

Film 4, *Minimalism*

One of the films that was in the running that I did not select as one of my top 10 (or top 20) was the 2009 film *No Impact Man*. There is, however, an interesting scene in the film where the title character, no impact man Colin Beavan, has a discussion with his toddler daughter about consumerism. As he explains to her, a consumer desiring to make environmentally sound purchases is faced with an extraordinary job, as this can require a great deal of research. In an effort to short circuit all this, Beavan suggests simply consuming less, a lot less.

It's a simple idea. So simple in fact that even a toddler can apparently understand it. In a certain way, it also forms the basis of the response to consumerism known as "minimalism."

In one sense, minimalism is hardly new, as most human beings throughout history have probably gotten by with the bare minimum, or nearly so, needed for life. Even today, for a broad swath of people across the planet, this is likely still true. Hence, we hardly need to prescribe minimalism for most people on the planet.

But what we were talking about here is voluntary minimalism. Relatively wealthy people who could buy lots of stuff, but choose not to for environmental or other reasons. In that sense, minimalism is a solution to a problem that is at epidemic levels in wealthy countries, like the US.

In America, at least as early as the nineteenth century, people began amassing stuff as consumer culture began to build momentum. One of the earliest critics of this phenomenon was Henry David Thoreau who, I think, can rightly be considered one of the great grandparents of American minimalism, as he pondered the bare minimum necessary for life – and then acted on what he learned during his relatively short Walden experiment.

In recent years, minimalism has emerged as a cultural movement designed to counter rampant consumerism. Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus, featured in the film *Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things*, are two leading proponents of the minimalist lifestyle. As this film makes clear, one of the interesting aspects of minimalism is that people are not necessarily adopting this lifestyle for environmental reasons. As Millburn and Nicodemus explain on their [website](#):

"Minimalism is a tool that can assist you in finding freedom. Freedom from fear. Freedom from worry. Freedom from overwhelm. Freedom from guilt. Freedom from depression. Freedom from the trappings of the consumer culture we've built our lives around. Real freedom."

Many people believe that responding to the climate crisis on a personal level will mean we have to do without quite a bit, which means that we will have to live drab lives of deprivation. What is intriguing about minimalism is that this group of individuals has voluntarily decided to do without quite a bit because they believe that this is a better way to live. This was also Thoreau's message. Intriguingly, after experimenting with a life of minimalism, Thoreau, Millburn, Nicodemus, and many others have all confirmed that this is indeed a better life.

So, is minimalism an important response to the climate crisis? One thing to consider is no impact man Colin Beavan's assertion that simply consuming less is enough. It would be great if it were, in fact, this simple. However, seemingly similar products and practices can have very different environmental footprints, especially when you consider the energy used to make them, their useful lifespans, the sort of materials of which they are made, the conditions under which they are manufactured, and so forth. Hence, it is not enough to just consume less: we need to make sure that we make the right decisions when we do consume.

Nonetheless, although *Minimalism* is not an environmental film, per se, living a minimalist lifestyle can have significant environmental impact. I am curious to hear what you think about the film. Is minimalism a viable and meaningful option?

While minimalism is a great start, a number of theorists have been considering the next step. Two such thinkers are Juliet Schor in her book *True Wealth: How and Why Millions of Americans Are Creating a Time-Rich, Ecologically Light, Small-Scale, High-Satisfaction Economy* and Tim Kasser in *The High Price of Materialism*. While both books are well worth reading, New Dream has conveniently put together two short videos that nicely introduce both works.

Incidentally, New Dream, formerly The Center for a New American Dream was, as [their website explains](#), "founded in 1997 by a group of forward-thinking activists and philanthropists who sought to draw greater attention to the links between individual action, social justice, and broader environmental impacts, and between excess materialism and negative impacts on human well-being, including children's development."

In *True Wealth*, Schor in many ways takes a minimalist approach. However, minimalism, from Thoreau through to modern minimalists, has largely been a personal choice. Schor considers

what if an entire society took up a similar approach by adopting a new economic model, what she calls a “plentitude economy.”

The idea is simple, people would work less (maybe a lot less, like in the Netherlands, where the workweek is under 30 hours) and hence have more time for things that would make their lives better and more rewarding, like growing some of their own food and other DIY projects. They would also have far more time for activities that would make them happier.

In short, Schor’s message is that while personal changes (of the minimalist variety, for example) are obviously terrific and absolutely necessary, we also need to think in terms of larger system change, involving the sort of economic and political change that she recommends.

