almost everyone, no matter how wealthy or destitute, finds some reasons to be happy at times; happiness can camouflage, and distort objective deprivation such as malnutrition and morbidity. On the other hand, discontent and frustration often motivate genuine achievement and the fulfillment it brings.

### **Basic Human Needs**

A second normative perspective starts from the assumption that there is a fundamental difference between real needs and 'false needs' or mere desires. But what needs are basic? Indispensability for biological survival, as in the provisions needed for famine relief, sets an extremely low threshold. Basic-needs theorists often include many further goals concerning physical and mental health, social development, and others. If the list becomes too long, however, it loses its moral urgency. An extensive list of basic needs must be defended in terms of a conception of well-being or the good life. The distinction between natural and artificial needs is problematic, and conceptions of what is "natural" vary widely. The needs that seem "basic" to many people vary over time, and often past luxuries come to be treated as necessities.

Although the basic-needs perspective is an improvement over utilitarianism, it remains incomplete. It suffers from conceptual unclarity about what needs are and the means to meet or satisfy them; it tends toward a static perspective that overlooks changing perceptions of needs; it often fails to be clear about why it is important to meet "basic" needs, beyond minimal biological survival levels.

## The Capability Ethic

A third approach answers the question, How much is enough for *what?*, with the response for human virtue." Such an approach is perhaps best represented by the neo-Aristotelian approaches of philosopher Martha Nussbaum and economist Amartya Sen<sup>2</sup>. For Nussbaum, virtues are the capabilities to perform valuable human 'functions' or activities; to have a virtue is to be able to be and act in valuable ways.<sup>3</sup> Nussbaum's long list of valuable capabilities may be grouped into three categories, with a few examples noted in each case: bodily virtues (good health, nourishment, escaping avoidable morbidity and premature mortality); individuality virtues (ability to have pleasurable experiences, function cognitively, make autonomous choices, enjoy self-respect); and social virtues (ability to engage in friendship, recreation, participation in family, communal, and political life). Sen defines an individual's well-being as her own valuable bodily, individual, and functions or activities as well as the capabilities for those activities.

The neo-Aristotelian virtue ethic differs from the stoic ideal of the good life. Rather than renunciation of goods and desires, the Aristotelian argues that we realize our greatest achievements by satisfying *certain* desires, meeting human needs, pressing against limits, and coping with misfortune. Consumption is unjustified when it weakens the prospects for realizing our valuable capabilities.

One advantage of the capabilities approach is that it recognizes individual and social variation in the level of consumption needed to achieve desired objectives. The same level of nutrition may require different types and amounts of food for different individuals; the virtue of being able to appear in public without shame requires different clothing in different times and places. Participation in a more affluent society inevitably requires greater affluence, a point missed by some proponents of the simple life.

## **American Consumption and Human Virtues**

Suppose a consensus were to evolve around a core of fundamental human virtues such as Sen and Nussbaum's list. What evaluation of current American consumption is implied by that consensus? A brief examination suggests that many Americans have too much of some things, and not enough of others, for their own good.

In relation to "bodily virtues" of health, nourishment, and shelter, the poor often cannot afford minimally acceptable physical functioning, while those with economic advantages are under pressure to work longer and harder, sometimes "working themselves to death." Turning to "individuality virtues," dissatisfaction and discontent with consumer society are widespread; compulsive or addictive consumption is common, fueled in part by advertising and fashion. Rational discussion is more common about topics such as cars and sports than about political life. Social virtues are undermined by the pressures to work and earn money for consumption. Middle-class Americans are so pressed for time that they often cannot be very good spouses, parents, friends, citizens, or environmental trustees. Even the available leisure time becomes commodified, as days off from work become opportunities for shopping.

## **Toward Conscientious Consumption**

"Conscientious consumption is consumption that is good for the consumer, fair to other people, and sustainable with respect to the environment. ... The neo-Aristotelian approach in virtue ethics has emerged as the most promising way to conceptualize human well-being and the good life and assess current American consumption. It provides us with a persuasive and explicit vision of human well-being. Conscientious consumption is consumption that promotes, secures, and expresses the diverse constituents - both self- and other-regarding - of a good human life." (26-27)

## Notes

1. A. Sen, "The Standard of Living," in The Standard of Living, ed. Geoffrey Hawthorn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
2. D. Crocker, "Functioning and Capability: The Foundations of Sen's and Nussbaum's Development Ethic," Political Theory 20 (1992): 584-612; "Functioning and Capability: The Foundation of Sen's and Nussbaum's Development Ethics, Part 2," in Women, Culture and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities, ed. M. Nussbaum and J. Glover (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 153-99.
3. M. Nussbaum, "Non-relative virtues: An Aristotolian Approach," in The Quality of Life, ed. M. Nussbaum and A. Sen. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 242-76.