

*Angst essen Seele auf*² — Escaping the ‘iron cage’ of consumerism

Tim Jackson

Society is faced with a profound dilemma. To resist economic growth is to court economic and social collapse. To pursue it relentlessly is to endanger the ecosystems on which we depend for long-term survival. For the most part, this dilemma goes unrecognised in government policy. It is only marginally more visible as a public debate. When reality begins to impinge on the collective consciousness, the best suggestion to hand is that we can somehow ‘decouple’ growth from its material impacts. And continue to do so while the economy expands exponentially.

The sheer scale of action implied by this strategy is daunting. In a world of 9 billion people all aspiring to western lifestyles, the carbon intensity of every dollar of output must be at least 130 times lower in 2050 than it is today. By the end of the century, economic activity will need to be taking carbon out of the atmosphere not adding to it. (Jackson 2009, Chapter 5)

Simplistic assumptions that capitalism’s propensity for efficiency will solve all the problems of ecological damage and resource scarcity are almost literally bankrupt. We now stand in urgent need of a clearer vision, braver policy-making, something more robust in the way of a strategy with which to confront the dilemma of growth. This is the challenge to which Wolfgang Sachs has dedicated his remarkable energy and much of his life’s work.

My aim in this short article is to address one aspect of this challenge: the role that anxiety — and our responses to it — play in consumer society. To make sense of this mission, I need first to sketch briefly the crucial dynamics of consumerism and to show how anxiety plays a role in it.

The iron cage of consumerism

As I have argued in more detail elsewhere (Jackson 2013), nature and structure conspire together to create an ‘iron cage’ of consumerism. On the

2 ‘*Angst essen Seele auf*’ (‘Anxiety eat soul up’ in English) was the title of a 1974 film by the celebrated German film director Rainer Werner Fassbinder. The grammatical incorrectness of the title was deliberate.

one hand, the profit motive stimulates a continual search for newer, better or cheaper products and services. On the other, our own relentless search for social status lock us into an escalating spiral of consumerism. Novelty plays an absolutely central role in this dynamic.

Novelty has always carried vital information about status. Having a faster car or a bigger house alerts others to our place in the world. Having the latest mobile phone or Ipad or HDTV conveys the vital message that we are ahead of the crowd, or at the very least that we move with the herd. The language of cool is conveyed through a vocabulary of the new. Novelty even allows us to explore the wider aspirations we hold for ourselves and our families. Our dreams of the good life are cashed out through a kaleidoscope of clever toys and sparkling ornaments.

Amongst those to whom we signal our importance, we must count ourselves. Confidence in our place in the social world hangs or falls on our ability to participate in consumerism. Nowhere is this more evident than in the peer pressures to which teenagers are today increasingly exposed. The 'shopping generation' is instinctively aware that social position hangs on the evocative power of stuff. Just listen to the ubiquitous iPhone conversations played out by 11-15 year olds on train journeys home from school.

There is nothing accidental about these conditions of course. On the contrary, we created them. And there are some clearly identifiable reasons for that. Perhaps the most telling point of all is the rather too perfect fit between the continual production of novelty by firms and the insatiable appetite for novelty in households. The restless desire of the consumer is the perfect complement for the restless innovation of the entrepreneur. Taken together these two self-reinforcing processes are exactly what is needed to drive economic growth forwards. As Victor Lebow (1955) once pointed out, our enormously productive economy requires that we "convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfactions, our ego satisfactions, in consumption".

Despite this fit, or perhaps because of it, the relentless pursuit of novelty stirs up a spirit of anxiety that undermines social wellbeing. Individuals are at the mercy of social comparison. Firms must innovate or die. Institutions are skewed towards the pursuit of a materialistic consumerism. The economy itself is dependent on consumption growth for its very stability. Governments who preside over instability soon find themselves out of office. The 'iron cage of consumerism' is a system in which no one is free.

