

Master thesis

Ascetic technologies and autonomy

Enhancing autonomy regarding consumption practices

J.R. van der Burg
Philosophy of Science, Technology and Society
University of Twente
June 2012

Student number : s0150614
First supervisor : Dr. Marianne Boenink
Second supervisor : Dr. Mark Coeckelbergh

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1. Introduction

In modern society, human beings are encouraged to fulfil their consumer desires. During economical crises, economists and politicians stress the importance of the preservation of consumer purchasing power. This preservation allows consumers to continue buying products on the market and, as such, it maintains financial fluidity in our economy. From this point of view, modern virtuous citizens perform part of their societal duty by buying commodities. Not only are human beings encouraged to serve the greater good through consumption; they are also constantly *seduced* to consume. The ongoing invention of new commodities (or upgrades of older versions) triggers ever new consumer desires. Furthermore, human beings are constantly exposed to all kinds of marketing strategies, persuading them to buy these new commodities.

With regard to the fulfilment of consumer desires, our society can thus be considered a restless society; fulfilling these desires seems to be an endless process. Individuals are constantly encouraged and seduced to fulfil their consumer desires and, furthermore, it is difficult to control certain desires (e.g. the desire to eat too much food or the desire to buy the newest mobile phone). We may raise the question whether human beings in this restless society act autonomously as consumers.

In many discussions concerning the relationship between consumption and autonomy, consumers are either portrayed as completely autonomous (in control of their desires) or non-autonomous (enslaved by their desires). I will not adopt one of these dichotomous positions. Instead, I will argue that consumers are endowed with a certain level of autonomy; their autonomy can be more or less developed. Accepting this relative notion of autonomy leaves room for the question how to enhance autonomy. In this thesis, I will contemplate the question how autonomy regarding consumption practices can be enhanced. Furthermore, I will reflect on the question how technologies, which I will refer to as ‘ascetic technologies’, can be employed in order to support this enhancement.

Before I will discuss this topic (and related sub questions) in a more detailed manner, I would like to pay attention to the question why enhancing autonomy is relevant. Why should we care about enhancing autonomy regarding consumption practices in the first place? The answer to this question lies in the connection between the fulfilment of consumer desires and underlying problems. Although consumption is often portrayed as an activity which serves society at large, obviously the large scale consumption of commodities generates problems as well.

First of all, the unrestricted fulfilment of consumer desires generates a problem of scarcity. When addressing this subject matter, I would like to adopt the notion of scarcity as explicated by Hans Achterhuis (1988). As Achterhuis argues, scarcity must not solely be seen as an objective given. Instead, it can also be viewed as a relative or subjective phenomenon. If one adopts a subjective notion of scarcity, the question whether a certain good is scarce, does not merely depend on the amount of goods available; it also (and perhaps more so) depends on the degree to which such a good is desired. When particular goods are desired to a large degree, they become scarce whenever the stock of these goods is limited. If we consider scarcity a subjective or relative phenomenon, our restless society (in which the fulfilling of

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desires is encouraged) cannot be considered a society of abundance, but rather a society which generates scarcity. Thus, in our 'empire of scarcity', abundance simply cannot exist.

Secondly, the fulfilment of consumer desires does not only generate scarcity; it also affects the environment in a negative way. Even individuals showing a sceptic attitude towards the reasons for climate change cannot deny the devastating effects of deforestation, the bio industry, or pollution. There is a direct link between our desire to consume wood, meat or oil, and the negative effects it has on our environment. In other words, consumer desires (and the fulfilling of these desires) can be considered the root of the problem.

The problems caused by the fulfilment of consumer desires can be referred to as a 'tragedy of the commons' (Hardin 1968). Hardin's famous thought experiment involves a pasture which is open to all herdsmen. In order to maximize profit, the herdsmen will try to keep as many cattle as possible on this pasture. Each herdsman is considered a rational agent, who weighs the positive and negative aspects of adding an extra animal. Adding one extra animal directly increases the herdsman's profit. At the same time, the extra animal contributes to the overgrazing of the pasture. However, the effects of this overgrazing are shared by all of the herdsmen; the overgrazing is not caused by one animal, but by all. Adding an extra animal thus increases profit while it contributes only a fraction to the problem of overgrazing.

This metaphor can be extended towards the problems caused by the fulfilment of consumer desires. I am not claiming that consumers are purely rational agents (like the herdsmen in Hardin's thought experiment), calculating which desires to fulfil. Nonetheless, in general, fulfilling a particular consumer desire provides direct satisfaction, while it plays a marginal role (if any) in causing the problems caused by overconsumption (or overgrazing). It is not a single consumption practice which causes the problem, but the totality of consumption practices. Thus, driving a car (for example) can be considered a fast, comfortable way of getting from point A to point B, while its effect on the environment is insignificantly small.

In other words, the action of an individual (e.g. not buying a new mobile phone, eating vegetarian food, or travelling with public transportation) does not - or, at best, to an insignificantly small extent - reduce the negative outcomes of desire fulfilment. The problems can only be overcome (or reduced) whenever a substantial amount of individuals change their consumer lifestyles. In other words, the problems related to the tragedy of the commons can only be solved (or reduced) on a collective level. Solving the problem may thus require governmental interference regarding our consumer lifestyles; it may require governments that restrict the fulfilment of consumer desires.

However, free market societies consist of institutions that promote the fulfilment of consumer desires; consumption is considered a civic virtue. When facing problems of scarcity and negative environmental effects, policy makers tend to search for solutions that do not affect our consumer lifestyles. New sustainable technologies promise a future in which scarcity and pollution can be overcome. In this way, a technological fix assures the continuation of our consumer life styles, without having the problems related to it.

I argue that, although this solution is tempting, it must be approached with a great deal of scepticism. It is doubtful whether this (utopian) situation can ever be realized, and thus we must face not only the means through which we realize the fulfilling of our desires (sustainable technologies), but also human desire itself. In order to counteract the problem at

hand, it is worthwhile to reflect on the question how to reduce the fulfilment of consumer desires.

Not only are free market societies poorly equipped to restrict consumption; restricting the fulfilling of consumer desires also generates a problem of choice. How do we decide which goods to consume and which not? This question has been answered in various ways. Harro van Lente, for example, argues we should ask ourselves which needs or desires we can afford (Van Lente 2010). However, although this question can separate sustainable goods from those that are not, it does not solve the matter of choice; it only removes the excesses. Again, the consumption of a single good does not cause the problem; it is the consumption of all goods which generates the tragedy. In other words, it is mainly a problem of degree and not a problem of kind.

In contemplating which consumer desires to fulfil and which not, various writers appeal to a normative notion of the good life. Philip Cafaro, for example, argues that overconsumption impoverishes our lives (Cafaro 2001). On the other hand, John O'Neill argues we should reflect on the worthwhile life and not solely on 'subjective state theories of welfare' (O'Neill 2008). Both authors adopt a normative stand towards the good life and argue that the connection (or disconnection) between consumer goods and the good life can be defined in an objective manner. However, I believe an objective, direct link between consumer goods and the good life might be hard (if not impossible) to find; a normative stance regarding the good life runs into the problem of pluralism. As notions of the good life vary, so does the idea of which commodities are seen as impediments on, or as contributions to the good life. A certain consumer good can be seen as valuable by one individual, while it might be seen as a mere luxury article by another.

In order to address the aforementioned problem of choice, I would like to follow a different path. I am not arguing that governments should not interfere with consumption patterns. Governmental interference regarding the restriction of consumption can be legitimate. However, I argue that it is hard (and perhaps impossible) to base any of these restrictions on a normative notion of the good life. As opposed to advocating such a normative notion, we may raise the question whether human beings act autonomously as consumers. Again, individuals are embedded in a society in which institutions promote the fulfilment of (consumer) desires. To which degree do such individuals act autonomously as consumers on the market? In this thesis, I will argue that this degree can be increased. I will reflect on the question how autonomy regarding consumption practices can be enhanced.

Enhancing consumer autonomy and promoting critical consumption may pay a positive contribution in counteracting the tragedy of the commons. Thus, by exploring ways to enhance autonomy, the problem of choice - regarding which consumer desires to fulfil and which not - is not addressed by adopting a particular notion of the good life. Rather, by enhancing autonomy regarding consumption practices, individuals themselves are better capable of deciding which consumer desires to fulfil and which not.

In reflecting on the question how autonomy regarding consumption can be enhanced and how ascetic technologies can be employed in order to support this enhancement, I will pose different sub questions.

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Firstly, as mentioned, our society can be considered a restless society, but what causes this restlessness? In classical philosophy of technology, sometimes technology itself is perceived as the sole reason for generating ever new desires. Hans Jonas (1979), for example, argues that modern technology generates a constant flow of new desires. As opposed to technologies which I refer to as ‘ascetic technologies’ modern technology, as described by Jonas, diminishes our autonomy; it generates desires beyond our control. But must technology be perceived as the sole reason for a constant flow of new desires, or must the reason for this constant flow be sought elsewhere?

In chapter 2, I will embed Jonas’ idea of modern technology as the sole reason for the creation of ever new desires in a broader historical context. In doing so, I will argue that - although technology plays a role in generating new desires - it should not be perceived as the sole reason. Instead, I will argue that the human condition can be considered restless; I will argue that human beings have a tendency to fulfil one desire after another. The historical overview, given in chapter 2, underlines this restless human condition. Furthermore, the overview contains different views of how the restless fulfilling of desires is valued. In short, chapter 2 will serve as a historical background, discussing the restless human condition (which undermines Jonas’ idea of modern technology as the sole reason for the creation of ever new desires) and different conceptions of the good life towards the restless fulfilling of desires.

Secondly, in this thesis I reflect on the question how to enhance autonomy, but what does it mean to be more or less autonomous as consumers? And, thirdly, which strategies can be employed in order to enhance autonomy regarding consumption practices? In chapter 3, I will argue that consumers are endowed with a certain level of autonomy; their autonomy can be more or less developed. In order to understand what being more or less autonomous as consumers entails, I will use Frankfurt’s distinction between first- and second-order desires as a theoretical framework. In addition, based on this framework, I will propose different strategies aimed at enhancing autonomy.

Fourthly, how can a critical attitude towards desires enhance autonomy regarding consumption practices? From a liberal perspective (such as Frankfurt’s), human desires can be considered reliable; human beings know what they truly want. However, as mentioned, human desires are shaped by (for example) marketing strategies. Therefore, enhancing autonomy may require a critical examination of desires themselves and of the ways in which they are formed. Such a critical attitude can be found in Stoic and Epicurean thought; Stoic and Epicurean schools deeply mistrusted desires and critically examined these desires and how they are formed. In chapter 4, I will reflect on the question how such a critical Hellenistic approach towards desires may enhance autonomy regarding consumption practices.

Finally, how can ascetic technologies be employed in order to support the proposed strategies? In chapter 5, I will discuss different ways in which these ascetic technologies can be employed. The term ‘ascetic technologies’ can be understood in a number of ways. The adjective ‘ascetic’, stemming from the noun ‘asceticism’, may refer to the act of controlling one’s desires. However, asceticism can also be explained in a different manner. As Foucault argues, the Stoic meaning of the word *askesis* can be understood as mastery over oneself (Foucault 1988). In addition, the noun ‘technologies’ may refer to technologies used in everyday language, but it may also refer to ‘technologies of the self’ (Idem). These

technologies of the self can be considered “practices by which people try to structure and stylize their way of living.” (Dorrestijn 2011, 3)

The title of this thesis refers to both types of technologies described above. It refers to both the Foucauldian practices and to technologies used in everyday language, aimed at enhancing autonomy. However, in order to avoid any confusion, in the following chapters the term ‘ascetic technologies’ will only refer to technologies, as used in everyday language . In short, in this thesis I will contemplate the question how to enhance autonomy regarding consumption practices and I will reflect on the question how such ascetic technologies can be employed in order to support this enhancement.

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2. Restless technology and restless humanity

As mentioned in the introduction, modern society can be seen as a dynamic, restless society. The fulfilling of consumer desires does not lead to a state in which individuals are content with their current possessions. Rather, fulfilling desires always seems to shift the horizon towards new desires. This chapter discusses this restless shifting of the horizon of desires and the causes of this restlessness. In classical philosophy of technology, sometimes technology itself is considered to cause this restlessness. This view, in which technology is the soul creator of an endless proliferation of new needs is, for example, discussed by Hans Jonas (1979). Jonas described modern technology as a restless technology, generating a never-ending flow of new desires. According to Jonas, human beings are unable to control this restless technology; they are subjected to its dynamics.

Although Jonas argues that modern technology is the creator of these endless desires, the argument that the fulfilling of one's desires inevitably leads towards new desires (as an ever shifting horizon) is not an argument which can be found solely in our industrial society; i.e. the argument does not drop out of thin air. Therefore, in this chapter, I will embed Jonas' idea of modern technology, as a sole reason for the creation of endless desires, in a broader historical context. I will provide a brief (and rather idiosyncratic) historical overview of the idea that fulfilling desires always shifts the horizon towards new desires, starting in ancient Greece and ending in the 19th century. In doing so, I will use Darrin McMahan's elaborate study on happiness (McMahon 2005) as a historical guideline. An important aspect of the history of happiness in western thought is the aspect of (controlling or fulfilling) desires. Studying the history of the idea that the horizon of desires shifts endlessly, enables me to review the restless technology as described by Jonas. I will argue that Jonas' sole reason for human and technological restlessness is incomplete.

2.1 Jonas' restless technology

In our industrial society, a wide variety of consumer products enter the market. Many of these products are not radically new or different, but are mere upgrades of earlier versions. The supply of new mobile phones, notebooks and flat screen televisions seems to be a never-ending process. Hans Jonas has argued that the never-ending flow of desires is generated by modern technology (Jonas 1979). He distinguishes, what he refers to as modern technology, from earlier forms of technology. Jonas argues that modern technology - as opposed to earlier forms of technology - does not reach a point of technological saturation, but gives rise to an ongoing proliferation of new needs. (Jonas 1979, 34, 35). In other words, modern technology creates a never-ending flow of new desires; it can be understood as a restless technology.

Jonas provides several examples of factors causing the restlessness of modern technology. Some of these examples are: the pressure of competition, visions of an even better life, and the fact that states depend on advanced technology and have an interest in its promotion. However, for Jonas, all these examples are based on a single premise. All these causal factors "have one premise in common without which they could not operate for long: the premise that there *can* be indefinite progress because there *is* always something new and better to find" (Jonas 1979, 36). In other words, all factors causing the restlessness of

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technology are based on the belief in infinity; the belief that there is always something better to find. This belief urges us to explore an ever changing horizon. Seen from this perspective, Jonas refers to modern technology as a “case of the entropy-defying sort [...], where the internal motion of a system, left to itself and not interfered with, leads to ever “higher,” not “lower” states of itself” (35).

This belief in indefinite progress itself can be explained through technology’s integral bond with science. Jonas argues, since the mid-nineteenth century, science can be viewed as a dynamic, never-ending enterprise. As opposed to the rather static, and seemingly finished Newtonian physics, nowadays science discovers layer after layer of new depths. Thus, post-Newtonian science triggers the belief in infinity; the belief that scientific discoveries are indefinite. Since scientific progress seems an indefinite enterprise, it offers a possibility of indefinite technological progress as well. Furthermore, the alliance between science and technology does not only open up new possibilities; scientific research also depends on sophisticated technological tools.

For Jonas, the apparent infinity does nourish our belief of technology’s predominant worth. It triggers enthusiasm and ambition. “Thus, in addition to spawning new ends [...] from the mere invention of means, technology as a venture tends to establish *itself* as the transcendent end” (38). By elevating technology to the level of the transcendent end, technological progress “perhaps no longer by choice, *can* now be seen to be the chief vocation of mankind” (38). In short, Jonas ascribes a certain level of determinism to modern technology; he describes a state in which human beings are not able to control technological progress. Within this state, we are subjected to the dynamics of a disproportionately grown, restless technology.

Furthermore, this technological determinism comes to the surface in technology’s ‘syndrome of self-proliferation’. Not all commodities entering the market are final goods for consumption. In order to produce these goods on a large scale, an entire industry is necessary. Thus, needs incited by technology, are not solely directed towards end products, but also towards machines making these products. Building a car, for example, does not only require the use of raw materials such as steel and rubber. It also requires different machines responsible for the production of different elements of the car. Furthermore, a car does not run without fuel and in order to obtain oil, a complete industry is necessary. Jonas has referred to this principle as a “syndrome of self-proliferation”, in which “technology exponentially increases man’s drain on nature’s resources, not only through the multiplication of the final goods for consumption, but also, and perhaps more so, through the production and operation of its own mechanical means.” (38, 39). Thus, for Jonas, technology has grown out of proportion and out of control, which effects our environment in a negative way.

2.2 Happiness as absence of desires

Although Jonas ascribes the never-ending flow of desires to his conception of modern technology (which, in its turn, is founded on the belief in indefinite progress), the general idea that humans are beings subjected to an ever changing horizon of desires, has a long history in western thought. In order to provide a broader picture, I would like to give a brief historical overview (starting in ancient Greece and ending in the 19th century) of the idea that the

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fulfilling of desires will never result in a peace of mind, but will always make place for new desires. In discussing this historical overview, I will use McMahon's study on happiness (2005) as a historical guideline.

The current economical situation in modern Greece (and in many other western countries) is sometimes said to be the product of a standard of living which has been much too high for too many years. Interestingly, ancient Greece produced different thinkers with ascetic visions of the good life in which desires were tamed or reduced. A key concept in ancient Greek thought is *eudaimonia* (human flourishing or happiness). In Greek tragedies, this *eudaimonia* is not something which human beings can control. Instead, human beings are always subjected to events that fate has in store for them, and the idea that they can make themselves happy is pure hubris. On the other hand, Plato's dialogues show a different conception of *eudaimonia*. Plato introduced the idea that happiness is something within reach of human beings themselves and not something which is up to the gods only. Plato's dialogues reveal a conception of *eudaimonia* - one that was accepted, for many centuries in western thought - which was not based on fulfilling as much desires as possible. Instead, human flourishing was perceived as human perfection; a state of wholeness in which humans are beings without any needs or desires. Seen from this perspective, a state in which the horizon of desires shifts constantly, can be seen as a state of imperfection.

The idea that happiness can be explained as a state without any desires, can be found in Plato's *Symposium*. Through Plato's work, Socrates argued that desire can be explained as the human recognition that something is missing, that a person is incomplete. As opposed to desiring human beings, the gods do not desire anything; they do not need anything but themselves. Plato, being a famous opponent of democracy, has described democratic humans as slaves of unnecessary desires and explicates how human desires tend to steer us towards the wrong directions. In order to achieve happiness, human desire needs to be nurtured or educated. Through self discipline, human beings can make sure that the better elements of the mind prevail. Happiness can be achieved by focussing on practicing philosophy. In order to fulfil the *summum bonum* of desires, all other desires must be controlled or even abandoned.

For Aristotle, *eudaimonia* is a key concept as well; it is, in fact, the human *telos*. The state of human flourishing can be achieved by cultivating virtues based on reasoning. However, as opposed to Plato, Aristotle argues this virtue alone cannot lead us towards this goal. A virtuous person can still be afflicted by unfortunate events blocking the road towards happiness. Furthermore, Aristotle underlines the fact that pure reason or contemplation is something divine (i.e. pure reason transcends human reason). Nevertheless, the act of getting accustomed to virtuousness can be seen as an education in the art of living, or the good life. For Aristotle, radical desire, or *pleonexia*, is one of human's worst vices. In *Politics*, he underlines the dangers of an unlimited accumulation of property. Whenever the accumulation of property exceeds a certain boundary, humans are indulged in insatiability; a never-ending process of fulfilling desires (*chrèmastikè*). This insatiability takes away their attention from *eudaimonia*. As opposed to a life in which human beings need to work to fulfil their endless desires, Aristotle promotes the good life, in which being free from labour plays an important role (Achterhuis 2003, 82,83).

