

Values and Prosperity

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We as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a “thing-oriented society” to a “person-oriented society.” – Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Since the American civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. spoke these words in the late 1960s, it seems clear that Western societies, as well as large swaths of the developing world, have ignored King’s call and instead become increasingly enamored of the materialistic values that create a “thing oriented society.” What else might we conclude when news sources and politicians seem increasingly obsessed with economic growth rates and the latest ups and downs of the stock market? What else might we conclude from the increasing power of multi-national corporations, 52 of whom had amassed so much capital by the year 2000 that they competed with nations to be among the world’s 100 largest economic organizations (Mander, Barker, & Korten, 2001)? What else might we conclude from the fact that several hundred billion dollars are spent yearly in the U.S. on advertising, enticing people to buy more and hinge their worth on their possessions? What else might we conclude from the fact that surveys of entering first-year U.S. college students show that the percentage who consider it essential or very important to be “financially well-off” has gone from 42% in King’s time to approximately 75% today (Irvine, 2007)?

In many respects, these facts may be seen as triumphs of the free-market, neo-liberal form of capitalism that its proponents claim is the most powerful, and perhaps only feasible, economic system for creating wealth in the contemporary world. If we agree that the highest personal and social goals are to create great material wealth, then we should certainly accept these facts as representative of triumphs. For if wealth and seemingly limitless consumption form our vision of prosperity, what more should we ask for than policy makers focused on maximizing GNP, powerful corporations with massive amounts of capital at their disposal, opportunities to be informed about wonderful products and services we might want to purchase, and a group of future workers and consumers highly motivated by money?

But while there is no doubt that the materialistic goals embodied in capitalism and consumerism have brought about prosperity in one sense of the word, we must also recognize that if a different set of values are applied to evaluate our current personal and social circumstances, capitalism and consumerism must be considered remarkably less successful, if not unmitigated failures.

For example, if we consider that people's well-being and happiness is an important, desirable feature of prosperity, we must confront two empirical facts. First, large scale studies in almost every economically-developed nation indicate that the large increases in economic growth and consumption since the early 1960s have been associated with no increase in people's personal happiness (Diener & Seligman, 2004). Second, dozens of studies document that the more individuals "buy into" the materialistic aspirations and goals encouraged by contemporary society, the lower their happiness and life satisfaction and the more they report being depressed, anxious, and unhappy (Kasser, 2002a).

And if we consider that close interpersonal and community connections are important features of a successful society, we must again confront two empirical facts. First, as capitalism and consumerism have infiltrated more aspects of culture, spreading their ideology of individualism and self-interest, individuals have become more self-centered and less concerned about the well-being of others (B. Schwartz, 1994; Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003) and less involved in their communities (Putnam, 2000). Second, research shows that those who take on the materialistic values encouraged by capitalistic, consumer society are less empathic, less cooperative, and more likely to view others as objects to be manipulated in order to get ahead in life (Kasser, 2002a).

And if our values lead us to care about whether or not the Earth will be able to sustain our grandchildren and great-grand-children (as well as other species) with clean air and water, healthy food, moderate temperatures, and safe places to live, we must again note two empirical facts. First, environmental scientists have reached the conclusion that the high levels of consumption enjoyed by Western societies are not sustainable, as they destroy habitats and biodiversity, pollute the air and water, and are contributing to global climate change (United Nations Environment Programme, 2002). Second, research shows that the more that individuals take on the materialistic values encouraged by capitalistic, consumer societies, the more they personally consume, the less they engage in ecologically-responsible behaviors, and the higher their ecological footprints (Brown & Kasser, 2005).

So if our values lead us to believe that material wealth is the most important end towards which people and society should strive, we should be quite content with the current state of affairs on the planet. But if we believe that people's happiness, civil society, and the ability of the Earth to sustain future generations are important ends to strive for, we have good reason to be concerned. And we might also begin to wonder how we might ignite the kind of "revolution of values" for which Reverend King called.

Useful insights from psychological research on values

In this paper I would like to propose that empirical research on people's values and goals may provide some useful insights into how to create an antidote to today's materialistic, profit-driven, consumer society and how to create the circumstances that might help people be happier, help society thrive, and help sustain the Earth's environment. As a starting point for understanding how this body of literature might be useful, let us consider the findings of studies that have examined the way in which people's values and goals are organized in their minds.

In these studies, people around the world have filled out surveys in which they have been asked to rate how important various goals and values are to them. Application of sophisticated statistical techniques to these reports consistently suggests that when people think about their goals and values, they tend to experience some aims as relatively consistent or compatible with each other whereas other aims are experienced as in conflict with each other. Researchers can visually represent these compatibilities and conflicts in what is called a *circumplex*. In a circumplex, people's values and goals are arranged in a circular pattern, with those values and goals that are experienced by individuals as psychologically compatible placed close by each other, and with those values and goals that are experienced as in psychological conflict placed on opposite sides of the circumplex. Figure 1 presents a circumplex model based on the work my colleagues and I recently conducted in 15 nations (Grouzet et al., 2005); similar findings could also be presented based on the work of Burroughs & Rindfleisch (2002) or S. Schwartz (1996). Although there is a good deal of information presented in Figure 1, here I would like to focus on just two features of the circumplex.

First, the circumplex clearly shows that the values of image, popularity, and financial success tend to cluster together (in the south-western and western portions of the circumplex); see Table 1 for some sample items used to assess these values. What this finding means is that when people rate money as an important goal, they also tend to care about image and status, and when they rate image as an important goal, they also tend to care about money and status, and so on. The finding that these three goals are experienced as psychologically compatible is of course quite sensible when we consider that capitalistic, consumer societies typically encourage people to demonstrate their popularity and to create an image on the basis of wealth and the purchase of consumer goods and services.

A second, more interesting aspect of the circumplex concerns the goals and values with which these materialistic aims conflict, i.e., those goals in the eastern and north-eastern portions of the circumplex. As can be seen in Figure 1, goals for financial success, image, and popularity tend to stand in opposition to three other "intrinsic"¹ goals: Self-acceptance (which involves trying to grow as a person), affiliation (which involves having close, intimate relationships with family and friends), and community feeling (which involves trying to help the broader world be a better place). What this finding means is that the more people focus on materialistic aims for money, image, and status, the more difficult it is for them to also focus on growing as a person, intimately connecting with other people, and contributing to the world at large; see Table 1 for some sample items that assess these intrinsic values.

This finding about value conflicts is especially important because these intrinsic aims for self-acceptance, affiliation, and community feeling are also the very values and goals that empirical research demonstrates promote personal happiness, positive social involvement, and ecologically sustainable behavior. Specifically, studies show that happier people place a relatively high emphasis on goals for self-acceptance, affiliation, and community feeling; by caring about such aims, the research suggests that people become increasingly likely to create lifestyles for themselves that satisfy the psychological needs required for psychological thriving (Kasser, 2002a). Other research suggests that people focused on these intrinsic goals treat others in more humane, cooperative, and caring ways, (McHoskey, 1999; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995; Sheldon, Sheldon, & Osbaldiston, 2000) thus benefiting others' well-being. And finally, studies show that a

strong focus on intrinsic goals also conduces to caring more about ecological sustainability and being less greedy with limited resources (Brown & Kasser, 2005; Sheldon & McGregor, 2000).

The rather fascinating conclusion that stems from this body of research is that the same set of values that might act as a counterweight to the materialistic values so dominant in our profit-driven, consumer society are the same set of values that are associated with high levels of personal well-being, the same set of values that conduce towards civil social behavior, and the same set of values that promote ecological sustainability. In a way, then, the basic strategy for bringing about Reverend King's revolution of values is clear and simple: Work against the insalubrious effects of materialistic values by enhancing the likelihood that people can behave in ways that express intrinsic values for self-acceptance, affiliation, and community feeling.

