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Involuntary Simplicity:
Changing Dysfunctional Habits of Consumption

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ABSTRACT: Why is it so difficult for 'voluntary simplicity' to become truly *voluntary*? It is suggested that an important distinction has to be made between beliefs which are 'espoused' and those which are 'embodied'. Certain crucial systems of embodied beliefs constitute *traps*, in the sense that they set, invisibly, a person's motivational agenda, and bias perception against their own detection. This analysis makes it clear why certain popular forms of campaigning and education are ineffective; and suggests that some methodologies of self-transformation associated with spiritual traditions such as Buddhism may have much to offer the environmental movement.

KEYWORDS: Beliefs, motivation, perception, psychology, voluntary simplicity.

> When our ruling passion is no longer survival it becomes comfort. To someone whose passion *is* survival our preoccupation with comfort is ignoble and trivial; there is no way it can be justified. It can't even be understood.
>
> Nicholas Freeling, *A City Solitary*

In non-abundant societies, where the prerogative of survival leaves little room for choice, people's patterns of consumption are predominantly dictated by the nature of their circumstances. When there is little to eat, how one acts is largely determined by agricultural or ecological forces beyond individual control. But in the affluent countries of the North, what people consume, what they waste, what long and short-term considerations are or are not taken into account in making consumption decisions – these betray the powerful influence of the cultural and individual assumptions and beliefs that are resident in people's minds. And if dysfunctional habits of consumption are driven by psychological factors, then a satisfactory solution is not going to be found in either technological innovation or in ecopolitical reorganisation, but in the liberation of individuals, in their millions, from the sway of an unconsciously self-destructive worldview.

This obvious starting-point for any discussion about ways of averting further ecological catastrophes is summed up by Laszlo (1989):

> There are hardly any world problems that cannot be traced to human agency and which could not be overcome by appropriate changes in human behaviour. The root cause even of physical and ecological problems are the inner constraints on our vision and values… Living on the threshold of a new age, we squabble among ourselves to acquire or retain the privileges of bygone times. We cast about for innovative ways to satisfy obsolete values. We manage individual crises while heading towards collective catastrophes. We contemplate changing almost anything on this earth except ourselves… A new insight must dawn on people: you do not solve world problems by applying technological fixes within the framework of narrowly self-centred values and short-sighted national institutions. Coping with mankind's current predicament calls for inner changes, for a human and humanistic revolution mobilizing new values and aspirations, backed by new levels of personal commitment and political will. (pp.46-7)

VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

Those who have seen that this individual process of *reprioritisation* is the nub of the problem have tended to take two routes. One involves making explicit the tacit dysfunctional beliefs that have driven heedless overconsumption and waste (as Laszlo does), in the hope that 'making the unconscious conscious' (in Freud's famous phrase) will do the trick. The other relies more on extolling the virtues of 'voluntary simplicity'. Elgin (1981), who coined the phrase, has argued irrefutably *why* changes in personal lifestyle are vital for planetary well-being, and has persuasively shown how such changes can be construed not as sacrifice but as a joyous reorientation of life away from 'having' and towards 'being' (c.f. Fromm, 1978). "To live more frugally on the material side of life is to be enabled to live more abundantly on the psychological and spiritual side of life" (Elgin, ibid.). And he offers in his book plenty of good, practical advice, not just about what we should be doing, but about how to get started and put it into effect. He has recently (Elgin, 1992) returned to the theme, and the mixture is as before: scary facts and prognostications acting as the 'stick'; glowing exhortations about the joys of frugality to provide the 'carrot'; and tips as to how to do it.

Yet while the spirit, as a result of reflecting on these considerations, may, for many people, be willing, the flesh remains often and indubitably weak. In this area of personal lifestyle, as in many others such as dieting or giving up smoking, to *know* what to do, to *agree* that it is a good idea, even to *want* to change, seem over and over again to be insufficient. A new course of action is enthusiastically embraced, but somehow, as T.S. Eliot (1962) said in "The Hollow Men", "between the idea and the reality, between intention and the act, falls the

Shadow". That which is adopted *voluntarily* has, it seems, little power to resist being shouldered aside by a deeper impulse that remains involuntary. The vital tactical question, then, in considering any attempt to save humankind from itself, focuses not on information or exhortation, but on the resilience of habits and beliefs that are 'embodied', in the face of contrary principles that are 'espoused'. One *wants*, and one *wants not to want*; the problem is how to translate the *wanting not to want* into *not wanting*.

