

Should frugality be viewed as a moral virtue?

We all know people who pride themselves on their thriftiness. They boast about how little their clothes cost and love to recall how they managed to survive on the smell of an oily rag during the depression/the war/graduate school. I confess to being one of these people myself. But what exactly do they—sorry, we—think is so admirable about frugality? Why view it as a virtue?

The term “frugality” has two main senses: i) living prudently within one’s means; and ii) living simply, in a manner that requires few resources and little expense. The value of living prudently within one’s means is fairly obvious and has been explained expertly by Ben Franklin, Mr. Micawber, and others. But the value of living frugally in the second sense is not so obvious.

Among philosophers, advocates of simple living are legion, from Lao Tzu and Epicurus to Thoreau and the Dalai Lama. But extravagance, too, has its champions. The ancient authors who document the wealth of Agamemnon or the riches of Solomon write in an admiring rather than critical tone. And this important strain in our culture is obviously alive and well today. For some, how much one spends on a wedding or a bottle of wine is a point of pride. And the extravagances of former times--the artworks, villas, palaces, cathedrals and tombs--are visited, and admired, by millions of tourists each year. Few of us today wish that the Medici had chosen the simple life.

In fact, the advocates of free spending within one’s means have a straightforward argument at their disposal. Life is to be enjoyed. Those able and willing to spend lavishly on good food, fine clothes, beautiful surroundings, travel, top quality entertainment, and exciting recreations are to be envied since they sample life’s riches to the full. That is precisely why most people would choose to be rich. Frugality, by contrast, is no fun. It should be grouped with what Hume calls the “monkish virtues,” an unfortunate hangover from a religiously-inspired ethic of self-denial.

So why eschew luxury? In recent times, an environmental argument has come to the fore: living simply reduces one’s ecological footprint, which is good for the earth and for everyone. But the traditional arguments for frugality typically focus on what is good for the individual. Some see frugality as morally valuable because it tends to be associated with other virtues such as wisdom, honesty, or sincerity. Some find the natural, uncluttered, focused character of a simple lifestyle aesthetically appealing. The most

common argument, though, is that simple living is the surest route—some even say the *only* route--to happiness. Why? Because it weakens our attachments to things that don't matter and helps us focus our lives on what is truly important, above all, our relationships with others,

If sound, this argument shows frugality to be a virtue in the sense of being a quality that promotes one's own well-being. Many philosophers endorse it. But perhaps they—sorry, we—are just putting a good spin on the fact that, for philosophers, extravagance is not usually an option.

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