

CHAPTER 17

VALUES FOR SURVIVAL

17.1 Limitations of this analysis

Viewed from the perspective of commerce and growth, the values reviewed in the last chapter call for endorsement rather than replacement. Desire for wealth keeps the economy humming, abetted by consumer values like gratification and convenience that induce consumers to part with their money. Judged from an environmental perspective, however, these values are deeply implicated in the ever-expanding economic activity that is destroying the very ecosystem on which such activity depends. From this latter perspective, it is a matter of utmost importance that these values be neutralized and replaced by others more conducive to a healthy environment. The present chapter is an attempt to identify a suitable set of replacement values.

There are several qualifications to make explicit before we begin. For one thing, it should be emphasized that the project at hand is not an exercise of ethical theory. Just as our criticism of consumer values in Chapter 16 was not that they are morally wrong (although some may be), so the values discussed in the present chapter are not put forward as morally right. The factor recommending these latter values is the promise they show of being environmentally benign, in contrast with those of the previous chapter which are environmentally harmful.

An example, by way of anticipation, is the value of moderation, which will be put forward as an antidote to the harmful value of gratification. Although moderation (and its close cousin, temperance) is a personal character trait recommended by moral philosophers going back at least to Plato and Aristotle, our concern here is not with personal virtues. Our concern is with moderation as a social value, which is to say an attribute valued by society at large. And the reason moderation should be preferred over gratification has to do with their respective ecological impacts, rather than one's superiority over the other from a moral perspective.

Another qualification concerns limitations in evidence upon which preferences like that of moderation over gratification can be based. The case against gratification is backed up by extensive data showing the adverse environmental effects of the fast-food industry (section 16.2), to mention just one example among many. But there is not much evidence showing that the effects of moderation would be markedly better in that regard. The reason is simply that social values have effects only when actually operative (section 15.3), and there are no societies readily at hand in which moderation has operative status.

A consequence of this limitation is that the case for moderation as a replacement value must be largely hypothetical. *If* this value were operative in a given social context, I shall argue in effect, then its ecological impact would be far less damaging than that of the value (e.g., gratification) it is posited as replacing. While an inference of this sort falls short of certainty, at least it is subject to possible verification.

In order to keep inferences of this sort in focus, we shall consider potential replacement values in explicit contrast with harmful values from the previous chapter which they might replace. Thus moderation will be considered in contrast with gratification, and so forth. Association between opposites of this sort, however, will not always be unique. Moderation will also be considered as a possible replacement of acquisition, and values other than moderation (e.g., forbearance) will be considered as a potential replacement for gratification. Although values in the real world might not be grouped so neatly, this tactic will make our task more manageable.

17.2 Moderation

In the discussion of pleasure above (section 16.2), the junk-food industry was portrayed as a major beneficiary of this particular social value. The discussion focused mainly on the fare of fast-food restaurants, notably carbonated beverages and highly flavored hamburgers. Although fast-food establishments obviously serve other values as well (especially convenience,

section 16.4), we shall continue to treat these products as designed to provide pleasure and gratification.

The value of pleasure is operative in social contexts where gratification of natural urges is generally approved as a motive for action (section 15.4). A sign that contemporary consumer society answers to that description is that few questions are asked when children are raised on a diet of soda pop, hamburgers, and greasy French fries. Designers of these foods make sure that most children find them enjoyable to eat. And given the general approbation of pleasure in consumer society, people find it normal that children (like everyone else) should eat what they find pleasurable and gratifying.

Given the operative status of this value, moreover, parents are not held in disapprobation when they take their kids regularly to fast-food restaurants. Teenagers feel free to indulge themselves daily on sweet drinks and fried fat because their peers can be counted on to do the same. And adults do not hesitate to “treat” themselves frequently because they have been brought up to think of it as normal behavior.

We have already noted that taste-treats of this sort are a primary cause of obesity and its attendant health problems. Indeed, most of the recent coverage of junk food in the media has been preoccupied with these effects on health. Our present concern, however, is with their environmental effects. As detailed in section 16.2, both the production of junk food and its delivery to the consumer result in extensive damage to the biosphere. What can be done to curtail that damage?