Both Plato and Aristotle seem to be aware of an ever shifting horizon of desires and both thinkers offer an education in order to avoid the restless fulfilment of these desires. However,

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this education was only accessible to a small elite owning sufficient means and spare time in order to be educated. Whereas Plato and Aristotle offered their ticket to human flourishing only to the lucky few, Stoics and Epicureans offered theirs to anyone willing to accept it (McMahon 2005, 70).

At first, Stoicism and Epicureanism seem two schools which differ a great deal. Someone who is not showing any emotion is often called a Stoic, while someone who is enjoying the pleasures of life is referred to as an Epicurean. However, both Hellenistic schools have a lot in common. Although, Epicureanism is often linked to modern hedonism, or a lifestyle based on fulfilling as much pleasures as possible, in fact both Hellenistic schools (Stoic and Epicurean) are based on ascetic thought. As McMahon explicates, both schools learned that *eudaimonia* can be translated as the ratio between unfulfilled desires and fulfilled desires (McMahon 2005, 68). Their method for changing this ratio was based on offering a radical medicine for ‘curing’ desires. Both schools used their philosophy as an art of life (*biou techné*), which provided a medicine for reducing desires; a way to separate the important desires from the ones that are misleading.

Thus, Stoics and Epicureans are aware of the restlessness of fulfilling never-ending desires. By reducing the amount of desires, we enhance our ability to fulfil our remained desires, while we are independent of everything beyond our control. In other words, reducing desires makes us stronger in dealing with our dire fate. These thinkers point towards the idea that - sticking with the metaphor of the horizon - many points on the horizon are too far away, or the idea that a beautiful view on a certain point of the horizon can be taken away from us. In chapter 4, I will discuss the critical attitude towards desires - found in Hellenistic thought - in a more detailed manner.

2.3 Never-ending desires and the original sin

As mentioned, the connection between happiness and the absence of desires has a long history in western thought. Stoics and Epicureans used their philosophy in order to cure desires. Doing so, improves our capability to deal with everything that fate has in store for us. For Augustine, who studied Cicero and Epicurus in his younger years, happiness can never be achieved by curing desires. He attacked the radical Stoic idea that a person who is tormented with pain can still be considered a happy person. Furthermore, he argued that happiness, in general, can never be achieved on earth.

The sole reason for this negative idea can be ascribed to his conception of the original sin. Unlike his contemporary and theological rival Pelagius, Augustine believed that the original sin was not undone by Christ. For Augustine, the eating of the forbidden fruit was a violation which could not be undone; not by any means. Instead, the original sin was an act that transformed human beings completely. Through the fall from paradise, Adam and Eve saddled human beings with the punishment of their violation. The pure happiness or wholeness of paradise was replaced by a state in which mankind was changed for the worse. Within this state, human beings are never able to quench their thirst; their desires can never be fulfilled. Thus, for Augustine, the original sin could be regarded the reason for our restlessness and our never-ending desires. Since the fall from paradise, the *condition humaine* is restless and earthly actions cannot contribute anything to improve this state. Because of the

original sin, our horizon of desires will shift endlessly. We are unable to make ourselves happy. True happiness is in the hands of God; it is only given to the chosen few in the afterlife.

Although - centuries later - another important Christian thinker, Thomas Aquinas, agreed that human beings will always be haunted by unfulfilled desires, he tends to be more positive regarding the human condition since the fall from paradise. Aquinas argued that the original sin has not resulted in a complete lack of goodness inside human beings. Within our sickly state, we can still do good things, but we need to be cured. Thomas Aquinas sees life as a long recovery process; a climb on the ladder towards God. Although perfect happiness (which excludes all forms of evil and fulfils every desire) cannot be achieved in this world, we are still able to climb the ladder and achieve an earthly form of happiness. Thus, Aquinas distinguishes two forms of happiness (*duplex felicitas*). Following Aristotle, he argued that pure happiness or pure contemplation is out of reach for human beings; getting accustomed to virtuousness leads to the highest form of happiness possible on earth. For Aquinas, this happiness can be achieved by receiving, what he refers to as 'theological virtues', whereas true happiness can only be found in the afterlife. This afterlife brings an end to all desires, whereas the receiving of theological virtues on earth, cures desires partly.

2.4 Happiness as fulfilment of desires

In Greek and Christian thought, happiness is considered to be a state in which human beings do not desire anything. Breaking with this traditional line of thought, Thomas Hobbes argues that happiness cannot be achieved through a satisfied mind. There is no such thing as a *finis ultimus* or *summum bonum* as described by ancient Greeks or Christians (McMahon 2005, 188). Instead, happiness must be perceived as a never-ending movement from one desire towards another. From this point of view, desires must not be seen as obstacles blocking the road towards happiness. Rather, the never-ending travel towards these desires (the ever shifting horizon) generates happiness. Furthermore, as opposed to Aristotle, Hobbes considers the desire for wealth not a vice, but he considers this desire a neutral part of our being. However, Hobbes argues, in a society in which human beings chase their desires (wealth, honour and other forms of power), a sovereign government is inevitable. For Hobbes, a state of nature (a state without any interference of a government) equals a state of war. This 'war of all against all' can only be prevented through a social contract and a sovereign state, keeping under control its citizens.

As opposed to Hobbes, Locke argued the state of nature does not necessarily need to be a state of war. Certainly, without God and without religion, humans would be nothing more than ferocious animals satisfying their own will. However, with religion as a firm moral basis, the state of nature does not lead to a war of all against all. Although Locke is a Christian, his conception of the original sin and its traces left inside human beings, differs from the conception of earlier Christian thinkers. Both Augustine and Aquinas regard the original sin as the prime reason for our state in which the fulfilling of desires is an endless enterprise. On the other hand, Locke argues, we are not born with fixed notions or ideas, but we are born with a mind as a blank slate or *tabula rasa*. A direct consequence of the idea of a *tabula rasa*, is that there cannot be any traces left of the original sin inside the human mind. The original

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sin has not transformed us into inferior beings, but we are born with a mind as a blank slate. Thus, for Locke, it is not the original sin that is responsible for our restless state. Instead, he regards religion as being the basis of our morality, preventing the mere fulfilment of our own desires.

However, for Locke the state of nature changed with the introduction of money. The introduction of this institution ended the religion based rule that 'we all may own as much as we can use (without letting it decay)' (Achterhuis 2003, 75). It eliminated the limits of accumulation. Before the institution of money came into being, humans were able to own a limited amount of goods. We can only use a limited amount of goods and we can save a limited amount of food without letting it decay. As opposed to goods for usage or food, money can be stored endlessly without breaking the rule.

Whereas Locke argues the introduction of money started an unlimited accumulation of wealth, Hobbes locates the reason of endless desires elsewhere. When Hobbes explicates the concept of greed, he claims that because everybody is chasing wealth, anyone finds it unpleasant when somebody else reaches its goal (Achterhuis 2003, 24). Hans Achterhuis shows that, viewed from this perspective, wealth is based upon comparison with fellow human beings. Wealth is not seen as an objective given, but it is viewed in relation with fellow humans. Within Hobbes' concept of greed, humans cannot be satisfied beings with a peace of mind. Otherwise, humans would not find it unpleasant if fellow humans reached their goal. Instead, human beings are always entangled in a power struggle in order to chase more wealth; in order to outrun their fellow humans. Thus, whereas for Locke, an important drive behind the ever changing horizon of desires is the introduction of money, for Hobbes, an important drive is comparison with fellow humans and envy.

2.5 Freeing our will

Whereas Hobbes argued that the never-ending process of fulfilling desires generates happiness, the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau doubted this idea sincerely. For Rousseau, modern society creates false desires which take us further away from happiness than they help to reach this destination. Rousseau argued that, by learning how to desire, we made ourselves slaves to our desires. Progress leads to an ever-shifting horizon of new possibilities. In modern society, we are alienated from our authentic selves, and Rousseau undertakes an attempt to restore this loss of authenticity; he tries to free this pureness or wholeness from within the depths of our mind. This authenticity can be found in Rousseau's concept of the state of nature. Criticizing Hobbes' notion of the state of nature as a state of war, Rousseau constructs his notion as a state in which humans are completely satisfied. In Rousseau's natural state, all humans live solitary. For natural humans there exists a balance between desires and the possibilities to satisfy these desires. In a solitary state, envy simply could not exist.

However, this delicate balance ceases to exist with the rise of civilisation. For Rousseau, the human capacity for self-perfection causes all progress. Through this capacity, human beings are able to accomplish extraordinary things. However, at the same time, this capacity leads to a never-ending restlessness and dissatisfaction concerning our current situation. The capacity constantly urges us to surpass ourselves and our fellow humans; it urges us to

compare us with others in order to outrun them. In other words, the human capacity for self-perfection led humans away from the state of nature, towards a state with an ever shifting horizon of desires.

Rousseau understood that the capacity for self-perfection blocked the road towards an original state of nature. He concluded that the only way to stop the proliferation of never-ending desires, is by subordinating our own will to - what he refers to as - the general will. Through a social contract, the general will provides a new form of freedom, replacing the freedom existing in the natural state. This social contract enables the state to make sure no one is extremely wealthy and nobody owns a lot more than needed. By subjecting our own will to the general will, human beings can partly restore the natural wholeness and they will be rewarded with a new form of happiness. With this secular form of salvation, Rousseau created a blueprint for those using politics in order to reduce desires and change humanity.

Rousseau's promise of salvation fostered hope that humanity could achieve a peace of mind. In a completely different manner, Arthur Schopenhauer also tried to escape from the ever shifting horizon of desires. Not a single philosopher has described the never-ending process of fulfilling desires as pessimistically as Arthur Schopenhauer. According to Schopenhauer, life is utterly sad. There exists no god or human *telos*; we simply have a will, an elementary life force, that makes us desire and long. This will pushes us towards our hunt for permanent satisfaction which will always be out of reach. Whenever a desire is fulfilled, the horizon shifts and shows us the next desire. Happiness can never be achieved; it can be seen as our will's mirage on the horizon, disappearing whenever we think we can reach it. Schopenhauer's vision of the human condition shows an extraordinary resemblance with the Christian vision of the human condition after the fall from paradise. However, for Schopenhauer, there exists no God which can lead us towards redemption. Instead, he argues redemption lies in the liberation from the driving force of the will. Although Schopenhauer is not a religious person, he admires religious ascetics who deliberately control their desires in order to free themselves from their will. However, he realises, most people are not able to follow this hard path. Schopenhauer prescribes another medicine to escape the slavery of the will. Through 'aesthetic contemplation', the will can be controlled. By enjoying a piece of art, the ever changing desires make way for a peace of mind.

2.6 The release of desires

Returning from our historical tour around instances of the idea that the horizon of desires shifts constantly, how can we understand Jonas' idea of a restless technology? Jonas takes modern, restless technology (which creates a never-ending flow of desires) as a point of departure and wonders what causes this technological restlessness. For him, this restlessness is founded on the belief in infinity; the belief that there is always something new and better to find. It is this premise of infinity that fuels the restless nature of modern technology which, in its turn, guarantees a never-ending proliferation of new desires. Although Jonas' explication of this premise explicitly revolves around *technological* restlessness, implicitly it describes a foundation of *human* restlessness as well. Ultimately, the belief in infinity is a *human* belief, and it is this belief that makes us explore the ever changing horizon in search for novelties and improvements. Furthermore, modern technology, which - according to Jonas - is founded on

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this belief, causes human restlessness by generating a never-ending flow of desires. Thus, Jonas' conception of modern technology can both be read as a cause of a never-ending flow of desires, and an effect of our desire to explore new possibilities (triggered by our belief in indefinite progress).

However, whether we read Jonas' belief in infinity as a foundation for *technological* or for *human* restlessness, it seems not suitable for carrying the total weight of this restlessness. Jonas founds this restlessness solely on the premise of the belief in indefinite progress. He provides a kind of epistemological pillar supporting the restlessness of technology (and, implicitly, of humanity) in total, without giving credit to any other pillar. On the other hand, the historical outline given here, shows an interesting array of thinkers providing different pillars supporting the human restlessness. Traditional Greek and Christian thinkers link human desire or human restlessness to our imperfect state. Modern thinkers discussed in this chapter, have related human restlessness to envy, comparison with fellow human beings, our capacity for self-perfection, or our raging will. In short, these different thinkers show different reasons for our ever shifting horizon of desires. However, what these thinkers have in common, is the conviction that the *condition humaine* is restless; they share the general idea that humans are beings with never-ending desires. Even in traditional thought, where human beings are encouraged to control or cure desires, a state without any desires is out of reach. Furthermore, although Stoic and Epicurean philosophy is aimed at reducing desires, Epicureans and Stoics are aware of the human tendency to fulfil as much desires as possible. It is this general restlessness of human nature, caused by different factors, which provides a broader foundation supporting the structure of a restless technology.

This general human restlessness marks exactly the difference with Jonas' idea of restlessness. Since Jonas' notion of restlessness is based on the belief in infinity, it is defined historically. For him, technologies preceding modern technology relatively early reached a point of technological saturation and cannot be considered restless. Only, when passing a certain point in history (on which the belief in infinity had started), technology obtains its restless status. It is the belief in infinity, starting from a certain point in history, which causes both human and technological restlessness. Unlike Jonas, other thinkers discussed in this chapter acknowledged the fact that the *condition humaine* is restless; they acknowledged the timeless, general fact that humans desire, without pointing towards a historical turning point. In short, they define human restlessness not historically, but as an integral part of human nature.

One could be inclined to think that Rousseau defines the human restlessness historically as well. In the natural state, humans are beings with finite desires, whereas the end of the natural state marks the start of a restless humanity. However, Rousseau's natural state can be regarded a thought experiment; a fictive state in which human beings live solitary without being able to compare or to compete with other human beings. Furthermore, for Rousseau, our capacity for self-perfection is a general aspect of human nature.

Jonas' historical foundation is intended to mark a turning point on which technology has grown restless. However, as I have discussed, this foundation is incomplete. But if human restlessness can be seen as an integral part of our being, than how can we explain the fact that the current speed of technological progress is significantly higher, than the speed in traditional societies? To explain this difference in speed, a historical turning point can also be given

along another way. As discussed before, in traditional thought, human desires underlined the fact that human beings are imperfect. Traditional thinkers advocated a notion of the good life in which desires were perceived as obstacles blocking the road towards human flourishing. Furthermore, in traditional societies, different elements were at work, restricting the fulfilling of human desires. I will not provide an extensive outline of these elements here, but some of them discussed by Hans Achterhuis are: religion, hierarchical structures in a society and the absence of money (Achterhuis 2003). These elements all played a role in controlling human desires. Modern society, on the other hand, does not (or, at least, to a lesser extent) contain these elements. Human beings are encouraged to fulfil their desires as much as possible, as long as this fulfilment is not against the law.

This perspective reveals a historical turning point which is not based on the idea that a belief in indefinite progress triggered human and technological restlessness. Instead, it shows a historical turning point demarcating a temporal border, separating a time in which desires are restricted from a time in which desires are released. As Hans Achterhuis agreed with Lascarsis, our technical mastery over nature cannot be seen as an isolated fact, which can be considered the engine of technological progress. Rather, when mutual desires were released, the mastery over nature became profitable (Achterhuis 2003, 235). Seen from this perspective, desires are part of human nature, which - when released - cause a restless technology. In this view, not the belief in infinity, but the release of ever existing human desires can be regarded the reason for the restless nature of technology.

In short, in modern society, the speed of technological progress is significantly higher than the speed in traditional societies. This restlessness is not merely caused by the belief in indefinite progress, as claimed by Jonas. Rather, the release of ever existing desires can be considered a historical turning point. Compared to Jonas' historically defined premise of infinity, the acknowledgement of a historically defined release of ever existing human desires, provides a much broader foundation carrying the structure of both restless technology and restless humanity.

2.7 Evaluating desires

The historical outline given in this chapter shows an overview of various thinkers discussing the idea that the human condition is restless; the idea that human beings have a tendency to be immoderate. This general human restlessness - released during a certain time in history - can be considered the basis for restless technological progress. Furthermore, the historical outline shows two different conceptions of the good life. In the first, traditional conception, *eudaimonia* is perceived as a peace of mind; desires themselves are seen as obstacles blocking the road towards happiness. In order to acquire a state of happiness, desires should be reduced or controlled. In the second, Hobbesian conception, happiness is perceived as the endless fulfilling of desires. Desires are not seen as obstacles. Rather, the act of fulfilling desires is considered to generate happiness.

Although the human condition can be considered restless, these diametrically opposed notions of the good life reveal that human beings are not merely subjected to their desires. Human beings also have the ability to relate to their desires. The next chapter discusses this ability; it discusses the relationship between consumer desires and autonomy.

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With regard to the relationship between consumer desires and autonomy, two diametrically opposed views can be distinguished. In the first view, consumers are perceived as autonomous, rational human beings, in control of their desires. In the second view, consumers are portrayed as beings who are enslaved by their desires which are externally imposed on them. I will briefly explicate these two views and I will discuss the incompleteness of both of them. Instead of portraying consumers as absolutely autonomous or non-autonomous, I will argue that consumers are endowed with a certain level of autonomy; their autonomy can be more or less developed. In order to reflect on the question what it means to be more or less autonomous, I will use Frankfurt's distinction between first- and second-order desires as a framework. Furthermore, I will propose different strategies aimed at enhancing autonomy regarding consumption practices.

3.1 Sovereign consumers serving the greater good

As mentioned in chapter 2, in traditional (pre-modern) thought, the desire for wealth was generally seen as a vice and as an obstacle blocking the road towards *eudaimonia*. As opposed to this traditional, ascetic view regarding happiness, Thomas Hobbes regarded the desire for wealth a neutral part of our being, which generated happiness. These two visions can be seen as two types of discourse regarding the relationship between wealth and the good life. As Sassatelli (2007) shows, in all cultures and societies, a variety of normative discourses regarding the relationship between goods and human beings can be found. However, at the end of the 17th century (an era in which the amount of consumed goods in western society grew proportionally) the urge to classify this relationship was strongly felt. In this period, a variety of discourses can be found which tried to legitimize the consumption of commodities.

The notion of luxury has been an important notion in pre-modern moral discourse. In this moral discourse, luxury was used as a normative notion; as a category associated with needs or desires which exceeded the natural ones. It was Bernard Mandeville's famous book *Fable of the Bees*, which provided a new image of luxury consumption. Mandeville takes his position one step further than Hobbes. Whereas Hobbes' position can be considered neutral, Mandeville portrays luxury consumption as a 'private vice', which is nonetheless a 'public virtue'. Human traits such as envy and the never-ending chase for wealth may be private vices, but they contribute to the prosperity of society at large. As Sassatelli argues, Mandeville's position "opened the way to a new politico-economic perspective centred on the apparently obvious duo of the Nation and the Citizen, whereby [...] the Citizens could express their sovereign power also and above all by economic freedom, and in particular by the freedom to consume." (Sassatelli 2007, 36). From this politico-economic perspective, luxury can be seen as something contributing to the prosperity of the nation, thereby losing its traditional normative connotation. In other words, "from Mandeville onward luxury was, so to speak, *de-moralized*" (36).

