

CHAPTER 16

ECOLOGICALLY DESTRUCTIVE VALUES

16.1 Caveats and procedures

Values entered the discussion in Chapter 13, pursuant to the observations that economic production is impelled by consumer demand, that consumer demand is stimulated by marketing, and that corporate managers turn to marketing as a means of gratifying their desire for wealth (Figure 13.1). Acting through this chain of influences, desire for wealth is the driving force behind economic growth, which in turn leads to increasingly more extensive ecological destruction. The value attached to wealth by corporate managers and investors thus is a primary cause of our environmental crisis.

Values of another kind contributing to the crisis are those that make the consuming public responsive to the techniques employed by marketing specialists. These fall under the general category of consumer values. In conjunction with the value assigned to wealth, consumer values bear major responsibility for the damage human industry is inflicting upon the biosphere. As part of the strategy of alleviating this damage by curtailing economic growth (section 10.1), our best hope for social survival may be to replace consumer values now operative in industrialized countries with other values more congenial to environmental health.

In addition to their effect of making the consuming public responsive to advertising, consumer values typically are responsible for particular kinds of environmental damage that can be traced back to them individually. The tactic of the present chapter is to single out a few consumer values that are particularly detrimental and to examine some of their ecological consequences. Consideration of possible replacement values will be left for Chapter 17.

Certain cautions are in order as we undertake this project. Since we all are members of societies where consumer values are operative, we shall be looking critically at values in which we might be personally involved. In doing so, we need to be careful to detach the values under consideration from our own feelings of personal involvement.

We need also to be on guard against possible charges that this undertaking is “discriminatory” or “elitist.” It is unavoidable that the results of our analysis will reflect unfavorably on the life-styles of specific groups of people. One such case has already been encountered in Chapter 13, where pursuits of obsessively wealthy are shown to be contradictory to environmental health. Conclusions also will be reached in the present chapter that might be interpreted as contrary to the interests of “ordinary people,” of “the working class,” or of “honest people just trying to make a living.” Insofar as possible, we should refrain from judgments of this sort and do our best to proceed in an impersonal (objective) manner.

In the case of each value treated, our procedure will be (i) to identify the value in question, (ii) to describe its role in some prominent practice, industry, or social institution, and (iii) to look in detail at some of its deleterious environmental effects. The first value treated is that of pleasure.

16.2 Pleasure

Pleasure is designated by a variety of roughly synonymous expressions, including ‘gratification’, ‘enjoyment’, and ‘satisfaction’. Although many different sorts of experience can provide pleasure (the gratification of applause, the enjoyment of a concert, the satisfaction of meeting a goal), our present concern is with pleasures afforded by fulfilling natural needs and desires. As a further restriction for ease of example, we will stick with pleasures associated with food and drink.

Pleasure has already been identified as an *approbatory* value (section 15.4). When operative in status, it constitutes social approval of sensible pleasure as a motive for action, which is to say approval of pleasure-seeking behavior. The approbatory value of pleasure is operative in a given social group when members tend to look upon pleasure-seeking in a favorable light and to take it for granted without further explanation. A result is that members of the group generally will take advantage of opportunities for pleasurable activity and will tend to seek out opportunities under their own initiative.

Contemporary consumer society is premised on the value of pleasure, and more specifically of gratification. The role of pleasure in consumer behavior is well understood by marketing specialists. If a product can be associated in the public eye with gratifying experiences, it is almost assured of success in the consumer market.

Consumer gratification is the basis of the “junk food” industry, and hence a contributing cause of the damage this industry inflicts upon the environment. A case in point is the mammoth business enterprise responsible for bottling and vending the wide array of beverages known as “soda pop”. Soda pop recently has come under attack by public-health advocates for its contribution to obesity and other health problems. Leaving these to speak for themselves, our present concern is limited to its environmental effects.

At the turn of the century, people in the U.S. consumed roughly one gallon of soda pop per person per week.¹ This compares with an average national drinking-water intake of slightly more than three gallons per person per week (<http://orion.huji.ac.il/orion/archives/2000b/msg00246.html>). Carbonated beverages consumed in 2001 came packaged in some 70 billion cans, 25 billion plastic bottles, and 800 million glass bottles (<http://www.saveharry.com/bythenumbers.html>). Of these, roughly one half of the cans and less than one third of the bottles were recycled, leaving

over 50 billion containers to find their way into the nation's landfills

(<http://www.mindfully.org/Sustainability/2003/Aluminum-Cans-receycledSep03.htm>).

