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VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY AS AN AESTHETICS OF EXISTENCE

The art of ethics in a consumer age

Men have become the tool of their tools. The best works of art are the expression of man's struggle to free himself from this condition.

– Henry David Thoreau

1. Introduction

Throughout the Western philosophic tradition, ethics and morality have generally referred to the task of living in accordance with a body of objectively verifiable moral rules, of adhering to a moral code that is knowable through rational inquiry and which, by virtue of its rational basis, applies to all people in all places. Philosophers have always disagreed, of course, about which of the possible moral codes is the objectively true one. But there has been a widespread consensus that discovering such a code is the aim of moral thought and that living in accordance with such a code is the aim of moral behaviour. We can see this assumption underlying the work of almost all the great moral philosophers – from Plato, through St Aquinas, to Kant and Bentham, and beyond – and well into the 20th century this assumption remained an almost unquestioned verity (see Rorty, 1999: Ch. 4).

The logic beneath this assumption is quite understandable. If we are to live our lives according to the dictates of a moral code, even when it is not in our immediate self-interest to do so, then we should want the code to which we have subscribed to be somehow

deserving of our obedience. Nobody would want to live according to moral rules if those rules were just the arbitrary assertions of some megalomaniac who simply wanted all humanity to abide by his or her personal standards of conduct. On the contrary, if anyone were to subscribe to a moral code, it would presumably always be on the condition that the code was an embodiment of some independent and verifiable moral truth, in the sense that the code reflected an objective and rational moral reality, not merely the idiosyncratic whim of some authoritarian personality.

This conception of morality as obedience to an objectively verifiable moral code makes perfect sense when one subscribes to what is often called ‘the correspondence theory of truth’ (see Rorty, 1991). Put simply, this theory of truth holds that the purpose of philosophical inquiry is to determine (or determine the *method* for determining) which linguistic propositions reflect metaphysical or moral reality, and which do not. Within this framework of understanding, the goal of moral philosophy is to base normative, value-laden conclusions upon secure, metaphysical foundations, foundations that are external to the human mind, eternal, objective, universal, and unchanging, and which, for these reasons, transcend all personal or contextual perspectives. According to this view of moral philosophy, which we could call Moral Realism, it is either right or wrong to act in this way or that, from which it would follow that the task of moral philosophers is to determine which acts are moral and which are not. Indeed, it could be said that using ‘reason’ to distinguish moral from immoral behaviour has been the defining goal of moral philosophers throughout history. This goal seems coherent enough, and in many ways it also seems quite commonsensical.

Needless to say, however, no consensus has been reached about which of the various moral codes proposed is, in fact, the objectively correct one. That is, Christians, Kantians, Utilitarians, Marxists, and so on, are still debating each other over the truth of their respective moralities. Some might suggest that this lack of moral consensus must mean that there is no moral truth, as such; that morality has no rational foundation; or, perhaps, that human beings are fundamentally irrational and thus incapable of knowing moral truth when they see it. But this does not follow, necessarily. In particular, a lack of moral consensus is not necessarily fatal to Moral Realism or the correspondence theory of truth. After all, one might still believe that, in the future, human beings will finally uncover the moral reality that lies beneath the illusion of appearances and thus gain moral enlightenment – assisted, one might suppose, by some philosopher who devises a means of proving, by way of rational demonstration, that a particular moral code is the one and only one

that is *really* real; the one and only one that deserves our obedience. When this day arrives, the narrative might go, then, at last, people can finally stop debating which morality is the correct morality and instead dedicate their time and energy to actually trying to live morally.

It may be that such a day will indeed arrive. Some critical philosophers, however, such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, and Richard Rorty, among many others, have argued that the very search for universal moral truth, like the search for the Holy Grail, is a dubious one – if, by universal moral truth, one means a set of objectively verifiable moral rules, grounded in metaphysical reality, that apply to all people, in all places, at all times. These ‘post-metaphysical’ theorists have called into question, not simply the moral codes that moral philosophers have proposed hitherto, but, more fundamentally, the very goal of seeking objective, universalisable moral codes. This scepticism arose, in various ways, out of a loss of faith in the correspondence theory of truth, which, in turn, led to a loss of faith in all forms of Moral Realism. The essential reasoning here is that since truth must be expressed in language, and since language is a human creation, so must truth, ultimately, be a human creation (Rorty, 1989). In other words, it is argued that there is no knowable metaphysical reality which language should be seeking to reflect. From this perspective, human perception and understanding is always and necessarily mediated by language – ‘there is nothing outside of the text’, to borrow Jacques Derrida’s phrase (Derrida, 1998: 158) – and this means that knowledge, including moral knowledge, will always be a function of some conventional or ‘socially constructed’ linguistic framework, some paradigm of understanding. It arguably follows, therefore, that truth, knowledge, and meaning all lack the metaphysical foundations that philosophers throughout history had hoped to uncover for them. The metaphor of ‘philosophy as the mirror of nature’ thus loses its operational validity (Rorty, 1979). Furthermore, since language is inherently unstable and always subject to various interpretive ambiguities, there will never be one and only one moral code that is true for all people, in all places, and for all times. For even if we knew which moral code was the one and only one to obey – the Ten Commandments, for example, or Kant’s ‘categorical imperative’, or Bentham’s ‘greatest happiness principle’ – its context-dependent application would require interpretation, and interpretation is always a function of one or other ‘interpretive community’ (Fish, 1989). People may, of course, have the *experience* of moral certainty; but the ‘truth’ of such moral certainty will never be rationally demonstrable to all people.

What, then, becomes of moral and ethical discourse and practice if the search for a universal moral code is given up? The substantive part of this chapter begins exploring this question by turning primarily to the later works of Michel Foucault – the texts of his so-called ‘ethical’ turn (see especially, Foucault, 2000a). It is in these texts where Foucault develops his notion of ethics as ‘an aesthetics of existence’, which he presents as an alternative mode of ethical practice that can be taken up, by default, one might say, in the absence of a knowable and universalisable morality. Foucault’s strategy, we will see, is to problematise the notion of ‘selfhood’ by arguing that the ‘self’, far from being as independent and autonomous as philosophers have typically supposed, is in fact inextricably shaped by external linguistic and contextual forces, such that *who we are* as individuals is not the determinate product of free decisions made by some autonomous agent, but instead the product of social and linguistic forces that are largely beyond our control. Foucault does not deny or exclude the possibility of human freedom, however, as some might infer from his early work. Foucault does insist that our identities are socially constructed entities and that we lack a transcendental or purely rational ‘self’, but he nevertheless carves out and secures a certain, albeit limited, degree of space within which our socially constructed identities can *act upon themselves* for the purpose of ‘self-fashioning’. We may not get to choose the raw material of which our identities are constituted, but it nevertheless lies within our power to shape that raw material in various ways, just as the sculptor may make various things from a given lump of clay. According to Foucault, this relationship of the self to the self is the terrain of ethics, and when engaging the age-old ethical question, ‘How am I to live?’ Foucault suggests that we avoid the traditional search for a moral code and instead ask ourselves the further question, ‘What type of person should I become?’. Using aesthetic metaphors to describe and develop this process of self-creation, Foucault summarises his ethical position with the pronouncement, ‘Make life a work of art’ – an intriguing, provocative, but ambiguous statement that will be explored in more detail below.

The aim of this chapter, however, is not to present a thorough analysis of Foucault’s notion of an aesthetics of existence. Several such analyses have appeared in recent times (after years of unfortunate scholarly neglect), and much of this emerging commentary is very probing and insightful (see especially, McGushin, 2007; O’Leary, 2002). But this is not the time to focus on furthering that critical discussion or even providing a comprehensive literature review of it. Instead, after providing a brief exposition of Foucault’s ethics, this chapter will undertake to

actually *apply* the idea of an aesthetics of existence to a particular subject of ethical concern, namely, to our role as ‘consumers’ in the context of ecological overshoot and overconsumption, primarily in the developed world. This is an area that raises ethical questions concerning how we ought to live for two main reasons: firstly, due to the impact Western-style consumers are having on the natural environment; and secondly, due to the continued existence of poverty amidst plenty. There is, however, another perspective to consider also. A large body of sociological and psychological literature now exists indicating that Western-style consumption practices are often failing to provide meaning and fulfilment, even to those who have ‘succeeded’ in attaining a high material standard of living (for a review, see Alexander, 2012). These three consumption-related issues – ecological degradation, poverty amidst plenty, and consumer malaise – provide ample grounds for thinking that consumption is a proper subject for ethical engagement, in the Foucauldian sense of ethics as ‘the self engaging the self’. If it is the case that our individual identities have been shaped, insidiously perhaps, by a social system that celebrates and encourages consumption without apparent limit – and it would not be unfair to describe consumer societies in these terms (Denniss and Hamilton, 2005) – then it would seem that ethical practice today calls for a rethinking of our assumptions and attitudes concerning consumption, which might involve a deliberate reshaping of the self by the self.

