even criminal, remedies; some important values, like truth or scientific progress, may require considerable expenditures for their realization; and while excessive indulgence in luxury and extravagance may constitute what some would criticize as a "shallower" form of existence, the precise meaning of and justification for this sort of claim is hard to spell out. These criticisms, doubts, reservations, and qualifications certainly don't constitute a refutation of the idea that simplicity is more likely than luxury to foster virtue, but they do indicate that the connections between it and desirable character traits are probabilistic rather than necessary.

CHAPTER 3

Why Simple Living Is Thought to Make Us Happier

As already noted, the distinction between moral and prudential reasons for praising simple living is neither sharp nor essential. Many of the philosophers who advocate simple living belong to the tradition of virtue ethics; in their view, the qualities and practices that make us better people and those that make us happier (in the rich sense of self-realization) will generally be the same. Nevertheless, modern philosophy typically does recognize a distinction here, and we have used it to help distinguish and clarify the precise nature of the arguments in favor of simple living that we are considering.

The prudential arguments to be examined here, like the moral arguments discussed in the previous chapter, are far from new. In Western philosophy most of them were first put forward more than two thousand years ago, particularly by Epicurean and Stoic thinkers; have been regularly

endorsed by a host of medieval and modern writers; and continue to be rehearsed today in any number of self-help books advocating frugal simplicity.

A basic premise of all these arguments is that happiness is a good thing, something that virtually every human being naturally desires for its own sake. This is the view defended by Aristotle, by John Stuart Mill, and by countless other philosophers, both ancient and modern. Here and there one encounters dissenting voices, such as Nietzsche or Dostoyevsky, but what they say either applies only to a tiny minority, or confuses "desires happiness" with "desires *only* happiness," or with "desires happiness *above all other things*." The assumption that happiness is valuable is one that most people will readily accept. Our concern here is with the various reasons that philosophers have given for thinking that living simply increases the likelihood that one will be happy.

SIMPLE LIVING PROMOTES VIRTUE, WHICH PROMOTES HAPPINESS

In the previous chapter we looked at several reasons for believing that living simply is morally beneficial. That idea constitutes the first premise of this argument. The second premise, that morally good people will be happier in virtue of their virtue, was also discussed at the beginning of that chapter. Some have supported it by invoking a notion of cosmic justice: the law of karma, or the divine dispensation of rewards and punishments, in either this life or the next. Others have argued that moral virtue in and by

itself will naturally bring happiness in its train. Plato, for instance, argues that the moral integrity of the virtuous individual constitutes a sort of inner harmony, which he contrasts with the disharmony exhibited by the wicked. Since a person cannot fail, at some level, to experience this internal condition, the virtuous will be fundamentally content, while those who lack virtue will be unavoidably dissatisfied. Plato's conclusion is endorsed by most of the classical thinkers who came after him. The Stoics in particular insistently emphasize the supreme importance of moral virtue over all other good things. Thus Marcus Aurelius, echoing Socrates, insists that the only real harm one can ever suffer is harm to one's character,[1] while Seneca asserts that "virtue per se is sufficient for a happy life."[2]

Hard-bitten cynics may think it easy to dismiss all this as a kind of wishful thinking. But in fact this view—that good people should nearly always be considered more fortunate than those who lack the moral virtues—is very plausible. Compare two people: Jill, who genuinely feels pleasure at a colleague's success, and Jane, who feels intense pleasure at a colleague's failure. Who would you prefer to be? Most of us will of course opt to be Jill. An obvious reason for this is that we view her as the nicer person. But what if we put aside moral considerations? We grant that Jill is the more admirable person, but who do we think it is pleasanter to be? Plato's thinking suggests that Jill's condition is also the more enviable. One obvious reason is that, being a nicer person, she is likely to have more friends, to have better friends, to be more confident of their affection, and to enjoy relationships not sullied

by resentment. But a subtler reason, not so easy to articulate, is that Jill's generous-spirited pleasure in another person's good fortune is superior to—and not just in moral terms—the mean-spirited enjoyment of a colleague's failure. Of course, it is not easy to abstract this sense of nonmoral superiority from its moral trappings. It is not a matter of the intensity or duration of the pleasure. But it is perhaps captured fairly well by Plato's metaphor of inner harmony, a metaphor that extends beyond any particular moment of pleasure to take in the person's total experience. Self-centered, cruel, mean-spirited individuals are never at ease with—in harmony with—themselves or the world, which is why they can never achieve lasting contentment. Generous spirits, by contrast, experience less conflict between what they in fact feel and what at least some part of them thinks they should feel; furthermore, there is less disharmony between what they experience as their inner reality and the way they present themselves to the world.

SIMPLE LIVING ALLOWS ONE TO WORK LESS AND ENJOY MORE LEISURE

The more frugally you live, the less money you will need and the more you are likely to save. Either way, this will reduce your need to work, thereby increasing your leisure time, and hence your happiness. The reasoning is straightforward. It is interesting, though, to consider how work, leisure, and their relation to happiness have been variously conceived within the philosophical tradition we are

examining, and worth asking to what extent the critical attitude toward work within that tradition remains relevant today.

The idea of leisure carries more than one sense or association. A leisured life could be thought of as essentially indolent: one rises late and spends the afternoon lounging in the pool sipping margaritas. Or it can suggest more active forms of recreation: "leisure activities" such as sports, games, gardening, participation in the arts, trekking in the Andes, and so on. What these have in common is freedom from work, particularly the work that one does out of the need to make a living. To be sure, we draw a contrast between leisure and work even when a person has sufficient means to live without working, or when the work is precisely what he or she would choose to do anyway. In these cases we are thinking of leisure as recreational time. But the fundamental meaning of leisure, a notion that goes back to the ancient Greeks, is time in which one is free to choose what one does, free from having to do work that is a chore, a mere means to an end. For Aristotle, leisure in this sense is a precondition of the good life, since it is obvious that freely chosen activities engaged in for their own sake—for instance, study, sport, or conversation—are more enjoyable and fulfilling than work we undertake out of necessity or simply to secure something else, such as a paycheck.

While leisure is almost universally viewed positively, attitudes toward work have varied greatly over time and between different cultures. The upper classes in most societies have usually looked down on it. To not have to

work for a living is what traditionally distinguished them from the rest of society; so they viewed being compelled to work as a misfortune, and most manual work as somewhat shameful in the sense that one would feel shame at being reduced to it. This is the view that is shared, for instance, by the upper echelons of society in ancient Greece, in pre-revolutionary China, and in nineteenth-century Europe. But it is far from universal. Judaism, Islam, and Christianity all officially respect and encourage honest labor. Work is encouraged as a means to avoid want, since as the Bible tells, "He who tills his land shall have bread and to spare."[3] Even members of the leisured classes may come to endorse a work ethic to some extent and give themselves work to do—supervision of estates, public service, charitable work, or arts and crafts—since "an idle mind is the devil's workshop."

Today we continually and confusingly receive both messages. Hard work is touted in every school as the key to success, supermarkets hail the "employee of the week," and among working people at every social and professional level it is far more common to hear people boasting about how hard they work than about how much free time they enjoy. Yet out of the other side of its mouth our society still holds before us as the ultimate prize the dream of becoming one of the fortunate few who, through luck, daring, intelligence, or toil, no longer need to work but can relax and recreate. Obviously, both messages can be used to serve the economic system. Owners of capital who employ others to produce goods and services that are sold for a profit benefit from people believing both that a hard

worker is a good person and that the good life primarily involves making and spending money.

Champions of frugal simplicity typically prize leisure highly. There are some, though, who are suspicious of it. The ancient Greek poet Hesiod, opposing the contempt of the upper classes for labor, declares that it is idleness, not work, that is shameful.[4] The Rule of St. Benedict states that since "idleness is the enemy of the soul," the brethren should occupy themselves with manual labor and devout reading.[5] Ben Franklin, who considers any time spent unproductively as time wasted, warns that "trouble springs from idleness, and grievous toil from needless ease."[6]

At the other extreme are those who positively celebrate pure inactivity.

> What is this life if, full of care,
> We have no time to stand and stare?[7]

asks the tramp poet, W. H. Davies. Wordsworth defends sitting dreamily alone on a stone for half a day by claiming

> That we can feed this mind of ours
> In a wise passiveness.[8]

And Thoreau, in a passage cited earlier, positively boasts of doing nothing all day except sitting in the sun and staring at his pond. In fact, though, most advocates of idleness still tend to see it as good *for* something. Even Wordsworth, when sitting on a stone, is "feeding" his mind. Inactivity recharges one's batteries; it makes possible appreciation of the present moment; it helps one be receptive to whatever is interesting, beautiful, or

instructive in one's immediate surroundings. Philosophers, naturally enough, praise inactivity for facilitating reflection. Seneca, for instance, is scathing about the "antlike existence" of the majority, whose lives of "restless indolence" allow no time for reflection. The only people really at leisure," he argues, "are those who take time for philosophy."