Mandeville's entire beehive consisted of vicious bees contributing to the greater good. It was Adam Smith who redirected these vices towards rational self-interest, restricted to the market only (Achterhuis 2010, 183). The idea that self-interested actions serve the greater

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good, can be found in Smith's famous notion of the invisible hand. However, Smith added a new dimension to the discourse regarding consumption. Smith portrays consumers in modern society (as opposed to the declining nobility of the old feudal society) as rational well-behaving individuals, in control of their desires, pursuing long-term gratification. The market is viewed as a place where individuals pursue long-term gratification; a place of self-realization. Smith's thinking thus "acts as a normative background for contemporary consumer culture, placing value on the search for personal gratification while emphasizing self-control and individual autonomy." (Sassatelli 2007, 38). Economics has played an important role in portraying consumers as rational, autonomous actors performing cost-benefit analyses; an idea which can be found in contemporary liberal thought. This view of the sovereign consumer or *Homo Economicus* - acting rationally and pursuing long-term, self-interested goals - remains a popular one.

3.2 Pathological consumers

As opposed to this image in which consumption is portrayed as serving both the individual and the common good, a much more gloomy picture can be provided, in which human beings are subjected to desires which are externally imposed on them. An extreme example of human beings who are portrayed as pathological consumers - without the ability to reflect on their consumer behaviour - can be found in Aldous Huxley's famous novel *Brave New World*. In this *Brave New World*, human beings are cloned and conditioned according to the class they are assigned to. Each member of society is conditioned to engage in technologically advanced types of leisure, such as escalator squash, electro-magnetic golf or 'feelies' (movies that stimulate the senses). In this society, all kinds of consumption provide instant happiness for members of each class, while providing financial fluidity. As 'The Controller' puts it: "The world's stable now. People are happy; they get what they want, and they never want what they can't get. They're well off; they're safe; they're never ill; they're not afraid of death; they're blissfully ignorant of passion and old age; [...] they're so conditioned that they practically can't help behaving as they ought to behave. And if anything should go wrong, there's *soma*" (Huxley 1972, 173).

Brave New World can be read as satirical literature criticizing modern society in which human beings are conditioned to consume, without any critical examination of their consumer lifestyles. The idea that human beings are subjected to consumption patterns (externally imposed on them) can be found in various writings in western contemporary thought. Classical thinkers distinguished between natural and unnatural desires. Hellenistic philosophers argued that society plays a role in creating unnatural desires (I will discuss both Stoic and Epicurean thought regarding this topic in the next chapter). Furthermore (as mentioned in the previous chapter), Rousseau argued that by learning how to desire, we made ourselves slaves to our desires. The idea that society imposes desires onto human beings can be found in various writings of members of the Frankfurt School as well. According to Marcuse, for example, our advanced, industrial society conditions human beings in a very antagonistic way. He refers to this society as a totalitarian one, since 'totalitarian' is "not only a terroristic political coordination of society, but also a non-terroristic economic-technical coordination which operates through the manipulation of needs through vested interests"

(Marcuse 1970, 20). Marcuse describes our advanced industrial society as a 'one-dimensional society', in which fake or artificial needs are imposed on human beings. In this society, consumption can be seen as a form of social control in which 'one-dimensional men' are unable to critically reflect on their consumer behaviour.

3.3 Sovereign nor pathological consumers

The above thus shows two positions regarding the relationship between consumption and autonomy. In the first position, individuals are portrayed as sovereign consumers who are completely in control of their desires. Although these individuals are embedded within a society, they manage to behave independently as rational, autonomous consumers. They are, as it were, on top of their desires. On the other hand, in the second position, human beings are portrayed as pathological consumers. These individuals are not in control of their desires, but they are subjected to these desires which are externally imposed on them. They are, as it were, buried underneath their desires.

As Sassatelli (2009) argues, these views provide a caricature of actual consumption practices. Human beings cannot be seen as pathological consumers, enslaved by their desires which are imposed on them by society. This point of view does not take into account the ways in which consumers engage (actively and creatively) in consumption practices. The image of consumers as couch potatoes feeding on whatever society has to offer to them, does not pay credit to the various aspects of these consumption practices. Take, for example, products that emerge from subcultures. As opposed to commodities that are somehow forced on human beings in a top down manner, products springing from subcultures move in a bottom up direction.

On the other hand, the image of the sovereign, rational consumer fully in control of one's desires provides a caricature as well. Economics has played an important role in portraying consumers as individualistic rational actors, making cost-benefit analyses. This image of the consumer does not take into account the various social aspects of consumption. Some of these social aspects can be underlined with the effects which Liebenstein has referred to as the 'Veblen effect' (the higher the cost of a certain product, the greater its display value), the 'Bandwagon effect' (the demand for products grows whenever individuals show interest in them), or the 'Snob effect' (this demand diminishes) (Sassatelli 2007, 59). These different effects illustrate types of consumption which escape the logic of the rational consumer trying to buy the best product at the lowest price. In short, consumers cannot be seen as atomistic individuals rationally acting out of self-interest, independently of any social (and, as we shall see, material) context.

Thus, both the image of the sovereign consumer and the image of the pathological consumer are inaccurate. The view portraying consumers as rational, autonomous beings, does not take into account the social aspects connected to consumption. On the other hand, the opposed view is too deterministic with regard to the relationship between consumers and society. In this thesis, I do not want to argue that consumers are completely autonomous, or non-autonomous (as portrayed in the views above). I argue that consumers are always endowed with a certain level of autonomy and I believe it is wise to contemplate the question how to enhance their autonomy. In order to underline the importance of this question, I will

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briefly discuss some examples which undermine the liberal idea of the sovereign consumer who is fully in control of one's desires.

First of all, in a society in which many songs of the Sirens are heard, the chance of being seduced increases. Individuals are exposed to all kinds of marketing campaigns seducing them to buy commodities. Neuromarketing is employed in order to find hidden information inside the consumer brain; information that could (in theory) be used to influence buying behaviour. (Ariely and Berns 2010, 284). Although the field of neuromarketing is considered to be in an emerging state, it has the potential to enhance the effectiveness of advertising messages (Morin 2011). Secondly, marketing strategies such as greenwashing (making products look more environmentally friendly than they are) make it hard to choose real environmentally friendly products (Binkley 2009, 109). Thirdly, in some cases, human beings are not able to control their desires. Smokers are unable to stop smoking, human beings find it hard to ride a bicycle instead of driving a car, and modern societies cope with serious problems such as obesity and a high work load, generating stress. In other words, *wanting* to act in a certain way does not always result in *acting* in a certain way.

Finally, the liberal idea of the consumer in control of one's desires, serving society at large, is still a dominant one. During economical crises, many politicians stress the importance of maintaining consumer purchasing power. In addition, Hans Achterhuis (2010) has explicated the utopian aspects of neo-liberalism and the belief in the free market; a belief which is not made undone by the last economical crisis. In a sense, the dominant liberal idea of the sovereign consumer contributing to the greater good, serves as a moral background which hampers the possibility of critically assessing our consumer behaviour. All in all, the above indicates that it is legitimate to contemplate the question how autonomy regarding consumption can be enhanced.

3.4 Different conceptions of autonomy

Thus, consumers must not be perceived as absolutely autonomous or non-autonomous individuals. However, modern society does affect choices regarding consumption and it is relevant to contemplate the question how to enhance autonomy. But what exactly does acting autonomously (or non-autonomously) as consumers entail? Although, in general, autonomy is explicated as 'self-governance', it has been conceived of in a variety of ways. In order to define the notion I am concerned with, I will explicate several basic distinctions regarding autonomy¹.

Firstly, 'moral autonomy' can be distinguished from 'personal autonomy' (or 'individual autonomy'). Moral autonomy can be defined as self-governance by giving oneself moral rules, whereas personal autonomy refers to self-governance by accepting any kind of rules (Beauchamp 2001, 162). Individuals acting immorally, cannot be considered 'morally autonomous', but they may be considered 'personally autonomous'. Secondly, the notion of autonomy can be defined globally or locally. Understood as a global condition, autonomy refers to global autonomous personhood, whereas autonomy understood as a local condition refers to autonomy relative to a certain aspect. Individuals addicted to smoking may be

¹ These distinctions can be found in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
Source: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/autonomy-moral/>

considered autonomous in a general sense, but fail to control their behaviour regarding their addiction. Finally, basic autonomy can be distinguished from ideal autonomy. Whereas basic autonomy refers to a minimal status of self-governance, ideal autonomy can be understood as an ultimate goal; an achievement according to which a person is completely autonomous.

When discussing autonomy regarding consumption, I am referring to the following notion of autonomy. Firstly, I am referring to personal autonomy and not to moral autonomy. I am concerned with enhancing autonomy regarding consumer behaviour. Even though a certain action is immoral, it may nonetheless be autonomous. Furthermore, I am not concerned with a global notion of autonomy, but with a local notion. The autonomy, I am referring to, is directed towards consumer decisions; I am concerned with enhancing autonomy regarding consumption practices. Finally, I regard consumers at least autonomous in a basic, minimal sense (as outlined above). In addition, when discussing an increase of autonomy, I am not referring to an ideal notion, but merely to a higher level of autonomy. Thus - as mentioned before - in addressing the concept of autonomy, I am not referring to an absolute notion of autonomy; to consumers acting absolutely autonomous or non-autonomous. Instead, I am referring to a relative notion of autonomy. Consumers are always autonomous to a certain degree.

3.5 First- and second-order desires

The above explicates the relative notion of autonomy I am concerned with, but what does it mean to be more or less autonomous as consumers? In reflecting on this question, I will use Harry Frankfurt's distinction between first-order desires and second-order desires as a framework. Frankfurt has explicated an influential account of higher-order evaluations of desires. According to Frankfurt, first-order desires are "simply desires to do or not to do one thing or another" (Frankfurt 1971, 7). On the other hand, second-order desires - which are an outcome of the evaluation of first-order desires - can be referred to as desires to have (or not to have) certain desires. Furthermore, Frankfurt uses the term second-order volitions to refer to desires to have (or not to have) certain *effective* desires (desires that lead to action). In discussing freedom of the will, he is mainly concerned with these second-order volitions.

For Frankfurt, freedom of the will is exercised whenever an individual acts according to these second-order volitions; whenever the effective desires an individual wants to desire become, in fact, effective desires. He construes the notion of the will as the notion of an effective desire. Thus, individuals exercising a free will have the will (or the effective desire) they want to have. This notion of freedom of the will can be illustrated with an example. Individuals may have a first-order desire to smoke a cigarette (because they like the taste) and a conflicting first-order desire to stop smoking cigarettes (because it is unhealthy). After evaluating their first-order desires, individuals may have a second-order volition; they may have a desire to have an effective desire to stop smoking. Within Frankfurt's framework, individuals making this desire to stop smoking an effective desire, exercise freedom of the will.

According to Frankfurt, the essence of being a person can be found in a person's will. Only a person is "capable of becoming critically aware of his own will and of forming volitions of the second order" (12). As opposed to persons, 'wantons' are not capable of doing

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so. In order to illustrate the difference between persons and wantons, Frankfurt describes two types of addicts: an unwilling addict and a wanton addict. Unwilling addicts have conflicting first-order desires (the desire to take drugs and the desire to stop taking drugs). Furthermore, they have a second-order volition; they want the desire to stop taking drugs to be an effective desire. The will of unwilling addicts cannot be considered free, since they do not have the will they want to have (i.e. the will or effective desire to stop using drugs). As opposed to unwilling addicts, wanton addicts have no second-order volitions at all. These addicts do not have a free will either. They do not have the will they want, nor do they have the will they do not want; they simply have no volitions of the second order. In other words, they lack the capacity to reflect on their desires and motives.

Thus, both the will of unwilling addicts and wanton addicts cannot be considered free. In addition, Frankfurt introduces another type of addict, which is the most complex one to reflect on: the willing addict. Willing addicts do reflect on their desires, but they want the desire to take drugs to be their effective desire. Whenever the grip of the addiction would weaken, they would do whatever it takes to reinforce it. According to Frankfurt, the will of these willing addicts cannot be considered free since the desire to take the drug will always be effective, regardless of whether they have the will they want to have. However, although the addict's "desire is his effective desire because he is physiologically addicted [...], it is his effective desire also because he wants it to be. His will is outside his control, but, by his second-order desire that his desire for the drug should be effective, he has made this will his own." (20). Although the addicts' effective desire to take drugs, is triggered by their physiological addiction (beyond their control), it is now the effective desire they want to have. Thus, Frankfurt explicates the will of willing addicts in an ambiguous way. Their will is not free, since their second-order desires are formed beyond their control. But their will is free, since they have the effective desire they want to have.

3.6 Problems of Frankfurt's notion of freedom of the will

The ambiguity regarding the will of willing addicts reveals a problem that Frankfurt's notion of freedom of the will faces. How can we decide whether the will of willing addicts is free? Can their will be regarded their own since this is the will they want to have? Or is this will not their own since it is triggered by their physiological addiction (beyond their control)? Frankfurt's notion of freedom of the will thus faces a problem of identification (Ekstrom 1993, 602). The notion cannot provide a satisfying answer regarding the question when someone truly identifies oneself with a certain desire. In addition, a problem arises when discussing higher-order volitions. A person may have conflicting second-order volitions, leading to third-order volitions. And conflicting third-order volitions require fourth-order volitions and so on. Frankfurt, aware of the problem of infinite regress of higher-order volitions, admits "There is no theoretical limit to the length of the series of desires of higher and higher orders" (Frankfurt 1971, 16). But he argues that the formation of higher and higher orders can be ended "without cutting it off arbitrarily. When a person identifies himself *decisively* with one of his first-order desires, this commitment "resounds" throughout the potentially endless array of higher orders. [...] The decisiveness of the commitment he has

made means that he has decided that no further question about his second-order volition, at any higher order, remains to be asked” (16).

However, as Watson (1975) argued, making such a ‘decisive commitment’ *is* cutting off the endless array of higher orders arbitrarily. “It is unhelpful to answer that one makes a “decisive commitment,” where this just means that an interminable ascent to higher orders is not going to be permitted. This *is* arbitrary.” (Watson 1975, 218). Frankfurt’s notion of orders of desires “does not tell us how a particular want can have, among all of a person’s “desires,” the special property of being peculiarly his “own.””(218,219). From this perspective, the problem of an infinite regress can be referred to as a problem of identification as well. Cutting of the regress in a non-arbitrary way requires a form of identification which is not provided by the theory. In other words, Frankfurt’s notion cannot end the formation of higher and higher orders in the way he wants to, since the reason for ending this formation has no solid basis.

It is this problem that is addressed by Mark Coeckelbergh in his book *The Metaphysics of autonomy* (2004). Coeckelbergh argues that, in order to cut off the infinite regress in a non-arbitrary way, a metaphysical foundation is required. Only the acceptance of an external reference point, or a metaphysical foundation, provides a solid basis for ending the endless formation of higher-order desires. However, human beings do not easily accept such a metaphysical foundation. Thus, the concept of autonomy is problematic since such a foundation (of which the acceptance itself is problematic) is a requirement; autonomy cannot exist without its acceptance. Likewise, Frankfurt’s notion cannot provide an unambiguous answer regarding the question whether the will of willing addicts is free. There’s only this notion of higher-order desires to rely on, and without an external reference point (a foundation which is hard to accept), this notion cannot provide a satisfying answer.

Although the distinction between first-order and second-order desires is not entirely unproblematic, I believe the distinction can be useful. Firstly, although - *in theory* - an infinite regress of higher-order desires is possible, I believe - *in practice* - the problem of this infinite regress does not occur. Imagine individuals having three conflicting first-order desires (desire *a*, desire *b*, and desire *c*). After evaluating their first-order desires, they form a second-order volition (*X*). Now, imagine that - after a while - these individuals have three more desires (desire *d*, desire *e*, and desire *f*) which are in conflict with the aforementioned desires. I will briefly explicate three theoretical methods for evaluating these desires. The first way is by forming a second-order volition (*Y*) regarding desires *d*, *e*, and *f*, followed by the formation of a third-order volition regarding the second-order volitions *X* and *Y*. This way of evaluating, in theory, runs the risk of being subjected to an infinite regress. After a while, individuals may have even more conflicting desires which may require a fourth-order volition and the process of forming higher-order volitions can continue endlessly.

However, desires *a-f* can also be evaluated, by redefining second-order volition *X*. In other words, individuals can form a new second-order volition by evaluating all of their first-order desires (*a-f*). Finally, the effective desire to which second-order volition *X* is directed, can also be evaluated together with first-order desires *d-f*. Imagine that individuals want first-order desire *c* to be an effective desire (their second-order volition *X* is directed towards desire *c*). This desire *c* can be evaluated together with other first-order desires *d-f*, leading towards a new second-order volition. The evaluation of first-order desires, as shown in the last two methods, does not require a volition of the third order. Thus, these last evaluation methods do

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not run into the problem of infinite regress; new conflicting first-order desires can always be evaluated together with existing ones.

In addition, as long as the preference of existing first-order desires (*a-c*) remains the same, the outcomes of all evaluation methods are equal. They merely differ in the number of steps required for the evaluation. Within the first method, the desires are evaluated within two distinct steps, whereas - within the second and third method - the evaluation requires only one step (such that third-order volitions are not necessary). Whether we regard the evaluation of our desires as being based on the first method, the second one, or the last one, is completely arbitrary; none of these methods are an exact representation of how the human psyche regarding this evaluation works. Viewing evaluations as being based on second- third- or higher-order volitions is merely a matter of semantics.

Although, in practice, the problem of infinite regress does not occur, the problem of identification does. Frankfurt's notion of freedom of the will cannot provide an answer to the question whether a will is really one's own; whether an individual truly identifies oneself with a desire (hence, the problem of the willing addict). The answer to this question requires an external metaphysical foundation. I will not provide such a foundation here; this foundation is not required, since I am not concerned with an absolute notion of freedom of the will. Neither am I arguing that the essence of being a person lies in will (as Frankfurt does).

I regard the ability to form second-order desires (based on the evaluation of first-order desires) and the ability to fulfil these second-order desires an important aspect of acting autonomously.² An individual who has the ability to evaluate first-order desires and who is able to act according to the outcomes of this evaluation, can be regarded more autonomous than an individual who is not able to do so.

This highlights the way in which I will use Frankfurt's distinction between first-order desires and second-order desires³. Within this framework, first-order desires are desires to do or not to do something. Second-order desires are an outcome of the evaluation of first-order desires and can be defined as desires to have (or not to have) certain desires. And the degree to which consumers can be considered autonomous, depends on the degree to which they are able to evaluate their first-order desires and on whether they can act according to this evaluation.

² My focus will be on autonomy rather than on freedom of the will. Firstly, freedom of the will can only be addressed in an absolute manner (one's will cannot be partly free; it is either free or unfree), whereas the notion of autonomy can be addressed in a relative way (some decisions are made more autonomously than others). As mentioned before, I am concerned with a *relative* notion of autonomy. Secondly, within Frankfurt's notion of freedom of the will, knowledge does not play a significant role. Within this notion, an individual dumping chemicals into a lake - unaware of any negative effects - acts according to a free will. However, such an individual can be considered less autonomous than an individual who has this knowledge.

