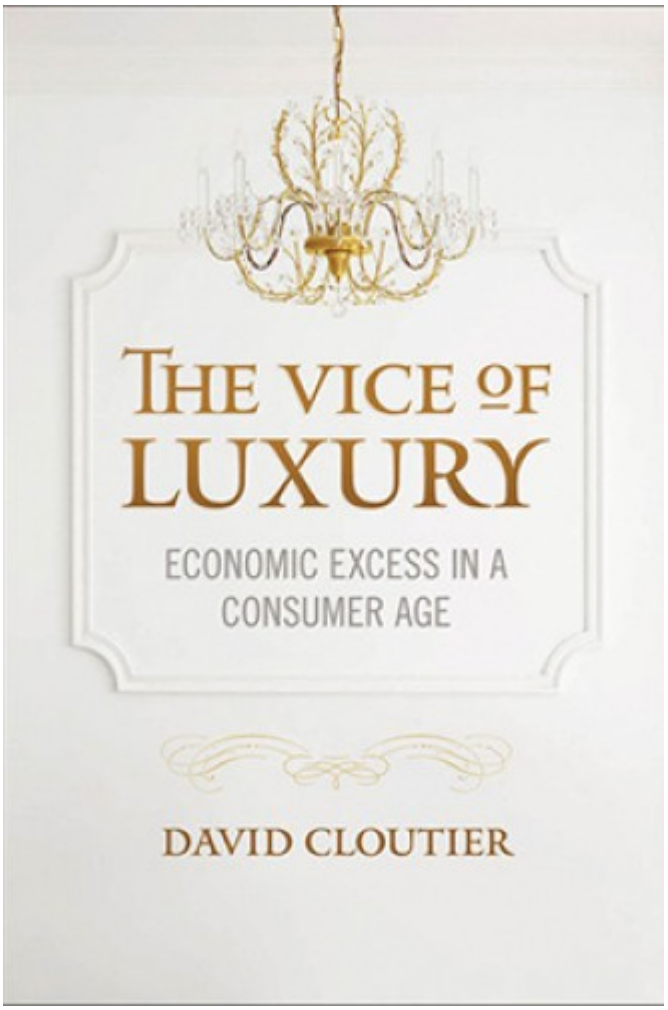
The joy of things and the trap of excess

An ethicist and an anthropologist ask: How much is too much?

by Lee Hull Moses in the January 4, 2017 issue

In Review



The Vice of Luxury

Economic Excess in a Consumer Age

By David Cloutier
Georgetown University Press

My Life with Things

The Consumer Diaries

By Elizabeth Chin
Duke University Press

A few years ago, my mother-in-law gave us an electric heated mattress pad. I didn't know such things existed, hadn't asked for it. What an incredibly ridiculous extravagance, I thought. Then I got into bed on a cold night with the heater turned on and wondered how on earth I had lived without it for so long.

I thought of that extravagant mattress pad as I read David Cloutier's argument for seeing luxury as a moral problem. We must, he argues compellingly, recognize

luxury as a vice and confront our propensity toward excess if we are to overcome the inequalities that plague our society and move closer to the kingdom of God.

A Catholic scholar at Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg, Maryland, Cloutier turns often to the teachings of the pope as a source of wisdom. But he also engages a wide range of ancient and contemporary voices. Given its primarily scholarly tone, this book is more likely to find an audience in the academic classroom than the congregational discussion group. Yet it offers important contributions to the conversation about how to live faithfully and responsibly with what we have.

Cloutier is at his most readable and most convincing when he uses real-life examples, pointing out the complexities of moral choices and economic decisions. He considers, for example, the high-priced coffee drinks that many of us have incorporated into our daily lives:

> Some think a cartful of goods at Walmart is consumerism run rampant but their mocha lattes not so much. . . . This is not to say that the $5 coffee by itself is a significant moral problem, although whether one should consider it as an occasional treat rather than a daily item is a question. But many people who pay $5 a day for it also resist paying the $6 price attached to a gallon of organic, sustainably farmed milk instead of the bargain-basement-priced milk.

