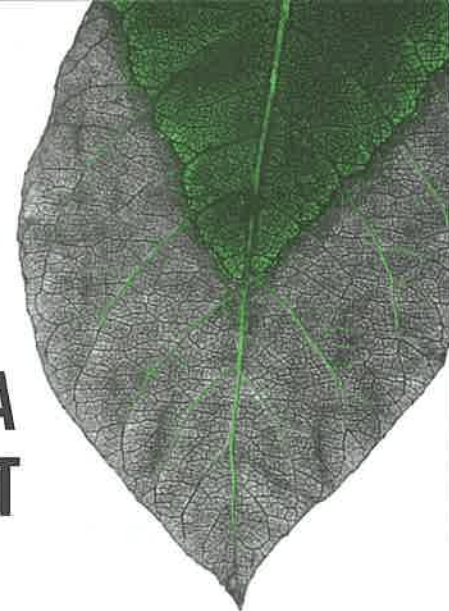


## INITIAL THOUGHTS

1. *How often do you pray, and what do you pray about? Try to be honest and specific.*
2. *What is the story of change you believe is guiding the following groups of which you are a part? To answer this, think about the explicit and/or implicit goals, messages, and practices of each of the following:*
  - a. *Your church*
  - b. *A poverty alleviation ministry with which you are familiar*

## CHAPTER THREE

# YOU CAN BECOME A CONSUMING ROBOT



What many people call “psychological problems” are simple issues of idolatry. Perfectionism, workaholism, chronic indecisiveness, the need to control the lives of others—all of these stem from making good things into idols that then drive us into the ground as we try to appease them. Idols dominate our lives.<sup>1</sup>

—TIM KELLER, THEOLOGIAN AND PASTOR, 2009

American culture is probably the least Christian culture that we’ve ever had because it is so materialistic and it’s so full of lies. . . . The problem is people have been treated as consumers for so long they don’t know any other way to live.<sup>2</sup>

—EUGENE PETERSON, SCHOLAR AND PASTOR, 2011

**A**s discussed in the introduction, something has gone wrong in Western civilization. While we have achieved unprecedented levels of material prosperity, our social fabric is falling apart. We are less and less happy, and our physical and emotional health are deteriorating. This indicates that our culture is shaping us into something that we simply aren’t designed to be. Our story of change and the systems and formative practices that it fosters are trying to force us to be square pegs in round holes. We just can’t do it. We don’t fit. Our bodies and minds are screaming out against this dehumanizing process.

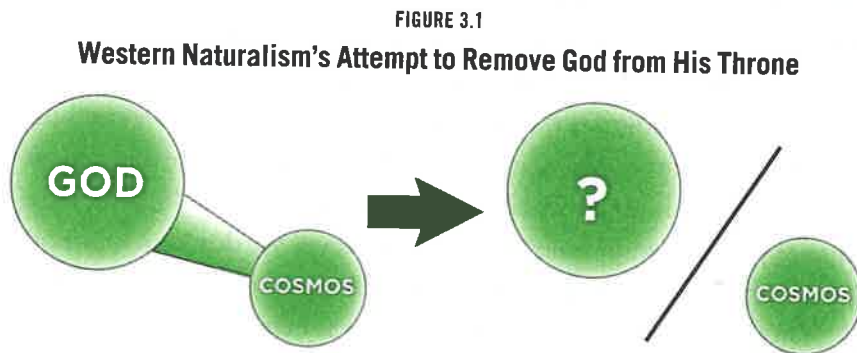
Our story is wrong. That means our metanarrative—our basic understanding of the nature of God, of human beings, and of the world—must be wrong, too.

Western civilization and its approaches to poverty alleviation throughout the post-WWII era have been dominated by Western Naturalism.<sup>3</sup> As influential as naturalism is, however, it's not the only perspective shaping Western civilization.<sup>4</sup> America consists of subcultures that, to varying degrees, draw on all three of the foundational religious perspectives (see points 1, 2, and 3 in Figure 2.3). As you read this chapter, therefore, it's likely that you will find descriptions of some facets of the people and culture that you have encountered, but it will not capture all their features, for naturalism is not the only story out there.