Bringing intrinsic values into people's lives and society

There are at least two good reasons to be optimistic about this strategy. The first is that surveys show that most people report that the intrinsic goals of self-acceptance, affiliation, and community feeling are quite important to them: Cross-cultural studies consistently find that such values and goals are among the highest ranked priorities that people typically have in life (see Kasser, 2002b). Theoretically, this makes good sense, given that intrinsic goals are understood as aims that typically help people satisfy the psychological needs that are necessary for optimal psychological health. Because people seem to be somewhat naturally predisposed to such intrinsic aims in life, and because such aims have demonstrated positive associations with beneficial outcomes, it may be that people will find the pursuit of such goals and values to be a reasonably palatable antidote to the materialistic values that so dominate modern society.²

The second reason to be optimistic that people might respond to the idea of intrinsic values is that quite a number of social movements and policy efforts are already underway that, from my vantage point, implicitly reflect an attempt to disengage from materialistic values and instead focus on healthier, intrinsic goals. Although there are quite a number of such movements and policies that could be discussed, here I will focus on four.

Values-based purchasing and investment

Consider, for example, the twin movements of ethical consumption and socially-conscious investment. In both, individuals choose to pay extra money, invest extra time, or potentially forego higher returns on their investment in exchange for the opportunity to "buy" or "invest with their values" (Lewis & Mackenzie, 2000; Shaw, Grehan, Shiu, Hassan, & Thomson, 2005). Notably, these values are rarely the materialistic ones, as much of the marketplace already provides a plethora of options expressive of such values. Instead, ethical consumption and investment typically involve using one's money to facilitate the intrinsic goals that Figure 1 shows oppose materialistic tendencies. For example, people often purchase fair-trade items or invest in companies with certain employee policies because they hope to enhance the freedom and self-determination of workers (i.e., self-acceptance values). Or sometimes individuals invest in or buy from companies with family-friendly policies (affiliation). Or they may buy organic and sustainably made products or invest in alternative energy start-up companies because of their concerns for their children, future generations, and the biosphere in general (affiliation and community feeling goals).

The fact that consumers and investors have sought out such opportunities and that more options seem to be appearing in the marketplace suggest that ethical consumption and investment may be one relatively easy way to help people to enact their healthier values. “Voting with one’s dollar (or pound or Euro)” may have beneficial influences on society by financially supporting companies whose policies successfully enact intrinsic values. Ethical consumption and investment may also improve the happiness of consumers and investors by giving them the opportunity to express their intrinsic values in the financial domain of their lives, rather than engaging in behavior counter to their values (which is likely to cause the unpleasant experience of cognitive dissonance).

Voluntary Simplicity

While sometimes people attempt to express their intrinsic values through their consumption and investment choices, other times people express their values by rejecting the “work and spend” consumer lifestyle so dominant today. This trend, variously called “voluntary simplicity” (VS; Elgin, 1993; Pierce, 2000), “cultural creatives” (Ray & Anderson, 2001), and “downshifting” (Schor, 1993), describes a lifestyle in which individuals choose to live a materially simple, “inwardly rich” life unburdened by long work hours and uncluttered by many possessions. Qualitative reports suggest that such individuals attempt to center their lives around developing their personal interests, spending time with family, volunteering in their community, engaging in personally-meaningful spiritual practices, and living in an ecologically light fashion (Elgin, 1993; Pierce, 2000). As such, it seems that the VS lifestyle provides an excellent prototype of a group of individuals who are trying to avoid materialistic pursuits and instead orient their lives around intrinsic goals.

Indeed, the parallel between VS and our theoretical conceptualizations seemed so clear that Kirk Warren Brown and I conducted a study comparing a sample of 200 North American VS practitioners with 200 mainstream Americans matched to the VSrs on age, gender, and geographic location (Brown & Kasser, 2005). Consistent with our expectations, the VS group scored substantially higher than mainstream Americans on the relative importance they placed on intrinsic vs. materialistic goals. Our analyses also revealed that VS practitioners were both significantly happier than mainstream Americans and were living in more ecologically sustainable ways. Particularly remarkable were our analyses (using Structural Equation Modeling) that demonstrated that a good deal of the reason why the VS groups were living more ecologically sustainably and were happier than mainstream Americans was that the VS group was more focused on intrinsic and less focused on materialistic values. Such results, though preliminary, are quite promising, as they suggest that when individuals create a lifestyle that is focused on intrinsic values rather than materialistic values, they not only live in more ecologically sustainable ways, but they are happier too!

Time Affluence

While materialistic values, profit-driven capitalism, and consumerism have been quite successful in creating great material affluence for some, social commentators have noted that an unfortunate side effect has been an increase in “time poverty” for many (e.g., de Graaf, 2003; Honore, 2005). The helter-skelter attempt to make more money and consume as much as possible leads many individuals to work long hours and spend more time commuting; further, many businesses and governments implement policies that encourage (if not force) long work hours as a means of enhancing profit and economic growth (e.g., see Golden, 2003; Hayden, 2003). The result is that many people find it quite difficult to pursue their intrinsic goals. For example, long work hours can crowd out the time people have to spend engaging in activities relevant to self-acceptance goals, such as pursuing personal hobbies, reflecting on life, and generally taking care of mind, body, and soul (see deGraaf, 2003). Commentators also have noted that busy people seem to have less time for their spouses, friends, children, and even pets (deGraaf, 2003), thus reflecting the difficulty of pursuing affiliation goals. And when they experience time poverty, people often are less likely to do activities relevant to community feeling goals such as volunteering, voting, and engaging in behaviors that sustain the Earth (deGraaf, 2003).

These observations suggest that another way to orient individuals and society towards intrinsic goals is to place the concept of “time affluence” on an equal footing with material affluence. Some research supports these ideas. For example, Kasser & Brown (2003) reported that life satisfaction was higher in individuals who worked fewer hours; Kasser & Sheldon (in press) expanded on these ideas in a series of four studies. Specifically, Kasser & Sheldon developed measures of material and time affluence to assess individuals’ subjective experience of whether they had enough money and enough time. Results showed that even after controlling for people’s subjective (and actual) wealth, individuals who felt more time affluent reported greater subjective well-being and happiness. What’s more, further analyses (using mediational tests) revealed that when people felt more time affluent, they were more likely to engage in activities that supported their intrinsic values, which in turn explained why such individuals were happier than less time affluent people.

Other research has demonstrated the ecological benefits of time affluence. For example, Kasser & Brown (2003) found that people who worked shorter hours were more likely to engage in ecologically responsible behaviors and also had lower ecological footprints. Nation-level analyses by Rosnick and Weisbrot (2006, pg. 1) have reached a similar conclusion: “If, by 2050, the world works as many hours as do Americans, it could consume 15-30 percent more energy than it would by following Europe. The additional carbon emissions could result in 1 to 2 degrees Celsius in extra global warming.” Future research still must investigate how intrinsic values may play a role in these dynamics, but policies developed to improve time affluence likely hold substantial promise for a healthier populace and environment.

Alternative Economic Indicators

Efforts to change governmental measures of “prosperity” and “progress” are a fourth path towards helping people and society disengage from materialistic pursuits and focus on intrinsic values concerns. In the contemporary milieu, policy makers, newspeople, and citizens alike typically use indicators such as a nation’s Gross National Product per capita, its stock market, and other financial metrics of “prosperity” as the main ways of determining whether a nation is healthy, thriving, and “successful.” Unfortunately, the calculation of such metrics is often inflated when members of society pursue ends counter to intrinsic goals. Take the following classic example: Which of the following is better for the economy? Option A, in which I walk to a park, talk with some friends, and pick up some trash that is lying on the ground? Or Option B, in which I fill my car with gas, drive to a bar, get drunk, re-enter my car, run a stop sign, and crash into another car, thereby injuring two people who have to be taken to a hospital and killing another who has to be buried in a coffin later that week?

By the standard metric of materialistic values and GNP, Option B is clearly “better” for the economy as it involved substantial economic activity, including the purchase of gasoline and alcohol as well as eventual service costs of car repair, hospitalizations, and burial. Option A, in contrast, involved no economic activity and so does not contribute to GNP. But, from the perspective of intrinsic values, it is quite clear that Option A is the better activity.

Such an example suggests that all levels of government would do well to develop and adopt metrics that do not privilege materialistic values but instead account for how successful a society is with regard to intrinsic values. Several such proposals already exist, including Diener & Seligman’s (2004) call for a variety of national well-being indicators, Redefining Progress’ Genuine Progress Indicator, the Kingdom of Bhutan’s concept of Gross National Happiness, the new economics foundation’s Happy Planet Index, and the Sustainable Development Commission’s (2003) call for careful measurement of societal well-being and environmental impact alongside economic progress. In each of these metrics, other variables are included in the calculations besides “financial profit” in an attempt to incorporate outcomes relevant to intrinsic goals, such as volunteer activity, work done directly to support the family, environmental health, etc. If governments at the local, state, and national levels were to adopt such indicators and to report to citizens about progress on them with nearly as much energy and enthusiasm as is currently devoted to materialistically-oriented metrics such as the stock market and GNP, individual citizens might begin to demand that politicians seek out ways of enhancing these more intrinsically-oriented indicators of prosperity.

Conclusion

Humanity has become ensnared in a vision of prosperity that has elevated financial profit, material wealth, and consumption to the highest good. While such a vision has fulfilled its promise of creating wealth, goods, and services, it has failed to provide optimal levels of happiness, social cohesion, and ecological sustainability; indeed, some evidence suggests it has damaged these aspects of “the good life.” Clearly we require a new vision of prosperity.

In this brief article, I have suggested that a new vision of prosperity based on intrinsic values holds substantial promise both for dislodging the destructive hold materialism has over contemporary life and for bringing about improved personal well-being, social cohesion, and ecological sustainability. This conclusion is based on substantial empirical evidence showing that when people are primarily oriented towards goals and values for self-acceptance, affiliation, and community feeling, they not only care less about materialistic, consumeristic goals, but they are happier, they treat others in more beneficent ways, and they live more lightly on the Earth. On the basis of this and other research, I suggested that we can ignite a “revolution of values” by encouraging people to consume and invest in a values-based manner, by providing more opportunities for lifestyles of voluntary simplicity and time affluence, and by developing and implementing alternative governmental indicators of progress. Certainly other strategies would also be useful, including banning marketing to children and marketing in publicly owned spaces (such as parks, schools, and buses), facilitating the relocalization movement, exploring more communal forms of living, and adjusting economic policies and laws to decrease the extent to which economic structures are primarily focused on profit, competition, and economic growth at all costs.

None of these will be easy tasks, as immense power structures, existing ideologies, and the very human fears about change will push many to want to retain the materialistic status quo. But no revolution, even a peaceful revolution of values, has ever been easy.

End Notes

1. Kasser & Ryan (1996) called these goals “intrinsic” because they typically are inherently satisfying to pursue (rather than being means to some other end) and do a relatively good job of satisfying universal, intrinsic psychological needs necessary for thriving.
2. One may wonder why it is, then, that materialistic values have come to hold such sway in contemporary life. Briefly, our perspective (reviewed in Kasser, Ryan, Couchman, & Sheldon, 2004), suggests that there are two primary pathways that combine to increase the likelihood that individuals adopt materialistic values. The first pathway is social modeling; specifically, when individuals are frequently exposed to messages encouraging materialism, whether via parents, peers, schools, or television, people are more likely to take on those values and be materialistic. The second pathway is what we call insecurity; specifically, when individuals are worried about whether they will be safe and secure and whether their physical and psychological needs will be satisfied, the evidence suggests they increasingly orient towards materialistic values, perhaps as a maladaptive type of coping mechanism. Thus, in addition to the suggestions listed in this paper for increasing intrinsic values, the most effective groups of strategies for decreasing materialistic tendencies would include removing materialistic messages from the environment and increasing feelings of psychological security among the populace; see Kasser (2006) for more on these strategies.

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Table 1

Goal Contents, Descriptions, and Sample Items

Goal contents	Description	Sample items
Image	To look attractive in terms of body and clothing	"My image will be one other's find appealing."
Financial Success	To be wealthy and materially successful	"I will be financially successful."
Popularity	To be famous, well-known, and admired	"I will be admired by many people."
Affiliation	To have satisfying relationships with family and friends	"I will have a committed, intimate relationship."
Community feeling	To improve the world through activism or generativity	"I will assist people who need it, asking nothing in return."
Self-Acceptance	To feel competent and autonomous	"I will have insight into why I do the things I do."

Figure 1

Circumplex model of Aspirations from Grouzet et al. (2005).