In modern times the work ethic has had plenty of critics; indeed, there is a distinguished tradition of writing in this vein, most of it directed at exposing the folly of overwork while reestablishing the value of leisure. Paul Lafargue, writing in the late nineteenth century, criticized the way that well-intentioned labor movement slogans about "the right to work" and "the dignity of labor" were effectively preaching values that ultimately serve the interests of the bourgeoisie rather than those of the working class. Work, he says in *The Right to Be Lazy*, should be nothing more than "a mere condiment to the pleasures of idleness."[9] Bertrand Russell echoes this sentiment. "The morality of work is the morality of slaves," he writes, "and the modern world has no need of slavery."[10] The work ethic is outmoded, Russell argues, because laborsaving technology should make it possible for us to satisfy all our needs while greatly reducing the hours spent performing uninteresting and unfulfilling tasks. From now on, therefore, "the road to happiness and prosperity lies in an organized diminution of work." John Maynard Keynes predicted and welcomed this development, which he thought would naturally come about as a result of increased productivity and economic growth. More recently, Bob Black and Alain de Botton

have sounded similar themes in supporting a new revolutionary imperative: "Workers of the world, relax!"[11]

Very often, of course, these critics of work and champions of leisure are themselves highly productive individuals. You don't produce an epic like Wordsworth's *The Prelude* or win the Nobel Prize for literature, as Russell did, or crank out a shelf load of books after the fashion of Lafargue or Botton, without working hard. But this paradox is only apparent. What they criticize is work that one is *forced* to do; their own "work" is simply the worthwhile and fulfilling activity to which they devote their leisure time. Lafargue and his ilk do not insist that everyone use their leisure productively; like Baudelaire, they see loafing as a valid way of living. But others are more judgmental. Schopenhauer, for instance, is fulsome in his praise of leisure, seeing it as one of life's greatest goods since it allows a person "to exercise his pre-eminent quality, whatever it is," and doing this constitutes happiness. Yet he is scathing about "mere idlers" and "contemptible loafers" who have material wealth enough to be leisured but insufficient mental resources to use their free time well; instead of achieving happiness, he sneers, this type will simply be bored.[12]

There are various routes to a life of leisure, understood as freedom from necessary (and therefore oppressive) labor. The most farsighted people take the simplest path and make sure they are born into money. Others, through luck, shrewdness, or both manage to marry money, but this is not always easy; if it were, Jane Austen's novels would be much shorter and less interesting. For the majority,

though, there are two main paths to independence. One can accumulate enough to obviate the need to work, or one can practice frugality and thereby reduce the amount of work required to meet one's needs. These are not mutually exclusive, of course. Ben Franklin consistently advocates both, since the less that industrious people spend, the sooner they will accumulate plenty: "a penny saved is a penny earned." But frugal sages generally favor the second option. When Seneca observes that "even poverty can transform itself into wealth by applying thrift,"[13] he means that if we learn to make shift and be content with relatively little, we will not lack anything of real value that the rich enjoy because of their wealth. The first route—accumulate! accumulate!—has the disadvantage that it typically involves a huge initial investment of time spent with one's nose to the grindstone. Moreover, as noted in the previous chapter, it carries the very real danger that one will acquire, in addition to riches, habits of acquisitiveness and covetousness, that one will come to so enjoy the pleasurable sensation of making money, and so cherish the purchasing power money brings, that it becomes hard to step off the treadmill.

There is, though, an obvious third option: find work that both pays the bills and is inherently rewarding. Until recent times this would have seemed a rather remote possibility to most people. Work was what you were forced to do out of necessity; enjoyable and fulfilling activities were what you engaged in, if ever, during your leisure hours, when you were not working. This would have been true for most slaves, serfs, peasants, and servants since ancient

times. And with the advent of industrial capitalism, the contrast became even more extreme. Marx, in his 1844 writings on alienated labor, was one of the first to analyze this:

> The worker . . . only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His labour is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced labour*. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labour is shunned like the plague.[14]

This is still the situation of many workers, especially those doing the most poorly paid jobs. But it is also true that, compared to Marx's time, many more people today expect, seek, and find work that in one way or another is reasonably pleasant and fulfilling.

This last claim will doubtless strike some as Pollyannish. Alain de Botton, for instance, holds that "a few jobs are certainly fulfilling, but the majority are not and never can be." So we should maintain, he urges, "a firm belief in the necessary misery of life [that] was for centuries one of mankind's most important assets, a bulwark against bitterness," and remember that "work is often more bearable when we don't, in addition to money, expect it always to deliver happiness."[15] But Botton exaggerates when he says that only a few jobs are fulfilling. Surely, the truth today is that many are, many are not, and many are fulfilling

in some ways and to some extent. Hardly anyone enjoys boring, unskilled, repetitive, poorly paid work that takes place in lousy conditions, is not socially valued, and satisfies no social need. But people can and do derive considerable satisfaction from work in which they exercise skills, help others, and serve purposes they consider important, and through which they make friends, socialize, construct an identity, and feel themselves to be a participant in the world at large. The fact that they would not do it if they were not paid does not mean that their work is properly or adequately described as nothing but an oppressive burden of alienating activity. Since most people have to earn enough to live on, if their work were unpaid then no matter how much they enjoyed it, they would be forced to find some other means of livelihood. Nor does the feeling of relief experienced at the end of the day or the end of the week prove much. We feel relief at the conclusion of freely chosen tasks too: digging a garden, hosting a birthday party, attending a meeting, writing a poem. For many people, the reason work is irksome is not because of its inherent nature but because they have to do it rather more than they would like to: five days a week instead of three; fifty weeks a year instead of thirty.

The opposition between work (what one must do to earn a living) and leisure activities (which are freely chosen because they are inherently satisfying) has always been, and still is, quite sharp for many people. But for a much larger number of people than in the past, especially in affluent societies, the contrast has become less sharp, most obviously where working conditions have improved,

hours have been reduced, and the work itself requires skills that make it interesting and enjoyable. Thus, while living frugally can certainly loosen the yoke of necessity that binds one to a job, and while not *having* to work for a living still appeals to almost everyone, the ideal of simply belonging to and recreating with the leisured classes is no longer the primary dream that our culture holds before our eyes. It has been displaced, to a considerable extent, by the ideal of a working life spent immersed in fulfilling activity, where one is paid for doing what one enjoys doing. Graduation speakers never advise the graduating seniors to "get out there, find a way to make a quick buck if you can, and then retire." The message is always, rather, "pursue your passion and make a difference." Today, the people many consider most fortunate are not heirs to millions or lottery winners, but those who have a clear sense of their calling and enthusiastically devote their life to it: the scientist, artist, scholar, artisan, entrepreneur, teacher, entertainer, mechanic, or service-provider—all those whose work is their passion. Botton and others may argue that the ideal of work as a primary source of fulfillment is an unrealistic and sugarcoated myth, just an updated version of the work ethic, peddled so that the workers will come to hear the clank of their chains as music. But that position is hard to justify. It is not very plausible to suppose that most of those who claim to find their work somewhat satisfying are suffering from false consciousness.

Nevertheless, the basic argument that living frugally can reduce the need to work and thereby increase leisure time remains sound. And from the perspective of those

who live contentedly in this way, the spectacle of people working frenetically for many years just in order to afford the trappings of affluence—second homes, expensive meals out, exotic vacations, and so on—is puzzling. Often, the puzzlement is appropriate. Exactly what is the point of working round the clock buying and selling credit derivatives in order to add another million dollars to the tens of millions one has already made? Sam Volk, a former hedge-fund trader on Wall Street who eventually quit to start a nonprofit organization devoted to helping the poor, believes that such people are "wealth addicts" whose compulsive behavior, distorted perceptions, and forms of self-deception are comparable to what one observes in people suffering from drug or food addictions.[16]

However, two qualifications to the basic argument are in order. First, we have to recognize that individuals often have little choice about how hard they work. Many, just to make ends meet or in order to work in their preferred field, are forced to work harder and longer than they would like. Frugality is not a silver bullet. When wages are low, even working two jobs may not bring in enough to cover the basic costs of even a modest modern lifestyle. And as Barbara Ehrenreich documents in *Nickel and Dimed*,[17] sometimes being poor makes living cheaply more difficult. People who don't have a month's rent in advance, for instance, may be forced to live in a motel where they will pay more for their accommodation than if they were able to secure an apartment.

A second qualification is that in twenty-first-century industrialized societies, work is much less of a curse for many people than it used to be in the days of Aristotle, or, for that matter, of Marx. To be sure, there are still millions working at jobs they dislike for low pay, and for them the opposition between work and leisure remains absolute. But there are millions more who, instead of scratching out an existence as impoverished peasants, or laboring in dark satanic mills, or toiling as slaves, now have somewhat meaningful, adequately paid work in reasonably pleasant conditions that provides several important benefits apart from the pay—friendships, social engagement, routine, and self-respect—that go quite a long way toward compensating for the loss of leisure. (Housework, too, is far less onerous than it used to be when children were many, appliances few, and husbands who did the dishes nonexistent.) Moreover, the idea of the good life as one spent enthusiastically immersed in work that constitutes one's calling has been widely embraced. The idea is not new, of course, and there have always been a few lucky people whose lives meet this description. What is new, though, is the huge expansion of educational and vocational opportunities, especially since the Second World War, that has made the dream of finding work that is inherently fulfilling less of a fantasy for ordinary people than it used to be.

