

The Energy Transition: Religious and Cultural Perspectives

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OVERCOMING ENERGY GLUTTONY: A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

by *William B. Irvine*

Abstract. As there are food gluttons, so there are energy gluttons. One difference is that energy gluttons are typically oblivious to how much energy they consume and the source of that energy. Their energy gluttony is a side effect of insatiable desire for material goods, which themselves are often associated with social status. Nonetheless, steps taken to deal with energy gluttony parallel those taken with food gluttony. Typically these fall into three categories: educational, political, and technological. I will examine a fourth, however, best characterized as philosophical. I will show how, by following the advice of the ancient Stoics and training ourselves to care less what others think of us, we can help overcome our desire for social status, resulting in a reduction in our desire for material things and a significant reduction in our personal energy bill. The pessimistic conclusion, however, is that most people are probably unwilling to undergo the self-analysis and self-transformation that this philosophical approach requires.

Keywords: energy conservation; gluttony; philosophy; Stoicism

By any measure, residents of developed nations are energy gluttons. In particular, we Americans consume 39 times more energy, on a per-capita basis, than the citizens of Eritrea. We also consume more energy than our parents did, who in turn consumed more energy than their parents did. And despite these statistics, our desire for energy is not sated. If we win a lottery or come into an inheritance, we are likely to use the money to explore new ways to consume energy.

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The concept of energy gluttony, though, requires some clarification. A *glutton* in the usual sense of the word is a person who craves food and is more concerned with quantity than quality. Thus, a food glutton might drive to the supermarket at midnight to buy a pint of ice cream, despite having eaten more than three square meals the previous day.

An energy glutton, by way of contrast, does not consciously want to consume energy. He does not, for example, drive to a gas station at midnight with a craving to burn a few gallons of gasoline. To the contrary, he is generally blissfully unaware of the amount of energy he consumes. For the energy glutton, energy consumption is simply a byproduct of satisfying various other cravings he experiences, including, perhaps, a craving to own a bigger home, a newer SUV, and the latest electronic gadget.

In this paper, I will investigate energy gluttony. I will argue, to begin with, that our energy gluttony is a consequence of our wanting a variety of material goods. This claim, to be sure, is neither novel nor startling. I will go on, though, to make what I hope is a more provocative claim: in all too many cases, we do not want material goods for their own sake; instead we want them in order to fulfill certain social desires that we experience. Why, for example, do some people want to acquire a Rolex watch? Not, in most cases, for its own sake; to the contrary, they want a Rolex because they want to gain the admiration—or, better still, the envy—of other people.

But if our energy gluttony is indeed a manifestation of our desire to improve our position on the social hierarchy, it suggests a rather unorthodox strategy for overcoming energy gluttony: we need to stop caring so much about what other people think of us. On completing my examination of the causes and consequences of energy gluttony, I will explore this strategy for dealing with it. It is, as we shall see, the strategy that the ancient Stoic philosophers would have regarded as obvious, had they concerned themselves with energy gluttony.

HUMAN DESIRE

Humans are typically brimming with desire. Some of our desires have been in existence for days or even decades; others came into existence just seconds ago. The desires in question, it is important to realize, do not exist in isolation; instead, they tend to be connected to each other. More precisely, most of the things we want, we want not for their own sake but as a means of getting something else. Thus, suppose that at noon one day, you find me hunting desperately for my car key. Why do I want my key? Not for its own sake, but because I need it to start my car. And why do I want to start my car? Because I want to drive to a restaurant, so I can buy lunch, so I can end the hunger pangs that, it being noon, I detect within me. Nearly all of our desires, it turns out, are instrumental in this manner: we want things not for their own sake, but because obtaining them will enable us to obtain something else (Irvine 2006, 63).

Because our desires are connected, one desire can give rise to many other desires. This certainly was true in the case just described: my desire to put an end to my hunger pangs gave rise to a whole array of desires. It is therefore important, if we wish to simplify our lives, to keep in mind La Rochefoucauld's observation that "It is far easier to stifle a first desire than to satisfy all the ensuing ones" (La Rochefoucauld 1959, 108).

We like to think that we are the master of our desires, that we call them into existence and then take steps to satisfy them. Sometimes this is indeed the case: I can, for example, consciously form a desire to snap my fingers and then act to fulfill that desire. In most cases, though, the desires we form are only partially under our control. I had little power, for example, over the hunger pangs that made me want to drive to a restaurant and eat—if only I could find my car key!