One positive step in this direction is to impose limits on the marketing of the products involved. An example is the recent ban announced by the British Office of Communications (Ofcom) on the advertising of junk food and drink in conjunction with TV shows that attract a large proportion of teenagers under the age of sixteen.¹ Another expedient would be to increase taxes on the offending products, in hopes of discouraging their consumption.² A potentially more effective (albeit less direct) approach, however, is to disengage the social values that

encourage people to spend money on junk food in the first place. In the context of the present discussion, this amounts to rendering the value of gratification and associated values inoperative.

In effect, the value in question constitutes social approval of doing things expressly for the purpose of gaining pleasure. One thing needed to render the value of gratification inoperative is to eliminate, or at least to diminish, this approval. If something like this were to happen, people would no longer automatically assume that pleasure-seeking on their part would go unnoticed by their peers. They would think twice before buying a carton of soda pop in the presence of strangers, and would be less prone to take their kids to fast-food restaurants on a regular basis. Doing things just for pleasure would be a bit like scratching an itch in public; once in a while it might pass without notice, but doing it with abandon would make people stare.

Eliminating social approval is different from the onset of disapproval. A more positive tactic for discouraging pleasure as a social value would be the establishment of an opposing value that leads people to view pleasure-seeking with some degree of disapprobation. One contrasting value of this sort mentioned previously is that of moderation. A close relative is the social value (not the character trait) of temperance.³ Let us consider the effect of such values on pleasure-seeking behavior, supposing for the moment that they are operative in some relevant society.

One thing to observe initially is that moderation and temperance are commendatory values. They are not approbatory because there is no natural desire to act in such a manner, and they are not normative because lack of moderation and the like is not proscribed as flatly wrong (so at least we will assume). Recalling the discussion of Chapter 15, let us review what it is for a commendatory value of this sort to be operative.

A social value is operative if, for the most part, it is looked on favorably by members of the social group in question. This is indicated by a tendency of individuals to maintain the value in their personal behavior and by a general expectation that others will do the same. In the case

of commendatory values specifically, the favorable outlook of society at large provides positive motivation for undertaking activity that exhibits the value in question (section 15.5).

Given a social context in which the value of moderation is operative, accordingly, people in that context will practice moderation in their personal behavior. This means that they will avoid excesses of food and drink, and generally will comport themselves without self-indulgence. In particular, it means that they will not over-indulge in pleasurable activity. When presented with opportunities for experiencing pleasure, they typically will react with restraint rather than unbridled enthusiasm.

Moreover, they will expect other people to behave moderately as a matter of course. Self-indulgence of any sort will be considered unseemly, especially with regard to the pursuit of pleasure. Lack of moderation in particular cases will often call for explanation, insofar as it is perceived as a deviation from standard behavior. Avoidance of excess, on the other hand, will be considered normal and as such beyond need for explanation.

In contexts where the value of moderation is fully operative, in brief, over-indulgence in pleasure will strike most people as deviant and out of the ordinary. Seeking pleasure for its own sake will be generally discouraged. Contrary to the general approbation that marks pleasure itself as a social value, when the value of moderation is socially operative the unrestrained pursuit of pleasure is generally held in disapprobation.

Hypothetical as such circumstances may be, if social approval of pleasure as a motive for action were withdrawn, and if a countervailing value such as moderation were to become operative instead, then the influence of pleasure on consumer behavior would be effectively nullified.⁴ This would have significant consequences for the marketing of highly profitable products like soda pop, fatty hamburgers, and french fries. While such consequences alone would not put fast-food chains out of business, their products would become less likely to sell just because of the pleasure derived from consuming them.

Other social values that might counteract pleasure in this general manner are those of restraint and forbearance. As far as its impact on the pursuit of pleasure is concerned, restraint from self-indulgence is tantamount to exercising moderation. Forbearance likewise is a form of abstaining from the immoderate pursuit of pleasurable activity.

It should be emphasized that the disengagement of pleasure as a social value is not a recipe for a dreary life. Even if values like forbearance and moderation were firmly established in the public arena, they would not eliminate our natural tendency to drink what we enjoy drinking, to eat what we find pleasant, or to engage in other activities we generally find gratifying. Their effect instead would be to hold in check whatever inclination we have to indulge those tastes on every available occasion. Human life, after all, may be more enjoyable when it is not preoccupied with the constant pursuit of enjoyment.

