

Tekst 7

Materialism damages well-being

By Richard Tomkins

Is it going too far to suggest that, until very recently, the leitmotif of human history had been misery? It is easy to imagine the past as some kind of bucolic idyll, but only by ignoring the perpetual visitations of war, pestilence and famine. In between, you might have hoped to avoid living too much in the shadow of fear, superstition or religious persecution but 21 what the economist John Maynard Keynes described as the permanent problem of the human race: want, or the struggle for subsistence.

It is one of the 22 of recent economic history that, in the advanced industrial world, this seemingly permanent problem has been solved. For the most part, people in developed countries live in a state of surfeit, not of want. They no longer worry whether they can afford to put food in their children's bellies or keep a roof over their heads, but which cable channel package they should subscribe to, where to spend their holidays and which designer labels they should wear.

But some people are 23. Even though they are richer, healthier and safer than ever before, and even though they enjoy more freedoms and opportunities, they continue to moan: about rising depression and suicide rates, about crime, about the decline of civility, about obesity, road rage and drug abuse, about hyper-competition and rampant materialism and, above all, about spam.

The fact is that, in the West, increases in economic output and consumption are no longer 24 by increases in people's reported levels of happiness. And as the gap widens, it is close to becoming an

obsession. This week, I received reports on the pursuit of happiness from two think-tanks on the same day: one from the London-based New Economics Foundation and another from the Canberra-based Australia Institute. Last week, the Royal Society, Britain's top scientific academy, held a two-day conference on the science of well-being. Last month, New Scientist magazine devoted a two-part series to the subject. And so on.

You can sum up the main findings of happiness research in a few sentences. Although more money delivers big increases in happiness when you are poor, each extra dollar makes 25 once your basic needs have been met. Much more important are non-material things such as a good marriage and spending time with loved ones and friends.

However, money and material goods do matter in one respect: people tend to seek status, and therefore judge themselves against the visible signs of 26. Unfortunately, as the New Economics Foundation report remarks, this is a never-ending competition because the bar simply gets raised all the time. One house used to be a sign of status; now only two will do.

If people could only overcome their worries about status, their route to happiness would be clear: they should downshift, trading less pay for more time with their families and friends. It will never happen, you may say. But according to Clive Hamilton, author of the Australia Institute report and a visiting scholar at Cambridge University, an astonishing 25 per cent of Britons aged 30-59 have done just that in the past 10 years, voluntarily taking a cut in earnings to improve the quality of their lives.

If I were in advertising, I think I would be starting to worry a bit about findings like these. Our whole economic system, with its targeted annual increases in gross domestic product, is founded upon the concept of satisfying the desire for 27; and advertising exists only to help generate that desire. But what if people became convinced that acquisitiveness, rather than adding to their happiness, was standing in its way?

People have always been equivocal about advertising, worrying that it hoodwinks them into buying things they do not need. Perhaps that explains the paradox that, as society has grown more liberal, attitudes towards advertising have gone 28. It is no longer the case that you can market any goods that can be legally sold. People are demanding that advertising should operate within the parameters of social, even moral, objectives. Bans on tobacco advertising are now being followed by calls for restrictions on the advertising of other “undesirable” products such as alcohol and fast food. And there is a rising clamour for bans on marketing to children, much of it driven by fears that they are being brainwashed into consumerism from birth.

From there, it is quite a short step to argue that advertising to adults should be banned on the grounds that it makes them unhappy. It will never happen, of course; people will always require – indeed, desire – material goods, even if they give them a lower priority, so advertising will 29. But is it possible to imagine a day when every advertisement will have to be accompanied by a government health warning such as: “Danger: materialism may damage your sense of well-being”?

Acquisitiveness, after all, is a lot like smoking: harmful, addictive and much easier to quit if everyone else does so at the same time. So the greater happiness of the many would best be served if social policy were directed towards marginalising status-seekers and turning them into pitiful pariahs, leaving the rest of us to 30, in the comfortable knowledge that we were not only in the majority but also doing the right thing.

Convinced? I am. Tell you what, I’ll agree to stop being a greedy self-maximiser if you will, then we’ll both be much happier as a result. Ready? One, two, thr . . . Hey! What do you think you’re doing? Get your hands off my credit card RIGHT NOW.

Financial Times

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Kies bij iedere open plek in de tekst het juiste antwoord uit de gegeven mogelijkheden.

1p 21

- A there was no escaping
- B this was more of a nightmare than
- C this was nothing compared to

1p 22

- A controversial issues
- B few lasting illusions
- C most startling achievements

1p 23

- A fed up with all this
- B just unfortunate
- C never satisfied
- D too easily misled

1p 24

- A affected
- B compensated for
- C explained
- D matched

1p 25

- A less difference
- B life easier
- C life more complicated
- D you want another

1p 26

- A others' appreciation
- B others' success
- C their country's economic growth
- D their sense of well-being

1p 27

- A happiness
- B independence
- C more
- D power

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1p **28**

- A** completely over the top
- B** in the opposite direction
- C** much the same way

1p **29**

- A** be of an entirely different nature
- B** fulfil a necessary role
- C** lose some of its impact

1p **30**

- A** carry on as usual
- B** downshift
- C** keep up our status
- D** save up for later