Tim Kasser’s *The High Price of Materialism* (both the book and the video snippet from New Dream) considers the impact that materialism, in the sense of ramped-up consumerism, has in our lives. It is not a pretty picture, as materialism makes us less happy and more anxious, depressed, and selfish, for a start.

Again, I am curious to hear what you think. Can we maximize minimalism (so to speak) by building our society and economy on less materialistic values? Would this indeed be better for us and the planet? Could we actually make this happen? In other words, could we get enough people to go along with it to actually re-invent our materialist culture?

Class discussion of *Minimalism*

Note that the following observations, which are in italics, have not been paraphrased or altered, though I do correct the occasional typo and, because of space concerns, often just part of the comment is reproduced here along with my reply. In working through these, I will first quote a student’s observation, followed by my thoughts.

The thing that bothered me first was when Joshua Milburn was talking about how his life looked a lot like “everybody else’s,” listing off a lot of items and things, “closets full of expensive clothes,” and how now he has a lot less – he has his chair, his table his bed, etc... It just came across to me as grossly privileged for him to say that what he had was very average and now he has way less than average, when his apartment is honestly nicer than anything I’ve ever lived in. Growing up in a home where our house was pretty bare but not at all by choice, that just didn’t sit right with me. Also when the man later on who said he was “homeless” – there’s a big

difference between traveling and renting homes wherever you go and not being able to afford a place to live, so again, it just felt grossly privileged.

This is a wonderful observation that squarely hits on a central point:

Minimalism is a movement by and for privileged people. There is no doubt about it. After all, minimalism doesn't make sense for people who have very little. As they may only have essentials in their lives, what is there to give up? Indeed, their lives may well be best characterized by lack rather than abundance.

However, for people who have a lot (i.e. too much), for example, certain people in wealthy countries like the US, minimalism makes sense.

Unfortunately, the documentary *Minimalism* does not address this issue in any meaningful way. To the contrary, Millburn and Nicodemus spend a good bit of time portraying themselves as successful before they chose a minimalist lifestyle. This is seemingly done to underscore that their lifestyle is one of choice, rather than necessity. In other words, yes, I live like a poor person, but I was once (and presumably could again be) quite wealthy. Unfortunately, this can be more than a little grating.

This is not to say that there is no merit to minimalism. Quite the contrary. From an environmental perspective, since the wealthy countries have largely brought about the climate crisis in the last few decades through their relentless consumption and corresponding greenhouse gas emissions, anything that people in these countries can do to reduce this endless cycle of consuming and emitting should certainly be welcome.

Indeed, people in wealthy countries who adopt a minimalist lifestyle could do even more.

For example, being a minimalist, you might have either more disposable income, as you are buying less new stuff, or more time, as you might be working fewer hours in order to buy new stuff. So, what about that extra time and money that you have? You could of course, buy fewer things of higher quality, which would still take as much money. Or use the money for other things, like purchasing experiences, such as travel. Or use the time that you have freed up for self-care.

But what donating that money or time to worthy causes? Again, the documentary *Minimalism* does not address this possibility in any meaningful way. Consequently, minimalism can (and in the documentary arguably does) come across as selfish and self-serving. Of course, it certainly need not be, but, again, the documentary did not explore how a person could directly help themselves AND others through a minimalist lifestyle.

I remember I watched this film in my economics class my senior year of high school and I was left inspired. I wanted to desperately change my ways of living. But in the end, I was not

successful. Mostly because at the time I was still living with my parents and they shut my idea down immediately because to them minimalism does not exist. I come from a Latinx immigrant family. For my parents, the more things you own, the more it is seen as a form of success. Being able to own a car and buy clothes and materialistic things means they have succeeded in life. To them it means all their hard work has paid off after years of struggling in this country to prove their worth. While I do understand where they are coming from and their reasoning for not wanting to live a minimalist life, there is no way to change their thinking.

Another excellent point.

In wealthy countries like the US, we live in a system that measures the worth of a person by way of how much they consume. Simply put, success is measured in terms of consumption. Hence, if you are a mega successful influencer, your life is characterized by unbridled consumption. Huge houses (and lots of them), fancy cars (and lots of them), expensive designer outfits (and lots of them), exotic trips (and lots of them) – you get the idea. And social media provides a wonderful opportunity to telegraph your consumption/worth to the world.

Of course, most people never achieve this level of purchasing power. Nonetheless, we are all encouraged to aspire to consume as much as possible. Maybe just one McMansion and a closet full of fast fashion.

But, what if you are on the other end of the spectrum and do not have the resources to consume much? Since success and the worth of a person is measured in terms of consumption in this system, such a person would hardly be seen as successful. Indeed, in its most nasty form, we are encouraged to think of such a person as a failure.