³ In order to avoid some of the complications of Frankfurt's vocabulary, I will reduce the number of desires within the framework to two (namely: first-order desires and second-order desires). When discussing second-order desires I am referring to the kind that Frankfurt refers to as second-order volitions. In general, when consumers want to have a certain desire, they want this desire to be an effective desire. Furthermore, I am not concerned with thought experiments regarding desires to have an ineffective desire (such as Frankfurt's example of a doctor who wants to have a desire to take drugs - in order to understand drug addicts - but does not want to act according to this desire). Instead, I am concerned with consumer desires leading to action. Consumer desires which do not lead to action cannot counteract the 'tragedy of the commons' at hand.

3.7 Different types of consumers

In addition, Frankfurt's distinction between different types of addicts is a good starting point in order to distinguish different types of consumers (unwilling consumers, wanton consumers and willing consumers). Firstly, unwilling consumers could act in a more autonomous way. Although they have second-order desires (e.g.: they want to have the desire to stop smoking, eat small portions of food, or ride a bike instead of driving a car), they do not act in accordance with them. Secondly, wanton consumers do not reflect on their consumer behaviour; they do not have second-order desires regarding consumption. They cannot be considered autonomous, since they lack the capacity to reflect on their consumer behaviour.

The inhabitants of Brave New World can be considered pure wanton consumers (except those inhabitants whose conditioning process has failed); these inhabitants completely lack the capacity to reflect on their first-order desires. It is doubtful whether genuine wanton consumers exist in our society. When discussing wanton consumers in our society, I am referring to consumers whose capacity to reflect on their first-order desires could be more developed. Finally, willing consumers (consumers who reflect on their first-order desires and are steered by a second-order desire to consume) can be considered to act in an autonomous way (always to a certain degree). They may not act morally, but they act autonomously in the sense that - to a certain degree - they are able to evaluate their first-order desires and to act according to the outcomes of this evaluation.

Since I am concerned with a relative notion of autonomy, the notions of willing consumers, unwilling consumers and wanton consumers must not be understood in an absolute manner. The ability of willing and unwilling consumers to form second-order desires is never absolute; they are always able to a certain degree. Likewise, the inability of wanton consumers is relative; to a certain extent, they are able to form second-order desires as well. In other words, unwilling and willing consumers have a certain level of wantonness, and wanton consumers have a certain ability to form second-order desires. Although these notions must not be understood in an absolute manner, they are useful, since they allow me to distinguish between different types of consumers; they allow me to discuss their wantonness, willingness or unwillingness with regard to consumption practices.

3.8 Evaluating and enhancing autonomy

When taking into account the framework outlined so far, autonomy consists of two different elements. The first element is the evaluation of first-order desires, leading towards second-order desires. The second element is acting in accordance with these second-order desires. Thus, in order for a decision to be autonomous (in a minimal sense), actors must have the capacity to reflect on their first-order desires (or to form second-order desires), and they must be able to act according to this evaluation. The degree to which such a decision can be called autonomous thus depends on the degree to which they are able to reflect on their first-order desires, and on the question whether they succeed in acting according to this evaluation.

Based on these two elements, I propose two different strategies aimed at enhancing autonomy. The first strategy consists of enhancing the ability to evaluate first-order desires, thereby forming second-order desires. The second strategy consists of enhancing the ability to act in accordance with these second-order desires. This latter strategy can be directed towards

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first-order desires or towards actions stemming from these desires. The second strategy can thus be divided into different sub-strategies directed at either desires or actions. I will propose two sub-strategies directed towards desires and two sub-strategies directed towards actions. In short, the second strategy aims to enhance the ability to act in accordance with second-order desires, by either: a) curing first-order desires, b) controlling first-order desires, c) removing the ability to act in accordance with first-order desires, or d) motivating / de-motivating acting in accordance with first-order desires.

These different strategies (and sub-strategies) can be illustrated with an example of individuals smoking cigarettes. The first strategy may consist of providing information with regard to the effects of smoking. Imagine individuals having two conflicting first-order desires: the desire to smoke cigarettes (they like the taste) and the desire to stop smoking cigarettes (they don't like to wear smelly clothes). The individuals in this example are unaware of the health hazards connected to smoking cigarettes. After evaluating their first-order desires, they may have a second-order desire to have a desire to smoke cigarettes. Although these individuals have evaluated their first-order desires, providing them with information regarding health hazards, enables them to make an evaluation which is more inclusive. After retrieving this information, their first-order desire to stop smoking may not only be based on the fact that smoking makes their clothes smell bad, but also on the fact that it creates health hazards. They may stick to their second-order desire to have a desire to smoke (they are willing consumers with regard to smoking), or they may have a second-order desire to have a desire to quit smoking (they are unwilling consumers). Either way, they have incorporated the dangers of smoking in their evaluation. In short, providing the information enhances the ability to evaluate their first-order desires; it decreases their level of wantonness.

Now, imagine that these individuals (aware of the dangers of smoking) want to quit smoking (they are unwilling consumers with regard to smoking). However, somehow they are not able to act according to their second-order desire. The second proposed strategy aims to enhance autonomy, exactly by enhancing the ability to act in accordance with second-order desires. When taking into account the sub-strategies outlined above, this can be achieved in different ways. Firstly, it can be done by curing the first-order desire to smoke, for example, by using nicotine patches (provided that these nicotine patches work perfectly). Secondly, it can be achieved by controlling the first-order desire to smoke, perhaps by using therapy or meditation. Thirdly, cigarettes can be banned from the shops, making it impossible (or, at least, impossible within legal boundaries) for smokers to act according to their first-order desire to smoke. And finally, cigarettes can be taxed to an even higher degree, thereby de-motivating individuals to smoke, or motivating them to quit smoking.

The two proposed main strategies are directed towards different types of consumers; they are directed towards different aspects of consumption. The first strategy addresses the wantonness of consumers and aims to decrease the level of wantonness (for example, by providing information with regard to the dangers of smoking). The second strategy, on the other hand, aims to enhance autonomy by enhancing the ability to act in accordance with second-order desires. It addresses individuals as unwilling consumers with regard to a certain consumption practice (for example, smoking). It aims to help these unwilling consumers to act according to the evaluation of their first-order desires. If we take into account the notion of autonomy outlined above, the strategy does *not* enhance the autonomy of individuals who can

be considered willing consumers with regard to a certain consumption practice. These willing consumers have formed a second-order desire (they want to have the desire to consume a certain product) and act in accordance with it. Interfering with their actions would lead to a decrease in autonomy; it would disable them to act in accordance with their second-order desires.

The examples concerning the last two sub-strategies (banning cigarettes from the shops and increasing cigarette tax) are not directed towards individual smokers, but they affect all smokers. These strategies thus enhance the autonomy of some smokers (unwilling smokers) while they diminish the autonomy of others (willing smokers). Therefore, in the following chapters I will discuss sub-strategies which affect individual consumers only. Cigarettes could, in theory, be sold only to those carrying an identification card. As a form of self-protection, smokers could register themselves as unwilling smokers. These registered unwilling smokers could be prohibited to buy cigarettes or they could be obliged to pay a higher tax fee. By registering themselves as unwilling smokers, *individuals* make it impossible for themselves, or they de-motivate themselves to buy cigarettes.

In short, when taking into account the notion of autonomy outlined so far, the first strategy can be considered to be directed towards wanton consumers, and the second strategy can be considered to be aimed at unwilling consumers. These strategies and types of consumers towards whom these strategies are directed, can be summarized as follows.

Strategy	Example	Consumer
1: Enhancing the ability to evaluate first-order desires, thereby forming second-order desires	Providing information with regard to dangers of smoking	Wanton
2: Enhancing the ability to act in accordance with second-order desires, by	-	-
a) Curing first-order desires	Using nicotine patches	Unwilling
b) Controlling first-order desires	Using therapy or meditation	Unwilling
c) Removing the ability to act in accordance with first-order desires	Prohibiting buying cigarettes	Unwilling
d) Motivating / de-motivating acting in accordance with first-order desires	Increasing cigarette tax	Unwilling

The examples above show different strategies aimed at enhancing autonomy with regard to smoking cigarettes. Although the act of smoking can also be understood as a physiological addiction, these examples provide a clear understanding of how each strategy can be applied. These strategies can be extended towards everyday consumption practices such as eating meat, driving a car, or buying all kinds of commodities. In chapter 5, I will contemplate the question how technologies (which I will refer to as ascetic technologies) can be used in order to support the strategies outlined in this chapter. Before I will discuss the use of these technologies, I would like to draw attention to an objection that could be raised against the employment of the aforementioned strategies. When discussing the employment of these strategies, I am concerned with individuals who choose to follow these strategies themselves, without employing any coercive measures. The use of such coercive measures is often rejected by means of anti-paternalistic arguments. However, although I will focus on

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employing strategies on a voluntary basis, I will argue that the use of coercive measures should not beforehand be rejected by means of such anti-paternalistic arguments.

3.9 Coercion and paternalism

Whereas the first strategy, explicated above, addresses the wantonness of consumers, the second strategy addresses their unwillingness with regard to a certain consumption practice. However, this does not imply that wanton consumers or unwilling consumers would always *choose* to follow a certain strategy. Enhancing the ability to evaluate first-order desires could, for example, be accomplished through obligatory lessons regarding consumption practices.⁴ However, wanton consumers may choose *not* to follow these lessons. Furthermore, individuals may, for example, be unwilling consumers with regard to smoking who, nonetheless, choose *not* to follow a certain sub-strategy aimed at enhancing the ability to act in accordance with their second-order desires. They may want to quit smoking but they may refuse to use nicotine patches. Likewise, they may refuse a kind of therapy, and they may disagree with banning cigarettes from the shops, or an increased cigarette tax. In short, individuals may be unwilling consumers or wanton consumers who choose *not* to follow one of the strategies outlined above. Would forcing one of these strategies upon them enhance their autonomy?

First of all, it would enhance their autonomy with regard to a certain consumption practice (for example, smoking). If the first strategy is successful, it enhances the ability to form second-order desires, regardless of whether individuals choose to follow this strategy or not. Likewise, the second strategy - if successful - enhances the ability of unwilling consumers to act in accordance with their second-order desires, regardless of whether they choose to follow such a strategy or not. Both strategies can thus be considered to enhance autonomy with regard to a certain consumption practice, regardless of whether these strategies are mandatory or not. On the other hand, obliging individuals to follow one of the strategies diminishes their level of autonomy with regard to following such a strategy. After the evaluation of their first-order desires, they may have chosen not to follow a certain strategy. Obliging them to do so, makes them unable to act according to their desire not to follow such a strategy.

Obliging individuals to follow one of the strategies thus enhances autonomy with regard to a certain consumption practice, while it diminishes autonomy with regard to following such a strategy. In this thesis, I aim to contemplate the question how to enhance autonomy without taking such coercive measures. The first strategy may consist of providing information or it may consist of offering different types of education regarding consumption practices. The second strategy can be used (on a voluntary basis) as a tool which enables individuals to act in accordance with their second-order desires. However, although I am concerned with offering strategies on a voluntary basis, obliging individuals to follow one of the strategies should not beforehand be rejected.

Obliging individuals to follow one of the aforementioned strategies can be understood as an act of paternalism. In a general sense, paternalism can be referred to as the intentional

⁴ A far less radical option, is to provide information with regard to consumption practices (e.g. the information on cigarette packages).

limitation of a person's freedom (by the state or by another person), motivated on grounds of benevolence. With regard to the enhancement of autonomy concerning consumption, paternalism can thus be understood as the intentional limitation of a person's freedom in order to enhance autonomy. Here, the limitation of a person's freedom (or a decrease in person's autonomy) concerns the choice of whether or not to follow one of the strategies outlined above. The enhancement of autonomy, on the other hand, concerns a certain consumption practice.

A well-known distinction between two types of paternalism is Feinberg's distinction between strong and weak paternalism. From a weak paternalistic perspective, paternalistic interventions are permitted only, if these interventions concern behaviours that are substantially non-autonomous or non-voluntary (Beauchamp 2001, 375). It is, for example, legitimate to pick up injured victims of car accidents who are in a shock and refuse ambulance service. In Frankfurt's terminology: these victims are not able to form second-order desires. However, from a strong paternalistic perspective, paternalistic interventions may also be justified if these interventions are directed towards choices which can be considered autonomous (Idem). Imagine an individual who has formed a second-order desire to have a desire to climb a high building. Restricting this individual from doing so, can be considered an act of strong paternalism.

These examples show that, in our society, acts of both weak and strong paternalism are not necessarily rejected. Furthermore, the distinction between weak and strong paternalism is not entirely clear. This distinction can only be considered unambiguous if one accepts the idea of the fully autonomous individual, who - in some cases - (for example, in case of a car accident) is substantially non-autonomous. However, as discussed, this image of the individual as fully autonomous or sovereign is not a very accurate one. Human beings must not be perceived as fully autonomous or as completely pathological; instead, they are endowed with a certain level of autonomy. Thus, whether interfering with the freedom of individuals can be considered strong paternalism or weak paternalism is unclear; it is not altogether clear what 'substantially non-autonomous' or autonomous means.

By taking into account this ambiguity, it is not clear whether obliging human beings to follow the first strategy by means of mandatory education, is an act of weak paternalism or strong paternalism. In general, in legal and moral theory, children are not portrayed as autonomous individuals. Obliging children to go to school is usually justified by arguing that an education increases their autonomy. If one accepts this justification and if one accepts the image of (adult) individuals having a certain degree of autonomy which can be enhanced, teaching the ability to form second-order desires regarding consumption and the ability to act according to these desires, cannot beforehand be ruled out by means of anti-paternalistic arguments.

Furthermore, the justification of coercive measures can be based on the harm principle. The question can be raised whether certain consumption practices generate harm to the individual and to others. Consumption is related to the 'tragedy of the commons' outlined in this thesis. If consumption patterns of an entire population cause harm to the environment, and if the enhancement of autonomy regarding consumption would result in lower degrees of consumption (which can, of course, be doubted), it is legitimate to contemplate the question whether freedom-limiting interventions can be justified on grounds of the harm principle. All

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in all, obliging human beings to follow a certain strategy cannot beforehand be rejected by means of anti-paternalistic arguments.

3.10 Critical attitude towards first-order desires

Again, my aim in this thesis is to explore different strategies directed at enhancing autonomy regarding consumption practices, without taking coercive measures. In chapter, 5 I will contemplate the question how technologies (which I refer to as ascetic technologies) can be employed in order to support the strategies outlined in this chapter. However, before I will discuss the use of these so-called ascetic technologies, I would like to critically examine consumer desires themselves.

In Frankfurt's notion of freedom of the will, first-order desires and the ability to form second-order desires are somehow taken for granted. From Frankfurt's point of view, the question whether a person's will is free, merely depends on one's ability to act according to one's second-order desires. Frankfurt does not raise the question how certain desires come into being; he merely takes these desires for granted. Individuals always know what they truly want, independent of the context in which they are embedded. However, as argued, this image of the sovereign consumer is inaccurate; human desires are indeed shaped by this context. In other words, what lacks in Frankfurt's analysis, is a critical examination of first-order desires themselves and of ways in which these desires are formed. This critical attitude towards desires themselves can be found in Stoic and Epicurean philosophy. In chapter 4, I will discuss this critical attitude. Incorporating this critical attitude towards desires into the framework of autonomy, provides a better understanding of what it means to be more or less autonomous.

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In the previous chapter, I have argued that consumers are endowed with a certain level of autonomy; their autonomy can be more or less developed. Frankfurt's framework of first- and second-order desires served as a starting point in order to understand what it means to be more or less autonomous. Based on this framework, I have proposed different strategies aimed at enhancing autonomy. However, as mentioned, within the liberal framework, first-order desires themselves are not critically examined; consumers are considered atomistic individuals, gaining their autonomy independent of the context in which they are embedded. In this chapter, I will not rely on this independent position; I will not beforehand rely on first-order desires. Instead, I will critically examine these first-order desires and how these desires are formed. In doing so, I will study the critical attitude towards desires found in Stoic and Epicurean thought. Stoic and Epicurean schools deeply mistrusted desires; they argued that many of these desires are based on socially taught beliefs, which - in many cases - are false.

4.1 Problematic aspects of studying Hellenistic philosophy

Before I will explicate the subject outlined above, a significant amount of modesty is in place here. Studying Hellenistic philosophy is not an easy thing to do. First of all, a small amount of early Epicurean texts and no complete early Stoic texts have survived. Academics are left with studying fragments of early texts and with later texts in which the works of early Epicureans and Stoics are discussed. Furthermore, at an early stage, the Stoic school split up in different movements with different views (Hadot 2008, 133). In short, there are serious difficulties in explicating a coherent account of Stoic and Epicurean thought. My aim here is not to provide such a coherent account. Instead, I am concerned with the ways in which these Hellenistic schools practiced ethics as a philosophical discipline and, in particular, with their critical attitude towards desires. Therefore, Martha Nussbaum's *The therapy of desire* (2009) will serve as a background for studying how both schools practiced their philosophy as an art of life, aimed at curing desires. Nussbaum explores how different Hellenistic schools used therapeutic arguments in order to address human suffering.

4.2 Eudaimonia as ataraxia

Before I will examine the ways in which both Stoic and Epicurean schools used their philosophy as a therapy of desires, I will discuss why they bothered about desires in the first place. Above all, these Hellenistic schools used their philosophy as an art of life aimed at curing human suffering. Epicurus, for example, argued:

Vain is the word of a philosopher which does not heal any suffering of man. For just as there is no profit in medicine if it does not expel the diseases of the body, so there is no profit in philosophy either, if it does not expel the suffering of the mind. (Bailey 1975, 133).

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In addition, Cicero - on behalf of the Stoa - claimed:

There is, I assure you, a medical art of the soul. It is philosophy, whose aid need not to be sought, as in bodily diseases, from outside ourselves. We must endeavor with all of our resources and all our strength to become capable of doctoring ourselves. (Nussbaum 2009, 14).

For both Stoic and Epicurean schools, (first-order) desires can be considered to cause human suffering. Thus, the critical attitude towards desires is not born out of a fundamental aversion towards them; rather, these schools argue that desires can be considered a *source of human suffering*. This attitude can be found in Epicurus' letter to Menoecus:

And again independence of desire we think a great good-not that we may at all times enjoy but a few things, but that, if we do not possess many, we may enjoy the few in the genuine persuasion that those have the sweetest pleasure in luxury who least need it, and that all that is natural is easy to be obtained, but that which is superfluous is hard. And so plain savours bring us a pleasure equal to a luxurious diet, when all the pain due to want is removed; and bread and water produce the highest pleasure when one who needs them puts them to his lips. To grow accustomed therefore to simple and not luxurious diet gives us health to the full, and makes a man alert for the needful employments of life, and when after long intervals we approach luxuries disposes us better towards them, and fits us to be fearless of fortune. (Bailey 1975, 89).

Furthermore, on behalf of the Stoa, this attitude can (for example) be found in one of Seneca's letters to Lucilius:

Superfluous things require sweating. These are matters that cause the gown to wear out, that force us to age in a tent, that make us travel to strange coasts. What is enough, is within reach. Anyone, who can get along with poverty, can be considered rich (Seneca 1980, 21)⁵.

Both texts illustrate that luxury or superfluous matters cannot be considered evil in themselves. Rather, getting accustomed to a sober lifestyle makes it easier to deal with everything that fate has in store for each human being. Fulfilling desires takes effort and creates restlessness. Furthermore, getting accustomed to luxury makes individuals more susceptible to fate; this luxury can be taken away from them at any time. Thus, desires can be seen as a source of human suffering.

