OPTIMISATION

the art of personal sufficiency

John Naish, author of *Enough: breaking free from the world of excess*

In the modern developed world, the vast majority of us can be supplied with the things we need as a basis for living contented and fulfilled lives, such as food, heating, healthcare, safe transport and security. But our society tells us that we should always pursue 'more' – whether it be more money, possessions, choices, work or growth… and ultimately more of a commodity called 'happiness'.

But this approach is increasingly backfiring, with the Western world now suffering growing epidemics of depression, stress and anxiety – along with a range of stress-related physical diseases such as cardiovascular disease. This population-wide pursuit of 'always more' has also set consumer culture on a collision course with ecological collapse. Thus, our constant striving appears to makes us increasingly miserable as well as physically endangered (see de Graaf 2005).

The constant, all-consuming pursuit of 'more' is only a recent phenomenon. From the dawn of civilisation until shortly after the Second World War, it was considered admirable in Western culture to know when you had enough of any particular thing, and to understand where having more would actually prompt less satisfaction, because your pursuit had taken you into the world of diminishing returns where you have to put more effort into attaining something, but the rewards get increasingly smaller. The rewards can also rapidly turn into negatives: too much work robs us of time we might spend enjoying the fruits of that labour; and consuming excess food lies behind the West's 'obesity epidemic'. The old art of knowing when you had enjoyed the optimum amount of anything is encapsulated in the Edwardian table saying: 'Thank you, I have had an elegant sufficiency, and any more would be superfluous.'

This Western philosophy stretches back to Aristotle, who devised the idea of the Golden Mean, where the path to contentment lies between the 'twin evils' of having too much or too little. This idea is also in the Chinese Tao Te Ching written in 260BC by Lao Tsu, which declares, 'He who knows he has enough is rich' (see Maurer 1982). In 18th-century Europe, frugal living was considered the cool lifestyle choice: outside royal courts, luxury goods were often spurned, thanks to the practice of 'worldly asceticism', a Calvinist idea that offered hope of salvation through diligent use of God's gifts (i.e., planet Earth). Puritans and Quakers promoted the 'Christianity writ plain' ideal, where it was considered good to produce, but bad to consume more than necessity required. Those who lived luxuriously were criticised for squandering resources that might support others.

It might seem odd that humans have had to develop social conventions for knowing when they have had enough, rather than being able to perceive this instinctively. But the basic difficulty lies in our ancient instincts: through millions of years of early evolution, humankind's great success as a species lay in its ravenous, dissatisfied striving for 'always

more'. The humans who made it through the frequent famines, plagues and natural disasters of the Pleistocene era were the ones who always stockpiled, always grabbed the most land and possessions, always gorged when food was available. They never had to develop an instinct that said, 'enough'. They never had to learn how to deal with abundance. And they survived to pass us their genes.

When humans began to organise themselves into civilisations capable of creating regular material abundances as well as surviving shortages, it became necessary to develop a philosophy of enoughness, of personal sufficiency, so that resources could be shared and enjoyed, optimised rather than squandered. This approach, pioneered by the likes of Aristotle and Lao Tsu, remained broadly accepted until the aftermath of the Second World War, when the vastly expanded wartime industrial power of America faced shrinkage and depression unless consumers could be persuaded to want ever more and more new things, and to take out credit to buy them.

The American marketing guru Victor Lebow, a former director of Fabergé, described this trend in the *Journal of Retailing* in 1950: 'We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever-increasing rate,' he wrote. 'Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption a way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption.'

Lebow's clarion call was amply answered. The rapidly expanding power of postwar marketing, sales and advertising helped to ensure that personal consumption grew at an exponential rate across the developed world. Vast industrial growth also precipitated revolutions in technology that brought leaps in the realms of communications, healthcare, transport and construction – sufficient to make our lives comfortable and potentially sustainable… so long as we learn to live within the planet's capacity to support our activity.

For while the post-war period of rapidly spiralling consumption was great for manufacturers, it became apparent that it wasn't so beneficial for the planet. By the 1970s a welter of ideas had emerged about the need to say, 'enough growth'. The most famous examples are two books: E.F. Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful: Economics As If People Mattered*, and the high-powered Club of Rome think-tank's *Limits to Growth*.

Since the 1970s we have lived with the growing awareness that our ecosystem is fragile, that perpetual economic growth is impossible and that every time we earn or consume, we may make the world potentially worse for our children. By the late 1980s, even the Sun newspaper had appointed its own green correspondent. Today the most bullish Western consumers' consciences are regularly punctured by shards of eco-understanding. But our culture and economy remain centred on the idea that there is no alternative to continuing to produce and consume ever more, even when we know that it may prove calamitous. So why hasn't our behaviour changed?