17.3 Simplicity

In its primary sense, the term ‘simplicity’ means absence of complexity. It can also mean lack of artifice and affectation, as well as freedom from ostentation. With respect to life-style in particular, however, it connotes the absence of luxury. This is the sense employed in the present section.

The present section is concerned with simplicity as a potential replacement for the social value of comfort. As may be recalled from Chapter 16, comfort is a value largely responsible for the flourishing market in air-conditioners, both in the U.S. and in urban areas of Europe and Asia. Alleviating the extensive ecological damage caused by air-conditioners (section 16.3) requires cutting back on their use. And this in turn involves dislodging comfort from its current status as a dominant value in consumer society.

Rendering the value of comfort inoperative is basically a matter of changing society’s general endorsement of comfort as a state worth achieving. As with pleasure already mentioned, this change would occur in two phases. One would amount to a retraction of society’s

encouragement (i.e., its commendation) of comfort-oriented behavior. The other would be to establish a countervailing value that leads to comfort-seeking being expressly discouraged.

Simplicity is one such value. Given that simplicity in this connection has to do with lifestyle rather than satisfaction of basic urges, it constitutes a commendatory rather than an approbatory value (section 15.5). The value-change called for, accordingly, is the replacement of one commendatory value by another. For the change to take effect would be for society to stop recommending the pursuit of comfort and to begin recommending simplicity in personal pursuits instead.⁵

For society to encourage simplicity in the personal affairs of its members would be for simplicity to be operative as a social value (section 15.3). Given the sense of simplicity specified previously, this would be tantamount to society encouraging its members to avoid luxury in their personal behavior. Insofar as comforts of the sort in question (e.g., air-conditioning) are forms of luxury, the effect would be to discourage individuals from the pursuit of luxurious comfort.

In contemplating this possibility, we should be assured that foregoing comforts like air-conditioning and cushy furniture does not entail a monastic existence. Abandoning one extreme does not require embracing the other. Simplicity is a matter of avoiding luxury, which is different from a Spartan self-denial.

Nor does a general avoidance of luxury require the withholding of amenities under special conditions. With regard to air-conditioning in particular, we should bear in mind that it serves many purposes other than personal comfort. We value air-conditioning for its role in shielding asthmatic children from allergens, for the climate-control it provides in museums and libraries, for its making possible the installation of large computers in closed quarters, and so forth. There is no reason why such applications should be unavailable in societies rejecting the use of air-conditioning as a personal luxury.

Needless to say, the borderline between luxury and necessity in this regard remains elusive. There are certain uses of air-conditioning technology that at first appear essential but

probably fall under the category of luxury instead. An example is its use in buildings without natural cooling capacities, such as glass-encased sky-scrapers and high-rise apartment dwellings. In some structures of this sort, reliance on air-conditioning could be reduced by expedients as simple as operable windows. In cases where a building's design makes air-conditioning unavoidable, on the other hand, a society attuned to environmental impacts might view such a building itself as a dispensable luxury.

Another illustration of luxuries masquerading as necessities is the construction of retirement homes in sweltering climates for people who are not habituated to those conditions. Although air-conditioning might really be needed to make these structures habitable (even natives could not live in sealed-up buildings), their very existence might come to be seen as a luxury that society can ill afford in the first place. More will be said on this topic in the final chapter.

To recapitulate, if simplicity were to replace comfort as a dominant social value, many people would still be served by air-conditioning in their daily routines. This is true especially of people who spend time in museums, libraries, and children's hospitals, as well those who are aged or otherwise infirm. As far as the general population is concerned, however, most of us would no longer consider it imperative to maintain our living spaces at 68° Fahrenheit. Most of us would adapt to prevailing temperatures as a matter of course, like our ancestors did before air-conditioning was invented. This would be especially good news for a beleaguered environment struggling to cope with the impact of an invasive technology.

There are other social values that might replace comfort with similar effect, among them austerity and asceticism. Austerity is equivalent to extreme simplicity, connoting a life-style stripped of non-essentials. Asceticism is exemplified, in turn, by strict self-denial and by abstinence from creature comforts. Since both austerity and asceticism rule out indulgence in luxury, both would counteract the force of comfort as a consumer value.