Of course, as I have suggested, Millburn and Nicodemus spend a good deal of effort convincing us that they were and could again be successful if they chose to be. But not everyone has that confidence. Hence, they need to prove their worth to the world through consumption, endless consumption. That's how the system works.

While some people, like the person who wrote this comment, choose to opt out of the system, for other people, like their parents, it is not so easy, as the system exerts enormous social pressures on them to assert their worth through consumption, which results in increased greenhouse gas emissions.

But let's be clear, it would be misguided to put the blame on these individuals, as the blame squarely lands on the system itself, and the corporations that maintain it.

“Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things” was my favorite movie of the quarter so far. What made me like it so much was the fact that it gave me a breath of fresh air, allowed me to step back and rethink some of my own practices with new ideas of minimalism. I started to also ask questions like “Is this useful to me?” for various items in my life and it even prompted me to start to get rid of some of the excesses.

As we have seen, there are certainly reasons to be critical of the documentary *Minimalism*.

However, let's stand back and consider the climate crisis for a moment. What is the principal cause of this crisis? It is certainly not most individuals in low- and middle-income countries. As I have repeatedly noted, the poorest 3 billion people on earth have only contributed 5% of the greenhouse gas emissions that our species has put into the atmosphere.

Rather, the principal cause of the crisis is a minority of people on the planet, who live in wealthy countries, and who have lifestyles that are utterly unsustainable, as these individuals consume far too many of the planet's resources, which results in staggering greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Ironically and tragically, this unbridled consumption is not achieving what these people desire, which is greater happiness.

Let's be very clear about the fact that some of these GHG emissions come from the United States collectively, rather than being the byproduct of individual action. From things like maintaining a large military and extensive infrastructure, like roads. But much of this is expended in order to make the "American Dream" possible for each of us individually.

So, is there a cure to this sickness? In fact, there is. Here is the prescription: consume less, a lot less. It's seemingly just that simple.

Unfortunately, it's not that simple, as many people, like the parents of the person who made the previous comment, will not likely take the prescription. Should we fault them for this? Certainly not. Why not? Because, as I noted, many of us in wealthy countries are trapped in a system that has yoked our very sense of worth and self with consumption.

So, in diagnosing this as a personal problem and offering a prescription to cure it, we lose sight of the fact that this is a far larger, systemic issue – which deeply needs to be changed. Simply put, unbridled consumption and capitalism needs to be severely checked.

How do we go about doing this? Ultimately, by electing a new generation of politicians that will reel in the corporations that are profiting at the expense of us and the planet. And, of course, we need a generation of activists to bring this attention to the forefront of the public consciousness.

So, what about this comment, that the documentary *Minimalism* "gave me a breath of fresh air, allowed me to step back and rethink some of my own practices with new ideas of minimalism"? This was, incidentally, hardly the only comment like this, as many, many people had similar sentiments.

Yes, summing up what we have been saying, 1) such a comment can only come from a privileged position, 2) given our extraordinary consumer culture, many people will not

feel this way, and 3) one person's action are virtually insignificant, given that there are nearly 8 billion people on the planet. So, should we then not bother with something like minimalism?

To the contrary, I am of the decided opinion that rampant consumerism in wealthy countries (and the corresponding greenhouse gas emissions) needs to be radically minimized if we are to mitigate the climate crisis. In this sense, people who are now voluntarily minimalizing are harbingers of the future, working out how all of us in wealthy countries will need to live if we are to get through this crisis.

Of course, individual action alone doesn't add up to much, but it is a start, especially as it makes clear that another way of life is possible. For many people, this itself is an epiphany.

[T]he minimalist life sounds appealing to me and I want to start getting into some of the practices that were seen throughout the documentary. I also realized that my very own grandma has a very similar mindset of a minimalist. She lives in Mexico and sometimes she comes to visit us but when she does she always comments that she wouldn't like to live in America because she says she's noticed that it seems like everyone here just focuses on materialistic things and is money oriented. She also appreciates the simple things in life and has always made whatever she buys last a long time. I used to not get why she said what she said about the US. but after the documentary it highlighted all of the things my Grandma was saying and I agree with her.

What a wonderful comment, which makes clear that minimalism is hardly new, but rather has been a way of life for most people on the planet for most of human history.

We might then conclude that it isn't that sad for them, but lucky for us that we now have so much. But, from the revealing and perceptive viewpoint of this person's grandmother, we are not the lucky ones, regardless of what we have been told. From her perspective, in the US, "everyone here just focuses on materialistic things and is money oriented," rather than appreciating "the simple things in life."

