

## Consumerism, Aristotle and *Fantastic Mr. Fox*

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Who am I? ... Why a fox? Why not a horse, or a beetle, or a bald eagle?  
... Who am I? And how can a fox ever be happy without (forgive the  
expression) a chicken in its teeth? (Mr. Fox in Wes Anderson's  
*Fantastic Mr. Fox*, 2009)

Mr. Fox is a wild animal, but he lives in a modern, consumerist society. More precisely, Mr. Fox is *Vulpes vulpes*—a common red fox—but he lives with his family in a good tree in a nice area; he wears designer slacks, a neatly pressed white collared shirt, and a tie; he talks about rising housing costs and falling interest rates; he worries about job security and the quality of the things he buys. In short, Mr. Fox is both a wild animal and a consumer.

Wes Anderson's *Fantastic Mr. Fox* is (at least partly) about Mr. Fox's attempt to flourish in this dual role.<sup>1</sup> As such, this film raises some interesting and difficult questions about what it means to be a member of a certain kind, what is required to flourish as a member of that kind, and how consumerism either promotes or inhibits such flourishing.

In this article I will use *Fantastic Mr. Fox* as an entry point into an examination of the relationship between consumerism and human flourishing. Specifically, I will offer a novel approach to the film—one that emphasizes the conflict between consumerism and Mr. Fox's ability flourish—as a way of engaging with the worry, which many philosophers have expressed, that consumerism threatens the identities of individual consumers.

After describing the nature of consumerism, I will view certain of Mr. Fox's worries—worries brought on by his consumerist lifestyle—through the lens of Aristotle's account of flourishing. I will then use this Aristotelian approach to argue that consumerism threatens one's ability to flourish *as a human being* because it tends to discourage one from engaging in distinctly human activities. I will then conclude by looking to Mr. Fox for a response to this threat.

### **The Nature of Consumerism**

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<sup>1</sup> Anderson's film is based on Roald Dahl's book, *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. Insofar as the book and film are different, the film better and more clearly expresses the themes that I am interested in here.

Consumerism is a complex system of activities, and it is therefore difficult to characterize. One might begin by saying that consumerism is a form of social and economic activity that is built around the purchase and use of goods and services. But this definition, by itself, is incomplete to the point of being misleading. Alternatively, one might try to describe the nature of consumerism by giving paradigm examples of consumerist societies—the United States in the last 50 years, for instance. Such examples are helpful, but again, insufficient for fully capturing what consumerism is. Indeed, perhaps it is not possible to *fully* capture what consumerism is. I, at any rate, will not attempt to do so. What I will do is mention three distinctive characteristics or marks of consumerism as a way of supplementing an intuitive understanding of the concept.

First, consumerism is marked by the purchase and use of goods and services *beyond* what is required to meet basic needs (see Veblen, 2003, 50; Bell, 1978, 38). People need food, clothing, shelter, etc., in order to survive, but part of what is distinctive about consumerism is that individual consumers (i.e., those engaging in consumerism) continue to buy and consume food, clothing, shelter, etc., even after their basic needs are met.<sup>2</sup>

Second, consumerism encourages *repetitive* consumption. Here the idea is that, because the goal of consumption in the present sense is not merely to have one's basic needs met, the desire to consume cannot be satisfied just by having one's needs met. If, for example, I desire to eat in order to meet my basic needs, then that desire will be satisfied once my basic needs are met—i.e., once I am full. But if I desire to eat for some other reason, or just to eat, then satisfying my basic needs may not satisfy my desire to eat. Indeed, in such cases, I might eat repeatedly without fully satisfying the underlying reason or desire that drives my consumption.<sup>3</sup>

Third, in consumerist societies, material goods are not the only objects of consumption. Services, advertising, media, ideas, time, and attention are also

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<sup>2</sup> This is at least in part because, in consumer societies, goods are not treated just as means to purely practical ends (e.g., survival, safety, etc.). Here I don't mean to suggest that consumer goods always (or ever) lack instrumental value. For many authors have rightly pointed out that consumption is often a means to the end of promoting one's social status (see Baudrillard, 1968; Bell, 1978). The main point that I am making here is that, in consumerist societies, goods are not seen by consumers as mere means to purely practical ends such as need satisfaction or increased safety.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Baudrillard (1968) writes, 'If consumption were indeed what it is naively assumed to be, namely a process of absorption or devouring, a saturation point would inevitably be reached. If consumption were indeed tied to the realm of needs, some sort of progress toward satisfaction would presumably occur. We know very well, however, that nothing of the kind happens: people simply want to consume more and more ... consumption must henceforward either keep surpassing itself or keep repeating itself merely in order remain what it is—namely, a reason for living' (223).

consumed (see Baudrillard, 1968, 218-219; McCracken, 1988). A consumer eats, drinks, and wears material goods, but she may also read magazines, follows fashion trends, and look out for good deals on furniture. All of these activities constitute engagement in consumerism.

The three characteristics of consumerism described above are not necessary and sufficient conditions for satisfying the concept, ‘consumerism’; that is, they do not, and are not meant to, exhaust the nature of consumerism. However, they are helpful supplements to an intuitive understanding of the concept. And this is the basic understanding of consumerism that I will rely on in what follows.

### **The Dangers of Consumerism**

Many authors have suggested (or at least worried) that consumerism is harmful, dangerous, immoral, or otherwise problematic. One specific worry about consumerism that authors have focused on can be rather vaguely stated as the worry that consumerism threatens the identities of those who engage in it. Hannah Arendt (1958), for example, claims that certain aspects of consumerism ‘require ... the actual loss of all awareness of individuality and identity,’ and that consumerism creates circumstances in which ‘it is possible to lose one’s identity’ (213, 214). Marx (1964) similarly claims that a certain form of labor common to consumerist societies ‘alienates man from himself’ such that ‘he is reduced to an animal’ (127, 125). Again, the idea seems to be that consumerism threatens to diminish or destroy the identities of those who engage in it. I find this worry interesting, and even compelling, but it needs further clarification.<sup>4</sup> So in what follows I will (with the help of Mr. Fox) articulate one way in which consumerism might threaten the identities of those who engage in it.

