

Tyranny of Want³⁰⁰

For us to be able to live, certain physical needs have to be met. Air and water come to mind. This category is really not fungible. What this means is that any meaningful change in the quality of air or water, or any pollution of them, would pose a serious detriment to us. Then there is the need for necessities such as food, clothing, and housing. There is some level of fungibility there, in that there are almost an infinite number of options in terms of the nature, the quality, the quantity/amount, etc., that would be sufficient to meet the human need. Then there are needs such as transportation, source of livelihood, etc. There are also various other types of non-material needs, including emotional, familial, psychological, moral, and social. Those are not the focus of our discussion here. (In fact, those crucial needs often are sidelined in creating the more “physical” cravings of consumption, possession, and acquisition.)

Societies have historically met their members’ needs in different ways. When the sole purpose of so many institutional entities is to focus on profit, the concept of genuine need very quickly morphs into needless craving that is detached from authentic need. Success in meeting that objective also creates unquenchable acquisitiveness within a society’s members, and the drive to imitate what others have, and the cycle goes on. With this conditioning, the concept of contentment, which every religion promotes, is ejected from our psyche.

As alluded to by James Baldwin, an American writer and orator, within such a structure-based system, there may still be an implicit understanding to fulfill human spiritual needs through the material route, thus bringing us “much closer to being metaphysical because nobody has ever expected from *things* the miracles that we expect.”³⁰¹ As an example, note the category labeled *Inner Beauty* included within the cosmetics section on the website of a big-box retailer (image in Figure 4). Thus, the very concept of “inner beauty” is now a cosmetic notion, because it can sell whatever makeup a corporation wants to sell. Psychologically, this obsession with image “creates an image of the self ... that is utterly lacking in natural generosity.”³⁰²

