

Consumerism, Marketing, and the Cardinal Virtues

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The tendency for consumers to overindulge in purchase activities has been analyzed and discussed since the time of Plato, yet consumerism in today's marketplace has become increasingly more prominent and pernicious. In this conceptual article, we examine consumerism and discuss the four weaknesses in human nature that promote it. We then apply the four cardinal virtues—moderation, courage, justice, and prudence—and describe how these virtues can be implemented by consumers and producers so as to counteract the weaknesses and result in more effective achievement of the common good. As a result of this application, both consumer decision-making and producer marketing-action should work to promote human flourishing.

Introduction

The ownership of private property is often extolled in Catholic social teaching as being necessary to support the development of both the person and the family.¹ Property represents the stored value of prior wages and helps insulate the individual from income loss due to short-term illness, momentary job interruption, or other hazards. The individual can sell or trade personal property and thus support his or her family until the crisis is over. Property ownership thus allows the person a certain amount of freedom to function without undue outside influence.

Capitalistic markets have developed around the world to support widespread individual ownership of private property. Some of these markets, the United States being a good example, allow for a relatively free flow of goods and services. Yet other markets incorporate fairly significant restrictions either through

government regulation (e.g., the European Union) or through arrangements with large producers in a system derogatorily referred to as “crony capitalism” (i.e., Argentina). These regulatory constraints often impede the availability and variety of products offered to consumers. Despite these constraints, consumers in Western nations have achieved a significant level of power, and now enjoy government and producer-sponsored “rights” that include liberal return policies, product performance warranties, fair pricing, and safety in use. The process of shopping is generally perceived as an enjoyable and socially rewarding experience as consumers choose from a vast and ever-changing array of consumer products.²

But the Church does not offer an unconditional endorsement of the quest for individual private property. Why? Because the Church teaches that God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all, without favoring (or excluding) any one individual or group.³ Consequently, those who accumulate private property have an obligation to use it not merely for their own benefit but for the shared benefit of all. Specifically, “Individual persons . . . must act in a way that benefits not only themselves and their family but also the common good.”⁴ Property owners have a duty to use the personal property in their possession for authentic human development.

Capitalistic systems come with the inherent risk that the drive for private property can be sought for its own sake rather than as a means for authentic human development. Accordingly, recent popes, notably Pope Francis, Pope Benedict XVI, and Pope St. John Paul II, have strongly criticized this disordered mentality under the heading of “consumerism.”⁵ They warn that consumerism is a potentially devastating threat to the world’s poor and the global environment. Further, it undermines the happiness of consumers themselves, for it stimulates desires that adversely impact the health of both body and soul. It leads people to covet what their neighbors have, to seek possessions at the expense of virtue, and to focus on immediate gratification and frivolous pleasures instead of that which is long-term and truly valuable.

No matter what the product category may be, whether fashion, food, pharmaceuticals, personal electronics, adult beverages, or weddings, a consumerist mentality can dominate markets. People are tempted to follow a lifestyle they believe will make them happy, and by equating consumption with happiness, consumers buy much more than they need and spend more than they should. They try to acquire the latest and greatest products and in doing so try to “keep up with the Joneses”—or in fact to outdo them. People attempt to fit in with societal expectation rather than be different. In doing so, they sacrifice long-term goods for short-term satisfactions, and their purchases often fail to build the value that private property ownership is supposed to provide.

So, how can our society reduce consumerism and its ill effects? We recommend the application of virtue and provide three reasons. First, recent conceptual research suggests that automatic self-regulation in the form of personal values, traits, and virtues can moderate the relationship between desire to buy and the decision to buy, and conscious self-regulation in the form of moral emotions and social identity moderates the same relationship.⁶ Second, recent empirical research conducted among Chinese consumers demonstrates that the consumeristic lifestyle is restrained in the Chinese culture through the adoption of Confucian virtues such as trustworthiness, truth-telling, meeting obligations, and reciprocity.⁷ This suggests that consumerism may be restrained in other cultures through the application of similar virtues. Third, virtue has a strong history of beneficial normative application beginning with Plato.

The third point is essential. Plato's *Republic* subjects consumerism to a trenchant philosophical critique. The text argues that the human appetite for luxuries is in principle limitless and unable to be fulfilled so that consumerism, as a way of life devoted to satisfying such desires, is subject to futility and unhappiness. Indeed, Plato likens the people who make a living satisfying those desires to handlers of a terrible beast. They know what the beast wants, but they do not know whether what the beast wants is truly good for it. Plato resolves the dilemma by introducing the four cardinal virtues as the way to bring order and happiness to human life. Moderation, courage, justice, and prudence are not only useful for restraining desires but they also constitute the natural flourishing or health of the soul.⁸ Since Plato, the critique of consumerism has been a staple of philosophical discourse.⁹

As we shall see, a life lived according to the cardinal virtues of moderation, justice, courage, and prudence is the best defense against the deceptive allure of consumerism.¹⁰ While a growing body of literature sees virtues as the solution to overconsumption and the negative impact on the environment,¹¹ our focus in this article is somewhat different: We wish to curb frivolous consumption for the sake of the person and encourage consumers to weigh more heavily long-term value into their purchase calculus. Doing so will free up resources that can be directed toward the poor and the environment, and these are good reasons to pursue the virtues.