As a beast fable—that is, as a story where animals act and dress like humans, and plausibly serve as an allegory or lesson about human nature—*Fantastic Mr. Fox* is at once a story about foxes, badgers, rats, opossums, and rabbits, and also a story about humans. By drawing attention to how human traits are exemplified, allocated, and appropriated among non-human animals, this film offers a humorous yet honest (and humorous because honest) look at how human traits, customs, and practices might occur naturally—that is, in the wild.

And in *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, Mr. Fox often reflects on something like the worry mentioned above. For instance, in a moment of existential crisis brought on by his consumerist lifestyle, Mr. Fox asks, ‘Who am I? ... Why a fox? Why not a horse, or a beetle, or a bald eagle? ... Who am I? And how can a fox ever be happy without ... a chicken in its teeth?’ In this scene, Mr. Fox is reflecting

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<sup>4</sup> Each of the authors quoted here offers his or her own explanation for how consumerism threatens the identities of those who engage in it. In what follows, I do not mean to be giving an interpretation of how these authors view the worry. Rather, I quote these authors to show that the basic worry that I am concerned with in this paper is common.

on his identity as a certain kind of animal (i.e., a fox). This reflection leads Mr. Fox to wonder how a fox like himself could be happy without ‘a chicken in its teeth’. Here Mr. Fox is referencing what he later identifies as activities that are characteristic of foxes. He says, ‘Foxes traditionally like to court danger, hunt prey, and outsmart predators.’<sup>5</sup> So, when Mr. Fox asks how a fox could be happy without a chicken in its teeth, he is really wondering whether a fox can be happy (or flourish) without engaging in foxlike activities.

Here Mr. Fox is drawing a connection between his identity as a fox, his ability to *act* like a fox, and his ability to *flourish* as a fox. More precisely, it seems that Mr. Fox is suggesting that his identity as a fox is somehow tied to his ability to flourish as a fox by acting like a fox.<sup>6</sup> It is therefore natural for Mr. Fox to think that anything that discourages or prevents him from engaging in foxlike activities also threatens his identity as a fox. And here it seems that Mr. Fox is particularly worried that consumerism threatens his identity in this way. For all of Mr. Fox’s reflections about his identity are prompted by a shift from his living like a (wild) fox to his living like a (tamed) consumer.<sup>7</sup> Mr. Fox may not fully recognize that consumerism is the threat. And it is not until later that arch-capitalist factory farm owners Boggis, Bunce, and Bean become the physical (and symbolic) manifestations of the threat of capitalism on Mr. Fox’s livelihood. But already at this point it is clear that his consumerist lifestyle, which includes shopping for trees, discussing mortgage rates, holding down a steady job, clipping coupons, etc., is keeping him from engaging in foxlike activities and thus threatening his identity as a fox. Thus, it appears that Mr. Fox’s worry derives from the fact that consumerism threatens his identity by discouraging or preventing him from engaging in activities that are characteristic of foxes.

There are a few points about the above account of Mr. Fox’s reflections that are worth special attention. First, the operative notion of ‘identity’ here is grounded in a relation to one’s species or kind. Mr. Fox is not worried about his identity *qua* individual so much as he is worried about his identity *qua* fox.<sup>8</sup> Second, on the present view, one’s identity is realized through engagement in activities that are characteristic of one’s species or kind. At least part of what

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<sup>5</sup> Mr. Fox then adds, ‘That’s what I’m good at.’ Hence, Mr. Fox is not just recognizing that foxes act certain ways; he is also internalizing this fact—he is recognizing that he, as a fox, is meant to act in certain ways.

<sup>6</sup> This connection shows up throughout *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. For instance, when Mr. Fox is asked why he engages in dangerous activities, he simply responds, ‘Because I’m a wild animal.’ He then defends this simplistic answer to his wife by saying, ‘I’m trying to tell you the truth about myself.’ Again, Mr. Fox is implying that there is a tight connection between the way he acts and his identity as a certain kind of wild animal (i.e., a fox).

<sup>7</sup> In section 4 I will describe in the detail the *specific* ways that consumerism threatens Mr. Fox’s identity.

<sup>8</sup> That’s not to say that Mr. Fox’s individuality isn’t important for other themes in the film (see Orgeron, 2011).

makes Mr. Fox a fox, it seems, is his ability to act like a fox. Third, Mr. Fox's conception of identity is intimately connected to flourishing. Mr. Fox thinks that his ability to flourish depends on his ability to realize his identity by acting like a fox. Finally, Mr. Fox worries that consumerism is a force that prevents or discourages him from acting like a fox. Thus, Mr. Fox worries that consumerism threatens his identity.

This account of Mr. Fox's reflections is reminiscent of Aristotle's views about identity and flourishing. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle introduces and defends the kind-relative notion of identity mentioned above. He also claims that how one flourishes depends on what kind of thing one is, and that flourishing is tied to one's ability to engage in actions that are characteristic of one's kind. Aristotle says:

To call happiness the highest good is perhaps a little trite, and a clearer account of what it is, is still required. Perhaps this is best done by first ascertaining the proper function of man. For just as the goodness and performance of a flute player, a sculptor, or any kind of expert, and generally of anyone who fulfills some functions or performs some action, are thought to reside in his proper function, so the goodness and performance of man would seem to reside in whatever is his proper function (*NE*, I.7, 1097a22-33).

Here and elsewhere Aristotle suggests that each kind of thing has its own characteristic function or *ergon* (this is usually translated as 'function', but it could also be translated as 'task', 'work', or even 'characteristic activity'). Indeed, for Aristotle, part of what it means to be a member of a particular kind—i.e., to have a certain kind-relative identity—is to have a particular *ergon*.<sup>9</sup> The *ergon* of an eye, for example, is to see (*De anima*, 412b20). This, of course, is different from the *ergon* of an ear, plant, fox, or human being. For eyes, ears, plants, foxes, and human beings each have their own distinctive *ergon* that is essential to their kind.

And, according to Aristotle, a given thing's *ergon* is inextricably tied to the means by which it flourishes. In particular, Aristotle claims that a thing flourishes by properly engaging in those activities that are appropriate to it given its kind-specific *ergon*. For example, because the *ergon* of a flute player is different from the *ergon* of a sculptor, the flourishing of a flute player *qua* flute player will be different from the flourishing of a sculptor *qua* sculptor. Specifically, a flute

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<sup>9</sup> In *Metaphysics*, when talking about living things, Aristotle says, 'No part of such a body can be properly defined without reference to its function' (Z10, 1035b16-17). Thomas Nagel (1980) captures the general idea as follows: 'The *ergon* of a thing, in general, is what it does that makes it what it is' (8; see also Rorty, 1980, 379).

player *qua* flute player flourishes by playing the flute and playing it well, while a sculptor *qua* sculptor flourishes by sculpting well (1098a12-13). So Aristotle believes that, for a thing to flourish, it must realize its kind-specific *ergon* by engaging in the activities that are characteristic of its kind. And what's more, Aristotle thinks that a thing must engage in such activities well in order to flourish (*EE*, VIII.3). It is not enough for a flute player to just play the flute; in order to flourish, she must play the flute well. Thus, we might say that, for Aristotle, one's flourishing requires that one properly engage in the activities that are characteristic of one's kind.

What this must mean is that anything that discourages or prevents a thing from properly engaging in the activities that are characteristic of its kind will also threaten its ability to flourish as a member of that kind, and indeed, will threaten its very identity as a member of that kind.<sup>10</sup> So if consumerism, for instance, discourages or prevents humans from properly engaging in humanlike activities (whatever those are), then on the present picture, consumerism threatens the identities of humans, and thus, their ability to flourish as humans. This is one way to express the general worry that consumerism threatens the identities of those who engage in it. Thus, in keeping with the framework provided by Aristotle and Mr. Fox, I will henceforth adopt the following working hypothesis about the danger of consumerism: consumerism threatens one's ability to flourish *as a human being* because it tends to discourage one from properly engaging in distinctly human activities.

### **The Characteristic Function of Humans**

In light of the above hypothesis, there are two questions that need to be answered. First, what are the characteristic activities of human beings? And second, how does consumerism discourage humans from properly engaging in those activities? In this section I will try to sketch an answer to the first question, and in the next section I will offer some answers to the second question.

In order to determine what activities are characteristic of human beings, it will be helpful to first get a sense of the sorts of activities that we are looking for. Here again, *Fantastic Mr. Fox* offers a distinctively Aristotelian approach to our answer. Concerning foxes, Mr. Fox cites courting danger, hunting prey and

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, Aristotle suggests that a thing would cease to exist as the kind of thing that it is if it could no longer engage in the activities that are characteristic of its kind. For instance, in *De anima*, Aristotle says, 'when seeing is removed the eye is no longer an eye' (412b20). Also, in *Metaphysics*, Aristotle says, 'For it is not a hand in any and every state that is a part of a human being, but only when it is able to carry out its function' (Z10, 1036b30-32; cf., 1035b16-25).

outsmarting predators as characteristic activities of his kind.<sup>11</sup> And, later in the film, Mr. Fox identifies some of the characteristic activities of his non-fox friends. Mr. Fox begins by saying:

When I look down this table ... I see a room full of wild animals; wild animals with true natures and pure talents; wild animals with scientific-sounding Latin names that mean something about our DNA; wild animals with his own strengths and weaknesses due to his or her species.

Mr. Fox then hatches a scheme that is built around the various species-specific abilities of his friends. This scheme makes use of the fact that *Talpa europea* (a mole) can see in the dark, *Oryctolagus cuniculus* (a rabbit) is fast, *Castor fiber* (a beaver) can chew through wood, and so on. Mr. Fox organizes his plan around these abilities because he believes that his cohort is strongest when the distinctive abilities of each species are put into action.

At least two points about Mr. Fox's conception of species-specific activities can be gleaned from these scenes. First, Mr. Fox thinks that the characteristic activities of a given species will be rooted in abilities that make that species different from other species. For example, moles can see in the dark, but rabbits and beavers can't. And beavers, not moles or rabbits, can chew through wood. This might not be the best way to distinguish one species from another, and Mr. Fox's particular examples of species-specific activities might not be spot-on, but the general point should be clear: the characteristic activities of a species will tend to be rooted in abilities that distinguish it from other species. Second, Mr. Fox treats the abilities that give rise to these species-specific activities as strengths. For Mr. Fox, the vision of a mole, the speed of a rabbit, and his own ability to outsmart predators are assets. Thus, while Mr. Fox recognizes that each species also has its own weaknesses, he ultimately emphasizes the tie between a species' nature and its strengths.

Here again Mr. Fox has struck an Aristotelian chord. For, like Mr. Fox, Aristotle believes that one way (and perhaps the best way) to identify the characteristic activities of a species is to identify abilities that make it different from other species. Aristotle uses this method when searching for the characteristic activities of humans. He says, 'What can this [activity] possibly be? Simply living? [Man] shares that even with plants, but we are now looking for something peculiar to man' (*NE*, I.7, 1097b35-1098a1). According to

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<sup>11</sup> These activities are too broadly construed to count as characteristic of *just* foxes, but we can set such worries aside. For here it is not my goal (nor is it Anderson's goal) to *correctly* identify the characteristic activities of foxes or other animals. The importance of the activities listed by Mr. Fox is largely symbolic. And, for my purposes, they serve to highlight certain features that are useful for identifying species' characteristic activities.

Aristotle, simply living cannot be the characteristic activity of humans because there are other things that live. And, for the same reason, Aristotle also rules out ‘nutrition and growth’ and ‘sense perception’ as characteristic activities of humans (1098a1-2). So, for Aristotle, identifying those activities that are distinctive of humans will be a good way to find out what their characteristic activities are.

Aristotle also thinks that the abilities that give rise to a species’ characteristic activities constitute strengths of that species. For, on Aristotle’s view, one’s proper engagement in activities that are characteristic of one’s species is what allows one to flourish. Thus, so long as the abilities that allow a species to flourish are counted among its strengths, it’s clear that the abilities that give rise to the characteristic activities of humans are strengths of humankind.

So then what exactly are the characteristic activities of human beings? According to Aristotle, the characteristic activities of human beings are rational activities.<sup>12</sup> Aristotle adopts this view partly because he believes that humans are unique in their ability to engage in rational activities such as deliberation, goal-directed reasoning, reasoning about what constitutes the good life, and reflection on the nature of reality. Their ability to engage in these rational activities is what distinguishes humans from other animals, and it is what allows humans to flourish *as humans*. Thus, for Aristotle, reasoning is the characteristic activity of human beings.

There is some debate among Aristotle scholars over which specific rational activities Aristotle thinks are the most important.<sup>13</sup> I will not adjudicate on this particular textual disagreement here. However, I do want to put a finer point on the kind of reasoning that will take center stage in the discussion that follows. Most (if not all) willful activities require reasoning in some sense, but here I want to focus on what I will call ‘contemplative reasoning’. Contemplative reasoning is an abstract, conscious activity with certain distinctive aims, and it may take the form of either (or both) theoretical or practical reasoning. Examples include reasoning about the nature of reality, deliberation about what (in general) is good

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<sup>12</sup> Aristotle says, ‘The proper function of man, then, consists in an activity of the soul in conformity with a rational principle or, at least, not without it’ (*NE*, I.7, 1098a7; see also *Met.*, A, 980b25-28).

<sup>13</sup> Specifically, some Aristotle scholars think that theoretical reasoning (*theoria*) is what Aristotle thought was the highest activity for humans (see Nagel, 1908; Ackrill, 1980), and other Aristotle scholars give that place to practical reasoning (*phronesis*)—i.e., that which guides deliberation in choosing the best (or most virtuous) course of action (see Foot, 2001; Quinn, 1993). Still other commentators believe that Aristotle held these two forms of reasoning to be of roughly equal importance (see MacIntyre, 1999).



for oneself, reflection on how one's life should go, thought about how to achieve happiness, and consideration of what is the highest good.<sup>14</sup>

Such reasoning is typically more abstract and general than other forms of thinking and reasoning. This is not to say that contemplative reasoning never involves thought about particular events, actions, or other details; rather, it's just to say that contemplative reasoning (typically) does not just concern such particularities. For example, if I reason to the conclusion that I ought to be more generous, this might motivate me to be more generous on some particular occasion. But my contemplative reasoning is not just about that particular occasion; it's about becoming generous, in general (see Burnyeat, 1980, 82). Thus, there is an important sense in which contemplative reasoning (typically) transcends reasoning about what to wear or eat on a particular occasion, or what to watch, listen to, who to see, etc., at any given time.

Contemplative reasoning also tends to have certain, distinctive aims. According to Aristotle, the primary aim of contemplation is to discover truths about the world and one's place in it, as well as truths about how to flourish as a human being. Unlike other forms of thought and reasoning, contemplative reasoning is not just concerned with how to meet one's basic needs, nor is it just aimed at bringing about pleasurable states and avoiding painful states. Rather, contemplative reasoning is concerned with 'higher' things like abstract knowledge, wisdom, virtue, and human flourishing. Hence, contemplation might be (and often is) called a particularly 'lofty' or 'deep' form of mental activity (see Nagel, 1980, 12; Foot, 2001, 29-30).

Contemplative reasoning therefore requires conscious attention. For it requires entertaining complex thoughts about what the world is like, what one values, what one should value, and so on. These thoughts are sophisticated, challenging, and thus, difficult to handle with dexterity. Hence, proper contemplative reasoning arguably requires that one attend to one's thoughts, perceptions, feelings, emotions, and memories concerning (past and present) circumstances, and also that one bring these various elements of one's mental life into contact with each other so that one can reason with and about them. And, in general, these demands cannot be met without careful, conscious attention.

Finally, I want to stress that contemplative reasoning need not be done alone—i.e., in isolation from other people. There might be a temptation to think

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<sup>14</sup> I mention these particular kinds of reasoning because Aristotle explicitly talks about each of them: theoretical contemplation (*NE*, X.7-9), what is good for oneself (1140a26), reflection about one's life (*VI.7*, 1141b13), thought about achieving happiness (*Eud. Rhet.*, 1366b20), and consideration of the highest good (*NE*, VI.12, 1144a31-33). I think that 'contemplative reasoning' is an apt name for these forms of reasoning, but by using this name, I do not mean to imply that there is a distinct kind of mental process called 'contemplative reasoning' that is easily separable from other mental processes. Rather, I use the term just because it connotes certain features of some human reasoning that are important to the current discussion.

of contemplative reasoning as the sort of activity whereby one sits alone in one's armchair and simply thinks. However, while such activity might count as an instance of contemplative reasoning, it is important to recognize that contemplative reasoning can (of often does) also take place amid conversation, discussion, or debate with other people.

Now, I take it for granted that contemplative reasoning is a valuable activity for humans to engage in. Indeed, many believe that contemplation has special value.<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, for instance, believes that proper engagement in contemplation is vital for human flourishing (*eudaimonia*). According to Aristotle, concern with day-to-day activities may be a precondition for flourishing, but such activities only play a supportive role in that they allow humans to contemplate.<sup>16</sup> For Aristotle, 'complete happiness' for humans consists in engagement in the activity that 'rules and guides us and which gives us our notions of what is noble and divine' (*NE*, X.7, 1177a12-15). Aristotle calls this activity 'contemplation' (1177a18). Hence, for Aristotle, it's not proper engagement in just any form of reasoning that is required for human flourishing; rather, it's proper engagement in certain forms of reasoning—what I have called contemplative reasoning—that really fosters human flourishing.

Thus, given what has been said here and in previous sections of this paper, we might say that in order to realize one's identity and flourish as a human being, one must be able to properly engage in contemplative reasoning. So, on this picture, anything that prevents or discourages one from engaging in contemplative reasoning will threaten one's identity as a human being.

With this framework in mind, we can return to the worry that consumerism threatens the identities of those who engage in it. And we can spell this worry out by applying what we have learned from Aristotle and Mr. Fox to the working hypothesis provided in the previous section. That hypothesis about the danger of consumerism can therefore be amended in the following way: consumerism threatens one's ability to flourish as a human being because it tends to discourage

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<sup>15</sup> Some philosophers argue that contemplation is required for certain knowledge of one's own mental states—including one's beliefs, desires, intentions, etc.—and some suggest that such self-knowledge is essential to one's being a rational agent (see Burge, 1996; Moran, 2001). Others argue that something like contemplative reasoning is necessary for action, and especially moral action (see Buss, 1999; Foot, 2001; Korsgaard, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Nagel (1980) gives this helpful interpretation of Aristotle: 'Human possibilities reveal that reason has a use beyond the ordering of practical life. The circle of mutual support between reason, activity, and nutrition is not completely closed. In fact all of it, including the practical employment of reason, serves to support the individual for an activity that completely transcends these worldly concerns ... the best and purest employment of reason has nothing to do with daily life ... This divine element, which gives us the capacity to think about things higher than ourselves, is the highest aspect of our souls, and we are not justified in forgoing its activities to concentrate on lowlier matters—namely, our own lives—unless the demands in the latter area are threaten to make contemplation impossible' (11-12; see also *NE*, X.3, 1174a1-3).

one from properly engaging in contemplative reasoning. The question that remains is: how does consumerism do this?

### **Consumerism and Contemplative Reasoning**

Thus far I have been drawing heavily from both Aristotle and Wes Anderson's *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. Unfortunately, Aristotle doesn't say much about the dangers of consumerism.<sup>17</sup> However, the Aristotelian picture that I have been developing can certainly be extended or applied to consumerism. And *Fantastic Mr. Fox* can help us do that. So in what follows I will primarily use this film to enrich the above hypothesis about the dangers of consumerism. Ultimately I will suggest that consumerism discourages one from properly engaging in contemplative reasoning by (i) demanding a great deal of one's time, energy, and attention, (ii) reshaping one's desires, and (iii) changing the nature of one's social relationships. I will do this by treating Mr. Fox's plight as an analogy for the plight of human consumers.

Early on in *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, Mr. Fox dedicates much of his time, energy, and attention to courting danger, hunting prey, and outsmarting predators. But, after adopting a consumerist lifestyle, Mr. Fox finds it difficult to engage in these foxlike activities. For his new lifestyle apparently demands most (if not all) of his waking time, energy, and attention.

These demands come from several sources. One such source is Mr. Fox's job at a newspaper. Mr. Fox would not normally do this work, and he does not appear to be interested in doing it for its own sake, but he does it anyway in order to maintain his comfortable, consumerist lifestyle. And, after work, it appears that much of Mr. Fox's free time, energy, and attention are spent living out that consumerist lifestyle. For instance, in order to stay current on what products are the most fashionable to own, and in order to get the best deals on such products, Mr. Fox spends time and energy looking at advertising, comparing prices, and bargaining. Of course, *consumption itself* also appears to be a focal point of Mr. Fox's life, and so it is natural to assume that it takes up much of his time, energy, and attention.

It is also noteworthy that Mr. Fox's thirst for consumption is not easily satisfied. Later in the film, after getting a new tree, Mrs. Fox asks Mr. Fox, 'Do you still feel poor?' Mr. Fox responds by half-heartedly saying, 'Less so.' This indicates that the time, energy, and attention that Mr. Fox originally dedicates to consumerist activities is insufficient to satisfy his consumerist urges, and that even more time, energy, and attention is required to satisfy those urges.

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<sup>17</sup> One notable exception is *Politics I*, in which Aristotle claims that certain forms of commerce are unnatural.

There is a clear analogy between Mr. Fox's plight and the plight of human consumers. Mr. Fox spends a great deal of his time, energy, and attention on consumer activities, and as a result, he lacks the resources necessary for engaging in foxlike activities. Human consumers also tend to spend a lot of their time, energy, and attention on consumer activities. For consumerism encourages repetitive purchase and use of goods and services in *excess* of what is required for meeting one's basic needs. In other words, consumerism encourages consumers to consume—to repeatedly eat, drink, buy, use, view, etc.—even after consumers' basic needs are met. So, if Mr. Fox's case is any guide, we should expect human consumers to have difficulty finding time, energy, and attention for non-consumer activities (including contemplative reasoning).<sup>18</sup> Thus, we might expect consumerism to discourage humans from regularly engaging in contemplative reasoning simply because consumerism demands so much time, energy, and attention.

Another way that consumerism discourages Mr. Fox from engaging in foxlike activities is by reshaping his desires. Again, early on in *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, Mr. Fox's life is geared toward courting danger, chasing prey, and outsmarting predators. For, at this point in his life, Mr. Fox consistently desires to do these things. However, after Mr. Fox adopts a consumerist lifestyle, his goals shift so that his desire to engage in foxlike activities is significantly weakened.