SATISFYING BASIC NEEDS SUFFICES FOR HAPPINESS

The claim that simple living is the surest path to happiness obviously rests on a certain conception of happiness. At the heart of this conception, at least for most of the frugal sages, is the idea that happiness requires only that we satisfy our basic needs and desires. This view is common

to Epicureans and Stoics and to the many influenced by them. As Epicurus says: "Thanks be to blessed Nature, because she has made what is necessary easy to supply, and what is not easy unnecessary."[18] The refrain is picked up by Seneca. Writing to his mother to console her on his being exiled in Corsica, he tells her, "Nature intended that no great equipment should be necessary for happiness; each of us is in a position to make himself happy."[19] Boethius, in prison, awaiting execution, writes:

> If you wish only to satisfy your needs—and that is all Nature requires—there is no need to seek an excess from Fortune. Nature is content with few and little: if you try to press superfluous additions upon what is sufficient for Nature, your bounty will become sickening if not harmful.[20]

Twelve centuries later, Thoreau sounds the same theme in *Walden*. As he puts it, with characteristic charm, "While I enjoy the friendship of the seasons, nothing can make life a burden to me."[21] Indeed, Thoreau's experiment in living is, among other things, an attempt to demonstrate existentially the sufficiency of basic necessities for a fulfilling way of life. But perhaps the core of Epicurus's prescription was given its definitive expression in the twentieth century by the philosopher Baloo in Walt Disney's *The Jungle Book*, when he sang in praise of "the simple bare necessities" provided by "Old Mother Nature's recipes."

Just what counts as "necessary" for a satisfactory life is obviously a matter on which reasonable people can disagree. Jean Kazez, for instance, in her reflections on this

question, includes happiness, morality, autonomy, and knowledge, all of which would probably be endorsed by both Epicureans and Stoics, but also throws in self-expression and personal development or progress, which seem to be more modern values, while not including friendship.[22] There is also a possible distinction to be drawn between simply being happy and living a satisfactory or fulfilling life, but pursuing this here would take us too far afield since it is not really one that the ancients made.

The thesis that to be happy we have only to satisfy our basic needs is most appealing. Yet while we may nod approvingly at the wise words of Epicurus and the rest, the way most of us in the modernized world live suggests that we don't really accept their claims, or that we at least have a much-expanded notion of what constitutes our basic needs. Epicurus defends his position, however, with arguments that rest on a fairly sophisticated account of human needs and desires. These are worth examining.

According to Epicurus our natural default condition is pleasurable. Pain is a disturbance of this condition. So to live pleasantly is to be by and large free from physical pains and mental or emotional troubles. The key to such a life is first of all to free oneself from foolish anxieties, such as the fear of death, and second to free oneself from foolish desires, which means those whose satisfaction will not really make us happier.

Epicurus proceeds to distinguish between natural desires (e.g., the desire for food) and nonnatural desires (e.g., the desire to have statues erected in one's honor). This

distinction is suspect, though. Why call any desire nonnatural, given that it arises within a natural being? It is certainly easy, especially after Darwin, to conceive of the desire for glory (statues in one's honor) as having a natural origin: heroes are hot, so they tend to have more sex and make more babies. The problem with Epicurus's use of the terms "natural" and "nonnatural" is that they seem to be intended as descriptions yet also function as evaluations: it is simply a given that the natural is better than the nonnatural. Having made that dubious distinction, he goes on to make an even more dubious assertion: "All that is natural is easy to be obtained," he says, "but that which is superfluous is hard." Prima facie this statement is patently false. Millions who are victims of famine, war, disease, natural disasters, or political oppressions would not consider obtaining things like food, shelter, or security easy; on the other hand, in societies where huge amounts of stuff is produced, acquired, stored in the basement, then thrown away, anyone can gather unlimited superfluous possessions for little or nothing.

Epicurus's distinction between natural and nonnatural desires is thus best put aside. More defensible and relevant is a further distinction he draws between necessary and unnecessary desires. A desire is necessary if failure to satisfy it leads to pain of some sort. Among necessary desires he identifies those essential for life itself (e.g., the desire to escape danger), those necessary for physical comfort (e.g., the desire for protection from the elements), and those required for happiness (e.g., the desire

for companionship). Desires that are not needed for any of these are judged unnecessary.

Epicurus does not despise or repudiate nonnecessary desires such as eating novel foods or listening to music. Satisfying them can diversify our pleasures, and this diversification is itself pleasurable. The original Epicureans in fact held a feast in their garden on the twentieth of each month, showing that they did not confine themselves to enjoying only the bare necessities. Epicurus simply advises us to recognize that pleasures enjoyed through the satisfaction of nonnecessary desires are dispensable; we can be happy without them, so we should avoid being consumed or controlled by a desire for them.

The key idea here, which Epicurus takes from Plato, is to bring our desires under control. Unhappiness results when people become too invested in satisfying nonnecessary desires, especially when, as so often happens, such desires become insatiable. For "nothing satisfies the man who is not satisfied with a little."[23] Exactly how and why desires become insatiable is an interesting question. In *How Much Is Enough?* Robert and Edward Skidelsky hypothesize that a proclivity to always want more is rooted in human nature since it is natural to be always comparing ourselves with others, and we do this by reference to various objects of desire—for instance, wealth, income, power, or honors. In premodern societies this tendency is kept in check by religion and traditional mores. These provide a concept of the good life that sets limits to how much of anything it makes sense for a person to want. But capitalism, they argue, "has inflamed our innate tendency to insatiability by releasing

it from the bounds of custom and religion within which it was formerly confined."[24] It has done this in several ways: through advertising; by encouraging everyone, not just the better off, to compete for status through buying stuff; by pushing an ideology that applauds incessant striving for more; and by "monetizing" the economy—that is, translating the value of everything into how much it yields or will sell for—a shift that encourages people to want money for its own sake. The phenomenon of insatiable desire for more is most apparent in those who already have the most, such as CEOs, vice presidents of corporations, and traders in high finance. These people do not need more money, but their salaries and bonuses matter to them as indicators of status and recognized achievement. As one of them remarked, money is "just a way of keeping score."[25] Interestingly, two thousand years before the advent of capitalism, Plato observed that, more than any other desire, the lust for money tends toward insatiability.[26]

According to Epicurus, the way to avoid being plagued by insatiable desires is to cultivate an attitude of gratitude: "We should not spoil what we have by desiring what we have not, but remember that what we have too was the gift of fortune."[27] This certainly sounds sensible, and Epicurus's injunctions have been echoed by countless sages since. But they should not be accepted uncritically. Three problems are worth mentioning.

First, one could argue that insatiable desire, far from being a recipe for unhappiness, is precisely what drives some people to attain higher, more intense, or more expansive forms of happiness. People who seek and secure high

political office, great wealth, a Nobel Prize, an Olympic gold medal, or a fabulous art collection may, it is true, never still the inner restlessness that drives them onward and upward. In that sense they remain unsatisfied. But they could also claim to experience levels and kinds of satisfaction (happiness) unknown to those who are "satisfied with a little." Here we once again encounter a clash between two conceptions of happiness reminiscent of the debate between Socrates and Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias* described earlier. One side identifies happiness with the state of being free from troubles; the other side identifies it with the continuous process of striving, getting, and striving for more. Instead of assuming that one of these conditions typically makes a person more happy than the other, we might consider the possibility that there are different kinds of happiness, and individuals would be well advised to pursue the kind that is best suited to their circumstances and personality.

Second, the warning against insatiable desires makes more sense with respect to some desires, less sense with respect to others. It seems most reasonable when the object of desire is something like territorial conquests, wealth, power, fame, glory, influence, sex, expensive art objects, fancy clothes, sports cars, and so on. But what if the object of desire is knowledge, understanding, artistic satisfaction, the eradication of a disease, or the elimination of injustice? Is the fact that these desires cannot be finally satisfied a reason for reining them in? Isaac Newton famously lamented that his quest for insight into the nature of things could be compared to the actions of a boy playing on the

seashore "whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me." Would it have been better for him to have kept his desire for understanding in check so as to avoid this abiding feeling of disappointment? The accomplished and acclaimed novelist Zadie Smith offers this advice to fellow writers: "Resign yourself to the lifelong sadness that comes from never being satisfied."[28] Should she, instead, advise her readers never to even try?

This argument can be taken in two ways. One way is to see it as supporting the previous objection: there are kinds of pleasure and happiness that are invariably tied to feelings of dissatisfaction, and the Epicurean guidelines fail to appreciate this. The other way is to see it as placing a question mark against the prioritizing of happiness. The insatiable desire of Newton for understanding, of Beethoven for adequate artistic expression, of Shackleton for adventure, or of Harriet Tubman for justice may not have brought them happiness; it may even have interfered with their capacity to be happy. But such examples remind us that happiness may not always be a rational person's primary goal.

A third problem with Epicurus's thesis that happiness requires only the satisfaction of our basic needs is that the notion of "basic needs" is unstable because it is historically and culturally relative. In premodern times, and in some societies today, a person might well be satisfied with being safe, healthy, comfortable, well fed, and befriended. But in most contemporary societies, and certainly in modernized, industrially developed countries, anyone who had *nothing but* these goods would be classified as seriously

impoverished. In a country like the United States, even people of relatively modest means are likely to have much more: car, TV, radio, music system, phone, camera, washer, microwave, running hot water, flush toilet, books, games, toys, pictures, ornaments, pets, kitchen gadgets, jewelry, best clothes, best crockery, sports equipment, plus any amount of unspecified junk that mysteriously accumulates in the garage and which one hopes will eventually go to a better home following the yard sale.