In addition, we recommend virtue simply for the sake of individual human flourishing.¹² The best way of life—the one that will bring intrinsic satisfaction—is a way devoted to virtue and character, and it is this approach that can counter the deceptive allure of consumerism. In this article, we aim to restate the Platonic solution to consumerism in the contemporary context by speaking of

the virtues in the context of both consumer and marketer. In this way, we intend to flesh out the vision suggested by John Paul II:

Of itself, an economic system does not possess criteria for correctly distinguishing new and higher forms of satisfying human needs from artificial new needs which hinder the formation of a mature personality. *Thus a great deal of educational and cultural work* is urgently needed, including the education of consumers in the responsible use of their power of choice, the formation of a strong sense of responsibility among producers and among people in the mass media in particular, as well as the necessary intervention by public authorities.¹³

Naturally, our judgment concerning consumerism is compatible with being pro-business. Companies provide many goods and services that solve genuine problems and improve the human estate. Therefore the cardinal virtues enable us to engage in business and buy products without compromising human development and happiness. By exercising the virtues we outline here, consumers and marketers will not fall prey to the harm that remains an ever-present possibility, and they will be in a position to take advantage of the good that business does.¹⁴

Further, we evaluate consumerism in terms relevant to marketing and philosophical anthropology. Marketing literature displays awareness that producers have an obligation to deliver a genuine good to consumers. Philosophical anthropology reflects on the human good and the sorts of virtues that will promote it as well as the sorts of vices that will undermine it. Accordingly, we believe that this article makes an original contribution by identifying weaknesses in human nature and their relevance to the choices of consumers and marketers. While marketing and philosophy are not the only two approaches one might take to the topic, we believe they are beneficial nonetheless. We invite others to approach the issue from other disciplines, such as theology, economics, psychology, or sociology.

In the remainder of the article, we discuss consumer behavior and the important role of individual decision making and evaluation. Then we turn to consumerism that is a prevalent attitude of nonvirtuous consumer behavior and identify the four ways it undermines human flourishing. After that we introduce the four cardinal virtues as ways to counteract consumer attitudes and promote human flourishing by examining the way those virtues are activated both for the consumer and the producer.

Consumer Behavior and Happiness

Consumer behavior is the field that studies why consumers buy the things they buy, when they buy them, and where they buy them. Theoretical underpinnings of the field are dominated by the model of consumer behavior proposed by Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell that views consumers essentially as problem solvers who are motivated to improve their lives by engaging in certain consumption activities.¹⁵ It suggests that consumers first attend to a variety of cultural, family, environmental, and media influences that help them recognize problems they want to solve. Consumers then engage in internal (memory) and external search activities (internet, advertising, friend recommendations, and so forth) to identify potential solutions to problems. Next, consumers evaluate the alternatives identified by way of their search, engage in purchasing activity to acquire products or services, and finally evaluate whether they have improved their life as a result of the whole effort. By mentioning the prevailing model of consumer behavior, we do not wish to imply any form of behaviorism or determinism. Rather, we wish to consider the fact that the activity of a consumer is a structured, multistaged action.

Consumer behavior, like any behavior, can be performed poorly or well. The criterion for distinguishing good and bad performance is not only a subjective feeling of satisfaction or objective measures of whether or not the consumer “got a good deal” in terms of the price, for it also concerns how consumer choices fit into the overall aim of the person’s life. That is, it concerns how a given consumer choice enables or disables the quest for happiness. Humans are motivated to achieve happiness, even when helping others, because doing good for others makes us good and thereby happy. Consumer behavior, then, can be evaluated in terms of whether or not it is successful in promoting individual happiness.

Here, however, a puzzle presents itself: what is happiness? As Aristotle points out, even though people agree that they want to be happy, they do not agree on what happiness is. Some think it is pleasure, others honor, others money-making, and still others virtue.¹⁶ Aristotle argues that only the life of virtue qualifies as the happy life, for pleasure is insubstantial and sometimes bad; honor derives its value from the good that is honored; money is for the sake of what money can buy; and virtue is valued for its own sake. A life devoted to pleasure, fame, or money will be an unhappy one. Only virtue contributes to true human flourishing.

When it comes to human flourishing, we ask not only how someone feels but how someone *is*: As an example of a human being, is he or she praiseworthy or a blameworthy? The four cardinal virtues are habits that enable us to act well in four aspects of life: moderation regarding pleasure, courage regarding pain, justice regarding people, and prudence regarding truth and goodness.

Moderation (also called temperance) is the virtue of action that concerns pleasure. Like all virtues for Aristotle, it hits the mean between two extremes: self-indulgence and insensitivity. Moderation restrains and tames our desires so that our best self remains in control; the immoderate person, by contrast, is a slave to his or her passions, which grow beyond all measure. Courage (also called fortitude) is the virtue of action that concerns fear of pain. It hits the mean between two extremes: cowardice and recklessness. Courage enables us to achieve goods that, while honorable, are difficult and involve personal risk. The uncourageous person, however, remains driven by fear. Justice (also called fairness) is the virtue of action that concerns our relations to others. It strikes the right balance between too much and too little while taking into account what people are owed. The unjust person wants more than his or her fair share. Prudence (also called wisdom) is the virtue of thought that allows us to make good decisions in a given situation.¹⁷ Aristotle saw these four interconnected virtues as being critical for human happiness:

No one would maintain that he is happy who has not in him a particle of courage or temperance or justice or practical wisdom, who is afraid of every insect which flutters past him, and will commit any crime, however great, in order to gratify his lust of meat or drink, who will sacrifice his dearest friend for the sake of half a farthing, and is as feeble and false in mind as a child or a madman.¹⁸

The cardinal virtues make our choices beneficial for our life's overall aim: happiness or human flourishing. What makes for good consumer choices? We think the cardinal virtues are at work in each of the stages of consumer behavior.

Problem Recognition. The virtue of prudence helps consumers identify which problems are appropriate to be solved now and which should be put off until later. Moderation helps distinguish what one really needs versus what one merely wants. A good consumer, that is, one who makes consumer choices that do not compromise human flourishing, will integrate consumer choice within a broader concept of the human good that emphasizes virtue and communion.

Information Search. Again, the virtue of prudence helps consumers attend to good information sources and trusted relationships to gain product information while discounting spurious information and overzealous product claims offered by unscrupulous producers.

Alternative Evaluation. The virtue of moderation can help keep consumers from excess and help determine how far they can proceed in acting on their desires. Prudence can help consumers achieve an objective and true evaluation—one centered on a long-term perspective. Justice allows consumers to determine what might be a fair price and what represents good value.

Purchase Activity. The virtue of courage helps consumers remain steady in the face of obstacles, resist overly persuasive sales techniques, and refrain from purchasing products and services they do not need or cannot afford.

Post-Purchase Evaluation. The virtue of prudence can help consumers decide whether the acquired product or service has really improved their lives. If it has not, then this should help consumers reorient purchase activity in the future and curb future desires for products that have proven to lead away from true happiness.

Consumerism

Nonvirtuous consumer behavior promotes consumerism, a mentality that regards human success in terms of having goods rather than being good and of having possessions instead of moral character.¹⁹ It regards life as striving for goods rather than as striving for goodness. The kinds of decisions we make habituate us to a certain general approach to problems, and if the only tool one has is a hammer, all problems start to look like nails! Therefore, consumerism trains us to think of products as the solution to all our problems and to think only about problems that advertised products might be able to solve. Consumerism in this sense is also referred to as materialism, an attitude that may infect both consumers and marketers. Consumerism and materialism are similar in effect, even while the causes are different. Both overvalue material goods: Consumerism overvalues because of the expectation that the goods will bring happiness; materialism overvalues because it denies everything that is not material. Virtue theory, on the contrary, suggests that virtue is the solution to most of our problems, and it reminds us that being good is more rewarding than accumulating material goods.

Today's consumerism was shaped by the Industrial Revolution that led to widespread urban living and a ready supply of inexpensive consumer products, as well as by the advent of radio, television, and now social media outlets that make marketing efforts pervasive in a person's life. Most of us live our lives surrounded by a media-saturated environment that delivers hundreds of advertising messages each day. Consumerism is fueled by a ready supply of new products and a steady stream of messages aimed at motivating their consumption.

Empirical research demonstrates that there are costs to the materialistic tendencies of consumerism, and studies have shown the following relationships:²⁰

1. Consumerism is related to economic variables, including money (consumers high in consumerism desire a much higher income); spending (consumers high in consumerism spend at a higher rate); work motivation (consumers high in consumerism identify with

gathering income through luck, crime, or magic instead of hard work); giving (consumers high in consumerism are less likely to make organ donations, less likely to share a cash windfall, and less likely to make charitable contributions).²¹

2. Consumerism is neither unique to the West nor directly related to affluence. Rather, socially and economically dynamic countries all show high levels of consumerism among citizens. For instance, Romania and Ukraine rank as high in consumerism as do the United States and New Zealand.²²
3. Consumerism correlates highly with social consumption motivation and a mid-range level of opinion leadership and is a significant and important predictor of time spent shopping and spending. Consumers high in consumerism are sensitive to the social acceptability and communicative ability of products and brands.²³
4. Consumerism correlates highly with wasteful spending. Consumers high in consumerism are more likely to splurge on items that can be displayed on the person and are more likely to describe such splurges as expensive. When reflecting back on their splurge purchase, high-materialism consumers feel significantly more irresponsible and guilty than do low materialism consumers.²⁴
5. Men are generally more consumeristic than women, although women engage in impulse buying more than men do.²⁵
6. Impoverished youth are more consumeristic than their wealthier counterparts, a difference attributable to low self-esteem.²⁶

Based on extant research, we suggest that consumerism has four defining features that play to weaknesses in human nature.

The first defining feature is confusion about what we really need. Consumerism fails to distinguish needs from wants—a confusion that fosters an unlimited appetite for new products. It trains us to focus on the hoped-for enjoyment of what one does not have rather than the enjoyment of what one does have. It complicates the consumer's life by giving a myriad of options without meaningful differences. For example, at Home Depot there are ten similar options for hose nozzles that the customer has to evaluate. We rationalize our wants as needs: "I will buy this new pair of shoes because otherwise I cannot wear my purple outfit." Consumerism thereby aggravates the human weakness for pleasure.²⁷ Verizon runs a television advertisement that touts the all-encompassing capabilities of its FIOS product. The ad features a song from a 1989 Queen album

called, “I Want It All,” which extols the virtues of goal-setting and perseverance. But the advertisement only uses the first three lines of the song so the overall effect creates a very materialistic and hedonic orientation to the advertisement. As the chorus blares, “I want it all, I want it all, and I want it now!” the listener cannot help but understand that Verizon is saying that it is all right to demand that one receive everything and receive it instantly. Apparently, there is no virtue to delayed gratification. The human being has a potentially infinite appetite for pleasures—an appetite that will crowd out the desire for higher goods.

The second defining feature is the criterion of ease or convenience. In a consumerist culture, people tend to focus on easy solutions to problems. Potential solutions that are more difficult, even if they are more noble and meaningful, are often ignored. Rather than change our lives or adjust our expectations to solve problems, we want to acquire the easiest solution that holds promise. For example, rather than filling our plate with more healthy but less tasty options, we call on producers to engineer products that will taste good *and* be healthy. Consumerism aggravates the human weakness for ease.²⁸

The third defining feature is the desire to outdo others in consumption. In a consumerist culture, people are desperate to have what others have and hope to have what others do not yet have. We try to keep up with the Joneses, which is to say we are motivated by envy and vanity. This dynamic is especially at work in the schoolyard where insecure adolescents seek status through conspicuous displays of possessions (clothing, shoes, cars, phones, and so on). Adults fare no better and seek status through brands. Consumerism overlooks the idea that the gifts of the earth should be available for the benefit of everyone, and consequently, it regards purchase decisions as solving private needs rather than community needs. Consumerism aggravates the human weakness for wanting to outdo others and prizes the private good over the common good.²⁹ One class of consumers referred to as *market mavens* direct intensive efforts at following the markets for certain product categories so that they can be perceived to be knowledgeable by others.³⁰ Even though they may not purchase and own the products involved, they spend a great deal of time and effort in learning about product alternatives, prices, and where to buy. This can be helpful knowledge, but when pursued because of vanity, it can lead to the waste of time and resources.

The fourth defining feature is the transitory over the enduring. The consumerist mindset values quantity, novelty, and present enjoyment over quality, reliability, and future enjoyment. First, it wants more and cheaper goods over fewer, more enduring goods. Consumers are excited to chase after price-off promotions so they can brag to friends and family about finding a “good deal.” Seeking the deal

becomes more important than buying products that provide benefits and are really needed. Second, the consumerist mindset wants goods that continue to change incrementally so that new becomes synonymous with good; people discard what is old for the new, even though it is only marginally better. Companies respond to this desire by developing products with planned obsolescence.³¹ Apple, for example, does not authorize its customers to change the rechargeable battery on the iPod; it is essentially a disposable product.³² The rationale, no doubt, is that consumers will want to get an up-to-date iPod rather than repair a used and outmoded one. Third, the consumerist mindset enjoys the present at the expense of the future—as in buying on credit. Consumerism aggravates the human weakness for superficial enjoyment.³³

Consumerism is a danger to human flourishing because it distracts people from what is worth striving for. It plays to people's weaknesses instead of to their strengths.

Virtues and Consumers

Virtues are at work in everyday consumer behavior insofar as that behavior leads to happiness. However, when it comes to consumerism, those virtues become even more crucial because they must counteract a pernicious and pervasive societal mentality opposed to happiness. The moment of consumer behavior most significant in combating consumerism is the problem-recognition stage. Am I really hungry or do I just need a light snack? Do I need manufactured snacks or does fresh fruit work even better? Is it a problem that I do not have something I want but do not need and (truth be told) cannot afford? Is it a problem that I do not have what somebody else has? In this respect, the confusion fostered by consumerism is a confusion about what problems should be solved and whether products are the solution to our most important problems.

