

What Price, the Soul?: Examining Consumerism Through Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics

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In today's consumer society, we often seem to equate freedom with the ability to choose from a range of products, each of which promises to satisfy some desire. The Cold War is over, and freedom has triumphed. The spread of democracy is celebrated as new markets open up. The vanguards of capitalism claim fresh territory: a McDonald's restaurant opens in Beijing, a KFC in Moscow. At long last the people of the world are free to take part in the important decisions that rule our daily lives: Coke or Pepsi? Nike or Adidas? Burger King or Pizza Hut?

On the edges of civilization, however, lone voices still question the orders of the day. Not content to follow fads, to leap after bargains and shop their blues away, these mad souls mutter amongst themselves: Surely there must be more to freedom than this mad rush to consume, this mindless, ruthless competition for baubles and trinkets. They turn away from the bright lights of the shopping malls, the flickering screens of the home shopping networks and the all-you-can-eat buffets of the endless, bustling marketplace. No, they whisper to the throngs of endless, unheeding buyers. You are not free. You are slaves, all of you: slaves to your desires.

Yet if these voices are right, and our way of life is not the expression of a truly free society – if there is more to freedom than simply this “pursuit of happiness,” as acted out in the struggle for wealth and the exercise of purchasing power – what then? Might there be some other form that freedom could take, and some other means of dealing with our multitudinous desires? Perhaps, in such a rapidly changing world, it may be worth our while to take a step back, and to investigate some older notions about freedom, human nature and, particularly, desire. This paper will use the writings of some ancient Greek and Roman philosophers as a lens through which to examine these modern problems of consumerism and desire.

The Factions of the Soul

In the Republic, Plato seeks to uncover the true nature of the human soul, that he might know what makes us virtuous or just. Plato describes the soul as being composed of three parts or elements: the reason, the appetite, and the spirit. The reason is “the element in the soul with which it calculates,” the appetite is that “with which it feels passion, hungers, thirsts, and is stirred by other appetites,” while the spirited element is that “with which we feel anger” (439d-e). In this light, when we look at the ways consumer culture entices us to

act, it seems to be largely through appeals to the appetite. Fast food restaurants and vending machines stocked with empty calories offer instant gratification of our sensations of hunger and thirst, and advertisers appeal to our desires for sex and love to sell us everything from sports cars to body spray, from deodorant to lingerie.

Plato describes an internal struggle between these elements for control of our souls, and thence our behavior. Plato notes that “some people are thirsty sometimes, yet unwilling to drink,” citing this as evidence that “there is an element in their soul urging them to drink, and also one stopping them – something different that masters the one doing the urging” (439c). Our appetites may tempt us to eat unhealthy foods, enticing us with the pleasurable sensations of sweet tastes and rich textures. Our reason, however, may remind us of the eventual negative consequences of such indulgences. Each time we overcome our gluttonous urges, then, it represents a victory for reason in the struggle for our souls.

Plato sees the proper role of the spirit as giving assistance to the reason, helping it overcome our appetites. He notes that “when appetite forces someone contrary to his rational calculation, he reproaches himself and feels anger at the thing in him that is doing the forcing; and just as if there were two warring factions, such a person's spirit becomes the ally of his reason” (440b). Thus our feelings of guilt when we succumb to the temptation to indulge in junk food, or to purchase luxuries we can't afford, can be seen as manifestations of this spirited element in our souls. Although the reason is calculating and unemotional, we sometimes experience our emotions exhorting us to heed the conclusions of reason. This regulative urge, Plato suggests, is the voice of the spirit, rushing to the aid of the reason.

