

Climacus & others:

|| 2 ||

- temperance

- refusing

material goods & desire for them

- humility (vs. pride)

Captive to Consumerism

The only thing that consoles us for our miseries is distraction, yet that is the greatest of our wretchednesses. Because that is what mainly prevents us from thinking about ourselves and leads us imperceptibly to damnation. Without it we should be bored, and boredom would force us to search for a firmer way out, but distraction entertains us and leads us imperceptibly to death.

—Blaise Pascal

What do American emerging adults think and feel about the mass consumer society in which they have grown up? Are they comfortable with mass consumerism? Do they like it? Or do they have concerns about the environmental impact of mass consumerism or the misplaced values and priorities that some critics see in consumer materialism? What role does the buying and consumption of material things play in the lives, values, and goals of emerging adults today? This chapter explores the place of mass consumerism and materialistic visions of the good life among emerging adults. After a brief view of some survey statistics, we explore in some depth today's emerging adults' views of mass consumerism. In that discussion we focus on how critical or uncritical they are of our culture of material consumption. We then shift to examine emerging adults' outlooks on what makes for a good human life, and how material consumption fits into that vision.

First, in our nationally representative telephone survey, we asked emerging adults some questions about materialism and consumerism. The findings help to provide a larger context for the analysis of our follow-up interviews with them. Among emerging adults ages 18–23, 65 percent said that shopping and buying things give them a lot of pleasure. Fifty-four percent said that they would be happier if they could afford to buy more things. And 47 percent felt that the things they own say a lot about how well they are doing in life. These are survey questions about which some respondents likely feel a social-desirability bias not to

give answers that would make others view them as materialistic or shallow. Nevertheless, between one-half to two-thirds of emerging adults said that their well-being can be measured by what they own, that buying more things would make them happier, and that they get a lot of pleasure simply from shopping and buying things. A majority of emerging adults today thus appear quite positively disposed to materialism and consumerism, at least as far as surveys can measure that.

What about our in-person interviews? What did we learn there? Our discussions with emerging adults focused on possible practical and moral questions concerning mass consumerism. What do they think about the general topic of shopping, buying, and consuming material things like clothes, cars, music, etc.? How do they think or feel about the consumption of material products that nearly all Americans engage in? Are there any limits to what people should possess? What are they, and why? What are reasonable goals when it comes to buying, owning, and consuming things in their own lives? What we found is that few emerging adults expressed concerns about the potential limits or dilemmas involved in a lifestyle devoted to boundless material consumption. Most are either positive or neutral about mass consumer materialism. Only a few have reservations or doubts.

We went into this consumerism section of the interviews expecting at least some emerging adults to display a heightened awareness about environmental problems associated with mass consumer economies. We thought we would hear a variety of perspectives, including some "green" and "limits-to-growth" viewpoints—especially since a sizeable proportion of those we interviewed are in college. We expected at least some of them to speak critically about the emptiness or dangers of all-out materialism, even if that talk was only rhetorical banter for the sake of considering all possible sides. We also went into our interviews expecting to hear emerging adults talk about the political and military complications of such dependence on foreign natural resources like oil. And we expected some to emphasize the importance of personal, inward, subjective, or spiritual growth or richness over the material consumptions of products. But we heard almost none of that. We actually started off in these discussions very cautiously, determined not to be leading in these directions with our questions, since we assumed that many emerging adults would be primed to criticize mass consumerism. But when we heard no such critiques, we began to press harder. Soon we were nearly pushing the emerging adults we interviewed to consider any plausible problematic side to mass consumerism, if they could. They could not.

Even when we started deliberately leading emerging adults to address such questions, very few wanted to go there. Most emerging adults simply had very little to say that was critical, nor were they worried or even much aware of the

possible questions or concerns about mass consumerism. For the vast majority, mass consumerism was good, end of story. Some others thought that mass consumerism may have some problems, they admitted, but none that they can understand or that need to affect their own lifestyles and goals.

relationship w/ previous chapter! — no limits
 Mass Consumerism—What, Me Worry?

For nearly all emerging adults, mass consumerism is either an unqualified good in life, or it may have some problems, though none that they can understand or do anything about, and so therefore none with which they should be concerned.

Perfectly happy. Contemporary emerging adults are either true believers or complacent conformists when it comes to mass consumerism. Most like shopping and buying things. Most enjoy consuming products and services. It is the way of life with which they are familiar and content. What problems with mass consumerism could there be? This was the general outlook of emerging adults on mass consumerism. But different individuals expressed it in slightly different ways, emphasizing somewhat different themes, even if a good amount of overlap among them is clear. One group was unabashedly enthusiastic about mass consumerism. They strongly emphasized its importance in driving the American economy and improving people's way of life. One, for example, said about mass consumerism, "It's important, keeps the economy going. Going into too much debt is always a very negative thing. But you gotta do what you can, stimulate everything." Another argued:

Some people like that stuff, you know? The way I think about it is, I see the people all going to the mall wasting their money. But then again, it's not like they can afford mansions, not like everyone can be Bill Gates. So, lots of people get that simple pleasure in life, a lot of people's pleasure in life derives from that consumerism. So, if you have to spend 70 hours a week in retail to afford that, I'm not really going to criticize. Consumerism is good for the economy.

Should there be any limits at all to what people consume? "No," said one, "in our capitalist society, none. [Just] if you can afford it." In response to those who might say that materialism is bad for the environment, that mass consumerism may reflect misplaced life priorities, or that it undermines relationships or spiritual life, another emerging adult replied:

They're probably right. But at the same time I guess this is one place where I'm just like, "This is the world we live in, either get on board or

be unhappy." I don't really know what to tell you. I guess I just really don't agree with people who are like, "Let's go granola." That's really unnecessary. You don't have to live that way anymore. You have the opportunity to live better. That's why your parents did what they could for you, and their parents did for them, is to give you this. We are improved. Be improved. *really?*

Here we find a vision for self-improvement, for growth and transcendence beyond the old. But the improvement in this case does not concern self or morals or social justice, but rather material lifestyles and personal consumption. Yet another emerging adult we interviewed reflected a similarly uncritical mentality:

I am the ultimate American when it comes to that, I mean, I got 500 bucks in my pocket one day, and two days later, I'm looking to make my next 500. I spend my money, man I am great for the economy. If I won the lottery I would stimulate the economy on my own. Because I spend my money that I don't save, unless I set [a savings goal] of what I make, I spend.

Likewise, this young man sees a synergy between the enjoyments of personal consumption and the health of the national economy: "I buy a lot of movies and CDs. I joke that is what I do, instead of my friends who buy cigarettes and beer. I don't know, whatever makes people happy—it's like, our society is based on buying stuff, so I guess it helps." Does he think there should be any limits to what people maybe should possess? "Again, to each his own. I don't like buying a lot of stuff, but if it makes you happy, that's what your hobby is, and you can afford it, whatever." *Is it?*

Another set of emerging adults did not talk about helping the economy but rather more individualistically about how shopping and consumerism make them feel good, help them be respected, and build self-confidence. Consider the following representative quote, for example:

It feels good to be able to get things that you want and you work for the money. If you want something, you go get it. It makes your life more comfortable and I guess it just makes you feel good (about yourself) as well. You want to get some, you work for it and you can get it. I think it's a good thing to buy what you want if you work for it, because when you work for something, then you gain that accomplishment, it's not like you were just given money, I want to get this, you know, I'll buy that. It's like you actually work for that thing so you feel that you deserve it, you earned it. You earned that thing that you wanted. You weren't just given it. *getting some*
What if you were

Here working, earning, buying, and enjoying are key to achieving self-respect. In this second case, consuming material goods is a basic source of personal happiness and self-esteem. "Buying stuff really makes me happy. I know how bad that sounds, but seriously." Why does that sound bad, we asked? "Because you shouldn't be that materialistic, you shouldn't define your happiness on the things that you have or want." Why not? What is wrong with that, we pressed?

Okay, when I'm having a bad day, a bad week, whatever, there is nothing that makes me feel better about myself more than going and buying myself a whole new wardrobe. I feel like a better person, I feel prettier, I feel more intelligent sometimes, I feel cleaner, it's just a great feeling. I feel self-sufficient 'cause I bought it on my own.

Note that the last response does not actually answer the question asked, about why being happy with shopping sounds bad, but rather ignores it and presents more information justifying the need to shop. Exchanges with other interviewees were similar: "I love shopping, I love music. I think it's fine. You know, maybe not necessary to buy a \$10,000 purse or whatever, but I like shopping, I can't really go against it." Does she think there are limits to what people should possess? "I don't know, I mean, if you want it, buy it. There's certain things that are just, I think, unnecessary. But, you know, if you think it's necessary in your life and you can afford it, more power to you." Might mass consumption be destructive to society in any way, we ask? "I love to shop. My sister doesn't, I do. I love to shop, I love going to the mall, I like buying things. I don't consider myself materialistic, I don't depend on my material things to make myself who I am, but I do love to shop." Again, the answer to whether mass consumption might be destructive is simply "I love to shop." The premise of the question itself is apparently invisible.

A third theme among emerging adults on the topic of mass consumerism is the avoidance of making any evaluative judgments of anyone's consumption habits. It is entirely an individual matter and should be driven by whatever makes people happy. Thinking collectively about these concerns as a society is either inconceivable or illegitimate. It's up to individual people. Consider, as examples, the following quotes. "I think everyone has what they like," one young woman declared.

If you have a thousand shoes, that is all you. If you want a thousand shoes, cool, that is all what you want. I personally wouldn't want a thousand shoes, I love shoes, but I wouldn't want that many because I don't value spending my money on that. But I don't want to judge someone else and say you can't or shouldn't have that.