The environmental impact of these discarded containers is not limited to landfills and roadsides. Containers that are thrown away have to be replaced. As far as aluminum cans are concerned, replacing discarded cans with others made from virgin materials required the energy equivalent of over 16 million barrels of crude oil and produced over 3 million tons of greenhouse gases (see last-mentioned web site). Although wastes involved in replacing containers could be sizably reduced by using bottles requiring deposits, the industry has been fighting laws to that effect for decades

(<http://www.mindfully.org/Plastic/Polyethylene/PET-Bottle-Waste5sep03.htm>). Part of the reason, presumably, is that handling refunds on bottles cuts into vendor profits.

Another ecological hazard bound up with our taste for sweetened water is the many millions of vending machines worldwide that offer soda pop chilled to just the right temperature. An estimated 3 to 4 million soda-pop vending machine in the U.S. account for 1/3 to 1/2 of one percent of the total electricity consumed in the country today (i.e., around 12-15 billion kWh).² In developing areas, the percentage could well be higher. A significant proportion of the ecological damage caused by electricity production across the globe thus can be blamed on the soda-pop industry and the consumer value of gratification that supports it.

Among more obvious effects of the junk-food industry are the containers and wrappings that make service at fast-food outlets so quick and easy. Despite recent efforts by certain chains to become environmentally more "friendly," most hamburger containers are still made of nonbiodegradable polystyrene. A small portion of these are recycled, but countless others (how many "billions sold"?) will remain in some landfill indefinitely.

Other problems lie with the production of meat that goes into these delicacies. One is the matter of beef cattle being an extremely inefficient means of producing protein for human consumption. It has been estimated that about 40% of grain grown worldwide (70% in the U.S.) is fed to livestock, despite the fact that as many as 15 people could be fed with the grain required to provide a beef diet for a single person.³ As matters stand, about one-third of U.S. cropland is used to feed cattle headed for slaughter. By dominating the use of cropland in this fashion, the fast-food hamburger is a major contributor to land erosion, ecosystem poisoning, and general degradation of the nation's arable land.

An even more distressing aspect of the hamburger's environmental impact is that much of the industry's meat now comes from steers raised in Central and South America. Most of the land involved has been made available by destroying tropical rain forests. One study concluded that for every quarter-pound hamburger sold in fast-food restaurants, roughly 165 pounds of living matter has been destroyed at its place of origin.⁴ This includes not only trees in the affected rainforests, but also birds and insects residing in them. Although estimates vary, more than a million acres of rain forest probably have been destroyed to serve the needs of the fast-food industry.⁵ Such devastation would not have happened without the help of gratification as an operative consumer value.

16.3 Comfort

When comfort was introduced as a social value in the previous chapter (section 15.3), it was identified as a value with *commendatory* force. This at first may seem counterintuitive, given comfort's superficial resemblance to the paradigmatically approbatory value of pleasure. Being comfortable is pleasant, and pleasure often brings comfort. So why isn't comfort an approbatory value as well?

A defining mark of approbatory values is the social approval they provide of behavior undertaken to satisfy a natural urge or instinct (section 15.4). Such behavior is motivated by an inborn desire, and the associated value approves of that motivation. The main reason comfort is not an approbatory value is that comfort-seeking behavior seems not to be motivated by a natural desire. There appears to be no inborn urge for comfort to match our innate desires for food and sexual gratification.

In classifying comfort as a commendatory value, the comfort we are talking about is more specific than a general pleasantness and lack of discomfort. It is a kind of comfort that borders on self-indulgence, often associated with what might be viewed as luxuriousness. For people with ample means, examples would be heated swimming pools, first-class seating on airplanes, and luxury hotel accommodations. Other examples, for people with ordinary resources, are overstuffed furniture, down-filled comforters, and central air-conditioning.

Whereas pleasure-seeking behavior is motivated by natural promptings, people are led to seek comfort of this sort primarily by social influences. The reason comfort is a commendatory value is that it provides motivation for behaviors and practices that society has come to consider desirable and worth recommending. Comfort-seeking behavior is motivated by the force of that general recommendation. To the extent that the value is operative, members of the group concerned will generally consider comfort something worth pursuing.

Through most of human history, pursuit of comfort in the present sense seems to have been limited to people with extraordinary means (kings, nobility, bishops). Being beyond the reach of ordinary people, there was little social incentive to look for comfort in the pursuit of daily routines. To the contrary, conditions we now consider distinctly uncomfortable were endured by our predecessors as a matter of course. Victorians put up with uncomfortable clothing, Shakers got along with uncomfortable furniture, and almost

everyone (including castle-dwellers) made do with uncomfortable housing. Only within roughly the last two hundred years have societies emerged with sufficient resources for comfort to be established as a general social value.

Once creature comforts of the relevant sort came within reach of ordinary people, however, they soon came to be perceived as generally desirable. Manufacturers were encouraged to make them widely available, and consumers were encouraged to buy them for personal use. People became increasingly aware of what they would miss by not purchasing the commodities in question. Previous luxuries became necessities; and lack of these commodities came to be viewed as a social liability. By the time this had happened, the commendatory value of comfort had achieved operative status.

In many cases, to be sure, products we are encouraged to purchase under the influence of this value (overstuffed furniture, heated automobile seats) may be no more damaging to the environment than less luxurious alternatives. A notable exception comes with contemporary society's increasing dependence on air-conditioning. Let us look briefly at the deleterious effects of air-conditioning upon the biosphere.

Around the turn of the century, the U.S. consumed more electricity running home air-conditioners than the overall national consumption of all but 19 other countries.⁶ At this point in time, 47 percent of dwellings in the U.S. had central air-conditioning, up from 23 percent twenty years previously. By now, that figure may be assumed to have extended past 50 percent.

The detrimental effects of coolants used in air-conditioning are well known. Although the U.S. and other industrialized nations have sharply reduced their use of ozone-depleting CFCs as a result of the Montreal Protocol (section 5.6), use of CFCs in air-conditioning has been increasing in rapidly developing countries like China and India.⁷ This makes air-conditioning a major contributor to ruptures in the ozone layer

that threaten human health no less than the viability of many chlorophyll-bearing organisms.

Other environmentally harmful side effects stem from the generation of electricity required to operate air-conditioning systems. In a recent report from the U.S. Department of Energy (www.eia.doe.gov), air-conditioning is explicitly cited as a major factor leading to record high levels of carbon dioxide emission. Air-conditioning thereby is a major cause of global warming. Other environmentally harmful effects include smog, acid rain, and ecologically disruptive power lines.

Despite such hazards, air-conditioning has become a “basic need” in U.S. society. Regardless of income level, most Americans expect air-conditioning when looking for housing. In the southern part of the country, specifically, where people managed to get by for millennia without artificial cooling, more than 9 out of 10 dwellings now have some kind of air-conditioning. And other countries are beginning to follow suit. As of 2007, for example, 7/8ths of urban households in China owned air-conditioners.⁸ While China began to phase out CFCs for HCFCs in 2007, many of these are older models still using ozone-depleting CFCs as coolants.

Many things have happened in recent decades to bring about this widespread dependence on cooling equipment. Not to be overlooked are factors like improved technology and globalization, which have made the equipment less expensive and more readily available. (China and South Korea produce most of the world’s window air-conditioners.) No less influential, however, have been changes in social attitudes shaping the way people think about personal comfort. Increased demand is a condition of increased production (section 13.4); and the growing prevalence of comfort as an operative social value is probably the main reason that air-conditioning is in growing demand. The prevailing value of comfort, in a manner of speaking, is the “axle grease” that moves cooling equipment from producers to consumers.

By reverse token, if the influence of this value were substantially weakened, there would be fewer air-conditioners drawing electricity from polluting power plants. In most climates, at least, there are ways of keeping cool that are compatible with a healthy environment. One is to build houses that take advantage of natural circulation. Another is to build in the midst of trees, which cool the air not only by shade but by moisture evaporating from their leaves.

Contrary to what might at first appear, renouncing comfort as a social values is not tantamount to resigning ourselves to discomfort in our daily routines. As far as temperature control is concerned specifically, it rather is to adopt alternative (and often time-tested) ways of coping with hot weather that do not rely on energy-intensive technology.

16.4 Convenience

We live in a society devoted to labor-saving technology. We open cans, mix batter, and sharpen pencil in the least laborious way possible. Most doors in commercial buildings open without pushing; and once inside we avoid stairways when elevators are available. We microwave frozen meals for dinner, or else head out to the nearest fast-food restaurant.

Our previous discussion of the fast-food industry (section16.2) focused on the gratifying taste of its products. Whereas trips to hamburger outlets are often motivated by pleasure, however, this should not obscure the fact that fast-food restaurants are eminently convenient as well. In many cases, it is both quicker and easier to buy a ready-made “meal” (hamburger, french fries, carbonated beverage) than to prepare something in one’s own kitchen. Fast-food outlets are but one of many kinds of “convenience store” that have replaced the corner grocery in our commercial landscape.

