

Introduction

For well over two thousand years frugality and simple living have been recommended and praised by people with a reputation for wisdom. Philosophers, prophets, saints, poets, culture critics, and just about anyone else with a claim to the title of “sage” seem generally to agree about this. Frugality and simplicity are praiseworthy; extravagance and luxury are suspect.

This view is still widely promoted today. Each year new books appear urging us to live more economically, advising us how to spend less and save more, critiquing consumerism, or extolling the pleasures and benefits of the simple life.¹ Websites and blogs devoted to frugality, simple living, downsizing, downshifting, or living slow are legion.² The magazine *Simple Living* can be found at thousands of supermarket checkout counters.

All these books, magazines, e-zines, websites, and blogs are full of good ideas and sound precepts. Some mainly offer advice regarding personal finance along with ingenious and useful money-saving tips. (The advice is usually excellent; the tips vary in value. I learned from

Amy Dacyczyn's *The Tightwad Gazette* how to make a toilet-brush holder out of an empty milk carton, and I have never bought a toilet-brush holder since! On the other hand, her claim that one can mix real and fake maple syrup with no significant loss in quality failed a rudimentary family taste test.) But while a few treat frugality as primarily a method for becoming rich, or at least for achieving financial independence, most are concerned with more than cutting coupons, balancing checkbooks, and making good use of overripe bananas. They are fundamentally about lifestyle choices and values. And although they are not works of philosophy, they are nonetheless connected to and even undergirded by a venerable philosophical tradition that in the West goes back at least as far as Socrates. This tradition constitutes a moral outlook—or, perhaps more accurately, a family of overlapping moral perspectives—that associates frugality and simplicity with virtue, wisdom, and happiness. Its representatives typically critique luxury, extravagance, materialism, consumerism, workaholism, competitiveness, and various other related features of the way many people live. And they offer alternative ideals connected to values such as moral purity, spiritual health, community, self-sufficiency, and the appreciation of nature.

One could view the plethora of publications advocating frugal simplicity as evidence of a sea change regarding values and lifestyles that is currently under way or at least beginning. But the fact that philosophers have been pushing the same message for millennia without

it becoming the way of the world should give us pause. Many people pay lip service to the ideals of frugality and simplicity, but you still don't see many politicians trying to get elected on a platform of policies shaped by the principle that the good life is the simple life. On the contrary, politicians promise and governments strive to raise their society's levels of production and consumption. The value of continual economic growth is a given. The majority of individuals everywhere, judging by their behavior, and in spite of all the aforementioned literature, seem to associate happiness more with extravagance than with frugality.

One way of understanding this paradox is to see it as a paradigm case of good old-fashioned human hypocrisy. But that is too simple, and not just because many people live consistently thrifty or exuberantly extravagant unhypocritical lives. The gap between what is preached and what is practiced, between the received wisdom we respect and the character of our culture, reflects a deeper tension between two competing conceptions of the good life, both of which are firmly grounded in our intellectual and cultural traditions. Events like the recession that began in 2008 heighten this tension and make us more aware of it. Hard times spur renewed interest in the theory and practice of thrift while intensifying people's desire to see—and enjoy—a return to getting and spending.

Most books and articles about frugality and simple living are polemical: their aim is both to criticize materialistic beliefs, values, and practices and to advocate an alternative way of thinking and being. Although I am

decidedly sympathetic to the outlook they recommend (and my family can vouch for my being certifiably tight-wadish), this book is not a polemic. Readers expecting a searing critique of consumerism will be disappointed. Although in places, particularly in the final two chapters, I defend some of the tenets of the “philosophy of frugality” against possible criticisms, the purpose of the work is not to tell the reader: You must change your life! Rather, the book is a philosophical essay, an extended reflection on a set of questions relating to the notions of frugality and simplicity, a reflection that begins by referencing certain strains in the history of ideas in order to elucidate issues and to provide a springboard for discussing whether the wisdom of the past still holds today.

The book began as a study of frugality, but I soon realized that it was hard to discuss frugality without also discussing the idea of simplicity, or simple living. From ancient times to the present, the notions have very often been run together and discussed as an entire package of virtues and values. To a large extent I do the same. For brevity’s sake I use labels like “the frugal sages,” “the philosophy of frugality,” or “the frugal tradition,” but in all such cases I am referring to the philosophical tradition that associates both frugality and simplicity with wisdom, virtue, and happiness.