At one point, Mr. Fox tells his wife that he wants to move from their home in a hole into a tree. He says, 'I don't want to live in a hole anymore; it makes me feel poor.' Mr. Fox's wife reminds him that foxes normally live in holes, and later on Mr. Fox's lawyer warns him that the tree he wants buy is in a particularly bad location 'for someone of his type of species'. These are considerations that may have appealed to Mr. Fox earlier in his life, but here he brushes them off. For his desires are no longer primarily oriented toward acting like a fox. Indeed, until Mr. Fox goes back to courting danger, chasing prey, and outsmarting predators partway through the movie, it seems that he had not done so for a number of years (perhaps since his son was born).<sup>19</sup> What Mr. Fox desires is to live a comfortable life as a thoroughgoing consumer. And Mr. Fox tries to satisfy this desire by spending his time, energy, and attention working, shopping, buying, and making sure that he owns the right things.

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<sup>18</sup> That is, unless consumerist activities require or at least involve study, reflection, and contemplation. For some people, this may be the case. However, I do not think that this is the norm.

<sup>19</sup> This is evidenced by the fact that, when Mr. Fox returns to his foxlike ways in the film, he marks the occasion by saying 'and so it begins', and continues to talk as if he hadn't done this since his wife announced her pregnancy and asked Mr. Fox to stop stealing chickens.

This preoccupation with consumerist activities is on stark display when, after he is tracked down to his tree and shot at by Boggis, Bunce, and Bean because he stole food from their farms (as foxes are wont to do), Mr. Fox is lying in bed and, in a moment of reflection and regret, the first thing he says is, ‘Why the cuss didn’t I listen to my lawyer? At this point we’ll be lucky if we can flip this tree for half of what we’ve already sunk into it.’ Instead of focusing on how to outsmart his predators (or on anything else), Mr. Fox’s primary concern appears to be purely economic. Above all, he doesn’t want his engaging in foxlike activities to have cost him money.

None of this is to say that Mr. Fox’s desire to engage in foxlike activities is ever fully removed or extinguished. Indeed, that Mr. Fox starts engaging in these activities once again suggests that his desire to do so was there all along. Nonetheless, what seems clear is Mr. Fox’s desire to engage in foxlike activities is temporarily weakened, outweighed, or swamped by his desire to engage in consumerist activities.

Again, there seems to be an analogy between Mr. Fox’s plight and the plight of human consumers. Mr. Fox’s desires are oriented toward engaging in consumer activities, and as a result, his desire to engage in foxlike activities is weakened. Like Mr. Fox, human consumers value, and thus desire, consumer goods and activities; that is, they desire certain kinds of food, drink, clothing, entertainment, etc., and they desire the experiences that come along with consuming those goods. And engagement in these consumer activities does not require, involve, or encourage philosophical reflection or other forms of contemplative reasoning. Thus, if a consumer’s primary desires are for consumer goods and activities, then we might not expect her to properly engage in contemplative reasoning very often.

This suggestion once again strikes an Aristotelian chord. According to Aristotle, ‘The starting point of choice . . . is desire and reasoning directed toward some end’ (*NE*, VI.2, 1139a32; see also *Phys.*, II.3). Hence, Aristotle thinks that, in order for a human to realize her *ergon* by engaging in the activities that are characteristic of humans, she must first desire to engage in those activities. So, for Aristotle, if a human does not desire to contemplate, she will not regularly (and properly) contemplate. Thus, if desires to engage in consumerism inhibits or replaces one’s desire to engage in contemplative reasoning, then Aristotle would see consumerist desires as a barrier to engaging in contemplative reasoning.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> In *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle says, ‘So if some choice and possession of natural goods—either goods of the body or money or of friends or the other goods—will most produce the speculation of the god, that is the best, and that is the finest limit; but whatever, whether through deficiency or excess, hinders the service and speculation of the god, is bad’ (VIII.3, 1249b16-20). See also Burnyeat (1980, 82-83).

There is even more to the story. Mr. Fox's consumerist lifestyle also has an impact on the nature of his social interactions with his family, friends, and other animals in his community. For one thing, Mr. Fox's consumerist lifestyle rarefies his interactions with his family and friends. While at home, Mr. Fox's nose is often buried in a newspaper, whether because he is looking for good deals on trees, reading his own column, or simply catching up on the local news. And when Mr. Fox's adolescent son acts out in order to draw his father's attention, Mr. Fox hardly notices. In fact, the most significant attention Mr. Fox gives his son early on in the film is when he derides his odd or 'different' clothing. All of this naturally creates a certain tension between Mr. Fox and his family.<sup>21</sup>

And this tension only deepens whenever Mr. Fox's foxlike nature emerges. At one point in the film, Mr. Fox explains to his wife that, as a wild animal, he has the urge to court danger, hunt prey, and outsmart predators. He then adds that this is simply the truth about himself. Mrs. Fox responds by saying, 'I don't care about the truth about yourself,' and she then insists that Mr. Fox owes it to his family to set aside his foxlike urges. Here, Mrs. Fox seems to be suggesting that Mr. Fox's priority should be to maintain a comfortable lifestyle for his family, and that his engagement in other activities (including foxlike activities) should be sacrificed to that end.

When we bring Mr. Fox's plight into contact with the plight of *human* consumers, certain themes emerge. First, insofar as one's engagement in non-consumer activities is counter to the wants of one's family, friends, and community, it seems likely that one will be discouraged (whether implicitly or explicitly) from engaging in non-consumer activities. So, if one's proper engagement in contemplative reasoning is counter to the wants of one's family, friends, or community—because it takes up too much time, causes one to doubt the value of living a consumerist lifestyle, or whatever—then we can expect one's family, friends, and community to discourage one from engaging in such activity. Indeed, in some circumstances, there may be pressure, perhaps even powerful pressure, to set aside contemplative reasoning.