This chapter will explore the possibility of such an ethics of consumption in the following ways. First, by explaining how neoclassical economics, which is arguably the most influential paradigm of thought in the world today, conceptualises consumption as something that benefits both ‘self’ and ‘other’ and, therefore, as something that should be maximised. To the extent that modern consumers have internalised this conception of consumption, an ethics of consumption might involve engaging the self for the purpose of changing the self and creating something new. The second way an ethics of consumption will be explored will be through an examination of the theory and practice of ‘voluntary simplicity’, a term that refers to an oppositional living strategy or ‘way of life’ with which people, somewhat paradoxically, seek an *increased quality of life through a reduction and restraint of one’s level of consumption* (see generally, Alexander, 2009). The paradox, so-called, consists in the attempt to live ‘more with less’. Since voluntarily living simply means heading in the opposite direction to where most people in consumer societies (and increasingly elsewhere) seem to want to go, one would expect living simply to require a fundamentally creative engagement with life and

culture, especially in contemporary consumer societies that seem to be predicated on the assumption that ‘more consumption is always better’. This need for a fundamentally *creative* engagement with life is what prompted the present attempt to elucidate the idea of ‘voluntary simplicity as aesthetics of existence’, and it is this attempt to infuse Foucauldian ethics with an emerging post-consumerist philosophy of life that constitutes the original contribution of this chapter. It is hoped that this practical application of Foucault’s ethics might also prompt others to consider how ethical engagement might produce new ways of being that are freer, more fulfilling, and yet less resource-intensive and damaging than the modes of being which are dominant in consumer societies today. Could it be, for example, that the ‘Death of Man’, to use Foucault’s phrase, was actually the first (and a necessary) phase in the demise of what one might call ‘homo consumicus’? And what forms of life, what modes of being, would or could materialise with the voluntary emergence of ‘homo *post*-consumicus’? These are the large questions that motivated this study and in the following pages a preliminary attempt is made to grapple with them. The aim, however, is not to legitimate ‘what is already known’ (Foucault, 1985: 9), since that would not be a very Foucauldian endeavour; rather, the aim is to explore whether or to what extent it is possible to ‘free thought from what it silently thinks’ (*ibid.*), in the hope that this might open up space to ‘think differently’ (*ibid.*), to think otherwise.

2. Foucault and the Art of Ethics

‘Morality will gradually *perish* now’, asserted Friedrich Nietzsche in 1887, with characteristic bluntness (Nietzsche, 1969: Essay III, 27). ‘[T]his is the great spectacle in a hundred acts reserved for the next two centuries in Europe – the most terrible, most questionable, and perhaps also the most hopeful of all spectacles’ (*ibid.*). The form of morality to which Nietzsche was referring, and to which he himself was instrumental in undermining, was the form, outlined above, of morality as obedience to set of rules that are grounded in some knowable metaphysical reality. While previous philosophers had argued that human beings shared a common nature by virtue of being endowed with ‘reason’, Nietzsche claimed to have ended that particular myth and with it the myth of a morality knowable through an appeal to reason. Nietzsche predicted that as more people came to understand this – as more people experienced this crisis of morality to which he referred – morality itself would gradually ‘perish’.

According to Foucault (1990: 49), Nietzsche's prediction has already come to pass: '[T]he idea of morality as obedience to a code of rules is now disappearing, has already disappeared. And to this absence of morality corresponds, must correspond, the search for an "aesthetics of existence".' The purpose of this first substantive section is to explore in a little more detail what this curious notion of an 'aesthetics of existence' might mean, and whether it is able, as Foucault suggested it was, to fill the void left by an absent morality. The analysis in this section, however, will be more expository and descriptive than critical, since the aim of this chapter is to build upon Foucault's ethics, not attempt to offer them a comprehensive statement or defence (see, McGushin, 2007; O'Leary, 2002). After outlining his ethics, the analysis will then attempt to develop a Foucauldian ethics of consumption.

2.1. *The search for an 'aesthetics of existence'*

Foucault was extremely sceptical of the claim, made throughout the Western philosophic tradition, that beneath the various manifestations of human subjectivity which have arisen throughout history there lies an ahistorical or transcendental subject that all human beings share: 'I do indeed believe', he once stated, 'that there is no sovereign, founding subject, a universal form of the subject to be found everywhere' (Foucault, 1990: 50-1). The notion of a 'universal form' of the subject is epitomised in the work of Immanuel Kant, who argued that human beings are endowed in common with rational faculties and that by correctly employing those faculties we can determine, on rational grounds, the universal moral rules that ought to govern human life. In complex ways that cannot be explored in any depth here, Foucault rejected this universal notion of 'the subject' and all that flowed from it. Just as Nietzsche had referred to the 'Death of God' to signify the loss of faith in a transcendental basis for morality, Foucault referred to the 'Death of Man' to signify the loss of faith in a basis for morality that was somehow grounded in a universal 'human nature'.

If there is no universal form of *the subject* but rather only historically specific forms of *subjectivity*, what are the implications of this on how we understand the human situation? It is in response to this type of question or self-questioning that Foucault began developing his notion of ethics as 'an aesthetics of existence'. 'From the idea that the self is not given to us,' Foucault famously pronounced, 'I think that there is only one consequence, we have to create ourselves as a work of art' (Foucault, 2000b: 262).

This aesthetic metaphor strikes many people as strange – perhaps even confronting, silly, or perverse – for we are not generally accustomed to talking about life as a work of art. We might want to say, for example, that life is one thing, art is another, and that these distinct categories should not be conflated. But the distinction between art and life was precisely what Foucault was trying to question; to get us all to question. In fact, it can be argued that Foucault was not actually using art as a ‘metaphor’ here at all. That is, he was not proposing that we are related to our own lives *like* the way the artist is related to his or her raw materials; instead, he was proposing that we are related to our lives *as* artists, whose raw material is life itself. As he once lamented in an interview (Foucault, 2000b: 261):

[I]n our society art has become something which is related to objects, and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?

Foucault's reasoning here is unusually straightforward: if the nature of ‘the self’ is not given to us in advance – that is, if there is no ‘true self’ to which we should be trying to interpret correctly and live in accordance with – then it follows, by default, that we must *create* ourselves. We are not, however, given a blank canvas to work with, so to speak; which is to say, we do not get to create ourselves from scratch, since our identities are by in large a product of social and linguistic forces beyond our control or choosing. Nobody, for example, gets to choose the categories which structure their perception of the world; rather, we are all educated into – or subjected to – a form of life, and through that process we find ourselves embedded within elaborate structures of power/knowledge that both enable and constrict our thoughts and actions (Foucault, 1977). This education and those power/knowledge structures shape who we are as individuals and they define the nature of our subjectivity. Nevertheless, Foucault argued, we can also act upon ourselves, act upon our socially constructed subjectivities, through processes that he variously called ‘self-fashioning’, ‘care of the self’, ‘techniques of the self’, or ‘arts of the self’. Foucault (1990: 37) defined the Greek ‘arts of existence’ as: ‘those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria’. Through these processes, in which the self

engages the self, human beings have the potential to transform their subjectivities in much the same way a sculptor transforms a given lump of clay. The subject, Foucault (2000c: 290) insisted, ‘is not a substance... [i]t is a form’, and what form that subject takes is up to us as individual agents, at least in part. This is the creative challenge – one might say, aesthetic challenge – with which we are all burdened. We must, as Foucault (2000b: 262) proposed, ‘create ourselves as a work of art’.

This proposition, however, remains ambiguous. If Foucault meant that we should all try to make ourselves as beautiful as possible, then we might fairly dismiss his argument as either ridiculous or irresponsible, or both; as an argument not worthy of any serious consideration, except perhaps to refute it briefly by showing that there is much more to life than beauty. That is not Foucault’s argument, however (see especially, Foucault, 2000b: 262). Creativity, not beauty, is primary aesthetic value that defines Foucault’s ‘aesthetics of existence’, and most of the criticism levelled at his position becomes obviously misguided when this is recognised. In other words, Foucault was no mere ‘dandy’ in the tradition of Charles Baudelaire or Oscar Wilde; nor was he advocating an ‘aestheticisation of politics’ that would simply open the door to fascism. Both of those interpretations represent superficial readings of Foucault, and they have been dealt with adequately elsewhere (e.g., O’Leary, 2002). Once more, by suggesting that we are all artists of life, Foucault was not suggesting that we should make our lives *beautiful*; instead, he was highlighting the fact that existence places upon us the burden of *creativity*. And creativity, one can argue, is a legitimate aesthetic criterion, and one that provided Foucault with a justification for employing the term ‘art’ as he did. After all, we are all familiar, no doubt, with works of art that are not beautiful, as such, but which are nevertheless deserving of being considered ‘art’ on the basis that they are worthy expressions of creativity. And this, it is argued, gets to the heart of Foucault’s ‘aesthetics of existence’: he is not calling upon us to be beautiful ‘dandies’; he is calling upon us to avoid being mere products of our socialisation and to instead be worthy expressions of creativity.

This explains, in essence, why Foucault’s ‘aesthetics of existence’ is *aesthetic*. Life, he is suggesting, like art (or as art), is a fundamentally creative undertaking; a project that requires shaping, moulding, sculpting, and creating, in accordance with some (evolving) vision. But even if this aesthetic dimension of existence is accepted, on what basis, one might ask, could Foucault legitimately call his notion of an ‘aesthetics of existence’ an *ethics*? That is, so far

as ethics concerns the question of ‘how one ought to live’, surely there is more to living ethically than merely being creative?