Ontological insecurity and the 'sacred canopy'

That a sense of anxiety pervades consumer society is scarcely a new insight. It was Adam Smith who first highlighted the role of shame in the social life of the consumer. "A linen shirt, for example, is, strictly speaking, not a necessary of life," wrote Smith (1776/1937, 821) in *The Wealth of Nations*. "But in the present times, through the greater part of Europe, a creditable day labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt, the want of which would be supposed to denote that disgraceful degree of poverty which, it is presumed, nobody can well fall into without extreme bad conduct."

As Amartya Sen (1984) later pointed out, this social dynamic is part of what motivates a continual striving for the latest consumer goods in modern society. The richer the society, the more extensive is the set of goods needed for a 'life without shame'. Perhaps ironically, this relentless striving doesn't necessarily make people happier. Indeed it may even have made people less happy. Seeking to explain rising rates of suicide in Europe, the sociologist Emile Durkheim (1903/2002) suggested over a century ago that capitalism had undermined our sense of meaning and purpose and left us undefended against a profound anomie.

It is tempting to conclude from these remarks that consumerism — or perhaps capitalism itself — provides the source of this anomie. But this would contradict the abundant evidence that some form of anxiety at least is endemic to the human condition; that human beings are prone to what Anthony Giddens (1991) — following Freud — has described as a pervasive 'ontological insecurity'. A kind of existential angst about ourselves, about our loved ones, about the fate of our society, about existence itself.

Just because anxiety is inherent in the human condition, does not however absolve consumerism and capitalism from their role in responding to it. What is at stake here is not so much the source of this insecurity as the success or failure of each society, of each form of social organisation in managing anxiety. This more nuanced view has been beautifully articulated by the sociologist Peter Berger (1967). In Berger's view, *every* society is faced with the problem of constructing and maintaining its social world, or 'nomos'. This socially-constructed framework can be thought of as the set of assumptions, understandings, rules, maxims, norms, taboos and rituals which together bring order and meaning to human lives.

Berger's principal interest is the role that religion plays in this process. He shows in particular how religion allows us to make sense of our existence in relation to a higher 'sacred' order (cognitive meaning). It also provides a framework for moral governance (moral meaning). Finally, by offering a transcendent reality, it allows us to confront the question of our own mortality and the loss of those we love (emotional meaning).³

Berger called this overarching framework of meaning a 'sacred canopy'. And he suggested that this sacred canopy was a vital function in every kind of society. The 'sacred canopy' is all what keeps us from despair, from anomie, from the dark chaotic and meaningless void that threatens constantly to overturn us.

Secular and religious theodicy

Central to this task of 'world maintenance' is the task of 'theodicy'. Theodicy (which means — literally — the justification of god) has its roots in medieval theology. So it might seem odd that I should call on such an idea in a discussion of consumerism. But as I hope to show, it is quite precisely this task that consumerism has usurped in modern society. And it is noteworthy that we have no better, more familiar terminology with which to confront one of the most fundamental dynamics in human society.

Broadly speaking, theodicy is the attempt to come to terms with the existence of 'suffering' and 'evil' in our lives. In religious language, theodicy asks the question: why should a caring God allow evil to prosper and the innocent to suffer? Religious theodicy was for a long time associated quite precisely with the need to reconcile belief in an omnipotent and benevolent god with the existence of evil and suffering in the world.⁴

But as Berger convincingly argues, theodicy can be construed as a more generic concept in the sociology of religion. It can even be framed in non-theological terms. Specifically, Berger defined theodicy as the (religious) legitimation of 'anomic' phenomena — that is to say, as the attempt to defend the existing 'nomos' or world view against the ever-present threats to meaning that assault it. These threats arise in particular as a result of suffering, loss and our own mortality. Put differently, theodicy attempts to cope with the

3 This typology of meaning mirrors one set out in Campbell 2003.

4 See for example Hick 1968; and more recently Astley et al. 2002.

discrepancy between our ideals and visions and the reality of the world with which we are daily confronted.