Consumerism prioritizes having goods over becoming good, and consequently, human flourishing is undermined. To reorient priorities so that we value being over having and character over possessions, it is necessary to reaffirm the classical suite of virtues. The four cardinal virtues can be summarized in their application to consumerism as follows.

Moderation. Consumers have a desire for pleasure—to win friends, have a good time, dine at expensive restaurants, and be perceived to be among the elite at what they do. Moderation helps consumers regain sanity. The desire for pleasure knows no limits. Moderation allows consumers to enjoy pleasures without harm to themselves, loved ones, or neighbors. Moderation is not only a certain

strength to master our desires, it is also an ability to distinguish our wants from our needs. Immoderate people think that satisfying their wants is necessary, and from their perspective, the moderate person is guilty of an extreme asceticism. But the moderate person can see that he or she has an appropriate appreciation for the natural goodness of material things, and that the immoderate person is blind to his or her true good. In a consumerist culture, the moderate person will necessarily appear strange, and will appear to have an insufficient appreciation for consumer goods. Moderation differs from austerity, which is the unwanted removal of luxuries due to financial difficulties; it differs from asceticism, which is the renunciation of luxuries for the sake of some further spiritual benefit. Moderation recognizes the seductive quality of consumerism, the danger to the human person, and finds satisfaction in becoming good rather than acquiring things. It prioritizes the inward good of virtue over the outward goods of production; it prioritizes that which lies within its own power over that which makes it susceptible to the vicissitudes of fortune.

Courage. Courage is the virtue that masters fear of pain and the longing for the path of least resistance. Consumers are sometimes reluctant to take a principled stand for fear of criticism from various stakeholders. But avoiding criticism or pain is not always the best course of action. Consumers need a touch of bravery along with mental discipline to tough things out. Courage makes consumers freer because it masters fear and places the potential pain in service to our genuine good. The courageous consumer can undertake solutions, such as changing one's lifestyle, that require more effort than mere consumption. For example, it is more difficult but more effective to lose weight through exercise than through consuming engineered foods. It is more difficult but potentially more rewarding to take public transportation than to buy a second family vehicle.

Justice. Justice concerns our relationships with others. Justice controls the consumerist tendency to seek advantage at the expense of others by shifting the consumer away from her own desires for more and allowing her to appreciate the interests of others. Justice shows us that human excellence is not measured by material success but by moral success. Instead of seeking the lowest price possible, it seeks instead a fair price. It promotes the common good rather than a private good.

Prudence. The virtue of prudence allows consumers to make decisions based on their good instead of their wants. It enables them to choose the enduring over the transitory and prioritizes fewer goods that will last and can therefore be enjoyed in the future. A prudent person might continue to use a product that still works even though it does not have as many features as the newest version; such a person may even choose to repair a product rather than buy a new one—even

if it is not necessarily cost-effective to do so. Why? The goal of prudence is to live a life that is meaningful, and pride of ownership—genuinely taking care of one's things—is more satisfying than chasing the moving target of novelty or seeking to maximize money for its own sake. The prudent person will naturally resist the “throwaway” mentality of consumption.

In a culture of excess, the virtuous mean is countercultural. Insofar as our sense of what is good is shaped by cultural influences, we will likely think that excess is good and moderation is bad. How, then, can virtue be introduced? Aware that our age is one that is remarkably consumeristic, each of us can err on the opposite extreme by focusing on needs alone.³⁴ Over time, our sense of moderation will develop, and we will become adept at distinguishing wants and needs. Because habits are deeply ingrained, parents have a special responsibility for ensuring that the right habits develop in their children.³⁵ Parents can prevent consumerist attitudes from taking root in their children by eliminating their children's exposure to advertisements on television and making sure that family celebrations such as Christmas and birthdays are not dominated by consumerist expectations. Instead of celebrating life with consumer products, parents can celebrate with communal festivity, works of the imagination, and the communal experience of nature. In this vein, Pope Francis thinks we can combat the “paradigm of consumerism” by giving those in our care an experience of beauty: “If someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple.”³⁶

In the introduction to *The Book of Virtues*, William J. Bennett describes moral education as “the training of heart and mind toward the good”³⁷ and suggests that it involves explicit instruction, exhortation, training in good habits, and moral literacy. Moral literacy involves stories, poems, essays, and other writings that give individuals specific reference points about virtue. Stories speak to the inner part of an individual—their moral sense. Consequently, storytelling is a very effective approach in conveying virtues to the young.

Finally, the best way to instill virtue in children is for parents themselves to be virtuous. They should not rush to buy the latest and greatest nor appear to relish consumer goods. Even in their speech, they can embody the virtues; instead of saying that a given consumer item that a child wants is one “we can't afford,” they say it is one that “we don't need.” Then, they can redirect the expressed desire to some family activity or outing that will be more rewarding.

Virtues and Producers

Consumers have a great ability to influence producers who provide goods and services that consumers do not want. They can effectively “vote with their wallet” by either refraining from purchase or buying another brand, and they can convey their dissatisfaction to family, friends, and acquaintances through hundreds of product rating websites. Consequently, most producers are increasingly careful to conduct research on consumer likes and dislikes and then structure their product and service offering to strongly appeal to the target audience.

Consumers seem to enjoy their substantial influence over producers and the opportunity to apply leverage in gaining “more” from the negotiation. A major problem with consumerism is that consumers have generally embraced the practice, and they keep asking for consumerism-type responses from producers. If consumers can begin to curb their consumerist appetites by developing the cardinal virtues, then producers will begin to respond to the consumers’ lead. At the same time, there is reason to hope that businesses can take the initiative even absent wide-scale consumer activity.

Over the years, marketing has evolved from a sales orientation intended to move product out of inventory, to a focus on delivering long-term value to consumers by helping them solve their problems more effectively.³⁸ Today’s marketers recognize that developing long-term trusting relationships with consumers is the best way to create brand loyalty and repeat business. This results in long-term profitability for most firms. Consequently, ethical marketers utilize an understanding of the consumer-behavior model to assist consumers at each step of the purchase process. Research has shown that when producers apply a profit maximization approach to each decision, they invariably miss the human element in seller-buyer relationships, which counts significantly in business.³⁹ Consequently, the business that is oriented to treat customers fairly will build loyalty, market share, and achieve higher profit. Virtuous producers do not look at this relationship as ends justifying the means; they simply recognize that there is a proper and ethical way to run a business, and this way is the surest path to success.

The motivation of marketing to provide value for the sake of repeat business raises the question of whether there are moral virtues applicable to what is basically a self-interested calculation, or more benignly stated, a technique to sell more products. In this context, virtue is relevant. Businesses are entitled to profit only insofar as they provide value to consumers. The goal of the consumer to acquire a good and the goal of the business to provide a good should align, and only insofar as it does is the business entitled to receive money from the

consumer.⁴⁰ In addition, marketers are not simply agents of the business but human beings whose own character is at stake in the kinds of business actions they undertake. They should, therefore, focus on authentic human goods in their activities. John Paul II writes,

In singling out new needs and new means to meet them, one must be guided by a comprehensive picture of man which respects all the dimensions of his being and which subordinates his material and instinctive dimensions to his interior and spiritual ones. If, on the contrary, a direct appeal is made to his instincts—while ignoring in various ways the reality of the person as intelligent and free—then *consumer attitudes* and *life-styles* can be created which are objectively improper and often damaging to his physical and spiritual health.⁴¹

Instead of playing to the weaknesses of consumers (insatiable desire for luxuries, desire to outdo others, laziness, and superficiality), marketers can play to the strengths of their natures. They can promote moderation, justice, courage, and prudence by displaying their products as accessories to a good life instead of the substance of that life. The lifestyle that marketing promotes does not need to be a consumerist one.

Moderation. A human life requires more than animal necessities. Relish or appreciation is important for a specifically human life,⁴² but measure is essential. Rather than multiply desires needlessly, marketers should focus product development and advertising on products that will enhance the human estate. Producers should promote the product in a realistic context and not focus on an exclusive or excessive lifestyle. A company such as Abercrombie and Fitch could curb consumerism by focusing on the full range of benefits for their products rather than on social status and sex appeal.⁴³ Jos. A. Bank frequently runs “buy one and get two free” promotions. This advertising approach effectively encourages people to buy more clothing than they need, filling their closets with items that they rarely use. A better approach might be for Jos. A. Bank to run simple price-off sales.

Justice. Village Farms, on its container of “Sinfully Sweet” tomatoes, counsels the consumer to “Give in to delicious temptation.” Similarly, Hewlett Packard named a line of printers and laptops, “Envy,” after one of the seven deadly sins. The golden rule is applicable here: The marketing personnel of one company are consumers of every other. Everyone is in the first place a consumer and therefore has a personal stake in how consumers are treated. How do we want to be treated? Not by having our buttons pressed but by appealing to our sense of the good. The game is not maximization of private benefit but making available to others a genuine good that serves the common good. Marketers, then, can check themselves before developing another campaign: Do I want my spouse,

my children, my parents, or myself to be exposed to the kind of message I am creating?⁴⁴ A good example of this approach is US Inspect, one of the largest home inspection service firms in the United States. This company has based its reputation on decades of honesty, integrity, and meeting customer expectations; the company's leadership routinely applies a rigorous test of advertising and promotional communications to make sure that customers are given an honest and complete understanding of what the firm offers.

Courage. Marketers are masters at moving the human affections. This is easily done by appealing to weaknesses for pleasure or the insecurity that is inherent in consumer personalities. But the greater the marketing talent, the greater the ability to move people based on the value the product provides instead of the weaknesses of human nature. Marketers should have the confidence in their own products to market them in their own right. Chipotle Mexican Grill has constructed their promotional communications around the phrase *food integrity*, which they define as "serving the very best sustainably raised food possible with an eye to great taste, great nutrition, and great value."⁴⁵ The company's website suggests that they emphasize organically grown local produce and meat from animals raised without synthetic hormones. When the company was not able to obtain enough pork that met these standards, they deleted "carnitas" from the menu rather than substitute lower quality pork.

Prudence. Companies can develop products that will endure. They can make inexpensively priced replacement parts. Furthermore, they can produce items with durable long-term value rather than short-term profit in mind. Consumers will then come to associate a brand with stability and reliance. For instance, Stihl is a Swiss-based company that has established a reputation for producing very durable and long-lasting chain saws, backed by over 1,000 proprietary design features supported by patents.⁴⁶ As a result, the Stihl brand is perceived as a desirable and high-quality product that is worth more than the asking price. This perception has helped Stihl establish a strong market presence over the years.

In sum, the marketer, recognizing that his or her own character is at stake, can strive to realize the cardinal virtues in the sorts of activities he or she undertakes.⁴⁷ In this way, the virtues of the consumer and the virtues of the producer can align to combat the danger of consumerism and together promote human flourishing. Instead of the unbridled appetites for more, the desire for one's own advantage at the expense of others, the consideration of only easy solutions to life's problems, or the attempt to rest in passing pleasure, the cardinal virtues open another possibility: human flourishing.

Conclusion

We have argued for the importance of the cardinal virtues for enabling good consumer behavior and thereby combating consumerism. Those virtues protect the consumer from four natural human weaknesses and promote authentic human development. Human flourishing results from exercising the virtues of moderation, courage, justice, and prudence. These virtues are something that both consumers and producers can appreciate and promote. Other studies have shown the pernicious effects of consumerism. In this article, we identified the causes of overconsumption in some adverse inclinations of human nature. We proposed the cardinal virtues as the antidote to the consumerist mentality. For this reason, we believe that the virtues should figure prominently in discussions of consumerism and consumer behavior.⁴⁸

Notes

1. Pope Leo XIII, encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum* (May 15, 1891), no. 9; Pope Pius XI, encyclical letter *Quadragesimo Anno* (May 15, 1931), no. 45; Pope John Paul II, encyclical letter *Centesimus Annus* (May 1, 1991), no. 6; and Vatican Council II, pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), no. 71.
2. Mark J. Arnold and Kristy E. Reynolds, "Hedonic Shopping Motivations," *Journal of Retailing* 79, no. 2 (December 2003): 77–95.
3. John Paul II, encyclical letter *Laborem Exercens* (September 14, 1981), no. 14; John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, no. 6; and John Paul II, apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici* (December 30, 1988), no. 43.
4. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2005), 178.
5. Pope Francis, encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* (May 24, 2015), no. 203; Pope Francis, apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), no. 2; Pope Benedict XVI, encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate* (June 29, 2009), no. 51; Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, nos. 36–41; and Pope John Paul II, encyclical letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (December 30, 1987), no. 28.
6. Leslie E. Sekerka, Deborah Brown McCabe, and Richard P. Bagozzi, "Self-Regulation: The Moral Muscle in Online Ethical Consumerism," *Journal of Marketing Development and Competitiveness* 8, no. 1 (2014): 9–20.
7. Mike Thompson, "Signals of Virtue in Chinese Consumerism and Business," *Journal of International Business Ethics*, 3, no. 2 (2010): 71–83.

8. In Christianity, natural virtues are seen to play a part within a greater whole founded on the theological virtues in general and charity in particular. For a clear explanation of the way in which natural virtue is elevated while not diluted by Christian faith, see Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 53–87.
9. See, for example, St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 2, a. 1, ad 1; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, pt. 2; and Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, chap. 1.
10. On the cardinal virtues in general, see Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966); Peter Geach, *The Virtues: The Stanton Lectures 1973–74* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); David Carr, “The Cardinal Virtues and Plato’s Moral Psychology,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 38, no. 151 (1988): 186–200; and David Oderberg, “On the Cardinality of the Cardinal Virtues,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 7 (1999): 305–22.
11. Joshua Colt Gambrel and Philip Cafaro, “The Virtue of Simplicity,” *Journal of Environmental Ethics* 23 (2010): 85–108; Ronald Sandler, *Character and Environment: A Virtue-Oriented Approach to Environmental Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Peter Wenz, “Synergistic Environmental Virtues: Consumerism and Human Flourishing,” in *Environmental Virtue Ethics*, ed. R. Sandler and P. Cafaro (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 197–213; Michele Micheletti, *Political Virtue and Shopping: Individuals, Consumerism, and Collective Action* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
12. On the value of a virtues-based approach to ethics, see G. E. M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy* 33 (1958): 1–19; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); and Jonathan Sanford, *Before Virtue: Assessing Contemporary Virtue Ethics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015).
13. John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, no. 36.
14. Robert G. Kennedy, *The Good that Business Does* (Grand Rapids: Acton Institute, 2006).
15. James F. Engel, David T. Kollat, and Roger D. Blackwell, *Consumer Behavior* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973).
16. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.5.
17. According to Deirdre McCloskey, modern economic theory wrongly reduces virtue to prudence understood as selfishness; in contrast, she thinks business in fact involves what she calls the suite of “bourgeois virtues” that are learned from family and the