**THE NATURE OF GOD AND HUMAN BEINGS IN WESTERN NATURALISM**

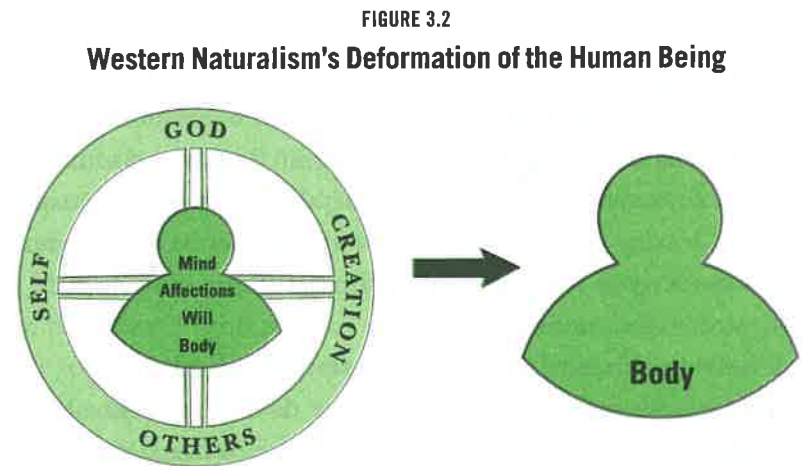
As a relational being, God is deeply and actively engaged with His world. Moment by moment, He holds the atoms in place, empowers the deer to dart through the forest, and directs the course of nations. And as a tender Father who's always present, He guides every step of His beloved children. God is interested; God is involved; God intervenes.

Conversely, as pictured in Figure 3.1, Western Naturalism doubts that God exists and believes that even if He does exist, He is irrelevant to the everyday working of the cosmos. The cosmos is viewed as a closed machine that is solely material in essence and operates according to fixed laws of nature without any divine intervention.



Adapted from Darrow L. Miller with Stan Guthrie, *Discipling Nations: The Power of Truth to Transform Cultures* (Seattle: YWAM, 2001), 3-4.

Western Naturalism's material understanding of the cosmos shapes its perspective on human beings. Western Naturalism reduces the mind-affections-will-body-relational creature to a mere physical being that has no soul and that is completely individualistic, not needing relationships in order to flourish (see Figure 3.2). Because this creature is purely material, it derives its happiness from consuming material things in order to gratify its sensual nature. And because this creature is not primarily relational, it selfishly pursues its own interests without regard for the effects it might have on its relationship with God, self, others, or the rest of creation.



Because Western Naturalism creates a vacuum by denying a divine being, it necessarily elevates this material, self-interested creature: humans take the place of God. Indeed, humans are viewed as the masters of the universe, creatures who use their superior intelligence to create technological advances that master the material world. Creatures replace the Creator.

The heart of this story of change is fundamentally arrogant. Given that God does not exist and that human beings are in charge, any material prosperity is necessarily the result of human ingenuity. And those who have accumulated the most wealth must be the smartest of all, preeminent over the rest of humanity.

Unfortunately, Western Naturalism's false god is not just some

abstract philosophical concept. Despite the fact that this god does not exist, this god dramatically impacts our daily lives to the extent that we embrace naturalism. Remember, human beings are transformed into the image of whatever god they worship. And the god of Western Naturalism is a purely material, individualistic, self-interested, consuming machine.

Consider the contrast between the images of Figure 3.2. You are created to be like the image on the left, an integrated body and soul that is wired for intimate relationship, deep communion, with God, self, others, and the rest of creation. When your entire being, your body and your soul, experiences these relationships as God intended, you experience the good life: you become whole. But Western Naturalism would like to reshape you by deforming you into the image on the right. Denying the centrality of relationships for a human and failing to treat her as an integrated body and soul causes a person to shrivel up—key aspects of her humanity are stripped from her, leaving her in a robotic state that is less than fully human. This doesn't seem like the path to human flourishing. In fact, it's only a path to destruction.

What does this have to do with poverty alleviation?

Because Western Naturalism has so deeply influenced Western civilization, Westerners *unconsciously* and *automatically* spread the virus of Western Naturalism to poor people. The ways that poverty alleviation strategies are designed, the things that they do, the formative practices that they foster, and the goals for which they strive can deform poor people, transforming them—at least partially—into the material, individualistic, self-interested, consuming machine described above. A person's full humanity is compromised in this deformation. Western Naturalism is a clear instance of *when helping hurts*.

To see how this deforming process works, let us consider the two primary strategies that Western civilization has used to help poor people, both of which have been heavily influenced by Western Naturalism. Many readers will agree that the first of these strategies is

dehumanizing, but that the second strategy is deforming is less obvious and may be harder to embrace for many people.