In response to the idea that a person might own 12 mansions and 20 cars, another emerging adult said, "I think it's kind of silly, but hey, to each their own." Yet another said to a similar question, "I don't really have any positive or negative feelings towards the issue. People should get things if it works for them, if that's what they want." So is any amount that people buy too much? "No. I don't feel like that. I think people should do what makes them happy." She then continued:

I guess I don't really think about consumerism as far as its effects on society. I think I don't like to have too much stuff like clutter. I do get rid of stuff a lot. I like to shop. I'll be honest with you. I am a woman. I like to go shopping. [But] I don't really think about long-term effects on society and mass production and mass consumption.

Finally, another only qualified the "happy individual" criteria with her personal problem with rich people who do not also give to those who have material needs:

I'm definitely a consumer. I like to buy things. I like to have things. Yeah, I think it's great, capitalism and giving consumers choices are all good. I mean, you can have too many cars, too many boats, two planes, which is kind of over the top. People can definitely get excessive in a lot of ways. There is definitely a limit. But, it's whatever makes you happy. If somebody needs all those things, then they need all those things. But if they're not giving back to people who are more needy than, yeah, I've got a problem with that.

Yet even in this example, it's still ultimately "whatever makes you happy."

As seen to some degree in earlier quotes, a large group of the emerging adults—about one out of four we interviewed—also emphasize "whatever makes you happy," but clearly added the qualification of "within your means." Anybody can buy whatever they want, in other words, as long as they can afford it. The only possible limit to mass consumption is the danger of consumers going into too much debt. The standard line here is, essentially, as one emerging adult stated, "I'm not really concerned about mass consumption. If you have the money, you can buy what you want in society." Another told us, "I don't have any particular thoughts on that, not really. But I think sometimes it's ridiculous how much stuff costs, like \$80 on a pair of shoes, it's just dumb." What, we asked, about any possible limits on consumption? "I don't think so. If you have the money to buy it, regardless how I think about the product, you should still have the right to buy it."

Even emerging adults who complain about consumption fads in the end come back to the issue of purchasing power, as in the following quote: "A lot of

people focus on material things, me included. We look at labels, as far as what one person, this celebrity, wears I want to wear. A lot of people pay attention to material objects and name brands and stuff." So are there any limits, we asked, to what people should possess? "I don't think that there are any limits. As long as you can afford it. People talk, you know, 'You shouldn't buy this, you shouldn't buy that,' but if you've been successful and well enough off, I think that you should indulge yourself." It is not only upper-middle-class emerging adults who think that money justifies consumption. Emerging adults who are just struggling to get by financially also share the same view: "I wish I had more money, no, I have a really hard time. Me and my husband have been trying to be really good, but it's gotten to the point now where I feel bad like if I go even to Wal-Mart to buy me a shirt; but if I go out and buy my kids stuff, I don't feel as bad like that." Does she think there are any limits to what people should possess? "I think if you have the money, you can own whatever you want."

It's not only that money can purchase anything you desire. Some emerging adults, including the woman quoted above, seem to assume that humans can consume endlessly, since, they believe, if a product is man-made, then it can be remade infinitely:

I'd say if you got the money, get it. Just don't go invest all your time and money in materialistic stuff, because there is always going to be something newer and better. If you can afford it, go ahead and get it. I don't really too much worry about massive consumption because, if you can buy it, then I am pretty sure that it was made by man, so it can be made again. Unless it's like gas, 'cause like I know, the oil is running out or whatever and so, that's like halfway made by man—they turn it from petroleum into gas. But see now they're making cars that don't even have to run off of gas. So just park it in your garage and plug it in.

Natural resources are apparently endless, and when they are not, technological developments will overcome our limitations. Therefore, the only factor that matters is 'if you got the money.' Similarly, this emerging adult explained, "If you have the means to have what you need and some of what you want, I don't think there's a limit, that's fine. Like nobody's limiting Donald Trump from buying this state [New York], but he has the means to have the things that he needs and the luxury of having things that he wants." Are there any potential problems, then, when it comes to the topic of mass consumerism?

I do think there's too much jealousy when people are like, "Well, she got a Range Rover for her 16th birthday and all I got was my brother's old Camry," you know something like that. I think that's the problem, when

people start being jealous of people who are more fortunate. There's always gonna be jealousy. I'm not trying to say that it's gonna be like everybody is, "I'm happy with my beat-up old car with no windshield." But I think everyone just needs to accept what they have or strive for better or they just need to stop [complaining].

Again, any problems that might exist—other than a possible inability to afford things—has to do with individual attitudes. People should either live within their means or try to increase their means—and avoid jealousy and envy.

Another variant on the common "mass consumerism is completely fine" theme emphasizes the inevitability of materialism and mass consumption. These emerging adults are less likely to think that mass consumerism is necessarily a good thing. They do not evaluate it with the same positive zeal as some of their peers quoted above. But they do think that it is necessary to the functioning of our economy and thus an inevitable part of life that we ought to accept and enjoy if we can. One, for example, observed, "I think that's in my everyday life, so I don't know about the topic but it's in everybody's everyday life. I don't know." Another said, "Um, it's capitalism, kind of a way of life. It's [laughing] kind of what America has evolved into. America sort of centers on it, it's necessary to survive." Yet another said, "I don't know if this is just naive, but I think somebody is making it, so it's kind of good, they have a job because of it. Somebody's making that car, wherever it's being made, they have a job, they're earning money hopefully. I don't know, I guess that one is a little too big for me." Still another explained how consumer spending was necessary for the economy:

After learning a little bit about economics, see, it's a good thing. In high school economics I learned about gross domestic product. Basically, the more people spend, the better the economy. The economy is like a bathtub with three faucets. The biggest faucet is consumer spending. [Another] one's government spending, and the other one is, I think, business spending. Then there are three drains. One goes back to consumer spending, the other goes to the government, and the other is personal savings. So in a recession the problem is people holding onto their money because they're scared, when what they really need to do is spend money to put more into the bathtub to help the economy.

Finally, this emerging adult acknowledged that a lot of consumerism wastes money but is justified anyway because it creates jobs and makes people happy: "I think people who spend a lot of money spend it in the wrong stores that don't really help out the economy. But it does give jobs to people based on money, so that's good. I see people buying frivolous things [and wonder] why would you

I guess who lives?
 *// waste your money on that? But, if that's going to make them happy, I suppose [it's fine]. Are there any limits, we asked, to what people might possess? "That's personal feelings, if they can live with wasting all their money when people are starving. But no, there shouldn't be restrictions." But, we pressed, might all of this material consumption be bad for the planet? "It's probably not good, [but] you're not going to change how people are." In short, mass consumerism is part of an immutable way of life and individuals operating as consumers within the system have no responsibilities to consider other than their own desires and happiness.

Another small group of those we interviewed expressed no problem with mass consumerism per se, but said they wished that wealthy people would be more generous in their voluntary financial giving to the needy. The following example of this view was expressed by an emerging adult woman:

What is wealth?
 I go back and forth on that. On the one hand, you know, capitalism, you get what you can, which I am all about, you work hard and you get the benefits. But I think you have some responsibility when being well-off to help those who aren't. If you look at Bill and Melinda Gates, no one cares that they own a huge place, because they have done so much good and people think they deserve their place. Which I think is fine. They take so much responsibility for people, and I think that's amazing, like if they wanted to, they could own everything, but they choose to do good, which I think is the ideal for people.

Likewise, this one mentioned—in the course of describing her own excessive shopping and expanding wardrobe—the importance of the wealthy "giving back":

Oh my lord, I have an addiction to shopping lately that's developed ever since I started working in retail, and it's gotten bad. I think that we are definitely a consumer nation. It can become a problem, I don't know, I think that when you really look at it on the grander scale it's probably really detrimental. But it's doing wonders for my closet [laughs]! But I do think too much wealth is outrageous, and I really do think that it's important to give back [to the needy].

How, we asked, would someone know that they have too much money or too many belongings? "I don't know," she replied, laughing.

Inconsequential concerns. So far, the slightly different approaches named above, which are all essentially quite content with mass consumerism, account for 61 percent of our interviewed emerging adults. Another 30 percent, equally male and female, fall into the category of expressing some concerns about mass

consumerism but thinking that they can do nothing about it. In the end, mass consumerism remains in place and their lives remain unchanged. With these people, then, we begin to hear some critiques of mass consumerism, but nothing that makes any difference in the end. They suspect that there is probably something wrong with excessive material consumption. But they do not fully understand what that might be; they tend to think that whatever might be wrong is someone else's behavior or attitude; and they are not actually affected much if at all in their own consumption behaviors.

One version of this general outlook focuses on something being wrong with people owning too many material possessions. Typical of this position is the statement "I think sometimes people are ridiculous with what they buy, but if that's what they want to do and they have the money and they worked for it, that's their choice." This evaluation moves us a bit beyond the "perhaps unnecessary" or "a little silly" mentioned by the previous group toward a more overtly negative evaluation. Yet what exactly is wrong with too many possessions is not usually explained. And often the perceived benefits of mass consumerism to the economy are injected into conversations here as well. But something about owning too much does seem to bother some emerging adults, though rarely enough that it makes any difference in their own lives. In any case, like the previous group, these emerging adults think that each individual is only responsible for and accountable to themselves for what they buy and own—nobody can say anything to or about anyone else. For instance, one said, "I do believe there is such a thing as excess material possessions. But am I the one to judge how much someone should have? No. I think some people just overdo it, if people are buying stuff to make themselves happy then I think that there's something a little off." Part of what is going on here is emerging adult ambivalence of thinking other people sometimes consume too much, while also wanting to be able to buy a lot of things themselves, as with this case:

If someone has too much money or too many houses? Yes, I think there should be a limit, because some people have five houses and millions of dollars while other people are living on the streets. I don't think that's fair. However, I think if I was a person with five houses and all that money I wouldn't quite see it the same way, so and I think people who work hard deserve to be paid well. But, I don't know, that's a hard one to balance. I'd actually like to have five houses, I'd like to have that, I don't know, I think that's a little too much. I'd like to have a nice large house, be financially comfortable, have maybe two cars, jets, a boat. I mean I'd like to have all that stuff one day, and that's why I feel, I don't think there should be a limit, but at times I still, where I am now, I think there should be limits, but I don't know.