Undoubtedly there is, and Foucault never denied this. Nietzsche occasionally seemed to conflate ethics and creativity, such as when he argued that what mattered when giving ‘style’ to one’s life was not whether it was good or bad but simply whether it represented ‘a single taste’ (Nietzsche, 1969: 2). But if that is a fair representation of Nietzsche’s position – and to be fair to Nietzsche, it is not (see Nehamas, 1985) – a simplistic conflation of ethics and creativity certainly does not represent Foucault’s position. In developing his aesthetics of existence, Foucault drew heavily upon the ancient Greeks, who regularly employed notions of moulding and sculpting when philosophising about the ‘art of living’, and Foucault’s position must be understood in relation to that ancient approach. Indeed, with a nod to the Greeks, Foucault claimed that ‘the problem of an ethics as a *form* to be given to one’s conduct and to one’s life has again been raised’ (Foucault, 1990b: 263). And has been raised again, we might infer, due to the emergence of the postmodern condition in which human nature – the supposedly ‘universal form’ of the self – has been fragmented and is once again in need of being ‘shaped’ by self-engagement rather than merely ‘discovered’ by reason.

The ethical dimension of Foucault’s aesthetics of existence deserves some further attention, however, because it remains unclear whether this approach can legitimately be called an ‘ethics’. The first point here is to reiterate the important distinction Foucault draws between morality (which, from Foucault’s perspective, concerns living in accordance with an objective and universal moral code) and ethics (which concerns the self’s relationship with the self). Since the purpose, or at least one function, of Foucault’s post-structuralist critique of metaphysics was to cast doubt on the very possibility of objective and universal forms of knowledge, including moral knowledge, it follows that his ethics would never aspire to be a new morality. Indeed, Foucault (1990c: 253-4) declared that it would be ‘catastrophic’ if everyone submitted to a universal moral code, and an inquiry into why he thought this would be so should shed light on the nature of his ethics as an aesthetics of existence.

Foucault thought that submission to a universal moral code would be ‘catastrophic’ because any code’s purported or perceived universality would really be nothing more than a naturalised prejudice, and the danger here is that the particular moral perspective that has been placed under a veil of universality might blind people to relationships of domination that ought to be questioned and, if possible, opposed and transcended. Think, for example, of the colonial Americans who for centuries assumed that

black slaves were not moral agents deserving of moral respect but merely animals that should be put to work. From their perspective, it was not immoral to have slaves, since slaves were not objects of moral concern. This, of course, raises the question: Might we, today, have our own moral prejudices to which we are similarly blind? The point here is that since knowledge, including moral knowledge, is always a function of a particular, socially constructed conceptual framework – one that necessarily lacks metaphysical foundations and which is therefore liable to shift or even collapse – then ‘ethical’ activity requires questioning the moral assumptions of dominant paradigms for the purpose of exposing their contingency; exposing the possibility of things being ‘otherwise’. The goal of this ethical activity is not to replace an existing moral code with the *real* moral code, but instead to bring to consciousness the suffering, pain, domination, or oppression that existing moralities repress or deflect attention away from. Notice that this ‘bringing to consciousness’ is a change in the self brought about by engaging the self, and this is what ethics means for Foucault. Edward McGushin (2007: 115), in his seminal work on Foucault’s ethics, notes that Foucault, far from valorising narcissism, was suggesting that ‘when one takes care of oneself, an essential dimension of the self that requires attention is the relationship one maintains with others’. We can see similarities here between Foucault’s aesthetics of existence and Derrida’s ethics of deconstruction. As Derrida once explained: ‘Deconstruction is not an enclosure in nothingness, but an openness to the other’ (see Kearney, 1984: 124). This attempt to be ‘open to the other’ – open not just to other people but also other perspectives – is also an essential aspect to Foucauldian ethics.

This is a process, it should be noted, that has no end, because the underlying point is that *every* perspective has blind spots, so ethical activity aims to constantly renew the self for the purposes of bringing those blind spots to our attention, knowing, all the while, that a complete and undistorted perspective – the ‘view from nowhere’ – is always and necessarily inaccessible to us. It is on this basis that Richard Rorty (1989) highlights the ethical importance of reading widely – of reading novels in particular – because by reading as many different types of ‘narratives’ as possible, we are less likely to become entrenched in any one, particular narrative.

An aesthetics of existence also includes what Foucault (2000c) called ‘the practice of freedom’. By this Foucault meant that transforming the self by the self is not an undertaking that is intended simply to benefit *others* but to benefit *oneself* too, by exposing the ways in which we are freer than we think we are. Think, for example, of anorexics whose lives are destroyed by a warped understanding of ‘beauty’; or the status seekers whose lives

are wasted by defining ‘success’ in relation to the number of rich and famous people they can impress. By engaging the self by the self and questioning our own assumptions – assumptions, say, about the meaning of ‘beauty’, ‘success’, ‘wealth’, or whatever – then we may be able to free ourselves from assumptions that are locking us into lives of self-imposed unfreedom. While we may not suffer anorexia or chronic status anxiety, Foucault suggested that we will all have our own prejudices, and thus ‘the practice of freedom’ means constantly aiming to ‘free thought from what it silently thinks’ (Foucault, 1985: 9). Again, this is not a process that has a destination. It is an ongoing, evolving process of creative self-renewal – a process of ethico-aesthetic engagement that Foucault called an ‘aesthetics of existence’.

3. Problematising Consumption – Engaging the Self

Having outlined the notion of ethics as an aesthetics of existence, it is now time to apply this approach to an area of ethical concern in the hope of deepening the understanding of the practical implications of Foucault’s ethical perspective. Although previous studies have incisively unpacked many of the theoretical intricacies of Foucault’s ethics, and criticised, refined, and developed aspects which were only touched on above, there has nevertheless been an unfortunate failure, with rare exceptions, to actually apply Foucault’s ethical insights to what one might call ‘life’. Not only is this unfortunate but it arguably contradicts the defining impulse of Foucault’s ethical project, which was to provide tools for engaging creatively with the question of ‘how one ought to live’. Foucault, it is clear enough, was not interested in playing abstract theoretical games for the sake of it. ‘I am an experimenter’, he once explained, ‘in the sense that I write in order to change myself and in order not to think the same thing as before’ (Foucault, 2000d: 240). The very purpose of his work was to transform himself and thus his life, a process which he noted was ‘rather close to the aesthetic experience’ (Foucault, 1990d: 14). Why else, he asked, should a painter paint ‘if he is not transformed by his own painting?’ (*ibid.*). We see, then, that Foucault’s ethical position is fundamentally practical in its orientation and trajectory, and something essential is missing from any discussion of his ethics if their practical implications are not explored. Indeed, Foucault’s engagement with ancient Greek philosophy can be understood as a criticism of the distinction that has arisen within much modern academic philosophy between philosophy, on the one hand, and life, on the other. Just like the Greek philosophers, Foucault recognised no such distinction, and

the Greek conceptualisation of philosophy as ‘the art of living’ ought to inform our engagement with Foucault’s ethics at every turn. Otherwise, we may miss the point of it all.

3.1. *Consumption as a subject of ethical concern*

The practical implications of Foucault’s ethics will now be explored by problematising the role consumption plays in our lives. After providing some theoretical context to this undertaking and explaining how the dominant paradigm of neoclassical economics may influence our thinking and behaviour as consumers, the analysis will consider whether the idea of ‘voluntary simplicity as an aesthetics of existence’ might provide a useful way to understand and engage ourselves ethically about how and why we consume (and live) as we do (however that might be).

As noted in the introduction, consumption presents itself as an area of ethical concern in at least three ways: first, because Western-style consumption is putting an immense and unsustainable burden on the planet’s ecosystems, so much so that contemporary cultures of consumption are diminishing the capacity of the planet to support life as we know it; second, because the high consumption, resource-intensive lifestyles enjoyed by most people in the richest regions of the world coexist in a world where great multitudes live lives oppressed by material deprivation; and thirdly, because there is a large and growing body of sociological and psychological literature indicating that once our basic material needs for food, shelter, clothing, etc. are met, the limitless pursuit of more money and possessions neither produces any lasting happiness nor satisfies the human need for meaning (Alexander, 2012). Far from representing the peak of civilisation, cultures of mass consumption are showing distinct signs of widespread social, even spiritual, malaise (see, e.g., Myer, 2000). Any one of these issues, it could be argued, would be sufficient for consumption to become a proper subject for ethical engagement, in the Foucauldian sense of ethics as ‘the self engaging the self’. When the three issues are considered together, the case for ethical engagement is compelling.

At once, however, we are confronted with a strange incongruity, even a contradiction, of sorts; one that seems to tear the present analysis apart. In an age when the facts of ecological degradation, extreme poverty, and consumer malaise lie quite plainly before our eyes, one might have thought that high consumption lifestyles were already a subject of widespread ethical engagement. That is, one might have expected consumption practices to be a domain of constant and dedicated ethical attention, given that over-

consumption seems to be driving several of the world's most pressing problems (including the problem of consumer malaise). And yet, it can hardly be denied that any ethical engagement that takes place within consumer cultures does not, as a rule, seek to reduce or moderate consumption but rather encourage, glorify, and increase consumption – and increase it without apparent limit (Denniss and Hamilton, 2005). And here is the contradiction: consumption is at once an extremely obvious realm for ethical engagement, for the three reasons stated above, and, at the same time, engaging the self by the self for the purpose of deliberately reducing or moderating consumption seems to be more or less unthinkable within modern consumer societies. Indeed, there seems to be an almost unquestioned assumption throughout consumer societies that consumption practices are somehow 'beyond ethics', in the sense that how much we consume does not really need to inform the answer we give to the question of 'how one ought to live'. On the contrary, it is presumed that everyone is justified seeking as high a material standard of living as possible, a pursuit that is limited, it would seem, only by the laws of a so-called 'free market' economy.