This image of desires as a cause of human suffering is based on a particular notion of the good life. For all Hellenistic schools, *eudaimonia* can be explained in more or less the same manner; as a total peace of mind or freedom from disturbance (*ataraxia*). This freedom from disturbance can be achieved by reducing the commitments to all the unstable elements in the world (Nussbaum 2009, 41). Although many things happen beyond our control, we can control the way in which we value these things. Thus, Hellenistic philosophy promises their pupils a life of self-sufficiency; it promises an autonomous life, independent of the unstable elements in the world.

⁵ In this essay, all quotations from Seneca are translated from Dutch by me.

4.3 Curing unreliable first-order desires

As opposed to the framework outlined in the previous chapter, Hellenistic philosophers adopted a critical stance with regard to first-order desires. For Stoics and Epicureans, desires are not only responsible for causing human suffering; they are also far from reliable. Hellenistic thinkers hold that many passions or desires are based upon socially taught beliefs and that many of these beliefs are unreliable. If passions or desires are formed out of socially taught beliefs, then they need to be critically examined just like any other socially taught belief. According to Stoics and Epicureans, philosophy is suited for modifying these passions or desires, since beliefs responsible for forming desires respond to argument (Nussbaum 2009, 9, 39). Thus, both Hellenistic schools adopted a critical attitude towards desires and towards the ways in which desires are formed. They deeply mistrusted the socially taught beliefs responsible for forming desires and offered their philosophy as a medicine aimed at curing desires.

In *The therapy of desire* (2009), Martha Nussbaum investigates this analogy between philosophy and medicine. Understood in a medical way, philosophy is able to cure human diseases, which are caused by false beliefs. Whereas the medical art is able to cure bodily diseases, philosophy can be employed in order to cure the sufferings of the soul (14). In order to clarify the medical approach, Nussbaum compares it with two other ethical approaches, which she refers to as a Platonic approach and an ordinary belief approach.

Within the Platonic approach, ethical norms exist independently of human beings; these ethical norms are simply out of reach for humans. Thus, the Platonic approach is based on “the idea of the radical independence of true good from human need and desire. [Therefore], digging more deeply into ourselves is not the way to proceed in ethical inquiry.” (19). As opposed to this Platonic approach, the ordinary belief approach is based on the idea that “ordinary beliefs and intuitions can be treated as criteria of ethical truth and rightness” (24). Whereas - within the Platonic approach - ethical truth, and the notion of what health entails, exist independently of human lives - within the ordinary belief approach - human beings can simply be asked what they think of a certain case (for example, what they desire), and the answers given to these questions can be considered reliable. Within Frankfurt’s framework, first-order desires are considered reliable (whenever they are not the outcome of an addiction). His notion of first-order desires can thus be considered to be based on ordinary belief.

The aforementioned approaches cannot be understood as medical approaches. A doctor adopting a Platonic approach would not be considered a good doctor. This (divine) doctor would not consult the patient with regard to one’s health. This consult is not required, since this divine doctor knows what a healthy state entails; and this healthy state exists independently of the patient. Such a divine doctor could regard a certain state healthy, even though the patient is suffering from terrible pains. On the other hand, a doctor adopting an ordinary belief approach would not be considered a good doctor either. This doctor would only consult the patient, without adding a professional dimension to the doctor-patient relationship. Nussbaum provides an example of individuals who are used to suffering from malnutrition. These individuals may argue they feel just fine. However, the doctor knows that these individuals are undernourished and may offer food in order to overcome the

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malnutrition. After a while, the individuals might actually be in a position in which they are able to judge the difference between their situation before and after the malnutrition (20).

The above thus shows that a medical approach somehow requires an asymmetrical relationship between the doctor and the patient. The patient's input must be taken seriously, but the medical approach also requires a trained eye which is able to judge the health of the patient. In other words, "The medical conception seeks to combine the critical power of Platonism with the worldly immersion of ordinary-belief philosophy." (32). The approach takes seriously human desires, but does not take these desires for granted. It critically examines how human desires are formed and aims to cure those, that do not correspond to a particular notion of what health entails. For both Stoics and Epicureans, this notion of health is closely related to their notion of nature.

4.4 Epicurean and Stoic notions of nature

According to both Stoic and Epicurean schools, many value judgements are based upon false beliefs about the nature of things. False beliefs are beliefs which do not correspond to the notion of nature as perceived by these Hellenistic schools. Society plays a role in creating these false beliefs; as mentioned, many of these beliefs are formed through social learning processes. Philosophy's task is to replace these false beliefs by beliefs which *do* correspond to nature. As Nussbaum argues: "Hellenistic philosophers will often ask about nature [...] in part by looking at how things are before culture gets to people to deform them." (Nussbaum 2009, 31). Thus, both schools argue that human flourishing can be achieved through living in accordance with nature. However, due to different conceptions of what nature entails, this living in accordance with nature means something different to each of them. I will briefly discuss the notion of 'nature' as explicated by both Epicureans and Stoics.

For Epicureans, the universe merely consists of atoms and void. Although gods do exist, these gods do not interfere with the world. Therefore, talking about divine meanings or an immortal soul of human beings is useless. Humans consist of matter only and consciousness is the mere movement of atoms. In Epicurus' universe, pain is the source of evil and pleasure is the source of good; by nature, human beings seek pleasure and avoid pain. This can be underlined with Diogenes Laertius, arguing:

All living creatures from the moment of birth take delight in pleasure and resist pain from natural causes independent of reason. (Long 1986, 62).

As the above shows, Epicureans claim that truth can be found in the body (in sensations of pleasure and pain), independent of reason. For Epicureans, bodily perceptions can be considered entirely reliable, and all error comes from belief (Nussbaum 2009, 108). As Epicurus argues:

It is not the stomach that is insatiable, as the many think, but the false belief that the stomach needs an unlimited amount to satisfy it. (Nussbaum 2009, 112).

Although Epicureanism is often linked to modern hedonism, Epicureans promote a life in which desires should be reduced; they aim to cure human beings from desires based on false

beliefs. In doing so, they distinguish between desires that are natural and those that are vain or empty (infected by false beliefs). As Epicurus argues:

We must consider that of desires some are natural, others vain and of the natural some are necessary and others merely natural; and of the necessary some are necessary for happiness, others for the repose of the body, and others for the very life. The right understanding of these facts enables us to refer all choice and avoidance to the health of the body and (the soul's) freedom from disturbance, since this is the aim of the life of blessedness (Bailey 1975, 87).

Stoics, on the other hand, do not share the Epicureans' materialistic world view. Zeno, for example - on behalf of the Stoa - believes the universe is an organized, harmonic whole guided by reason (*logos*). The universe is guided by a god, leading it into the right direction, and living in accordance with nature means living in accordance with the rational whole of the universe. As Seneca argues, the god lives within us:

The god is near you, he is with you, he is inside you. [...] a holy spirit lives within us that observes all the good and evil inside us and guards us. [...] But a good human is no one without the god: or can anyone transcend fortune without being helped by him? [...] In every human lives a god, which god, nobody knows. (Seneca 1980, 108-109).

Through this holy spirit within us, human beings are "naturally equipped with 'impulses to virtue' or 'seeds of knowledge', and this equipment is sufficient to direct human reason in the right direction." (Long 1974, 182). What Stoic philosophy needs to do is to grow these 'seeds of knowledge', or to train human reason. Growing the seeds of knowledge enables human beings to distinguish false beliefs from those that are true.

Thus, Both Epicureans and Stoics ground their notion of the good life on their notion of nature. For Epicureans, truth can be found in the body. The senses are entirely reliable and all error comes from belief. For Stoics, on the other hand, truth can be found in universal reason. By nature, all human beings have a piece of divinity within themselves; a divine core which must be nurtured or trained. Both Epicurean and Stoic notions of nature serve as a metaphysical foundation enabling them to judge what is healthy and what is not. Human beings must be cured from false beliefs, such that they can live in accordance with their particular conception of nature.

4.5 Desires and the social context

The notions of nature as perceived by both Hellenistic schools provide a norm, which enables them to distinguish between desires that are reliable and desires that are not. Desires based on true beliefs (beliefs which correspond to their particular notion of nature) are reliable, whereas desires based on false beliefs (beliefs which do not correspond to this notion) are not. Hellenistic philosophy does not only provide a norm enabling them to distinguish between reliable and unreliable desires; Hellenistic schools also explicated how false beliefs (and thus also desires which are based on these beliefs) are formed.

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As mentioned earlier, both Stoic and Epicurean schools argue that many beliefs - on which desires are based - are socially taught. Seneca discusses, for example, the human tendency to rely on examples set by others, without any critical reflection.

Anywhere in life, you can see happening what you can often see happening when human beings in a crowd start to push and overrun each other [...]: no one merely damages oneself with one's mistakes, but one also creates and influences the mistakes made by others. Because it is harmful to cling on to human beings walking in front of you, and as long as every human being prefers to accept something rather than to judge for oneself, one will never form a judgement about life, instead, one simply accepts something, and in a roundabout way the mistakes spin us around and throw us into the abyss. The examples set by others are fatal to us; we can only cure ourselves whenever we release us from the masses (Seneca 2009, 9).

By using the analogy of a crowd, Seneca urges his readers not to follow the herd, not to follow the examples set by others, but to critically think for themselves. He urges his readers not to accept commonly held beliefs, but to critically assess these beliefs.

An example of a commonly held belief, as attacked by Epicurus, is the belief that gods interfere with human lives. It is this 'belief of the many' which, according to Epicurus, is false.

First of all believe that god is a being immortal and blessed, even as the common idea of the god is engraved on men's minds, and do not assign to him anything alien to his immortality or ill-suited to his blessedness: but believe about him everything that can uphold his blessedness and immortality. For gods there are, since the knowledge of them is by clear vision. But they are not such as the many believe them to be: for indeed they do not consistently represent them as they believe them to be. And the impious man is not he who denies the gods of the many, but he who attaches to the gods the beliefs of the many (Bailey 1975, 83, 85).

Epicurus is aware of the 'beliefs of the many' in which gods interfere with human lives and argues we should replace these socially taught beliefs by beliefs which he holds to be true. He addresses the fear of gods stemming from these 'beliefs of the many' and argues we should not fear death or have a desire to live an infinite time span. Since gods do not interfere with human beings (either dead or alive), death is not something to be afraid of.

So death, the most terrifying of all ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist (Bailey 1975, 85)

Thus, Like Seneca, Epicurus explores the human tendency to follow examples set by others, or to accept commonly held beliefs. Both Stoic and Epicurean thinkers offer their philosophy in order to cure these commonly held beliefs which, according to them, are false.

Lucretius provides another interesting example of a way in which culture shapes human desires. Whereas Epicurus discusses commonly held religious beliefs, Lucretius explores the relation between desire and narrative. He describes the way in which popular poetry shapes human desire in his society.

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Men, blind with desire, attribute to women excellences that are not really theirs. And thus we see women who are in many ways misshapen and ugly being the objects of great delight, and of the highest honor. And each man laughs at others, and urges them to make amends to Venus, since they are sick with a base love – while, poor wretch, he often cannot see his own trouble. A black woman is called “honey-skinned” [*melichrus*], an unwashed and smelly woman “unadorned” [*acosmos*], a grey-eyed woman “a veritable Pallas,” a wiry and twiglike woman “a gazelle” [*dorcas*], a tiny dwarfish woman “one of the Graces” [*charitonia*], “all pure salt,” a giantess is “a wonder” [*cataplexis*] and “full of majesty.” If she stammers and cannot speak, she “has a lisp” [*traulizi*]; if she is dumb, she is modest (Nussbaum 2009, 175).

Lucretius argues that, in his society, the way men perceive women is influenced by popular poetic clichés. In this satirical text, men adore their women since they are influenced by popular poetry; men’s false romanticized view on women is influenced by popular poetic culture.

The texts by Seneca, Epicurus and Lucretius all reveal a critical attitude towards commonly held beliefs. Furthermore, as Martha Nussbaum explicates, both Stoic and Epicurean schools were the first in western philosophy’s history to discover the existence of *unconscious* motivations and beliefs. The examples above illustrate different ways in which culture (religion and poetic culture) shapes human desires. In addition, Hellenists acknowledged that many beliefs and motivations are not apparent. Human desires may be shaped by ‘the belief of the many’ or by popular poetic culture, but human beings are often unaware of the fact that their desires are shaped by these forms of culture. In other words, according to both Hellenistic schools, human desires are often based on *unconscious* beliefs and motivations.

As Nussbaum shows, this acknowledgement is apparent in the writings of Lucretius. According to Lucretius, the fear of death makes human beings turn towards religious beliefs and religious authorities. He argues that religion is irrational and built upon false beliefs, and that these beliefs make humans rely on priests (who stimulate the fear of death even further), rather than on their own judgements. Furthermore, the (unconscious) fear of death creates a kind of restlessness; human beings are restless, but unaware of the cause of this restlessness. As Lucretius argues:

If only human beings, just as they seem to feel a weight in their minds that wears them out with its heaviness, could also grasp the causes of this and know from what origin such a great mountain of ill stands on their chest, they would hardly lead their lives as we now often see them do, ignorant of what they really want, and always seeking a change of place as if they could put their own burden. [...] Thus each person flees himself. But in spite of all his efforts he clings to that self, which we know he never can succeed in escaping, and hates it – all because he is sick and does not know the cause of his sickness. (Nussbaum 2009, 197-198)

Lucretius claims that this unconscious fear of death, creating a kind of restlessness, comes to the surface under certain circumstances.

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It is more in times of danger that one can really look into a person and know, in his adversity, who he is: for then, at last, the true voices are drawn forth from the depth of the breast. The mask is torn off; the fact remains. (Nussbaum 2009, 199).

Thus, according to Lucretius, in times of danger, the unconscious fear of death comes to the surface. Hellenistic philosophy or therapy aims to bring to the surface such unconscious beliefs and motivations. The awareness of these unconscious beliefs and motivations enables individuals to evaluate their desires in a better way.

Take, for example, Epictetus' description of the tragic murders committed by Medea. He argues that she is wrong in doing so, but that she can hardly be blamed since culture 'blinded and lamed' her.

Why then are you angry with her, because the poor woman has gone astray concerning the most important things and has turned from a human being into a poisonous snake? Why do you not, if anything, rather feel sorry for her, the way we feel sorry for the blind and the lame? Why don't we feel the same compassion for those who are blinded and lamed in the most crucial respects? (Nussbaum 2009, 327-328).

Culture has 'blinded and lamed' her, such that she could not have acted in a different way. Philosophy's task is to bring to the surface unconscious motivations and beliefs, and the ways in which culture has deformed them. Through self-examination of both culture and belief, Medea would have been able to "take charge over her own thinking, considering duly the available alternatives and selecting, from among them, the one that is best." (328). In short, both Epicurean and Stoic therapy require a critical examination of first-order desires and the beliefs and motivations on which they are grounded.

4.6 Epicurean and Stoic methods

Thus, as Nussbaum shows, both Hellenistic schools acknowledge that first-order desires are far from reliable and that these desires may be based on unconscious motivations and beliefs. These motivations and beliefs (of which the pupils are unaware), cannot be addressed by calm dialectic reasoning. In order for these motivations and beliefs to come to the surface, intensive therapy is required. As Nussbaum argues: "Aristotelian dialectic imagined the self as available to itself at all times, a flat surface, so to speak, or a clear and rather shallow pool from one could always pick out the relevant intuitions. Stoicism, like Epicureanism, thinks differently. The self must acknowledge itself; only this brings peace and freedom. But this requires assiduous, daily litigation, in a darkened room, as the soul, in the absence of external light, turns its vision on itself." (Nussbaum 2009, 341). Self-scrutiny is required in order to unveil the motivations and beliefs causing desires. Hellenistic philosophers aimed to find the motivations and beliefs from the depths of the pupil's soul.

In order to address these depths of the soul, both Epicureans and Stoics employed different methods. I will briefly discuss several methods, as exercised by each school. Firstly, Epicureans acknowledged the importance of the use of personal narrative. Epicurean pupils are asked to confess their thoughts; actions, secrets, desires and dreams such that the teacher is able to make an appropriate diagnosis. Other methods used, are meditation and memorization, and reading out loud of Epicurean dogmas. These methods were employed to

cure the inner self. Furthermore, Epicurus' hedonistic calculus can be seen as a way to calculate which desires to satisfy and which not. When deciding which desires to fulfil, Epicureans take into account the pains caused by satisfying vain or empty desires. Since Epicureans claim that truth can be found in the body (independent of reason), epicurean pupils are not asked to train their ability to reason. Epicurean ethics is practiced in a merely instrumental manner (aimed at curing human suffering), with Epicurus as a spiritual leader.

As opposed to Epicureans, Stoics *do* train the faculty of reason. According to them, universal reason is the only reliable source. Stoics ask their pupils to train the faculty of reason, such that it is in accordance with this universal reason. Thus, logic and natural philosophy are taught in order to train the mind. They prepare the ground for ethics, which is sometimes referred to as the 'fruit of the garden' (Long 1986, 179). Furthermore, Stoics employ techniques of meditation and self-scrutiny. For Stoics, therapy is not suited for public consumption (as is the case with Epicurean therapy). Instead, Stoic therapy employs narratives and examples which are used in order to cure *particular* pupils (Nussbaum 2009, 337-340). Finally, Hadot provides different examples of Stoic practices. One of these examples concerns practicing to see reality as it exists, without adding value judgements to this reality. Another example of a practice, is imagining future difficulties, pain and death. By imagining these obstacles, Stoics anticipate on misfortune and death; on everything that fate has in store for them (Hadot 2008, 140-143).

4.7 Hellenistic philosophy, desires and autonomy

When taking into account the above, how does the evaluation of desires - as practiced by Stoic and Epicurean schools - relate to autonomy? As opposed to Frankfurt, Hellenistic philosophers do not take for granted first-order desires. For Frankfurt, the decisive identification with one of a person's first-order desires requires no further questioning. His notion of first-order desires can thus be considered to be based on ordinary belief (as discussed by Nussbaum). A person is capable of deciding which first-order desire is truly one's own, independent of the context in which this person is embedded. As explicated in the previous chapter, this decisive identification with a desire is problematic. Frankfurt's analysis does not provide a satisfying answer to the question whether a first-order desire is truly one's own; the analysis lacks a solid metaphysical foundation.

Hellenistic philosophers, on the other hand, do not take for granted first-order desires. From a Hellenistic point of view, the evaluation of desires must not be understood as an oversimplified utilitarian cost-benefit analysis. Instead, desires themselves have to be critically examined as well. The evaluation, thus, requires a kind of critical distance from human desires. In adopting a critical distance, Hellenistic philosophy explores an interesting relationship between desires and beliefs; many human desires are considered to be based upon (socially taught) beliefs. Therefore, a critical examination of desires requires a critical examination of beliefs on which these desires are based, and on the ways in which culture has deformed these beliefs. As opposed to Frankfurt, Stoics and Epicureans thus *do* take into account the social context in which human beings are embedded. Furthermore, both Stoic and Epicurean schools are aware of the existence of *unconscious* beliefs and motivations; human beings may not be consciously aware of the beliefs and motivations on which their desires are

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based. The awareness of these unconscious beliefs and motivations enables individuals to evaluate their desires in a more critical manner. By adopting a critical stance with regard to first-order desires and the formation of these desires, Hellenistic philosophy thus adds a layer to the evaluation of human desires.