Another important insight that can be gleaned from Mr. Fox concerns the breakdown of social relationships. It might not be obvious how Mr. Fox's disregard for his son, wife, or friends affects his ability to engage in foxlike activities, but for Aristotle and others, there is a clear connection in the *human* case. According to Aristotle, continual interaction with other people is a

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<sup>21</sup> It might be argued that Mr. Fox's consumerist lifestyle actually puts him in *more* contact with his family than did his life of stealing from the factory farmers, since he engages in various consumerist activities at home. But notice that Mr. Fox doesn't really engage with his family while at home. His contact with them is short and stilted. Indeed, the point in the film when Mr. Fox's bond to his family is the strongest is at the end, when they all engage in foxlike activities together (see section 5). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

prerequisite for engaging in contemplative reasoning. Aristotle says, ‘When great issues are at stake, we distrust our own abilities as insufficient to decide the matter and call in others to join us in our deliberations’ (*NE*, III.3, 1112b10-11). This means that, for Aristotle, real contemplation requires conversation, discussion, and debate. Alasdair MacIntyre (1999) expresses a similar idea as follows:

What we need from others, if we are not only to exercise our initial animal capacities, but also to develop the capacities of independent practical reasoners, are those relationships necessary for fostering the ability to evaluate, modify, or reject our own practical judgments, to ask, that is, whether what we take to be good reasons for action really are sufficiently good reasons, *and* the ability to imagine realistically alternative possible futures, so as to be able to make rational choices between them, *and* the ability to stand back from our desires, so as to be able to enquire rationally what the pursuit of our good here and now requires and how our desires must be directed and, if necessary, reeducated, if we are to attain it (83).

What these reflections suggest is that, in addition to time, energy, attention, and the right desires, proper contemplative reasoning requires continued interaction with other people. What Mr. Fox’s case shows is that a preoccupation with consumer activities can diminish certain forms of interaction with other people. For many of the consumer activities that Mr. Fox engages in are non-social. Thus, if it’s true, as it is in Mr. Fox’s case, that a preoccupation with consumer activities tends to diminish the sort of interaction described by Aristotle and MacIntyre, then we have reason to believe that consumerism discourages contemplative reasoning.

So far I have suggested some ways in which consumerism might discourage one from engaging in contemplative reasoning—namely, by (i) demanding a great deal of one’s time, energy, and attention, (ii) reshaping one’s desires, and (iii) changing the nature of one’s social relationships. Of course, I have not shown that consumerism actually (or always) does do these things. So the above worries will only constitute genuine threats or dangers if certain facts or assumptions about consumerism are in fact true. Those assumptions are: (1) engagement in consumerism often takes up so much of consumers’ time, energy, and attention that consumers are forced to forego other, non-consumer activities, (2) engagement in consumerism often causes consumers to desire consumer goods and activities as opposed to other, non-consumer goods and activities, and (3) consumerism often rarefies certain forms of social interaction. I have

appealed to Mr. Fox as an analogy in order to justify these assumptions—assumptions that I think are true.

With that said, the foregoing discussion can be summed up as follows. I began with the worry that consumerism threatens the identities of those who engage in it. I then gave this worry an Aristotelian face by suggesting that consumerism threatens the identities of those who engage in it by discouraging them from engaging in characteristically human activities. Then I suggested—again in keeping with Aristotle’s views—that those characteristically human activities are forms of contemplative reasoning. Finally, I tried to suggest some specific ways that consumerism might discourage humans from engaging in contemplative reasoning. On the basis of this discussion, my final hypothesis is: Consumerism threatens one’s ability to flourish as a human being because it tends to discourage one from engaging in contemplative reasoning by (i) demanding a great deal of one’s time, energy, and attention, (ii) reshaping one’s desires, and (iii) changing the nature of one’s social relationships.

### **A Solution**

The above hypothesis offers one plausible way to understand the worry that consumerism threatens the identities of those who engage in it. I also think that this hypothesis is true. That is, I think that consumerism threatens one’s ability to flourish as a human being because it tends to discourage one from engaging in contemplative reasoning. Of course, it doesn’t follow that consumerism must do this, or that it always does do this. This is why I have cast the above hypothesis as expressing a danger of consumerism rather than an inevitable result of consumerism. What this means is that there may be room for those living in consumerist societies to respond to and overcome this danger. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this paper to defend such a response in any detail. However, *Fantastic Mr. Fox* does offer something like a response to the worries that I have expressed. So I will end this paper by giving a brief sketch of that response.

In the latter half of *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, Mr. Fox, his family, and his friends are on the run from factory farm owners Boggis, Bunce, and Bean. These farmers destroy the Fox’s tree, chase them underground, and threaten to kill all of the animals in their community. Bean even goes so far as to wear Mr. Fox’s severed tail (which he shot off) as a necktie, thereby turning one of a fox’s most distinctive features into an item of standard business attire. The animals run away, but as the chase continues, they grow increasingly tired and hungry. The outlook is grim, and the animals begin to lose hope. Luckily, Mr. Fox eventually leads his cohort to safety by sneaking them into a supermarket at night.



Before entering the supermarket, Mr. Fox tells the group, ‘Get enough to share with everybody. And remember, rabbits are vegetarians and badgers supposedly can’t eat walnuts.’ They then begin to consume various products on the shelves. In the last scene of the movie, Mr. Fox is asked to give a toast. So Mr. Fox pulls several food products up into his arms, steps up onto a (literal) soapbox, and addresses his family and friends:

They say all foxes are slightly allergic to linoleum, but it’s cool to the paw ... they say our tree may never grow back, but one day something will. Yes, these crackles [referring to the products in his arms] are made of synthetic goose, and these giblets come from artificial squab, and even these apples look fake, but at least they’ve got stars on them [referring to stars painted on the apple in his hand]. I guess my point is, we’ll eat tonight, and we’ll eat together. And even in this not particularly flattering light [referring to fluorescent lighting in the supermarket], you are without a doubt the ... most wonderful wild animals I’ve ever met in my life. So let’s raise our boxes to our *survival*.<sup>22</sup>

The animals then celebrate their good fortune, and the movie ends. Some commenters interpret the ending of *Fantastic Mr. Fox* merely as a sentimental concession to audiences looking for a happy ending (see Browning, 2011, 100-102). But this interpretation fails to appreciate certain nuances in the film’s ending.

