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The Virtue of Restraint

by Gary Gardner

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THE VIRTUE

IS THERE SUCH A THING AS TOO MUCH CHOICE?

It was supposed to be a quick run to the food store. All I needed was a quart of milk and some cereal for a house guest. I hurried into the Giant, our aptly named supermarket, and made my way to the breakfast cereals, wondering what kind my friend would like. I began pacing the aisle, absorbed in the choices stacked in front of me. Corn flakes or raisin bran? Name brand or store brand? Single packs or full size? Sugared or plain—or maybe chocolate-flavored? Overwhelmed by the variety, I wheeled around and surveyed my path. The entire aisle, from top to bottom on one side, was stocked with cereal, something I'd never noticed before. My curiosity now piqued, I retraced my steps, this time counting. Grand total: 130 different kinds, sizes, and brands of cereal available to the discerning shopper.

On the way home, I pondered the experience, searching for the advantage of such extensive choice. I have often heard it said that “development is anything that increases one’s options,” a shorthand definition that holds a tidy appeal. After all, a primary reason Germany is regarded as more developed than, say, Haiti, is that Germans have more opportunities—more options—than Haitians do. Is a country with 130 cereals really better off—more developed, all other things being equal—than a country with just 10? As our development advances, should we be aiming for 200 different cereal choices?

It seems to me that the benefits of ever-expanding choice have been oversold in wealthy countries. The same food system that can offer 130 different kinds of cereal helps create a nation of excess. A majority of American

adults are overweight, and one in five is obese, partly because we are offered an almost endless selection of foods high in sugar and fat—foods that are heavily promoted and available cheaply, at any hour, almost any place. We face an alarming rise in infections that resist treatment, and that could trigger plagues of a kind we once thought conquered, because this economic system promotes generous access to antibiotics. Without a sense of restraint—an



ILLUSTRATIONS BY ROLF LAUB

OF RESTRAINT

BY GARY GARDNER

understanding of the wise and often limited use of options—ever-expanding choice becomes a “tyranny of freedom,” as professor of psychology Barry Schwartz of Swarthmore College puts it, that can actually retard or even unravel our development.

As I arrived home, I couldn’t help but contrast my experience of selecting a cereal with some of the more important decisions I had ever made: who I would marry, what job I would accept, which house

I would buy. With cereals, I had an avalanche of information about price, quantity, flavor, texture, ingredients—along with less useful data, such as which celebrity athletes or cartoon characters endorse which brands. Moreover, I had all the time I wanted to make my decision, since the supermarket was open 24 hours. And even with all this information, if I’d made a disappointing cereal choice, it would have been of little consequence.

On the other hand, when I bought a house, got married, or took a job that might well change my life, my choices were much more limited and information about them was considerably harder to get. A lot of that information was subjective or hidden or needed a great deal of soul-searching. The TV offered no advice. Moreover, on these more important questions, time pressures loomed, and a poor decision was likely to bring great grief. My options, it turns out, were quite constrained. And yet, I think I did a better job with these major decisions than I did with the cereal.

We consider these important, limited-choice decisions to be character-building, formative, developmental. Not only are options few, but the commitment required by these choices means foreclosing huge sets of other choices—we do not normally continue to look for new houses, jobs, or spouses once we have committed. Here, the limits on choice are central to a person’s development. My plethora of cereal options, by contrast—the knowledge that any kind of early morning sweet is possible—does little for my development. Most of those options are just different ways of delivering sugar—offering little real choice, I should add—and could increase my risk of tooth decay, heart disease, or diabetes. Having a larger number of choices doesn’t necessarily bring happier outcomes.

Many people seem to understand, intuitively, that development and restraint go hand in hand. Parents set limits for their children—bed-times, allowances, constraints on offensive language or behavior—so the kids can develop to their fullest potential. The budding swimming star, if she wants a shot at making the Olympic team, will inevitably have to limit her social time. Yet, consumption-driven economics promotes, without embarrassment, the antagonistic concepts of development and unlimited consumption. The message we get from our business pages,



TV commercials, and politicians is that you can't consume too much, your credit card balances can't be too high, and the number of cereal brands in the store simply can't be too many. The challenge, for those who sense that that message is self-serving, is to build economies that harness the creativity of capitalism while recognizing the central importance of restraint in true development.

THE UGLY SIDE OF EXCESS

As it generates greater wealth, the growth driven by mass consumption is also producing some troubling side effects. Most fundamental is the failure of advanced industrial societies to deliver widely their most hyped product: well-being, or happiness. Studies of societal happiness show that income growth and happiness, which once marched upward together, have been uncoupled. In the United States, for example, the share of people describing themselves as "very happy" declined from 35 percent in 1957 to 30 percent today, despite a more than doubling of income per person. For many of us, it seems, the more we ask consumption to fill our lives, the emptier we feel.

This malaise may also be reflected in the prevalence of depression, which public health officials now describe as an "epidemic" in industrial countries. British psychologist and journalist Oliver James asserts that "the closer a nation approximates the American model—a highly advanced and technologically developed form of modern capitalism—the greater the rate of mental illness amongst its citizens." Consistent with this assertion, a 1998 report of the World Health Organization notes that depression now ranks second in the world table of diseases—more widespread than cancer, for example—in high-income nations. And within the United States, the rise in depression tracks closely with growing prosperity. A survey of 18,000 adults found that Americans born in the ten years after World War II were 3 to 10 times more likely to suffer major depression before the age of 34 than were their compatriots born before World War I.

The downside of American prosperity is also evident in more specific ways. Consider food, which—like many other consumer goods—is inexpensive in the United States, and available in cornucopian quantity and variety. "Filling" stations now supply the belly as well as the gas tank. Coffeeshops serve 12 varieties in 3 sizes, with or without caffeine. University libraries, once strictly off-limits to food and drink, increasingly permit them. If product proliferation and availability are the measures of the food industry's progress, the U.S. food system is indeed highly developed.

But America's eat-all-you-can-eat culture is now actually undoing some of the health gains that were achieved earlier in the century. The same accelerating trend that now counts 61 percent of American adults

as overweight or obese is spreading to other countries, even low income ones. Obesity alone is estimated to have cost Americans the equivalent of 13 percent of their expenditures on health care in 1998. It also increases the risks of heart disease, diabetes, stroke, and cancer—the four leading causes of death in the industrial world. Arguably, Americans would be healthier and more prosperous—more developed—if food were less ubiquitous, and if fewer sweet and fatty foods were so cheaply and ubiquitously available.

The problem, in a nutshell, is that the harm done by the side effects of many development initiatives now outweighs the benefits of those development paths. Yet industrial economies seem to be producing more and more of this economic sclerosis. Consider pesticide use. Like antibiotics, pesticides are typically overused, killing farmworkers, polluting waters, and costing societies some \$30 billion annually. Yet, while crop output per hectare has increased, pests devour 37 percent of that output today, compared with 30 percent in 1935, before pesticides were introduced. Societies would have been healthier and more prosperous if pesticides had been reserved as a tool of last resort, an occasional supplement to more organic strategies that rely on nature to check pest populations.

Similar cost-benefit imbalances are found with car-centered transportation. How polluted must air become, and how slow do average commutes have to get, before we realize that adding more cars and building more roads is making it harder and unhealthier to get where we want to go? A city that has paved 40 percent of its land to accommodate cars may offer more choices of routes to get from one place to another than a community that is only 5-percent paved, but that doesn't necessarily mean people actually get where they want to go any faster or more easily!

In their book *Natural Capitalism*, Paul Hawken and Amory and Hunter Lovins characterize these unwanted excesses of choice as wastes—of material, time, energy, and even people. They document a long string of wasteful costs generated by the U.S. economy, from the costs of highway congestion to those of drug use and unnecessary prisons. By their calculations, such economic deadweight adds up to some \$2 trillion, more than a fifth of the U.S. GNP. That's like a 180-pound man gaining an additional 40 pounds—with no added developmental benefit, and with significant increased risk to himself. Much as excess fat threatens personal health, accumulated societal flab can eventually harden our economic arteries.

Often, our lack of restraint is promoted under the guise of individualism or privacy, conditions that increase our options by allowing us to do what we want, when we want to. Television, for example, is the individualization of leisure, giving us free run of a panoply of programs. The automobile is the individualization of transportation, offering the option to

go most anywhere at any time—though increasingly slowly. Suburbanization is the individualization of housing and open space. But by maximizing private choice, these developments diminish social interaction, and reduce a society’s social capital. Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*, has found television to be especially corrosive to societal health. At least half of all Americans usually watch TV alone, he reports, and he estimates that each hour of television viewing per day corresponds to a 10 percent reduction in most forms of civic involvement. And the Internet may be further fraying the social fabric: a 2000 study found that heavy users of the Internet tended to be socially isolated.

Many psychologists blame such growing social isolation for the epidemic of depression. Today, a quarter of Americans live alone, up from 8 percent in 1940, and at least 20 percent of the population is estimated to have poor mental health. By contrast, the Old Order Amish people of the U.S. state of Pennsylvania, who have a strong community life made possible in part by their car-free, electricity-free, lifestyles, suffer depression at less than one-fifth the rate of people in nearby Baltimore. The Amish way of life may not be preferred by many, but it reminds us that a community can create its own economy, and that socially rich but consumption-lean lifestyles can be important means of achieving real happiness.

EVOLVING WITH RESTRAINT

Constraints, far from being thorns in our side, have been boons to humanity’s moral, cultural and

even physiological development for millennia. Neurobiologist William Calvin believes that the limits imposed by winter, for example, accelerated the development of human intelligence. Surviving summer was fairly easy for early hominids; it was not hard to collect the bounty of nuts, berries, and roots that surrounded them. But mastering winter often required hunting skills that could produce food and hides during the lean and cold months. Survival favored those with the intelligence to conceive of advanced hunting skills, such as construction of a trap. Calvin writes that the rapid enlargement of the human brain over 2.5 million years “is awfully quick by the standards of evolutionary biology. Yet winter once a year, an abrupt climate change every few millennia, and an ice age every hundred thousand years will speed up things ever so nicely.” With the evolution of consciousness, options increased—from gathering food to gathering and hunting; from living in warm places to living almost anywhere. That expansion of options began the process we know as cultural development.

The shift from hunting and gathering to agriculture that began 10,000 years ago put us on a path toward growing freedom from natural constraints. Intensive cultivation coaxed more food from a parcel of land than natural processes alone had. Irrigation ensured water for crops even when rainfall was scarce. And the surplus food yielded by these advances fueled population growth to levels unsupportable in the era of hunting and gathering. In sum, agriculture was the first of many large-scale cultural innovations that allowed humans to supersede natural limits—

AN EXCESS OF OPTIONS

Area	How Options Have Expanded	How An Excess of Options Hurts Development	How Restraint Could Maximize Development
Food	Food, much of it full of sugar and fat, is available everywhere you look in the “developed” countries—most of it at irresistibly low prices.	More than half of Americans are overweight. Excessive weight is a major risk factor in the four leading killer diseases, and costs the U.S. the equivalent of 12 percent of its spending on health care.	Limit cheap food to healthy choices: A hefty “fat tax” based on the nutrient value per calorie could help limit the amount of bad foods we eat.
Transportation	Car-centered transportation maximizes options: people can travel almost anywhere, at any time. Commercials even show cars driving through old-growth forests.	Gridlock results. Los Angeles drivers stuck in traffic waste 120 gallons of fuel each year and more hours than they get in annual vacation. The trend is the same in other major U.S. cities.	Limit the convenience of car use: A multimodal transportation system emphasizing mass transit and bicycles, with limited auto access in downtown areas, could maximize mobility.
Agriculture	Pesticides aim to eradicate pests entirely from crop-lands. The number of pesticides continues to proliferate.	Resistance sets in; today the world spends more than \$30 billion on pesticides, yet a greater share of crops are lost to pests than before pesticides were introduced.	Limit the use of totalitarian approaches to pests: rather than trying to eradicate pests, manage them in a balanced way.

limits that had shaped the development of all life, without exception, for billions of years.

Conventional wisdom interprets this history in a self-congratulatory and inaccurate way. It asserts that nature is anarchical in its wildness—hence the phrases “law of the jungle” and “state of nature” to connote disorder—and that civilization brings order to this chaos. But actually, nature is the ordered realm, and civilization the chaotic one, observes social evolutionary theorist Andrew Schmookler. The hugely complex natural world functions so well because each natural actor has particular, circumscribed roles. Each species is limited in what it can eat, where it can live, how it can communicate, and how it can interact with other species. Taken together, these limited roles constitute an order that is essential to ecosystem functioning.

By contrast, human success at surpassing many natural limits—producing huge quantities of food by farming, traveling in vehicles, talking on the phone across oceans, and seizing the habitats of other species for its own use—has made civilization largely open-ended. Natural limits have become increasingly easy to ignore, or even scorn, at least in the short term. “Out of the living order,” Schmookler writes in *The Parable of the Tribes*, “emerged a living entity with no defined place,” that is, a humanity capable of building its own space, increasingly disconnected from the natural limits of climate and ecology.

The open-endedness of human activities has led to great advances for humanity, of course. But practiced without restraint, it has also posed great and growing problems. The

ancient Sumerians, for example—as well as nearly all succeeding irrigation civilizations, including our own—overused their irrigation systems, allowing salt to build up and poison their farms, in several cases contributing to the downfall of their societies. And the wealth generated by agriculture was used excessively by some, fueling the creation of social hierarchies.

For Schmookler, these and other problems represent a chaos never seen before the advent of civilization, a chaos generated by a species that had pushed back its natural limits. And out of this chaos, says Schmookler, emerged “the problem of power.” When human intelligence reached levels that allowed humans to shed their naturally prescribed roles, cultures and civilizations developed. But they developed differentially, with some advancing more rapidly or in different directions than others. These differences—one clan is known, say, for its spears, another for its cave paintings—inevitably translated into differences of power. Without a central governing authority to ensure the peace, each culture, and later, each civilization, was left to fend for itself—an insecure state of affairs that produced full-blown societal competition for power, a competition that continues to this day. Indeed, our civilization is the product of a social evolutionary process, akin to natural selection, which favored those civilizations most adept at wielding power.

Social hierarchy, conquering armies, and privileged economic access were forms of power used to deal with food shortages, overpopulation, and other dysfunctions created by economies that operated at odds with the



natural world. In essence, says Schmookler, humans traded their balance within nature for a new “bondage to power.” And over the millennia, cultural innovations designed to maximize power have grown in step with our divorce from the natural world. Today’s deforestation and coral reef destruction, it would seem, are of a piece with the development of nuclear arsenals and the growing gap between rich and poor, even if a direct connection cannot always be drawn. Because we have not exercised restraint, concludes Schmookler, our blessings—our extended choices—have become our curses. Our growing freedom leaves us ever more tightly shackled.

The wisdom traditions of evolving human civilizations recognized the problem posed by unlimited options and prescribed power over oneself, rather than power over others, as a way to check the problem. “Moderation in all things,” a common exhortation among ancient sages from Confucius to the Roman playwright Terence, is a good summation of this approach. Modern religious traditions as different as Buddhism and Islam have similar teachings: “To take all one wants is never as good as to stop when one should,” goes a famous Taoist refrain. And Mahatma Gandhi’s famous “seven social sins that can destroy a nation” are sins precisely because of the moderating factor they lack: wealth without work, commerce without morality, pleasure without conscience, education without character, science without humanity, and worship without sacrifice. Moderation, Gandhi and others make clear, is not meant to deprive or impoverish our lives, but to enhance them. The author Bill McKibben tells the story of the American journalist who once asked Gandhi: “Can you tell me the secret of your life in three words?” “Yes,” replied Gandhi, “Renounce and enjoy,” by which he meant that one should curb attachment to goods, power, or prestige, in order to find happiness. It is hard to imagine wisdom more at odds with the message of our consumption-based civilization.

With the development of capitalism, human activities diverged from natural ones ever more radically. Capitalism produced great social advances for many, but absent an ethic of restraint, it inevitably introduced excess—from severe inequality to pollution to unsustainable levels of materials consumption. Mass consumption and development, long-time partners, became more and more at odds, like a marriage gone sour. The gap between the world’s rich and poor is far wider now than it has ever been before. In 1956, urban planner/philosopher Lewis Mumford lamented that capitalism would make virtues of six of Christianity’s seven deadly sins: pride, avarice, lust, envy, gluttony, and anger. And commentator Travis Charbeneau has noted that the seventh sin, sloth, is often dangled as the reward for successfully exercising the other six. Yet, in our largely triumphalist modern

regard for capitalism, the strain between consumption and development remains unacknowledged.

Yet if anything, the excesses of our age seem to be on the verge of ballooning, with potentially catastrophic consequences, as human activity abandons any pretense of restraint. Despite growing environmental awareness, major drivers of our civilization seem hell-bent on declaring independence from the natural world that sustains us. In April 2000, Bill Joy of Sun Microsystems published his now famous *Wired* magazine essay warning of the uncontrolled power of rapidly emerging scientific advances in biotechnology, advanced robotics, and nanotechnology (microscopic, molecular-level manufacturing). Common to each of these three future supertechnologies is the power of self-replication, which would allow unnatural creations such as exotic, engineered plants and super-intelligent robots to establish themselves as new species—the first human inventions to make themselves essentially immortal, and beyond human control.

Bill Joy is no Luddite. As a chief scientist at Sun, he’s a widely respected technophile. Yet, he sees these boundary-busting “developments” as likely to pose serious threats to the human species within a few decades, and he urges great restraint in researching them. Unfortunately, for many Americans, Joy’s prognosis seems to have been received as more of an investment opportunity than a warning. Oblivious to the value of limits, our civilization shows little interest in understanding and respecting such critical boundaries. Unless we get interested soon, speculated the late astronomer Carl Sagan, we may be the next civilization in the universe whose demise is met by a failure to grasp the importance of restraint (see box, page 18).