This is not to say that conditions for billions of people across the planet, especially in low- and middle-income countries should not improve. Everyone should have access to clean water and healthcare, for example.

However, converting everyone on the planet into consumers in keeping with the US model would be as disastrous for the planet as it would be for them. Of course, some people, like this person's grandmother, would have the good sense to reject a life of relentless consumerism, but given how successfully the US has been turned into a country of consumers, and how successful the project is sweeping the planet, there is every reason to fear that individuals like this are in the minority.

This makes clear that what we are facing here is not just a US problem, but is now a worldwide phenomenon - though the US is, of course, clearly one of the global leaders in consumerism and is in part responsible for the successful marketing of it to the world.

I loved that this film's baseline was that less does and can make us more happy. The American Dream is a tarnished, outdated, consumeristic goal that is not only ruining the planet but deteriorating our well-beings. It was inspiring to hear how the people in the film have readjusted their lives, perspectives, and happiness by deconstructing their attachment to material items. I got chills when the film faded out with the saying, "love people and use things because the opposite never works". It's TRUE. It's devastating that our culture has been built around and conditioned to think that stuff gives us happiness, purpose, or fulfillment. The most important aspect in our lives is our relationships, with ourselves and others. True happiness cannot be found from a Black Friday sale or the Instagram Ad.

Well said.

It is indeed "inspiring to hear how the people in the film have readjusted their lives, perspectives, and happiness by deconstructing their attachment to material items," which is quite an accomplishment. 150 years ago, Henry David Thoreau wrote a book about his own personal journey of deconstructing his attachment to material things.

Why is this such an accomplishment? Precisely because, as we have noted, corporations have excelled at turning human beings into consumers. They exert all sorts of pressure in all sorts of ways to make us pine for the "material items" on offer.

This is, of course, what makes minimalism so difficult to adopt - and to keep as a lifestyle over time. It also gets to the root of the problem, which, as we have noted, is not with individuals, but rather the corporations that have raised us from a very young age to be rampant consumers.

Of course, these corporations would like to tell us that the problem is ultimately with us, as we should simply not buy the things on offer, but this is a rather outlandish position, as they spend billions of dollars every year pressuring us to make these purchases.

This also underscores the fact that it is unlikely that minimalism will become anything like a dominant culture in the United States if we do address this root problem, which is not with individuals, but with marketers fashioning them into consumers.

As with the climate crisis, this will ultimately involve putting politicians into office who are willing to decisively act on this problem.

Until then, minimalism is a fascinating grassroots phenomenon trying to work out how to live a more authentic life free of unnecessary things. In this sense, it may be a provocative glimpse into the future.

Let's hope.

Since I already saw Minimalism last quarter in English 22, this week I instead watched the alternate videos, "Visualizing a Plenitude Economy" and "The High Price of Materialism".

These videos build off of the minimalism argument, but on a more societal scale. "Visualizing a Plenitude Economy" talks about how, following the 2008 financial crisis, Wall Street was thriving while poverty and joblessness were rampant in our society. Their solution was a Plenitude economy: changing how we spend our time is the key to reducing environmental impact, creating more jobs, and making our everyday lives better. They suggest changes such as reducing individual workloads (instead of hiring 4 full time employees, hire 5 and have them each work 80%). This is very in line with the Nordic model, with people working less and having more time for socializing and seeking personal fulfillment. Instead of juicing as many work hours out of their employees as they possibly can, these companies instead want their employees to work less, in order to be more productive.

Minimalism is largely a personal choice, though one can imagine families adopting it as well. But what would this be like on a larger, "societal scale"?

As this person rightly notes, "following the 2008 financial crisis, Wall Street was thriving while poverty and joblessness were rampant in our society." In response, scholar Juliet Schor suggested the idea of a "plenitude economy," where people would work less (perhaps just four days a week for 30 hours or so). This would result in a shrinking of the economy, also known as "degrowth," but one that did not bring about joblessness, poverty and unhappiness, but rather more fulfilling lives, as people would have, to again quote this person, "more time for socializing and seeking personal fulfillment."

Although this may sound like a theoretical (and hence unrealistic) idea, as this person rightly notes, this is very in line with the Nordic model, as countries like the Netherlands and Denmark have largely adopted this approach. For example, "[around three-quarters of people in the Netherlands choose to work part-time - anything from 12 to 36 hours a week.](#)"

Although the idea of three-quarters of the workforce working part time may seem almost unthinkable to our American sensibilities, it can and does work in other countries. Amazingly, the per capita income in the Netherlands is just a few percent less than the United States.