Plato seems to hold that this spirited element always allies itself with reason in this way: “But spirit partnering with the appetites to do what reason has decided should not be done – I do not imagine you would say you had ever seen that, either in yourself or anyone else” (440 b). If we were to view the spirit as simply the emotional aspect of our personalities, it would be easy to disagree with this statement, as consumerism often plays on our emotions to sell its products against our better judgment. Sentimentality may prompt us to buy exorbitantly priced jewelry. Irrational hope sells millions of lottery tickets every year. Fear is a particularly powerful sales tool: After the 9/11 attacks, panicked consumers cleared the stores of duct-tape and plastic sheets to seal off windows against poison gas – an irrational response to be sure, but one which consumer culture was quick to exploit.

However, such an easy identification of “spirit” with “emotion” would be a misreading of Plato's intent. Importantly, Plato does not simply bundle all of our emotions into the spirited element. “Passion,” for instance, is named as part of the appetitive element. It is only anger that Plato specifically identifies with spirit. Guilt and shame, then, might be seen as a form of self-directed anger, and a means of controlling our appetites.

This account of the spirit, which sets anger apart from passion and the other appetites, would almost seem to make anger uniquely free from outside influence, although subject to our inner reason.

However, even if anger is not partnered to other appetites, neither is it always necessarily allied to reason. Certainly, we are all capable of behaving irrationally in the grip of anger, and doing things that we later regret. Even if the spirit exists as a separate category from hunger, thirst, sadness, joy, and other feelings, it must still have a certain independence from the reason. Thus, this "spirited element" may also be susceptible to manipulation, becoming a means of controlling us and channeling our impulses into consumptive desires. Violent movies and video games are some examples of products which appeal to sensations of anger. Albums of aggressive music might be another. Indeed, even underground cultures such as punk rock, born out of a sense of alienation and anger, can quickly become products to be packaged and sold, with spike bracelets and brightly colored hair dyes being sold at shopping malls. In such cases, the spirit seems to be led astray from that which Plato saw as its proper function. Rather than an ally of reason against the temptation of the appetite, the spirit becomes simply one more competing desire among many, clamoring to be fulfilled through consumer purchases, with reason left alone and unaided to mediate and choose between them.

Lifestyles of the Reasonable & Temperate

For Plato, the healthy soul is one in which the reason reigns supreme, with the spirit acting as its loyal lackey to dominate the appetites. Such a rational and wise soul, Plato believed, would be best equipped to choose the proper pleasures for a healthy and well-balanced life. Plato held that only a few people, those who are both well-educated and born with naturally rational souls, could ever achieve this type of life, saying that "the pleasures, pains, and appetites that are simple and moderate, the ones that are led by rational calculation with the aid of understanding and correct belief, you would find in those few people who are born with the best natures and receive the best education" (431d).

Plato describes the life of such a wise person as one in which the reason, rather than the appetites, rules our decisions. Rather than "surrendering rule over himself to whatever desire comes along" (561b), the wise person should live a life of temperance: "As for the appetitive element, he neither starves nor overfeeds it, so it will slumber and not disturb the best element with its pleasure or pain but will leave it alone, just by itself and pure, to investigate and reach out for the perception of something... that it does not know." Because the reason is the best part of the soul, Plato teaches, and the pursuit of knowledge is the best activity, we should pander to our desires just enough to quiet them. In our modern society, perhaps this calmness could be sought by using reason to evaluate the claims advertisers make about

their products and seeking out those offers which can quickly and efficiently soothe our clamoring appetites. Then, with these appetites no longer competing with our reason for control of the soul, we can engage in the truly good life of philosophical contemplation.

Our consumer society, however, seems geared not towards this quiet satisfaction, but instead encourages us to seek out ever more desires to satisfy. The greater the range of products available to us, the more desires we are able to pander to, the higher our standard of living is said to be. Consumer culture, with its multitude of products and experiences for sale, seems designed to cater to that which Plato called the "democratic soul." Of the person possessed of such a soul, he wrote:

He lives from day to day, gratifying the appetite of the moment. Sometimes he drinks heavily while listening to the flute, while at others he drinks only water and is on a diet. Sometimes he goes in for physical training, while there are others where he is idle and neglects everything... There is neither order nor necessity in his life, yet he calls it pleasant, free, and blessedly happy, and follows it throughout his entire life (561c-d).