This provides us with a suitable starting point, albeit a rather inauspicious one, for exploring an ethics of consumption. Why is it that an ethics of consumption is almost unthinkable in consumer cultures? In addressing this complex question it may be useful to begin by considering some of the central insights of what could be variously labelled 'post-structuralism', 'social constructionism', or 'postmodernism' – a heterogeneous body of philosophical thought of which Foucault was one of the most notable exponents (although he rejected all such labels). For present purposes, the most relevant aspect of this literature is how it variously exposes human understanding and perception to be a function of whichever linguistic framework happens to mediate our experience. The world does not categorise itself, Foucault and others argued; human beings must do that; and how we happen to categorise the world (and what meaning we attach to those categories) changes how we experience the world and ourselves, what we see, and thus how we act. But we do not get to *choose* the 'language game' we play, as such; instead, we are educated into a form of life from birth, first upon somebody's knee, and then through lessons ratified by wider society. This can make it seem as if the way we have learned to categorise the world is the one and only way to categorise the world, when, in fact, it is merely one of infinite possibilities, one of infinite means of 'socially constructing' reality. The categories and paradigms we use to think about the world generally do not seem like 'social constructions', however, or artefacts that human beings

have created and thus might one day recreate. Rather, our categories or paradigms, after years of entrenchment, social affirmation, and reification, often just seem to be ‘natural’, ‘inevitable’, or ‘just the way the world is’ – simply a reflection of the intrinsic nature of reality that exists independently of the human mind and which, therefore, it makes no sense to doubt (see Fish, 1989).

As noted earlier, one problem with the apparent ‘naturalisation’ of socially constructed categories and paradigms is that this can blind us from relationships of domination (including self-domination) by directing our thought and attention elsewhere. Even if we do perceive relationships of domination, ‘naturalisation’ can stop us from resisting or opposing such domination on the (mistaken) grounds that it is ‘inevitable’ or ‘just the way the world is’ and, as such, cannot be avoided. This phenomenon of naturalisation (or reification) provides the battleground for critical philosophy, and critical philosophy could be broadly defined as the intellectual undertaking that aims to uncover and dismantle the systems of meaning which serve to establish and sustain relationships of domination and violence in the world. If we do not see that domination or violence even when we are looking at it, then we are guilty of what might be called ‘interpretive violence’. It is for the ‘archaeologist’, in Foucault’s sense, to excavate the foundations of human thought and expose our categories of understanding for what they are – human impositions that have shifted historically and are liable to shift again. It is for the ‘genealogist’, again in Foucault’s sense, to study the history of those categories to determine how and why they arose, how and why they have evolved, which interests they serve, or claim to serve, and how they fit into current structures of truth and power. And finally, it is for the ‘ethicist’, once more in Foucault’s sense, to consider to what extent our categories of understanding contribute to relationships of domination, and how an individual, through self-fashioning, might be able to escape current modes of thought and open up space for new modes of thinking and being that are less oppressive (either of oneself or others, or both).

How does all this relate to our subject of consumption? Building upon the theoretical perspective just summarised, it will now be maintained that the reason an ethics of consumption is almost unthinkable in consumer societies – despite consumption, at the same time, seeming to be an extremely obvious subject for ethical engagement – must be because the form of life into which we, modern consumers, have been educated must somehow marginalise consumption as a subject of ethical concern. This marginalisation is itself a subject of ethical concern, and so it is of

some importance that we gain an understanding of why and how it occurs. This marginalisation can be best explained within, and attributed to, the exceedingly influential paradigm of neoclassical economics, and the mechanics of this marginalisation will now be explained.

3.2. *Neoclassical economics and the marginalisation of consumption*

Neoclassical economic theory is based on a particular conception of human beings, a conception that assumes we are all essentially ‘rational, self-interested, utility maximisers’. Put simply, rationality in this sense means that human beings have goals and that they make sound decisions about how best to pursue those goals; self-interestedness, in this sense, means that human beings aim to further their own goals rather than the goals of society in general; and utility maximisation means that the goal which human beings have is to maximise their own utility (or happiness). The implications of this conceptualisation of humanity are enormous. It is argued by neoclassicists that if we place these types of human beings in a world without private property, a ‘tragedy of the commons’ (Hardin, 1968) would result, since people would be able to internalise the benefits of productive activity but externalise at least some of the costs, leading to ‘the ruin of all’ (if it were a situation of ‘free access’ to resources) or some non-optimal outcome (if it were a situation of ‘state controlled’ access to and power over resources). However, within a functioning private property system, the theory goes, both the *benefits* and the *costs* of productive activity are internalised, and it is said that this is the best means of maximising overall utility. People get back what they put in.

Furthermore, free markets must be part of this equation. Since resources are scarce relative to the demands human beings make upon them, it is important that resources find their way into the hands of those who will ‘exploit’ them best. The most efficient way to allocate resources, neoclassicists argue, is to allow human beings to voluntarily exchange, on mutually beneficial terms, their private property rights in free markets. Since market transactions are assumed to increase the wealth of both seller and buyer – otherwise why would the parties have traded? – neoclassicists argue that free markets are in everyone’s interests and that market activity should be maximised. Obviously, a great many details have been glossed over here, but in outline this represents the dominant ideological foundations of free market capitalism.

The implications of this ideology on how we understand consumption are profound and far-reaching, although not always appreciated. It is hoped that by highlighting those implications it will become better understood how it is that consumption has been marginalised as a subject of ethical concern. Three points should suffice to explain the mechanics of this marginalisation. First, consumption within the neoclassical model is an expression of freedom, or, to employ neoclassical terminology, an expression of ‘private preference’. Since consumers are assumed to be ‘rational, self-interested utility maximisers’, it follows that any act of consumption must be a rational act that maximises an individual’s happiness. After all, with money we are able to purchase those things we desire and need most, and the neoclassical theory of consumer preferences holds that consumers always purchase that bundle of goods which maximises their happiness, given their limited income. More money means more opportunity to consume, and more consumption means having access to more of those things which contribute to happiness. So, not only is consumption considered an expression of freedom, it is also an expression of freedom that maximises an individual’s happiness. At least from the individual perspective, then, more consumption would seem to be unquestionably good. So far as this line of reasoning is accepted or internalised, it is quite understandable why consumption is not considered a subject of ethical concern.

Secondly, however, from the neoclassical perspective the benefits of consumption do not flow solely to the individual who consumes. Since both parties to a market transaction are assumed to benefit from all market transactions – again, otherwise why would they trade? – consumption is conceptualised, not simply as an expression of individual freedom that maximises *individual* happiness, but also as an expression of freedom that *benefits others too*. This, in essence, is the common understanding of the ‘invisible hand’ argument, which holds that the pursuit of self-interest in the marketplace is the best means of promoting the common good. This perspective, in fact, provides a rather ingenious defence of greed: the more market activity one undertakes (whether transacting from the consumption or production angle), the more one benefits others, since, once again, market activity is assumed to benefit both parties in the trade. This ratifies the thesis that consumption is unquestionably good, from which it seems to follow that more consumption must always be better. Again, consumption is marginalised as a subject of ethical concern. Indeed, this ‘invisible hand’ argument implies that practices of consumption would only become a subject of ethical concern – or become ‘immoral’ – if we did *not* consume as much as possible.

For present purposes, the third and final point about how neoclassicism marginalises consumption concerns the way in which any problems caused by market activity are always approached from the ‘production angle’, never (or very rarely) from the ‘consumption angle’ (see Princen, 2005). The reasoning is as follows. Despite the first two ways in which neoclassicists conceptualise consumption as unquestionably good, no one, not even neoclassicists, can deny that market activity is causing, and has always caused, some real problems. Think, for example, of the many ecological crises we are facing today, such as climate change, the mass extinction of species, pollution, deforestation, the depletion of the ocean’s fisheries, soil erosion, etc. One might have hoped that these crises would have prompted neoclassicists to finally rethink their uncritical attitudes toward consumption, to finally acknowledge that, perhaps, consumption is not unquestionably good. But this has proven to be a false hope, and perhaps this should have come as no surprise. Neoclassicism, after all, is a grand, totalising meta-narrative, which claims to have an answer to all criticisms, such that all and any of the problems caused by market activity have a purported solution *within* the free market system and without needing to rethink or revise any of the neoclassical assumptions (including the assumptions about consumption). If there is a problem caused by market activity, neoclassicists argue, this simply indicates that there has been what is called a ‘market failure’, which typically means that the costs of production have somehow been externalised, leading to artificially cheap commodities which, in turn, leads to the overconsumption of such commodities. But the neoclassical solution to such overconsumption does not require questioning consumption in any way. Consumption, as we have seen, is sacrosanct! Rather, the solution to such market failures is simply to attempt to internalise all externalities *from the production angle* – that is, to try to find ways to make sure that the costs of production reflect the ‘true’ costs (i.e., the costs *all things considered*). Once this has been achieved – if it can be achieved – any consumption that takes place is once again assumed to be at an ‘optimal’ level, which is to say, at a level that maximises overall utility. In this way, neoclassicism manages to retain perfect faith in the *virtue* of consumption. We might conclude, therefore, consciously or unconsciously, that since consumption is a virtue, it need not be a subject of ethical concern. Acts of consumption are beyond ethics, or, as neoclassicists put it, such acts are simply ‘given’.