The reason that I coupled the film "Visualizing a Plenitude Economy" with *Minimalism* is that it suggests that, by shifting to a different sort of economy, we could maximize minimalism, so to speak, by having people work less and instead spend more time learning meaningful lives.

"The High Price of Materialism" ... [mentions] ... how in America today, we're told that 'the good life is the goods life'. As we become more materialistic, we suffer more from depression, anxiety, substance abuse, we act less empathetically, generously, and cooperatively, and we stop appreciating ecologically conscious activities. At its core, the video focuses on the points that: 1. We need to understand what causes people to prioritize materialistic lives, and 2. We need to promote intrinsic values (growing as a person, being close to your family/friends, and improving the world). We need to spend more time working on ourselves and making sure our personal values are being reflected in the lives we live...(continued)...

We need to live a life that shows how much we care about the people around us and the world we live in. This really goes hand in hand with the minimalist lifestyle, and reminds me of the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh... Hanh, a Buddhist monk, said that we have everything we need to be happy right now. Happiness does not come from our possessions, it comes from within ourselves, from the people around us, and from being fully present and interconnected with the world, living completely in the moment. This really put the puzzle pieces together for me personally, and helped me understand what this is all about. I think we tend to get so caught up in living our lives that we find it hard to see the downsides of everything. We understand the drawbacks of a problem, but we can't just rip the band-aid off and get it over with. We know that our obsession with our possessions is toxic, but we can't bring ourselves to throw them away because we know the work we put in to buy them...(continued)...

We know the harm that our behaviors are having on the planet, but we can't give them up. It is so easy to feel discouraged with the direction the world is headed in and subsequently disillusioned with the suggested changes in our lifestyles that we want to live. Ultimately, though, if we could just be brave enough and strong enough to give new things a try, we could solve our problems so easily. But, things aren't that simple. It's not easy to just compromise on everything, it's not easy to give up the things that we feel that we deserve, and it's particularly hard to change our conventions on how we should live our lives every day. But, all we can do is take baby steps and begin to build a life that we feel satisfied living. We need to be the pioneers so that the people that come after us can see the benefits of a new world and a new way to live our lives.

This comment is so thoughtful and squarely on the mark that I don't really know what I could add.

All in all, this was a very thoughtful group of responses to the notion that, for those of us in wealthy countries (who are the principal cause of the climate crisis), living less of a consumerist lifestyle would not only be better for the planet, but for each of us as well.

This week I watched "Building a Plenitude Economy" and "The High Price of Materialism". I really enjoyed these videos and was especially pleased to see the youtube comments for them being so overwhelmingly positive, people really want to make changes to the way we live our lives. I was intrigued by the way that the environment and economy were linked in a plenitude economy, and by the assertion that we should actually work less. I think, especially in the U.S., we put such an emphasis on productivity and "hustle culture", that it is hard for many people to imagine working less could be good. However, as the video points out, this would free us up to do other things that would help us to build our communities and create more eco-friendly lives (for example gardening or keeping bees). I will say that I think this plan will only work if our government takes more responsibility for making sure everyone has high wages and basic needs met, because without that a "plenitude economy" may lead to more inequality. However,

knowing that the Dutch government has already implemented this (and knowing that they have happier citizens AND less emissions than us) is really inspiring. However, U.S. culture is incredibly different and I think it will take a change of perspective to get us there.

In addition, the documentary's example of the ABC news anchor who turned to meditation due to his overthinking/worried nature resonated with me as well. For me, I consider myself a chronic overthinker who constantly ruminates on even the smallest things. The ABC news anchor's advice of worry is good, but excessive worry only leads to self-pity made me realize how much I unconsciously worry. His segment has made me realize that many things are just not that deep and excessive worrying will only lead to more unnecessary stress in my life.

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Another thing I found interesting was the idea of keeping things that bring you joy. As a person who does admittedly buy into the "next best thing" rather frequently, I find that, after watching this documentary, I want to ask myself what brings me joy. I think this would make me happier, and decrease the amount of things that I consume that I don't need. Having worked in a thrift store for 2 years before coming to university, I saw consumerism every day. People donated brand-new items that I couldn't fathom getting rid of, simply because they already had way too much stuff. It always made me reflect on the level of consumerism we are told is right every day, and how truly engrained it is in our minds that we need all of these things. I have been happy to see how much my generation enjoys thrifting clothing rather than buying from fast-fashion companies, but I still get discouraged when I see people making "hauls" of all the brand-new things they buy frequently. I think if people tried, they would find that buying new things doesn't make you happy. I learned a lot from this documentary and I think others could too.

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