It is not inconceivable that cultures might actually exist in which abstemious values such as these have operative force. Ancient Sparta comes to mind as a possible instance. But such values are often accompanied by authoritarianism and repression, which in themselves have little environmental merit. It is better to pursue simplicity with society's encouragement than to be deprived of luxuries by dictatorial authority.

17.4 Patience

Simplicity would also go a considerable way in counteracting the horrific effects of private transportation upon the environment. A simple life-style would naturally lead one to rely, whenever possible, upon simple means of transportation. Valuing simplicity in this regard, a person would choose to get around by walking or peddling rather than by motorized vehicles, and when motorized assistance was needed would go by bus rather than by private automobile. Obviously enough, the more people there are making choices like these, the more the biosphere at large would benefit.

When the ecological damage resulting from automobiles was discussed in the previous chapter (section 16.4), however, it was taken to illustrate the adverse effects of the value of convenience. To some extent, the value of simplicity does indeed tend to counteract these adverse effects. For example, someone committed to a simple life-style would probably eschew conveniences like power cultivators and electric hair-driers. But there are other values that seem to oppose convenience more directly. One such is the social value of patience.

It may at first seem counterintuitive to think of patience as a social value. We commonly consider patience to be a quality of character, thinking of a patient person (a person with that quality) as someone who can endure set-backs and inconvenience. The transition in thought from character trait to social value is enabled by the observation that society can either value or fail to value the quality of patience on the part of its individual members. Inasmuch as a social value is something valued by society generally (section 15.2), patience counts as a social value to

the extent that it is held in esteem by society overall. A little reflection shows that it is a commendatory value (section 15.5), meaning that people are motivated to behave with patience by the positive encouragement of other people.

Given this meaning of patience as a social value, its opposition to convenience seems obvious. In contexts where the value of convenience is operative, people will look for convenient ways of doing things as a matter of course. They will tend to find labor-saving devices attractive, and will be inclined to exchange money for them when an occasion arises. Manufacturers will find it profitable to develop labor-saving products, which can be effectively marketed on the basis of the convenience they provide.

In contexts where the value of patience is operative, by contrast, avoiding inconvenience will not be taken as an end in itself. People will be inclined to spend the time and effort necessary to “do things naturally,” and generally will not find labor-saving devices particularly attractive. Manufacturers will shy away from convenience-oriented products, and marketers will not emphasize convenience in presenting products to potential buyers. When patience is operative, in brief, it will tend to nullify the effect of convenience as a motivating value.

As with the consumer values of pleasure and comfort above, two steps are probably required to render the value of convenience ineffective. One would amount to withdrawing social encouragement of convenience-prompted behavior. If this were to happen, people would no longer consider it “cool” to own the latest snow blower and riding lawn-mower (regardless of area to be shoveled or mowed). The other step would amount to the establishment of a countervailing social value, patience or some effective equivalent. If this were to happen, people would start looking at purchases motivated primarily by convenience with lack of sympathy or even disapproval.

As far as the bane of private transportation is concerned, we have already allowed that use of automobiles is motivated by various values other than convenience alone (section 16.4). People own cars for reasons having to do with expressing individual personalities (e.g.,

Hummers vs. hybrids), as well as with autonomy and social status. But convenience remains a major factor in their day-by-day use. We find it easier to drive than to walk when visiting a friend around the block. We would rather drive the kids to school ourselves than contend with the vagaries of a car pool. And we find it convenient to drive our own cars to work, even when public transportation is readily available.

It is with respect to mundane activities like these that the value of patience would probably make the most difference if it were socially operative. To be sure, dealing with a car pool can be a nuisance and a bother, and waiting for a bus is often annoying. But these are inconveniences that a patient person can typically endure. If a substantial number of current car owners were to show this kind of patience, the environmental benefits would be considerable.

There of course are other values that would tend to dampen the environmental effects associated with the use of private automobiles. In addition to simplicity, as already noted, there is the “old-fashioned” value of self-reliance. To the extent that a person is self-reliant, he or she is less dependent on automotive technology. Another is the value of independence, in the basic sense of managing things oneself without need of assistance.

Given that automobiles often count among our most prized possessions, moreover, other countervailing values would include those that act contrary to the value of acquisition. One such is the value of personal contentment, to which we turn next.

17.5 Contentment

A characteristic mark of consumer societies is the high value they place on acquisition (section 16.5). In such societies, people are motivated to go shopping both by social pressure (typically applied through advertising) and by the example of their peers. Acquisition thus is a commendatory value (section 15.5), encouraging the purchase of goods and services that are often unneeded.