To put it in modern terms, sometimes he signs up for a gym membership, other times he pigs out on Twinkies. Of course, if such a "democratic soul" is happy, then it seems hard to see why the life of reason would be preferable. Why not surrender to the siren song of consumerism, simply allowing our reason to guide our selections while living in service to the desire of the moment?

Desire is the Mover of the Soul

Aristotle believed that the human soul was composed of various abilities or "potentialities," with desire existing as one of these parts of the soul. In *De Anima*, his examination of the human soul, Aristotle divides the soul into a number of these potentialities, such as "nutrition, perception, desire, locomotion and understanding" (414a 30), with reason serving as a sort of culmination of the highly developed soul: "Finally and most rarely, some have reasoning and understanding. For perishable things that have reasoning also have all the other parts of the soul; but not all of those that have each of the other parts also have reasoning" (415a 10).

In examining what motivates human actions, however, Aristotle found that it was not this most highly developed and uniquely human aspect of our souls that causes our behavior, but rather our desire. Aristotle acknowledged that, at first glance, we may sometimes seem to act based on pure reason: "There are apparently two parts that move us – both intellect and desire" (433a). Here he separates the intellect or reason into two parts, that which "reasons for some goal and is concerned with action," which is distinguished from the "theoretical intellect" by this concern for a goal (433a 15). While the theoretical intellect may be content to

simply contemplate abstract knowledge, the other part of the intellect, which contemplates objects of desire, demands action. Thus it may seem that there are several elements of the soul involved in moving us to act: "Hence it is reasonable to regard these two things – desire, and thought concerned with action – as the movers. For the object of desire moves us, and thought moves us because its starting point is the object of desire" (433a 20).

However, Aristotle concludes that it is only through its connection to desire that our intellect actually moves us to act: "And so there is one mover, the desiring part... [I]ntellect evidently does not move anything without desire, since wish is a form of desire, and any motion in accordance with reasoning is in accordance with wish; desire, on the other hand, also moves us against reasoning, since appetite is a kind of desire" (433a 20). The fact that we are able to want things despite our reason telling us not to, like junk food and cigarettes, is evidence that desire can exist in us independent of reason. However, whenever our reason leads us toward a goal, even one which runs contrary to our appetites, we find ourselves wishing for the attainment of the goal. Thus Aristotle finds that the part of our intellect that produces action cannot function autonomously from the desiring part of our soul. Ultimately, our every action must begin with our soul's potential for desire.

Aristotle writes that "in every case the mover is the object of desire, but the object of desire is either the good or the apparent good" (433a 25) and, furthermore, that "intellect is always correct, but desire and appearance may be correct or incorrect" (433a 25). This statement certainly sounds promising; if the intellect is always correct, might this mean that our "thought concerned with action" can lead us unfailingly to the good, regardless of consumer culture's attempts to manipulate our appetites and emotions? Unfortunately, Aristotle says not. The "intellect" he refers to here seems to be the theoretical part of the understanding, that which deals with purely abstract knowledge, as he says elsewhere that "in the case of things without matter, the understanding part and the object are one, since actual knowledge and its object are one" (430a 5). Appearance, on the other hand, as "that in virtue of which some object appears to us" (428a), is that part of the understanding which draws conclusions about objects in the world – things with matter. An "incorrect" appearance, then, would be a conclusion, drawn from a perception, that does not properly represent the thing it is a perception of. Thus, if we are presented incorrect appearances, such as deceptive advertisements or false promises about the effects its wares might have on our lives, then consumerism may lead us to have "incorrect desires" by misleading our understanding.