*"fair" as mask for
 resentment*

And this:

I think we are an overly materialistic society. At the same time, I like new things. It's tough because I do enjoy having new things. I think it's also very important to sustain a strong economy just from a political standpoint. At the same time, from a religious standpoint, I've got to be wary of material [things] or being overly materialistic. I mean, I feel like such a hypocrite talking about this, but I do see definite problems with how consumer centered our society has become, that's mostly the consumer part of it but the disposable part of that consumerism, you know, people keep a cell phone for six months and then trash it for no good reason, it's just out of control. There're definitely negative impacts from that on countries and on the environment, whatever, on ourselves even. But I think, again, I mean, I enjoy the act of shopping, I enjoy being able to purchase things that I want. So, I don't know. But I think there's a point where it gets out of hand. *I just haven't found it*

This mildly conflicted viewpoint of both believing that Americans are too materialistic and feeling the personal desire to enjoy materialism are expressed well by this emerging adult:

I'm probably somewhere in the middle on consuming. I do think that there's just too much stuff. We buy too much and make too much, but it makes the world turn better and then people get paid and have jobs because we buy too much stuff. I don't know. Yeah, we should buy less stuff. But it's not going to happen. So I'll keep buying my \$4 coffees from Starbucks and, you know, I'd be in a \$60 jeans from Abercrombie that I don't really need but really want and just go home with.

In short, this group of emerging adults responds: sure, there may be problems, however vague my understanding of them is, but nothing is going to change, so go out and enjoy spending money. Central to their inability to envision any change in our mass consumerist way of life are three key assumptions of liberal individualism. The first is that everyone, including the rich, has fairly earned their money through hard work. The second is that no person or society has the right to impose any external restrictions on any other individual. And the third is that people are naturally driven by self-interested acquisitive motives, which ultimately cannot be denied or deterred. All three of those assumptions are evident in this emerging adult's uncertain assessment of mass consumerism:

just the way things are - can't change

I think there should be limits to what people possess, but there are people out there who work harder than others. It's almost like, how is that fair if we say there's a limit on what you can own? There are some things that we hear people buy are kinda ridiculous, like a \$20 million yacht. It's like something that you use once a year, maybe, and you say, "Oh, okay, that seems a little odd." But, yeah, it seems unfair to put limits and say, "Hey, you can't buy that." But at the same time, too, there is a reason that some of them have that money, because they have worked harder. They have earned their way to get all of that riches and stuff. It's like how can we, who don't have it, say, "You can't get that." You know, if he really wants that, then, you know, that's what he's gonna get.

Another told us, "I don't know, we're a consumer society [laughs]. I guess ideally I would like a very socialist society where everybody sort of shares everything but I guess I couldn't place a threshold. Certain things just seem ridiculous to me, when people own so much or have so much money who don't think that they can just live kind of regularly." But greater moderation or equality are ideals that will never be realized.

Among these emerging adults, some others tend to worry about the relationship of mass consumerism to human happiness. A few emerging adults suggest that material possessions are simply unable to provide people with happiness, as in this case: "I think people are so miserable in their lives that they're trying to buy happiness, and the advertising and marketing people get rich off of the unhappiness and insecurity of people. They sell an image people want so they buy and buy and buy in a desperate attempt to fill a gaping hole of miserable cynicism." Still, this problem with happiness is conceived as one that concerns other individuals, not the one speaking. Another emerging adult talked about people working jobs that make them unhappy in order to be able to afford the consumer purchases they want:

We're definitely a materialistic society and the average American usually is a consumer. We're all consumers, technically. That's what gets to me sometimes. I work eight hours inside a building. I don't think human beings were meant to do that, sit inside for eight hours and just move your hands. That seems so terrible. It doesn't have anything to do with hunter-gatherer survival, basic survival. So it feels like sometimes we're just wasting our lives away, just so we can buy that new car, new house, kind of thing. We work to live in this country. If you don't work you're going to have a terrible life, living on the street kind of thing.

*goal of life: work
survive*

So does he think consumerism ought to have any limits? "There aren't any limits, not really. I mean in a capitalistic society you just want to get ahead, so the more you have, hey, more power to you, kind of thing. Go for it." This same person also said, "I would like to have a house, a car, the American dream kind of thing, just a set-up job, decent pay kind of thing." Finally, one emerging adult voiced concerns about the misplaced priority of seeking happiness through shopping itself:

I think about it, because some people buy things unnecessarily. Like, I've met people that are buying underwear or shoes because they didn't feel like looking for or washing their own clothes. That's ridiculous to me. I personally get what I want. Like, I've had my Air Nikes, my uptowns for almost two years now. But I don't really wear them that much and they're in good condition. So there's no need for me to buy one every summer, just so they can shine when the sun hits it. That's how I feel about it. Some people will just buy because they like buying or because they're having a sale or whatever, so they shop.

A related issue that some emerging adults voiced, echoing a theme above, concerns mass consumerism's ability to tempt some people into living beyond their means. This is a stronger response than the "as long as you can afford it" idea we heard above. One, for instance, emphasized paying bills before going out to buy a new car:

I guess if you can own it and comfortably support yourself, fine. I think you shouldn't be buying things if you need to spend your money on more important things. Like you shouldn't be buying a car if you already have like bills you need to pay or something. You don't need like 12 mansions, that's excessive, certainly excessive. But I don't feel they should be limited, because although it's selfish and greedy, I don't believe it's our right to be able to like tell them what to do with their money.

"To each his own," said another. "To some people shopping is their thing, but I think you have to be very careful with that, like, I mean frivolous and just throwing money away, just be careful, you know. On the one hand, I feel like if it's your money, you made it, you should be able to do what you want to with it. But I also think someone has to hold someone accountable, you know, you need to be cautious with what you buy." At the same time, this person wants to be able to buy whatever he decides he wants to buy:

For myself, I want to be basically financially able to do what I want. If something came up, my family members needed something, being

able to help them. Married. Kids. You know. Luxury isn't necessary. What's most important to me is, if I wanted to, is to be able to go out and buy a nice boat, that would be nice. Just being able to. I'm not really into boats, so I wouldn't buy a boat. But if I wanted to, that would be more important.

Another set of emerging adults worry some about the problem of inequality when it comes to consuming material goods. But again, their individualistic assumptions ultimately make inequality impossible to address. And they personally do not worry enough about it to make any changes in their own lives or to work on changing social structures. Usually, concerns about inequality of consumption are framed in extreme terms, as with this comparison of people with 100 pairs of shoes and those with none:

I see myself as someone who loves to shop. But I also recognize that I need to be careful with that. I own more things than I need, and really need to be able to part with a lot of things. There's a lot of people who need shoes and I have over 100 pairs that I don't need. So yeah, I am worried about how consuming we are as a society, but not worried enough to change my ways yet.

Likewise, this emerging adult used the idea of 15 pairs of sunglasses to illustrate her point: "I definitely feel like people spend way too much time and effort in buying things for themselves and don't really take a step back and think, like, you don't really need 15 pairs of sunglasses. You could give that money to something else. I really think that people have definitely lost their priorities." In theory, the following emerging adult thinks helping homeless people is more important than buying new shoes. But in the end those kinds of calculations prove difficult to make, given individualistic assumptions about never limiting individuals and people's absolute right to the money they earned through hard work:

Oh, I'm sure there is a limit. But, I don't really know how to put a limit on anybody. I even have close friends who sure spend a lot of money. I guess probably where it becomes a problem is where if you don't pay your bills. Or if you were standing in front of a homeless person who can't eat and you'd rather buy those shoes. I mean, people work hard for things and you should be a good financial steward, but I don't know where to put that line on other people. I know that I have lines that I draw. *where? why?*

This emerging adult thought it was crazy—although also legitimate—to splurge on nice clothes when others have a hard time buying food:

"crazy"

People that go out and spend a thousand dollars on clothes are absolutely crazy, and I don't plan on doing that anytime soon. If it makes them happy, they're crazy, but they can go ahead and do that if they can afford it, since I've known people that do that and then end up in trouble later. Just the whole idea of being able to go and spend a couple thousand dollars on clothes in one shopping experience when other people are having problems buying groceries, just that whole concept is crazy for me.

crazy?

whatever they want

So what, we asked, should they do with money instead? "Whatever they want to. I mean, I think it's crazy for them to do that, but if they enjoy it and they want to, they can." Again, consumerism is critiqued here, but the problem with it resides not in the larger system or culture but in other individuals who are excessive in their consumption.

A few other emerging adults mentioned—and usually only mentioned, without elaborating—some concerns about the negative environmental impacts of mass consumerism. But again, they do not think they can do anything about it. One, for example, mentioned the environment in a discussion that wove in multiple themes noted above:

just think

I have a particularly negative attitude towards commercialism overall, just because I'm not a big shopper and I just think it's very wasteful. It's great for the economy, but it's very wasteful. I don't think it's right for someone to have like 30 airplanes and five Hummers, or whatever. But I think it's their right to do that. I would disagree with it, but I'm not too worried about it. I'm just worried about the repercussions of the environment and things like that. But for people's personal lives, I think it can transform people into more consuming beings, but, as much as I dislike that, I don't have a problem with it.

huh?