The activities of supplying and consuming unneeded products impose unnecessary stress on an already overburdened biosphere. From an environmental perspective, it appears urgent that the motivation to buy such products be effectively neutralized. This amounts to neutralizing the influence of acquisition as a motivating value, which (as before) might take place in two stages. One is to render the value itself inoperative, thus eliminating social encouragement to make superfluous purchases. The other stage amounts to establishing a countervailing value by which needless purchases would be actively discouraged.

One value that would have this negative effect is that of contentment. The sense of contentment intended here is not a matter of uncaring complacency, as when one is content to leave other people to fend for themselves. The sense is rather that of being satisfied with what one has, when one already has enough for a decent existence. To be content is to be at ease with one's current circumstances, and not to feel the need for anything more.

With respect to personal possessions in particular, to be content is to be uninterested in acquiring further private goods. Being content, of course, is a personal characteristic, and hence distinct from contentment as a social value. Contentment becomes a social value when society at large comes to value that characteristic on the part of its individual members. In the manner of social values generally (section 15.3), the value of contentment is operative in a given social context when people are encouraged by their peers to show contentment in their personal affairs. Under the influence of that motivation, members of the social group will tend to feel content with circumstances that are already tolerable and will encourage others to do the same.

In societies where acquisition is a dominant social value, people will seek out occasions to make new purchases and will seldom be content with what they already have. In societies where contentment dominates, by contrast, people will tend to find what they have sufficient and will show little interest in new acquisitions. This is the manner in which the two values are opposed. Just as one is a mainstay of consumer society, so the other tends to stifle obsessive consumption.

As with other social values we have been considering, the value of contentment might be operative without applying to all aspects of social existence indiscriminately. Indeed, there may be certain contexts in which contentment is treated as something actually to be avoided. An example is the context of athletic competition, where competitors are exhorted to be content without nothing short of victory. Other examples could be found in the domains of health, education, and character development.

Our present concern, however, is restricted to contentment with respect to physical possessions. In contexts where contentment is operative as a social value, one can expect public support for remaining satisfied with material belongings adequate for a decent life. To the extent that this value becomes operative, it should tend to reverse at least some of the damage inflicted by consumerism upon our beleaguered environment.

Another value that might have a similar effect is moderation, considered above as an antidote to the environmentally pernicious value of gratification. Social pressure that moves people to avoid excessive pleasure-seeking as unseemly might also motivate them to show like restraint in acquiring physical goods.

Character traits like moderation and contentment have long been recognized by moral philosophers and theologians as personal virtues (section 15.5). We now can see that they have environmental ramifications as well. When the exercise of these virtues is reinforced by public approval—i.e., when moderation and contentment are operative as social values—they also work to the advantage of the ecosystems that support human existence.

17.6 Equity

Our discussion of social values began in Chapter 14 with a series of moral quandaries stemming from industrialized society's disproportionate use of the biosphere's nonrenewable resources. Prior to this, we had concluded that the current environmental crisis has been precipitated by excessive use of nonrenewable energy (Chapters 5 and 6), that this excessive

energy use is part of a pattern of continuing economic growth (Chapter 7), and that economic growth is driven by desire for wealth (Chapter 13). The upshot is that desire for wealth is largely to blame for our environmental crisis.

To all appearances, wealth is one of the most firmly entrenched values in modern industrial society. Moreover, desire for wealth appears to be among current society's strongest motivational influences. This is due, at least in part, to wealth's unusual status as both an approbatory and a commendatory value (section 16.6). Because of this dual role, pursuit of wealth receives social support in two different ways. Given its approbatory role, desire for wealth is sanctioned as an acceptable motive for action. And in its commendatory role, activity undertaken in pursuit of wealth receives positive social encouragement.

Because the value of wealth is so firmly ingrained in current society, it may be harder to dislodge than consumer values such as pleasure and convenience discussed previously. Whereas pleasure, for instance, presumably could be replaced by (i) withdrawing social approval of pleasure as a motive for action and (ii) establishing as operative a countervailing (commendatory) value like moderation instead, the displacement of wealth as an operative social value appears to require stronger measures. This requirement brings normative values back into the picture.