Aristotle refers to the ultimate object of our desires as being an "unmoved mover." He writes: "There are two types of movers: the unmoved mover and the moved mover. The unmoved mover is the good achievable in action, and the moved mover is the desiring part; for the thing that is moved is moved insofar as it desires, and

desire, insofar as it is actual, is a sort of motion" (433b 15). The "good," as the object of our desire, is unaffected and unchanged by our desire for it. We, on the other hand, including that part of our soul which desires, are altered and moved by our desires. Thus that which we desire has power over us, and is able to move us. We, however, at least in Aristotle's conception, seem powerless to affect our desires.

This conclusion makes consumerism's seeming ability to shape our desires profoundly unsettling. If our every act is motivated by our desires, then control over our desires confers control over our lives, and even our very souls. If consumer culture really does control our desires, then it would have the potential to rule us completely; we would be all but defenseless against it and entirely at its mercy. Surely, it would be meaningless to speak of freedom when our every action is determined by something we are powerless to affect. And yet, might it be able to use this power for good? If consumer culture can truly lead us to our heart's desire, perhaps we should surrender ourselves to this despotic ruler, and allow its control over our lives to go uncontested.

People Just Want to be Happy

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle addresses the question of how people ought to live by examining "the good," the common object of all of our desires. Aristotle identifies this good with happiness, noting that, while we may sometimes be guided by other motivations as well, this desire to be happy is always present: "Honor, pleasure, understanding and every virtue we certainly choose because of themselves, since we would choose each of them even if it had no further result, but we also choose them for the sake of happiness, supposing that through them we shall be happy" (1097b). When we do something because it is honorable, it is because we think that honor will bring us happiness; when we do something because it is pleasurable, it is because we think that physical pleasure makes us happy. This desire for happiness, then, is at the center of what it means to be human.

Consumer culture promises to provide us with this elusive happiness, so long as we can afford to pay. Advertising is filled with images of smiling, happy people. *Buy this product*, the voice of the culture whispers, *and you can be this happy too*. Yet even the wealthy, conspicuous consumers, who can afford the most sumptuous lifestyles, the widest array of products, and the highest rates of consumption, still seem to be plagued with unhappiness. Alongside the purchases of designer handbags and expensive wines, their credit card bills list antidepressants and visits to therapists.

Where, then, have these unhappy winners of the social competition gone wrong? Aristotle writes that "happiness is the activity of the soul expressing complete virtue" (1100a 5). This happiness, as an activity, is not simply the fleeting and momentary joy that we get from an individual purchase or experience: "For one swallow

does not make a spring, nor does one day; nor similarly does one day or a short time make us blessed and happy" (1098a 20). Likewise, it is not a goal that, once obtained, can be held onto: "[Happiness] is not a state. For if it were, someone might have it and yet be asleep for his whole life, living the life of a plant, or suffer the greatest misfortunes" (1176a). The truly happy person, Aristotle believes, is the person whose virtuous soul leads them, time and time again, to the correct behavior – the virtuous path – regarding every pleasure and pain. This virtuous path is a sort of middle road, a correct indulgence which guides us in choosing rationally just how much to indulge ourselves: "Virtue, then, is a state that decides... the mean relative to us, which is defined relative to reason... It is a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency" (1107a).

Thus, when consumer culture offers to satisfy our desires, perhaps our proper response would be to calculate just how much indulgence is reasonable in each case. Faced with our modern culture's arsenal of competing desires, Aristotle's mean might have us act as responsible consumers, planning our budgets carefully, counting our calories and saving up for unassuming package-deal vacations. This rationing of desire still leaves us at the mercy of consumerism, however. Reason determines how far we go down any path, but our desires determine our direction. We are left like train engineers, perhaps able to control the speed of our lives, but unable to travel outside of the tracks which our desires lay down for us. Is this life of thrift, spent in pursuit of the virtuous mean, neither too much nor too little, and ultimately determined by something outside us, really the best we can hope for?