Convenience emerged as a dominant social value in conjunction with the widespread availability of small electric motors in the late 19th century.⁹ To attribute

such a late date to the developing value of convenience is not to suggest that people led lives burdened with inconvenience during earlier periods. Even hunter-gatherers presumably favored easier over harder ways of doing things. The point is that social groups had no occasion to develop a general predilection for labor-saving devices until electric motors appeared on the scene. Only then did a market develop catering to that general preference.

Once technology became available to produce labor-saving devices for the mass market, however, convenience took over as a major selling point in consumer society.¹⁰ People bought things with convenience in mind, and by their example encouraged other people to do the same. This set the stage for marketers to extol their products for the convenience they provide, and for manufacturers to vie with one another in the design of convenience-providing products. As part of the whole process, the status of convenience became solidified as an operative social value.

Given that most labor-saving devices operate on electricity, expanding use of these devices causes corresponding increases in the amount of electricity they consume. And their use has been expanding rapidly in most parts of the world. Along with the proliferation of air-conditioning equipment noted in the previous section goes an expansion of electricity-operated appliances like clothes washers and dryers, dishwashers, microwave ovens, vacuum cleaners, and food blenders. Most American households are likely to feature two or three dozen of such devices, consuming roughly as much electricity per annum as three or four window air-conditioners.¹¹ It is obvious that labor-saving devices like these are responsible for a significant portion of the environmental damage stemming from the production, delivery, and consumption of electric power.

Among institutions and practices centered around our preference for doing things the easy way, however, the ecologically most damaging by far are those involving the

private automobile. Once viewed as a rich man's plaything, the automobile has become part of the very fabric of all save the most "under-developed" of world societies.

Although many factors contributed to its presently almost universal acceptance, one of the more prominent is the sheer convenience it provides. The automobile has given ordinary people unprecedented mobility in daily travel routines, has enormously increased the range of places they can visit, and has enabled them to travel at almost any time of the day or night they choose. In addition, having access to a car enables a person to take advantage of auxiliary conveniences, such as banking by ATM, buying food, beverages, and medicines at pick-up windows, and returning library books and videotapes through after-hour depositories.

Book-length accounts have been written of the effects of automobiles on the environment.¹² Given that well over 100,000 more cars and passenger vehicles are being added daily to the total of about 600 million on the planet's highways (in 2006), such accounts would have to be updated frequently to remain current. A few general facts will suffice for present purposes.

A substantial portion of the environmental damage caused by cars occurs before they are sold and put on the road. This includes damage resulting from extracting raw materials used in manufacture, damage due to energy consumed in converting these raw materials into finished products, and that associated with building the massive systems of roadways on which the products will be operated. For example, it has been estimated that producing a single automobile requires around 100,000 megajoules of energy, generates about 30 tons of wastes, and results in over a billion cubic yards of polluted air.

More frequently noted than figures like these are the amounts of fuel consumed by cars in operation and the pollution resulting from this fuel consumption. In 2002, more than 85 billion gallons of gasoline were consumed by transportation in the U.S., about 90 percent of which was taken up by automobile travel. Today the U.S. consumes

more oil for transportation than it produces, which makes our reliance on automobiles the primary reasons for our country's dependence on foreign oil.

Before the Clean Air Amendments of 1977 regulating pollution from gasoline engines, a typical car discharged over 500 pounds of hydrocarbons, 1,700 pounds of carbon monoxide, and 90 pounds of nitrogen oxide for every 10,000 miles driven. In 1966, some 60 percent of the approximately 146 million tons of air pollutants discharged in the U.S. was due to motor vehicle traffic. While notable improvements in these conditions resulted from the 1977 Amendments, automobiles remain a major source of greenhouse gases and ozone-depleting nitrogen oxide. Inasmuch as few other countries have enacted comparable legislation, the fact that some 100,000 new cars go into service everyday is good reason to suppose that pollution from automotive traffic worldwide continues to increase.

Once a car goes out of service, most of its metal and plastic parts can be recycled. But tires and fluids pose special problems of disposal. Although some old tires find other uses (e.g., in playgrounds and road construction), most are simply buried or left in large piles (where they sometimes catch fire). As far as fluids are concerned, every low-voltage automotive battery contains about a pound of sulfuric acid which, along with oil, antifreeze, and transmission and brake fluids, must be sequestered indefinitely as toxic waste.