Indeed, if we examine our desires, we will come to realize that all too often, we do not so much *form* a desire as *detect its presence within us*. After dinner, for example, I might find myself lying on the couch, feeling stuffed. Then suddenly this little voice in my head will remind me that there is ice cream in my freezer. The voice in question emanates from a semirational, "animal" component of my brain (Irvine 2006). In response to this voice, the rational component of my brain is likely to object that I do not need ice cream, that I am still stuffed from dinner. This objection rarely silences the animal component, though. Indeed, on many evenings, it wins the debate with what turns out to be irrefutable logic: the voice points out that besides there being ice cream in my kitchen, there is fudge sauce I can pour over it. I do not think I am alone in being subject to this sort of internal debate. I also suspect that other people's internal debates often end the way mine do, with the animal component handily triumphing over the rational component.

As a general rule, the more life affecting a desire is, the less control we have over it. Thus, we have considerable control over trivial desires, such as deciding whether or not to snap our fingers. We are also firmly in command when it comes to deciding what color socks to wear when we get dressed in the morning or which cereal to have for breakfast. We do not get to choose, however, whether we fall in love and even more important, the person with whom we fall in love.

Why do we have the particular desires we do? In large part, because of our evolutionary past. Why, for example, do we experience the hunger pangs that trigger cascades of desire within us? Because our evolutionary ancestors who experienced them were more likely to survive than those who did not, and we inherited the internal wiring that gives rise to those pangs. Why do we experience sexual desire? Because our evolutionary ancestors who experienced lustful feelings were more likely to reproduce than those who did not, and we, their descendants, inherited the wiring that gives rise to these feelings. Why do we tend to overeat? Because our evolutionary ancestors could never be certain that their next meal was forthcoming.

They were therefore programmed to glut themselves whenever food was present and to favor sweet, fattening foods over the alternatives. (This nutritional strategy worked well on the savannas of Africa 100,000 years ago, but it is a recipe for nutritional disaster for modern humans who live with a fast-food restaurant perpetually just around the corner and a pint of ice cream always on standby in the kitchen freezer.) And more generally, why are we insatiable? Because our ancestors who always wanted more—in particular, more food, more sex, and better shelter—increased their chances of surviving and reproducing, and thereby increased their chances of becoming our ancestors.

The thing to realize about evolution is that it programmed us not so we could live happy, meaningful lives, but so we could survive and reproduce, perhaps in misery. If, however, the desires we discover within us are triggered by our evolutionary programming, and if this programming is unconcerned with our happiness, we would do well to mistrust these desires.

DEALING WITH DESIRE

The normal human response on detecting a desire is to proudly take ownership of that desire and then set about trying to satisfy it. After all, as long as we allow a desire to remain unsatisfied, we ourselves will be dissatisfied and therefore unhappy. We reason that the best way—indeed, the only way—to regain our happiness is to satisfy the desire in question.

Many philosophers and religious thinkers over the millennia and across cultures have concluded that this manner of dealing with desires, although in some sense the obvious way to deal with them, is futile. There is, after all, no guarantee that we will be able to satisfy the desires that take up residence within us, in which case we will remain dissatisfied; and even if we do succeed in satisfying these desires, new desires will quickly pop up to take their place, in which case we will once again find ourselves dissatisfied. Thus, by unhesitatingly taking ownership of whatever desires pop into our head, we condemn ourselves to a life of dissatisfaction, when a life of satisfaction is within our grasp. Among those reaching this conclusion were the Stoic, Skeptic, Cynic, and Epicurean philosophers of the ancient world, along with such diverse religious thinkers as Buddha, St. John of the Cross, and Thomas Merton.

And how, according to these individuals, can we gain a life of satisfaction? To begin with, we need to stop taking ownership of whatever desires pop into our head. Rather than welcoming new desires with open arms, we should subject them to cold-eyed scrutiny. “Where did this desire come from?” we should ask ourselves. “Is it a desirable desire, or one that we should try to extinguish?”

We may not be able to control which desires spontaneously pop into our head, but we can, if we work at it, develop an ability to sort through these desires, act on some of them, and discard the rest. People who develop this

ability have a good chance of living the life of their choosing, and thereby increase their chance of living a life that is both happy and meaningful.