Freedom From Desire

For the Stoic philosophers, desire was something to be avoided, a distraction which interfered with our living a good life. The best way of life, they believed, was one which is free of internal strife, a goal best achieved by living in harmony with our basic natures. The Roman historian Diogenes Laertius wrote of the Stoics: "They say that an animal's first [or primary] impulse is to preserve itself, because nature made it congenial to itself from the beginning, as Chrysippus says in book one of *On Goals*, stating that for every animal its first [sense of] congeniality is to its own constitution and the reflective awareness of this" (Reeve 369). Where Aristotle felt that humans' primary drive was to be happy, the Stoics instead found the instinct towards simple self-preservation to be more fundamental. Diogenes continued, "The Stoics claim that what some people say is false, viz. That the primary [or first] impulse of animals is to pleasure. For they say that pleasure is, if anything, a byproduct that supervenes when nature itself, on its own, seeks out and acquires what is suitable to [the animal's] constitution" (369). Thus our pleasure is a result of our desire to persist and thrive. Our hunger leads us to eat, and our thirst to drink, simply because these are necessary to our continued survival.

Like Aristotle and Plato, the Stoics recognized the human capacity for rational thought as setting us apart from other animals. As Diogenes writes, "[w]hen reason has been given to rational animals as a more perfect governor [of life], then for them the life according to reason properly becomes what is natural for them" (370). Because this ability to reason is an important aspect of our human nature, it becomes an important factor in determining our proper course in life: "Therefore the goal becomes to 'live consistently with nature', i.e., according to one's own nature and that of the universe, doing nothing which is forbidden by the common law, which is right reason, penetrating all things... And this itself is the virtue of the happy man and a smooth flow of life" (370).

Of course, in both Plato's and Aristotle's view, desire and appetite were part and parcel of our basic natures, albeit parts which should properly be subjugated to the reason. To the Stoics, however, the very presence of certain desires were seen as corruptions of the soul: "As there are said to be ailments in the body, such as gout and arthritis, so too in the soul there are love of reputation and love of pleasure and the like. For an ailment is a disease coupled with weakness and a disease is a strong opinion about something which seems to be worth choosing" (371). Interestingly, these are two tendencies which consumerism seems particularly adept at manipulating: love of reputation drives us to spend money beyond our means on expensive status symbols, while love of pleasure leads us to neglect our health in favor of bad food, alcohol, cigarettes and other guilty pleasures. Thus the Stoic attitude suggests that consumerism's appeals speak loudest to unhealthy souls. A healthy soul, on the other hand, would be better able to resist such appeals.

The Stoic attitude also rejects the materialism which pervades consumer culture, in which we identify our success in life with the quality of our possessions. In his work *The Handbook*, the Roman Stoic philosopher Epictetus cautions us: "Do not be joyful about any superiority that is not your own. If the horse were to say joyfully, 'I am beautiful,' one could almost put up with it. But certainly you, when you say joyfully, 'I have a beautiful horse,' are joyful about the good of the horse" (6). To a Stoic, when we think we are 'cool' because we drive a cool car or wear cool clothes, we are mistaken. Any 'coolness' present in a car remains a property of the car, not the owner, and it is futile to think that such a property might 'rub off' onto a person's true self, their soul.

For a Stoic, the proper path through life is one which rejects desire and denies the appetites. Epictetus cautions us against the negative consequences of desire: "Remember, what a desire proposes is that you gain what you desire, and what an aversion proposes is that you not fall into what you are averse to. Someone who fails to get what he desires is unfortunate... for the time being eliminate desire completely, since if you desire something that is not up to us, you are bound to be

unfortunate, and at the same time none of the things that are up to us, which it would be good to desire, will be available to you" (2). The only reason we ever encounter bad fortune, Epictetus tells us, is that we desire things which we then fail to obtain. If we refuse to play the game, we will never lose; by ridding ourselves of desire, we also rid ourselves of all disappointment and sense of failure. To paraphrase Epictetus' position with a few modern clichés, we should step out of the rat race, stop trying to keep up with the Joneses, and make lemonade out of whatever lemons life gives us.

