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Pleasure, Guilt and Regret in Consumption: Revisiting the Vice-Virtue Categorization in Theories of Self-Control

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Abstract

The popular characterization of self-control conflicts as a choice between hedonic vices and utilitarian virtues leads to the unrealistic prediction that hedonic consumption is always accompanied by feelings of guilt and regret. The paradox is resolved by recognizing that excess consumption—rather than hedonics—is the defining characteristic of vices.

Extended Abstract

Self-control problems are often characterized as intertemporally inconsistent preferences (Ainslie 1975; Loewenstein and Prelec 1992), where a consumer prefers the immediate consumption of a good to its consumption in the future, but as time passes by she regrets having consumed the good in the past. Based on intertemporally inconsistent preferences, Wertenbroch (1998) introduced a formal definition of vice and virtues: A product X is a vice relative to product Y, and Y is a virtue relative to X, if X is preferred now rather than later, and Y is preferred later rather than now.

We argue that Wertenbroch's (1998) definition—in combination with the corollary that vices are hedonic and virtues are utilitarian—has led to the development of theories of self-control that postulate that enjoyment derived from consumption is always accompanied by feelings of guilt and regret. We show this by reviewing the self-control literature, and propose a change to the definition of vice-consumption that recognizes excessive consumption—rather than hedonics—as its defining characteristic.

Wertenbroch's definition was highly influential, the vice-virtue distinction has been adopted in the literature on self-control in social psychology and consumer behavior (a comprehensive review of self-control papers published in JEP:G, JPSP, Psych Science, OBHDP, JCR, JM, JMR, Marketing Science, and Marketing Letters from 1995 to 2016 shows that over 70% use the vice-virtue distinction). In the typical self-control experiment (e.g., Baumeister et al. 1998; Shiv and Fedorikhin 1999), participants are given a choice between a vice (e.g., a piece of chocolate cake) and a virtue food (e.g., a fruit salad). Choice shares serve as the dependent variable, where higher shares of the vice are interpreted as a relative lack of self-control. In fewer instances (e.g., Coelho do Vale et al. 2008; Campbell and Mohr 2011), self-control is measured by the absolute amount of vices chosen or consumed.

Khan, Dhar and Wertenbroch (2005, p. 20) postulated: "...by Wertenbroch's (1998) formal definition, hedonic goods could be characterized as vices and utilitarian goods as virtues in a direct comparison with each other." (cf. also Alba and Williams 2013; Milkman et al. 2008, 2010; O'Curry and Strahilevitz 2001; Read et al. 1999). According to this corollary, vice products are tempting, elicit more affective responses, and provide for more experiential consumption, fun, pleasure, and excitement than virtue products do. Virtues, in contrast, are primarily instrumental and mainly purchased and consumed on the basis of their functional aspects, that is they promote health and—in case of durables—efficiency. The idea

that self-control conflicts can be characterized as choosing between hedonic and utilitarian consumption opportunities is also present in other theories of self-control, such as the conflict of want versus should selves (Bazerman et al. 1998), desire versus willpower (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991), heart versus mind (Shiv and Fedorikhin 1999), and enjoyment versus control (Stroebe et al. 2012).

If vices = hedonic and virtues = utilitarian, pleasure derived from hedonic consumption must be accompanied by feelings of regret because—by definition—vices are preferred now rather than later, and virtues are preferred later rather than now. Consequently, the consumption of vices will necessarily be regretted at a later stage (Baumeister 2002; Read et al. 1999) and induce feelings of guilt (Kivetz and Simonson 2002). Enjoyment from immediate consumption will be tainted by feelings of guilt and anticipated regret, and post-consumption enjoyment (e.g., memories) will be thwarted by experienced regret. The more enjoyment is derived from hedonic consumption, the more guilt and regret will be anticipated and experienced. So, according to current theories of self-control, the self-disciplined consumer lives a healthy life devoid of enjoyment.

Clearly, this is an incorrect depiction of hedonic consumption. Many people seem to enjoy consuming products without being plagued by feelings of guilt and regret. The consumption of any product, whether hedonic or utilitarian, may be harmless in moderation. In excess, however, consumption becomes problematic and perilous. Pizza for example—typically considered a vice—is per se not bad for one's health. Millions of Italians eat it several times a week, and they belong to the slimmest people in Europe. Even for addictive and strictly toxic substances such as cigarettes, consumption amount linearly determines health damages (Bjartveit and Tverdal 2005), so a cigarette a day is much less damaging than a pack a day. Likewise the consumption of so-called virtues can be harmful when consumed in excess. Fruitarianism, for example, a diet consisting exclusively of eating fruits, is dangerous and may cause nutritional deficiencies in protein, calcium, vitamins D and B. The deficiency of some of these nutrients can cause severe and irreversible damage, especially to the brain and nervous system (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fruitarianism>). Our argument also holds for vices and virtues other than foods. Spending time with friends and family can be a virtue unless done in excess. Working is a virtue unless done in excess. Praying, running, eating, sleeping, having sex, . . . , any activity is harmless or even beneficial in moderation but perilous in excess.

Realizing that excessive consumption—not hedonics—is the defining characteristic of vices leads to a number of straightforward but fundamental implications. First, the definition of vices needs to include consumption amount as its defining characteristic. Second, tests of self-control theories should use consumption amount—rather than choice share of vices—as dependent variable. Third, moral licensing effects (justifying future consumption of vices by past consumption of virtues) rely to a large extent on the binary classification of virtue-versus vice-consumption. When consumption amount—a continuous variable—is the defining characteristic, however, moral licensing is much harder to accomplish as it is difficult to define the cutoff of consumption amount at which licensing is psychologically feasible. Finally, the most important implication concerns consumer welfare. Consumers can enjoy hedonic consumption without being plagued by feelings of guilt and regret as long as they consume with moderation. Indulgence is not a matter of too much enjoyment but of too much consumption. Consequently, consumers can exert self-control without depriving themselves of enjoyment derived from consumption (cf., Cornil and Chandon 2015).

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