Ecological damage stemming directly from the manufacture, operation, and disposal of automobiles traces back directly to our involvement with such machines. Given the systematic connections between the automotive industry and the rest of the economy,¹³ however, there are indirect environmental costs we should be aware of as well. Some of these have to do with infrastructure, such as highways, parking lots, and city thoroughfares. In the U.S. specifically, there were about 4 million miles of public roadway at the turn of the century.¹⁴ These covered a total of 24,500 square miles (more

than half the area of Pennsylvania). Add to this roughly 11,000 square miles of parking lots and driveways, and we have an area about the size of Illinois covered with asphalt, concrete, or other hard surfaces. Whereas much of this was once prime farmland, it is now ecologically dead. Apart from humans, the only living things that have anything to do with it are the countless millions of animals destined to become roadkill.¹⁵

A revealing indication of the systematic interactions between the automotive industry and other sectors of its economy is the fact that, in Canada during the last half of the 20th century, ownership of automobiles grew at almost exactly the same rate as the country's GDP.¹⁶ In view of the close correlation between a country's productive output and its energy consumption (section 7.2), and that between energy consumption and environmental degradation (section 7.4), this suggests a comparably close correlation between environmental degradation and numbers of automobiles in service.

This summary account of the private automobile's transgressions against the environment has been intended to illustrate the adverse ecological effects of convenience as a social value. While convenience surely has been a factor in the general acceptance of the automobile as a means of transportation, however, it would be naive to suppose that other values are not involved as well. People are also drawn to cars for reasons having to do with freedom and autonomy. People with cars at their disposal do not have to rely on other people to take them where they want to go. Another value served by owning a car is that of individuality. In that regard, compare a Hummer with a Prius as a public manifestation of the driver's personality.

Yet another value bound up with car ownership is that of social status. Perhaps more than any possession other than our private homes, an automobile can serve as a symbol of affluence and success. When we come to address the topic of conspicuous consumption in the next section, the private automobile will continue to be available as an illustration.

16.5 Acquisition

By definition, a social value is something valued by society at large (section 15.2). A given society might value a specific kind of experience (e.g., pleasure), a certain state or condition (e.g., comfort), or a particular manner of dealing with one's daily affairs (e.g., convenience). A distinctive feature of consumer society is the high value it ascribes to acquisition, which differs from the above in being a particular kind of activity.

Acquiring consumer goods is something people do. As such, it is distinct from the circumstance of possessing goods that have already been acquired. While the possession of goods can be a firmly entrenched social value in its own right, its role in consumer society is not much different from its role in previous ages.¹⁷ Consumer society is premised on the willingness of people to spend money on a plethora of goods, regardless of what they do with those goods subsequently (e.g., keep them, discard them, give them away).

As far as the three types of social value identified in Chapter 15 are concerned, acquisition clearly is a commendatory value. It is not normative, because failure to acquire (although sometimes frowned upon—even considered “unpatriotic”) is seldom treated as categorically wrong. Nor is it approbatory, inasmuch as it does not result from a natural urge or desire that might be rendered socially acceptable by general approval.

Acquiring consumer goods rather is an activity that members of concerned societies urge upon each other, recommending it both by example and by group persuasion. Like other commendatory values, acquisition is a social construct. It is a value that evolved with the formation of consumer society, growing into its present role of abetting the process of consumption by which productive activity leads to corporate profit (section 13.6).

The value consumer society attaches to acquisition derives from a social phenomenon which, following Thorstein Veblen, is commonly referred to as “conspicuous consumption.” By Veblen’s account, wealth and influence gain social standing for their possessors only when put on display before society at large. An effective way of making one’s wealth evident is to spend lavish amounts on goods and services for which one has no obvious need. Consumption of this sort is conspicuous to the extent that it appears extravagant and unnecessary. Put briefly, conspicuous consumption is ostentatious expenditure on goods and services intended primarily as a display of wealth and social power.

In its traditional form, conspicuous consumption was a prerogative of rulers and noblemen, who would call attention to their status by maintaining large households, giving lavish banquets, and wearing clothes that ordinary people could not afford. With increasing economic productivity following the Industrial Revolution, however, goods and services once available only to the very rich came within reach of less affluent people as well. This had consequences for the wealthy and the not-so-wealthy alike. On one hand, opulent people had to rely on even more extravagant means to display their superior wealth. This means that their consumption habits became more and more wasteful.

As far as the less affluent were concerned, on the other hand, there was incentive to imitate the consumption practices of the privileged few. Included among these practices was the use of unnecessary consumption to establish status within one’s social group. Whereas conspicuous expenditure once was confined to wealthy people demonstrating their superiority over the masses, accordingly, it now became a means by which ordinary people could prove their worth to each other. Although unlikely to catch up with the wealthy in quantity and quality of things acquired, the less wealthy came

under social pressure to expand the tally of acquisitions they could flaunt before their peers.