Let us now turn our attention to particular desires, beginning with our material desires—our desires, for example, for cars, clothes, and consumer gadgets. There is a wonderful word for the material things we routinely want but do not really need: “stuff.” If you are a normal person, your dwelling place and life are cluttered with stuff.

There are, to be sure, people who refuse to think of the material objects, large and small, that fill their house or apartment as being merely “stuff.” These objects, they will insist, are treasured possessions that they hope someday to hand down to their children. The children in question, however, will likely see things differently when they come into their inheritance. If they are normal (and sensible), they will strive mightily to dispose of their parents’ accumulation of what to their way of thinking is obviously stuff. Thus, their mother’s assiduously collected set of refrigerator magnets with pictures of owls will go into the dumpster they rented as the obvious solution to their stuff-disposal problem. Their father’s collection of (unused) air sickness bags, acquired over the course of countless business trips to distant places, will go (hopefully) to the highest bidder—and failing that will go into the dumpster.

If their parents were typical Americans, their dwelling will be filled with knickknacks, along with things that, although functional, were used minimally. The closets, for example, will be stuffed with clothes and shoes, many of which were worn only once, and some of which, as is evidenced by the price tags still on them, were worn not at all. The basement will have a section for gifts that they were grateful to have received but were never able to find a use for. Their garage will be cluttered with the paraphernalia required by sports that, after trying once or twice, they abandoned. Now that their owner has been buried, these material objects are likely themselves to be interred—not in a cemetery but in a landfill somewhere.

A daughter called on to dispose of her father’s estate might spend odd moments thinking about the role stuff played in her father’s life. In particular, although all these possessions might have brought him some happiness, would not he have been happier still if he had overcome his need for stuff? Having said this, I should add that the daughter in question is likely to have “stuff issues” of her own. Indeed, one reason she is condemning her father’s stuff to the landfill is because her own dwelling is already filled to capacity with her own stuff. And besides, her father’s taste in stuff differs from her own.

A CASE IN POINT: GRANITE COUNTERTOPS

To keep this discussion focused, let us consider one particular desire that has in the last decade afflicted many consumers: the desire to install a

granite countertop in their kitchen. The primary function of a kitchen countertop is to hold objects at a convenient level so that meals might be prepared. While polished granite can perform this function, cheaper and more eco-friendly alternatives are readily available. So why do people choose granite?

In attempting to answer this question, it is important to keep in mind that it is only recently that consumers developed their craving for granite countertops. Indeed, in the *New York Times*, the use of granite countertops in residential kitchens was first mentioned in 1995: a house in Stamford, Connecticut, we are told, had such countertops. The house in question, though, was selling for three-quarters of a million dollars, implying that a mere 15 years ago, granite countertops were a luxury item possessed by only a handful of homeowners. By the year 2000, granite countertops were mentioned with greater frequency in the *New York Times*, and by 2005, it was apparent that granite had become the countertop of choice for any discriminating homeowner.

During this same period, I noticed that friends, neighbors, co-workers, and relatives had started renovating their kitchens. The upgrades in question were quite expensive, costing, in some cases, as much as a modest home would have cost in the not-too-distant past. Not only that, but to get their kitchens remodeled, they had to put up with months of inconvenience. The showpiece of these remodelings, I discovered, was almost without exception the installation of granite countertops.

That people can live without granite countertops is obvious. Throughout human history, most people did live without them; indeed, even the people who currently live with them managed to get along quite well without them for most of their life. So why did people suddenly want granite countertops? Primarily because other people wanted them. If other people did not want them, or even worse, expressed their disdain for people who had them, very few souls would be brave enough to resist popular opinion and install a granite countertop.

Granite countertops are worth discussing in this, a paper about energy gluttony, inasmuch as they are a wonderful example of how oblivious we are to the energy costs of the “stuff” we find ourselves wanting. It presumably requires a considerable expenditure of energy to pry a slab of granite from the inside of a mountain, and it requires additional energy to polish it, lug it to a homeowner, and then install it. But these are factors that most granite-countertop buyers do not consider, even for a second. What they instead focus their attention on is the beauty of the countertop and how installing it will transform their kitchen from being merely a place where food is prepared into an architectural fashion statement.