There are, of course, people who are so poor that they have little or none of this sort of stuff. And there are communities like the Amish, as well as individuals who opt to live "off the grid" or who accept blogger Dave Bruno's "100 thing challenge"[29] and deliberately choose to do without the conveniences and accoutrements that others take for granted. But it remains an obvious truth that most of us living in the modern world do not think we would be happy with nothing beyond Epicurus's "bare necessities." We may be wrong about this, of course. As psychologist Daniel Gilbert has persuasively argued, we are often extraordinarily bad at predicting what will make us happy.[30] But there are some plausible reasons for thinking the way we do.

First, as the patterns of social life change, so does our notion of what counts as a necessity. This is obviously related to the point just made about the relativity of "basic needs," but it is important to see that the change is not just in our way of thinking. We now view hot running water as a basic necessity; not so long ago it would have been thought a luxury. But the reason is not simply that we have become used to our creature comforts and have therefore

raised the bar on what counts as necessary. Social expectations change too, and those who don't change in accordance with them pay a price. People who, lacking access to hot running water and a washing machine, wash themselves and their clothes with merely medieval frequency, are likely to find themselves short of friends and unemployed. To not have a phone in a modern society is to be cut off from the world just as much as if one were housebound in an earlier time. Many jobs require one to drive, and for people without access to good public transport, a car can also be indispensable for shopping and visiting friends. As Jerome Segal argues in *Graceful Simplicity*:

> Exactly what goods and services are required to meet a given need is not something that is fixed. . . . It is not that new needs are being dreamed up. The needs remain the same, but the commodity specification, the goods and services required to meet long-standing needs, changes rapidly.[31]

Segal supports this claim by considering in detail what is typically required in late twentieth-century America to meet one's basic needs for economic security, housing, transportation, food, health care, clothing, and education. It is precisely because meeting these needs now requires one to spend so much money that simple living after the fashion recommended by Epicurus and co. has become harder to achieve in spite of all our wonderful laborsaving technology.

A second reason most of us now feel we need more than the bare necessities to be happy is that as the world

changes, so do our desires, ambitions, and expectations. When Segal says that no new needs are being dreamed up, he exaggerates. His claim suggests that human beings at any time have a basic need to be happy, and all that changes over time is the "goods and services" necessary to meet this need. But this fails to recognize that the *substance* of our conception of happiness is affected by the way the world changes. Large numbers of young people aspire to "get on," to travel, to have exotic or exciting experiences, to achieve something of note, to see the world and make a mark on it. Their dreams may often be unrealistic, but that is not the point. The point is that with the great increase in life expectancy, social mobility, vocational prospects, and recreational opportunities that has occurred over the past two centuries, the Epicurean notion of happiness will strike many as excessively modest, if not downright boring. Moreover, if we see others pursuing more ambitious goals and in some cases enjoying success, this will naturally influence our conception of the good life. It will also make it hard for those who stay at home and tend their garden not to feel dissatisfaction with their situation—the sort of frustration experienced by George Bailey (Jimmy Stewart) in Frank Capra's classic film *It's a Wonderful Life* until an angel teaches him to be grateful for what he has.

The last observation leads to a further reason why we find it hard today to be content with Epicurus's bare necessities: we now need more in order to sustain our self-respect. This matters because self-respect is, by common consent, a necessary condition of happiness. In *A Theory of Justice* the political philosopher John Rawls makes it

one of his "primary goods"—that is, one of the things that every rational person can be assumed to want, whatever his or her life plan might be. Rawls in fact suggests that self-respect may be the most important primary good, for without it individuals lose a sense of their own moral worth and are liable to feelings of shame.[32]

Ideally, perhaps, we would be like Diogenes in his barrel, utterly indifferent to our standing in the socioeconomic pecking order. We would repeat to ourselves Epictetus's aphorism that "circumstances don't make the man, they only reveal him to himself," and would have no interest in comparing ourselves to others. This is a central element in Stoic wisdom. On this view, if you cannot maintain your self-respect just because others are better off than you, even though you have the basic necessities of life, the problem lies within yourself, not in your situation. But this is a very difficult teaching for most people to fully internalize. As Marcus Aurelius himself observes, "We all love ourselves more than other people, but care more about their opinion than our own."[33] In reality, most of us cannot avoid allowing the way we compare with and are viewed by others to influence the view we form of ourselves. The society we belong to provides a mirror that is largely responsible for our self-image. This has always been true. But in premodern societies, where one's social standing as citizen or slave, master or serf, was largely fixed by birth, it was easier to be content with one's lot in at least two respects: (a) the great majority would not be much better off; and (b) one's social standing was seen by all as something largely outside one's control. It is less easy in societies like

contemporary America where competitive attitudes percolate from the economic system to other areas of social interaction, and where one constantly encounters the pervasive (and highly questionable) idea that the society is essentially meritocratic. So even though in many respects the poor today have a much higher material standard of living than ever before, it probably requires greater independence of spirit today to be "poor and proud of it" than at any previous time.

My point here is not that everyone living under capitalism is hopelessly caught up in a materialistic rat race. Most people have no desperate burning desire to be rich or powerful or famous, and are quite capable of being content with what they consider enough. But to live with nothing but the bare essentials invites pity or contempt. Few enjoy being pitied or looked down upon, and few can be subjected to it continually without this adversely affecting their sense of self-worth.

These critical observations on Epicurus's claim that satisfying one's basic needs suffices for happiness do not mean that his thesis is entirely wrong. It offers a useful perspective, a reminder that prods us into reflecting on the way we live with an eye to identifying wants and habits that are foolish, wasteful, unnecessary, or inauthentic. The truly valuable idea it contains is that the key ingredients for happiness are usually within easy reach for those of us not mired in awful circumstances. When we fail to realize this, we assume that happiness lies in the acquisition of what we do not already have. This is the mistake that leads us to step off the path toward contentment and onto the hedonic treadmill.

SIMPLE LIVING PROMOTES SERENITY THROUGH DETACHMENT

This argument is closely tied to the one just considered; indeed, the two are interdependent. Satisfying one's basic needs will suffice provided one embraces a certain conception of happiness in which peace of mind is given paramount importance. It will not be sufficient if one's notion of the good life has to include such things as country club membership, gourmet dining, paragliding, and round-the-world cruises, or full-blooded involvement in complex and demanding enterprises like political campaigns, business ventures, or large-scale theatrical productions. To those with the latter outlook, the fact that simple living may promote serenity is a weak argument since serenity is not their ultimate goal. Among philosophers, however, the identification of the good life with a life of mental and emotional tranquillity is almost a commonplace. Thomas More's thinking is representative: his recipe to ensure happiness for the citizens of Utopia is to pass laws that eliminate both fear of want and pride in pomp (that is, the sort of glory won by excelling others).[34] Once this is done, he assumes that no one would be so irrational as to want more than he or she needs. Poets, too, often sing the same refrain. The best-known poem of More's contemporary Henry Howard (who, like More, met his end on Henry VIII's scaffold) is "The Means to Attain a Happy Life," which praises whatever produces "the quiet mind" as the key to happiness:

The equal friend, no grudge, no strife;
  No charge of rule, nor governance;
Without disease, the healthful life;
  The household of continuance;

The mean diet, no delicate fare;
  True wisdom join'd with simpleness;
The night discharged of all care,
  Where wine the wit may not impress.[35]

For all their differences on metaphysical issues, Platonists, Epicureans, and Stoics largely agree on this point. True, unlike Plato, Epicurus identifies the good with pleasure rather than with virtue and, in contrast to some of the Stoics, seems to favor a quietistic withdrawal from society as opposed to immersing oneself in civic duties. But their conceptions of happiness are all at bottom quite similar. Epicurus, as noted earlier, considers our normal condition to be pleasurable. The main threat to this condition is the occurrence of negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, envy, jealousy, frustration, anger, or resentment; so, as with the Stoics, one of his chief concerns is to learn how one can avoid these. If this endeavor is successful, the result is something like the internal harmony that Plato holds up as the chief indicator of spiritual heath.

The Buddhist view of the normal human condition is entirely different from the Epicurean view, yet in practical terms the conclusion it leads to is not so different. According to the Buddha, human life typically involves a great deal of suffering, so the goal of life should be the cessation of suffering. These assumptions underlie his advocacy of

the "eightfold path" to enlightenment and liberation from suffering. Schopenhauer, who was greatly influenced by Buddhist teachings, holds that life is generally a wretched business in which we oscillate between boredom and pain. Our best hope in his view, therefore, is simply to reduce the pain as best we can. "The prudent man aims at painlessness not pleasure," he writes, since "the nature of all pleasure and happiness is negative, whereas that of pain is positive."[36] For this reason he decisively sides with Socrates against Callicles: "The happiest lot is that of the man who has got through life without any great pain, bodily or mental, not that of the man who has experienced the keenest delights or greatest pleasures."[37] This is not to deny that there are thinkers who identify moments of unusual joy as being the primary reason for describing any life as happy, but such a view tends to be more commonly found among poets and artists than among philosophers.

What should we make of the thesis that simplicity is a sure way to secure serenity? The claim has been advanced in two ways.

The Franklinesque argument (named in honor of Ben Franklin) is fairly obvious. If you live simply and frugally, you will stay out of debt; and if you make sure your income always stays ahead of your expenditures, you will accumulate a nice little nest egg over time, which means you will not have to live in fear of the workhouse. This approach is, as one would expect from Ben Franklin, solidly prudential.

