

Can Growth Continue without Compulsive Consumption?

Classical Virtue and Cognitive Behavior Therapy for Attenuating Excessive Consumption

Robert A. Gahl, Jr. (gahl@pusc.it)

Pontifical University of the Holy Cross

Before entering the body of my presentation, allow me to quickly respond to the question posed to our panel. Yes, growth can continue without compulsive consumption. However, paradoxically, with compulsive consumption, continued growth is unattainable. Economic growth and sustainable, integral development requires the creativity of free human persons who aspire to the highest values. Consumerism, in contrast, leads to materialism, reciprocal instrumentalization, personal failure, and unsustainability. Today's crisis, in the aftermath of the great recession, requires a rebirth of freedom in accord with the highest aspirations of the human person towards those goods that offer sustained and sustainable human flourishing. Working with contemporary (third generation) positive psychology, enlightened, post-materialist economists have developed new advanced statistical measurements for societal well-being along with policy strategies that, instead of promoting consumerism at all costs, promote authentic human wellbeing. (See, for example, Martin Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*, Atria, 2012; Robert Costanza et al., "A comprehensive picture of sustainable societal well-being should integrate subjective and objective indicators," *Ecological Economics* 61, 267–276 (2007); and, as mentioned in our panel discussion by Enrico Giovannini, the important work regarding Gross National Happiness and the OECD's Regional Well-Being Index or Better Life Index, for example John Hall, Enrico Giovannini, Adolfo Morrone, and Giulia Ranuzzi's "A Framework to Measure the Progress of Societies", *OECD Statistics Working Papers*, 2010 and www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/).

Early on in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis straightforwardly explains that: "The great danger in today's world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience."(EG2) Later on in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis describes the destructive effects of consumerism on both the individual and on society while quoting from St. John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus*. Francis writes: "Sometimes we prove hard of heart and mind; we are forgetful, distracted and carried away by the limitless possibilities for consumption and distraction offered by contemporary society. This leads to a kind of alienation at every level, for 'a society becomes alienated when its forms of social organization, production and consumption make it more difficult to offer the gift of self and to establish solidarity between people'(CA41)"(EG196). Consumption can become a moral disorder when sought for selfish and materialistic utility. What is more, when consumption begins to impinge upon one's psychological health, when it becomes impulsive, compulsive, or addictive, such that one consumes without self-control, purpose, or personal freedom, then it has also become pathological.

The rejection of materialism by recent social doctrine of the Church, whether in *Centesimus Annus*, *Caritas in Veritate*, or *Evangelii Gaudium*, affirms genuine human freedom, social economic freedom, and the intrinsic freedom of the market economy. In contrast with the superficial interpretations of some libertarian authors critical of papal magisterium, the Church defends a deeper understanding of human freedom and therefore an even deeper appreciation for the market economy than many suppose. Men and women are responsible agents of choice. Our freedom is not just from constraint but principally for the good. Personal self-determination drives the economy on both the demand and the supply side. Given that we are created in the image of God, our inherent creative potential capacitates us to make use of the goods of the earth and of human artifice in creative ways and to develop new

products and new designs to offer an ever more abundant supply of goods, whether natural or artificial. Both sides of the macro economy, demand and supply, are driven by human freedom, and both sides allow for the expansive inventiveness of creativity. In contrast, wherever mechanistic behavior dominates, the market is degraded into a brutish activity of commercial exchange based exclusively on unidirectional utility, that constitutes much less than a truly human market economy. The buyer and seller, the consumer and producer, enter into a dialectical relationship of utility according to the rules of a zero sum game rather than the relationship of benevolent friendship according to the creative rules of intrinsic growth proper to spiritual beings. According to the elevated vision of Catholic social doctrine, only with such a relationship founded on mutual gain do both consumers and producers act freely, only then do they live up to their vocation as the ultimate resource and as children of the Creator.

Consequently, the methods and tools of recent developments in contemporary psychology, and even neuroscience can be used along with moral and spiritual analysis to protect the market and the full freedom of all participants. Indeed, the power of recent developments in psychology and in neuroscience is further confirmation of the Christian moral and ascetical tradition and also, although sometimes insidiously, a tool for marketing. Like many of the advances in technology and medicine, these discoveries may be used for good or for evil. Indeed, not just in illicit drug traffic but also in licit gambling, especially online gambling, the discoveries of psychology are used to maximize profits in the short term by short circuiting the freedom of consumers. By selling them a short term and often destructive experience, billfolds are emptied and families are destroyed because personal freedom is manipulated and therefore impeded from reaching its true aspirations.