Those who own or long to own a granite countertop might respond to these comments by pointing out that although it is true that granite countertops have a high upfront energy cost, it is a one-time expenditure.

After all, because granite is so durable, granite countertops need never be replaced. In the long run, then, a granite countertop will pay for itself, in terms of energy consumption.

This would be a sound argument if homeowners lived happily ever after with the countertops they installed. I would be willing to bet, though, that the same homeowners who installed granite countertops during the first decade of the twenty-first century will, by the third decade, if not sooner, find such countertops to be both boring and dated. Forgive the pun, but they will start taking them for granite. And not long thereafter, they will jackhammer them out of their kitchens to make room for whatever the *New York Times* informs them is the new “gotta have” countertop material.

THE SOCIAL-HIERARCHY GAME

At this point, an objection to the above analysis might arise. I have said that the desires we form tend to be a consequence of our evolutionary past. It is highly unlikely, though, that our evolutionary ancestors craved granite countertops: they would not, after all, have been very convenient on the savannas of Africa. How, then, can I explain our modern craving for these countertops?

I would begin my explanation by pointing out that on the savannas of Africa 100,000 years ago, solitary individuals were unlikely to survive for long. Thus, our evolutionary ancestors who were gregarious—who were, that is, psychologically wired to feel most comfortable when part of a group—were more likely to survive than those who did not have such feelings. We modern humans have acquired this wiring, and as a result, we are likely to be miserable or perhaps even suicidal, if deprived of human contact for an extended period.

And on joining a group of people, our evolutionary ancestors who cared about their social standing within that group were more likely to survive and reproduce than those who did not care. A high-ranking member of a group had better access to group resources and, if male, to mating partners; a low-ranking member, by way of contrast, might be lucky to eat. Once again, we have acquired the psychological wiring of these ancestors, and as a result we care very much about our position on the social hierarchy. It feels wonderful when others admire us and defer to us; it feels terrible when they ignore or insult us.

As a result, we spend an inordinate amount of time and energy playing what might be called the “social-hierarchy game.” We insult others, both to their face and behind their back, in an attempt to impair their position on the social hierarchy. We engage in programs of self-promotion to advance our own position on that hierarchy.

In conclusion, we want granite countertops not because our evolutionary ancestors wanted them but because we are, thanks to our evolutionary past, wired to play the social-hierarchy game and because we live in a culture in which, thanks to architectural fashion trends, we can gain social standing by installing granite countertops. And so we do. This is true, by the way, of many of our material desires: we want the “stuff” we do for the simple reason that the people around us want it. This suggests a radical solution to energy gluttony, and it is to this solution that I will now turn my attention.

DEALING WITH GLUTTONY

According to public health officials, America is currently in the midst of an obesity epidemic. It affects adults and children alike and shows every sign of going global, with serious health consequences for humanity. Indeed, the obesity epidemic is to public health what the global warming crisis is to the environment. In order to understand how we might overcome our gluttony with respect to energy, it is useful to ask what has been done, at the societal level, to overcome gluttony with respect to food.

The three primary ways to deal with food gluttony can be characterized as educational, political, and technical. In the educational approach, we teach people about the consequences of food gluttony. The education in question might be medical: we might, for example, explain to people that food gluttony can lead to diabetes and then describe for them what their daily life will be like if they become diabetic. Alternatively, the education might be spiritual. A thousand years ago, for example, a priest, rather than telling people about the negative consequences gluttony would have for them in *this life*, might have described, in gory detail, the consequences it would have for them in *their afterlife*. Gluttony was, after all, one of the seven deadly sins, meaning that a glutton was likely to spend eternity in the bowels of hell (Prose 2003).

A second way to deal with unhealthy eating is political in nature. Politicians might outlaw certain foods, the way they have tried—rather unsuccessfully, I might add—to prevent drug addiction by outlawing various drugs. Or they might “punish” unhealthy eating habits by making overweight people pay higher health insurance premiums.

A third solution to food gluttony is technical in nature: rather than trying to curb people’s tendency to overeat, scientists might develop drugs or surgical procedures that would protect them from the negative health consequences of overeating. Imagine, for example, an anti-fat drug: take it and you could eat all the ice cream you wanted and not gain a pound.