The point of all this has been to suggest that the paradigm of neoclassical economics is primarily responsible for why consumption has been marginalised as a subject of ethical concern within market societies and beyond. Given the essentially

hegemonic role neoclassical economics plays in the world today – manifesting in the globalised political sphere as ‘neoliberalism’ or ‘Empire’ – perhaps it should come as no surprise to discover that all of us may have internalised its precepts to some degree. That is, even those who have never studied or even heard of neoclassical economics – indeed, even those who dedicate considerable amounts of time to criticising the ideology! – may still have imbibed some of its reasoning simply by virtue of living in a world that is so fundamentally shaped by it. We are, after all, social constructs, and, as explained earlier, our perception of the world and of ourselves is a function of the paradigm of understanding that we bring to experience and that we use to make sense of the world. We do not get to choose which paradigm we think with, however, since the act of choosing would be an act of thinking, and in order to think in the first place a paradigm of understanding already has to be in place. As Martin Heidegger once asserted, somewhat cryptically, ‘language speaks man’ (see Rorty, 1989: 50), by which he meant, we can suppose, that our notions of ‘self’ are not independent of language but a function of it. Donald Davidson made a similar point, but more clearly, when he wrote that ‘there is no chance that someone can take up a vantage point for comparing conceptual schemes by temporarily shedding his own’ (Davidson, 2011: 287). We must begin, that is, from where we are, with whom we are, rebuilding the boat of understanding one plank at a time, without ever being able to begin again from scratch.

If neoclassical economics has been internalised to some extent, consciously or unconsciously – in particular, if one has internalised the neoclassical understanding of consumption as unquestionably good – this means that the first step in any ethics of consumption might involve engaging the self by the self for the purpose of *centring* consumption; that is, for the purpose of deliberately bringing consumption into focus as a subject of ethical concern. Every conceptual framework conceals as it reveals, and whatever enlightenment one might gain from neoclassical economics, it must be acknowledged that its impressive edifice also casts shadows. Consumption, for reasons just explained, lies in the dark. An ethics of consumption must begin, therefore, by casting light in its direction, and this can only be achieved by deliberately giving the subject increased attention. Obviously, if one does not look for, or cannot see, a subject of ethical concern, it will not be a subject of ethical concern. However, even when the possibility of dedicating increased attention to consumption has been raised, which is perhaps the most difficult step, there is a second step, and that is to actually *maintain* the attention. The third step is to determine how, exactly, and in what ways, one could engage the self by the self with

respect to consumption (an endeavour that is taken up in the next two sections).

Notice, here, that the terrain of ethical activity lies *within* the self, at least at first, rather than being external to it. Someone who is cognisant of the three consumption-related problems outlined above – ecological degradation, poverty amidst plenty, and consumer malaise – might initially think that living in opposition to those problems must require, say, attending rallies, campaigning for political reform, engaging in civil disobedience, volunteering, engaging with and trying to mobilise the community, etc. These are surely all important things, but if our minds are not in order, then it may be that we end up directing our time and energies to pointless or even counter-productive activity, no matter how good our intentions might be. One thinks here of the young Alcibiades, who wanted to leap into a political career, but who was ultimately persuaded by Socrates that, before he tried to take care of and assume control over others, he should first make sure he had taken care of and was in control of himself (Johnson, 2003). Otherwise, even the best intentions might go astray. Socrates was to reproach Alcibiades for being so presumptuous: ‘you are not only ignorant of the greatest things, but while not knowing them you think that you do’ (*ibid.*: 26). Importantly, however, Socrates was not assuming the role of advisor on the basis that he knew *more* than Alcibiades; rather, in typical fashion, Socrates assumed his role on the basis that he better understood the *limits* of knowledge; better understood that if he knew anything, it was that he knew not. In other words, Socrates knew better than any other that human understanding always has blind spots. The analysis above was intended to suggest that consumption might be one such blind spot.

Ethics was historically about living in accordance with one’s ‘true self’, and since the true self was typically assumed to be a ‘rational self’, living the ethical or moral life was about living in accordance with a universally applicable moral code, knowable through reason, and which, on that basis, was deserving of obedience. When viewed from a Foucauldian perspective, however, it would seem that living the ethical life is not so much about ‘becoming who one is’, since, as Foucault insisted, ‘the self is nothing more than the correlate of technology built into our history’ (see O’Leary, 2002: 35). It could well be, as suggested above, that ‘who we are’ today is partly a function of various strains of neoclassicism that have been ‘built into our history’ and which have come to shape our identities (in ways that may not be obvious or even positive). Perhaps we have become seemingly fixed to these forms of neoclassical subjectivity, subjectivities that may produce negative effects, but which we

cannot always notice because our subjectivities have been fixed in an extremely effective and thoroughly ‘naturalised’ way: our subjectivities, that is, may have become a ‘second nature’ from which it will require a massive labour to free ourselves. ‘Maybe,’ Foucault suggests, ‘the task nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are.... We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries’ (Foucault, 1982: 785). This is, in essence, the point the preceding analysis made in the context of consumption practices.

4. Toward a Foucauldian Ethics of Consumption

The thesis being presented in this chapter has two central dimensions, which at this stage may be worth restating in summary form. The first dimension is that the subjectivities that have been imposed upon us by and within consumer society have marginalised consumption as a subject of ethical concern, and it was argued above that this marginalisation is best explained by and attributed to the hegemonic role neoclassical economics has played, and still plays, within consumer societies. Since human beings are socially constructed entities, it should come as no surprise that the social and institutional celebration of consumption within consumer societies has been internalised to some extent, shaping our identities and our worldviews, often in subtle ways. If it is the case, however, that cultures and structures of overconsumption are driving several of the world’s most pressing problems, then it may be that ethical activity today requires that we engage the self by the self for the purpose of *refusing who are* – so far as we are uncritical consumers – and creating new, post-consumerist forms of subjectivity. Exposing the possibility self-creating such post-consumerist forms of subjectivity constitutes the second dimension of this chapter, and this second dimension will now be elaborated on by infusing the idea of voluntary simplicity with Foucault’s notion of ethics as an ‘aesthetics of existence’. The final section of the chapter will outline several ‘techniques of the self’ that could be employed by those who wish to actually *practise* the idea of voluntary simplicity as an aesthetics of existence.

4.1. Voluntary simplicity as an ‘aesthetics of existence’

Voluntary simplicity, as described throughout this book, refers to an oppositional living strategy with which people seek an increased

quality of life through a reduction and restraint of one's level of consumption (Alexander and Ussher, 2012). This way of life generally involves providing for material needs as simply and self-sufficiently as possible, minimising expenditure on consumer goods and services, and directing progressively more time and energy toward non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning. As Duane Elgin (1998) has defined it, voluntary simplicity is 'a manner of living that is outwardly simple and inwardly rich, ... a deliberate choice to live with less in the belief that more life will be returned to us in the process'.

However, as we have also seen in this book, there is a misnomer at the heart of 'the simple life' – which is to say, it is not very 'simple', in the sense of being 'easy' to live or practise. Indeed, living a simpler life of reduced consumption in the midst of a consumer society is a great challenge – everything conspires against you. This is not to suggest that living simply is impossible in a consumer society, but it cannot be denied that living simply, so far as it is possible, demands a fundamentally *creative* engagement with life. It does not happen by default! By and large this is because the world is increasingly structured to encourage ever-higher levels of consumption, not voluntary simplicity. Therefore, those who wish to live in opposition to this trend will need, above all else, to use their imaginations – and to use them transgressively. They will need to actively reshape their lives, in their own way, and defy, avoid, reinterpret, subvert, and transcend socially entrenched norms of consumption. Furthermore, any effort to live simply in a consumer culture should not be conceived of as something that has a *destination*, as such; instead, it should be conceived of as an *ongoing creative process*.

This understanding of voluntary simplicity as an ongoing creative process is what prompted the current attempt to infuse this oppositional living strategy with Foucault's conceptualisation of ethics as an aesthetics of existence. For present purposes, 'poetry' could be used as the aesthetic trope through which this infusion could take form. Those who wish to practice voluntary simplicity, it could be said, are tasked to become 'life poets' – oppositional imagineers who must reimagine almost every aspect of the high consumption life that consumer society expects, encourages, and takes for granted. If we are prepared to broaden our conception of poetry to include more than just written or spoken verse, and define it (as did the romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley) as 'the expression of the imagination' (1890: 2), then to say, 'be the poet of your life', as Nietzsche (2001: 170) implored, begins to make more sense. Blurring the distinction between art and life, it suggests that we should take hold of life, as the poet takes hold of language, and

shape it into something new, something worthy, something *beyond consumerism* – to imagine the best, post-consumerist life we can and then set about creating such a life. For are we not each related to our own lives in a way comparable to how the artist is related to his or her own materials? Are we not each charged with the task of creating as an aesthetic project the meaning of our own lives? The Greek and Roman Stoics were keen advocates of this form of self-cultivation, and the Stoics were in fact the inspiration for Foucault's 'aesthetics of existence'. This approach to existence, as we have seen, is to conceive of life as 'raw material' which individuals are responsible for sculpting. From this perspective, we are condemned to be artists of life, with the world condemned to be our canvas. And this chapter proposes that creating a post-consumerist life of voluntary simplicity from within a consumer society might require nothing less than the passionate exercise of our creative imagination.