In the classification of social values put forward in Chapter 15, normative values were characterized as having more force than values of either approbatory or commendatory nature (section 15.6). Like both of these others, normative values support certain kinds of behavior as socially acceptable. Beyond this, however, a normative value (like honesty) presents the behavior it supports as not merely acceptable but also obligatory. Normative values carry with them a distinction between right and wrong. What is right is deemed mandatory and hence prescribed, whereas what is wrong is proscribed and subject to sanctions. While sanctions vary from case to case, they must be strict enough to elicit compliance if the value is to maintain its operative status.

Put otherwise, normative values establish standards of acceptable behavior; and these standards are kept in place by adverse consequences that follow when they are not met. This is the kind of force that may be needed to counteract the effects of the value assigned to wealth in contemporary society. What normative value, or values, might be available for this purpose?

To prepare for an answer, let us return to the moral quandaries previously mentioned. The first (quandary (1) of section 14.2) is posed by the fact that a few people have accumulated enormous amounts of wealth in support of lifestyles unavailable to the vast majority, and in the process have brought the biosphere to a state of near-collapse. The lives of many are threatened by the wealthy lifestyles of a few. Whatever else one may think of it, this state of affairs involves a profound injustice.

The second quandary (2) stems from the fact that our current opulent lifestyles are enabled by an extravagant expenditure of resources that future generations might need just to stay alive. This shows a callous selfishness, to say the least. In the view of anyone with moral sensibility, it is likely to appear inequitable to an extreme degree.

Quandary (3) arises with the observation that our practices of economic production result in the destruction of countless living creatures, often to the point of exterminating entire species. Although intuitions vary, this strikes many people as grossly unfair. Why should multitudes of other creatures have to die in order to sustain economic growth at a level profitable to human beings? If we are to be honest with ourselves, this question has no positive answer.

Our current economic practices result in an *unjust* distribution of wealth among people now alive, involve an *inequitable* appropriation of natural resources likely to be needed by future generations, and cause *unfair* injury to uncounted numbers of other living creatures. These grievous consequences are tolerable only in societies that *permit* injustice, inequity, and unfairness. Conversely, in societies where the normative values of justice, equity, and fairness are operative, consequences of this sort would not be tolerated.

In a way that might be instructive, the three quandaries reiterated above epitomize our environmental crisis. *If* we weren't (1) engaged in lifestyles undermining the ecosystems on which human life depends, *if* we weren't (2) squandering resources likely to be needed by future generations, and *if* we weren't (3) killing off thousands of other species, *then* we probably wouldn't be confronted with an environmental crisis in the first place. Although the crisis extends beyond these particular moral issues, taken together they go to the heart of the problem. Any steps successfully taken to resolve these issues would go a long way toward resolving the overall problem as well.

Let us spell out why this is the case. A major portion of the present study has been given over to showing that the economic practices of industrialized society are largely responsible for our environmental crisis. These practices are also responsible for the moral quandaries we have been discussing in particular (section 14.2). Given the role desire for wealth plays in motivating these practices (Chapter 13), it follows that both the general crisis and the particular quandaries are due largely to the value industrialized society ascribes to wealth. Both are due, that is to say, to wealth operating as a social value.

As just observed, furthermore, those particular quandaries would not arise in societies where justice, equity, and fairness are operative social values. With regard to these quandaries specifically, the normative values of justice, equity, and fairness, if operative, would have the force needed to cancel out the morally pernicious effects of the value currently assigned to wealth. The reason is simply that the quandaries could arise only in social contexts where unjust, inequitable, and unfair practices are permitted, which is to say that they would not arise when such practices are not permitted. In brief, the quandaries would not arise in contexts where justice, equity, and fairness are in force as normative social values.

To the extent that these normative social values would cancel out the pernicious effects of wealth in the case of these quandaries, moreover, they would be effective as well in counteracting wealth as a primary cause of our general crisis. This is not to say that these values

would be enough by themselves to set our environmental affairs aright. For reasons laid out earlier in this chapter, remedial values like moderation, simplicity, and patience would also be needed. As far as the value of wealth is concerned, however, its damaging effects would be largely nullified if these several normative values were to become operative.