One reason is that our marketing culture has become extremely effective at targeting our subconscious brains. We may consciously know that chasing and consuming more and more is bad for us and bad for the planet, but subconsciously, we still feel driven to do so. We are

like the 60-a-day man who knows that smoking will kill him, but still he can't stop (see Marshall 2007).

One of the most effective tools used by advertisers is the cult of celebrity (see Evans and Hesmondhalgh 2005). All the new 'even better' products that advertisers dangle in front of us seem to be owned by beautiful people. There's Liz Hurley in perfumed ecstasies over a new cosmetics range; Daniel Craig manfully tapping on a product-placed laptop while pretending to be James Bond. Our subconscious minds tend to over-identify with celebrities because we evolved in small tribal groups. In Neolithic times, if you knew someone, then they knew you, too. If you didn't attack each other, you were probably friends. Our minds still work this way – and give us the false idea that the celebrities we see so much are somehow our acquaintances.

Humans are also born imitators: this talent underlies much of our species' success, as it enabled us to adapt to changing environments far quicker than our competitors could via biological evolution alone. What gets us far ahead of other primates is our attention to detail. A chimp can watch another chimp poking a stick into an ant-hill and then mimic the basic idea, but only humans can replicate a clever technique exactly. As a result, we need to choose with great care who we copy. We have evolved to emulate the habits of the most successful people we see, in the hope that imitation will elevate us to their rank. This helps to explain why many of us feel compelled to keep up materially with celebrities, the mythical alpha-people in our global village.

There's a dark side to the celebrity effect, too. We so want to be part of our tribe's top clique that we're perpetually anxious about being snubbed by it. Feeling left out makes us so mad that our ability to act intelligently plummets. This was shown by a series of tests that involved making students feel sorely excluded. Roy Baumeister, a psychologist at Case Western Reserve University, invited undergrads to meet a group of impressive strangers and then asked them to name two of the group that they would like to work with on a project.

But next the students were told that, sorry, the strangers did not rate them. The rebuffed students' IQs plunged by about a quarter for several hours. Their aggressiveness rose. Baumeister says his tests reveal that tribal rejection interferes with our self-control: 'It strikes a blow that seems to interfere with our ability for complex reasoning,' he says. 'You may do stupid things' (Baumeister et al 2002). Thus our perpetual exclusion from the celebrity clique makes us more likely to dumbly, impulsively buy stuff – just because it is endorsed by people we desperately want to love us.

Celebrities are only one weapon in the marketers' broad battery of highly sophisticated subconscious persuaders which constantly make us feel compelled to pursue more new things and to feel bad about the things that we already possess. But although this constant pursuit of 'more' is having increasingly toxic social and environmental effects, no one in power would dare to suggest that we curb the advertisers' activities – unless they are advertising products that actively cause immediate harm to health, such as tobacco and alcohol.

In fact, the very idea of creating a culture that encourages us to live sustainably balanced lives by rediscovering the lost art of sufficiency is currently taboo. There is a distinct lack of high-level discussions on alternative ways to organise our society. For the sake of personal and

planetary balance, we urgently need to develop an economic system that is effectively zero-growth, to stop putting any more strain on our systems. But this is not up for discussion in the corridors of power, says Tim Jackson, a green economist who sits on the Sustainable Development Commission, a UK government watchdog.

I asked him what would happen if we were to wave a magic wand, so that one morning we woke to find that suddenly everyone in Britain was living a personally and planetarily sustainable existence, he said: 'This is the hardest question of all. I've just raised this at our commission and was told by a Treasury official that switching to true sustainable development might mean that we have to go back to living in caves. The government has a split personality on this. It keeps telling people to get out of their cars and consume less. But we would be up the creek without a paddle if everyone did. As it currently exists, our economy relies strictly on increases in consumption.'

The credit crunch has clearly shown that our postwar culture of more-more-more cannot be sustained, but the lack of government action means that we have to achieve change from the grass roots, by learning as individuals the lost art of sufficiency – the art of being highly wary of marketing tricks and knowing when to say, 'that's enough for me, I have the optimum amount of this, and I want to leave space and time for other bounties in my life'. It is a challenge for all of us.

Example discussion questions to stimulate reflection on optimisation

- Discuss what 'enough' means to you. When is excess permissible? When is it enjoyable? How do you put limits on your own actions?

- Can Governments pass effective laws to make people consume only enough of certain things? Which items can be limited and how? Which items can never be limited, and have to be left to individuals' own discretion?

- Can you ever have too much of the following: friendship, gratitude, social connection, rewarding leisure time, contentment? Discuss ways in which consumer society can prevent us from enjoying these qualities to the full.

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