In his writings on the Greek Stoics, Diogenes tells us that "They say the wise man is also free of passions, because he is not disposed to them.... And they say that all virtuous men are austere because they do not consort with pleasure nor do they tolerate hedonistic [actions and attitudes] from others" (Reeve 371). By refusing to succumb to the temptations of pleasure, a wise person becomes free to live in accord with their own rational nature: "He alone is free, and the base men are slaves, for freedom is the authority to act on one's own, while slavery is the privation of [the ability] to act on one's own" (372). Once we are no longer controlled by our desires, then the external control exerted on us by the objects of our desires can be replaced with true self-control, making us the masters of our own destinies.

The Liberation of Desire

For Plato, the proper course of action when confronted with desire is to "neither starve nor overfeed it," but to seek out simple and moderate pleasures with which to placate our appetites, letting us get on with our intellectual pursuits. Similarly, for Aristotle, the ideal path is to find the "golden mean" which separates virtue from vice, indulging in any pleasures to the extent that our reason tells us we are neither "deficient" nor "excessive." In both these interpretations, it may be possible to live a good life in a consumer society which manufactures desires, so long as the reason is free to guide us in a limited indulgence. Of course, such a course may be difficult, with our appetites constantly being tempted and thus threatening to overwhelm our reason.

For the Stoics, however, our best course of action would be non-participation in consumer society. Our desires, the Stoics feel, can only enslave us and lead us astray. It even seems likely that today's consumer society, by seeking to fulfill every desire and pander to every appetite, would be considered horribly misguided by the Stoic philosopher. The Stoic, rejecting "love of reputation," would probably not seek to convince the rest of us to join in this austere lifestyle, but would rather opt out of society in general, perhaps observing silently, judging us and suppressing their pity for our lost and decadent souls. However, this freedom to sit on the sidelines seems a hollow sort of freedom: merely a freedom to do nothing at all. Meanwhile, consumer culture remains the only game in town.

What all three of these ancient philosophies share is

a concept of human nature that is fixed and unchanging. In my view, this is a limitation which ultimately prevents any of them from being truly useful in envisioning a way of living that might allow us to move beyond our current consumer society. What is needed today is not simply a conception of desire as an inevitable evil, to be dominated by the reason or rejected outright. Rather, what is needed is a way to redefine our desires on our own terms.

There is a conception of freedom that is not merely the ability to act or to choose, but to be self-determined. If we are to be truly free, to control our own lives and determine for ourselves whether or not we will be happy, and what that happiness will entail, then we must seize control of that which controls us. We must learn to move the unmoved mover. Rather than accepting the "good" for which we strive as some fixed point, determined by nature, to which we can only relate as passive subjects, we must learn to freely decide just what it is we wish to strive for – not merely in terms of competing products, but in terms of the very values which make us strive. Instead of simply satisfying or denying our externally conditioned desires, we should seek to decide for ourselves what constitutes a worthwhile desire, and what the aim of our lives should be. When we fail to take responsibility for our desires in this way, we leave ourselves open to be defined by the desires of others, be they advertisers or ideologues.

By redefining our desires, we may even be able to redefine ourselves. Instead of simply settling for the reasonable consumption of goods, perhaps we can begin to reshape ourselves into our own conception of the good. This task, however, seems to be one which lies outside the realm of ancient philosophy. Such a task will require new tools, and a new way of viewing human nature: not as predetermined, but as raw material, ours to be shaped. Of course, such a project is necessarily open-ended, and it is difficult to say where it might lead. However, one thing is clear: such a liberation requires a conception of the good life that does not center on the mere purchase of objects. The freedom to control our own desires, and thereby our own lives, can never spring from a mindless compulsion to consume. Rather, we must set out guided by a different, equally fundamental desire: the ever-present human need to create.

All quotations taken from Reeve, C.D.C., and Patrick Lee Miller, eds. *Introductory Readings in Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006. Print.