As operative social values, it may be noted, justice, equity, and fairness amount to pretty much the same thing. While distinctions could still be drawn among them, in practical effect the others would be tantamount to equity itself. In social contexts where equity is operative as a normative value, rich people would not accumulate enormous amounts of wealth at the expense of the poor, a privileged few would not engage lifestyles that threaten the existence of future generations, and other species would not face extinction by our zealous economic practices. Thus it is that equity would serve as antidote to the destructive value of wealth.

But for equity to be established as an operative normative value, penalties must be forthcoming for noncompliance. What this means for practical purposes is that agents (individual or corporate) who exploit others in pursuit of wealth must be subject to social sanctions. Given the arena in which the value is to operate, such sanctions would be largely economic in nature. Examples might be progressive taxes on higher incomes and boycotts of businesses whose activities cause harm to other species. We return to the topic of remedial measures in the final chapter.

17.7 Living with alternative social values

Before turning to possible remedial measures, let us reflect further on the kind of remedy required. In bare essentials, what is required is a worldwide shift in social values. Values built up over two or three centuries of consumerism got us into this mess in the first place. And the most promising way out requires eradicating those values in favor of others that are environmentally more friendly.

This obviously is a very tall order. A change in social values of such magnitude will carry with it fundamental alterations in the societies involved. It will also affect the individual lives of people within those societies, bringing about significant changes in their day-by-day existence.

For many people, the prospect of having to deal with significant changes in their daily lives can be a scary business. To make the prospect more palatable, we should realize that such changes for the most part would be for the better. For the most part, that is to say, individual lives would be more satisfactory in a society incorporating environmentally friendly values than in present-day society dominated by consumption and profiteering.

To help make this apparent, compare what we will call the “contentment ratio” of alternative future societies. A society’s contentment ratio is the proportion of its members who are content with their lives to those who are chronically discontent. The two societies we shall compare in this regard are society P, which *perpetuates* the values of current society, and society S in which these values have been *superseded* by values congenial to a health environment.

For the comparison to be realistic, it must take place far enough in the future to allow the changes in successor society S to take place. Let us assume a time lapse of two generations, or about 50 years. If no significant change in values takes place by then, society P will be in dire straits indeed. There will be widespread hunger due to drought, massive dislocation of populations due to climate change, and few natural resources left by which human suffering might be alleviated. While a few pockets of wealth might remain, the vast majority of human beings will be living in poverty and destitution.

In the worst-case scenario, the biosphere will be degraded to a point where it can no longer support human society as we currently know it. In this case, the privileges of wealth will no longer be available and what is left of society will be in a state of desperation. Worst scenario or not, the contentment ratio of society P in 50 years will be much lower than what would be found if the measure were applied today.

Version S, on the other hand, is the social order that would exist 50 years from now if the values of consumer society had been effectively replaced by the environmentally friendly values of the sort we have been discussing. During the interim while these values were taking effect, the relationship between the biosphere and its human inhabitants will have been gradually improving. (If not, we have not located the right replacement values.) At the 50-year mark, climate change will be abating, food supplies will be stabilizing, and gross disparities in wealth will be mostly eliminated. On balance, most inhabitants of S will be better off than the majority of people living today, and their overall contentment ratio would be significantly higher.

However this plays out in detail, the contentment ratio of S will be higher than today and that of P will be considerably lower. This shows that a shift from present-day consumer values to a set of values favorable to environmental health almost certainly would be a change for the better. Whatever vicissitudes you and I undergo in the process, as reasonable people we have no better choice than committing ourselves to doing the best we can to help bring such a shift in values about.

Be this as it may, the hard reality of the matter is that any concerted effort to rid contemporary society of its consumer values is sure to be met with determined resistance. It will be resisted by marketing specialists who make their living inducing consumers to spend money, by corporate managers paid high salaries to maximize profits, and by mainstream economists dedicated to perpetual growth. It will be resisted most vigorously, perhaps, by people who use money as a means to political power and by the politicians who benefit from their largesse. How can such opposition be overcome?