Another spoke of environmental concerns, but mostly to point out that they are inconvenient and nobody is doing much about them:

The more you buy, the world is getting worse and environmentally we're not really doing anything big to change it, because it's kind of inconvenient I guess to do anything about it. Eventually we're going to have to, but I think right now everybody is just like, "That will happen 100 years from now, so why even worry about it kind of thing?"—keeping their heads in the sand kind of thing.

individualism

This emerging adult suggested that he is not concerned with the environment, although it could become "a little more important":

Talking about the environment and stuff like that or what? I mean, not really, honestly, I don't really have too many concerns with things. When it comes to environment, I think that could be a little more important when it comes to that, I guess. Not consuming too much, recycling, reusing, and all that stuff.

Likewise, this emerging adult thinks, wonders, and worries about environmental issues, but in the end is not concerned because "it will all get sorted out":

Sometimes I think about mass consumption. Sometimes I wonder. It seems like so many companies are making things that really aren't worth having, like why does the company make that? It's just one more thing to be bought and thrown away, because it's not going to work once you get home. Sometimes I worry about that. Like all the money that must go into that. And then where does all this stuff get disposed to? I'm sure all of that will get sorted out. It does not keep me up at night. But I think about it.

In addition, one emerging adult voiced a concern about the possibility of the exploitation of labor in a globalized economy.

I don't know, consuming is good for the economy. I don't like to do it but it's fine if people want to do that. I'm more concerned with the production end, the way things are produced. Unfortunately, in order to have a moving economy you got to produce things with cheaper labor and sometimes internationally exploit. I'm concerned about the exploitation factor. But I think material consumption is, on a whole, good. It helps. Again, the whole consumerism thing is kind of ridiculous, but it's part of what makes this country, that people go out and buy ten pairs of shoes in a three-year span, and if they have the money to do that then they can do it, unfortunately. I do not have the set limit on what people should buy, but if you have ten houses, that's too much. five houses?

What we have found so far is, first, that 61 percent of emerging adults we interviewed have no problems or concerns with American materialism and mass consumerism. These emerging adults are essentially quite happy with our social system of shopping, buying, consuming, and disposing. Second, another 30 percent of emerging adults mention certain concerns about mass consumerism, but none they think they can do anything about and none that especially affects how they personally think or live. Whatever possible problems may be out there, they do not "keep them up at night." In either case, it is hard to criticize others for

91%

overconsumption when you yourself enjoy shopping and want to be able to buy anything you might want in the future.

* liberal individualism
Structuring and governing the outlooks of nearly all of the 91 percent of interviewed emerging adults represented above is the dominant cultural paradigm of liberal individualism. In this outlook, individuals are autonomous units who act and choose independently of each other. Meritocracy ensures that people earn what they deserve, so those with abundance are entitled to dispose of their wealth exactly as they please, however excessive or crazy it may be. People can hold personal opinions about what is good and right for others to consume, but they have no right to voice these opinions—who are they to say?—much less to have them place limits on anyone else. Almost inconceivable are notions like a common good, human interdependence, systemic reform, or voluntarily embraced cultural alternatives of visions of the good life and society. All that society is, apparently, is a collection of autonomous individuals who are out to enjoy life. The idea of people changing their own lifestyles or of mobilizing for collective social or economic change is nearly unimaginable. Individuals can make their own choices and should not spend beyond their means. But individuals cannot really influence other people or make a difference in the larger world. That is beyond them. Some may be aware of problems of waste, inequality, environmental degradation, the exploitation of overseas labor, or misplaced life values and priorities. But there is nothing to be done about those. They are beyond individual control, so they will either work themselves out or will simply impose their negative effects in due time.

* buying "green"
Criticism and consumer choice. The vast majority of American emerging adults, then, have few or no problems with materialistic mass consumption, at least of the kind that make any difference. But there was a smaller minority of emerging adults who did, in fact, voice some real concerns that, at least for a few, appear to make a small difference in their lives. These concerns did not focus on inequality, the exploitation of overseas labor, or misplaced life values and priorities. They nearly all addressed instead problems around the environmental impact of mass consumerism and waste. This is the minority of emerging adults that is at all tuned into the negative impacts of excessive consumption on the environment or other aspects of life. And at least a few of them actually try to live personal lifestyles that somewhat reflect those concerns. What that mostly consisted of, however, is their exercising individual consumer choice: shopping in thrift stores, not going to the mall, or generally buying fewer things than they might otherwise purchase—nothing too drastic. This more critical group represents 9 percent of all the emerging adults we interviewed, and is split evenly among men and women. The proportion of those, however, who mentioned that these problems actually affect their personal behaviors is much smaller than that—perhaps only a few percent of all those we interviewed. In any case, their comments on

personal responsibility & proactivity = NONE

these matters are worth examining, to get a flavor of what somewhat more critical emerging adults sound like.

One emerging adult told us,

I'm sort of an environmentally conscious person, sort of opposed to overconsumption, mostly because of the waste that it generates. People are very quick to just replace things and use nonrenewable resources instead of fixing their stuff, they'll just throw it away and get a new one. Or on a different scale, clothes, they go out and buy lots of clothes, which I sort of do too.

Did he think there are limits to what people should possess? "I think so. Like, I'm not a fan of couples with no children having 12-room houses. So I guess there is like a limit and I feel like sometimes you can redirect the money to something more important." And how does someone know what the limit is? "What you truly need. Not necessarily like you should live with the bare minimum of need, but if you're comfortable, then you don't necessarily need like a sixth car kind of thing." Whether this particular emerging adult actually limits his own consumption, he did not say. Another emerging adult spoke similarly:

* his own consuming
I think our society is far too materialistic, that there's a lot of problems with it. It's not something that's sustainable. Environmentally, we live in a way that's kind of selfish, taken against the world backdrop, and people put a lot of their personal happiness and satisfaction in life on material acquisitions, things that they've got. And I don't think that ultimately makes people any happier. happiness

For a few, as in the following case, traveling overseas opened their eyes to new perspectives:

I can compare German to American society, and say that rampant materialism is a problem in the United States. People become more and more concerned with the distractions in life, the iPhones, MTV, pop music, sports, all this. When I was in Germany, I felt it was a very healthy society. Every person walking down the street, regardless of their profession, would be able to talk to you about German classical music or literature. I don't think that's the case in the United States. I don't know if that's a problem or not, but, being abroad myself, I see it as a problem. ?

What, then, should Americans do about that?

I really believe that people should understand personally what they need, instead of feeling they need something because somebody else says so. Advertising is a really disgusting thing in our society, we're constantly bombarded by things, magazines and product placement. You see this beautiful person wearing a Polo shirt and so you feel you need to go buy it. Obviously, as an economist you hope the American spending machine continues, because it creates a higher standard of living. But you go to a place like Germany, which is a wealthy country, and people there are mostly concerned about what they need on a day-to-day basis, clothing, food, (friendship). Sometimes I think material goods become a substitute for basic needs, and that's kind of what's contributing to the sickness in American society.

not the way it works

?

Again, however, this emerging adult did not talk about anything specifically different in his own life. The implication seems to be that greater awareness will make the difference. Another emerging adult also emphasized the importance of awareness and education:

will it?

I see nothing wrong with having material things, 'cause it's what we do, we like to have things. The key lies in realizing that they're just material things and they mean nothing to you, they're just things. So to value interpersonal relationships, to value yourself and life instead of putting your life in your car, job, or big-screen TV, I think that's ridiculous. It'd be better if we lived in a more recycling culture and actually using things, rather than just throwing them out when we're done. I think that's contributing to what's destroying the environment and not appreciating it.

no limits

Do you think, we asked, there should be limits to what people own? "I don't think there should be limits. I think people should just be educated about their actions and about what happens when you throw out that TV or watch TV all day, you know, just understand what they're getting themselves into."

Another emerging adult emphasized the importance of not shopping too much and not letting possessions "go to your head." He explained: "Sometimes I buy into consumerism, mostly I don't. Recently, my friends went to the big mall around here and invited me, and either I'm seriously too tired or I just can't get excited to go buy clothes and get tons of stuff. I never have been, because when I get tons of stuff I never get around to using it all, if I buy a lot and never use it, what's the point of buying it in the first place?" And what of his more general view of mass consumption?

I think it's wasteful. And too much stuff can go to your head and make you think you're important when really you're just the same as everybody else. Over time you're probably never gonna wear all the clothes you buy, never gonna play all the video games, so if you keep it to almost a minimalist type of stance, just try to do what you think you can or would want to do or buy, I think that's all you should do.

So what are his views about placing limits on acquiring possessions? "I think there should be limits, living a comfortable life, sure, that's the beauty of being an American as far as liberty in this country involves. But too much stuff is just gonna go to your head in the end. That's where religious charities and stuff come into play, where you can donate part of your money." Thus, even those who express concerns about excessive consumerism are reluctant to do anything that might challenge a comfortable life, as this same person explained:

comfortable

I'd like to live in the future a comfortable life, get married and have some kids eventually, be comfortable with my job. I think just living a comfortable but not overexcessive life is definitely reasonable. I mean, look what happened with the depression in the '30s, which was because of mass consumption. Yeah, too much can seriously go to your head, not that you should give away all your possessions and live on the streets, but you should definitely still have a comfortable life, but not overexcessive.

how defined?

Thus, many of the emerging adults who are the most critical of mass consumerism, including the following one, recurrently focus on being practical by buying useful products in moderation: "I think you should buy what you need and stick with it. If you enjoy doing an activity and you need equipment for that, then do it. Don't get really hard core and greedy about it, just get what you need and just be happy." Again, we asked, what makes something "hard core?" Where should one draw the line?

just be happy

If you have things you bought on a whim but don't use ever, I think that is where I would draw the line. And I have stuff like that too. You should definitely think about it before you buy it, like, "Do you need it? Yes. Okay. Go for it." Or do you only just want it? Are you going to use it more than once or twice? If not, then, okay. That was fun. Toss it in the garbage or let it sit in the closet and collect dust for two years, and then you find it again you're like, hmmm, I don't need this.

For nearly all of the most critical emerging adults, we see, the primary if not exclusive solution to the problem is becoming a more discriminating consumer

and getting rid of excess possessions. One, for instance, who was one of the very few who mentioned any of this fostering any changes in their personal lives, said:

We waste a lot. I don't necessarily think you should have only one outfit. But I think a lot of people are oblivious about how much they really do consume. I watched a documentary about how much we throw away, which was challenging to change our minds and make different decisions, which I try to incorporate it in my life. I catch myself throwing away a can or buying something that I really didn't need. It's hard to get away from in our society, but I do wish it was something that would change. Our world is not going to last very long if we keep throwing all this junk on it. A lot of young people have never known anything else [than materialism] and it seems like it could define you these days, whether you have the Gucci handbag or from Kmart. It's sad how important brand names have become.

She herself tries to recycle cans, buy less, and not be controlled by the power of name brands. Other than that, she only wishes things would change and feels sad about the state of things. Similarly, this young man has translated his concerns into efforts to buy clothes at thrift stores:

I definitely think mass consumption is a problem. Right now in the ocean there's a pile of trash the size of Texas that has all gathered because the way the currents go, it all goes in one spot the size of Texas. That's not cool. I'm not a fan of trash everywhere, and especially in my city, I see things dumped all over the place, and this is the only place we have, so it'd be nice if we tried and kept it looking nice. But I definitely shop at thrift stores and stuff, 'cause there's definitely overproduction, over-consumption, over-everything. Then people buy lots and lots of things that they don't need, and then they don't understand why gas is so expensive. All this stuff is shipped here in huge tankers that use gas, that's why.

The mildly evaluative language here—such as “not cool” and “not a fan”—is not very pointed. But, unlike most emerging adults, at least this person has modified his behavior in some specific way. Important to some critical emerging adults, too, is reducing the amount of possessions one owns, as this young woman explains:

I think Americans have this way of buying a lot more stuff than they really need. I've tried not to do that. My parents' house is full of stuff

because my mother is a stock person, but my father and I are not, so we try as hard as we can to not accumulate stuff. I moved from my little apartment, packed everything up, and it all fit in the back of my dad's truck, and I like that.

So what exactly, we asked, is the problem with owning lots of stuff? “I don't know, people with 8,000 pairs of shoes are a little ridiculous, but I don't really know that I can place numbers on ‘This is okay, but this is ridiculous.’ It's a problem I guess in terms of the environment, but people are now learning not to buy stuff and that's interesting, like you don't see hardly anybody with giant SUVs anymore.” What possessions does she need, then, to be happy? *Not in Texas*

I don't need a whole lot to be happy now. You want to have a roof over your head, to have a car, to have Internet. You need to have Internet, that's just, there's just no other way. Like your house is not really actually a habitable house if it doesn't have Internet. You could live without water or trash, but not without Internet. Right now my boyfriend and I have a big-screen TV and satellite and we have nice computers, so we have everything that personally I need to make me happy. *Living w/ boyfriend*

Emerging adults have a difficult time seeing anything wrong with high-tech communication and entertainment gadgets. To them, the Internet is a basic necessity.¹ But, again, being aware and making responsible consumer choices—while acknowledging the importance of strong consumer spending for “the economy”—is the heart of environmentally conscious emerging adults' strategy for countering the negative effects of mass consumerism, as this one explained:

It's not okay to hurt the environment, we shouldn't build things that destroy habitats. We should protect habitats when we build new developments. But consumerism keeps the economy going. It's a helpful thing that we're such mass consumers, we need to buy things to help stimulate the economy, so it's a good thing to buy, actually. We need it for our economy. But, yes, there also seems to be a climate shift going on, it's not necessarily global warming. But the fact is nobody can change the entire economy, so the only thing we can do is know what we're doing when we buy things and be aware of the choices we make, to not make consumer choices that are going to harm the entire human population.

Very few emerging adults could or would see possibilities beyond being “aware” and careful in consumer purchases. Only one who we interviewed directly criticized

massive wealth and income inequality in America as it affects people's ability to consume too much:

Even if Bill Gates had given half his money to charity, he still has too much. I think that some people have way too much money. And what do you need all that for? Nobody needs to be a millionaire or even earning a high hundred thousand. Why do you need to live any higher than middle class? Like why can't everybody have the same amount of money and just be happy with a nice house and a yard and a pool? That's what my family has, right? I don't need any more than that. I'm never gonna have more than that. I'm gonna have a nice house, a car, and a sweet TV and that's it. Like, my family doesn't make a ton of money and I still have enough to afford a nice CD collection. Why do you need millions of dollars or even \$400,000? That's too much money, in my opinion. People make like hundreds of millions of dollars, that's gross.

Extremely few emerging adults would go that far, to challenge absolute differences in wealth among Americans, to suggest that there might be a cap on the top income earned. That is a somewhat radical view that violates the assumptions of liberal individualism, as described above. At the same time, it is far from clear that he has any specific plan or proposal in mind to reduce income inequality and excessive consumption, or that this view affects his own life in any challenging way. What might be done to curtail the excesses of wealth, he does not say. Meanwhile, even he hopes to enjoy a comfortable middle-class lifestyle—to have a nice house, a car, a “sweet” TV, and a nice CD collection.

Visions of Ideal Lifestyles

In the next set of questions in our interviews with emerging adults we addressed the issue of what makes for a good life when it comes to lifestyle and goals involving the ownership of material possessions. Specifically, we asked, “What is your idea of a ‘good life’ when it comes to the ideal kind of lifestyle you might have? What are your goals when it comes to buying, owning, and consuming in your life—or maybe living modestly or simply?” Few emerging adults we interviewed took us up on the “living modestly or simply” possibility. Again, few express interests or purposes or goals that are dramatically unlike that of securing material security and comfort for themselves and their families. The vast majority of emerging adults once more came out strongly in favor of a financially unconstrained, materially comfortable lifestyle spent by them and their families consuming a variety of rewarding goods, services, and experiences.

Material comfort, security, family, and happiness. When asked about what makes a good life in terms of an “ideal kind of lifestyle” and about goals when it comes to “buying, owning, and consuming,” most emerging adults expressed some variant of this answer: “A family, a nice car, nice house, my own practice, be happy, stuff like that.” Such responses were remarkably similar across sex, race, and social class. What nearly all emerging adults want and expect out of life when it comes to buying, owning, and consuming is to be financially and materially comfortable. Emerging adults elaborated this outlook in a variety of ways:

Have a nice house that belongs to me. Have a nice, reliable, dependable vehicle. Have something to play with on the weekends, maybe a boat, a four-wheeler, or a bike or whatever. And be able to provide for the family, and, basically, the best way to put it is, I'm comfortable. I'm not struggling, I'm not rolling in money, but I'm comfortable. Something could happen tomorrow, put a little bit back [into savings], I'm OK.

And:

I guess I'd like to have nice things, I don't know, I wouldn't really need them but I'm not going to say that if there's a sale that I don't spend money that I shouldn't. I definitely want to be comfortable. I want to have a house and a car and that stuff. My parents just bought a boat, which now I think is a nice addition [laughs]. So I think I definitely want to be comfortable.

Most, though not all, emerging adults describing their ideal, materially comfortable lives usually deny an interest in becoming super rich. Many appear to think that wanting to be rich might be too greedy and that it comes with troubles of its own, as this one explains: “I don't want to hurt for anything, don't want to struggle. But, I don't want to be so wealthy that I have to worry about robbers and stuff like that. I just want to be okay in life, I guess, I'm the kind of person that just wants a middle-class kind of life.” Another said, “I want to have a nice car, I want to have a boat. Those are things I want to have later on in life, toys, but nothing in excess. I mean, it's whatever makes you happy.” Yet another spoke along these lines of balancing enjoying the kind of job they want with the imperatives of material comfort:

I think ideally I would have a job that would allow me to, you know, be able to explore the outdoors, like rock climbing, hiking, camping, that sort of thing. I would have a job that would let me do that as well as travel and do missions work. And, you know, also live a comfortable life

as if it were a last need

seem amount of work?

really?

time or money?

in a house, but it doesn't have to be like 5,000 square feet for two people. You know, just a decent living where I never want for anything but something comfortable, not necessarily depriving myself of anything.

Others, however, such as this one, are more explicit about wanting a clearly upper-middle-class status: "Comfortable lifestyle, obviously married, to be able to educate my kids. I want to earn, between me and my wife, at least a quarter of a million dollars a year. That's a number, I guess, I'd be satisfied with making that." Still others who come from somewhat lower social classes express lower expectations, but still focus their goals primarily on financial and material comfort and security. One, for instance, told us, "I like what my family has now, except for our house would be fixed up and everything paid off and that would be the good life. I don't need anything more than that." Another said,

I'd like to have a house and, like I said, a decently, a car that the service engine light doesn't come on every five blocks. What I want most in my future is stability, to be stable. I want to have somewhere that I call a home and, you know, probably take up a hobby or two, and, materialistically speaking, I wouldn't mind some kitchen gadgets, washer and dryer, matching dining room set, a nice TV, maybe—well I have a nice TV now but I want like [nicer].

stable in this economy?

In either case, most tend to emphasize financial security as part of the expected picture: "Having no mortgage, making sure you're secure, if something bad happens, you have some type of savings to help you out, or making sure if you have a kid you can take care of them, provide. I guess just being financially stable is my one big goal." In some cases, as with the following, "security" includes the idea of family stability along with material comfort, with both being kept in a judicious balance:

To have a nice home, to be relatively comfortable, I don't have to have, like, fancy whatever. I mean, if I can still provide security for my family and myself and my future, then hey, good on it. I'd much rather have a small house and be happily married and kids than have, like, a McMan-sion and be twice divorced.