The Marleyesque argument (named in honor of Bob Marley) advocates an alternative approach, which is nicely summed up in Marley's song "Three Little Birds":

> Don't worry about a thing,
> Cause every little thing's gonna be all right.

Marley's advice is hardly novel, of course. It belongs to a venerable tradition whose best-known representative is Jesus:

> Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. . . . Which of you by taking thought [i.e., worrying] can add one cubit unto his stature? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in his glory is not arrayed like one of these. . . . Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself.[38]

Marcus Aurelius presents the same idea rather more prosaically: "Forget the future," he says. "When it comes it comes, and you'll have the resources to draw on."[39] In the same vein Seneca observes that "expectancy is the main impediment to living; in anticipation of tomorrow it loses today."[40] The underlying point here is that worrying about the future is not just useless most of the time but actually prevents one from enjoying the present moment, for which peace of mind is a necessary condition.

These two ways of linking simple living to serenity do not sit happily together. Franklin says we should think about the future and utilize our resources so as to protect ourselves against future adversity. Marley and co. urge a more direct route to serenity: just stop worrying about the future, period: everything will work out fine (and in Bob's case, the route would typically be made even more direct by toking a joint). But the others call on us to simply have faith in the future without the use of confidence-enhancing drugs. And on the face of it, one has to admit, this does not seem especially sensible. Sometimes the bad thing happens: people die, fall sick, get injured, lose their jobs, lose their homes, find themselves robbed, betrayed, oppressed, or abused, become depressed, and so on. So why should we believe that "every little thing's gonna be all right" when there is so much evidence to the contrary?

Given this obvious objection, a more nuanced understanding of the seemingly less prudential approach is perhaps in order. The idea behind the words of Jesus and Seneca is presumably not that we should eschew future planning entirely; after all, some of Jesus's best-known parables, which describe activities like manuring a fig tree, or repairing garments to make them durable, seem to applaud forward-looking prudence. The key idea is, rather, that we should cultivate habits of mind which make us less attached to things we may well lose, especially material possessions. We will then be less anxious in the present, and better prepared to deal with adversity when it comes. That is how they connect simplicity to serenity.

This seems sensible, at least with respect to material possessions. (The notion that we guard against becoming excessively attached to family and friends—although it is urged by Stoics, Buddhists, and others—is a hard sell to most people these days, especially since the likelihood of a loved one dying early and unexpectedly is so much less than in the past.) One has to admit, though, that it is Franklin's prudential philosophy rather than blithe unconcern for the future that has now become widely established as common sense. Every article on personal finance and every financial-planning consultant urges us to worry about the future, to put aside a sum to deal with a period of unemployment or an unforeseen emergency, to fund as fully as we can private and company pension plans, to pay into college savings programs, to make sure we have adequate life insurance, health insurance, property insurance, long-term care insurance, pet insurance, and so on. For the real worrywarts, there are extended warrantees of every kind plus travel insurance, cell phone insurance, wedding insurance, car loan gap insurance, and extended insurance against alien abduction (in 2013 the best rate going was a single lifetime premium of twenty-five dollars for ten million dollars' worth of coverage). The government requires us or encourages us through its tax policies to make some of these provisions for the future. And if most people in societies without adequate state pensions are not saving enough to ensure a comfortable retirement, that is not because they are closet Stoics or Buddhists, committed to living in the present, but because they simply don't have sufficient spare income.

The idea that we should not concern ourselves unduly about the future because "expectancy is the main impediment to living" has to be qualified for other reasons too. At the societal level, too much focus on present goods, like lower taxes or gas prices, at the expense of future goods such as a cleaner environment and an adequately funded welfare state, is hardly praiseworthy, and we would do well to worry about the consequences of this shortsightedness. With respect to both individuals and communities, it is hard to make significant plans and engage in long-term projects without worrying about the ways in which they might be derailed. This is true whether one is raising a child, planting crops, running a business, carrying out research, writing a book, building an organization, or working for a cause. Yet immersing ourselves in such projects and bringing them to fruition yields some of our most valuable experiences and accomplishments. It hardly makes sense to eschew long-term enterprises on the grounds that they usually produce anxiety as well as (one hopes) satisfaction. And it is hard to really throw oneself into a project without worrying about its prospects for success.

The advice not to worry unduly about the future thus has to be quite restricted if it is to be reasonable. It amounts to telling us not to spoil the present through excessive anxiety about the future, and not to worry unduly about the loss of things that do not really matter. One of the merits of simple living is that it demonstrates how little we need to possess in order to be content, and how much of what we consider necessary is in fact superfluous. Keeping these points in mind may help us become, in Epicurus's phrase,

"fearless of fortune," at least with respect to wealth and possessions. But it is less obvious how living simply helps one to achieve greater detachment from other things one values, such as loved ones, meaningful projects, or political causes.

LIVING FRUGALLY PREPARES ONE FOR TOUGH TIMES

This prudential argument in favor of practicing frugality was especially popular with the Stoics. As Seneca puts it, "poverty must become our familiar so that Fortune may not catch us unprepared."[41] Should adversity strike, it will be less of a shock to the system if one has been living frugally rather than wallowing in the lap of luxury, and this will make it easier to cheerfully keep up one's chin.

Notice that this is slightly different from the argument considered in the previous chapter that accustoming oneself to discomfort builds hardiness, industry, self-control, and other virtues. Here, the claim is that it offers a form of protection against being made miserable by a loss of wealth, income, or status. The arguments overlap, of course. Remaining cheerful in adversity, not being susceptible to discouragement or despair, is a socially valuable trait as well as being a quality beneficial to self. But in keeping with the distinction outlined earlier, the claim that practicing frugality decreases one's chances of misery can be classified as primarily a prudential rather than a moral argument.

Seneca, along with other advocates of frugality, actually advises us to practice systematic deprivation of luxuries:

> Set aside a number of days during which you will be content with plain and scanty food and with course and crude dress, and say to yourself, "Is this what frightened me?" It is in time of security that the soul should school itself to hardship, and while Fortune is benign it should gather strength to meet her harshness.[42]

This all makes good sense. Taking cold showers every morning is excellent training for a prolonged power outage; survival courses prepare one for any unexpected breakdown of civilization's normal services. This is why we heartily recommend cold showers, wilderness experiences, and the like to other people, especially youngsters who have enjoyed disturbingly comfortable childhoods and have never had to wrestle with the elements the way we had to. But although the argument makes good sense in theory, it is another of those arguments that is better chewed on than swallowed whole; and as is usually the case with familiar ideas, doing this reveals its limitations.

Whether the experience of deprivation, voluntary or otherwise, makes it more likely that one will avoid the slough of despond in times of future hardship is an empirical question. There is a huge literature on the topic of how people can, do, or should cope with adversity. A lot of the psychological research has tended to focus more on emotional traumas such as the loss of loved ones, disabling accidents, rape, the experience of war, or the onset of serious illness. Often the focus is on the long-term damage done by such traumas and how it can be repaired. Psychological

research relating to the sort of material deprivation that accompanies poverty, unemployment, or homelessness has shown that many of the associated problems, such as poor health, substance abuse, and depression, result from the chronic stress experienced by people who are continually forced to make the sort of difficult choices that more comfortably off people rarely face. Some studies even show that everyday stress can have a physiological effect on the brain that makes us less able to cope with adversity.[43] But it would clearly be a mistake to think that this proves Seneca and his fellow Stoics wrong, for the sort of voluntary self-denial he recommends is not the sort of thing that should create stress. On the contrary, one of the main arguments for choosing to live simply—which may include accustoming oneself to occasional deprivation—is precisely to reduce stress.

How well people adapt to material deprivation seems to be most of all a matter of temperament, which while affected by experience does not seem to be determined by it. Some who are accustomed to luxury seem to adjust very easily to a change in circumstances. Boethius is a paradigm example. Born around 480 CE into a noble Roman family, he became a senator at the age of twenty-five and consul at thirty. Thus he lived his first forty years as a member of the privileged elite. Yet when in 522 he was charged with treason, imprisoned, and sentenced to death, his reaction was thoroughly sanguine. Instead of cursing and lamenting his sorry fate, he spent his last days writing *The Consolation of Philosophy*, a classic statement of the view that happiness depends on one's inner state,

According to Epicurus, "they have the sweetest pleasure in luxury who least need it." By "luxury" we can take him to mean any departure from the fairly simple satisfaction of ordinary needs and desires. Underlying his claim is a familiar and plausible idea: continual experience of the expensive and luxurious can turn what ought to be a delight into a taken-for-granted requirement, the lack of which causes annoyance and discomfort. But where such experiences contrast with what we are accustomed to, the pleasure we take in them is likely to be much keener. Hot showers and soft sheets are especially pleasurable after a sustained period of roughing it. We savor gourmet food in a fancy restaurant more when eating out is an occasional treat. The deprived child will be more excited by a fine present than the spoiled brats who are accustomed to getting whatever they ask for as a matter of course. Interestingly, one hardly ever encounters a similar but reversed argument in favor of indulgence—that prolonged experience of luxury heightens one's capacity for enjoying things of cruder quality. Yet this can sometimes be the case. People enjoy camping; they establish rustic log cabin retreats; they relish a return to a biscuits-and-gravy breakfast at the local greasy spoon. For the most part, though, enjoyment of the contrast is asymmetric: most people tend not to enjoy going from high quality to low quality in most areas, whether it be beds, bands, beer, or bagels.