However, Hellenistic philosophy is also normative through and through. Both Stoic schools perceive *eudaimonia* as *ataraxia*, or a total peace of mind. This *ataraxia* can be achieved through living in accordance with their conception of nature. This conception serves as a norm, enabling them to distinguish between a healthy (natural) and a sick state. Stoic and Epicurean philosophy aims to cure those desires that do not correspond to their particular notion of nature. Thus, although Stoic and Epicurean pupils are encouraged to critically reflect on their desires, this critical reflection is limited by the Stoic and Epicurean notions of the good life and of nature⁶. Both Stoic and Epicurean notions provide a foundation on which this critical reflection can be done. Many arguments aimed at curing desires can only be considered valid if one accepts this foundation.

Thus, both Frankfurt and the Stoic and Epicurean schools provide an account of absolute autonomy. Frankfurt's evaluation of first-order desires can be considered an account of *personal* autonomy. Frankfurt *a priori* takes for granted first-order desires and the ability to evaluate these desires⁷. Whether or not a person is autonomous, depends merely on one's ability to act according to the outcomes of the evaluation of first-order desires. Stoics and Epicureans, on the other hand, provide an account of *normative* autonomy. Instead of relying on an individual's first-order desires, both Hellenistic schools deeply mistrusted these desires. Their particular notions of the good life and of nature serve as a norm or metaphysical foundation (which is lacking in Frankfurt's account), enabling them to distinguish between healthy and sick desires. Hellenistic individuals are perceived as pathological consumers, and Stoic and Epicurean philosophy is employed in order to cure them. Stoics and Epicureans thus promise their pathological pupils (*a posteriori*) an autonomous life.

Adopting a notion of normative autonomy, as perceived by Stoics and Epicureans, requires the acceptance of their particular notions of the good life and of nature. With regard to desires regarding consumption in modern society, this is far from obvious. Most of us would not literally accept one of their notions of nature and most of us are not solely striving for a tranquil life⁸. Since the acceptance of such a particular notion of the good life and of nature is problematic, an evaluation of first-order desires may not only require a critical examination of first-order desires; it may also require a critical examination of different conceptions of the good life, without *a priori* adopting a particular conception as a norm. Such an evaluation would thus consist of a critical examination of first-order desires and of ways in which these desires are shaped, without taking for granted a certain notion of the good life. However, Hellenistic philosophy also teaches us that creating a critical distance towards desires and towards different conceptions of the good life is not an easy thing to do.

⁶ As opposed to Epicureans, Stoics are encouraged to train the faculty of reason. Nonetheless, the critical reflection of desires is limited by their normative notions of the good life and of nature.

⁷ For Frankfurt, the ability to evaluate first-order desires is directly linked to personhood.

⁸ Furthermore, in this thesis I am concerned with a relative notion of *personal* autonomy.

Our society has its own types of narratives and commonly held beliefs which are part and parcel of who we are.

In short, Frankfurt's evaluation of desires is based on - what Nussbaum has referred to as - an ordinary belief approach, in which desires are simply taken for granted. On the other hand, the Hellenistic evaluation of desires can be considered to be based on a medical approach, in which desires are critically examined, based on a particular norm. A third approach, can be referred to as a critical approach. Within this critical approach both first-order desires and different conceptions of the good life are critically examined. Adopting such a critical approach would not require adopting the Hellenistic notion of the good life in which *eudaimonia* is perceived as *ataraxia*. Instead, the Hellenistic notion may serve as an alternative for the popular, modern (Hobbesian) conception of happiness, based on fulfilling as much desires as possible.

4.8 Critical reflection of consumer desires

A critical approach - in which first-order desires and different conceptions of the good life are critically examined - thus complements Frankfurt's framework of first- and second-order desires. An evaluation of first-order desires should not be perceived as an oversimplified utilitarian cost-benefit analysis. Instead, such an evaluation requires a critical examination of first-order desires themselves without *a priori* taking for granted a particular notion of the good life. In this section, I will extend this critical approach towards the domain of consumption. I will provide several examples in which such a critical approach may enhance autonomy regarding consumption in modern society.

Firstly, the awareness of commonly held (perhaps unconscious) beliefs, on which desires are based, enhances the ability to evaluate first-order desires. Commonly held beliefs in our society are, for example, the beliefs in the importance of the free market, technological progress, economic growth and consumer purchasing power. With regard to this topic, Hans Achterhuis (2010) has explicated the utopian belief in the free market, in our neo-liberal age. Furthermore, in general, there exists a kind of work ethic in which hard work is valued, in many cases leading to a 40 hour work week. Partly, consumer desires are based on, or triggered by these commonly held beliefs. These beliefs somehow provide norms which promote the production and consumption of commodities. Being aware of the commonly held beliefs on which consumer desires are based, may enable consumers to critically reflect on their first-order desires; to critically reflect on their consumption practices. Instead of taking for granted the seemingly inevitable 40 hour work week or the purchase of the newest mobile phone, being aware of commonly held beliefs creates a critical distance allowing individuals to consume more autonomously.

Secondly, one of the ways in which human desires are shaped, as explicated by Hellenistic philosophy, is through the use of certain narratives. To the modern reader, the relationship between popular poetic culture and the way in which men value their women (as described by Lucretius) may seem a little far-fetched. However, some modern variations of this theme can be found in our society. Susan Quilliam (2011), for example, argues that romantic fiction influences the way in which women perceive love affairs and sexuality. Being a psychologist, she claims that "a huge number of the issues that we see in our clinics

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and therapy rooms are influenced by romantic fiction.” (Quilliam 2011, 181). There is an astonishing similarity between the men in Lucretius’ poem and the women visiting Quilliam’s clinics and therapy rooms. Both authors portray a group of people with distorted images of their love lives, who require a form of therapy.

In addition, the recent discussion regarding the sexualisation of society (in which the role of, for example, pornography and music videos on sexual morale and sexual desire is debated), can also be regarded an example of a discussion concerning the ways in which narratives shape human desire. With regard to consumption, many types of narratives exist in our society. From childhood onward, human beings are exposed to all kinds of commercials, movies, TV-shows and magazines seducing them to buy commodities. On the internet, human beings are exposed to personalized advertisements. In other words, modern society has its own types of narratives (not only through texts, but also through images) influencing the ways in which we value things and influencing human desire. The awareness of how narratives shape our consumer desires may create a critical distance with regard to these desires. It enables individuals to critically reflect on these first-order desires and to consider alternatives.

Nonetheless, individuals must be made aware of such alternatives. Providing alternatives enables individuals to choose from a broader range of possibilities, rather than to follow an uncritical habit of consumption. Karen Soper (2009) aims to explore such alternatives by advocating a form of hedonism which she refers to as ‘alternative hedonism’ (Soper 2009). The alternative hedonist takes into account consumer practices and their “environmental consequences, their impact on health and their distrains on both sensual enjoyment and more spiritual forms of well-being” (12). Alternative hedonism thus seeks alternative ways of acquiring pleasure, other than the mere consumption of commodities. For example, it stresses the positive effects of having more spare time when working less. Furthermore, it stresses the sensual pleasures of consuming differently. Riding a bike is not only an activity that burdens individuals; it also provides pleasures that the car-driver is not experiencing (5). Thus, alternative hedonism may, for example, stress the pleasures of taking long walks, playing with your children or taking naps in the afternoon, rather than working full time and purchasing the newest flat screen television. Soper’s alternative hedonism can thus be considered an alternative notion of the good life, which is not merely based on earning money and consuming goods.

We may raise the question whether providing alternatives (such as Soper’s alternative hedonism) can be done in a value-neutral way. It requires a choice of which alternatives to provide. Must these alternatives merely contain forms of ‘alternative hedonism’ as outlined above, or should they also contain excessive consumption practices (such as owning a swimming pool or a space rocket)? Perhaps it is impossible to provide alternatives without taking into account a certain conception of the good life. Nonetheless, providing alternatives - which are not based on an unrestricted desire fulfilment - may enhance autonomy regarding consumption. Being aware of the dominant conception of the good life and being aware of alternatives may enhance the ability to evaluate first-order desires. The awareness may enhance the ability to choose a position in between the popular notion of restless happiness as perceived by Hobbes and the notion of *eudaimonia* as *ataraxia*, as perceived by Stoics and Epicureans.

Finally, although Martha Nussbaum's study of Hellenistic therapy is mainly concerned with desires based on false beliefs (on a cognitive level), the critical attitude can also be extended towards non-cognitive fields. Desires may also be based on particular (unconscious) motivations or habits. The awareness of these motivations and habits may enhance the ability to critically reflect on these desires. Take, for example, the first-order desire to own a new car. This desire could be an example of a so-called *mimetic desire* (a desire which is mimicked). In other words, as the word on the street often goes, the desire to own a new car could be triggered by the fact that one's neighbour owns a new car. If, however, individuals are aware of the fact that this desire is - in fact - mimetic, they are more capable of distancing themselves from this desire. If they are aware of the unconscious motivation (i.e. *mimesis* or perhaps status) or habit, they are in a better position to evaluate their first-order desires.

4.9 Social and material context

Thus, the critical approach (outlined in this chapter) adds a layer to Frankfurt's evaluation of desires. It deepens the analysis of what it means to be more or less autonomous. First-order desires should not be taken for granted. An evaluation of desires requires a critical examination of desires themselves and of the ways in which the *social context* shapes these desires. Furthermore it requires a critical examination of different conceptions of the good life. While this chapter focussed on the ways in which the *social context* shapes human desires, the following chapter aims to discuss the role of the *material context*. As I will argue, not only the social context, but also the material context influences human desires.

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Autonomy regarding consumption can be enhanced by either enhancing the ability to evaluate first-order desires, or by enhancing the ability to act according to this evaluation. Hellenistic philosophy teaches us that first-order desires should not be taken for granted. An evaluation of first-order desires requires a critical examination of these desires themselves and of the ways in which the *social context* shapes these desires. Whereas the previous chapter examined different ways in which the *social context* shapes human desires, this chapter discusses the ways in which the *material context* does so. I will examine the role of the material context in shaping desires. Furthermore, I will explicate different ways in which this material context (or ascetic technologies) can be employed in order to enhance autonomy with regard to consumption.

5.1 Autonomy and technology

In chapter 3, I have outlined two opposed views with regard to the relationship between consumption and autonomy. In the first view, consumers are portrayed as sovereign individuals who are in control of their desires. In the second view, consumers are seen as pathological beings who are enslaved by their desires. This dichotomy between sovereignty and pathology can also be found in the discussion concerning the relationship between technology and humanity.

In *Technology and the character of contemporary life* (1984), Borgmann distinguishes different positions regarding this relationship; namely: substantivism, instrumentalism and pluralism (9). From a substantivist point of view, human beings are subjected to technology which operates as an autonomous force. For Borgmann, the most important example of this position is provided by Jacques Ellul, who described technology as an omnipotent, autonomous force. A certain level of substantivism can also be found in Jonas' position as outlined in chapter 2. Secondly, from an instrumentalist perspective, technology must be perceived as a neutral means. In this view, human beings are completely in control of technology which is merely used as a value-neutral tool.

Both approaches are criticized by Borgmann. The substantivist view "seeks to give a comprehensive elucidation of our world by reducing its perplexing features and changes to one force or principle. That principle, technology, serves to explain everything, but it remains itself unexplained and obscure." (9). The substantivist view can thus be seen as a reductionist view which leaves the topic of technology itself unexplained. On the other hand, Borgmann argues, the instrumentalist view is a short-sighted one, portraying technology as a mere neutral means which is employed by sovereign human beings.

The third position, which tries to overcome the shortcomings of both substantivism and instrumentalism, is referred to as pluralism. From a pluralistic point of view, technology must neither be seen as an autonomous force, nor as a value-neutral means. Rather, the view takes into account the complex processes of "evolution and interaction." (11).⁹ However, although Borgmann acknowledges the complexities and interacting forces at work, he argues that

⁹ As Verbeek argues, Borgmann would consider Latour's amodern actor-network theory a pluralistic position (Verbeek 2005, 175).

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technology “does not take shape in a prohibitively complex way, where for any endeavor there are balancing counterendeavors so that no striking overall pattern becomes visible.” (Borgmann 1984, 11). According to Borgmann, this overall pattern escapes the eye of the pluralist.

Borgmann calls this overall pattern (which can be found in modern society) the device paradigm. In explaining this paradigm, he distinguishes between things, on the one hand, and devices on the other. For Borgmann, a thing “is inseparable from its context, namely its world, and from our commerce with the thing and its world, namely, engagement.” (41). Borgmann’s famous example of the hearth illustrates the kinds of engagement involved with things. “The mother built the fire, the children kept the firebox filled, and the father cut the firewood.” (42). Different types of engagement (physical engagement and social engagement) are required to light the hearth. As opposed to things, devices do not require engagement, but merely invite consumption. Whereas the hearth requires different forms of engagement, such as the gathering and cutting of wood, a central heating system produces mere warmth. The system does only require switching on the thermostat while the device does its work in the background, making available - what Borgmann refers to as – its commodity (in this case, warmth).

Thus, whereas things are directly connected to their context and require engagement, devices do their work in the background (making available their commodity), inviting mere consumption. The device paradigm can be understood as a pattern in which things are replaced by devices. This pattern thus leads to an increase of devices which merely invite consumption; a topic which is illustrated with Borgmann’s example of the couch potato, feeding on whatever the television has to offer. As the example shows, for Borgmann, the replacement of engaging things with commodity delivering devices must not be understood as an enrichment of human lives, but as an impoverishment.

Although Borgmann argues that devices impoverish our lives, he does not want to reject technology altogether. Rather, he wants to reform technology empowered by - what he refers to as - focal things and practices. Focal things can be explained as things which invite engagement and promote focal practices (instead of passive consumption). Since these focal practices can be regarded engaged ways of dealing with the world, they are in a position to break the pattern referred to as the device paradigm (Verbeek 2005, 185). Two examples of focal practices, discussed by Borgmann, are long distance running and the culture of the table. These two practices can be considered valuable in themselves and require engagement. According to Borgmann, the reformation of technology requires a so-called public deictic discourse. Such a deictic discourse “is about something that addresses us in its own right and constitutes a center by which we can orient ourselves.” (Borgmann 1984, 155).

The device paradigm has been criticized by Peter-Paul Verbeek, who argues that Borgmann merely provides examples of devices which reduce engagement, without taking into account the fact that technological devices can also amplify engagement. An electronic piano, for example, can be seen as a device which amplifies engagement (Verbeek 2005, 188). Likewise, computer games may amplify engagement. As Verbeek shows, the image provided by Borgmann is incomplete. However, the device paradigm can be considered a *general* feature of modern society. Many devices do their work in the background and many devices reduce engagement. One way of enhancing consumer autonomy may thus be raising

awareness with regard to the amount of effort required for delivering certain commodities. Raising awareness of how devices do their work in the background may enhance the ability to evaluate first-order desires. Furthermore, Borgmann's normative notion of the good life, in which focal practices are valued more than passive consumption, can be considered an alternative conception of the good life. Taking into account this alternative conception (without taking this normative notion for granted) may enhance the ability to form second-order desires as well.

5.2 Experiential gap

Borgmann's device paradigm can thus be understood as a pattern in which many technological devices do their work in the background. There seems to be a discrepancy between the actions of consumers (e.g. flipping a switch) on the one hand, and the amount of effort necessary to enable this action. In other words, human beings do not experience the conditions of possibility and the effects of their actions. This so-called 'experiential gap' is explored by Adam Briggie and Carl Mitcham (2009). In traditional societies, they argue, individuals are embedded in their local environment. In these societies "there is little mediation between an individual's actions and the consequences of those actions. This results from being embedded in a particular place and using small-scale, simple artefacts." (Briggie and Mitcham 2009, 377). Whereas traditional societies can thus be considered embedded societies, modern society can be described as a networked society. Instead of being part of an embedded society and linked merely to the local environment, modern individuals are linked to nodes inside complex networks.

Briggie and Mitcham define embedding as "part-whole relationships where the part is subordinate to the whole." (375). On the other hand, disembedding is defined as "the dissolution of such part-whole relationships and the resulting autonomization of the parts. In this way nodes are created that can be linked in networks, or systems of relationships composed of individual *nodes* and *links* between the nodes." (375). In modern society, different processes of disembedding are at work. For example, the production of commodities is disembedded from the consumers. Production and consumption are not embedded within the whole. Rather, both production and consumption can be seen as two different nodes linked inside a network. As opposed to human beings in traditional societies, individuals in modern society are thus surrounded by consumer goods which are disembedded.

Briggie and Mitcham employ Borgmann's device paradigm as a way to capture this experiential disembedding. Borgmann's heating system works in the background, isolated from the conditions that make this heating system function. Individuals turning on the heating system do not experience these conditions; i.e. there exists an experiential gap between the consumer on one node of the network and the conditions which make the system function on another node. Different types of experiential embedding were at stake in traditional societies, but in modern society this experiential disembedding is much more intensified. Searching information on the internet only requires typing a few letters and users are unaware of the computer servers at work, searching information and consuming a considerable amount of energy. Many devices in modern society merely require flipping a switch or clicking a mouse. The user on one node inside the network is connected to another node in which the conditions

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are created, but this user does not experience these conditions (hence the experiential gap). It is this experiential gap which promotes uncritical consumption. Consumers do not experience the direct effects of their consumer behaviour, which makes it hard (and sometimes impossible) to ethically reflect on these consequences. As the authors claim: “When technical activities are divorced from ethical reflection, true users of technology become passive, uncritical consumers.” (382).

One way of enhancing autonomy can thus be achieved by creating awareness of the experiential gap or by trying to decrease the size of this experiential gap. This can, for example, be achieved through education. One of my friends is an energy consultant and he is working on a project in which pupils are given more insight in energy consumption. He has connected a home trainer to a generator (which is connected to an energy meter), such that pupils are able to see the amount of effort which is required to supply the energy necessary for a television or a game console. The project aims to give insight in the amount of energy which is required to make these devices work. Such awareness can be raised with regard to different areas, such as the effects of our actions on the environment, or the labour conditions of workers creating our commodities. These kinds of awareness decrease the size of the experiential gap. As I shall discuss in the next section, technologies can be employed in order to fulfil this task.

5.3 Two types of ascetic technologies

As the above shows, the material context in which human beings are embedded shapes first-order desires and shapes the ability to evaluate these desires. The awareness of a process of commodification, as perceived by Borgmann, and attempts to decrease the size of experiential gaps may enhance the ability to reflect on our first-order desires regarding consumption. However, the material context (or technologies which I refer to as ascetic technologies) itself can also be employed in order to enhance autonomy. In chapter 3, I have proposed two strategies aimed at enhancing autonomy. The first strategy consists of enhancing the ability to evaluate first-order desires, whereas the second strategy consists of enhancing the ability to act according to this evaluation (I have divided this last strategy into four sub-strategies). As I will argue, ascetic technologies can be employed in order to support these strategies. In this chapter, I will distinguish between ascetic technologies supporting the first strategy and those supporting the second one. But how must the employment of these ascetic technologies, in both cases, be understood?