#### POVERTY ALLEVIATION STRATEGY #1: HANDOUTS OF MATERIAL RESOURCES

If people are wired like the consuming robots on the right side of Figure 3.2, then it's pretty simple to improve the lives of poor people: just give them money or other material things such as food or clothing. This will enable them to consume more, and *presto!* with full bellies, they are better off.

But people simply aren't wired this way. We are made like the creature on the left side of Figure 3.2: image bearers created for relationship. And a key component of the proper *relationship to creation* is being able to work and enjoy the fruits of that work. Approaches that undermine this relationship—no matter how well-intended—harm the very people they're trying to help.

Many Christians have criticized the federal government's welfare programs in this regard. But many churches and ministries in their food banks, soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and short-term mission trips also adopt this approach. Certainly, when a person experiences a crisis and needs *temporary* emergency assistance, it is appropriate for governments, churches, and ministries to give poor people material resources. But continually giving handouts to able-bodied people over time can create unhealthy dependencies and undermine people's dignity and work. As a result, they are worse off than before they received handouts. It is for this very reason that the Bible strongly warns against giving handouts to able-bodied people (2 Thess. 3:6–15; 1 Tim. 5:9–13).

The negative impact of a poverty alleviation strategy that undermines work is not superficial. As we saw in chapter 2, a faulty story of change reshapes people, deeply impacting the very core of their being, and deforms them into a different sort of creature altogether. In terms of our wheel analogy, any approach that undermines work

removes the “relationship to creation” spoke. The wheel won’t be able to support itself, and the spokes and hub will become damaged. Research has found that people without work often suffer a loss of self-esteem (“relationship to self” spoke),<sup>5</sup> strained marriages (“relationship to others” spoke),<sup>6</sup> and a host of mental and physical health problems (hub).<sup>7</sup> Poverty alleviation strategies that undermine work do *real* harm.

We need to make a few caveats before moving on:

- Note that we are emphasizing *able-bodied* people. Ongoing support is appropriate for people who are unable to work due to chronic physical or mental health problems.
- One can also make a strong case for providing ongoing financial support to able-bodied people, as long as the support incentivizes work. Nothing in our fallen world guarantees that the free market will provide a living wage. For example, the earned income tax credit essentially acts as a wage subsidy for low-income workers, enabling them to earn more dollars per hour than they would otherwise. There is some biblical precedent for this, as the gleaning laws in the Old Testament amounted to an ongoing subsidy to those who were willing to work (Lev. 23:22).
- In practice, we must pray for wisdom, because the effects of any handouts are likely to vary dramatically depending on the nature of the person’s poverty and even culture. For example, giving money to the working head of a two-parent household is likely to have very different consequences than giving money to a person who is chronically homeless and struggling with alcohol addiction. And giving money to a poor person in rural Tanzania will yield very different results altogether.<sup>8</sup>

Those caveats notwithstanding, simply giving ongoing handouts to able-bodied people is the classic case of *when helping hurts*.

## POVERTY ALLEVIATION STRATEGY #2: ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT<sup>9</sup>

Because ongoing handouts are politically unpopular and financially draining, Western civilization has pursued a second strategy to help able-bodied people who are poor: Economic Empowerment.

At the macro level, this strategy promotes and establishes institutions and policies that generate economic growth, thereby creating job opportunities for poor people so they can achieve greater consumption via their own work. Generally speaking, this amounts to spreading capitalism by establishing property rights, enforcing contracts, strengthening financial institutions, investing in public infrastructure, and allowing for freedom of exchange.

At the micro level, this approach includes initiatives that aim to enable poor people to have greater success in the expanding marketplace: GED courses, jobs training programs, after-school tutoring programs, healthcare, financial education, microfinance, improved farming techniques, and more. Perhaps your church or ministry is providing some of these types of initiatives.

The Economic Empowerment Strategy seems better than the Handouts Strategy, doesn’t it? Surely, an approach that enables able-bodied people to support themselves through work is more consistent with God’s story of change, as it moves people closer to living in right relationship with creation. Moreover, since the industrial revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, using markets to promote rapid economic growth has helped most of Western civilization escape material poverty. And as globalization spreads Western-style economics and growth to the Majority World, dramatic reductions in material poverty are taking place there as well. *Simply put, in terms of lifting people out of material poverty, there is no better strategy than Economic Empowerment.*

At the same time, a subtle but deadly danger lurks behind the Economic Empowerment Strategy, one that should give Christians considerable pause.<sup>10</sup>

### The Foundations of Western Economics

The story of change, systems, and formative practices of the global economy are based on the teachings of mainstream Western economics (neoclassical economics), the very embodiment of Western Naturalism.

Mainstream Western economics describes human beings as *homo economicus*, which is none other than the self-interested, individualistic, materialistic, consuming robot at the heart of Western Naturalism (the right side of Fig. 3.2).<sup>11</sup> In the absence of the true God, mainstream economics assumes that the purpose of life is to serve *homo economicus*, the false god of Western economics.

The happiness of *homo economicus*, a purely material creature, can be increased indefinitely by consuming more and more, so economists believe that the key to greater human flourishing is never-ending increases in income achieved through unmitigated economic growth. This is the story of change according to Western economics, the top oval in Figure 3.3.

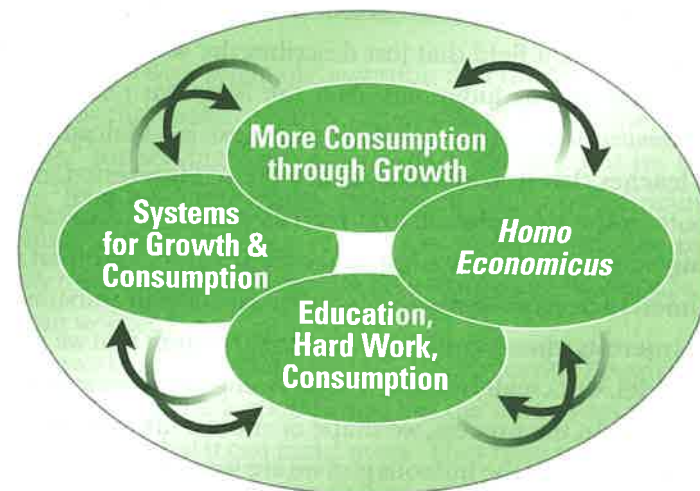
Western civilization creates systems consistent with this story of change (see the left side of Figure 3.3). Formal institutions like the World Trade Organization, private property, freedom of exchange, corporations, and schools seek to stimulate economic growth. And informal institutions, including messages from advertising, television, music, social media, and the workplace, all communicate that earning more to consume more will lead to the good life.

Moving to the bottom of Figure 3.3, we see that mainstream economics encourages formative practices that are consistent with its story of change: we get more education and work harder and harder so we can spend more and more money on ourselves.

And finally, as we see on the right side of Figure 3.3, the economy reshapes individual personhoods—minds, affections, wills, bodies, and relationships—making people more and more like material, individualistic, self-centered, consuming machines. Human beings are transformed into the image of whatever god they worship, and the god of the global economy is *homo economicus*.

FIGURE 3.3

Individual and Cultural Formation in the Economic Empowerment Strategy



Adapted from Brian Fikkert and Michael Rhodes, "Homo Economicus Versus Homo Imago Dei," *Journal of Markets and Morality* 20, no.1 (Spring 2017): 106.

Most of us are completely unconscious about what is happening, never even stopping to question the deforming effects of the current marketplace. Most of us think about market forces in the same way that we think about gravity—as a fixed law of nature that cannot be changed and for which we are not responsible. We just take the law as a given and live in strict adherence to it, knowing that if we try to violate it by, say, jumping off a tall building, we will get hurt.

Similarly, many of us live as though the current economic system cannot be violated, cannot be changed, and is not our responsibility. While it would be foolish to ignore market forces—for instance, by starting a business that has no chance of succeeding—it is wrong to put economic life in the same category as a law of nature. Unlike the cases of gravity or inertia, human beings create economic systems and have choices regarding how to behave within them, making us morally responsible before God for our economic decisions.<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, the discipline of mainstream economics taught in Western universities and colleges—the discipline that provides

the story of change, formative practices, and systems for the global economy—removes the possibility of any moral obligation. The first chapter of every introductory textbook claims that economics is a value-neutral field, a field that just describes the way the world really is without passing any judgment. And the idea that people act like *homo economicus* is one of those facts that “just is.” Mainstream economics teaches that it is “normal” to act like self-interested, consuming robots in the marketplace and increasingly in all aspects of life, including marriage, child-rearing, and even religion.<sup>13</sup> Human beings are assumed to be *homo economicus* everywhere, selfishly pursuing their own self-interests wherever they go. And to the extent that we internalize this model, we actually make it true by acting like *homo economicus* in our daily lives. In the process, we shape economic life and culture as a whole in the image of the hideous god we are worshipping.

Is it really any surprise that America’s celebrities aren’t the Mother Therasas of this world, people who sacrifice their lives for others, but rather flamboyant hedonists and reality TV stars? The god of the global economy, the god of Western Naturalism, is a grotesque distortion of the image bearers that humans were created to be.