This observation is connected to the phenomenon psychologists have labeled "hedonic adaptation." Over time, people generally get used to changes in their circumstances,

whether positive or negative, and tend to revert to the same level of happiness they had before the change. One of the most remarkable illustrations of this was provided by a study of how lottery winners responded to their new circumstances, as compared with accident victims who had been rendered paraplegic. Although their reactions in the short term were what one would expect, within a year the lottery winners were no happier than the accident victims. Both groups had adjusted to their new circumstances, but while the lottery winners were discovering unforeseen problems, such as unreasonable expectations or envy on the part of family and friends, the accident victims were enjoying unexpected compensations, such as closer bonds with those around them whose devotion gave unequivocal assurance of their love. Hedonic adaptation can also be seen in small matters. We relish the slick new cell phone for a short while, but fairly soon it is simply a tool we take for granted, giving us no more pleasure than our clunky old one. And psychologists have found that underindulgence can be a good strategy for enhancing pleasure; subjects who abstained from eating chocolate for a week found they enjoyed a piece of chocolate far more than did subjects in another group who had been fully indulging their chocolate cravings.[44]

On the whole, this sort of adaptation seems to be a good thing: it means that most of us are not utterly destroyed by traumatic losses, not even by crippling accidents or the deaths of loved ones. It also supports the idea, repeated by frugal sages of almost every stripe, that worldly success will not deliver happiness and therefore is not something

we should unduly concern ourselves with. And it explains why Epicurus and the rest are right to think that excessive indulgence in luxury, novelty, variety, or the exotic is likely to blunt our ability to savor the pleasure they offer. It does not follow, though, that we should eschew these pleasures entirely. Opulent luxury may be dispensable; but for most people, occasional novelty and change are important sources of pleasure. Some variety in our pleasures, in what we eat, listen to, watch, read, visit, and do, keeps us from becoming bored through habituation. Yet it is also wise to avoid overindulging a taste for novelty and variety. Psychologist Simon Laham, discussing eating habits, suggests that "variety in food, much like spice, should be used sparingly and wisely,"[45] and this advice can be extended to other sources of pleasure. Travel offers a good example. There are a few people who have permanently "itchy feet" and are restless the moment they settle anywhere. And there are some, probably a larger number, for whom the very idea of leaving their home turf is anxiety inducing. For most of us, though, part of the pleasure of traveling lies in encountering things that are different from what we are used to; the familiarity of home (like our staple diet of familiar dishes) serves as the necessary backdrop against which novelty and variety stand out and are enjoyed.[46]

That all sounds eminently sensible, and for the most part it is. There are complications, though, and two are worth mentioning here. The first concerns the idea that those unused to luxury will appreciate it the most. The problem is that some fine things may best be appreciated by connoisseurs who, almost by definition, experience

them regularly rather than rarely. A nice example of the contrast in question is presented by a scene in *Babette's Feast*, Gabriel Axel's film adaptation of an Isak Dinesen short story. Babette, a wonderful Parisian chef, is living in a small village on the bleak coast of Jutland in northern Denmark following the violent suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871. The aging local population practice severe austerity as required by their brand of Protestantism. When Babette comes into a large sum of money, she spends the entire amount putting on a fabulous banquet for the two elderly sisters who took her in and their neighbors. One unexpected guest at the feast is General Löwenhielm who, alone among those sitting around the table, has seen the world, has moved in high society, and is accustomed to luxury. Everyone present enjoys the food, and the locals' ingrained distrust of luxury as sinful is swept away by the sensory pleasures they experience at the table. Yet while they are certainly aware of how the feast before them contrasts with their normal plain fare, only the general can fully appreciate the truly exceptional quality of the dishes and the expensive wines that accompany each course. Indeed, his astonishment at encountering such quality in this remote and humble location is made more amusing by the fact that everyone else around the table—for whom all of this is completely novel—is, if anything, less impressed. They know the meal is much tastier than what they are used to; but they cannot know, as the general does, that it compares favorably to the very best available anywhere: that it is, in fact, the work of a great artist. *Babette's Feast* thus provides some ammunition for the antiausterity

school of thought, both through its memorable portrayal of the dreary existence of the small community zealously committed to austerity, and by challenging the idea that those accustomed to luxury appreciate it less.

A second critical point to be made, regarding this argument for keeping one's experience of fine things rare, is that it does not obviously generalize to cover all activities. It may be true that if we only ever watch topflight soccer, we derive less pleasure from watching inferior teams kicking a ball about, and that if we only ever listen to the world's best orchestras, we risk impairing our capacity for enjoying less polished amateur performances (except, of course, when our eleven-year-old has the oboe solo). This is a possible drawback to connoisseurship. While being able to discriminate between different levels of performance bespeaks a more sophisticated level of appreciation, which is presumably good, it may also diminish one's ability to enjoy anything less than the best. Yet hardly anyone argues that we should regularly read pulp fiction in order to enhance our enjoyment of good literature, or watch plenty of dumb and tedious B movies so as to appreciate more fully the rare gems when they come along. In some other spheres—science, for instance, or politics—the argument would make even less sense. Thus the principle that having too much of a good thing may lessen one's appreciation of that thing does not hold universally, and even where it does hold, it does not always provide grounds for eschewing quality. It may be a good reason for not overdosing on haute cuisine, but it is not a good reason to spend a lot of time watching bad television.

The second main argument to support the idea that simple living enhances our capacity for pleasure is that it encourages us to attend to and appreciate the inexhaustible wealth of interesting, beautiful, marvelous, and thought-provoking phenomena continually presented to us by the everyday world that is close at hand. As Emerson says: "Things near are not less beautiful and wondrous than things remote. . . . This perception of the worth of the vulgar is fruitful in discoveries."[47] Here, as elsewhere, Emerson elegantly articulates the theory, but it is his friend Thoreau who really puts it into practice. *Walden* is, among other things, a celebration of the unexotic and a demonstration that the overlooked wonders of the commonplace can be a source of profound pleasure readily available to all.

This idea is hardly unique to Emerson and Thoreau, of course, and, like most of the ideas we are considering, it goes back to ancient times. Marcus Aurelius reflects that "anyone with a feeling for nature—a deeper sensitivity—will find it all gives pleasure," from the jaws of animals to the "distinct beauty of old age in men and women."[48] "Even Nature's inadvertence has its own charms, its own attractiveness," he observes, citing as an example the way loaves split open on top when baking.[49]

With respect to the natural world, celebrating the ordinary has been a staple of literature and art at least since the advent of Romanticism in the late eighteenth century. Wordsworth wrote three separate poems in praise of the lesser celandine, a common wildflower; painters like van Gogh discover whole worlds of beauty and significance in

a pair of peasant boots; many of the finest poems crafted by poets like Thomas Hardy, Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, William Carlos Williams, and Seamus Heaney take as their subject the most mundane objects, activities, or events and find in these something worth lingering over and commemorating in verse: a singing thrush, a snowy woods, a fish, some chilled plums, a patch of mint.

Of course, artists have also celebrated the extraordinary, the exotic, and the magnificent. Homer gushes over the splendors of Menelaus's palace; Gauguin left his home country to seek inspiration in the more exotic environment of Tahiti; Handel composed pieces to accompany momentous ceremonial occasions. Yet it is striking that a humble activity like picking blackberries—the subject of well-known poems by, among others, Sylvia Plath, Seamus Heaney, and Richard Wilbur—appears to be more inspirational to modern poets, more charged with interest and significance, than, say, the construction of the world's tallest building, the Oscar ceremonies, the space program, or the discovery of DNA's molecular structure. One might even say that it has now become an established function of art to help us discover the remarkable in the commonplace. This, after all, is one effect of art that uses "found objects," such as Duchamp's sculpture *Bicycle Wheel* in which a bicycle wheel is mounted above a wooden stool. Commodity art, which uses mass-produced objects; trash art, which makes art out of garbage; and pop art, which uses commercial labels and logos—all these also reinforce this idea that everything has the potential to be aesthetically interesting. Musicians and composers who use "found sounds" and ambient noises in their work offer a similar lesson.

But it is not just the aesthetic appreciation of the ordinary that simple living can encourage. Ancient philosophers also pointed out that just about any segment of the natural world, from the starry heavens above one's fields to the spiderweb in the corner of one's prison cell, offers abundant material worthy of close observation and poses innumerable fascinating questions to the naturally curious mind. Moreover, the contemplation of nature is recommended not just as a pleasurable activity but also as a source of spiritual refreshment readily available to everyone regardless of rank or fortune since, as Seneca points out, "from any spot whatever eyes can be raised to heaven equally well"[50]—an attitude that seems to have helped him deal with his own misfortune when he was exiled to Corsica. Once again, there is no reason to assume that the connection being asserted—in this case between a simple lifestyle and a heightened appreciation of the commonplace or the wonders of nature—is universal or inevitable. But prima facie it is plausible to suppose that such appreciation is more likely when we are subjected to fewer exotic and expensive diversions.