Of course, Foucault insisted that we do not get to *choose* the raw material we work with, in the sense that the form one's life takes is inevitably shaped, at least in part, by the world around us – including, as I have argued, by the ideology of neoclassical economics. We exist, that is, both as creatures and creators. But insofar as we retain some space for freedom within which we can make our own decisions, then we are responsible for creating our own lives in much the same way as the sculptor is responsible for the statue; the painter for the canvas; the poet, the poem. As Jean-Paul Sartre was to propose (after qualifying his early notion of 'radical freedom' sufficiently to account for structural influences): *we can always make something new out of what we have been made into* (see Flynn, 2006: 67).

The infusion of voluntary simplicity with Foucault's aesthetics of existence presents itself most coherently, perhaps, when we consider the 'life as art' thesis in the context of Pablo Picasso's definition of art. According to Picasso, art should be understood as 'the elimination of the unnecessary' (quoted in Haenn and Wilk, 2006: 461). If it is the case that modern consumers are consuming excessively – whether in terms of nature, social justice, and/or personal wellbeing – then the creative process that voluntary simplifiers are tasked to undertake is the process of eliminating unnecessary consumption from one's life, and, in this way, make life more 'artistic' in Picasso's sense. Just as painters challenge themselves never to make unnecessary strokes of the brush; just as the poets challenge themselves never to include an unnecessary word or phrase; so must the voluntary simplifier aspire to craft a life that does not entail wasteful consumption. That is, voluntary simplicity as an art of living requires the individual to creatively

eliminate unnecessary consumption from one's life. This goal will not be achieved overnight. But in a world of dangerous overconsumption – a world in which ecosystems are being degraded, great multitudes remain oppressed by poverty, and in which the suburban 'American Dream' is looking increasingly like a failed experiment – eliminating unnecessary consumption can be fairly understood as the defining goal of the 'life poet'; the defining goal of 'voluntary simplicity as an aesthetics of existence'. As Thoreau (1982: 292) once wrote: 'Men have become the tool of their tools. The greatest works of art are an expression of man's struggle to free himself from this condition.'

The reference to Thoreau here is not casual, and deserves some elaboration. Not only is Thoreau arguably the most powerful exponent of voluntary simplicity, a case can also be made that he anticipated, though in a less developed form, Foucault's notion of an 'aesthetics of existence'. Foucault's philosophical perspectivism (which underpins his ethics) could be inferred from Thoreau's (1982: 559) claim that: 'The universe is wider than our views of it' or from his suggestion that nature could support more than 'one order of understandings'. Jane Bennett (2002), in fact, has developed a post-structuralist interpretation of Thoreau with considerable insight. But Thoreau also seems to have been very sympathetic to the ideas of 'self-fashioning' and the 'art of living', as the following passage makes clear:

I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavour. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so make a few objects beautiful, but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look.... To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of the arts (Thoreau, 1982: 343).

Similarly, in the conclusion to *Walden*, Thoreau (*ibid.*: 562) urged us all to 'live the life [we have] imagined'.

To some readers all this may sound grandiose, but the point being made is a serious one. 'Love your life', Thoreau (*ibid.*: 566) stated with disarming simplicity, and make no excuses. 'Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour' (*ibid.*: 343). Thoreau thought that there are as many ways to live 'as there can be drawn radii from one center' (*ibid.*: 266), and he desired that there 'be as many different persons in the world as possible' (*ibid.*: 325). But he also saw 'how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves' (*ibid.*: 562), how easily we fall into the 'deep ruts of tradition and conformity' (*ibid.*). This

troubled Thoreau deeply, for he thought that if we do not live *deliberately* – that is, if we only get out of bed because of ‘the mechanical nudgings of some servitor’ (*ibid.*: 342) – then we are just sleepwalking through life, injuring eternity by killing time. ‘Little is to be expected of that day, if it can be called a day, to which we are not awakened by our Genius’ (*ibid.*: 342). Thoreau, to be sure, is speaking not so much to geniuses here, as to the genius (or poet) in us all. Take yourself and your life seriously, he is saying. Do not let yourself be swept along. Claim your freedom and exercise your capacity to create your own fate. Compose yourself! WAKE UP! ‘Moral reform’, Thoreau insisted, ‘is the effort to throw off sleep... To be awake is to be alive’ (*ibid.*: 343). With a slight change in the language, this could easily be interpreted as a Foucauldian perspective: ethical practice, one might say, is the effort to throw off ‘the self’ imposed upon us by society. To compose oneself is to be free.

With the basic idea of voluntary simplicity as an aesthetics of existence stated in outline, it is now time to consider, with respect to the question of consumption, ways that one might actually set about ‘throwing off the self’ and creating someone new.

5. Desubjectivisation: ‘Techniques of the Self’ and the Art of Voluntary Simplicity

In this final section, several ‘techniques of the self’ will be outlined which may provide a useful starting point for actually practising the ethics of voluntary simplicity as an aesthetics of existence. That is, the following 10 techniques may assist those who seek to overcome the aspects of their identities and behaviours that may have been shaped by the consumerist forces of contemporary society. The aim of these techniques is to transcend, through self-cultivation, the subjectivities that have been imposed upon us by consumer society and to create something new. It is important to note, however, that voluntary simplicity as an aesthetics of existence does not have anything to say about what form that ‘new self’ will ultimately take; rather, the purpose is to help break the consumerist mould of the ‘existing self’ so that new, post-consumerist forms of subjectivity can emerge.

5.1 Read about consumerism and voluntary simplicity

The importance of reading about consumerism, to begin with, lies in the fact that many of the mechanisms of consumer society are not

obvious and, for that reason, can escape our notice. But if those mechanisms are not recognised or understood, they obviously cannot be resisted. Consequently, we can find ourselves shaped by those mechanisms in insidious ways. For example, the complex concept ‘hedonic adaptation’ (e.g., Di Tella and MacCulloch, 2010) holds that once human beings have their basic material needs satisfied, further increases in material wealth can have *short-term* influences on happiness (the so-called ‘consumer buzz’, of which we may be all aware), but little or no *long-term* influence on happiness (a phenomenon which may be much less obvious). That is, once human beings attain a modest material standard of living, evidence suggests that we end up ‘adapting’ to further increases in material wealth, which means that we typically find ourselves no better off than when we were less wealthy. If this is so, and there is considerable evidential support for this phenomenon, then this should affect the way we shape our lives, especially with respect to our pursuit of consumption. We might decide, for example, that if the pursuit of increased material wealth is unlikely to provide long-term satisfaction then that pursuit should not be the focus of our lives. But if we do not know about the process of ‘hedonic adaptation’, then we cannot plan our lives with the aim of avoiding consumption that is wasteful from the perspective of happiness.

A second example of the subtle workings of consumerism – from the many to choose from – is known as the ‘Diderot Effect’ (named after the philosopher Denniss Diderot (1769), who was the first to write about the phenomenon). The ‘Diderot Effect’ refers to how one consumer purchase can induce the desire for other purchases, which can induce further desires, and so on. The purchase of some new shoes looks out of place without a new outfit to match; a new car looks out of place parked in front of a shabby old house; painting the lounge can make the kitchen look even older; and replacing the sofas tempts one to replace the chairs too. This striving for uniformity in our standards of consumption – ‘the Diderot Effect’ – can function to lock us onto a consumerist treadmill that has no end and attains no lasting satisfaction. But if we are aware of this phenomenon, we can take steps to resist it, by foregoing the initial upgrading, for example, and thereby step off the consumerist treadmill. We can then do something else with our lives – something more ambitious, perhaps, than making sure our carpet matches our walls.

The point of these two examples is to show how consumerism can often lock us into practices of consumption that are wasteful of our time and energy (to say nothing of the waste of resources they entail). By dedicating some of our attention to the mindful study of consumerism, however, we may deepen our insight into the world,

and our lives, and this may well assist us in escaping consumerism and in the planning and creation of new, post-consumerist forms of life. In other words, by deepening our understanding of consumption and its effects, we may find ourselves better able to live lives of what David Shi (2007: 131) called, ‘enlightened material restraint’.

As well as reading about consumerism, it is suggested that there is also great value in reading widely about voluntary simplicity. For those of us who have been educated into a consumerist form of life, within a consumerist society, it can be very difficult indeed to imagine that alternative forms of life exist. In fact, so entrenched can we become in the consumerist form of life that we can resemble the fish that does not know it is in water. That is, we may not even recognise consumerism as consumerism – as one form of life among others – but assume instead that it is ‘just the way the world is’. By reading about alternatives like voluntary simplicity, however, we can unsettle this assumption and expand our imaginations, and hopefully come to see that we have a choice in the way we live. We can change our lives, and perhaps begin changing the world, by changing our minds. Not only that, reading about voluntary simplicity can be self-fulfilling in that it can affirm and support the transition to a post-consumerist life. This is but an inflection of the old adage that what we give our attention to, we become. The choice, it would seem, is ours.