Firstly, technologies providing relevant information regarding consumption practices, can be employed in order to enhance the ability to *evaluate* first-order desires. The acquired information enables individuals to evaluate their first-order desires in a better way. Thus, this first group of ascetic technologies can be seen as a group of different *media*, carrying information regarding consumption practices. Secondly, technologies can be employed in order to enhance the ability to *act* according to the evaluation of first-order desires. These technologies can be seen as a kind of *behaviour steering technologies* or tools, steering behaviour such that individuals act according to their second-order desires. Whenever ascetic technologies are used as media, carrying information, the goal of these technologies is to enhance the ability to evaluate, while the character of an individual’s behaviour is open

ended. On the other hand, when ascetic technologies are used as behaviour steering technologies or tools, the goal is to help individuals to act according to their evaluation of desires, or to steer their behaviour such that it corresponds to their evaluation.

Before I will explicate the ways in which both types of ascetic technologies enhance autonomy, I would like to pay attention to the fact that the boundary between them is not always clear. As we will see, ascetic technologies can sometimes both be seen as media (carrying information) and as behaviour steering technologies. The question whether the use of certain ascetic technologies enhances the ability to evaluate or the ability to act cannot always be answered in an unambiguous manner. Nonetheless, the distinction between the two types allows me to examine the employment of ascetic technologies from different angles.

5.4 Ascetic technologies as media

One way of enhancing autonomy regarding consumption can thus be accomplished by employing ascetic technologies, serving as media, carrying useful information with regard to consumption practices. An example of such an ascetic technology is the aforementioned home trainer. In this section, I will provide more examples of this group of ascetic technologies.

Firstly, ascetic technologies can be employed in order to provide information with regard to energy consumption. An example of such an ascetic technology is the *wattcher*.¹⁰ The wattcher website contains the slogan ‘save energy at home through insight’. The wattcher can be inserted in every socket at home, and provides insight in energy consumption on different levels. Firstly, it shows the current energy consumption in Watts. Whenever a technological device (such as a television or a water boiler) is turned on, the wattcher display immediately shows the increase in energy consumption. The more energy is consumed, the larger the number on the display and the faster the number flashes on and off. Secondly, it shows the total amount of energy consumed each day. Finally, it compares the daily energy consumption with an adjustable target consumption and it shows whether the daily consumption is higher than, equal to, or lower than this target consumption. In other words, as the slogan reveals, the wattcher provides insight in the amount of energy consumed inside a household.¹¹

Some other examples of ascetic technologies providing information with regard to energy consumption are: displays indicating the amount of fuel consumed when driving a car, or displays on washing machines indicating the amount of consumed water. Likewise, search engines could be equipped with a display, indicating the amount of energy consumed for search actions. An example of an ascetic technology providing information with regard to a different type of energy consumption (or calorie consumption) is the *FoodPhone*. This FoodPhone is an application for mobile phones with integrated cameras and is aimed at helping obese people losing weight. By sending pictures of everything they eat to a central number, they receive information with regard to the calories they have eaten (Verbeek 2009, 233). This application, thus, allows them to gain insight in the amount of calories they consume.

¹⁰ Source: <http://www.wattcher.nl>.

¹¹ Another example of an ascetic technology which provides information with regard to energy consumption at home, is the ‘Toon’ thermostat. Source: <http://www.eneco.nl/toon>.

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While the ascetic technologies, described above, provide insight with regard to *energy consumption*, other technological media can provide insight with regard to the *consequences* of consumption patterns. Various websites¹² allow their users to calculate their ecological footprint, thereby raising awareness with regard to the effects of consumption patterns. The ecological footprint represents an estimation of the amount of space on earth required to fulfil one's desires regarding consumption. Information can also be provided through environmental simulation games, in which players directly experience the effects of their consumer behaviour. Ascetic technologies can also provide information with regard to the *personal* consequences of consumption patterns. The *PersuasiveMirror*, for example, shows a future mirror image, based on a person's current lifestyle. It thus provides information (whether this information is reliable can be doubted) concerning the way in which one's current lifestyle influences one's looks in the future (Verbeek 2009).

Depending on the point of view, all ascetic technologies described above, can also be perceived as persuasive technologies (that is, in fact, how Verbeek describes the FoodPhone and the PersuasiveMirror). If designers are trying to persuade individuals to consume less energy or fewer commodities, or to live a healthier lifestyle, then - from the perspective of the designers - the technologies are persuasive technologies. However, these technologies also provide information, which allows users to evaluate their first-order desires in a better way. Gaining insight in the amount of energy consumed or the effects of consumption patterns, allows consumers to make decisions that are better informed. These technologies raise awareness with regard to energy consumption and the consequences of consumption patterns.

As opposed to Borgmann's devices (which deliver their commodities quietly in the background), these devices make the effects of different kinds of consumption apparent. Instead of creating an experiential gap, these devices thus help to decrease the size of the experiential gap, by providing information. Thus, not only can devices amplify engagement (as Verbeek argues); some devices can also provide information with regard to the ways in which other devices deliver their commodities in the background, and with regard to the consequences of consumption. In other words, devices can also bring to the foreground how other devices deliver their commodities in the background. They can be employed in order to decrease the size of an experiential gap.

Whereas the ascetic technologies, discussed above, raise awareness with regard to the effects of consumption, technologies can also serve as media or platforms, providing *alternatives* for consumption. Different media can be employed in order to show different notions of the good life such as Soper's (2009) alternative hedonism. They can be employed to bring to the front a variety of alternative narratives, conceptions of the good live and (in Borgmann's sense) focal practices.

5.5 Ascetic technologies as behaviour steering technologies

The above shows different examples of ascetic technologies as media, aimed at enhancing the ability to evaluate first-order desires. These ascetic technologies carry information with regard to consumption practices and can be considered to enhance autonomy regardless of the way in

¹² E.g. <http://www.myfootprint.org> and www.wnf.nl/footprint.

which they are employed. The second group of ascetic technologies, aimed at enhancing the ability to act according to one's second order desires, can be considered a group of behaviour steering technologies. However, not all behaviour steering technologies are ascetic technologies. As I will argue, the question whether or not behaviour steering technologies are ascetic technologies *does* depend on the way in which they are employed.

Within the field of the philosophy of technology, a much debated topic concerns the legitimacy of employing behaviour steering technologies. This debate revolves around the question whether the employment of such technologies (given that they steer human behaviour in the right direction) is legitimate or whether they pose a threat to human freedom or autonomy. Verbeek, and Thaler and Sunstein, for example, argue that behaviour steering technologies do not necessarily cause infringements on human freedom or autonomy. However, legitimizing the use of behaviour steering technologies - based on the argument that they do not pose a threat to human autonomy - does not necessarily imply that these technologies *enhance* human autonomy. In other words, legitimate behaviour steering technologies are not necessarily ascetic technologies. In order to clarify this distinction, I will briefly discuss two positions (as explicated by Verbeek, and Thaler and Sunstein) legitimizing the use of behaviour steering technologies. Furthermore, I will discuss the difference between the use of these technologies and the use of ascetic technologies.

Firstly, Verbeek (2009 & 2011) argues we should not *a priori* reject the use of behaviour steering technologies. According to Verbeek, human beings are always mediated by technology and "it is not the influencing of behaviour by technology that is immoral, but the refusal to deal with this inevitable influence in a responsible manner." (Verbeek 2009, 238). Based on the work by Foucault, Verbeek argues that freedom must not be understood as the total absence of influences from outside, but rather as a capacity to relate to these influences. Thus, we must not beforehand reject behaviour steering technologies (our behaviour is always influenced by technology), but we must think about the ways in which we can relate to technologies and how we must employ these technologies in a responsible manner.

Likewise, Thaler and Sunstein (2009) argue that human choices are always influenced by the environment or the 'choice architecture' in which humans are embedded. According to the authors, human beings often do not make rational, well reasoned choices. They argue the 'choice architecture' should be actively engineered in order to influence human behaviour for the good. In other words, they legitimize their position - which they refer to as 'libertarian paternalism' - by referring to the human inability to act rationally and to the fact that human choices are always influenced by the choice architecture in which they are embedded. By engineering the choice architecture, human beings can be 'nudged' towards the right direction.

Both positions, as outlined by Verbeek, and by Thaler and Sunstein, show that behaviour steering technologies do not necessarily constitute infringements on human freedom or autonomy. Human behaviour is always influenced or mediated by the material context in which human beings are embedded, and these authors contemplate the question how behaviour steering technologies (or nudges) can be employed in a responsible manner. However, as mentioned, the fact that these technologies do not necessarily cause infringements on human autonomy does not imply that they *enhance* autonomy. Although I believe behaviour steering technologies can be used in a responsible manner, it does not imply

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that they enhance the capacity to form second-order desires or the ability to act according to these second-order desires. The difference between behaviour steering technologies, as discussed above, and ascetic technologies can be illustrated with an excerpt of Homer's *Odyssey*.

On the Achaean island, Circe gives directions to Odysseus, helping him to continue his journey. In doing so, she warns him about encountering the Sirens with their enchanting songs. In order to pass these Sirens alive, she advises Odysseus to stop his men's ears with wax, such that they are unable to hear the songs. Furthermore, she argues, if Odysseus wants to hear these songs, he should order his men to bind him to the mast. Being tied to the mast, he can experience the enchanting songs without being able to act upon them. The example, thus, shows two types of primitive technologies (wax and the combination of ropes and the mast) which enable Odysseus and his men to pass the Sirens in a safe manner. Both types of technologies can be considered behaviour steering technologies; the combination of ropes and the mast steers Odysseus behaviour, whereas the wax steers the behaviour of his men. Without these technologies, both Odysseus and his men would be enchanted by the songs causing them to steer the boat towards the Sirens. However, the technologies prevent them from doing so.

Both types of technologies work in a different manner. The ropes and the mast prevent Odysseus from acting upon his first-order desire to sail towards the Sirens. On the other hand, the wax prevents the songs from reaching his men's inner ears; it prevents them from being exposed to an irresistible first-order desire. Whether the use of these technologies can be considered ascetic technologies depends on the point of view. The advice given by Circe enhances Odysseus' ability to evaluate his first-order desires. Circe passes on useful knowledge concerning an irresistible first-order desire triggered by the enchanting songs, and concerning ways in which Odysseus is able to pass the Sirens in a safe manner, such that he is able to take precautionary measures.¹³ Furthermore, the use of the technologies enables him to act according to his second-order desire (the desire to have a desire to pass the Sirens in a safe manner). Being tight to the mast, he is unable to act according to the seducing sounds of the Sirens, but he is able to act according to the evaluation of desires which he has made in advance. Odysseus' men, on the other hand, did not evaluate their desires; their ears are merely stopped with wax, such that the enchanting songs do not reach their inner ears. The wax does not enhance their ability to evaluate their first-order desires (they received no information concerning the Sirens; their ears are simply plugged with wax), neither does it enhance their ability to act according to this evaluation.

Thus, whether or not technologies can be considered ascetic technologies, depends on the way in which they are employed. The technologies enhance Odysseus' autonomy; they are tools which enable him to act according to his first-order desire to pass the Sirens in a safe manner. On the other hand, the technologies do not enhance the autonomy of his men; they simply had their ears plugged such that the seduction did not reach their inner ear. This distinction can, for example, be extended towards the use of a speed limiter. Some individuals feel the urge to drive a car as fast as possible. As soon as they start the engine of their car,

¹³ In this case, Circe (instead of an ascetic technology) can thus be considered a medium providing useful information to Odysseus.

they are enchanted by the engine's song, generating an irresistible urge to speed up. A speed limiter can be considered a behaviour steering technology; it prevents drivers from driving faster than a certain speed. However, whether this technology enhances autonomy depends on the way in which it is employed. Equipping all cars with speed limiters (as a safety measure) would not necessarily lead to an enhancement of the autonomy of drivers. A speed limiter can only be considered an ascetic technology whenever drivers are aware of the irresistible, enchanting song of the engine, and whenever they want to drive in a slow manner. In this case, the speed limiter can be employed in order to enhance the ability to act according to the evaluation of their first-order desires.

A speed limiter can be considered a kind of coercive technology; it forces human beings to drive slower than a certain speed. Verbeek distinguishes two more types of behaviour steering technologies, which he refers to as persuasive technologies and seductive technologies (Verbeek 2009, 239). Whereas persuasive technologies aim to persuade individuals (cognitively) to act in a certain way, seductive technologies make certain actions more attractive than others. The question whether these technologies are ascetic technologies, thus, depends on the source of the coercion, persuasion or seduction. Imposing these forms of behaviour steering on individuals (for example by designers) may be legitimate, but can - in many cases - not be considered an increase in autonomy. Only if the coercion, persuasion or seduction enables individuals to act according to the outcome of the evaluation of their first-order desires, the technologies can be considered ascetic technologies. Thus, in order for these technologies to be ascetic technologies, coercion, persuasion or seduction must not be imposed on individuals, but must be used as tools enabling individuals to act according to their second-order desires.

Both positions, as outlined by Verbeek, and by Thaler and Sunstein, require a public moral debate regarding the good life. If we are always influenced by our material context (the choice architecture or technology), we should actively think about the ways in which we can shape this material context, and shaping this context influences the quality of our lives. Verbeek argues that ethics and technology policy should focus (far more than is currently the case) on public visions of the good life and on the ways in which technology influences the good life (240). This focus enhances our ability to reflect on the question which behaviour steering technologies should be employed and which not.

Although I share this idea, the focus of this essay lies elsewhere. Instead of using *public* visions of the good life as guidelines in order to choose which behaviour steering technologies should be employed on a *public* level, I am concerned with employing ascetic technologies on an *individual* level. As mentioned in the introduction, the problem of overconsumption can be regarded a 'tragedy of the commons'. It is not so much a matter of certain types of consumption practices which cause the problem; rather, it is a matter of degree. It is the totality of consumption practices which generates the tragedy. In addition, the question whether consuming a certain commodity contributes to an individual's quality of life is a matter of personal taste. Some individuals may be interested in the newest mobile phones, while others are interested in bicycles.

The tragedy of the commons can thus not easily be addressed by deciding which behaviour steering technologies should be employed on a public level. Most types of the consumption practices do not cause the problems by themselves (the totality of the

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consumption practices causes the problem) and the question whether a certain good contributes to the good life cannot be answered in an unambiguous manner. Therefore, I argue that it is wise to contemplate the question how ascetic technologies may enhance *individual* autonomy; how they may enhance the ability to evaluate first-order desires and the ability to act according to this evaluation.

Thus, in addressing the tragedy of the commons, I am not concerned with using *general, public* notions of the good life as guidelines in order to decide which behaviour steering technologies should be employed on a *public* level. Rather, I am concerned with *individual* notions of the good life and ascetic technologies that can be used on an *individual* level. However, within this latter approach, a public moral debate can have a different function. Instead of using the outcomes of the debate as guidelines, helping us to choose which behaviour steering technologies should be employed and which not, the moral debate itself can function as a means which enhances the ability to evaluate desires. As argued in the previous chapter, a public moral debate concerning the good life brings to the front alternative conceptions of the good life, and these alternatives widen the scope of an individual's evaluation.

5.6 Ascetic technologies: different types of behaviour steering

As the above shows, an ascetic technology aimed at enhancing the ability to act in accordance with one's second-order desires can be understood as a kind of behaviour steering technology. In chapter 3, I have outlined different sub-strategies aimed at enhancing this ability. The ability to act in accordance with one's second-order desires can be enhanced by either:

- a) curing first-order desires,
- b) controlling first-order desires,
- c) removing the ability to act in accordance with first-order desires, or
- d) motivating / de-motivating acting in accordance with first-order desires.

Ascetic technologies can steer behaviour by supporting either one of these sub-strategies. In the following, I will discuss how different ascetic technologies (or different types of behaviour steering) can be employed in order to support each sub-strategy.

The first sub-strategy, outlined above, consists of curing first-order desires. An example of an ascetic technology supporting this sub-strategy, as discussed in chapter 3, is the use of nicotine patches. These nicotine patches (considered that they work properly) allow unwilling smokers to act according to the evaluation of their first-order desires. The nicotine patches can be seen as a kind of ascetic technology, allowing unwilling smokers to act more autonomously. Another example, related to everyday consumption practices, is the use of medication aimed at treating compulsive buying disorder. A medicine that would be able to cure shopping addiction can be understood as an ascetic technology helping the addicts to act in accordance with their second-order desire.

If we take into account the aforementioned types of medication and if - for the sake of the argument - we imagine them to work perfectly and without any side effects, do these types of medication merely lead to an enhancement of autonomy? The types of medicine support the ability to act in accordance with one's second-order desires, but - at the same time - they alter the first-order desires they cure. Can the use of this kind of medicine be regarded an ascetic

technology able to enhance autonomy, or does it alter an individual in such a way that it diminishes one's autonomy? In the following section, I will discuss the ambiguity of this kind of ascetic technology in a more detailed manner. Here, I will provide some more examples of ascetic technologies supporting the aforementioned sub-strategies.

The second sub-strategy aims to enhance autonomy by controlling desires. Before I will provide two examples of ascetic technologies which could be considered to support this sub-strategy, I would like to pay attention to an interesting research project regarding the relationship between a full bladder and the level of self-control. (Tuk et al. 2011). According to the researchers, a full bladder leads to an increase in self-control and a decrease in impulsivity. Controlling your bladder apparently enhances the ability to control yourself in other areas. Thus, they seem to have found a physical parameter which influences the level of an individual's self-control.

Whereas Mirjam Tuk et al. have discovered a physical cause leading to self-control in other areas, I would like to discuss a few examples of ascetic technologies which could enhance the ability to control first-order desires. The first example concerns an EconoMeter (Verbeek 2009), which can be found in certain cars. This EconoMeter displays the level of fuel consumption while driving a car. Due to different driving styles, the fuel consumption of drivers varies to a large degree. Accelerating slower and moving up gears quicker will result in a lower fuel consumption, which is indicated by the EconoMeter. Thus, the indicator helps to control the driving style. Whenever individuals want to drive more economically, without succeeding in doing so, the EconoMeter may serve as a tool enabling them to control their urge (their first-order desire) to drive in a sportive manner.

Another example of an ascetic technology, helping to control desires, is an intelligent plate (the 'jumbord').¹⁴ This plate must be used as follows. Whenever an individual takes a bite from the plate, the LED's of the plate will light up. Depending on the amount of food taken from the plate, the LED's will remain lit during a certain amount of time. The larger the amount of food taken from the plate, the longer the period the LED's remain lit. A person using this plate is supposed to wait for the next bite until the LED's have switched off again. This procedure must be repeated for each bite. The intelligent plate thus encourages individuals to slow down the pace of eating bites, leaving an interval between them (and the length of this interval depends on the amount of food taken).

The use of this plate is based on the idea that, when individuals reduce the speed of eating, they eat less food. Whenever a mouth watering meal is served, one may be inclined to bolt down the food in an instant manner, satisfying the hunger one might feel. However, the faster an individual eats, the more food is necessary to satisfy this hunger. Whenever the pace of taking bites is slowed down, satisfaction can be realized with eating less. The plate helps individuals to control their pace (their first-order desire to bolt down a meal), by reminding them to take their time for each bite. It encourages them to eat in a slower manner.

Both ascetic technologies, described above, can be seen as tools enhancing the ability to control first-order desires. They can, however, also be seen as a kinds of media, providing information with regard to the current driving style or with regard to the pace of taking bites.

¹⁴ Source: <http://www.jummen.nl>.

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Thus, they can both be seen as media (providing information) and as behaviour steering technologies (helping to control the first-order desire to drive or eat in a fast manner).