Recent developments in the area of positive psychology called mindfulness and cognitive behavioral therapy coincide with discoveries in neuroscience regarding decision making and brain region activation. These developments and discoveries can be a great help in living virtuously and freely, that is, in accord with one's own personal commitments. Indeed, one of the most promising currents in recent positive psychology is called ACT (Acceptance Commitment Therapy). Before describing the new psychological therapy, it may help to have a ready example in mind of a test case for excessive or compulsive consumption. Imagine a married man and father of a family starting up his computer on a rainy Saturday afternoon and noticing a pop-up advertisement for his favorite gambling site. The advertisement has been personally tailored to maximize the seductive effect of the trigger mechanism, and, he falls for the temptation, with almost automatic behavior. Despite the fact that, in a sense, he doesn't really want to, he still does it, and drives his family deeper into debt. With new data derived from functional magnetic resonance technology (fMRI), neuroscientists today know what region of the man's brain is activated by the pop-up advertisement. Online gambling marketeers also know what happens in the man's brain, how to maximize profits today, next week, next month, and for as long as they can. The online gambling profiteers use advances in neuroscience to manipulate and distort freedom of choice. They use vice and addiction to maximize their short term profits.

In marked contrast, cognitive behavioral therapy practitioners also know what's going on inside the man's brain. They too understand the shift from free to automatic behavior that leads to compulsive gambling and many other morally defective and pathological forms of behavior, whether drug or sex addiction, compulsive shopping, or convincing oneself of the need to update to the latest version of some new technology product, while knowing that one doesn't really need it at all. ACT is scientifically proven to help in ameliorating more than 10 kinds of pathologies, including conditions like type 2 diabetes that mostly manifest mostly with physiological symptoms. ACT challenges the patient, client, or, actually, anyone interested in growing in self-control and acquiring virtue, to first accept the experience of some unpleasant sensation or emotion, for instance, a non-desired desire, and then, after a few moments of acceptance that includes the proven ability to withstand the sensation or emotion without giving in to some automatic behavior, such as a trigger response, to then renew one's

commitment for some good of importance in one's life. The man at the computer struggling with his gambling addiction merely needs to confront his own desire to click through the pop-up, recognize that he can put up, at least for a few seconds, with the feeling of the non-desired desire to experience the exciting rush of gambling. Now, neuroscientists offer a fascinating and encouraging consideration. Once the man accepts the feeling associated with the trigger and activates a thought pattern for some other activity, diverse from giving in to the trigger, a distinct area of the brain is activated, an area associated with higher, executive decision making in the prefrontal neocortex. Consequently, rather than giving in to the trigger response that we have in common with the most primitive reptiles, he engages the highest component of his brain.

Things get even better. Given that the brain tends to conserve energy by not intensively activating all at once multiple regions of the brain, the activation of the prefrontal neocortex leads to a dissipation in the activity of the amygdala and the hypothalamus, thereby attenuating the force of the trigger. By accepting the non-desired desire for excessive consumption and turning to a higher, executive thought process, the man succeeds in bringing himself back into control. Now he is more capable of freedom, perhaps to continue responding to the emails that brought him to the computer in the first place. And yet, things get even better. Every time any of us practice ACT, the non-desired desires associated with any trigger mechanism are attenuated. The hold that emotions have upon our decision making is dissipated and we become more and more capable of self-control, and delayed gratification. In sum, we grow in virtue. We grow in freedom and the ability to enjoy possession of the goods that shape our deepest life-long commitments, all while growing in the ability to nurture the best forms of benevolent friendship. .

Marc Lewis, a neuroscientist famous for his work on drug addiction and mindfulness that includes direct reference to his own personal experience with opiate addiction, explains that his recovery occurred as he hit bottom and decided that he did not want to destroy his life and family. He stopped and repeated "NO" some 50 times and then repeated this process every time the withdrawal symptoms returned or he encountered a trigger. Although his personal experience is unique, scientific findings demonstrate that by staring at a clock for, say five minutes, most people succeed in attenuating non-desired desires and in achieving greater self-control. For those who believe in a transcendent good, especially for Christians who believe in an ecstatic, transcendent good, the potency of ACT can be raised to a supernatural level. Even better than staring at a clock, they can gaze upon an inspiring religious image while reciting a prayer, perhaps even a repetitive and contemplate prayer like a mystery of the Holy Rosary. Such a practice of faithful mindfulness engages the highest part of the brain to practice the acquisition of virtue while relying upon transcendent intercession, with the certain promise of an omnipotent aid for growth, even the possibility of sharing in divine life.

Twenty-first century CBT and cutting edge neuroscience offers practical wisdom in clear continuity with that of authors like Aristotle, Evagrius Ponticus, or St. Thomas Aquinas. Evagrius wrote with great detail on how to overcome the capital sins and their manifestations. He didn't realize what was happening inside his brain but he did know that self-restrained self-awareness with the renewal of one's deepest commitments contributes to self-mastery in the exercise of all the virtues. Likewise, scientific advances offer us an opportunity to overcome materialism and to consume the goods of the earth and the products of human ingenuity with responsibility and self-mastery. Economic crises are moral crises and we can apply these recent discoveries in psychotherapy to grow in moral virtue, especially regarding consumption, not for the passing moment to be later repented but for the sake of commitments that will really contribute to human excellence. Only by fostering freedom can sustainable development be achieved.