5.2 Keep precise financial accounts and reflect on them

Although practising voluntary simplicity is much more than just being frugal with money and spending less – it is also a state of mind – spending wisely does play an important role. In *Your Money or Your Life* – a prominent text in the literature on voluntary simplicity – Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin (2008) provide elaborate financial exercises for readers to undertake which seek to provoke reflection on the real value of money and the true cost of things. Such exercises may sound mundane and a bit pointless – most people believe themselves to be careful, rational spenders (perhaps because that is what neoclassical economists tell us we are). But if the exercises are carried out with precision the results may well surprise, even shock. One might find that seemingly little purchases add up to an inordinate amount over a whole year, or over ten years, which may raise new and important questions about whether the money might have been better spent elsewhere, not at all, or exchanged for more time by working less. The aim of such exercises is not to create tightwads, as such, but smart consumers

who are conscious of the full cost of their purchases, *all things considered*. After all, as Thoreau (1982: 286) insisted, ‘the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it’. When exploring voluntary simplicity in this light, one might well find that some reductions and changes to spending habits, rather than inducing any sense of deprivation, will instead be life affirming. Furthermore, it is often said that how we spend our money is how we vote on what exists in the world. Clearly, then, our relationship to money is an area that deserves close attention, for if we do not have a precise understanding of how we are spending our money, we can find ourselves misspending our money and thus our lives. Through the ‘technique’ of keeping precise accounts of our income and expenditure, however, we can bring this issue to the forefront of our attention and allow ourselves to better negotiate a fulfilling and meaningful life.

5.3 *Cultivate non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning*

Voluntary simplicity, it could be said, is about progressively directing increasing amounts of one’s attention away from the materialistic side of life toward the non-materialistic side. But cultivating a deep appreciation of non-materialistic goods often requires a certain degree of training (see generally, Burch, 2013). This training can be conceived of as an investment, of sorts, in the sense that effort expended in the early stages of development is justified on the basis that it will have positive, long-term impacts on one’s life (and perhaps positive, short-term impacts also). Learning to play a musical instrument, for example – say, the cello – may require some investment in this sense before one can appreciate the joy of performance or be introduced to the profound beauty that can emanate from a cello in the hands of a competent cellist. But once that degree of competency has been attained, the non-materialistic satisfaction that can flow from playing a musical instrument is essentially limitless, and perhaps, one might even say, infinite. Another example might be reading. The more one reads, the better one gets at reading (in the sense of reading more deeply). But once a certain degree of competency has been attained, books have the potential to provide us with an inexhaustible source of non-materialistic wealth, all the better for the fact that a book itself – which is, of course, a material object – can be shared or ‘consumed’ without limiting its non-materialistic re-consumption by oneself or another, again and again.

At this stage some may wish to level a charge of elitism against this ‘technique of the self’, but such a charge would be misguided.

After all, the point of this technique is simply to consciously direct one's attention to non-materialistic goods, rather than materialistic goods, and this, in itself, makes no value judgement about which forms of non-materialistic goods should be pursued. For example, whether one learns an instrument to play music by Bach or Dolly Parton is not at issue; nor is the point to privilege Herman Hesse over Mills and Boon. The point of this technique, once more, is to deliberately cultivate satisfaction and meaning in life through non-materialistic pursuits, rather than materialistic ones. But in which non-materialistic directions one should head is not something that can be informed by a consideration of voluntary simplicity as an aesthetics of existence.

5.4 *Work on overcoming status anxiety*

It is sometimes said that modern consumers spend their lives working jobs they do not like, to buy things they do not need, so that they can impress people they do not like. Whether this is an exaggeration or not is less important than the issue it raises about what motivates our consumption – in particular, the issue of whether or to what extent we consume for the purpose of seeking or maintaining social status. There is in fact considerable evidence to suggest that status seeking and social positioning is highly relevant to consumption practices, especially in consumer societies (see, e.g., Hirsch, 1976). But there are at least two problems with this approach to life and to consumption: firstly, social positioning through consumption is a zero-sum game, in the sense that when one person's social status is increased, someone else's must have relatively decreased, meaning that overall social satisfaction is unlikely to change; secondly, a strong argument can be made that, ultimately, it is much more important that we have the *respect of ourselves* rather than the *respect of others*, especially since the former is within our control, and the latter is much less so. Accordingly, if we choose to care about what others think of us – and it is a choice, although it may sometimes be a difficult choice – we are giving up some of our freedom to define our lives on our own terms. It can be argued, therefore, that practising voluntary simplicity as an aesthetics of existence implies cultivating an indifference to social status, which would involve constantly thinking about what is truly valuable in life and recognising, perhaps, that it is more important to shape one's life for the purposes of gaining self-respect than for the purpose of seeking the respect of others. After all, if one merely seeks the respect of others, one might come to the end of life and have succeeded in attaining

that respect, but have little respect for oneself. A case can be made that such a life would not be a successful life.

5.5 Regularly undertake the ‘deathbed experiment’

The ‘deathbed experiment’, so-called, is a technique of the self (popular among the Stoics) that can assist in the evaluation of what is most important in life, including how important money, possessions, and status are to a well-lived life. The thought experiment can be expressed in the following terms: *Imagine you are on your deathbed and someone asks you about which attitudes defined your life. What would you want to be able to say?* The Stoics argued that this type of thought experiment is important for at least two reasons: first, because the technique of trying to look back on life from the vantage point of our deathbed can help us prioritise our time and attention *today* as effectively as possible; and second, it can help us accept without complaint those things we cannot change and prompt us to set about changing those things we can.

Taken seriously – and it ought to be taken seriously or not at all – the deathbed experiment can provoke us to reflect on life’s ‘big picture’ and what role our attitudes have in shaping it. In particular, the experiment potentially has great relevance to the idea of voluntary simplicity as an aesthetics of existence, because it has implications on how we value money, possessions, and status. That is, it raises the question of what attitudes we will have toward these things on our deathbed. The purpose of considering this issue prior to lying on one’s deathbed is so that our conclusions shape our thoughts and actions today; so that we have no regrets in the future; so that we can, in Nietzsche’s terms, look forward to an ‘eternal recurrence’ of our lives.

One might suppose, for example, that a person on their actual deathbed rarely says, ‘I wish I had spent more of my life working to pay for more consumer goods’. More likely, perhaps, at least in consumer societies, is that a person might come to the end of their life and have some regrets about dedicating *too much* of their time and energy toward materialistic pursuits, at the expense of various non-materialistic goods, such as time with friends and family, or time to engage in creative activity or community engagement. In short, the deathbed experiment is a tool or technique that can be used (repeatedly) to avoid the regrets of overconsumption. To paraphrase Thoreau (1982: 343), we should aim to live what is life, so that we do not, when we come to die, discover that we had not really lived.

5.6 Acknowledge freedom by imagining alternative life paths

Freedom, as the existentialists often insisted, can be terrifying. Freedom can be so terrifying, in fact, that we can sometimes pretend that we are bound by circumstances to live the life we are currently living when, in fact, we are really just avoiding having to deal with the reality of our own freedom. Existentialists call this living in ‘bad faith’. For those brave enough to face their own freedom, however, the technique of imagining alternative, hypothetical lives can be a useful means not only of highlighting one’s freedom, but also of actually expanding it. This technique involves imagining various alternative futures for your life, futures that depend merely on an act of will to initiate. Imagine, for example, radically changing careers, or deciding to dedicate your life to this or that burning passion – imagine it seriously. Imagine also, perhaps, living a radically simpler life. What would life be like? What could life be like? How could we get there?

It may be, of course, that the life one is currently living is the best life, the freest life, the most fulfilling life – in which case the alternative lives imagined need not be pursued. But by imagining alternative lives, we can become more aware of the nature and extent of our own freedom. Perhaps, as Foucault suggested, we may discover that we are freer than we think we are.

5.7 Practise negative visualisation

Negative visualisation refers to imagining bad things happening in your life for the purpose of preparing yourself emotionally when, as inevitably happens, something bad does actually happen. Of course, negative visualisation may also help us avoid those bad things happening in the first place, which provides further justification for this technique. Human life is such, however, that bad things sometimes occur that are entirely out of our control, so if we are mentally prepared for such occurrences, they will never seem as bad as when they strike us out of the blue.

With respect to voluntary simplicity, it can be helpful to imagine losing our entire life savings, or losing our home in a fire, or coming home one day and discovering we have been robbed of our most prized possessions. By imagining such events and considering the various ways we could respond to them, we are more likely to respond effectively should they ever occur. We would be more likely, for example, to say to ourselves, ‘these are the circumstances of my life: how best can I live my life from now on, given these circumstances?’