The strategies for dealing with energy gluttony parallel the above strategies for dealing with food gluttony. To begin with, we can undertake educational programs to curb energy gluttony. The objective of such programs is to make people aware of how much energy their various

activities consume and explain to them the consequences for the planet of this level of individual energy consumption.

Such programs, to be sure, have already been implemented: consider, for example, efforts to make people conscious of their carbon footprint. It is also clear that such programs have had an impact on energy gluttony. It is likely, for example, that because of these programs, some people have bought energy-efficient hybrid vehicles who would otherwise have bought, say, gas-guzzling SUVs. (It is also likely, I should add, that many of those who bought hybrids were more interested in the social consequences of their purchase than in its energy consequences: in some social circles, after all, hybrid vehicles are to the garage as granite countertops are to the kitchen.)

Although educational programs can have an impact on energy gluttony, the impact is likely to be small. Many individuals' consumer cravings are so powerful that they will be immune to such programs. In defense of this claim, consider again food gluttony. A doctor can warn a morbidly obese person that he will die prematurely unless he dramatically changes his eating habits, but in all too many cases, the warning will be ignored. It therefore seems naive to suppose that we can cause a dramatic change in an energy glutton's behavior by warning him that his gluttony, along with that of other people, is likely to cause environmental inconvenience to members of some as-yet-unborn generation.

Realize, too, that although an educational program might succeed in getting people to abandon their SUVs for hybrid vehicles, it is unlikely to induce hybrid owners to give up their luxuriously appointed hybrid in favor of a stripped down hybrid—or, for that matter, in favor of riding a bicycle or walking. It is also unlikely to induce them to go on fewer vacations that require cars. Likewise, there will be many thoughtful, socially conscious Americans who will be disinclined to give up their European vacations, even though making this sacrifice would significantly reduce their energy consumption.

And along these lines, allow me to make one more observation. Al Gore, formerly vice president of the United States and currently a leader of the campaign to prevent global warming, would appear to be an energy glutton: he lives in a 10,000 square-foot mansion that uses, depending on whom you believe, between 12 and 20 times as much electricity as the rest of us typically use. It is a telling tale: if Al Gore, despite his profound appreciation of the consequences of global warming, cannot restrain his own energy gluttony, what hope is there for the rest of us?

A second way of dealing with energy gluttony is with political measures. We can, that is, pass laws that restrict people's ability to consume energy. We could, for example, put very high taxes on gasoline or on gas-guzzling cars. Or we could ban gas-guzzling cars altogether. There are, however, two obvious drawbacks to such measures. The first is that in a democracy like ours, it will be difficult to get people to vote for such measures or to vote

for politicians who would vote for such measures. The second is that even if America overcame this obstacle and passed laws that restricted energy consumption, the laws in question would affect only American energy gluttony. The rest of the world would probably be reluctant to follow in our footsteps. It is unlikely, for example, that the Chinese, who are just now discovering the joy of acquiring “stuff,” would be willing to limit their energy consumption until they had substantially closed the gap between their per-capita consumption and ours. Thus, even if Americans could curb their energy gluttony through political means, the problem of world energy gluttony would likely remain.

A third solution to energy gluttony is to resort to technology to discover a way to let people keep on consuming “stuff” at their current rate but dramatically lower the energy cost of this consumption. Although there is much that can be done on this front, technology is ultimately bound by the laws of physics. Thus, although hydrogen-powered cars might someday be commercially viable, it is unlikely that scientists will ever discover a way to dramatically reduce the energy cost of granite countertops.

A PHILOSOPHICAL SOLUTION

These are not, however, the only ways to deal with energy gluttony. Indeed, allow me to propose a fourth solution that is philosophical in its approach. The solution in question has the advantage of being both rational and radical—and by *radical*, I mean radical in the root sense of the word: my solution gets to the root of the energy-consumption problem.

Consider again my analysis of this problem. I have argued that for the most part, we want the stuff we do—the stuff that swells our personal energy consumption—not for its own sake, but because of the impact acquiring it will have on our social status. What this means is that if we could overcome our craving for social status, our desire for stuff is likely to decline dramatically, and with it, our consumption of energy. This solution, I hasten to add, is not original with me. I have simply taken the advice the Stoic philosophers gave on how to have a happy and meaningful life, and applied it to the problem of energy gluttony.