This is not simply a critique of luxury coffee: it illustrates a larger claim about human nature. "The important issues of food justice and faithfulness in sustainable food production fail here . . . but not because people are seeking injustice. Rather, they are disposed to luxury and end up tolerating injustice."

In a compelling section on social and economic justice, he argues convincingly that working toward systemic change will only be effective in ending inequality if we first turn our gaze self-ward and acknowledge our propensity toward wanting more and better things. "Justice-based solutions that do not attend to our dispositions toward luxury pretend that problems can be solved too easily."

After making the case for characterizing luxury as a vice—that is, a human problem that must be confronted—he turns toward the somewhat daunting task of defining what luxury is. In a world where many people sleep with no bed at all, my heated mattress pad will always be a luxury, but what about the shoes I'm wearing? Or the

several pairs of similar shoes I have at home? What about food? How much is too much? The line between basic needs and luxury desires is not always clear.

Cloutier digs into this problem with detailed enthusiasm, and he goes so far as to suggest amount income brackets to define the basic needs of a household. He acknowledges that “fixed, absolute standards” aren’t the point, qualifying his income brackets as “guidelines for discernment that we might fruitfully compare with our own spending.”

Particularly helpful to me was Clouiter’s discussion on what we are to do with the surplus, should we be lucky enough to have more than necessary to meet our basic needs. He suggests four categories toward which we might “direct our excess wealth,” each of which leads us toward a more relational and faithful life. First, we can share what we have, providing for the common good of our communities. Second, we can use what we have for celebrations and special occasions; “festival goods” is Clouiter’s term for this, which I like. Third, our goods can be put to use in the service of the work we are called to do. A well-equipped faculty office, Clouiter suggests as an example, might go beyond basic needs, but it provides a space where learning happens and relationships are nurtured. Finally, we can use our goods for enrichment, to enhance our lives and bring us joy. (I dare not include my heated mattress pad in this category, but a family vacation might qualify.)

Elizabeth Chin, an anthropologist who teaches media design practices at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, also wrestles with the question of how much is too much when it comes to material possessions. She describes how she lives in the tension between the trap of excess and the joy that such material goods offer.

> Of all the struggles I face in my life, the one I feel most acutely and most often (these days at least) is the war of my contradictory desires. On the one hand, I want everything: a well-trained dog; really lovely clothes and private school for my child; a big-screen TV with premium cable; not having to worry about money. Yet on the other hand, what I want is less, much less—in fact, nothing at all: to throw the TV away; grow my own vegetables . . .

Many readers will recognize this tension in their own lives; the complexities of everyday life do not always lend themselves to a clear moral choice.

If *The Vice of Luxury* sits squarely on the academic shelf, Chin's book is not easily categorized. Part academic study and part personal essay, *My Life with Things* offers both casual and scholarly readers an entryway into conversation about the place of material possessions in our lives.

Chin draws from the fields of anthropology and social science, which are clearly her expertise and her passion, but her strength is in reflecting on her own relationship with her things. She is witty and observant. Her reflections are often spot on, and at times she takes on a delightful conversational tone, as if she were telling you a story over a glass of wine. I related to her angst over buying gifts for preschool birthday parties and resonated with her longing for the feel of the morning paper when all the news is now online.

This book is a clear critique of capitalism. Karl Marx appears as a conversation partner throughout, in interludes that occasionally ramble and interrupt the flow of Chin's storytelling. But it's also a nuanced reflection on both the fact that we are inescapably tied to our possessions and the ways they connect us to our loved ones and neighbors around the world.

In contrast to Cloutier's precise and well-developed argument, Chin's reflections don't lead to a clear resolution or a call to action. Both books, however, challenge readers to examine their own lives.

Both Cloutier and Chin understand material goods and consumption as not inherently evil. Our things can be a source of joy and even, Cloutier reminds us, a means of encountering the divine, "the intimate, ongoing connection between the material and the spiritual, between creation and God." These books are ultimately about paying attention, to our lives, to our things, and to the choices we make about how we use what we've been given.

A version of this article appears in the January 4 print edition under the title "The ethics of excess."