In ordinary laymen's terms, theodicy can be construed as the attempt to 'make sense of' our lives. Faced with persistent injustice, the prosperity of ill-doers, the persecution of the righteous, how should we seek to live? What kind of morality are we to live by? Confronted with our own mortality, the persistence of suffering, the sorrow of bereavement, where should we turn for solace? How are we to protect the authority of compassion and the promise of love? Where, in short, are we to find meaning in our lives?

The broad argument I am going to make is that consumerism, ironically, has become a kind of secular theodicy. In some quite precise ways, consumerism has grappled and continues to grapple with foundational questions about our destiny. About social progress. And if we want to counter consumerism, I shall argue, we have to understand that. And offer some other less damaging ways of grappling with them. But first I want to illustrate the problem of theodicy a little more clearly. And in order to do so I'd like to take you back to the middle of the nineteenth century — to the year 1851.

Why do bad things happen to good people?

I want you to imagine if you can a windswept, stormy day in middle England. I know it goes against everything you've ever heard about England. But I want you to imagine it's raining like it's never rained before.

My story concerns a young girl named Annie. Before she reaches her 10th birthday she is already suffering from stomach pains, headaches, dizziness and difficulties in breathing. It's clear to her parents that something has to be done. So one day in late March her father prises the tearful Annie from her mother's reluctant farewell embrace and together with her sister Henrietta and their nurse, Fanny, they undertake the arduous journey north to Dr James Gully's famous water cure establishment in Malvern.

Her father's trust in the water cure is supreme. Only a few months previously he himself has been a patient in Malvern. What was wrong with him we're not entirely sure. Probably some kind of nervous dysfunction. Something that was treatable by a water cure. At any rate, he is so confident that a water cure will be effective that, he heads back to London to get some work done — more on the work later — leaving Annie in the care of her nurse and the good Dr Gully.

Two weeks later, he was summoned back to Malvern. Annie had taken a turn for the worse. Poor Henrietta was dispatched to nearby relatives. Charles — the father's name was Charles — took up a constant vigil by Annie's bedside, and wrote every day to his wife Emma to report on the almost hourly 'struggle between life & death' that Annie endured.

Racked with violent stomach cramps, losing strength by the day, writhing in agony on her sick bed, Annie would occasionally make pathetic attempts to sing her favourite hymns. But it was becoming obvious to everyone that she was losing the fight. By the morning of Wednesday the 23rd April, the girl lay motionless on her bed, wasted but tranquil, as the storm clouds gathered outside.

Her father sat by the window, staring into the dull grey Malvern hills, weeping quietly, waiting for the inevitable. A little time later, as Charles' biographers later describe the scene:

"The wind picked up. Charles and Fanny moved closer to the bed. Annie lay still, unconscious. It was just twelve o'clock midday. Thunder began to sound, great peals far above them — the mighty knell of Nature. They edged nearer and heard the breathing stop. She was dead."

The story of Annie's death is one of ordinary human tragedy. An unhappy but not uncommon tale; certainly not in the mid nineteenth century; or even today, when a child dies through poverty every three seconds and almost every single human life is crossed at some point by personal tragedy. Annie's death also serves to illustrate the subject matter of this paper.

The personal is historical

Theodicy, in a very personal and quite precise way, was the challenge facing Charles and Emma in the aftermath of Annie's death. Each of them reacted very differently to the challenge. When no word came from Malvern on the day of Annie's death, Emma realised immediately that the struggle was over. So that by the time Charles's letter arrived she was able to bear the knowledge 'sweetly and gently', crying 'without violence... as if it had all happened long ago'. A devout Christian, she turned to her faith for support, hoping to 'attain some feeling of submission to the will of Heaven'.