Before I continue my discussion of the Stoic-inspired solution to energy gluttony, allow me to correct some common misconceptions regarding Stoicism. People tend to think of the Stoics as emotionally repressed, grim, and even wooden individuals. The truth of the matter, though, is that the ancient Stoics were opposed not to emotion but to negative emotions such as anger, envy, anxiety, and grief. They had nothing against positive emotions, including that most positive of emotions, joy; thus, the phrase “joyful Stoic” is not an oxymoron. In fact, the ancient Stoics were notable for their cheerfulness and particularly notable for their ability to maintain a positive outlook in the face of adversity (Irvine 2009).

After considering the things we might value in life, the Stoics concluded that tranquility is the thing most worth attaining. The tranquility the Stoics sought, I should add, is not like the tranquility to be gained by taking a Xanax. Instead, it is a psychological state marked by the absence of negative emotions and the presence of positive emotions.

The Stoics also realized that when our tranquility was disrupted, it was usually other people who disrupted it. They might do this by insulting us, treating us unfairly, provoking our envy, or failing to appreciate us. It would therefore have been understandable if the Stoics had adopted the strategy of avoiding annoying individuals. And since nearly everyone is occasionally annoying, it would be understandable if they had chosen to become hermits.

But the Stoics did no such thing. They realized that although other people can cause us grief, they are also the source of some of life's greatest pleasures, meaning that a life without personal relationships is likely to be a miserable existence. They also felt that they had a duty to work with others—even with annoying individuals—to promote the common good. These views presented the Stoics with a quandary: how could they simultaneously have dealings and even close personal relationships with other people and nevertheless remain tranquil?

The Stoics concluded that the best way to accomplish this was to change their values and in particular to stop valuing other people's opinions of them. As part of this effort, they would stop playing the social-hierarchy game. They would not, as a result, do things calculated to gain the admiration or envy of other people.

To be sure, the Stoics continued to care what *some* people thought of them. They would, for example, care about the opinions of the people (usually fellow Stoics) they had chosen to be their mentors. Thus, when Epictetus was a student at the Stoic school of philosophy run by Musonius Rufus, he certainly cared what Musonius thought of him. And curiously, Stoics would also pay attention to what their enemies thought of them. They realized, after all, that their enemies were eager to discover their shortcomings and on uncovering them, would not hesitate to report their findings. Thus, if a Stoic wished to discover his shortcomings in order to overcome them, his enemies were a valuable resource.

Because they adopted and lived in accordance with uncommon values, the Stoics fully expected the non-Stoics around them, rather than admiring them, to disapprove of them. Not only that, but the Stoics took comfort in this disapproval. They reasoned that if someone who had adopted mistaken values approved of the choices you were making in daily life, it was probably a sign that you were making a mistake in your manner of living. It was thoughts like these that led Epictetus to observe that "If people think you amount to something, distrust yourself" (Epictetus 1983, §13). Thanks to the unconventional values they had adopted, the Stoics found it easy to

stop playing the social-hierarchy game, and when they did so, it triggered a dramatic change in their material desires.

STOIC ENERGY CONSUMPTION

I have argued that people tend to acquire “stuff” not for its own sake but because they want other people to admire or even envy them. If we stop caring what others think of us, though, we will lose our interest in the acquisition of stuff. And when we read the ancient Stoics, we find evidence for this phenomenon.

Above I mentioned Stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus. His own material desires can best be described as minimal. You need a place to live? Caves, he said, are wonderful (Musonius Rufus 2011, §19.4). And how should you furnish your cave? Simply, with a cot to sleep on and a wooden table to eat on (Musonius Rufus 2011, §20.2). (Having said this, I should add that Musonius would not necessarily object to a cave having a granite countertop instead of a wooden table, especially if that cave were located within a granite mountain.)

I would also point to American philosopher Henry David Thoreau, who, although not an avowed Stoic, was clearly under the influence of Stoic philosophy. Thoreau was resolute in his rejection of the social-hierarchy game. As a result, he was content, during his 2-year experiment-in-living at Walden Pond, to dwell in a 10 × 15 foot cabin, in which he was able to get along quite nicely without a granite countertop. He did, for a time, have three limestone paperweights on his desk, but they did not last for long: “I was terrified,” he writes, “to find that they required to be dusted daily . . . and I threw them out the window in disgust” (Thoreau [1854] 1962, 132).