CHAPTER 4: SOCIETAL CONSTRUCTS EXACERBATING TYRANNIES OF HUMAN PSYCHE

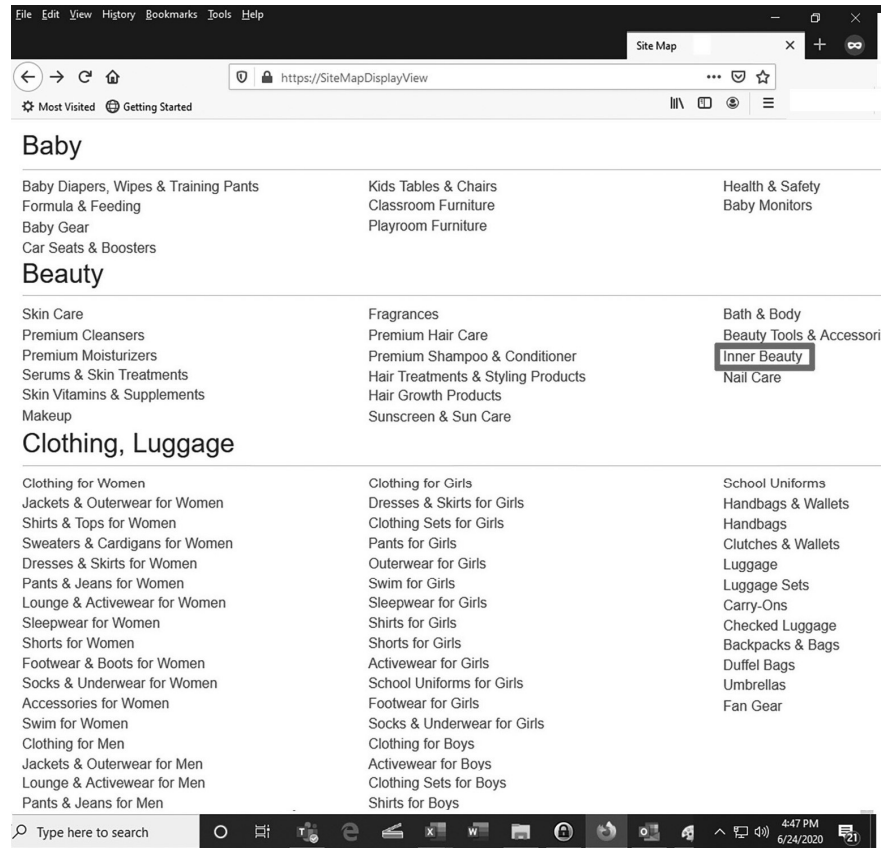


Figure 4

Another example of a “society where ‘respect’ for personal status has become a leading value,”³⁰³ is the positive light given by the media to the egregious excesses of billionaires and celebrities in showing their success. But the same media give negligible space to the countless millions who are homeless or hungry. Clearly, keeping them faceless keeps their plight meritless.

We would be told that such is the self-correcting mechanism of the “free market.” Yet the patent contradictions of these mechanisms stay far away from the public consciousness. Why, for example, is it that in the United States—a society where the military is considered sacrosanct by so many—some 15–20 percent of active-duty military families are food insecure?³⁰⁴ And how do we justify the millions of children who chronically face hunger and food insecurity in the

richest society ever in human history? Is it consistent with Jesus's message in a country with the largest Christian population in the world? Indeed, the system has successfully obfuscated that thought and deliberation at both the collective and the individual level. The side effects of this need-want inversion are highly informative and instructive. And yet, as eminent British psychologist Adam Phillips says, "agreeing to talk about winners and losers is part and parcel of the phobic avoidance, the contemporary terror, of kindness."³⁰⁵ He points out that kindness—"not sexuality, not violence, not money—has become our forbidden pleasure."³⁰⁶

PUBLIC AS INFORMED DECISION-MAKER: QUESTIONS FOR A DEMOCRACY

- When did our media and government actually begin actively informing the public about climate change and its impact? Did Exxon conduct a study decades ago whose conclusions showed the potential implications of climate change?³⁰⁷ Did Exxon immediately inform the public about that study? Was the public ever informed about that study? Will the public ever know the truth about that study?
- Why is it that a significant portion of the US municipal water supply does not meet national safety standards?³⁰⁸ Was it equally polluted fifty years ago? Was bottled water all the rage fifty years ago? Does the average citizen realize that two-thirds of bottled water is filtered tap water?³⁰⁹ How is it that large beverage companies can purchase municipal water at low prices and then sell at high profits? In 2018, it was estimated that \$31 billion were spent³¹⁰ on bottled water in the United States. Wouldn't the billions be better spent on fixing the municipal water system?

- Why are commercials aimed toward children created using child psychology? Are psychologists involved in the preparation of such commercials? Would a healthy and spiritually purposeful society target young and impressionable children to sell goods, especially with the help of psychological manipulation techniques such as neuromarketing?³¹¹

Insert 4:1

What we are witnessing is that meeting the needs of our economic systems can become hazardous to us in an individual as well as a collective sense. The profit need necessitates that more and more wants are created so that the demand and supply capacities keep nudging each other up and up “forever.” Most human societies in the past would have considered it to be a rather odd outlook on life given the common spiritual theme in most religions that “the matters of Torah do not endure except in one who considers himself as one who does not exist.”³¹²

Because human nature avoids the dissonance that any contradiction creates, the hazard—even when clearly visible—would have to be overlooked. And yet the contradiction is in our face. To paraphrase James Baldwin, the failure to look reality in the face diminishes the nation as it diminishes the individual. Our current systems of living meet the wants of a small minority to the extreme, and yet they ruthlessly ignore the genuine needs for a meaningful survival of a very large percentage of its population—the very populations that keep the systems breathing.

Not just a vivacious but a simply functional society should be able to notice the moral and existential dilemmas such problems present. Societies that ignore the reality of injustice may one day have to pay even a bigger price than their evolutionary decay. In his poem titled “Harlem,” Langston Hughes went on to say that a “dream deferred” festers and then explodes.

Let’s close this section with an excerpt from Lord Byron’s poem titled the “Age of Bronze”: