

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER I

What Is Simplicity?

The concept of simple living is complex. It encompasses a cluster of overlapping ideas, so our first task must be to identify and clarify the most important of these. One useful way of achieving an initial orientation is to consider some of the synonyms for terms like "frugal," "thrifty," and "simple." Here is a partial list.

mean	ascetic	serious	frugal	wholesome
miserly	self-denying	simple	thrifty	salubrious
closefisted	abstemious	prosaic	economical	unpretentious
cheeseparing	austere	stodgy	temperate	unaffected
stingy	severe	plain	moderate	unassuming
ungenerous	Spartan	homespun	continent	honest
illiberal	puritanical	dry	self-controlled	natural
parsimonious	unpampered	measured		pure
penny-pinching	poor	careful		
	hardy	sparing		
	unadorned	prudent		
	undecorated	provident		
	modest	scrimping		
		skimping		

The attentive reader will notice that the columns have been strategically arranged to bring out the fact that the terms form a spectrum of implicit or associated value judgments from mean and miserly (bad) to pure and natural (good). As one would expect, though, the champions of frugal simplicity like to accentuate the positive; and positive associations are also provided by the etymology of words like “frugality” and “thrift.” “Thrift” has a common root with “thrive”; both derive from the Old Norse *thrifa*, meaning to grasp or get hold of. In Chaucer’s Middle English of the late fourteenth century, “thrifti” meant thriving, prosperous, fortunate, respectable. And in his eighteenth-century dictionary, Samuel Johnson defines “thrift” as “profit; gain; riches gotten; state of prospering.” “Frugal” comes from the Latin term *frugalis*, meaning economical or useful, which is itself derived from *frux*, meaning fruit, profit, or value.

Today, most people are favorably disposed toward the idea of simple living, at least in theory. When a person is described as practicing frugality or having simple tastes, this is usually understood as a form of praise, especially if he or she could easily live otherwise. Celebrities who live in modest homes and ride the bus are not just applauded for remaining in touch with the common people; their lifestyle is also thought to bespeak nonmaterialistic values and hence a certain moral health or purity. But even when viewed in this positive light, the notions of thrift, frugality, and simple living carry a number of meanings. Here we will consider the most important of these, in some cases fleshing out the idea by identifying exemplary figures who serve to represent and articulate the senses of frugality

or simplicity in question. Making use of particular sages in this way should also lend a little color to the idea of a long-standing tradition of philosophical reflection on the nature and virtues of simple living.

ECONOMIC PRUDENCE

This is probably the most familiar and uncomplicated sense of thrift. It finds expression in many well-worn adages:

Waste not, want not.

A penny saved is a penny earned.

Willful waste makes woeful want.

Take care of the pennies and the pounds will take care of themselves.

One frugal sage particularly associated with this idea of fiscal prudence is Benjamin Franklin. Franklin was the archetypical self-made man. At seventeen he arrived in Philadelphia a penniless fugitive, having left without permission an apprenticeship at his brother’s printing house in Boston. By the age of forty he was a best-selling author and comfortably off. When he died at eighty-four, he was celebrated as one of greatest men of his time for his achievements as an entrepreneur, writer, politician, diplomat, scientist, inventor, and philanthropist. An interesting and rather endearing section of his autobiography is his account of how he sought to cultivate within himself thirteen specific virtues. The fifth in his list of virtues was frugality, which he defined for himself in this way: “Make no Expence but to do good to others or yourself; i.e. Waste nothing.”¹ Although Franklin

was surprised by and lamented his failure to perfect within himself many of the qualities on the list, frugality seems to have been one that gave him little trouble. One reason for this, according to his own account, was that his wife Deborah was

as much dispos'd to Industry and Frugality as my self. . . . We kept no idle Servants, our Table was plain & simple, our Furniture of the cheapest. For instance, my Breakfast was for a long time Bread and Milk, (no Tea,) and I ate it out of a twopenny earthen Porringer with a Pewter Spoon.²

Franklin amusingly goes on to note “how luxury will enter families . . . in spite of principle”; in his case, Deborah one day served him breakfast with fine tableware that she had bought simply because she thought “*her* Husband deserv'd a Silver Spoon & China Bowl as well as any of his Neighbors.”³ But by then, and for the rest of his life, he could easily afford such luxuries, a circumstance he repeatedly ascribes to his early habits of frugality and industry.

Franklin's essay “The Way to Wealth” contains many of his best-known maxims on frugality, most advising us to live within our means and to beware of waste and luxuries. For example:

A fat kitchen makes a lean will.
Who dainties love, shall beggars prove.
Fools make feasts, and wise men eat them.

Fond pride of dress, is sure a very curse;
E'er fancy you consult, consult your purse.

Get what you can, and what you get hold;
'Tis the stone that will turn all your lead into gold.⁴

Franklin is especially concerned to warn against the dangers of debt, since “he that goes a-borrowing goes a-sorrowing.” Debt, he says, “exposes a man to confinement, and a species of slavery to his creditors.” Debt is still spreading much misery, of course, usually in the form of credit card balances, student loans, and underwater mortgages. But in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the consequences of going into debt could be even more ruinous than today. In Dickens's London, the debtor's prison and the workhouse cast long shadows over many lives. And Victorian novels are stuffed with edifying examples of characters who illustrate the folly of living beyond one's means, from Mr. Micawber in Dickens's *David Copperfield* to Felix Carbury in Trollope's *The Way We Live Now*.⁵

Partly because it is so familiar, however, this sense of frugality—exercising fiscal prudence and living within one's means—is one of its less interesting meanings. Practicing thrift is obviously sensible for those of us who haven't inherited a fortune, who don't possess some highly marketable talent, or who lack the extraordinary salary-negotiating skills of a Kenneth Chenault (CEO of American Express, who in 2011 received a pay increase of 38 percent, taking his weekly wage to around half a million dollars). There can, of course, be circumstances where going into debt temporarily makes sense: for instance, to buy a house, pay for education, take advantage of a business opportunity, or deal with a pressing hardship such

as eviction or a medical emergency. But for most of us, most of the time, Ben Franklin's advice is clearly sound. "Beware of little expenses," he says; "a small leak will sink a great ship." And who would disagree? Well, there is always Oscar Wilde, according to whom, "the only thing that can console one for being poor is extravagance," and who, according to one account, lived and died true to his philosophy. Impoverished and on his deathbed in a seedy hotel in Paris, Oscar supposedly raised a glass of champagne and declared, "I die as I have lived—beyond my means." But few aspire to that sort of end.

My main concern in this chapter and throughout is not primarily with frugality understood as Franklinesque fiscal prudence. That notion is relatively uncomplicated, and the reasons for practicing it are fairly obvious. Rather more interesting are some of the other meanings attached to the notion of simple living as championed by the philosophers of frugality.

LIVING CHEAPLY

Living cheaply means adopting a lifestyle that requires relatively little money and uses relatively few resources. One point on which most frugal sages are agreed is that such a lifestyle is not difficult to achieve, since the necessities of life are few and easily obtained. What are these bare necessities? Strictly speaking, they consist of nothing more than food and drink adequate for survival and protection from the elements in the form of basic clothing and shelter. But one might also throw in a few tools and implements to be

used in the securing of these necessities, along with some companions in deference to Epicurus's claim that friendship is indispensable to human happiness.

Many of us like to believe we live cheaply, or at least that we know how to. Even people with three-car garages, summer homes, and sailboats enjoy telling stories of how earlier in life they lived in a shoebox and got by on oatmeal and the smell of an oily rag. But before we get too smug, we should perhaps recall and compare ourselves with Diogenes of Sinope, beside whom Ben and Deborah Franklin look like a pair of decadents wallowing in luxury.

Diogenes (c. 404–323 BCE) is the best known of the Cynic philosophers. The label "Cynic" is derived from the Greek *kynikos*, meaning doglike, and it was probably first applied to the Cynics as a term of abuse that likened their way of life to that of dogs. The stories told about Diogenes indicate that he had an acerbic wit, loved to buck convention, was contemptuous of abstract theorizing (Plato's in particular), and rigorously practiced what he preached. They also suggest that he found it amusing to see how he might live on less and with less.

Although he is usually depicted as using a barrel or large earthenware jar as a shelter, this may have been during his more decadent period. The sight of a mouse running around without any concern for finding a bed or protective shelter is supposed to have inspired him to accept cheerfully even greater poverty. Thereupon he doubled up his cloak to make a bed, kept his food in a bag, and ate, slept, and did whatever else he felt like doing wherever he felt like doing it. Reproached for eating in

the marketplace, he said, "I did it, for it was in the market place I felt hungry"—a classic example of criticizing conventions in the name of what is natural. Yet he found he could still make do with even less. Seeing a child drinking out of his hands, he threw away the one cup he owned, saying, "That child has beaten me in simplicity." On another occasion he threw away his spoon, after seeing a boy whose bowl had broken eat his lentils using a crust of bread.⁶

Like Socrates, Diogenes seems to have had no problem accepting things from others. Asked what wine he most liked to drink, he answered, "That which belongs to another." But he did not see this as incurring an obligation to the giver, since he viewed material goods as having little or no value, especially when compared to simple, easily obtained pleasures. This is the moral of the famous story about the meeting of Diogenes and Alexander. When the ruler of the world was taken to see the philosopher, he found him sitting contentedly in the sun. Asked to name a favor he would like Alexander to do for him, Diogenes merely asked him to stop blocking the sunlight. He argued that since the gods lacked nothing, to want nothing was to be like the gods, and to come closer to this state Diogenes would toughen himself to put up with any hardship by rolling in the hot sand in summer and embracing snow-covered statues in winter. To be sure, he once asked the Athenians to erect a statue in his honor, which looks like a fairly grand desire; but when asked his reason for making this request, he said, "I am practicing for disappointment"—in other words, he was toughening himself

up mentally as well. Were he a philosophy professor today, he would probably ask for regular pay raises.

Not surprisingly, Diogenes was considered pretty eccentric in his time, but he was understood to be putting a philosophy into practice. Anyone emulating him today, though, would probably be viewed by most people as mentally ill. This brings out the obvious point that what people consider "cheap" or "basic" or "necessary" varies according to time, place, and social class. These concepts are relative. A normal lifestyle for an Athenian citizen in Diogenes's day required far fewer accoutrements than are needed by a twenty-first-century New Yorker, whose "basic needs" might include electricity, running water, a flush toilet, central heating, air-conditioning, an equipped kitchen, a smartphone, an Internet connection, and a nearby Starbucks.

Scores of books and an unending stream of magazine articles are devoted to the topic of how to live cheaply by cutting costs, although the basic strategies are hardly mysterious: buy used items rather than new; where possible, do things for yourself rather than pay someone else; stock up on staple groceries when they're on sale; use discount coupons; grow some of your own food; don't eat out much; and in general follow the old formula "Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without." Some of this advice is timeless, but some can be rendered less relevant, less sensible, or less appealing by social and technological change. There was a time when it almost always made economic sense to repair an item rather than replace it, so people would darn socks, patch sheets, and take their defective

video recorder in for repair. But when half a dozen socks cost what a minimum-wage worker can earn in less than an hour, and when the cost of repairing a machine may easily be more than the price of a new one, some of the old ways can seem outdated. Treating things as disposable used to be an attitude associated with the rich. When Russian aristocrats hurled their wineglasses into the fireplace after drinking from them, they were flaunting their wealth. Today, though, using disposable items, or treating things as disposable, is often more economical in terms of both money and time. So while the guiding idea of living cheaply remains central to the notion of frugal simplicity, the methods of achieving this goal have to take into account changing times.

SELF-SUFFICIENCY

Taken literally, to be self-sufficient is to not be dependent on anything other than oneself. No living things can be perfectly self-sufficient in this literal sense since all depend on their environment to provide them with the means of life. But they can be more or less independent of others. Self-sufficiency is thus always a matter of degree.

The frugal sages regularly praise self-sufficiency, but they do not all have exactly the same thing in mind. Self-sufficiency contrasts with dependence, of which there are two main kinds: dependence on another's patronage, and dependence on someone else's skills or services, either directly, as when one hires a plumber, or indirectly through technology produced by others. When Greek and Roman

thinkers like Epicurus and Seneca talk about self-sufficiency, they typically contrast it with the first sort of dependency since they worry a good deal about the dangers of patronage. For them, being self-sufficient means, above all else, not being dependent on another person's favor or good opinion. For much of human history, enjoying the favor of one's social superiors has been a major avenue to success and an important defense against poverty and oppression. But of course one usually pays a price for such favor. Ideally, favor would be bestowed purely on the basis of merit, but everyone knows that the world does not typically work that way. Dependents must often flatter and fawn; they are expected to endorse their patron's words and approve of his or her actions. This is true whether one is a courtier complimenting a king, a politician currying favor with the crowd, or an employee hoping to impress a supervisor. Dependency of this sort thus inhibits one's ability to think, speak, and act as one sees fit. Being independent of such constraints is liberating, which is why Epicurus says that "the greatest fruit of self-sufficiency is freedom."⁷

There are interesting lines of connection between this classical conception of self-sufficiency and Emerson's famous essay on self-reliance, which urges the importance of thinking for oneself. But in the modern world, especially in America, the more practical notion of self-sufficiency has come to the fore. Being self-sufficient in this second sense means being able and willing to do things for oneself as opposed to relying on the labor of others. Romantics like Thoreau particularly stress the value of this sort of self-sufficiency, and some extend it to include reducing

our dependence on technology. Those who advocate self-sufficiency in this sense seek to counter the alienating effects of modernity, which, by increasing the division of labor and mechanizing so many tasks, has distanced us from nature and from the elementary activities that underpin our lives.

As already noted, self-sufficiency is a matter of degree. Very few human beings are capable of surviving outside a community, and within every community there are cooperative enterprises and some division of labor. Perhaps this is why one of the best-known exemplars of and meditators on this particular frugal virtue is a fictional character. Robinson Crusoe, one of modernity's first great literary heroes, exemplifies almost perfect self-sufficiency, at least in the years before he encounters Friday and makes him his servant. He is not completely self-sufficient since he makes use of tools and materials salvaged from the ship on which he was voyaging before he was shipwrecked, but he comes as close to it as any product of Western civilization is likely to come. In fact Robinson Crusoe celebrates literal independence and self-sufficiency as an important virtue just when it is starting to decline (Defoe's novel was published in 1719). Crusoe himself, as he sets about making bread, is struck by how ignorant he is of the process.

I neither knew how to grind or make Meal of my corn, or indeed how to clean it and part it, nor if made into Meal, how to make Bread of it, and if how to make it, yet I knew not how to bake it . . . 'tis a little wonderful,

and what I believe few People have thought much upon, (viz.) the strange multitude of little Things necessary in the Providing, Producing, Curing, Dressing, Making and Finishing this one Article of Bread.⁸

In effect, Crusoe's struggle to survive—and eventually thrive—purely by his own wits and labor becomes a metaphor for a different kind of self-sufficiency, the sort that allows individuals to make their own fortune through ingenuity and hard work. The comprehensiveness of his skills and activities—he becomes, among other things, a hunter, a farmer, an animal breeder, a builder, a carpenter, a boat maker, a weaver, a soldier, and a writer—also offers a striking contrast to the specialization and division of labor characteristic of emerging capitalism. For these reasons Crusoe has long been an inspiration to others. In *Emile*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's seminal work on education, the only novel that Emile is allowed to read before the age of twelve is *Robinson Crusoe*, specifically on the grounds that it will help inculcate the virtue of self-sufficiency.⁹ And Thoreau's experiment at Walden can plausibly be viewed as an attempt to re-create for himself, a few miles from home, the conditions of a castaway.

Self-sufficiency is obviously linked to living cheaply, since when you do something for yourself, you don't pay someone else to do it. Consequently, frugality self-help books have always been full of advice on how to brew your own beer, mend your own clothes, extract your own teeth, and so on. But the obvious truth is that most of us living in modernized societies are a million miles from

self-sufficiency. Yes, we might cultivate a vegetable garden, learn how to bake bread, and build a bookcase or two. Such activities are not to be despised; apart from saving money they can be intrinsically rewarding. But unless they add up to a definite lifestyle, we should not kid ourselves that we are doing more than playing at self-sufficiency. Most of us depend on others to build and equip our houses, grow and distribute our food, make our clothes, and provide our entertainment. We rely on a complex infrastructure for energy, transport, communication, and education. And we are hopelessly lost without our cars, phones, computers, stoves, and refrigerators. A new generation is now literally lost without a GPS navigation device.

Some communities, such as the Amish, clearly do achieve a significantly greater degree of self-sufficiency. This is partly in virtue of their general preference for forgoing the use of modern technology. But it is also because, as in *kibbutzim*, monasteries, and other collectives, the Amish work toward communal rather than individual self-sufficiency. Indeed, one reason they are able to manage so well, even farming without tractors or chain saws, and building houses without power tools, is that they can rely on one another to provide the necessary additional labor power. For all that, their horse and buggies may still be seen at times parked outside Walmart.

One further complication in the link between self-sufficiency and simplicity is worth noting. Self-sufficiency may be part of the traditional notion and the Romantic ideal of simple living, but in fairly obvious ways using technology can simplify our lives considerably. Which

is simpler, washing all your clothes and sheets by hand, or using a washing machine? Collecting and chopping wood to make a fire to cook over, or turning on the gas burner and pushing the electric ignition button? Walking across town and back to deliver a message, or making a phone call? The point here is that the concept of simple living contains crosscurrents. Reducing our dependence on infrastructure and technology may bring us closer to simple living in one sense—we are more self-sufficient—but takes us away from it in other ways since it makes basic tasks much more difficult, arduous, and time-consuming. And in some ways technology can even help us to be more self-sufficient, as when we use a washing machine to do our own laundry instead of using servants or sending it out.

BEING CLOSE TO NATURE

Some of the sages who advocate simple living have been resolutely urban, living their entire lives within cities and showing little interest in bonding with nature. But a connection between simplicity and the natural is a long-standing idea affirmed by many philosophers of frugality. The link can be made in several ways, though, depending on how the idea of being close to nature is conceived.

Diogenes the Cynic was one of the first to urge that whatever is natural cannot be bad and so should not be a source of shame. According to some reports he thought nothing of urinating or defecating in public.¹⁰ The Stoics

also prized the natural: according to Marcus Aurelius, “the natural can never be inferior to the artificial.”¹¹ They particularly stressed the importance of living in harmony with nature, of trying to cultivate a state of mind and a way of being that are attuned to the cosmos rather than at odds with it. That is a rather abstract formula, of course, but it can be cashed out, at least in part, as encouraging us to accept rather than oppose or lament the natural order of things. Aging and death, for instance, should be seen as necessary aspects of life, no more to be regretted than the succession of the seasons or the alternation of day and night. The Stoics also pointed out that contemplating and studying nature can be one of life’s greatest pleasures. It is also, happily, the most readily available, open to everyone at all times, even those like Seneca or his fellow Stoic Musonius who found themselves stripped of their wealth and exiled to remote islands.

Contemporary notions of what being close to nature involves have been heavily influenced by the Romantic movement, triggered by the advent of industrialization and increasing urbanization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In response to these trends, the Romantics stressed the importance of remaining in touch both physically and spiritually with the natural world. As Wordsworth succinctly put it:

One impulse from a vernal wood
Can teach you more of man,
Of moral evil, and of good,
Than all the sages can.¹²

But probably the best-known modern example of an individual choosing to live in rustic simplicity, away from the artificiality and sophistication of urban society (and its accompanying expenses), in order to be closer to nature is Henry David Thoreau. In 1845 Thoreau built a small cabin on land owned by his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson close to Walden Pond near Concord, Massachusetts, and lived there for a little over two years. The literary fruit of this experiment in living was *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, a strange combination in one book of memoir, naturalist observations, philosophical reflections, and social commentary. Thoreau’s detractors like to point out that his experiment was slightly less radical than readers of *Walden* might think, since he maintained contact with family and friends throughout his sojourn, often enjoying meals at their houses. But Thoreau does not hide this fact, and just because his experiment in living was not more extreme does not mean it has less interest or value. He was, after all, living more economically, more self-sufficiently, and closer to nature than any of his critics.

One of the things that makes *Walden* memorable and important is Thoreau’s ability to illustrate and articulate—to both show and tell—exactly why living close to nature is a cardinal value for people like himself, and, by implication, why a healthy connection to the natural world would ideally be a feature of every human life. In Thoreau’s view, it is not simply one among many optional sources of pleasure to be chosen from the hedonic buffet counter. To be close to nature is necessary if one is, in Thoreau’s phrase, “to live

deep . . . and suck out all the marrow of life."¹³ *Walden* is punctuated with prose-poetic passages expressing various shades of contentment, pleasure, delight, gratitude, and awe awakened by the sights and sounds of nature, from the rising of the sun to the buzzing of a mosquito. This passage is typical:

Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise til noon, rapt in a revery, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveller's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been.¹⁴

Elsewhere Thoreau explicitly affirms the indispensability of this relationship with the natural world to his own happiness:

I experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object, even for the poor misanthrope and most melancholy man. There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature and has his senses still. There was never yet such a storm but it was Æolian music to a healthy and innocent ear.¹⁵

Thoreau conducted his experiment for only a short period of his life, returning after a sojourn of two years, two months, and two days to spend the rest of his life living with friends in the town of Concord. The reason he gives is that he "had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one."¹⁶ In other words, he had other experiments in living to conduct. But until his death in 1862 he remained an avid naturalist. Working as a land surveyor, he continued to extend and deepen his knowledge of the natural environment around Concord, communicating his observations and reflections through lectures and essays.

Few of us try to emulate Thoreau. But a yearning to be in some way in touch with a natural environment runs deep and expresses itself in many ways. It is one reason why people who live in perfectly comfortable homes choose to go camping. It helps explain the popularity among people who can afford them of second homes or cabins in the country, bucolic retreats where life is simple, clean, and quiet, and of backyard gardening for those whose budgets don't extend quite far enough for a country estate. At the very least, most people will include in their domestic ornamentations a few house plants, or some landscape reproductions, or a Sierra Club calendar.

BEING CONTENT WITH SIMPLE PLEASURES

Not every advocate of frugal simplicity values pleasure. Ascetics and puritans have seen pleasure as a worldly distraction from more important spiritual concerns. The ancient Spartans distrusted its potentially softening influence on the character of warriors in training. But the enjoyment of simple pleasures, and their sufficiency for happiness, has long been central to many philosophers' conception of simple living.

The first and still one of the finest champions of simple pleasures is Epicurus. Born in 341 BCE, Epicurus grew up on Samos, although he was an Athenian citizen. After studying philosophy for several years, he began to teach his own doctrines and develop his own school. In his thirties he bought a piece of land on the outskirts of Athens and lived there contentedly with a group of friends and a few servants for the rest of his life. Unlike Plato and a host of other philosophers, Epicurus and his followers unabashedly affirmed the value of pleasure. Ancient Athenian gossips and scandalmongers thus had a field day spreading rumors about the kinky goings-on at the Epicurean compound, and some of this dirt stuck. The term "epicure" for a long time meant someone devoted to sensual pleasures. Today its primary sense is that of a person of refined gastronomic tastes. Yet both senses misrepresent Epicurus's philosophy. He does indeed say that life is good because it affords the opportunity for pleasure:

I know not how I can conceive the good, if I withdraw the pleasures of taste . . . of love . . . of hearing . . . and the pleasurable emotions caused to sight by beautiful forms.¹⁷

Moreover, Epicurus is no prude: pleasures of the flesh are included in the list of things that make life worth living. So although he is all in favor of simplicity, if he were with us today he would not be ordering a year's supply of Soylent, the "meal replacement" drink created by software engineer Rob Rhinehart, which contains all the nutrients a person needs but which is more or less tasteless. But Epicurus does place some important constraints on the pursuit of pleasures, and generally prefers those that are easily obtained. Like Socrates, he is convinced that only good people can be truly happy, so whatever pleasures we pursue must be compatible with virtue. He also warns against short-term pleasures like gluttony and sexual license that lead eventually to long-term pains.

The simple pleasures that Epicurus especially praises are such things as plain but good food, satisfying work, the contemplation of nature, and friendship. Naturally, different sages rank these differently. As we just saw, Thoreau, living in isolation at Walden, places less store on relationships than on the delight he takes in his natural surroundings. Epicurus, on the other hand, sharing his living quarters and large garden with friends and disciples, holds that "of all the things which wisdom provides for the happiness of the whole life, by far the most important is the acquisition of friendship."¹⁸

For someone devoted to pleasure Epicurus seems to have been remarkably hardworking. He wrote a prolific number of works, including a treatise on nature that ran to thirty-seven papyrus rolls, although, sadly, few of his writings have survived. But the paradox is only apparent. Philosophical reflection is itself a simple pleasure for those who find it pleasurable, since it requires few resources and can be practiced by anyone at any time.

Epicurus died aged seventy-two, cheerful to the last, even though he spent his final days in considerable pain from kidney stones and dysentery. According to his philosophy, pain is generally bad, but it is not to be feared, since if mild it is bearable, and if severe it is usually short-lived, as it was in his case. Nor is death to be feared: it is simply a return to nonexistence, a trouble-free condition. Underlying Epicurus's outlook on life is a strong sentiment of gratitude, both for life itself, which provides opportunities for pleasure, and for the fact that the best pleasures—the simple ones—are so easily obtained. His character and his philosophy are captured rather nicely in a surviving fragment from one of his letters. "Send me some preserved cheese," he writes to a friend, "that when I like I may have a feast."¹⁹

ASCETICISM

Asceticism is simple living taken seriously, often for moral or religious reasons. Ascetics deny themselves worldly comforts and physical pleasures. The word comes from the Greek *askesis*, which means exercise or training, and was

used to describe the regime practiced by athletes getting ready for a competition. Since ancient times asceticism has been one significant form of simple living, and many religious groups have embraced asceticism to varying degrees. Jains, for instance, traditionally possess very little, wear few clothes, and sleep without blankets. Asceticism has been integral to many strains of Hinduism and Buddhism throughout their history, and has also been taught and practiced by various Christian sects and monastic communities.²⁰ Carthusian monks, for instance, occupy simple rooms where they spend most of their time in solitude, forgoing even the pleasures of conversation. Judaism and Islam, however, have generally viewed the more extreme forms of asceticism negatively on the grounds that they express a rejection of God's gifts, even though both religions warn against materialism, and revered figures like Muhammad and Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidic Judaism, are admired for their simple lifestyles.

Sometimes ascetics go beyond merely renouncing worldly pleasures like sex, fine food, or cultural entertainments, and deliberately induce discomfort through measures such as fasting, wearing hair shirts, or attaching heavy chains to their legs. Here the purpose is usually to help direct one's attention away from the world and toward more spiritual concerns (although there is always the danger that one might fall into a sort of competitive asceticism, where the extent of one's renunciation becomes a matter of pride). Self-denial has also been viewed and used as a form of penance, a path to enlightenment, and a method of cultivating particular virtues such as hardiness and resilience.

Famous ascetics include the Jainist reformer Mahavira, Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha), John the Baptist, Francis of Assisi, Gandhi, and Tolstoy (in his later years). Few modern Western philosophers have taught or practiced serious asceticism, but quite a few have exhibited decidedly ascetic tendencies, among them Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein. The latter inherited a vast fortune but gave it away to his siblings, from whom he then refused financial assistance, and favored rigorously austere accommodations, partly, it seems, from an innate puritanical streak and partly because he felt this was most conducive to intensely focused thinking. Nietzsche, retiring in his thirties from a professorship at Basel owing to ill health, had no inheritance to fall back on. He eked out a humble existence on a meager pension, renting sparsely furnished rooms in small boardinghouses, during which time he wrote about “ascetic ideals,” by which he meant modes of living and evaluating that in some way renounce this world and its joys. His conclusion that philosophers tend to embrace ascetic ideals because they recognize in them conditions that favor their own flourishing was presumably based, to some degree, on self-observation.²¹

In particular times and places asceticism has been surprising popular—among the Puritans, for instance—and occasionally its promotion has even been state policy, as in ancient Sparta. Today, in modernized societies, severe asceticism is practiced only here and there by small groups or by isolated individuals. But we can perceive surviving traces of an ethic of self-denial in our everyday world, as

when we describe some luxury or gastronomic delight as “sinful,” or enjoy humor that rests on the premise that pleasures like sex or drinking alcohol are matters to be spoken of guiltily in whispers and euphemisms. For the most part, though, asceticism is thoroughly out of fashion nowadays. Vast amounts are spent by advertisers selling comfort, luxury, and sensory enjoyment, and the market for these items appears robust.

PHYSICAL OR SPIRITUAL PURITY

The idea of adopting a lifestyle that one considers clean or pure may sometimes be the motive behind asceticism, but it is nevertheless a distinct notion. The purity in question can be moral/spiritual, involving, say, the avoidance of certain sins or temptations such as covetousness, envy, pride, sexual license, or causing injury to others. Or it might be a more physically grounded notion, satisfied, perhaps, by wearing simple garb, eschewing ornamentation, shaving one’s head, and avoiding foods thought to be unclean. Very often, of course, these physical measures symbolically express an inner purity that is typically taken to be more important. This idea comes through in the well-known hymn “Simple Gifts,” in which lines like

When true simplicity is gained
To bow and to bend we shan’t be ashamed

link simplicity of lifestyle with unconcern for the opinions of the world (which tended to mock the Shakers’ dancing).

While the idea of clean or pure living may overlap with some of the other senses of simple living, it can also be at odds with them, just as the project of trying to be self-sufficient by eschewing technology can in one sense simplify and in another sense complicate one's lifestyle. Thus the ancient Pythagoreans, who aspired after purity, supposedly would not eat beans, or certain kinds of fish, or food that had fallen on the floor. Yet growing your own beans is so cheap, easy, and beneficial that it has become almost emblematic of the simple life. It is what W. B. Yeats imagines himself doing after he has arisen and gone to Innisfree to live in a cabin "of clay and wattles made."²² It is what Thoreau actually spent much of his time doing at Walden. As for not eating what has fallen from the table—that particular commandment will be positively shocking to tightwads everywhere who typically operate with a "five-second rule" rather than see good food go to waste.

LIVING ACCORDING TO A FIXED ROUTINE

Obviously, following a strict routine is compatible with a luxurious lifestyle. One could begin each day with a caviar breakfast, run through a fixed schedule of expensive pleasures, and retire each evening after bathing in warmed goat's milk. But quite often, when people describe themselves as living simply, or when they say they would prefer a lifestyle simpler than the one they have, at least part of what they have in mind is the simplicity of order and regularity. It is the felt absence of these that can sometimes

make parenting and traveling stressful—doubly so when these are combined!

A strict regimen is, of course, a noteworthy feature of life in a monastery, where it helps serve the general purpose of allowing the monks to focus their minds on what they believe matters most. No mental energy is expended on deliberations about what to wear, what to eat, where to go, what to do, or when to do it. The benefits can be significant, and go beyond just clearing one's day of distractions. As recent research in psychology suggests, the stress of making decisions, even small ones, can drain our willpower, while putting things on autopilot helps conserve it.²³

Of course, there are institutions other than monasteries that also impose on the inmates a strict regimen: military barracks and prisons, for instance. Most people would not embrace the sort of lifestyle simplification such environments enforce, just as most people do not join monastic orders. We value the freedoms that life on the outside permits us, even if these bring anxieties too. Yet we recognize the advantages of routine, especially those of us fortunate enough to enjoy a reasonable amount of leisure. The nineteenth-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer goes so far as to claim that "the greatest possible simplicity in our relations and even monotony in our way of living will make us happy, as long as they do not produce boredom."²⁴ By all accounts Schopenhauer practiced what he preached. After settling in Frankfurt in 1833, where he lived for the last twenty-seven years of his life, he emulated his hero Kant in following a strict daily regimen: breakfast; write for three hours; play the flute for one hour; lunch at the

Englischer Hof; coffee and conversation; afternoons in the reading room of the Casino Society, followed by constitutional walk with poodle; evening spent at home reading.²⁵ It is not clear that this made Schopenhauer happy. He was, after all, a card-carrying philosophical pessimist with curmudgeonly tendencies. But it probably made him happier than he would otherwise have been. Many of us willingly submit to routines, or impose them on ourselves, and being buffeted out of them by the busyness of events can be stressful enough to produce a longing for the attractions of order and regularity, even where these are purchased by sacrificing freedom and choice.

AESTHETIC SIMPLICITY

For some people simplicity is an aesthetic value, so one further sense that might be attached to the notion of simple living is a preference for an uncomplicated, uncluttered living environment. Imagine, for instance, an apartment with white walls, white trim, bare wood floors, simple wooden furniture, plain white kitchenware, white towels in the bathroom, and white blankets on the simple wooden beds. Or a house where the brick walls and overhead beams are left exposed, the furniture is rustic, and any artwork on display is clearly local and amateurish. Or a study containing nothing but a desk and a chair. All these are interiors that people deliberately create for themselves.

Simplicity of this sort is not necessarily frugal. The uncluttered apartment could be in the center of Paris; the plain wooden furniture might be custom-made. Wittgenstein

designed a house in Vienna for his sister Margaret characterized by austere, almost minimalist aesthetic lines, yet built with no concern for cost. But although such setups may not be cheap, they make no exhibition of expense. And the styles have symbolic significance. They bespeak sympathy with the plain, the unpretentious, the unostentatious. They connote honesty, purity, and a mind focused on essentials. In the case of country retreats, closeness to nature may also be sought and expressed. Fallingwater, the famous country home in Pennsylvania that Frank Lloyd Wright designed for the Kaufmann family, beautifully illustrates some of these notions, including the point that aesthetic simplicity can be pricey: the house cost the Kaufmanns \$155,000 in 1937, which translates to over \$2.3 million in 2010 dollars.

Fiscal prudence, living cheaply, self-sufficiency, being close to nature, contenting oneself with simple pleasures, asceticism, routine, and aesthetic austerity: these are the main senses and associations attached to the concept of simple living. Some are obviously more closely linked than others to the idea of frugality: living cheaply is an essential part of the notion, while aesthetic simplicity is connected to it in a more marginal way. These different senses can be separated out, but they are naturally associated and in many cases overlap with or imply one another. Home vegetable gardeners eat more cheaply by increasing their self-sufficiency in a way that yields the simpler pleasures attendant on being more in touch with nature. Religiously oriented communities have sought spiritual

purity by embracing an ascetic lifestyle, following strict daily routines, and working to make themselves largely self-sufficient in an aesthetically austere environment. Sometimes, though, forms of simplicity can conflict. Diogenes may have lived cheaply, but as a beggar he hardly exemplifies self-sufficiency.

Simplicity has additional associations, of course. In his essay “On Simplicity,” Ben Franklin is especially interested in praising unaffectedness in speech and manners; and he takes it for granted that these qualities are fostered by a simple lifestyle.

In the first Ages of the World, when Men had no Wants but what were purely natural, before they had refin'd upon their Necessities, and Luxury and Ambition had introduced a Thousand fantastik Forms of Happiness, Simplicity was the Dress and Language of the World, as Nature was its Law.²⁶

Although Franklin himself was from first to last an urbanite, he strongly linked affectation with the city and honesty with the countryside. “What Relief do we find,” he writes, “in the simple and unaffected Dialogues of uncorrupted Peasants, after the tiresome Grimace of the Town!”²⁷ Many others, though, have conceived of peasant life less flatteringly as characterized by ignorance, crudeness, and even simplemindedness—all decidedly negative associations.

Because the notion of simple living has multiple meanings, it is not possible to make any straight comparative assessment of how simply anyone is living compared to

someone else. We always have to specify what senses of the term are intended, and, as we noted earlier, the concept is relative to time, place, and culture. Montaigne observes that when the general practice among Romans was to bathe before dinner in water and perfume, to say one lived simply meant that one bathed in just water.²⁸ Yet for some people, even bathing in water would be viewed as luxurious.

The various sages mentioned in passing serve not only to exemplify one or more forms of frugal or simple living but also to illustrate the fact that this idea has occupied an important place in intellectual history. It has been explicitly discussed and defended by philosophers, moralists, and religious teachers since ancient times, and to this day remains linked in many people's minds with virtue and wisdom. In the next two chapters we will examine in more detail the main arguments that have been given for favoring the life of frugal simplicity. We will then be in a better position to consider to what extent these arguments still hold good today or have been rendered obsolete by the great social and technological revolutions that have transformed the world in the modern era.