To see how to enable oneself to change it is necessary to understand the psychology of addiction, for people's involuntary rejection of their 'better natures' can be seen as reflecting an addiction to luxury, or comfort, that relies on the same psychological (though not of course the same physiological) dynamics as that of heroin addicts, whose need may require them, in the heat of the moment, continually to over-ride their aversion to lying to, and stealing from, those they love. In the long run it may be no less destructive – to the sustainability of the planet, if not to individual well-being – to be unable to give up flushing the toilet after every visit, or to drop the attachment to being able to pop into town on a whim, which creates the addiction to the second car. For neither the drug addict nor the comfort addict is the combination of *voluntary* effort – 'will-power' – self-talk and guilt adequate to the task.

TRAPS

This problem arises when the dysfunctional habit is locked in place by an underlying system of belief which determines, to a significant extent, a person's worldview. Such a belief system is called by Stolzenberg (1984) a 'trap', which he defines as:

> a closed system of attitudes, beliefs and habits of thought for which one can give an objective demonstration that certain of the beliefs are incorrect, and in which certain of the attitudes and habits of thought prevent this from being recognised.

Such a system constitutes, in effect, one's vantage point; while the system is operating 'upstream' of perception, its assumptions are built in to the 'reality' that is experienced, and its constituents are not visible, and not open to question. One might say that the word-processing program that is currently installed on my computer is a 'trap' in the same sense. Its instructions and sub-routines are nowhere to be seen; yet they determine absolutely the 'reality' that appears on the screen in front of me. Unless I become aware (as in fact I am) that the 'belief system' embodied by WordPerfect 5.1 is simply one amongst many, and that there are many alternative 'realities' that my laptop is potentially capable of revealing to me, then I am 'trapped' into confusing the view according to WordPerfect with the way things 'really' (i.e. inevitably, unquestionably) are. It is possible (as I am about to do) to type, in WordPerfect, a 'heretical' statement

like "I wish I could be working in Microsoft Word; it's so much better". But whatever I type *within* WordPerfect can have absolutely no effect on the program itself.

Just so, when the mind habitually runs a particular belief system, and when that belief system is instrumental in creating (editing, selecting, interpreting) *experience*, then everything that happens can only be understood in terms of the presuppositions of the system – or it cannot be understood at all. As the programmers say, 'it does not compute'. To quote Stolzenberg (ibid.) again:

> A belief system has this one distinguishing feature: all acts of observation, judgment etc., are performed solely from the particular standpoint of the system itself. Therefore, once any belief or operating principle has been accepted, that is, is seen as 'being so', any argument for not accepting it will be rejected unless it can be shown that there is something 'wrong' with it from the standpoint of the system itself... And any such demonstration would collapse as soon as it had been given because its force would depend upon the correctness of the very methodology that has just been found to be incorrect.
>
> When an outside observer is in a position to see that such a system contains an incorrect belief and also that no proof of its incorrectness can be given in terms of the system itself, then he is in a position to say that this system has become a trap. In such a situation, the outside observer will see those within as being dogmatic, while those on the inside will see the observer as someone who refuses to accept what is 'obviously so'. And, in fact, both will be right. (pp.269/272)

THE TRAP OF COMPETITIVE NEEDS

We might argue that comfort-addicts are in exactly this situation. Their view of the world embodies a nest of assumptions that link together identity, preference and material comfort in such a way that denial of preference is experienced as a mortal blow to personal efficacy, and discomfort is experienced as a threat to physical survival. Xenos (1989), for example, shows how Europeans' 'normal' experience of themselves – and their experience of themselves as 'normal' – was shifted, in the eighteenth century, by the rise of manufacturing industry and the invention of fashion, towards a constant state of relativised need or scarcity. One's sense of self, and self-worth, came to depend on possession and consumption. As fashions changed, so those one aspired to be like threatened to pull further away, while the hot breath of those one was striving *not* to be like could perpetually be felt on the back of one's neck.

> Needs that are conceived to be naturally based, such as needs for food, shelter, sex, etc., can be approached discretely... But when these needs become intertwined with a fluid, ever-changing social world of emulation and conspicuous consumption, they

become transformed into an indiscrete desire constantly shifting its focus from one unpossessed object to another.

Among the social needs constitutive of modern commercial societies are those of recognition and prestige, and even if some of them run up against absolute limits to their satisfaction, others, particularly those tied to fashion, are capable of apparently infinite expansion. Thus the boundlessness of desire is realised in the proliferation of social needs. For us, the denizens of this world of desire, it is no longer a question of episodic insufficiency; out of our affluence we have created a social world of scarcity. (Xenos, ibid., pp.5/10)

Put simply, 'individual consumerism' has become a cornerstone of modern Northern/Western identity, so that living in a spiral of escalating affluence is no longer experienced as a fortunate option, but as a matter of absolute necessity. This belief installs consumption at the heart of human identity, as a core trait that is now not the servant, but the master, of survival. The idea of *not* being able to continue to consume in the style, and at the rate, that has been prescribed, therefore, can *only* be experienced as loss, sacrifice and threat, because the perceptual apparatus has been programmed to see that way.

This is true even when the conscious, voluntary mind is espousing alternative values and dispositions. One can *try* to cut down consumption, but if underneath the intention to live frugally there is the buried belief that 'I shop; therefore I am', the commitment to the conscious intention will be fragile and half-hearted, and can only manifest as a 'gesture' that may placate the espoused belief while, on a deeper level, validating the embodied belief. I *know* I should be buying recycled toilet paper, but somehow, when I get home from the supermarket, I find, almost to my surprise, that yet again it is the softer, whiter product that I have actually bought.

Whilst the underlying trap is in place, the attempt to live frugally is bound to be experienced, however faintly, as *painful*, as a deprivation of what is 'needed', and as soon as this occurs, the system as a whole seeks to rectify the situation. The lack of comfort or of choice becomes an itch that demands scratching; and because the 'motive' is still in place, there are no good-enough grounds for resisting the urge to 'scratch'. The Buddhist monk Nanavira Thera (1987) uses again the analogy of the drug addict:

If (the addict) decides that he must give up his addiction to the drug (it is too expensive; it is ruining his reputation or his career; it is undermining his health; and so on) he will make the decision only when he is in a fit state to consider the matter, that is to say *when he is drugged*; and it is from this (for him, *normal*) point of view that he will envisage the future. But as soon as the addict puts his decision into effect and stops taking the drug he ceases to be 'normal', and decisions taken when he was normal now appear in quite a different light – and this will include his decision to stop taking the drug. *Either*, then, he abandons his decision as invalid ("How could I possibly have decided to do such a thing? I must have been off my head.") and returns to his drug-

taking, *or* (though he approves the decision) he feels it urgently necessary to return
to the state in which he originally took the decision (which was when he was drugged)
in order to make the decision seem valid again. In both cases the result is the same
– a return to the drug. And so long as the addict takes his 'normal' drugged state for
granted at its face value – i.e.*as* normal – the same thing will happen whenever he tries
to give up his addiction. (pp. 205-6)

The foregoing discussion has tried to make clear that any espousal of
'voluntary simplicity' is doomed if it is overlaid on an embodied belief system
to which it is antithetical. It follows that encouraging people to see voluntary
simplicity as a 'good idea', and offering them advice as to how to put it in to
practice, is a waste of time if, for the vast majority of the audience, the underlying
addiction is not treated. But how is this to be done? How can one truly experience
the value of simplicity, when one's experience itself is the product of a belief in
the necessity of luxury?

GETTING OUT OF JAIL

There are a number of possible methods for escaping from the trap. One is to
require people to behave in a way that respects ecological values. If they are
prevented from retreating into the familiar, sensible, normal, comfortable way,
when the going gets tough, and are forced to put up with the withdrawal
symptoms (to 'go cold turkey'), without any apparent hope of returning to 'the
good (bad) old days', then a shift in underlying assumptions and priorities can
take place which makes it possible for the value of simplicity to be experienced
and appreciated. The problems and risks with this eco-dictatorial solution are,
however, too numerous and too obvious to make it either a viable or a sensible
option.

Another strategy is to engage a different motivation, so that the discomfort
of acting *as if* one were un-trapped is made worth bearing. Like the first method,
the idea is to arrange things so that people will for a sustained period act in line
with the espoused belief rather than the embodied one. As the benefit of the new
way of acting cannot be experienced to begin with, and therefore cannot act as
the *reward* for putting up with the disruption and discomfort, some *other* form
of reward can be used to keep the new behaviour going while it 'takes root'.

These rewards may be either positive or negative, and there are risks
associated with each. Lepper and Greene (1975), in their studies of the so-called
'undermining effect', have shown that when people are positively reinforced for
doing something that they themselves would have voluntarily undertaken
anyway, the habit can be 'appropriated' by the extrinsic reinforcement, and when
the reward stops, the original motivation is now no longer strong enough to keep
the behaviour going. So giving people money back on returnable bottles, to

encourage them to recycle, is a self-limiting expedient if it turns out that as soon as you stop the cash everybody stops recycling. This of course is why Elgin and others have emphasised that the simplification of lifestyles should be 'voluntary'. The use of negative reinforcement – punishment – on the other hand, tend towards the eco-fascist option, which we have already discarded.

A third option is to create a special context within which the value of a simplified lifestyle can be experienced; a context within which people's purpose or activity is framed in such a way that the materialistic trap is weakened or unactivated. On a camping holiday, or a meditation retreat, for example, one's expectations and habits of consumption may be radically different from those that are compulsive within the normal routines of life. The problem with this is that there is often little or no carry-over from one context to the other. We seem to be constructed psychologically in such a way that we can happily manifest different priorities in different contexts without feeling obliged to achieve any reconciliation (e.g. Lave, 1988). As Sheldrake (1990) has pointed out, many people sense no contradiction between working all week for a multinational oil company or a merchant bank, and on Friday evening dashing down the M4 in the Range Rover to a country home where the pin-stripe is immediately exchanged for working jeans, and Nature is celebrated, respected (and occasionally, without any felt contradiction, shot) for a couple of days.

This analysis of the causes of resistance to lifestyle changes makes the role of 'self-help' and 'support' groups very clear. Normal relationships, and the normal routines of life, readily reinforce both each other *and* the beliefs that underpin normal habits of consumption. But the power of *example* and *support*, in the suspension of this package of self-fulfilling, mutually-reinforcing life structures, is formidable, and certainly much greater than rational assent or individual resolve. Religious communities have long known the value of congregation and of *sangha* (Rahula, 1967), but in the lay world this kind of support has often been seen as a comforting *addition* to other strategies for life-change, rather than as one of the few strategies that actually addresses the heart of the psychological difficulty.

The final approach to making voluntary simplicity a reality which I shall discuss here is the cultivation of *mindfulness*, a term which Elgin (1981) has borrowed from Buddhist scripture. I have argued elsewhere (Claxton, 1994) that sharpening awareness of the immediate present is a prerequisite for the uncovering of tacit presuppositions. It is only an acquired (and therefore reversible) habit of perceptual imprecision that allows these unrecognised assumptions to be continually dissolved in the process whereby experience is fabricated. We can 'leap to conclusions', and mistake those conclusions for 'reality', only if we do not see that 'leaping to conclusions' is what we are doing. By attending precisely to the minute detail of experience, the nest of assumptions that link identity, security and consumption can be brought to light – not just in an intellectual fashion, but within the realm of spontaneous perceptions and dispositions.

CONCLUSIONS

The main conclusion of this analysis, then, is that those who wish to promote what they see as healthier lifestyles, and more sustainable patterns of consumption, must acknowledge that giving information, advice and encouragement have to be seen as just one component of a much wider strategy. To write your book, and then stand back in puzzled confusion while the mass of enthusiastic readers continue much as before, is only possible given an ignorance of the depth of the psychological challenge which a change of lifestyle poses. To become either angry, despondent or exhausted are the reactions of one who has grievously underestimated the magnitude and subtlety of the problem.

The second conclusion is that the practical wisdom that is often associated with spiritual traditions such as Buddhism is 'wise' not because it relies on a particular theology, but because it understands the psychological dynamics of inertia, denial and self-deception, and is designed to engage with the issue at the requisite depth (see Fox, 1990). The Three Jewels of Buddhism – Buddha, Dharma and Sangha – represent the power of inspiration and living example, the power of mindfulness, and the power of supportive friendship, respectively. Advocacy of 'voluntary simplicity', or any other significant lifestyle change, which does not understand that what is required is not *just* a change of habits, but that these habits are the visible tip of a massive and intricate belief system, is bound to increase frustration, guilt, hostility, and thereby to generate heat and friction – in the manner of one who releases the clutch, only to depress simultaneously the accelerator and the brake – but not much motion.

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