Once this mentality became established, spending money as lavishly as means allow became a way of gaining the respect of other people, and accordingly of maintaining self-respect. Social status could be bought, so to speak, by an ongoing expenditure of one's limited resources in the acquisition of a never-ending stream of consumer goods. In the economic setting of consumerism, personal success is less a matter of what one does with possessions already acquired than of having demonstrated the ability to acquire them in the first place.

In both its original form described by Veblen and its current form enshrined in consumerism, conspicuous consumption is fraught with environmental hazards. For one thing, spending money on things that are conspicuously unnecessary is inherently wasteful. Producing such goods uses up natural resources, consumes energy, and poses problems of disposal, all to an unnecessary degree. Given a biosphere hard pressed to meet the needs of its current population, it is harmful to press it further by producing goods that are patently unneeded.

The harmful effects of unnecessary acquisition are amplified by the tendency of luxury items to transmute into "necessities." Air-conditioning has already been cited (in section 16.3) as a one-time amenity that has come to be considered a "basic need" in American society. Other examples that come readily to mind are designer clothing, stylish automobiles, and various kinds of electronic devices. While such things might be needed "to keep up with the Joneses," they nonetheless impose an added burden on the biosphere.

Yet another adverse concomitant of conspicuous acquisition is the incentive it provides for producers and marketers to find new ways for people to spend money wastefully.¹⁸ Advertising a product as "new" or "improved" prompts consumers to think

that it is yet another thing they can acquire without redundancy. And each new product adds to the inventory of superfluous items retailers can make available in shopping malls and specialty stores. A reasonable guess is that no shopping mall is without at least one store offering an array of items none of which anyone actually needs.

Acquisition thus joins gratification, comfort, and convenience as social values at the heart of consumer society. As a rough and ready definition, a consumer society might be characterized as one in which these particular values have dominant operative status. Drawing on this definition, we may think of the present chapter as an examination of the damage inflicted on the biosphere by consumer society.

16.6 Wealth

The final value to be discussed in this chapter is that of wealth. In Chapter 13, desire for wealth was identified as the primary driving force behind the seemingly endless growth of free-market economies. But economic growth involves ever-increasing levels of energy consumption (sections 7.5, 8.1). Inasmuch as inordinate energy consumptions was responsible for our current environmental crisis initially, there is a sense in which the crisis was precipitated by desire for wealth. Moreover, given that wealth is desired because of the value we associate with it, there is a sense in which the crisis is due ultimately to this particular value. It thus behooves us to look carefully at the value our society attaches to wealth.

To set our compass, we should note that wealth is not a consumer value. People purchase things for purposes of gratification (e.g., sweetened beverages), of gaining comfort and conveniences, (e.g., air-conditioners and automobiles), and of sheer acquisition. These are all consumer values. Barring financial investments and the like, however, people do not buy things for the purpose of becoming wealthy. Consumption

tends rather to decrease one's wealth, which means that wealth is not a value by which consumption is motivated.

The connection between wealth and the consumer values we have been discussing is that the generation of wealth in a free-market economy depends upon the latter values being operative in the consumer sector (section 13.4). It is precisely because values like gratification and convenience are effective in present-day society that marketers can sell products in which these values are realized. And it is because such products can be sold that businesses are able to generate profits from which both corporate and personal wealth are derived.

With the three categories of social value in view (Chapter 15), let us see how wealth fits into the schema. It is clear that wealth is not a normative value. A value has normative status when it serves as a norm differentiating socially prescribed from socially proscribed behavior (section 15.6). In typical cases, socially prescribed behavior is characterized as right, and hence required, while socially proscribed behavior is characterized as wrong and in need of correction. Even though some people in some circumstances may look upon gaining wealth as the "right" thing to do, however, there is no attendant intimation that lack of wealth is wrong and requires rectification. This is enough to show that wealth is not a value with normative status.

It is less clear, however, whether wealth is an approbatory or a commendatory value. Regarding the former, it is relevant to note that wealth is basically a matter of some people having control of substantially more resources than others. This is a social phenomenon that began to emerge only after people settled in fixed communities and began to accumulate agricultural surpluses (section 6.3). Viewed this way, wealth is a social construct and does not result (as does pleasure and gratification) from satisfying a natural urge or desire. These observations suggest that wealth is not an approbatory value.