Even so, the ideal here clearly involves both family happiness and material comfort and security. Then again, some emerging adults are not shy about expressing their larger material ambitions. One, for example, told us:

A good life for me would be to have more than enough money than I actually need, and live like a kid the rest of my life. That would be my

little heaven in today's reality. Yeah, it's consuming a lot of stuff, but at the same time, if you can afford it, what is money anyway? Money is meant to be spent, so why not? You only live once, and if you have the chance to live in excess, why not?

on yourself?

What about any concerns this emerging adult may have about potential problems in mass consumerism?

I think it's hypocritical by a lot of people, just because if they had the money, would they really spend it on all the stuff that sounds righteous? Come on, this is the world. Everyone is human. If you had that kind of money you'd be doing the same thing. That's what I think, especially with the spending money. It's there for you. If there was \$1 million on this table, I would be flipping out right now.

Another described the kind of life he would like as "being able to spend and do whatever you want."

I mean, that's nothing I would ever achieve unless I win the lottery. But, you know, if I could have \$5 million, that would be amazing. That's a good life. I would be happy if I could go on vacation two or three times a year, send my kids to private school, never have to worry about paying bills. I guess if I reached a point of never having to worry about affording a house, cars, and paying my mortgage and paying my bills, then I'll be happy.

What, we asked more specifically, would be his ideal life scenario?

Finish top of my class first year, transfer to NYU or Columbia, land a job at a big law firm after the three years and then work at one of those big law firms for a few years, find my way into the sports entertainment industry being an agent. Meet a girl somewhere along the way and love, you know, who knows what love is these days? Be a sports agent and accumulate so much money that I could become a high school basketball coach and spend time with my kids and my family. *

Some emerging adults refer specifically to their own "American dream":

Realistically, a good life would be a house, a big yard, and a dog and you know, what is it? 2.5 kids or whatever. A husband, a kid or two, two vehicles and that's it, it's my American dream and to have a good job

and you know, be able to afford insurance and not struggle, and I don't care about being wealthy, I just want to be comfortable.

Being materially comfortable is a key element in most emerging adults' life goals. This can mean different things to different people, but for some it means a solidly upper-middle-class lifestyle, as this one expressed: "Ideally I would just like to have what I would say is comfortable for me, which I guess you would define as an upper-middle-class existence, of course, and being able to afford things for my family and my kids, and not really have money be an issue, is really what I'd like. That's what I hope for." Most also expect that their material comforts will only increase as they grow older:

Now, just nice clothes, I would say. The car doesn't matter to me because my car is all right, but I'd say clothes. Eventually, I want to live in a big house and have a really good car, that's why I'm going through college to get a job, so I can get these things I haven't had.

Another told us:

enough to be generous
competition
I would like in my life to have a house, houses in multiple countries, be well enough off to be able to do that, to be able to go on trips, have enough money so I can be generous and donate money, and also be well enough off, I guess, say wealthy, that I can travel and do things I want to do, and involve my family. Also have a car that I like. I guess some material objects, yes. Where I've come from is a very materialistic area, I had a lot of competition in high school about whose dad made what, whose parents drove what car, what you'd buy, what clothing brand you wore, everything.

One emerging adult woman finishing college at an Ivy League school observed this about her peers:

You have people that opt for the money, specifically, investment bankers. They're going to be working 80 to 100 hours a week and they had internships from the previous summers living in New York. You ask, "So how'd you like it?" They say, "I hated it." And then, "So why are you doing it?" They answer, "Cause I get paid over \$100,000 a year," and then, "but you know drains me out." They get two weeks of vacation a year, which they don't take because they don't want to fall behind. So they are accumulating money. What are they getting out of it? They really have no answer for that question. But money, everybody needs money. That's a big factor in how you live your life.

This emerging adult is rather unique among her generation for her critical awareness of the emptiness of living only for money. But in the end she does not offer an alternative, and she herself is moving along a similar kind of career development path as the peers she describes.

if not money what?
[A handful of somewhat alternative voices] A few of the emerging adults we interviewed did make an effort to speak about simplicity or moderation of material consumption or of giving money away generously, although they usually also mixed those themes with other thoughts of greater comfort or luxury. One, for example, spoke about both possibly being satisfied with the material basics in life as well as being financially secure and being interested in owning a luxury sports car:

It would really be nice to have food, shelter, clothing and transportation, that would be really nice. But I guess if I can't have those things, there are some people who are happy without them. But for a good life, no debt, maybe a mortgage, but I would love to pay it off soon and not have that. I would say live modestly within my means. And no sports car, although a Lexus IS would be so sweet [laughs].

Another talked about the importance of family and relaxation, as well as her lack of interest in accumulating a lot of material possessions, within the context of her simultaneous concern with financial security and material comfort:

I really would like to be financially secure when I'm older and not have to worry about making mortgage payments or even my kids or anything along those lines. But I do think it's important to balance getting everything you need financially and enjoying your family and taking time off to relax. Because you only have one life so you have to enjoy to the fullest. As far as shopping, I really don't want a ton of things. I'm very minimalist. We just cleaned our house and I threw out everything. I don't like a lot of things around. So I don't want multiple houses. I would rather just keep it to the bare minimum, things that I'll use but not a ton of other things.

not only faster, but obstruct
With this kind of material moderation, one house will suffice. The larger point is to enjoy life to the fullest, which the narrow pursuit of material things can obstruct. Finally, one emerging adult dreamed a bit about not only being financially comfortable but also having enough money to give to charity: *what is enough for charity?*

My ideal life would just be like financially being comfortable and not having to worry about paying bills and things like that, and being able

to buy things when I need them. I don't know. Actually, preferably I'd like to have a lot of money and be able to give it away, that would be my ideal life, would be like being able to donate to charities or even create charities. But I guess in terms of like material things, just having like a good-sized house but not like too big, but comfortable.

Another small number of emerging adults, particularly some from less well-to-do backgrounds, spoke more single-mindedly about the virtues of living simply or modestly, which is all they desire. One young woman said that all she wanted was "a house, somewhere to stay, you know, something to drive and a family. I want just a little, small house, something simple." A young man told us, "I don't need a huge house; I know that I can't afford a big huge house right now. Maybe eventually [I'll get one], but it really doesn't matter to me if I have a mansion or if I have just a ranch somewhere." One spoke of his interest in downsizing his housing even now: "We're going to sell this house when we leave and hopefully move into a two-bedroom apartment that's small, because this is way too much. We have too much room and we don't do anything with it and that's wasteful." The same person also expressed relatively modest retirement dreams: "Our goals when we retire, we want to have a house somewhere, wherever we decide to put our roots in and hang out there for a while, until our son is out of the house and, if we have any more kids, they're out of the house. Probably then just buy a little house in the mountains and then get an RV and travel around, but that's really it." Another emphasized the importance of living within his means:

I think there are more ways to be happy than to buy things. I learned this from my parents, but I live under my means. We don't have a huge house, we buy only the size that we need, I'm not going to go out and buy a Jaguar or use money for that, I don't want to be one of those people who buys a huge house and has a huge mortgage they can't pay off and an expensive car and then they can't pay for their kid to go to college. That's where I am.

Another likewise told us:

You know I wouldn't say I have to have something to be happy. I could ride a bike to work if I needed, I could get by without the truck. There's things that make you happy, just normal, and I enjoy them, like my nice clean apartment, I mean I enjoy things. But I think even without all that I would still be happy. I don't think material possessions make a person happy, if you have a productive job, a productive relationship, then the material things just help that out. But if you replace negative feelings

RV!
travel

with your job or with material things, then that's not going to make you happy at all.

The number of emerging adults who spoke in terms of moderation and contentment like this was very small, however.

Besides these, only a small handful of other emerging adults expressed any kind of genuinely different vision for what a good life would be for them. One rare example talked about the importance of music, agriculture, community, and relationships in life:

As long as I have my music equipment, someday I'd like to own a house, whatever kind of house that may be. Really I'd like to be able to work the land, get involved with a small group of people to be part of a community, and just be content. I don't have too many huge hopes. I don't want to be a millionaire. If that were to happen then that'd be an interesting life, but I try and keep my dreams real. I want to be able to do my music. I like to be part of nature and have my friends and somebody I love.

Yes you do

Another talked about her life goal of working in academia and of interests in socially responsible consumption:

I want to be a professor. So having a job in academia is something that's important to me in terms of having a good life. But that's not a material possession. I don't expect more than a professor's salary. I think that that would be fine for me, having a place to live, having a means of transportation, being able to be able to have enough money to make choices about how I spend my money, in the sense that I really like organic food and I like buying fair-trade clothes and stuff when I go out shopping, but that's just like a lot more expensive, it's almost like a luxury to be able to do that. So being able to do that. Like, I don't really want a lot and I actually don't like big houses. I don't think they're cozy and they waste a lot of energy and that kind of stuff.

Whole
paycheck

another group of
consumer items

Even in this case, however, having a decent salary and financial discretion in purchases is definitely a priority. Another emerging adult talked about the central goal of being happy, content, and having good friends and an enjoyable atmosphere in life:

Money would be nice, but to me it's not everything. For my personal lifestyle, I just want to be somewhere where I'm happy. Like, if I end up

living in this little shack and have not much to my name, I'm happy because I have good friends, and I'm in like a nice enjoyable atmosphere, then I consider that a good life. If your idea of being happy means having a lot of material possessions, fine, do what you please. But for me, it's just as long as I am content with where I am in life, it's all good. Is it? (social justice?)