For further evidence in support of the claim that by swearing off the social-hierarchy game we can reduce our material desires, I offer my own experience. A decade ago, I had the normal consumer desires. It was obvious to me why someone would want to own an expensive watch or a cool car. Then, as a consequence of doing research on desire for a book I was writing, I adopted Stoicism as my philosophy of life and as a result started taking steps to remove myself from the social-hierarchy game.

Along these lines, I became an insult pacifist: insult me, and I will reflexively respond with self-deprecating humor. I also worked hard at developing my ability to resist peer pressure. As a result, when friends and relatives, after remodeling their own kitchens, took me aside to suggest that my kitchen could stand some remodeling—with, of course, granite countertops as the centerpiece—I listened quietly and respectfully. Their advice, I realized, was well intended: they were only trying to help me avoid committing what had become a faux pas: to have a kitchen with old-fashioned Formica countertops. For me, though, such issues were no longer

a concern. Indeed, if you are the sort of person who would shun me because of the composition of my kitchen countertops, I suspect that we would not have many shared interests, so I have little to lose by being shunned by you—in fact, I might even stand to gain from your avoidance of me.

With this change in my social desires came a profound change in my material desires. Most significantly, I became dysfunctional as a consumer. I go to malls very rarely, and on those occasions, it is typically because someone has requested my company. Once at a mall, though, I do not buy things. I instead spend the outing dazzled by all the stuff for sale that I not only do not need and not only do not want, but cannot even imagine myself wanting. “Who in their right mind would buy all this stuff?” I ask myself. But then I look around me, and my question is answered: “Oh, yeah, all these people!”

Things have reached the stage at which, rather than envying people who live luxurious lifestyles, I pity them. Allow me to explain. Consider the owner of an extravagant mansion. Either this person can be happy without living in such a house or he cannot, and in either case, the situation is lamentable. If, after all, he can be happy without living in a mansion, then why go to all the trouble of acquiring one? And if he cannot be happy without living in a mansion, then he is to be pitied, in the same way as someone who cannot be healthy without extensive and ongoing medical treatments is to be pitied. I also find it curious that so many people, rather than joining me to lament this person’s predicament, not only admire him for living in a mansion but wish that they, too, could inhabit one.

It is important for readers to realize that my material desires vanished not because I cornered them, one by one, and wrestled them into submission. Rather, they simply abandoned me, the way the robins abandon my neighborhood each fall. I woke up one morning, and noticed that most of my material desires were gone. And let me add that I was not saddened by the departure of these desires, the way I am by the departure of the robins; instead, I felt relieved.

And what impact has all this had on my energy consumption? I do not have numbers to give you, but I am confident that by buying so much less “stuff” than I used to, my energy consumption has declined substantially. Having said this, I hasten to add that I by no means claim to have reduced my energy consumption to a minimum; lots of work remains to be done.

To be sure, practicing Stoicism is not the only way to achieve the kind of self-transformation required for my philosophical solution to energy gluttony. Practice Zen Buddhism, for example, and you are likely to quit playing the social-hierarchy game, at which point your material desires are likely to change in the manner I have described.

SOME SKEPTICAL CONCLUSIONS

Although I am convinced that philosophical solutions to energy gluttony can be spectacularly successful at the individual level, I must confess that I am doubtful whether these solutions can likewise succeed at the societal level. To adopt a philosophy of life such as Stoicism or Zen Buddhism, we have to be willing to examine critically our own lives and values. Most people are unwilling to do this. They instead convince themselves that “it’s all good” and consequently learn to love themselves just the way they are.

In many cases, these individuals have trouble imagining any higher purpose in life than to seek out the pleasures and avoid the pains that, because of their evolutionary past, they are wired to experience. They will continue to play the social-hierarchy game because, having played it since their infancy, they do not even realize that they are playing it and therefore do not realize that it is possible not to play it. These individuals are so thoroughly enslaved by their evolutionary wiring that they have trouble imagining what it would be like to be free.

Thus, the chance that a substantial number of people will adopt Stoicism, Zen Buddhism, or some other philosophy of life is rather small. As a result, although the lives of those who adopt these philosophies will likely be transformed, not just in terms of energy consumption but in terms of quality of life, their transformation will likely have little impact on the society in which they live.

NOTE

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