community. Among these she counts prudence as being understood as the ability to take care of oneself. The bourgeois virtues include the four cardinal virtues and the three theological virtues. See Deirdre McCloskey, *The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

18. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. B. Jowett, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 7.1, 1323a26–34.
19. See Gregory Beabout and Eduardo Echeverria, “The Culture of Consumerism: A Catholic and Personalist Critique,” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 5, no. 2 (2002): 339–83.
20. Tim Kasser, *The High Price of Materialism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).
21. Marsha L. Richins and Floyd W. Rudmin, “Materialism and Economic Psychology,” *Journal of Economic Psychology* 15 (1994): 217–31.
22. Guliz Ger and Russell W. Belk, “Cross-Cultural Differences in Materialism,” *Journal of Economic Psychology* 17 (1996): 55–77.
23. Julie Fitzmaurice and Charles Comegys, “Materialism and Social Consumption,” *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice* 14, no. 4 (2006): 287–99.
24. Julie Fitzmaurice, “Splurge Purchases and Materialism,” *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 25, no. 6 (2008): 332–38.
25. Brenda Segal and Jeffrey S. Podoshen, “An Examination of Materialism, Conspicuous Consumption and Gender Differences,” *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 37 (2013): 189–98.
26. Lan Nguyen Chaplin, Ronald Paul Hill, and Deborah Roedder John, “Poverty and Materialism: A Look at Impoverished Versus Affluent Children,” *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, 33, no. 1 (2014): 78–92.
27. Plato, *Republic*, II, 372e; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.3; and Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.30–10.34.
28. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.3, 1104b9–11; Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, section 14.
29. Plato, *Republic*, I; Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.36–39; Augustine calls it the *libido dominandi* in the preface to *City of God*.
30. Brian Engelland, Christopher Hopkins, and Dee Ann Larson, “Market Mavenship as an Influencer of Service Quality Evaluation,” *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 9, no. 4 (2001): 15–26.
31. See Giles Slade, *Made to Break: Technology and Obsolescence in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

32. For a fee, consumers can exchange their iPod for a refurbished iPod with a new battery.
33. Plato, *Republic* VIII, 560c, referring to the Lotus eaters in Homer's *Odyssey*, IX, 63–104; Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.35.
34. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.9.
35. Plato, *Republic*, VIII; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.1.
36. Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 215.
37. William J. Bennett, *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 1993), 11.
38. On countering the tendency to avarice by thinking of business as a craft, see Geoff Moore, "Humanizing Business: A Modern Virtue Ethics Approach," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 15 (2005): 237–55.
39. John Mackey and Raj Sisodia, *Conscious Capitalism: Liberating the Heroic Spirit of Business* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2013).
40. See Plato, *Republic*, 347a.
41. Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, no. 36.
42. Plato, *Republic*, II, 372d.
43. CEO Mike Jeffries told *Salon*, "Candidly, we go after the cool kids. We go after the attractive all-American kid with a great attitude and a lot of friends. A lot of people don't belong [in our clothes], and they can't belong. Are we exclusionary? Absolutely. Those companies that are in trouble are trying to target everybody: young, old, fat, skinny. But then you become totally vanilla. You don't alienate anybody, but you don't excite anybody, either." Benoit Denizet-Lewis, "The Man Behind Abercrombie & Fitch," <http://www.salon.com/2006/01/24/jeffries/>.
44. On the importance of the Golden Rule, see Domènec Melé, "Integrating Personalism into Virtue-Based Business Ethics: The Personalist and the Common Good Principles," *Journal of Business Ethics* 88 (2009): 227–44.
45. Based on Chipotle Mexican Grill Website, <http://www.chipotle.com/en-US/>.
46. Based on the Stihl USA Website, <http://www.stihlusa.com/>.
47. On how to educate business majors in the virtues, see Steven M. Mintz, "Aristotelian Virtue and Business Ethics Education," *Journal of Business Ethics* 15 (1996): 827–38.
48. For helpful remarks on earlier drafts of this article, the authors are thankful to Andrew Abela, Damian Ference, and Jonathan J. Sanford.