Likewise, this young man said the good life would involve family, farming, and self-sufficiency: (still individualism)

If I didn't have a truck, a drum set, if I didn't have anything but the clothes on me, it's fine. Like I said, material stuff doesn't really bother me that much. My ideal situation would be probably having a little house, a garden, yeah, just, you know, having a family, I guess. I don't really want a lot of stuff, so maybe just like a little house, little garden, grow some stuff. Like a farm, so I could literally be self-sufficient. I could grow everything I need, I wouldn't have to buy it from anybody. That'd be nice.

sorry, NO

Finally, one emerging adult told us, "I think it would be really cool if I could live out of a backpack and be comfortable, so that's what I think I would aspire to. But I don't know if I can achieve that." But, again, these most distinctively alternative views of the good life are rare. Very few emerging adults spoke like this. Instead, again, the typical viewpoint sounded more like this: I would like to have a house, a car, the American dream kind of thing, just a set-up job, decent pay kind of thing. That is absolutely how the vast majority of emerging adults think about a good life, living well, and being happy.

For the most part, then, in thinking about what a good life is, about what their own well-lived lives should look like, when it comes specifically to buying, owning, and consuming, emerging adults did not think very expansively or critically or creatively. Nearly all focus on a certain version of the standard middle- or upper-middle-class dream that is centered not only on family but also on financial security and material comfort and consumption.

An Aside on Ripple Effects in Higher Education

What we observe in this chapter about emerging adults' captivity to consumerism and materialism is connected, we think, to a loss of vision and understanding of the most important value and purpose of higher education. We step aside here to briefly note that loss. Ultimately, society should invest in higher

education because of the rich intellectual and personal development it fosters—and for the richer qualities of life reaped as a result by students and their families, workplaces, political communities, places of worship, and other people and social institutions whose lives they touch. Higher education serves a crucial common good in fostering breadth, depth, complexity, and richness in all dimensions of social, cultural, political, and economic life. What is ultimately the most important question about college education is, therefore, not what students can "do with it," in immediate and practical terms, but rather what college education *does to its students* deeply and broadly. It is about expanding people's horizons and depths of understanding, engaging students with the big questions that matter most in life, giving them tools to think and learn and communicate well, and passing on the richness of scientific and humanistic inquiry and understanding.

The most important payoffs of college education do not concern career promotions and higher salaries. They have to do with forming thoughtful, critical, appreciative, careful, capable, and interesting family members, neighbors, citizens, workers, leaders, teachers, artists, researchers, and friends. In short, the truly important product of higher education is better people, not bigger promotions and paychecks. That is in part because better people—broadly defined—help over the long run to produce better lives, better politics, better cultures, (genuinely) better economies, better societies. This is the real value and purpose of higher education at its best. And it is the job of leaders of colleges and universities to be making this case continually to prospective and current students, parents, faculty, trustees, alumni, legislatures, secondary-school educators, and the general public. Unfortunately, this is also an understanding of higher education that precious few emerging adults today grasp or value—in large measure, we think, because leaders in secondary and higher education are losing sight of this vision. The humanities especially are being marginalized, despite their central, long-term importance (at least when conceptualized and taught well) in strengthening the fabric of democracy.² As a result, nearly all emerging adults now assume a very different view of higher education.

Most, though not all, emerging adults believe in the importance of finishing high school and getting a college education. Large numbers want to do well in school, go to college, get a degree, and put it to good use. But for most, the reasons they value college seem to have little to do with the broadly humanistic vision of higher education described above. Rather, their motivations have almost entirely to do with the instrumental advantages it produces for them as competitive individuals—as well as the fun they want to have while in college. What really matters to emerging adults is getting the credits, earning the diploma, and becoming certified as a college-educated person so that they can get a better job, earn more money, and become a good salary earner and supporter of a

less selfish

NO WAY!

materially comfortable and secure life. Not very many emerging adults talk about the intrinsic enrichment of an education, of the personal broadening and deepening of one's understanding and appreciation of life and the world that expansive learning affords. Few emerging adults talk about the value of a broad education for shaping people into informed and responsible citizens in civic life, for producing members and leaders of society who can work together toward the common good. An articulation of an understanding of the enduring worth of a broad liberal arts education for the development of people and the sustaining of good, humanistic societies is rarely heard among this age group. For most, instead, higher education is good—besides, again, the fun one can have in college—because it promises to help secure for individuals more rewarding jobs, higher income, and, thus, greater expected personal prospects for material and psychological well-being, security, and happiness. For some, that means actually learning specific information and skills. One emerging adult, for example, said, "Right now I'm studying marketing, but I think I am going to change it to finance and accounting, so anything in business really. Because business is a very solid thing, businesses are going to be around for a long time. There will always be jobs, and I like math, so, accounting." For others, higher education is just so many formal but substantively meaningless hoops to have to jump through, whether in classrooms or over the Internet. Thus, another emerging adult, for instance, told us:

Once I did find a job [I realized] it would be so much easier to do well if I did have a degree, just because of the way access is given people. People just recognize you more if you have a degree. That's why I decided to go back to school. But really, my heart is in the work that I do. If I didn't need to be in school, I wouldn't.

Either way, those who can afford college are mostly happy to do it, because of the instrumental goods it will deliver to them as individuals. As one respondent said, "So many people are out of jobs and losing their houses, it's really kinda bad around here, so that's a reason why I want to go to school, so I can make sure I get at least a decent job."

There is, of course, nothing wrong with some young people never going to college at all—college is not for everyone.³ And among those who do go into higher education, there is also obviously nothing wrong with young people getting the training, credentials, and skills needed to secure jobs that will contribute to living good lives. But any college or university training and education that does take place we believe needs to happen within a larger context of broad personal and intellectual (development) designed to help challenge and enrich visions of what a truly good job, life, and society might look like—visions which make jobs themselves even worth doing and life itself genuinely good and worth

living. Our observation, however, is that such an expansive understanding of the true value and purpose of higher education is disappearing—it has, in fact, nearly disappeared among college-age American youth today. That is not primarily the fault of the youth. It is partly the fault of too many leaders in higher education losing sight of the best vision. Taking its place instead is a culture and system of higher education driven by individual careerism and pragmatic instrumentalism. And this is accelerated by shrinking public support for higher education, the growth of private big-money influences and corporate interests, the demands of "the Economy," and—behind much of this—the imperatives of materialistic mass consumerism. If this is correct, then these changes represent the massive loss of a profoundly rich educational heritage; an erosion, if not collapse, of the intellectual foundations justifying liberal, humanistic education; and the certain diminishment of the quality of personal, cultural, and social life in America for decades to come.

What, Finally, Is a Good Life?

Lastly, and returning to our main theme, in the concluding section of our in-depth, personal interview discussions—long after we had discussed consumerism and ideal lifestyles, on which we just reported—we approached the matter of materialism and mass consumerism with emerging adults somewhat less directly, by asking the question "What, ultimately, do you want to get out of life? What would living a 'good life' look like to you? What is it that you really want to accomplish or experience in your life before it's all over?" People throughout history have of course wrestled with these big questions and have come up with a variety of answers. Some say the good life is one spent in pursuit of moral virtues. Others say the good life involves exploring the vast wonders of nature and the diversity of human cultures to the fullest. Some talk of developing the full potential of one's personal gifts, talents, and abilities. Yet others believe a good life means learning control over one's individual desires, impulses, and passions. Still others emphasize the importance of loving relationships in family and among friends. And then again, some view the good life as one of love and justice before God. However the views vary, by most accounts offered by the people generally considered the wisest among us, the good life involves some kind of transcendence beyond one's own self. To live a good life, in other words, means progressing on some kind of journey to become something more than what we already are. It means realizing some higher purpose or value, often of a personal and perhaps even spiritual nature. To live a truly good life, in short, entails engaging with some important reality beyond oneself and transforming oneself in a way that enhances morality, understanding, or important relationships.

We did not focus the thinking of the emerging adults who we interviewed in this section specifically on consumerism or materialism. The topic here was rather their broadest views of what makes for a good life, of what they themselves ultimately want to get out of life. We also had by this latter section of the interviews already discussed their views of consumerism and materialism, so they may have also been ready not to reengage those topics, in order to avoid being repetitive. What they had to say in this section as a result tended to be somewhat broader and more diverse than what they said in the previous section about consumerism and materialism—as we would expect. Even so, when asked about a “good life” broadly conceived and what they want to achieve in life, the ideas of material success, financial stability, not having to worry about money, being successful in work, being able to provide for family, and having money to spend on valuable experiences and products were expressed again as significant themes in the majority of their answers. Thus, even when emerging adults are not directly asked about these subjects, for most, financial success, material acquisition, and consumer enjoyment surface as important ideas defining what makes for a good life and goals to achieve.