Contrary to the traditional communist line,⁶ I am convinced that a resort to armed violence would be counterproductive. There are several reasons for this conviction. One is that sustained violence tends to be immoderate and acquisitive, hence contrary to the very values that need to be established (sections 17.2, 17.5). Another is that armed violence itself is environmentally destructive, and thus contrary to the goal of environmental healing.⁷ Yet another

is that the violent overthrow of power brings new power to bear, which often is no less favorable to the environment than the power overthrown.⁸

Much more promising, it seems to me, would be an incremental approach working within the current economic system rather than directly opposing it. One possible strategy would be some form of “peaceful resistance,” in the tradition of Thoreau (“Civil Disobedience”), Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King. If large numbers of “consumers” acting en masse were to make a point of not buying soda pop, for example, manufacturers would soon learn that products cannot always be sold on the basis of gratifying flavor alone. This would be a point in favor of the value of moderation.

Another approach might be modeled after the techniques of ju-jitsu, in which the force of an opponent’s attack is turned to the attacker’s disadvantage. An example would be using the power of advertising to instruct people on how advertising can be resisted. A precedent of sorts is the “Surgeon General’s Warning” printed on cigarette packages. Effective use of this technique would advance the social value of contentment by making people less prone to the blandishments of advertising.

Approaches like the above are pursued in a public setting. There are also tactics that can be pursued by individuals acting privately. One example is unplugging the television set,⁹ thus making oneself unavailable to corporate sponsors. If enough people were to do this on an individual basis, the effect would be like a mass of tree roots breaking up a stone. The wiles of marketing cannot prevail against a grass-roots refusal to pay attention to its images. Success in this venture would strike a blow for simplicity against all the clutter introduced by watching television.

These examples provide a prelude to the final chapter. One standard way of ending a study like this is to propose a series of *policies* by which needed reforms might be implemented. The trouble with policy statements, however, is that they stipulate what should be done but leave the doing to other people. Another way is pursued in the following chapter which concludes the

study. This final chapter suggests practical remedies one might undertake on one's own, or else in cooperation with like-minded people.

Notes

1. According to <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2006/nor/27/advertising.supermarkets> (accessed March 2009), this ban has affected supermarkets particularly. An indication of the potential impact of such a ban can be gathered from a recent report that 82% of all promotions by Australian food companies are aimed at bringing junk food products to the attention of young people (http://www.cancercouncil.com.au/html/aboutus/media/mediareleases/aug1306_junkfood_tactics.htm; accessed March 2009).
2. A tax of this sort (sometimes referred to as the “Twinkie tax”) has occasionally been proposed to combat the problem of obesity (http://blog.nutritiondata.com/dieting_weight_loss_blog/2008/01/should-there-be.html; accessed March 2009). For various reasons, such initiatives have generally proved politically unpopular.
3. Moderation and temperance overlap in that each involves avoidance of extremes. The term ‘temperance’ may be less suitable for our purposes because of its association with the temperance movement (early 20th century) opposed to the use of alcohol, which of course can be used in moderation.
4. In *Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism* (Allyn & Bacon Publishers, 2008), p. 21, Richard Robbins remarks that the creation of consumer economy required a change from “such values as thrift, modesty, and moderation, toward a value system that encouraged spending and ostentatious display.” What is needed now is a reversal of that change.
5. A few days after this section was drafted, the Vatican’s ambassador to the U.N. announced that Catholics “should do something about climate change by adopting a life of voluntary simplicity” (*Catholic News Service*, April 24, 2007).

6. In the last paragraph of *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx declared that the ends he and Engels advocated could be attained “only by the forceful overthrow of all existing social conditions.” Whether or not this is true of the ends Marx advocated, it is not true of the aims motivating the present study. This study is aimed at bringing society into harmony with its supporting environment, without essential regard to how one or another social class (“bourgeoisie” or “proletariat”) is affected in the process.
7. There is an extensive literature on the environmental effects of warfare, over periods ranging from ancient to contemporary. This issue is not addressed in the present study, primarily because (even in a democracy) social values typically seem to have little influence over a nation’s readiness to go to war. It should nonetheless be noted that, during his tenure as Secretary-General of the UN, Kofi Annan spoke often and forcefully in warning about the adverse effect of contemporary warfare on the environment (see, for example, http://www.cadu.org.uk/info/environment/13_2.htm; accessed March 2009).
8. A cautionary example is that of the Bolsheviks who seized power during the 1917 Russian Revolution and founded the Soviet Union, which caused horrendous damage to the environment during subsequent decades.
9. This should be understood as a figurative reference to all electronic forms of advertising, including those accessed wirelessly which are not simply “unplugged.”