Negative visualisation is a central ‘technique’ of Stoicism (see Irvine, 2009: Ch 4). The Stoics argued that it is not events that hurt us; rather, we are hurt by the *interpretations* we give to those events. This is important because, while we are not always in control of the events in our life, we are in control of the interpretations we give those events. For example, continuing the above hypothetical, suppose we arrive home one day and discover we have been robbed of our most prized possessions. This event can be ‘dealt with’, from an interpretive perspective, in various ways. One response is to become angry, sad, or spiteful, but they are not pleasant or desirable emotions, so responding with anger, sadness, or spite generally makes a bad situation worse. Another way to respond, however, would be to show gratitude that our prized possessions enriched our life for as long as they did; another response again would be to recognise that there are many people around the world who have almost nothing, and this can make it seem rather perverse to lament the loss of our prized, but superfluous, possessions. The point is that the same ‘event’ can impact on one’s life in various ways depending on the ‘attitude’ with which we choose to deal with it. Again, the event is out of our control, but the attitude is not. To draw once more upon Nietzsche – a Stoic in his own way – one should live in the spirit of *amor fati* and ‘love thy fate’ (for a discussion see Han-Pile, 2011).

This technique of negative visualisation might be particularly important as the world confronts and deals with the impending ‘limits to growth’ (see Turner, 2012). Consumer lifestyles today are exceedingly resource dependent, and if it is the case that the planet simply cannot sustain their burdens, then consumer lifestyles as we know them today simply will not be a part of human civilisation for all that much longer. Since this means that consumer societies are likely to be maintaining a lower per capita material standard of living in the future than they are currently, it is best to ‘visualise’ this forthcoming transition for the purpose of preparing oneself, emotionally and otherwise, for its arrival. Economic contraction will be much harder to deal with by those who assumed that their consumer lifestyles were their God-given right, which could never be taken from them. Conversely, economic contraction will be much easier to deal with if one has anticipated it as an inevitability – perhaps, in some circumstances, a welcome inevitability. Indeed, those people who embrace voluntary simplicity may not need to look very hard to see that the limits to growth may well have an ‘upside of down’. This is likely to depend, however, on one’s attitude. Fortunately, the attitude we adopt in this regard is up to us. Why not, then, be an ‘upsider’?

5.8 *Anticipate and avoid consumer temptations and seductions*

Everybody in consumer societies has probably had the experience of walking through a mall, or watching a television advertisement, only to discover that such experiences can give birth to new, artificially imposed, consumer desires. We may not have even known that some product existed, but after being exposed to it through sophisticated marketing techniques, we find ourselves wanting it – needing it. Not only that, just knowing about the new product can make the things we currently own seem a bit old and dated, even though, prior to discovering the new product, our current possessions were a source of satisfaction. Those same possessions can become a source of dissatisfaction.

Within consumer societies people can be exposed to as many as 3,000 adverts each day (de Graaf *et al.*, 2005: 160), and the message implicit to *every* ad is the message that our lives are not good enough as they are, but that our lives can be improved if only we buy this or that product. It seems we are easily persuaded. But we need not be passive pawns in this perverse game. If we come to accept that marketing and advertisements can seduce us ever-deeper into consumerist practices, then one ‘technique’ for escaping those practices is simply to anticipate and avoid as many consumer temptations and seductions as possible. For example: do not go to the mall; do not read unsolicited junk mail or glossy magazines filled with ads; watch as little television as possible, etc. By regulating as far as possible what our minds are exposed to, we can change the nature of our minds and thus our lives. If we give too much of our attention to consumer products, however, we, ourselves, might become the product.

5.9 *Keep a journal*

As noted above, one of the greatest legacies of Stoicism is the idea that, while we may not always be in control of the events that happen in our lives, we are ultimately in control of the ways in which we *respond* to those events. But although we may be in ultimate control of our responses, we do not always respond how we would have liked, and sometimes our responses can become habitual rather than considered or deliberate, at which time our freedom, our power, to respond as we wish seemingly diminishes. Keeping a journal is a good way of having a conversation with oneself about the happenings of the day. By reflecting on one’s actions and taking a few moments to reflect upon one’s responses to events, one becomes better able to negotiate life in the future and

respond in the most fruitful ways. If one does not reflect in this way, the same mistakes can occur over and over again, and self-development essentially comes to a halt. Having a regular conversation with oneself through the keeping of a journal is likely to help us in all areas of life, but in consumer societies, it may be a particularly useful practice with respect to consumption. By critically reflecting on a regular basis upon our consumer purchases, consumer motivations, consumer insecurities, consumer expectations, consumer desires, etc. we are likely to become more conscious of the forces external to ourselves that conspire to turn us into mindless dupes who dutifully turn the cogs of the consumerist machine.

5.10 *Ask yourself, 'How much is enough?'*

This question is perhaps the central question of voluntary simplicity, and it is suggested that any attempt to practise voluntary simplicity must involve meditating upon it with exceptional dedication. Therein lies the truth of voluntary simplicity, *but not as an answer to the question, but the question itself*. Why, after all, must truth always be conceived of as an *answer*? That is, why must we deny the possibility that there could be truth awaiting us in a *question*? As it happens, however, 'How much is enough?' is an extremely unpopular question within growth-orientated, consumer societies. But it is a question that is arguably of revolutionary import, for it has the potential not only to deconstruct 'Empire', both ideologically and institutionally, it also has the potential to provide the fertile soil for growing a post-consumerist form of life.

This question, however, leads to an unexpected twist in the exploration of voluntary simplicity. We discover that it is impossible to answer the question 'How much is enough?' until we have first answered a prior and perhaps even more important question, 'Enough for *what*?' This 'prior' question challenges us to specify the point of our economic activity, for if we cannot identify its purpose we cannot know if our economic efforts have succeeded. Without some 'chief end' in mind to guide and justify our labour, we would merely be running in the ruts or acting for no conscious purpose, like the Brahmin who chained himself for life to the foot of the tree, but could not explain why he did it. The warning here, in effect, is that if we do not have a clear sense of what we are doing with our lives, or why we are heading in one direction rather than another, we will not be able to tell if our attitudes toward material things are keeping us on the right path or leading us astray.

Voluntary simplicity as an aesthetics of existence, however, can offer no guidance on the question, ‘Enough for *what?*’ – which is to say, we each must create as an aesthetic project the meaning of our own lives. The ethics of consumption explored in this chapter merely insists that we must face this question when shaping our attitudes toward money and material things. If we do not face that question, we cannot possibly understand the meaning or purpose of ‘economy’. Once we have developed some answer to that question, however, then we are in a much better position to answer the question, ‘How much is enough?’ Many participants in the Voluntary Simplicity Movement (Alexander and Ussher, 2012) are discovering that much less is needed than was previously thought, and perhaps, one might hope, others will come to realise that they, too, are freer than they think they are. By needing less, people may come to realise that they would not need to work so much to provide for themselves, and it is hoped that the 10 ‘techniques of the self’ presented above, if practised seriously, might assist in that realisation. Liberated from the limitless pursuit of more consumption and the endless labour that it demands, post-consumers are then free to set about doing something else with their lives.

6. Conclusion

It may be that Foucault scholars will take issue with aspects of the analysis above, perhaps the very nature of the analysis, and dismiss it on the grounds that Foucault would not have wanted or intended his work to be applied in this way; that his ideas have been misused or simply misunderstood. Admittedly, the ethics of consumption initiated herein will indeed need a more elaborate defence than space permits. Accordingly, consider the present sketch of ‘voluntary simplicity as an aesthetics of existence’ as a work in progress. But even if the present analysis in places goes further than Foucault would have ever allowed – in terms of its explicit normative content, for example – perhaps this stretching of his ethics is nevertheless ‘Foucauldian’, in the same way that Foucault’s use of Nietzsche was at times anti-Nietzschean, but for that very reason, Nietzschean (see Foucault, 1990c: 251). After all, Foucault described his own books as ‘a kind of tool-box others can rummage through to find a tool they can use however they wish in their own area.... I don’t write for an audience, I write for users, not readers’ (Foucault, 1994: 1). Foucault explicitly accepted, then, that it was an open question as to how the tools he provided were to be used and to what purpose they would be put. Similarly, when discussing his relationship with Nietzsche, Foucault (1977: 53-4) explained that

for him ‘the only valid tribute to thought such as Nietzsche’s is precisely to use it, to deform it, to make it groan and protest’. The same goes for Foucault’s thought, it could be said, perhaps even more so. If it is the case, then, that this chapter has taken Foucault’s ethics beyond their original intent, let this simply be considered a tribute, a sincere and grateful tribute, to one of the 20th century’s most brilliant and provocative ethical imaginations.

In closing, let it be noted, once more, that this chapter was designed with a practical intent; designed for the purpose of exploring an approach to consumption – the approach of ‘voluntary simplicity as an aesthetics of existence’ – that might actually be useful as a means of engaging the timeless question of ‘how one ought to live’. It is hoped that some readers find it to be so, although in Foucauldian spirit, one must acknowledge that it need not provide answers to all readers or a complete answer to anyone. Perhaps it was always more about raising questions than providing answers, anyway. Although the question of ‘how one ought to live’ is timeless, answering that question inevitably takes place relative to one’s own time and circumstances, relative to one’s own place in history. Let this acknowledgement of our deep and inescapable historicity provide this chapter and this book with its closing theme. We are both creatures and creators of our time. As creatures, we have been shaped, in many ways, to varying degrees, into consumers. As creators, our future is always and already opening up before our very eyes.

Let us be like the poets and make things new.

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