For Charles, Annie's death achieved an almost cosmological significance. Hours after her death, he was found still by the bedside, weeping inconsol-

ably. What he later described as an ‘insufferable grief’ served to shatter his belief in a moral and just universe and convince him of the underlying cruelty of nature. The horror of Annie’s suffering also sounded the deathknell for his already teetering belief in Christianity.

In the wake of her death, he threw himself with ever greater fervour into his life’s work: the formulation of one of the most influential scientific theories of the last two hundred years; a theory in which suffering and cruelty became the engine of evolutionary progress; a theory in which, as some latter-day philosophers have declared, there was no longer any room for God.

It is a very personal story. But the divide between Emma and Charles also serves to symbolise the changing role and status of religion in human affairs. In Emma’s world, the appropriate place to search for consolation over the loss of Annie was still her faith. For Charles, and for an increasing proportion of the Western world in the intervening 150 years, things had changed.⁵

The world after Darwin — yes, you’ve guessed it, the girl’s father was Charles Darwin — became an increasingly secular place. God was dead, trumpeted Nietzsche; religion was ‘knocked to pieces’, said George Bernard Shaw: “and where there had been God, a cause, a faith that the universe was ordered, and therefore a sense of moral responsibility as part of that order, there was now an utter void. Chaos had come again. The effect at first was exhilarating,” wrote Shaw. “We had the runaway child’s sense of freedom before it gets hungry and lonely and frightened.”

The functions of theodicy

The demise of God left open the question of meaning, the function of theodicy, in the modern world. My argument here is that some part of this function has become ‘internalised’ within consumerism itself, in some more or less precise ways. This isn’t to suggest that religious theodicy is no longer relevant, or that a consumerist theodicy is even remotely successful. But if this substitution of secular for religious theodicy is happening, if this fundamental task of world maintenance has really been handed over to consumerism, then it’s a pretty important thing to face up to.

⁵ For further historical details of the story recounted here see eg. Desmond/Moore 1991.

To be effective in its role of legitimation or sense-making, a theodicy must possess certain key characteristics. I want to distinguish six inter-related aspects of theodicy justice, reward, consolation, ontological security, transcendence, and eschatology.⁶ There are clear links between these different functions and they work together to defend us against anomie and protect the sacred canopy.

Together they have to demonstrate that the sacred order does not discriminate arbitrarily between different individuals (*justice*). A key element in maintaining this sense of justice is to ensure that some form of mechanism exists which dispenses compensations consistently in relation to 'good' and 'bad' behaviours (*reward*).

This compensatory mechanism is challenged by two specific conditions in the real world. The first of these is the persistence — and sometimes even the flourishing — of wrong-doers. The idea that 'evil' may prosper is deeply disturbing to the set of moral meanings established in society. Nonetheless it can, with some effort, be legitimated within broadly secular moral codes and practices.

A more intractable challenge is presented by the sometimes arbitrary incursions of suffering and loss with which we are always confronted (either individually or collectively) at some point in our lives. These have two specific forms: one is related to the loss of our loved ones; the second arises from our awareness of our own mortality.⁷ A credible theodicy must therefore offer plausible compensatory functions in the face of bereavement and suffering (*consolation*). It must also provide us with a working defence against the pervasive anxiety engendered by awareness of our own mortality (*ontological security*).

Some of the compensatory mechanisms established through theodicy may operate within the constraints of this world. But the challenge of providing an entirely secular compensatory mechanism is immense, particularly in the face of loss and existential anxiety. Most theodicies draw in part on compensatory mechanisms which operate in some other realm (*transcendence*), perhaps at some future point in time (*eschatology*).

6 Religious eschatology is the 'study of last or final things.' In secular terms, it is concerned with the question of 'how things turn out in the end.'

7 For discussion of the importance of these 'anomic phenomena' even in modern society see for example Giddens 1991; Becker 1973; Berger 1967.

The importance of the functions of transcendence and eschatology to theodicy is quite precisely to establish and maintain the authenticity of this other compensatory realm. A response from a participant in a study carried out at the University of Surrey illustrates how theodicial functions operate even on a day-to-day level for religious people (Jackson/Pepper 2010):

“You know, sometimes, something that really opened my eyes the other day driving on the M3 motorway. Traffic terrible, and my husband is not going to go this Sunday to church, or my eldest daughter baptise my grandchildren, and that makes me very, very sad, very unhappy. And on the motorway near Winchester, going past and these grey skies, a horrible time, raining. And there is this little bit of light, and there on the motorway there is a cross somewhere on a hill, and the light was shining on this cross and I was sitting down there under the rain, I have a meeting at nine o’clock, and I am sitting down there watching and this light shining on this cross and I say, yes you are there.”
(Female, Roman Catholic, 50s)

This response suggests a number of different theodicial functions. For instance it suggests access to consolation for life’s woes. The curious other-worldly quality of the light on the cross has elements of transcendence; and the symbolism of the cross as a metaphor for the redemption and future salvation of ordinary sinners also evokes a kind of eschatology.

Given the declining role of religion (especially in Western Europe) and the importance of religion and theodicy in world maintenance, it is an obvious question to ask: how does modern society maintain its world view? How does it defend itself against anomie? What structures and devices allow it to establish cognitive, moral and emotional meaning in the world? And how are these meanings legitimated in the face of suffering and loss? In other words where is the consumerist theodicy?

I want to argue of course that modern society has internalised a number of specific functions of world maintenance within the dynamics and organisation of consumerism. Since every society needs a sacred canopy, and since every sacred canopy must be defended or legitimated, it would be quite surprising if this were not the case for the consumer society as well.

The language of stuff

At first sight, the idea that material commodities play any particular role in the establishment of a socially-constructed nomos is an odd one. From a functional perspective, one thinks of material goods mainly as fulfilling certain essential physical or physiological tasks in the world. Psychological and social tasks are more obviously construed in terms of less material constructs: thoughts, conversations, norms, institutions perhaps. How is it that goods themselves can be asked to do this work?

This is one of the key lessons from the sociology of consumption. It is now broadly accepted that material things are deeply implicated in the social and psychological fabric of our lives. This role depends heavily on the human tendency to imbue material artefacts with symbolic meaning.⁸ And this ability provides an extremely influential ‘osmosis’ between the physical and the cultural world, between material and ‘non-material’ aspects of our lives.⁹

Consider this wonderful example from one of the respondents in Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton’s (1981) delightful study on the construction of meaning through everyday domestic objects. It illustrates my point perfectly. The respondent, an 8 year old North American boy, is asked by the interviewer: “What do all your special objects, taken together mean to you?” He replies:

“They make me feel like I’m part of the world.”

“How do they do that?”

“Because when I look at them, I keep my eyes on them and I think what they mean. Like I have a bank from the First National, and when I look at it I think what it means. It means money for our cities and our country, it means tax for the government. My stuffed bunny reminds me of wildlife, all the rabbits and dogs and cats. That toy animal over there reminds me of circuses and the way they train animals so they don’t get hurt. That’s what I mean. All my special things make me feel like I’m part of the world.”

It is probably easy to supply plenty of personal examples of the ‘evocative power’ of material goods. Broadly speaking the view of consumer society

8 The literature in support of this point is enormous. For a summary see Jackson 2011.

9 For a fuller discussion of this point, see Jackson 2006.

which emerges from this literature can be summed up by acknowledging with Mary Douglas (1976, 207) that:

“[a]n individual’s main objective in consumption is to help create the social world and to find a credible place in it.”

Material goods, in other words, are deeply implicated in the task of world maintenance, in a social, as much as in a physical sense. But the question remains: how does the consumer society address the critical question of theodicy? In particular, can we find evidence of the key functions identified in religious theodicies?