To get a larger perspective, we must see that nearly all emerging adults, when asked about their views of a good life and what they ultimately want to get out of their own lives, gave answers that mixed together a lot of different kinds of ideas, interests, and values. Rarely did they report only one goal or vision for a good life. Instead, most gave some combination of concerns, like having families, enjoying friends, traveling and experiencing the world, being happy, being financially stable and secure, enjoying the fruits of work, and enjoying material possessions, being a positive influence on others, and achieving in education and career. The most frequently mentioned of these ideas—voiced by about 60 percent of those we interviewed—concerns close relationships: getting married, having children, and enjoying good friends. They said things like “just [having] a full, happy family,” “being with the person I love,” “rais[ing] healthy children,” and “hav[ing] great friends.” Many of these explicitly mentioned wanting to avoid getting divorced—not saying that they want to get married but rather “just staying married.” As an aside, some emerging adults spoke of marriage and family not in terms of their loving and caring for other people—as most did—but rather as others loving and taking care of them. One, for instance, said, “I’d like to have had a wife that loves me and kids that admired me.” Another observed about his goal of marriage, “I feel like that is something that would really fulfill me.” Yet another said, “I want to have the most loving, caring wife.” Some emerging adults thus seem subtly to look to marriage and family more for what it can do for them than for the care they can invest into the others who they love—an approach that hardly seems conducive to achieving marital success.

for me (more individualism)

In any case, seldom did anyone we interviewed mention family alone as defining their vision of what they ultimately want to get out of or accomplish in life. Usually, marriage and family were combined with a few other goals, values, and interests. Often, however, these were stated in quite vague terms. Among the about 40 percent of emerging adults we interviewed who mentioned their desire to travel, for example, one told us, “I would love to travel and meet different people.” Another, who was among the roughly 40 percent who also talked about wanting to “be happy,” said things like “When I’m older I just want to still feel great about everything” and “Happy. I don’t want to be depressed.” About one-quarter of the emerging adults we interviewed spoke of wanting to help others or of being a positive influence in others’ lives—as with this one: “I would like to have some positive influence on something, whether that be people or dogs or babies or I don’t know, something, somewhere, some kind of positive influence.” Roughly one in five mentioned developing their own careers, reaching educational goals, or learning some skills or knowledge as part of their hoped-for good life. Thus, one said, “I’d like to make a mark [in some industry]. I kind of crave attention, in that I really want to make a mark that’s noticeable.” Much smaller minorities of emerging adults expressed other elements of their views of a good life. Eleven percent mentioned wanting not to have any regrets at the end of their lives, of making the most of all of their life opportunities. “I don’t want to have any regrets, but I know there will be some. I want to get everything I want, to do everything I want to do.” Nine percent, as in the following example, spoke of knowing God or making God proud, deepening their life of faith, or being more religious: “I want God to be satisfied with what I did and for him to look back and say, ‘Well done. I’m proud of you.’” About 5 percent talked about an interest in creating art, performing music, or making films and so being acknowledged by others for their creative works. Two percent mentioned being physically healthy or having a healthy family. Two percent talked about becoming a better person. One percent said they wanted to make their parents proud. And another 1 percent mentioned simply wanting to come up with some goal or purpose in life at all.

So there was some diversity here. But amid that there were also central, dominant themes. The most typical answer combined a desire to have a successful family, to be personally happy, and—as we will see next—to enjoy the financial ability to be able to consume the material goods and experiences one wants and not have to worry about money. Career success, financial comfort, and sometimes even becoming wealthy were sprinkled throughout 57 percent of the interview answers in this section, usually along with some other themes mentioned above, of course. One emerging adult told us that what she ultimately wants to get out of life is “having a beautiful family, my own house, my own car, and not having to worry about money.” Another said, “I want to have a good job, be able

to support myself, have a nice house, be able to do the things I want to do, probably get married and have kids." Yet another told us, "I'd like to be successful, well-off, provide for my family. Along the way maybe travel a little bit. Still play golf, go camping, visit places, stay at home, hang out with family more, go to the park, stuff like that." Some emerging adults spoke explicitly about wanting to get a lot of money. One, for example, said, "I want to make money. I really want to make money. And I want to leave a legacy." Another reported:

of what sort?
Six-figure income, yeah, 'cause I love money. That's my thing. It's attractive. You can have anything if you have your money. I just wanna be, like, financially set and everything. Nothing else. *Love? respect?*

Another agreed: "I want to be rich. It'd be good, man. Uh huh." But, again, most of those overtly seeking money mixed their desire for wealth with other goals. Thus one said, "Be wealthy, be happy. I want to travel a lot." Another reported: "Probably getting married, having kids, being able to live where I wanna live, and being able to afford the things that we wanna do. I'd like to travel the world, just to see different places, different things, meet different people, seeing new things, experiencing new things." Still another told us:

Can you are my "new experience"
Just having a good job, being stable, not having to worry about things, bills and all that, without struggling, being able to pay for the bills. And being able to go out once in a while, take a break, just being there with the good things that you want on your own time. And just working, having a good job, being able to spend time with family. I think that'll be a good life. To have a home, to travel. I definitely want to travel to different countries, see the world. That's probably about it, just to know my wife, too, and then love her. *Want annoy them*

Some seemed happy to settle for more modest versions of material success than others. "Somewhere where you're comfortable," said one, "like financially comfortable, where you're just content⁴ with where you are. And I definitely want to travel more, see the world, see what it has to offer." Another also took a similarly modest view: "What I would like to accomplish is basically being better off than my parents were." And yet others, as in this case, professed to want money not so much because it meant a lot to them personally but because they know it is "what matters" in the world: "What do I want? A relationship with God, good steady pay, make sure you can pay everything off, because money, apparently, to the world, is worth the world."

Again, in this section of the interviews, where we did not explicitly ask about money or material comfort, not all emerging adults described the ideal life that

they hoped to live in those terms. Some talked only about family, friends, being happy, education, religious interests, and "making a difference." Then again, 57 percent of the emerging adults we interviewed *did* spontaneously bring up the subjects of money and material consumption during their discussions of what they ultimately want to get out of life. And this was despite the fact that we had already talked about materialism and consumerism in an earlier section of the interview—in up to 88 other questions on other topics in the interview guide prior to this concluding point in the interview—making the discussion here feel somewhat repetitive.

Stated differently, when it comes to the nature of a good life believed to be worth living, to what in the end they want to get out of their lives, most emerging adults are rather limited in their horizons to a typical set of answers. In addition to having a nice family and being personally happy, another main goal of the majority of emerging adults is to have the financial means to possess and consume material goods, enjoyable services, and fulfilling experiences. Presumably, the last of these is also expected to contribute both to personal happiness and having a nice family. Only small minorities mentioned goals such as becoming a better person, being healthy, creating and performing art and music, serving community or country, or growing spiritually. These observed facts are totally consistent with the generally pro-consumerism survey statistics cited at the beginning of this chapter. They also comport with what emerging adults said in the discussions about materialism and consumerism examined above. And all of this, we think, tells us something sobering about the moral and spiritual visions of our culture when it comes to the goods of life and about the parochialism of the horizons into which we as a society are socializing our youth.⁵

Conclusion

We do not suggest that any of these issues or potential problems, much less their answers, are simple and easy. Nor do we expect 18- to 23-year-olds to be brimming with realistic programs and solutions to address complicated economic and environmental problems. What we did expect to hear more of from emerging adults, however, is a broader array of visions of the good life, a better-informed awareness of the possible problems of mass consumerism, a greater concern for consumerism's impact on the earth's natural environment, and some existential wrestling with the personal implications of these challenges for their own lives now and into the future. Of these things we heard very little. The majority of emerging adults are content with mass consumerism and materialistic and self-fulfillment-oriented lifestyles—as long as they can also enjoy these things with their spouses, children, and friends. They do not see any problem

La more "things" for me

with this. A substantial minority senses that consumerism entails some problems, but they are not very clear on what they are and are not particularly bothered by them. Fewer than one in ten emerging adults we interviewed voiced any kind of focused discontent or more intense criticism of mass consumerism. And only a minority of those spoke of actually changing their own thinking and behaviors accordingly. Most of what they actually did as a result of those discontents and criticisms was to try to maintain a greater awareness about overconsumption, to discard some of their excess possessions, and to be careful not to buy too many products that they did not really need.

Some cultural commentators today look to young Americans as our hope for a brighter future. Today's youth, some think, represent a new generation of alternative thinkers who will act as creative agents of change to push the nation in directions that are greener and more just.⁶ We wish that this was so. What we have found, however, suggests quite the opposite—at least when it comes to mass consumerism and environmental stewardship. Nearly all emerging adults in America today have fully bought into mainstream economics and culture. Indeed, they may be even a little behind the curve on where social change seems to be heading with regard to a greener future. Very many emerging adults we interviewed could not even understand the issue or problems that we interviewers were asking them about. The idea of having any questions or doubts about the cycle of shopping, buying, consuming, accumulating, discarding, and more shopping appeared to be almost unthinkable to most of them. Most seem quite consumed with consumerism. Emerging adults have in fact been very well raised by parents, teachers, and the media to perpetuate the kind of standard materialistic values and lifestyles into which they have been socialized. They want and expect material security and financial comfort. They view recently invented, high-tech communication and entertainment gadgets—like iPhones, laptops, high speed internet, and big-screen televisions—as basic essentials in life. They view individuals as autonomous decision makers out to maximize their privately held values and preferences. They believe that any money that they or anyone else earns is entirely their own to do with exactly as they please. Notions such as the common welfare or of living a good life not defined by material consumption rarely cross their minds. Shopping, buying, and consuming as a way of life is thus presupposed by most emerging adults, and owning some of the nicer things in life is a natural part of the purpose of life. Most simply want and expect to live comfortably, working hard to earn money and using their earnings to happily consume products and services to their satisfaction.

If there is a problem here, as we think there is, the fault is not primarily that of emerging adults. They are simply mirroring back to the older adult world, to mainstream society and culture, what has been modeled for them and what they have been taught. Emerging adults have simply been good learners and now are

eager to enjoy the benefits of their material abundance and consumer choice. So if there is a problem here, it is a problem of mainstream American culture and institutions. If we have questions about what we have learned in this chapter, they are questions to be put to all Americans. What really is a good life? What does it consist of? What more than anything else makes life worth living? What is of real value? Why do we feel so compelled (or what about our systems compels us) to consume and dispose of so much stuff? What are the moral and spiritual presuppositions of that kind of lifestyle? And what is that way of life doing to the earth's capacity to carry flourishing and healthy human life well into the future? These are no little questions. And what we have learned about and from emerging adults only presses them upon all of us more urgently.

family?