THE MARKET FOR LOVE AND HAPPINESS

So, modern economies are founded on an astounding non sequitur. Meant to be engines of our development, they are actually designed primarily to produce wealth, which we then assume to be the equivalent of development. But suppose you could design an economy from scratch. In your ideal world, would your first question be “How can we generate more wealth?” Or would it be “How can we help people become more developed?” I suspect most people would have little hesitation in choosing development as the highest priority. It is probably true, of course, that a steady stream of wealth would help lubricate the wheels of development. But by placing the question of development first, we put wealth at the service of humankind, instead of making wealth the primary rationale for economic activity.

If we are to focus on development, however, we still need to know what to develop. The psychologist Abraham Maslow pondered this question with his seminal theory of a generation ago, and the British

social scientist Tim Jackson has subsequently applied Maslow's thinking to economics. Maslow believed that human needs can be arranged hierarchically, starting with the material needs for food, shelter, etc., then moving to the need for physical security, thence to the higher needs of self-esteem, love, and finally, to "self-actualization"—the full realization of one's potential as a sentient being. It may be too much to ask that an economy supply self-esteem, love, and self-actualization, although many believe it can, as Jackson and his colleague Nick Marks have documented in a 1999 study.

Their research analyzed the doubling of individual spending by Britons between 1954 and 1994, and found that most of the increase was an effort to meet non-material needs—needs for affection, leisure, and creativity, etc.—through the consumption of material goods. For example, Britons were well clothed in 1954, but their spending on clothes increased by more than 200 percent per person by 1994, largely because fashion became a way to ensure status among their peers. Like citizens of other wealthy countries, Britons used the greater options afforded them by prosperity to meet needs that, in an age of fewer options and more social contact, had been met in their families and communities. But the literature on psychology is clear: we fool ourselves if we believe that nonmaterial needs can be met through the consumption of goods. Instead, love, self-esteem, and self-actualization are best gained through personal, social, and cultural interactions.

Not only is modern development unable to meet these higher needs; it may actually block people from attaining them. Jackson notes that there is "an impressive body of opinion suggesting that materialism inhibits the satisfaction" of non-material needs. Much of today's advertising, for example, sends an implicit message that is patently false: your self-worth depends on what you own. The car in your driveway, the size of your wardrobe, the electronic gadgets in your house—these externals have nothing to do with self-worth, but advertising works relentlessly to convince us otherwise. To the extent that advertising steers us toward false sources of self-esteem, it might be described as a promoter of faux development, or even as a source of developmental decay.

EMBRACING RESTRAINT

Restraint may seem a foreign notion in Western civilization, given our Enlightenment heritage and belief in perpetual progress. The idea that we might voluntarily tame our passions and constrain our thirst for knowledge feels almost unnatural to a species long accustomed to satisfying its acquisitiveness and curiosity. Even in the face of our own moral demise, and possibly in the face of threats to our

"It might be a familiar progression, transpiring on many worlds—a planet, newly formed, placidly revolves around its star; life slowly forms; a kaleidoscopic procession of creatures evolves; intelligence emerges which, at least up to a point, confers enormous survival value; and then technology is invented. It dawns on them that there are such things as laws of Nature, that these laws can be revealed by experiment, and that knowledge of these laws can be made both to save and to take lives, both on unprecedented scales. Science, they recognize, grants immense powers. In a flash, they create world-altering contrivances. Some planetary civilizations see their way through, *place limits on what may and what must not be done, and safely pass through the time of perils. Others, not so lucky or so prudent, perish.*"

Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*, 1994 (italics added)

very survival, we seem slow to grasp the need for judicious and tempered personal and societal lives.

Yet limits are a most natural thing, and a few noble examples of societal restraint prove that we haven't forgotten how to practice prudent circumscription. The Netherlands, for example, was as car-dependent as any other European country in the 1960s, but today the Dutch make 30 percent of all urban trips by bicycle—which accounts for less than 1 percent of such trips in the United States. The Dutch are almost certainly healthier and wealthier, and their cities more attractive and livable, than if they had continued to pack their roads and lives with automobiles.

A good example of technological restraint is the 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention, which forbids development of chemical weapons. Nations recognized that while initial development of these weapons would be difficult and costly, they would eventually be easy to copy and deliver to target countries, where they could do terrible damage. Nobody would be safe, and everyone's development would be in jeopardy. The Convention represents a decision to exercise restraint by foregoing the development of such weapons. Wouldn't the same kind of action be a prudent course for the development of germ-line biotechnology, or for technologies that have been shown to fray the societal fabric?

Drawing clear lines that limit our options for consumption, or for technology, is one of the most effective steps we can take to maximize our development, and it is a step that is more true to our nature as humans than is a culture of unlimited choice.

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