FRUGALITY FOSTERS SELF-SUFFICIENCY AND INDEPENDENCE

This is another of those arguments that clearly straddle the distinction between moral and prudential values. The frugal sages are united in their praise of self-sufficiency, from

Epicurus, who describes it as "the greatest of all riches,"[51] to Thoreau, whose sojourn at Walden was, among other things, an experimental demonstration of its value. But how, exactly, is being self-sufficient thought to promote well-being?

We noted earlier that among advocates of frugal simplicity there are two main notions of self-sufficiency: not being excessively dependent on another person's favors or good opinion, and doing things for oneself as opposed to relying too heavily on someone else's services or on technology. When classical thinkers like Epicurus and Seneca praise self-sufficiency, they do not primarily have in mind doing everything for oneself after the fashion of Robinson Crusoe; after all, some of them had servants and slaves. Rather, they conceive of self-sufficiency as meaning, above all else, not being dependent on another person's patronage. One way to achieve this, of course, is to be like Seneca or Marcus Aurelius and hold wealth or power in one's own right; but the more secure way is to follow the example set by the likes of Socrates and Diogenes and become indifferent to the material benefits that patronage promises.

Individual patronage may be less central to the workings of society today than in the past, but its negative aspects will be readily understood by any employees who feel they have to court their boss's good opinion, or by students hoping for a good letter of recommendation from a teacher. When I was in graduate school, I knew a distinguished professor who would ask students writing dissertations under his direction to serve drinks and snacks at his house parties. I am certain that all who agreed to work

as temporary unpaid servants were acutely conscious of the fact that their career prospects depended heavily on the sort of reference this professor would be giving them.

People who are dependent on the favor of others will almost inevitably be anxious about how they are viewed by their patrons. This anxiety is unpleasant in itself and constrains what they feel comfortable doing or saying. Ultimately it is likely to affect—one might well say *infect*—their thinking. As Upton Sinclair famously observed, "It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it."[52] Thus when Epicurus says that "the greatest fruit of self-sufficiency is freedom," he primarily has in mind freedom from any such inhibitions or anxieties, a condition he views as both conducive to moral integrity and necessary for peace of mind.

Moral approval of self-sufficiency persists today, but in modified forms. Time was when the upper classes would have viewed most kinds of labor as demeaning; not having to work for a living, and not getting one's hands dirty, were marks of gentility. Capitalism helped to usher in a stronger work ethic that eventually affected most echelons of society, and the rise of a more egalitarian outlook promoted new attitudes toward labor. Members of the higher social strata could demonstrate their enlightened attitudes by taking up activities previously considered beneath them—think of Winston Churchill taking up bricklaying as a hobby—and by becoming less reliant on servants, a shift in attitude that admittedly followed in the wake of servants becoming unaffordable. Over the past century a similar

shift has taken place with respect to the division of labor between the sexes. Women are now generally expected and encouraged to achieve economic independence by working outside the home; men, who would once have been ridiculed for doing "women's work," now risk losing respect if they are unwilling to shop, cook, clean, change diapers, and so on.

Self-sufficiency is still generally viewed as a virtue, and excessive dependency on others as a failing; but for many today its most important form is not so much the possession of particular practical skills as being fiscally self-supporting. This latter concept includes supporting oneself through paid employment, which is how most people realize it. Today, individuals who are "self-made" are applauded rather than despised, as they once were, for being nouveau riche, while among the least respected members of society today are those who are seen as the least self-sufficient, the alleged "shirkers" and "scroungers," who are dependent on welfare. The opprobrium thrown their way is usually undeserved, but the fact that they have become such a common object of moral contempt is significant.

These points relate to questions of well-being because, as we have already noted, self-respect is a key ingredient of happiness. Seeing oneself as self-sufficient or self-supporting typically bolsters self-respect; seeing oneself as unhealthily dependent on others can undermine it. This is one reason why there is such a strong correlation between involuntary unemployment and depression. It is worth noting, though, that self-respect does not require that one's self-perception be accurate. The lucky guy who was born

on third base and thinks he hit a triple may never be troubled by doubts about how he came by his independence. It takes a very independent mind and strong personality to uncouple one's self-perception from how one is regarded by others. For most of us, the extent to which we and our circumstances are respected by society at large decisively influences how we view ourselves. The concept of fiscal self-sufficiency is especially problematic in this regard. It is often applied inconsistently and tendentiously, and in a way that uncritically reflects prevailing assumptions and values. The hefty pensions enjoyed by some retired public servants are seen as honorable and deserved, while the pittances received from the public coffer by the long-term unemployed or disabled are viewed by many as badges of shame. Most people who find themselves impoverished hate having to accept charity; yet recipients of unearned income from inheritances and trust funds rarely suffer from any analogous sense of inadequacy.

Doing things for oneself—the second kind of self-sufficiency identified above—can also be praised on moral grounds. Capable people are useful to have around: they are better able to assist others and less likely to need help themselves. Contemporary advocates of self-sufficiency, however, tend to emphasize its agreeableness to self more than its usefulness to others. Growing vegetables, preparing and preserving food, making clothes, building furniture, undertaking do-it-yourself home improvement, decorating rooms, and so on have become popular recreational pastimes for many, each with its own set of magazines and how-to websites.

This kind of satisfaction did not get much recognition prior to modern times: if one could afford to pay another to perform a necessary task, one naturally did so. When an aristocrat like Tolstoy worked in the field alongside his peasants in the mid-nineteenth century, he was considered decidedly eccentric. Today, though, there would seem nothing especially odd about a wealthy CEO spending a weekend digging over a vegetable garden, building a boat, or preparing a barbecue. Indeed, a significant difference between the lives of those in the better-off social tiers today and in the not-so-distant past lies in the sort of tasks they might routinely undertake. It is rather remarkable, when one thinks about it, that many of those belonging to the professional or leisured classes a hundred years ago would have had little or no experience of such ordinary matters as, say, cooking a meal, doing laundry, washing dishes, changing a diaper, digging a garden, or painting a room. Even today, an entrenched sexual division of labor continues to limit the experiences of many individuals; but the social transformation that has taken place in this sphere over the past half century is nonetheless huge.

The advocates of self-reliance undoubtedly have a point: doing things for oneself can be immensely satisfying. Apart from the simple pleasure of being immersed in a task—achieving what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls "flow"[53]—one derives satisfaction from a sense of competence and accomplishment, and with this comes an enhanced and pleasurable feeling of independence. Feelings of dependency, by contrast, easily breed negative emotions such as alienation and resentment. One of

the best-known philosophical discussions of patterns of dependency is offered by Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. His analysis of the master-slave relationship shows how complicated patterns of dependency between people can become. In Hegel's narrative, the slave's initial dependence on his master (who chose to enslave rather than kill his vanquished enemy) is total. Gradually, however, the balance of dependency shifts. The slave undertakes work that puts him in immediate contact with nature; and as he becomes increasingly competent at practical tasks, his work becomes a form of self-expression. The master, by contrast, becomes alienated from nature, lacks a vehicle for self-expression, and becomes increasingly dependent on the slave. Hegel's account is highly abstract; but it suggests and implicitly endorses a modern view of the satisfaction to be derived from self-sufficiency and engaging work.

A rather different dialectic has been playing out in our relation to technology, however. On the one hand, the general availability of laborsaving technology has meant that we now do for ourselves many tasks that we used to pay others to do. Who now sends laundry out to a washerwoman? How many writers pay someone to type up their manuscript? People buy snowblowers so they can clear their own drives, and lawn mowers to mow their own lawns. It has become increasingly easy for us to print our photos, book our own flights, prepare our own taxes, and so on. So in many ways we have become more self-reliant. Yet at the same time we have become ever more dependent on the technology that supports this form of self-reliance.

Our direct dependency on other people has thus shifted to a dependency on technology, and therefore, of course, to an indirect dependency on those people who produce and service the technology. Computerized technology has simultaneously enhanced both of these opposing trends.

Photography offers a nice example of this. Before the advent of digital cameras, serious amateur photographers working with chemicals in darkrooms produced their own prints, created special effects, and generally understood the process they were using. Other people just had their film developed and printed commercially. Today we can all mess about most creatively with any digital photos we put on our laptop. In that sense we are doing for ourselves what used to be done by others. But at the same time this new form of self-sufficiency, which certainly yields the satisfaction of exercising a competency, yields the satisfaction of being independent in only a qualified way, since it rests heavily on having available sophisticated technology that most of us hardly understand at all. Still, it is largely because laborsaving technology has reduced the amount of time and drudgery involved in many chores that a new appreciation of how mundane work might be enjoyable has emerged, especially, perhaps, among those for whom it is optional. Cooking in a modern kitchen, for instance, is generally much easier and more enjoyable than it would be if all one had were a few blackened pots, an oven that needed constant attention, and a few seasonally available ingredients.

Advocates of self-sufficiency also point out, of course, that as well as being inherently satisfying, doing things for

yourself can save money, which reduces the need to spend time earning it. This is a further prudential argument for self-sufficiency, and one that will appeal to anyone committed to living frugally. For the most part it is clearly sound. Over time people can spend a considerable amount of money paying for things that they could make or do themselves as individuals or in groups: dinners out, lunchtime sandwiches, haircuts, house cleaning, lawn mowing, garden vegetables, bread, scarves, oil changes, and the like. The frugal zealot will be alert to all such ways of saving money.[54] One must also admit, though, that many goods and services are so cheap today, measured in terms of the hours of labor required to pay for them, that the economic benefits of doing things for oneself are often considerably less than in the past. A good-sized vegetable garden can yield a few hundred dollars' worth of food each summer. But it is very easy to spend close to this on garden products like seeds, tools, soil enrichments, pest repellants, frames, fencing, and so on. Ditto for clothes. Moreover, economists will argue that we should factor in the time spent on such projects—its value being equal to potential earnings forgone—in which case the savings involved would be further reduced. So if I save ten dollars by changing my own oil, but it takes me half an hour, and I can earn twenty dollars an hour doing other work, doing this particular task for myself does not really save me any money.