Consumerism as theodicy

Let us consider first the function of justice. Perhaps strangely, we find that concerns about justice in the distribution of consumer goods run like a constant refrain through modern society. It is evident in the language of consumer sovereignty, equal opportunity, fair trade and freedom of choice. The importance of fairness is also uncovered in qualitative studies of consumer attitudes.

Why should only the privileged few have access to the delights of fast cars, big houses and holidays in the sun? The consumerist ideal must allow everyone the possibility of this access if it is not to be condemned from within. At the macro-economic level, the entire ethos of consumerism is ‘legitimated’ by allegiance to the idea that consumption growth is a ‘rising tide’ that will (eventually) ‘raise all boats’.

The idea that consumerism offers to reward people for ‘good’ behaviour is also very widespread. A meritocratic society heralds high consumption lifestyles and celebrity status as the pinnacle of social achievement. And the discourse around consumption as a reward for good behaviour is also evident in consumer studies as the following quote illustrates (Csikszentmihalyi/Rochberg-Halton 1981):

“My Cadillac has become to me a thing I deserve. I wonder if others say things. I’ve had comments: ‘You’re rich,’ from customers. They may even resent it — I don’t care. It shows you make so much more money. It represents my right to own something associated with successful people.”

Even those with religious backgrounds tend to use the metaphor of reward to legitimate consumption behaviour, as the following response from our qualitative study of religious groups illustrates (Pepper et al. 2006):

“But I find myself standing in the middle of a shop and actually praying, having an argument with God, I really don’t need that. No you don’t need it, but you’re allowed to treat yourself sometimes.”

The link between consumption and ontological security — the management of deep underlying uncertainties about mortality and our place in the world — is also well-supported by the evidence.¹⁰

“The human animal is a beast that dies” said Big Daddy in Tennessee Williams’s play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. “And if he’s got money he buys and buys and buys. And I think the reason he buys everything he can is that in the back of his mind, he has the crazy hope that one of his purchases will be life ever-lasting.”

And what precisely are we to make of President Bush’s epoch defining call to arms in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy. ‘Mrs Bush and I would like to encourage Americans everywhere to go out shopping.’

A particularly telling contribution to the evidence comes from something called terror management theory which has its roots in Ernest Becker’s groundbreaking book ‘The Denial of Death’. Modern psychological experiments show that when people are exposed to cues that make them more aware of death — heightened mortality salience, it’s called — they tend to act to enhance their own self-esteem and protect their cultural world view. In a consumer society, self-esteem striving typically has profoundly materialistic outcomes. Just like George Bush asks them to. People go out shopping. Fascinatingly, however, there is also evidence to suggest that this urge is moderated in people who express strong allegiance to some particular faith.¹¹

Our apparent addiction to material things cannot entirely be construed in hedonistic or materialistic ways. Yes, perhaps there is something pathological about the intensity with which we cling to material goods. “Hollow hands clasp ludicrous possessions”, wrote Ernest Dichter in 1964. “Because they are links in the chain of life. If it breaks they are truly lost” (Dichter 1964).

10 Key contributions to the literature include the following: Giddens 1991; Baumann 1998, Campbell, 2003.

11 Becker 1973. See also: Arndt et al. 2003.

But material goods also facilitate consolation. Sacred goods remind us of those we love, of dreams we hold, of our hopes for the future. At a more mundane level the seemingly endless availability consoles us for the temporary nature of our lives, for our disappointments and failures. It assures us that society holds out the promise of better lives (for us and for our descendants) in the future.

Transcendence also runs like a current through our relationship to consumer goods. From Colin Campbell's concept of 'hedonic dreaming' to Russell Belk's explorations of sacredness and consumer desire, the evidence suggests that we use commodities both to dream of higher things and sometimes quite literally to escape or get away from it all.¹²

The evocative power of material things allows us to protect our ideals from the harsh scrutiny of daylight by offering us continual hope for a better world. But for goods to serve the cause of hope, as Grant McCracken (1990) has pointed out, they must be inexhaustible in supply. And it is precisely their continual failure truly to embody our ideals that makes them so successful as a strategy in the never-ending pursuit of 'displaced meaning'.