First, note Mr. Fox’s renewed attention to his community. Before the animals eat, Mr. Fox reminds them that it’s important to first get enough food for everyone. This care for or attention to others is a departure from Mr. Fox’s earlier lack of attention to others. We see the beginnings of this shift a bit earlier in the film when, after the farmers have chased the animals underground, Mr. Fox says, ‘These farmers teach us to be thankful and aware of each other ... let me say it again, aware.’ Here Mr. Fox is recognizing that his circumstances, while difficult, thankfully cause him to pay closer attention to his family and friends.<sup>23</sup> Implicit in Mr. Fox’s gratitude is an acknowledgement (and lamentation) of the fact that,

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<sup>22</sup> This final scene of the film is one of the more substantial and important points of departure from Roald Dahl’s book, *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. This leads me to believe that this scene is of special importance to Anderson’s vision for the film. For further discussion of the differences between the film and the book, see Kertzer (2011), Browning (2011), and Dorey (2012).

<sup>23</sup> The reconciliation of a family after periods of acute tension brought on by the selfishness and individuality of a central male character is a common motif in Anderson’s films (see Orgeron, 2007, 2011; Browning, 2011; Gooch, 2007; Hancock, 2005). It seems to me that the present instantiation of this motif is especially compelling, since Mr. Fox’s consumerism is not only a plausible motive for his selfish behavior; it’s also an interesting metaphor for the effects of certain socioeconomic structures that promote self-interested behavior.

by concerning himself primarily with consumer activities, he had been ignoring those around him. This is the turning point for Mr. Fox—the point at which his pessimism about his situation finally turns into hope and optimism. And his escape into the supermarket with his family and friends is the fulfillment of that hope.

Another noteworthy point about the conclusion of *Fantastic Mr. Fox* is that Mr. Fox's renewed awareness of those around him brings about changes in his attention and desires. Mr. Fox was once preoccupied with buying the right products, owning the right tree, and engaging in the right sort of consumer activities. But, after becoming more aware of others, Mr. Fox expresses a sort of indifference to or detachment from these goods and activities. For instance, Mr. Fox acknowledges that his once-beloved tree may never grow back, but he is not worried by this fact. For he is confident that he and his family will find other shelter, and he no longer desires for that need to be met by any particular hole, tree, or other structure.

It is also interesting that Mr. Fox's renewed awareness of those around him and his indifference to certain of his possessions does *not* lead to his outright rejection of consumerism, its products, or its styles. Rather, Mr. Fox treats the various elements of consumerism with caution—recognizing their drawbacks and dangers—while also lauding the fact that they constitute an environment in which he, his family, and his friends can live and flourish.<sup>24</sup> He points out that linoleum is slightly toxic, but then notes that it provides comfort that was not available underground. Mr. Fox points out that the various products that he (literally) embraces are artificial or somehow unnatural, but he delights in the fact that these products provide sustenance for his family and friends. And finally, Mr. Fox admits that the fluorescent lighting in the supermarket has certain aesthetic deficiencies, but he also recognizes that it allows him to see and interact with his family and friends. In sum, Mr. Fox knows that the supermarket is not a place where foxes normally abide, but he doesn't much care, for the supermarket allows him and his group of animals to survive.<sup>25</sup> And adaptation is foxlike activity *par excellence*.

Perhaps we can learn something from *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. Mr. Fox's response to the threat of consumerism begins with a renewed sense of awareness of those around him. Mr. Fox then attempts to cultivate a certain indifference to

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<sup>24</sup> This may reflect Anderson's own ambivalence toward consumerism. Some commenters (especially Orgeron, 2007, 2011; Browning, 2011) have drawn attention to the ways in which Anderson appears to be ambivalent toward self-advertisement both in TV commercials and in supporting materials designed to help market and sell his films.

<sup>25</sup> This appropriation of consumerist items for the good of the group is also seen earlier on when Mr. Fox's borrows a credit card (and special attention is paid to Mr. Fox's use of the credit card) to pick a lock to the compound where his son and nephew are trapped. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for mentioning this point.

consumer goods (particularly material possessions). Mr. Fox comes to exhibit this indifference because he comes to desire interaction with others and engagement in foxlike activities above all else, and he learns that he can do both of these things with or without the particular consumer goods that once populated his life. Similarly, if we follow Aristotle in taking contemplative reasoning to be an especially important activity for humans to engage in, then it's worth recognizing that we can engage in this activity regardless of which particular consumer goods we possess.

And if Mr. Fox's case really is similar to the human case, then one need not completely reject consumerism in order to flourish as a human being. Certainly one will have to be aware of the dangers, artificiality, and ugliness of certain aspects of consumerism.<sup>26</sup> But one can also recognize that a consumerist society is an environment in which it is possible (though perhaps difficult) to engage in contemplative reasoning. In fact, because certain aspects of consumerism are dangerous, artificial, and ugly, recognition of these facts might actually incite contemplation about the true nature of reality, consideration of what is really beautiful, and reflection on how one ought to go about living one's life in a consumerist society.

Perhaps these are things that we can learn from Mr. Fox.

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<sup>26</sup> This point deserves much more emphasis than I am able to give it here. For, as MacIntyre (1999) points out, 'there are always possibilities and often actualities of victimization and exploitation' tied to social systems like consumerism, and 'if we are not adequately aware of this, our practical judgments will go badly astray' (102). According to MacIntyre (1999), 'The virtues which we need in order to achieve both our own goods and the goods of others through participation in such networks only function as genuine virtues when their existence is informed by an awareness of how power is distributed and of the corruptions to which its use is liable' (ibid.).

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