Viewed from another perspective, nevertheless, wealth can be perceived as an offshoot of a natural instinct. Although a relative newcomer on the human scene, once wealth made an appearance it soon became established as a form of power.¹⁹ And humans are not different from other social animals in having a natural drive for power.

A characteristic of social groups generally is that they are arranged in hierarchies of relative influence. Following early research on birds, these hierarchies came to be known as pecking orders.²⁰ In human society, distinct examples are found in military organizations and in the hierarchical structures of large corporations. In both cases, the pecking order is a manifestation of relative power, having to do with who can issue orders and who has to obey them.

Given the prevalence of pecking orders within the animal kingdom generally, the tendency of people to arrange themselves in power structures of this sort appears to be innate. And since pecking orders are established by individuals vying for power, desire for power in some sense must be innate as well.²¹ Insofar as wealth is a form of power, this makes desire for wealth an expression of a natural human instinct.

By this line of reasoning, wealth turns out to be an approbatory value after all. The natural urge behind it is not a desire for wealth as such, which as previously noted is a social construct. People rather desire wealth for the power it represents. In societies where this desire meets with blanket approval, wealth is a value with approbatory status. Contemporary society sanctions the pursuit of wealth in the manner it sanctions pursuit of pleasure. Wealth thus joins pleasure as an operative approbatory value.

But wealth appears to be a commendatory value as well. The essential feature of commendatory values is that they constitute a general social recommendation of something as worthy of being pursued. As far as U.S. society is concerned in particular, there is abundant reason to think that pursuit of wealth enjoys widespread commendation. Recent evidence to this effect comes with the poll reported at the beginning of Chapter

15, showing that 80% of young adults in the U.S. see “getting rich” as the main life-goal of their generation. Comparable results undoubtedly would be forthcoming for other developed countries.

As far as commercial enterprise is concerned, we take it for granted that “the business of business is business,” and that the purpose of business is to make a profit. When profitability is threatened by rising costs of employee benefits like pension plans and health insurance, as recently has been happening with increasing frequency, the public tends to agree that these benefits must be sacrificed so that the business in question can preserve its profit margin.

In its dual status as an approbatory and a commendatory value, wealth receives the endorsement of society in two different respects. In its approbatory role, wealth is sanctioned as an acceptable goal to pursue. And in its commendatory role, it receives additional support as a goal that should be positively encouraged. This dual status gives wealth more persistence in its social setting than other approbatory and commendatory values taken individually. We shall have to take this additional staying power into account in next chapter’s discussion of how ecologically damaging values now operative might be replaced.

In concluding the present chapter, we should observe that there is nothing new in America’s preoccupation with wealth. This country’s zeal for making money goes back to the “Triangular Trade” of the late 1700s (section 10.2), as part of which slaves were imported to boost its economy. Wealth gained by slave labor contributed significantly to the expansion of American capitalism in the 19th century. This made way for the era of the so-called “robber barons” (e.g., Carnegie in steel, Rockefeller in oil, Vanderbilt in railroads) who amassed enormous fortunes by sharp dealings on the market. The fact that these individuals often contributed large amounts to philanthropy does not affect their standing as symbols of American dedication to wealth.²²

A more recent facet of our commitment to wealth is the additional means “captains of industry” have gained to achieve it. Whereas the Carnegies and Rockefellers of the 19th century relied on unscrupulous business practices in taking advantage of expanding industrial frontiers, today’s corporate managers also rely on techniques of marketing that are steadily growing in sophistication (section 13.5). In the manner illustrated by Figure 13.1, big business can generate profits by exploiting the prevailing values of the consuming public. These profits then can be converted into personal wealth by those in a position to do so.

Although wealth is not a consumer value itself, as already noted, it enlists the help of consumer values in working its influence. This means that it shares responsibility for their environmental consequences. When we turn to consider alternative values in the next chapter, we should bear wealth in mind as a social value urgently in need of replacement.

Notes

1. About one pint weekly is consumed per person worldwide (<http://www.beveragemarketing.com/news2p.htm>). Other data in this section on soda pop come from web sites of the American Beverage Association (previously the National Soft Drink Association), the Container Recycling Institute, and the Beverage Marketing Corporation, unless otherwise noted. All figures in this chapter are approximate; and different estimates often can be found in different sources.
2. An estimate of about 3 million machines appeared on the web site of the Center for Science in the Public Interest in 2003. Given an average consumption of about 4,000 kWh per machine (http://www.pnm.com/customers/tech-guides/BEA_esource/CEA_02.html), this adds up to 12 billion or more kWh and growing (<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/print/us.html>).