As for a consumer eschatology, the final state of affairs is not final at all. Rather it is a continually increasing flow of goods, making the world a better and better place. Not just for us but for our descendants. The endgame played out by consumerism is one in which the ability to go on consuming for generation after generation is the ultimate goal. A kind of heaven on earth, if not for us, then for our descendants. Vincent Miller has argued that consumer desire has completely 'derailed' eschatology by allowing desire itself to become the object of human striving.

"Consumer seduction is constituted against a horizon of possibility" he writes. "It is constantly looking beyond the present for more fulfilling alternatives. Expectation is endlessly aroused. But ... this expectation is as shallow as it is broad. Joy is sought in desire itself. Consumer anticipation is at heart a way of accommodating the endless repeat of the same, of finding pleasure in a world without hope." The consumer eschatology in this view is a kind of anti-eschatology — a study in denial of the fear that things will ultimately turn out badly — for all of us.

12 Campbell 1987; Belk et al. 1989; Belk et al. 2003.

Beyond Denial and Rapture

What I have tried to show in this short discussion is that consumerism has appropriated the functional importance of theodicy through the role that material commodities play in our lives. As I have already indicated, this theodicy is not entirely pathological. But it is clearly flawed.

Its conceptualisation of justice is tenuous, its framing and disbursement of rewards is iniquitous. It is deeply but perhaps perversely seductive in offering a rather fleeting kind of ontological security, one that needs continually to be reinforced by engaging in yet more consumption. But the material and environmental implications of this consolation are profound, even as its success as a psychological strategy is short-lived. It does offer a form of transcendence, but the degree to which this facilitates any real hope or consolation for our losses is suspect. Far from creating a credible eschatology, consumerism appears to be a continuous exercise in denial of our own mortality and of the widespread suffering in the world.

One thing is abundantly clear from this analysis. If consumerism is so profoundly implicated in world maintenance — a core element in the sacred canopy of modern capitalist society — any attempts to counter it through exhortation are bound to failure. If consumption plays such a vital role in the construction and maintenance of our social world, then asking people to give up material commodities is asking them to risk a kind of social suicide. People will rightly resist threats to identity. They will resist threats to meaning. They will ask quite legitimate questions of the motives of the moral persuaders.

Instead, we might usefully conclude, countering consumerism must start from more robust secular (or religious) theodicy: the building of meaning structures, communities of meaning, that lie outside the realm of the market; and that offer credible answers to the deep foundational questions that continue to haunt us. In a sense this response brings us back full circle to the starting point for this article. The growth-based society is predicated on the relentless desire for material stuff. But this perverse dynamic is deeply destructive and in the final analysis has little or nothing to do with meaningful prosperity. Worse it is now in danger of undermining the conditions on which future prosperity depends.

At the end of the day, prosperity goes beyond material pleasures. It transcends material concerns. It resides in the quality of our lives and in the

health and happiness of our families. It is present in the strength of our relationships and our trust in the community. It is evidenced by our satisfaction at work and our sense of shared meaning and purpose. It hangs on our potential to participate fully in the life of society. Prosperity consists in our ability to flourish as human beings — within the ecological limits of a finite planet. The challenge for our society is to create the conditions under which this is possible. It is the most urgent task of our times.

Ultimately, this analysis serves to remind us of the fragility of consumer society. Of the emptiness of consumerist lives. Angst essen Seele auf. Our systematic failure to address existential anxiety robs society of meaning and blinds us to the suffering of others; to persistent poverty; to the extinction of species; to the health of global ecosystems. The consumerist theodicy offers no answers to any of these challenges. And as the theologian Kenneth Surin has remarked:

“A theodicy is not worth heeding if it does not allow the screams of our society to be heard.” (Surin 1986, 52).

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