The question I began with seemed straightforward enough: Should frugality be considered a moral virtue? Almost every canonical philosopher with whose work I was familiar seemed to think that it should be. But why? These questions quickly led to a host of others. For instance:

- Why have so many philosophers identified living well (the good life) with living simply?
- Why is simple living so often associated with wisdom?
- Should extravagance and indulgence in luxury be viewed as moral failings? If so, why?
- Is it foolish or morally reprehensible to be extravagant even if one has the means to be a spendthrift?
- Are there social arguments for or against frugal simplicity quite apart from its consequences for the individual?
- Is it possible that frugality, like chasteness, or silent obedience in children, is an outmoded value, a trait that most people no longer consider an important moral virtue?

Chapter 1 examines what is meant by the terms “frugality” and “simplicity,” identifying what I take to be their most important senses, and fleshing out the explication of these by using as illustrative examples specific figures from the philosophical tradition I am mining. After a preliminary discussion of the distinction between moral and prudential reasoning, chapter 2 examines the main arguments that have been given for thinking that living simply promotes moral virtue. This is one of the main lines of argument advanced by the frugal sages. Chapter 3 looks at their other main line of argument, that living simply leads to happiness.

It is rather striking that although there is a consensus among the sages that living simply is better than living luxuriously, and that frugality is better than extravagance,

hardly any of them take the trouble to consider seriously arguments that might be mustered against this view. Chapters 4 and 5 seek to correct this deficiency. Chapter 4 discusses the dangers of frugality along with the positive side of wealth and acquisitiveness. Chapter 5 considers what can be said in favor of extravagance.

The Epicureans, the Stoics, and many of the other well-known sages belonging to the frugal tradition in philosophy wrote long ago. Given the dramatic transformation of the world since the Industrial Revolution, it is reasonable to ask to what extent their wisdom is still relevant today. Two changes in particular need to be taken into account: the vast increase in the size, complexity, and productivity of modern economies; and the threat to the natural environment posed by the activities and lifestyles that accompany all this economic growth. Chapter 6 examines the idea that the philosophy of frugality is basically obsolete in the modern world since in a consumer society the general happiness depends on most people not being especially frugal. Chapter 7 lays out the argument that a general shift toward frugal simplicity is exactly what we need to protect our environment from further damage, and considers several objections to this proposition.

A good deal of contemporary academic philosophy consists of sophisticated discussion, often couched in technical jargon, of narrowly defined theoretical issues. Papers at a recent meeting of the American Philosophical Association with titles like “Quantifier Variance and Ontological Deflationism” or “Modally Plenitudinous Endurantism,” are of this sort. Scholarship in the history of philosophy

typically offers subtle interpretations of thinkers and texts, backed by impressive erudition showing, perhaps, how Kant's moral philosophy does not, as some critics claim, inconsistently make use of utilitarian arguments, or uncovering ways in which Sartre's account of "the other" is indebted to Augustine's conception of God. It is not my concern here to criticize these ways of contributing to our understanding of philosophical issues. But philosophy has always been conceived more broadly than this. From the beginning, it has also included a general reflection on life, and this reflection does not have to be terribly complicated or use lots of specialized terminology. This is the sense in which figures like Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, More, Montaigne, Rousseau, Voltaire, Johnson, Emerson, or Thoreau can legitimately be called philosophers. Many of these are not much studied in Anglophone philosophy departments these days. To some extent this is a historical accident, but it also reflects the interests, both intellectual and vested, of academic philosophers, who generally prefer to tackle challenging theoretical or hermeneutic problems that offer opportunities for them to exercise their particular skills.

What I refer to as the "philosophy of frugality" is an example of philosophizing in the broader sense. Unlike the more specialized and professionalized kinds of philosophy, it often finds expression in literature and popular culture, and I have occasionally referenced these to bring out this connection. One book that was especially instrumental in directing my attention to this tradition of philosophy as reflection on life, and is itself a fine contribution to that tradition, is William Irvine's *A Guide to the Good Life*:

The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy.³ Irvine argues that the ancient Stoics offer insights into human nature and sound advice on how to achieve happiness that we would be well advised to listen to today. I agreed with much of what I read in Irvine's book, but found myself wondering why, in spite of its seeming cogency, a mass revival of Stoicism is unlikely. This led me to try to set out and appreciate some of the plausible arguments that can be made in favor of the quite different outlook on life that prevails today.

Again, the book is not a polemic. My general outlook is sympathetic to those who advocate frugal simplicity, but I do not think all the good arguments are on one side of the ledger. I have tried to do justice to some of the objections that might be leveled against the philosophy of frugality, and on some questions my final position is to come down firmly on both sides of the fence. Rather than making the strongest possible case for a particular conclusion, my main purpose has been to clarify the concepts, values, assumptions, and arguments related to the sort of questions posed above. My hope is that by bringing these into sharper focus, the book will help readers to reflect on such questions for themselves. For the issues are both inherently interesting and important, concerning as they do how we choose to live, what ends are worth pursuing in life, and what goals we should seek to realize as a society.