3. Figures in this paragraph come from Vandana Shiva's *Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply* (South End Press, 2000), pp. 70-71, and from the web site <www.vegetarian-society.org>.

4. From <www.vsc.org>, the web site of the Vegetarian Society of Colorado.

5. From <www.newdream.org>, the web site of the Center for a New American Dream.

6. The web site of the U.S. Energy Information Administration showed 0.42×10^{15} BTUs (123×10^9 kWhs) electricity consumption for home air-conditioning in 1997 (http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/consumptionbriefs/recs/actrends/recs_ac_trends.html).

Unless otherwise noted, this report is the source of other data in this section. Regarding total consumption in other countries, 20th-ranked Poland consumed 119×10^9 kWhs during the same period (http://www.nationmaster.com/graph-T/ene_eie_con). Such figures obviously vary year by year.

7. However, see endnote 1 of Chapter 8.

8. See <<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/02/23/MNGCV09PLB1.DTL&hw=ozone&sn=001&sc=1000>>

>. Relevant to the next paragraph, this site also mentions that China is the world's dominant producer of window air-conditioners. South Korea is another major source.

9. According to Vaclav Smil's *Energy in World History*, p. 170, electric motors of various sorts became available for industrial use during the 1890s. Smaller motors suitable for household use were common by 1900.

10. The following remark appeared recently in a typical small-city newspaper (the *South Bend Tribune* of March 4, 2007): "As do-it-yourself machines satisfy our society's increasing push for customer convenience, another phenomenon is finding its way onto the list—automated DVD rentals."

11. For purposes of comparison, five window units consume roughly the same amount of electricity as one 20,000 BTU central air-conditioner. These estimates come from <<http://www.city.ames.ia.us/ElectricWeb/energyguy/appliances.htm>>.

12. Among the better known are *The Ecology of the Automobile* (Montreal, Black Rose Books, 1993), by Peter Freund and George Martin; and *Asphalt Nation: How the Automobile Took Over America, and How We Can Take It Back* (New York, Crown Publishers, 1997), by Jane Holtz Kay. Web sites contributing to these paragraphs on the automobile are

<http://www.autolife.umd.umich.edu/Environment/E_Overview/E_Overview9.htm>;

<<http://www.ec.gc.ca/soer-ree/English/products/factsheets/93-1.cfm>>; and

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Car_culture>.

13. In Canada, a country with one of the highest numbers of automobiles per capita, one in twenty working people in 1990 had jobs linked to motor vehicles (<http://www.ec.gc.ca/soer-ree/English/products/factsheets/93-1.cfm>). A revealing indication of the systematic interactions between the automotive industry and other sectors of its economy is the fact that in Canada, during the last half of the 20th century, ownership of automobiles grew at almost exactly the same rate as the country's GDP (ibid.). Given the close correlation between a country's productive output and its energy consumption (section 7.2), and that between energy consumption and environmental degradation (section 7.4), this suggests a comparably close correlation between environmental degradation and number of automobiles in service.

14. This and the immediately following statistics come from

<<http://www.umassd.edu/sustainability/articleRubberAsphalt.cfm>>.

15. To mention only one of the many species involved, over one million deer are killed on U.S. highways annually

(<http://www.cnr.usu.edu/faculty2/jbissonette/documents/CKassarProposal.pdf>).

16. See endnote 13 of this chapter.

17. In Chapter 11 of *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen speaks of the possession of goods as evidence of the prepotence of their possessor over other members of society.

An added dimension of dominance comes into play, he says, with the conspicuous acquisition of goods one does not actually need.

18. According to an industry source (http://www.biz-architect.com/consumer_products.htm), 33,678 new packaged products (food, beverage, health, household, pet, etc.) were introduced in 2003 in the U.S. alone, up from 31,785 in 2002. Although packaged goods comprise only a few product niches among many, this gives a rough idea of the magnitude of new lines that appear annually.

19. A nuanced and up-to-date discussion of the relation between wealth and power in the U.S. can be found at <<http://sociology.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/power/wealth.html>>.

20. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pecking_order>.

21. Think of the role of *nachtgelust* (desire for power) in Nietzsche's *Human, All-too-Human*.

22. A recurrent theme of Alexis de Tocqueville's perceptive *Democracy in America*, published in 1835, is the country's obsession with money-making and the amassing of vast fortunes in the private sector. As Tocqueville put it, he knew of "no other country where love of money has such a grip on men's hearts." (*Democracy in America*, J.P. Mayer and Max Lerner (eds.), George Lawrence (trans.), Harper and Row, New York, 1996, p. 47).