While the ascetic technologies above aim to enhance autonomy by either curing or controlling first-order desires, ascetic technologies can also be employed in order to support the third or fourth sub-strategy. Such technologies can be employed in order to make an action stemming from a first-order desire impossible, or to motivate or de-motivate such an action. The fourth sub-strategy can be considered a weaker version of the third one. Ascetic technologies supporting the third strategy make certain actions impossible, while those supporting the fourth strategy merely motivate or de-motivate certain actions. The first group of ascetic technologies can thus be seen as a kind of coercive technologies, while the latter group can be considered a kind of persuasive or seductive technologies. Again, the source of the coercion, persuasion or seduction stems from the individuals who choose to employ the ascetic technologies themselves.

An example of an ascetic technology supporting the third sub-strategy is the aforementioned speed limiter. Individuals unable to adjust their sportive driving style, who choose to install a speed limiter, force themselves not to drive faster than a certain top speed. Another example could be the use of a credit card with a limited credit for individuals suffering from compulsive buying disorder. These individuals could choose such a credit card which makes it impossible to spend more than a certain amount of money.

An example of an ascetic technology supporting the fourth strategy, is the use of an application called *gypact*.¹⁵ The *gypact* website contains the slogan ‘incentivise your workout’ and it is based on the idea that a lot of human beings cannot find the strength to go to the gym as much as they want to. On the website you can make a pact. This pact consists of the minimum number of days per week you want to go to the gym, and the amount of money you are willing to pay whenever you miss a gym day. If you are subscribed, you can download an application to your mobile phone. This application is able to connect to the network of the gym, thereby registering the number of days you are actually there. If the number of days is lower than the number of days in the pact, you must pay the fee you have selected. However, if the number of days is equal to or higher than the number of days in the pact, you can actually earn money. The application thus motivates individuals to fulfil their desire to go to the gym, or it de-motivates the desire to stay at home. In short, *gypact* uses cash incentives to motivate / de-motivate acting according to a certain first-order desire.

In theory, such cash incentives could be extended towards everyday consumption practices. Individuals may, for example, make a pact with regard to fuel consumption or energy consumption. In this way, individuals are motivated to save fuel or energy. Individuals could choose to use a system which links their driving style to a reward or fine (or taxes). Depending on the driving style, drivers could be fined or rewarded to a certain degree. Through the system, individuals persuade or seduce themselves to drive slower. Using these kinds of ascetic technologies thus requires individuals to set a certain limit or boundary. The ascetic technologies are tools forcing, persuading or seducing them not to cross the boundary they have set themselves. In other words, the technologies can be employed in order to motivate them to pass the Sirens in a safe manner.

¹⁵ Source: <http://www.gym-pact.com>.

5.7 Curing first-order desires and autonomy

As mentioned above, the question whether ascetic technologies supporting the first sub-strategy (curing first-order desires) enhances autonomy, cannot easily be answered in an unambiguous manner. In order to reflect on this ambiguity, I will distinguish between types of medicine with a reversible character and those with an irreversible character. The use of the aforementioned nicotine patches is temporary. The nicotine patches are used during a certain period in which smokers attempt to quit smoking. Secondly, the use of nicotine patches is reversible. The desire to smoke may return after the treatment has stopped. Imagine, however, swallowing a hypothetical pill (or, for example, the use of gene therapy or deep brain stimulation), leading to an irreversible cure (or the eradication) of the first-order desire to smoke. Can this cure be considered an enhancement of autonomy (given that it allows unwilling smokers to act according to their evaluation of first-order desires), or does it alter the unwilling smokers in such a way that it diminishes their autonomy?

First of all, the hypothetical pill - like the nicotine patches - enhances the ability to act according to the evaluation of first-order desires. It can be seen as a tool, enabling unwilling smokers to quit smoking. However, the irreversible character of the drug removes the open-ended character of the future first-order desire to smoke. Whereas the use of nicotine patches (with a reversible character) leaves room for a possible return of the first-order desire to smoke, the hypothetical pill (with an irreversible character) cuts off this possibility. Imagine, for example, the invention of healthy cigarettes which taste the same as old-fashioned ones. An individual, who has used the nicotine patches in the past, may remember the pleasures of smoking and may reconsider one's first-order desires. An individual who has swallowed the aforementioned hypothetical pill is somehow deprived of this option; the first-order desire to smoke is irreversibly removed.

Since smoking can also be considered a physiological addiction, I will extend the use of this hypothetical pill to everyday consumption practices. Imagine, for example, individuals who can be considered unwilling consumers with regard to driving a car or with regard to buying the newest mobile phones. These unwilling consumers have evaluated their first-order desires, and based on the negative effects on the environment, they have formed a second-order desire to have a desire to quit driving their car (and go cycling instead) or to quit buying the newest mobile phones. However, no matter how hard they try, they do not succeed in acting in accordance with their second-order desire. The question remains whether swallowing a hypothetical pill, curing the first-order desire to drive a car or the first-order desire to buy the latest gadgets, would enhance the autonomy of these unwilling consumers. Imagine, for example, the invention (again hypothetical) of a car or a mobile phone which would somehow make a positive contribution to the environment. This positive contribution could make the unwilling consumers reconsider their first-order desires. The irreversible character of the pill, however, makes the re-emergence of the desire to drive a car or to buy the latest mobile phone impossible.

Although the examples of hypothetical pills - curing the first-order desires described above - are rather absurd, the thought experiment reveals a problematic aspect of medication aimed at irreversibly curing first-order desires. These pills immediately enhance the ability to act according to one's second-order desires, while - at the same time - they remove the open-

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ended character of the first-order desires they cure. Somehow these ascetic technologies thus diminish our ability to relate to outside influences (which may have a possible effect on our first-order desires); an ability described by Verbeek. Again, Verbeek (2011) argues that we are always influenced or mediated by technology. Referring to Foucault, he argues that freedom must not be understood as the absence of outside influences but as our ability to relate to these influences. Verbeek argues against the humanistic notion of autonomy in which human beings should be protected from outside influences. Instead of guarding the boundary between technology and humanity, he claims that we are technologically mediated through and through, and that we should think about ways in which we can use technology in a responsible manner.

In a sense, I take one step further. I certainly agree on the fact that we should think about the responsible employment of technologies in our technologically mediated lives. But, furthermore, I argue that technology can also be employed in order to *enhance* autonomy. Not only can we relate to outside influences; we can also vary the degree to which we are able to do so, and the use of certain technologies affects this ability. The inhabitants of *Brave New World*, for example, are conditioned (socially and technologically) such that they can be considered less capable of relating to outside influences than human beings in our society.

I believe this is exactly what is at stake when discussing the curing of first-order desires. If these desires are cured in an irreversible way, the degree to which individuals are able to relate to outside influences diminishes. The hypothetical pill mediates individuals in such a way, that it deprives them of the possibility to relate to future influences (like, for example, the invention of healthy cigarettes or environmentally friendly cars) which may have a possible effect on the cured first-order desire. The dominant and irreversible character of the pill eliminates the effectiveness of these future influences. In other words, the pill eliminates the possible modification of an individual's second-order desire regarding a certain consumption practice. Without the use of the pill, future influences may alter the second-order desire (e.g. regarding smoking or driving a car), but the use of the pill cuts off this possibility. Thus, there is no possible way to ensure that the pill will always support the individual's second-order desire, or whether the pill somehow alters the second-order desire in a way which would not have happened without the medication.

In short, although the hypothetical pill could be employed in order to enhance the ability to act according to certain second-order desires, it deprives an individual of the possibility to relate to future influences. There is an immediate enhancement of autonomy, which - at the same time - diminishes one's freedom to relate to possible future influences. Thus, the question whether the hypothetical pill enhances autonomy in the future can only be answered if the treatment has a temporary or reversible character. If the hypothetical pill has a reversible character, individuals could - from time to time - stop taking the pill. This would enable them to re-evaluate their first-order desires. In this way, they are able to relate to possible influences which may alter the formation of second-order desires.

5.8 Ascetic technologies and autonomy

As the examples in this chapter show, ascetic technologies can be employed in order to support the proposed strategies aimed at enhancing consumer autonomy. Ascetic technologies

as media can be employed in order to enhance the ability to evaluate one's first-order desires. Ascetic technologies as behaviour steering technologies can be employed in order to support the ability to act according to this evaluation. Thus, not only should behaviour steering technologies not *a priori* be perceived as infringements on human freedom or autonomy (as, for example, Verbeek argues); these behaviour steering technologies or ascetic technologies can also be employed in order to *enhance* autonomy. Verbeek argues against the humanistic notion of human freedom in which human beings should be protected from outside influences, and argues that freedom must be understood as our ability to relate to outside influences. However, the degree to which human beings are able to relate to outside influences differs. The material context influences this degree and ascetic technologies can be employed in order to enhance this degree; they can be employed in order to enhance autonomy regarding consumption practices.

5. Ascetic technologies

6. Conclusion

In the previous chapters, I have contemplated the question how autonomy regarding consumption practices can be enhanced, and how ascetic technologies can be employed in order to support this enhancement. This chapter discusses the final conclusions which can be drawn from the thesis outlined so far.

One way of addressing the tragedy of the commons (as explicated in the introduction), is by reducing the fulfilment of consumer desires. However, this is not an easy thing to achieve; in our society, the fulfilling of ever new consumer desires seems to be an endless process. In chapter 2, I have explored different causes responsible for generating ever new desires. As opposed to Jonas, who argues that modern technology can be seen as the sole reason for a constant flow of new desires, I have argued that the human condition can be considered restless. Although technology plays a role in the creation of new desires, it should not be perceived as the sole reason. Instead, human beings have a tendency to fulfil one desire after another. This line of thought is supported by many thinkers in both ancient and modern times.

However, although these thinkers share the conviction that human beings are restless beings, this restlessness is not always valued in the same manner. Whereas, in traditional thought, the never-ending fulfilment of desires is considered an impediment on the good life, from a popular modern perspective this never-ending fulfilment generates happiness. Thus, with regard to the fulfilment of desires, two different conceptions of the good life can be distinguished. In the first (traditional) conception *eudaimonia* can be explained as *ataraxia*, or a peace of mind. In the second (Hobbesian) conception, happiness can be explained as the fulfilment of one desire after another.

These diametrically opposed notions of the good life reveal another aspect of the human condition. Not only are human beings restless beings; they are also able to relate to their desires. Human beings may have a tendency to fulfil one desire after another; they also have the ability to reflect on their desires. However, this does not imply that human beings are always able to evaluate their desires in the best possible way. In addition, human beings are not always able to control their desires. As I have outlined in this thesis, human beings must neither be perceived as sovereign beings who are in control of their desires, nor as pathological beings who are enslaved by their desires. Discussions concerning consumption are often based on either one of these dichotomous positions. In constructing a notion of autonomy, I have rejected this autonomy-pathology dichotomy. Instead, I have argued that consumers are endowed with a certain level of autonomy.

Thus, in this thesis, I have outlined a relative notion of autonomy. In order to contemplate the question what it means to be more or less autonomous as consumers, I have used Frankfurt's distinction between first- and second-order desires as a theoretical framework. Although Frankfurt's notion of freedom of the will faces a number of problems (a problem of identification and a problem of infinite regress, which - after closer inspection - can also be explained as a problem of identification), the framework is a helpful starting point in order to understand what it means to be more or less autonomous.

When taking into account Frankfurt's distinction between first- and second-order desires, a certain consumption practice can be considered autonomous (in a minimal sense), if an individual has evaluated one's first-order desires and if this individual acts in accordance with

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this evaluation (i.e. in accordance with one's second-order desire concerning such a consumption practice). The *degree* to which a consumption practice can be considered autonomous thus depends on the degree to which an individual is able to evaluate one's first-order desires and on the ability to act in accordance with this evaluation.

Based on this notion of autonomy, I have proposed different strategies (and sub-strategies) aimed at enhancing autonomy. Autonomy can either be enhanced 1) by enhancing the ability to evaluate first-order desires, or 2) by enhancing the ability to act in accordance with second-order desires. I have divided this latter strategy into four different sub-strategies. Enhancing the ability to act in accordance with second-order desires can be achieved by either a) curing first-order desires, b) controlling first-order desires, c) removing the ability to act in accordance with first-order desires, or d) motivating / de-motivating acting in accordance with first-order desires.

The first proposed strategy aims to enhance autonomy by enhancing the ability to evaluate first-order desires. From Frankfurt's (liberal) perspective, these desires can be considered entirely reliable. Human beings always know what they truly want, independent of the context in which they are embedded. However, as argued, this image of human desires unaffected by society, is not a very accurate one; human desires are indeed shaped by the context in which they are embedded. In other words, what lacks in Frankfurt's account is a critical examination of first-order desires themselves.

As opposed to Frankfurt, Stoic and Epicurean philosophers do not take for granted first-order desires. Hellenistic philosophers adopted a critical attitude with regard to first-order desires and with regard to the ways in which the social context shapes these desires. This Hellenistic, critical attitude thus adds a layer to the framework of autonomy. The degree to which one is able to evaluate one's first-order desires does not merely depend on the ability to make a kind of utilitarian cost-benefit analysis. It also depends on the degree to which one is able to critically examine first-order desires themselves. Adopting this critical Hellenistic attitude thus enhances our understanding of what it means to be more or less autonomous.

However, Hellenistic philosophy is also normative through and through. The Hellenistic notions of the good life and of nature serve as a norm, enabling them to distinguish between a healthy and a sick state. This particular norm is hard to accept for modern consumers. Most of us would not accept the Stoic or Epicurean notions of nature and most of us are not solely striving for a peace of mind. Since the acceptance of such a particular norm is problematic, the evaluation of first-order desires may not only require a critical attitude towards these desires and towards the ways in which they are formed. It may also require a critical attitude with regard to different conceptions of the good life.

Within such a (neo-Hellenistic) critical approach, first-order desires are critically examined, without *a priori* taking for granted a particular notion of the good life. The approach does not adopt the Hellenistic norm of the good life in which *eudaimonia* is perceived as *ataraxia*. Rather, the Hellenistic (or traditional) notion of the good life may serve as an alternative for the popular, modern (Hobbesian) conception of happiness, based on fulfilling as much desires as possible.

A neo-Hellenistic critical approach towards first-order desires thus enhances autonomy by enhancing the ability to evaluate these desires. As discussed in chapter 4, such an approach may enhance the ability to evaluate first-order desires in different ways. Firstly, it may

enhance this ability by creating awareness with regard to the ways in which the *social context* (commonly held beliefs, narratives) shapes first-order desires. Secondly, it can be achieved by creating awareness with regard to unconscious beliefs, motivations and habits on which first-order desires are based. Thirdly, it can be achieved by offering alternative narratives and conceptions of the good life, without *a priori* taking for granted a particular notion as a norm. However, Hellenistic philosophy also teaches us that a critical examination of first-order desires is not an easy thing to do. We are all shaped by the social context and many (unconscious) commonly held beliefs are part and parcel of who we are.

As explicated in chapter 5, the ability to evaluate first-order desires can also be enhanced by raising awareness regarding the ways in which the *material context* influences these desires. Borgmann's device paradigm reveals a feature of modern society in which many devices do their work in the background, inviting uncritical consumption. In addition, Briggles and Mitcham argue that our society can be considered a networked society in which there exists an experiential gap between the user on one node of the network, and the consequences of user actions on another node. Creating awareness regarding the ways in which devices perform their duties in the background and raising awareness with regard to the consequences on a particular node in the network, enhances the ability to evaluate first-order desires. It allows consumers to take into account the so-called commodification of devices and the experiential gap, when evaluating their first-order desires.

The material context itself (or technologies which I have referred to as ascetic technologies) can also be employed in order to enhance autonomy. In other words, ascetic technologies can be employed in order to support the strategies proposed in this thesis. Firstly, ascetic technologies can be employed in order to enhance the ability to evaluate first-order desires. These technologies can be considered *media*, providing information with regard to consumption practices. This information may concern energy consumption, or the direct consequences of consumption practices. As opposed to devices described by Borgmann, such devices (or ascetic technologies) can bring to the front how other devices do their work in the background. Furthermore, ascetic technologies as media can be employed in order to provide information regarding alternatives (e.g. alternative forms of hedonism, alternative narratives and alternative conceptions of the good life).

Secondly, ascetic technologies can be employed in order to enhance the ability to act according to the evaluation of first-order desires. These types of technologies can be considered *behaviour steering technologies* or tools, steering the behaviour of unwilling consumers. However, not all behaviour steering technologies are ascetic technologies. The question whether or not behaviour steering technologies are ascetic technologies depends on the way in which they are employed. Only those behaviour steering technologies aimed at enhancing the ability to act according to the evaluation of first-order desires, can be considered ascetic technologies.

By taking into account the aforementioned sub-strategies, ascetic technologies - as behaviour steering technologies - can be employed in order to enhance the ability to act according to the evaluation of first-order desires, by either a) curing first-order desires, b) controlling first-order desires, c) removing the ability to act in accordance with first-order desires, or d) motivating / de-motivating acting in accordance with first-order desires. Nonetheless, as argued, the first sub-strategy (curing first-order desires) is not entirely

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unproblematic, particularly when it is employed in an irreversible way. Although ascetic technologies aimed at irreversibly curing first-order desires provide an immediate enhancement of autonomy, they diminish the ability to relate to future influences.

In short, autonomy regarding consumption practices can be enhanced by either enhancing the ability to evaluate first-order desires, or by enhancing the ability to act according to this evaluation. An evaluation of first-order desires should not be understood as a utilitarian cost-benefit analysis in which these desires are taken for granted. Rather, such an evaluation requires a critical examination of first-order desires themselves and of the ways in which both the social context and the material context shape human desires. Both strategies can be understood as Foucauldian technologies of the self, allowing individuals to act more autonomously as consumers. These technologies of the self can be taught by offering an education, or by providing relevant information. Furthermore, the strategies can be supported by technologies which I have referred to as ascetic technologies.

Offering an education concerning the aforementioned strategies and the use of ascetic technologies should not be perceived as threats to human autonomy. The popular liberal image of the sovereign consumer is inadequate. Consumers are endowed with a certain level of autonomy and employing such an education or ascetic technologies enhances autonomy regarding consumption practices; employing the proposed strategies promotes critical consumption.

Acknowledgements

The period in which I have studied philosophy of technology has been an interesting period, but also quite a tumultuous one. A combination of studying, raising young children and working can be quite demanding. Nonetheless, I feel grateful for having had the opportunity to study philosophy of technology. In particular, I would like to thank the following persons, which had a share in the realization of this thesis.

First of all, I would like to thank my two supervisors Marianne Boenink and Mark Coeckelbergh. Many ideas took shape during the interesting discussions we had. Marianne always replied my writings with sharp comments and helped to organize the thesis. In addition, Mark introduced me to Frankfurt which provided an interesting starting point in exploring the question what being autonomous as consumers entails. I also want to thank Tsjalling Swierstra who was initially my supervisor until he was offered a job at the University of Maastricht. During my literature study, he introduced me to Hellenistic philosophy which had an important impact on this thesis. I would like to thank Rik Altena, for sharing with me various projects he has been working on as an energy consultant. These projects influenced the ideas for the examples of ascetic technologies used in this thesis.

A word of gratitude goes out to my parents and to Eghard and Hanneke, for taking care of the children at times, such that I was able to study. Finally, I would like to thank my own family. During busy times, Kwint and Loek provide a wonderful distraction, while reminding me of the things that really matter. Liset supported me tremendously while she had to work hard herself. Thank you so much for your patience and support. I really look forward to spending a lot of free time with the four of us, enjoying an activity that we are all very fond of: just being idle.

Acknowledgements

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