SIMPLE LIVING KEEPS ONE CLOSE TO NATURE AND THE NATURAL

We noted in chapter 1 that living naturally and being close to nature are among the various meanings attached to the idea of living a life of frugal simplicity. Advocates of simple living typically extol the benefits of being in close touch with nature; but what are these?

According to the Stoics, those who live simply do not just live close to nature; they typically live, or aspire to live, in harmony with nature. Their conception of the good life is centered on the idea of living in accord with the natural order of the world as opposed to fearing it, resisting it, or complaining about it. Similar ideas can be found in many religions, notably Taoism and Buddhism, and clearly inform the outlook of more recent champions of simplicity. This desire to live more in harmony with nature can find many forms of practical expression: preferring artifacts made of natural materials; growing or buying organic produce; giving birth at home, rather than in a hospital; choosing to breastfeed; going without clothes (the definition of "naturism" set out by the International Naturist Federation describes it as "a way of life in harmony with nature, expressed through social nudity").[55] The popular environmentalist idea of seeking to reduce one's "ecological footprint" can also be seen as falling under this rubric.

Living in harmony with nature is assumed to be intrinsically preferable to the alternative. Awareness of and attention to nature are also seen as preconditions for *understanding* the natural world. This can also be valued

for its own sake as well as for the many benefits it brings. Epicurus offers an interesting argument in claiming that an understanding of natural phenomena liberates us from the sort of fear spread by superstition and fables—an early shot across the bows in the long-running conflict between science and religion. In a general sense he has been proved right: as our scientific understanding of nature has advanced, fear of supernatural beings—gods, ghouls, ghosts, goblins, and their like—has diminished. But it is primarily the scientific study of nature that has produced this effect, not simply living close to nature or enjoying it. Indeed, superstition of all sorts has traditionally had a firmer hold in rural communities, so it would be a stretch to claim that liberation from superstitious fear is a consequence of simple, natural living. Philosophers like Heidegger have even argued that our scientific understanding of the world, which is essentially aimed at domination and control, has been bought at the price of a damaged relationship between humanity and nature: in Wordsworth's phrase, "we murder to dissect."

Another ancient argument, and one that remains relevant today, is that the pleasures of appreciating and studying nature are readily available to nearly everyone in almost any circumstances. This consideration also grounds a further subtle argument advanced by Epicurus: studying nature makes us happier because it leads us away from envy, resentment, and dissatisfaction over what we lack compared to others. It does so because it leads us to take pride "in the good things of our own minds rather than in our circumstances."[56] The idea here is that readily

available pleasures have a beneficial equalizing function. Ocean-front mansions may be exclusive to the rich, but most facets of nature—trees, wildflowers, birds, insects, beaches, rivers, mountains, stars—are open to all. In an often-cited passage in Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, Meursault reflects, while in prison, that he could be content to spend his time simply looking up through a hollow tree trunk at the clouds and birds passing overhead. His thought captures not just the easy and equal accessibility of the pleasures nature offers but also their inexhaustibility.

Delight in the natural world may be neither universal nor necessarily correlated with a commitment to frugality or simplicity. Some urban frugal zealots get their greatest pleasures from dumpster diving, trash picking, and finding bargains in thrift stores. But it is so common that anyone unable to appreciate nature is generally viewed as strange. And most of those who advocate simplicity certainly see a connection to nature as essential to their physical and mental well-being. The benefits people derive from this connection are not reducible to a simple enjoyment of nature's beauty. Our link to nature runs deeper than this, as is indicated by the fact that we find nature beautiful in the first place. And even features that appear bleak, dangerous, or disordered—desert sands, open seas, forest undergrowth, or windswept moorland—still please the eye. Typically, people find nature refreshing. Removed from it, many begin to thirst for its sights, sounds, and smells, for fresh air, greenery, birdsong, moving water, the smell of the earth, and open skies.

Thoreau, as we noted in chapter 1, is especially good at revealing how the value of our connection to the natural world can go beyond just taking pleasure in natural beauty. For him, immersing himself in nature helps him to feel at home in the world. He even claims that proximity to nature is more important to him than human society:

> I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very patterning of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant, and I have never thought of them since. Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me. I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred to me, even in scenes which we are accustomed to call wild and dreary, and also that the nearest of blood to me and humanest was not a person nor a villager, that I thought no place could ever be strange to me again.[57]

More recent reflections on the importance of our link to the natural world have given rise to the "biophilia hypothesis," first suggested by Erich Fromm and later developed by E. O. Wilson in his 1984 work *Biophilia*, according to which human beings have a deep-seated impulse to affiliate with other life-forms.[58] This notion may be a little too speculative for some, but a body of empirical evidence seems to support the more modest hypothesis that human beings benefit from proximity to natural surroundings and are

susceptible to what Richard Louv has called "nature-deficit disorder."[59] Surgery patients experience less pain and recover more quickly if they are given beds next to windows that overlook greenery. Natural light promotes improved cognitive performance among Alzheimer's patients. A 2009 Dutch study of over 345,000 medical records concluded that those who live close to greenery suffer less from anxiety and depression. A study in the United Kingdom indicated that even a five-minute bout of "green exercise," such as walking in a park as opposed to on a treadmill, improves one's mood.[60] Such findings are hardly surprising, given that whole libraries could be filled with books that in one way or another describe, celebrate, praise, or give thanks to nature. For many, a life without the possibility of regular communion with nature would be devastatingly impoverished.[61] Choosing to live simply is one way of making this form of alienation less likely.

SIMPLE LIVING PROMOTES GOOD HEALTH

This is a straightforward prudential argument suggested and even partly covered by some of the preceding arguments. To some extent its plausibility rests on stereotypical associations. If we contrast the life of someone living in the countryside, breathing fresh air, getting vigorous exercise daily, eating fresh homegrown fruit and vegetables, the day organized around nature's rhythms, with the life of the city-dweller, surrounded by noise and pollution, exhaustedly navigating busy roads or teeming crowds during the daily commute, grabbing unhealthy snacks between

appointments before collapsing on the sofa at night with a TV dinner after another day in the rat race, we have little doubt which form of life is healthier, both mentally and physically. Historically, these stereotypes have some foundation. Since ancient times, cities have often been viewed with distaste as foul-smelling, disease-ridden, dangerous places. Escape to some bucolic retreat has been a perennial dream of poets from Virgil to Yeats.

On the other hand, for many centuries and in many parts of the world right up to the present day, people have left the countryside for the cities, no matter how crowded, dirty, and dangerous, because rural poverty can be so hopeless and unendurable. Cities typically offer more forms of support for the desperate, and more opportunities for those able to work. And cities today, especially in prosperous countries, are generally much cleaner and safer than at any time in the past, and offer access to all sorts of health-promoting benefits such as well-stocked grocery stores, up-to-date medical services, and useful support groups. The complexities of urban life, including the sort of work it often involves, may certainly be stressful, and studies report that in the United States there is less stress in rural populations. But other studies show that on many other counts, such as life expectancy, obesity, high blood pressure, and incidence of diabetes, stroke, and heart attack, rural residents in the United States are today less healthy than those living in the city or the suburbs.[62] Thus while many aspects of simple living can reasonably be associated with a healthy and less stressful lifestyle, the connection is loose. Simplicity is sometimes necessitated by poverty and accompanied

by ignorance; those who live high on the hog may benefit from being able to afford good-quality food and gym fees.

In this chapter we have considered some of the main reasons philosophers have given for thinking that frugal ways and a simple lifestyle will lead to happiness. All of these arguments have merit, but in some cases, when we examine them closely, we find that they involve concepts that turn out to be quite complex or to carry more than one sense. This was the case, for instance, with notions like basic necessities, self-sufficiency, and leisure. Recognizing this naturally complicates one's assessment of the arguments.

The key notions we have been discussing—notions like simplicity, frugality, basic needs, simple pleasures, leisure, serenity, self-sufficiency, living naturally—form a family. They overlap and are interconnected in various ways. But as in any family, there will be conflicts and tensions. It would be naive to think that every imperative or suggestion regarding simplicity or frugality will automatically support or even be consistent with all the others. To take just one example, there are times when what is more natural may be at odds with what is frugal. Organic food is generally more expensive than nonorganic; natural materials like wool, wood, or diamonds are often pricey compared to artificial substitutes. When this occurs, we reveal through our choices what matters most to us.

In reviewing the prudential arguments for frugal simplicity, we can readily see that some of them rest on assumptions that can be reasonably challenged, or invoke values

that are not universally accepted. Some people do not seek serenity. Some view a life in which one is content with simple pleasures as boring and unambitious. Some will argue that living simply may result in a failure to cultivate one's capacities for more complex pleasures. In the next two chapters we will look at some of these alternative perspectives more thoroughly.