Although she does not write from a distinctly Christian perspective, F. S. Michaels echoes these considerations in her award-winning book, *Monoculture: How One Story Is Changing Everything*:

In these early decades of the twenty-first century, the master story is economic; economic beliefs, values, and assumptions are shaping how we think, feel, and act. The beliefs, values and assumptions that make up the economic story aren’t inherently right or wrong; they’re just a single perspective on the nature of reality. In a monoculture though, that single perspective becomes so engrained as the only reasonable reality that we begin to forget our other stories, and fail to see the monoculture in its totality, never mind question it. We accept it as true simply because we’ve heard its story so often and live immersed in it day after day.

The extent to which we accept that monoculture unquestioningly and live by its tenets is the extent to which our lives are unconsciously shaped by it.<sup>14</sup>

We disagree with Michaels’ assertion that the “beliefs, values, and assumptions that make up the economic story aren’t inherently right or wrong,” for serving *homo economicus* is idolatry. But we do agree that our lives are increasingly shaped by the story of mainstream economics, a story to which many of us are *unconsciously* and *automatically* defaulting. Consider the following story of Anna, a typical American worker.<sup>15</sup>

Anna works at a company that has been recently bought out. The company always made a good profit, but the new owners and managers have decided that it can make more. They have taken the “normal” view of mainstream economics: they want to extract as much wealth as quickly as they can. They reinforce this goal through the corporation’s organizational culture: Managers who increase the company’s profits are praised as heroes and as people of virtuous character, even though they cut salaries and benefits to employees. Human resources policies are changed to foster cutthroat competition amongst the employees, pitting them against one another in a vicious race for the top-paying positions. Finally, the goal is reinforced through the corporation’s formative practices, as the employees engage in tasks that are designed to maximize shareholders’ profits by increasing sales and cutting costs.

Anna spends the majority of her waking hours immersed in a community whose story of change, systems, and formative practices is centered on the goal of increasing profits in order to increase consumption for *homo economicus*, which, in this case, is embodied in the company’s shareholders and herself, for she wants to keep her job. Anna can’t help but be deformed by the materialistic, individualistic, self-centeredness of such a community. Indeed, psychologists are finding that some common corporate practices fundamentally conflict with factors that are known to promote human flourishing.<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, the deforming process of Western Naturalism doesn’t end when Anna leaves work each day. As she relaxes on the

couch every evening in front of the television, she is bombarded with programming and advertising intentionally designed to create dissatisfaction within her, thus encouraging her to engage in more materialistic behaviors than ever before.<sup>17</sup>

Sadly, Anna's increasingly materialistic lifestyle never satisfies her. Rather, it launches her onto a consume-earn-consume-earn treadmill in an exhausting quest for happiness. This treadmill is time-consuming, reducing Anna's and her husband's availability for family and other relationships. And Anna is not unique. Research shows that during the last two decades of the twentieth century, there was a 33 percent decline in family meals in America and a 45 percent decline in entertaining friends in homes.<sup>18</sup> As Anna's relationships deteriorate, she is likely to become more materialistic, seeking to fill the relational void in her life with more material things.<sup>19</sup> And so the consume-earn-consume-earn treadmill turns faster and faster, increasingly deforming Anna from a mind-affections-will-body-relational creature into a frightfully unhappy, materialistic individual.

Unfortunately, Anna's materialistic individualism doesn't just harm her and her family. She is just one of millions of Americans engaging in the same lifestyle. Collectively, our behaviors change the systems, creating both formal and informal institutions that both reflect and reinforce our core values of self-interested, materialistic individualism.

With respect to formal institutions, research has shown that rising materialism and individualism is causing Americans to withdraw from participating in parent-teacher associations, nonprofit organizations, religious institutions, the political process, and more, thereby contributing to an overall breakdown in the social fabric of the community, which in turn leads to increased individualism.<sup>20</sup> We've lost our sense that we all are in this together, that my flourishing is bound up with yours, and that we're called to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Informal institutions both express and reinforce Anna's lifestyle as well. For example, as she runs to and fro, Anna joins millions of

Americans in never losing sight of her smartphone. Responding to the values of highly individualistic consumers, the tech industry and social media platforms have created a whole new ecosystem of self-expression. At the push of a button, we can instantly share our "unique" pictures, stories, and experiences with the world. But rather than fostering relationships, recent studies link smartphone usage to increases in individualism, loneliness, and depression, particularly for America's youth.<sup>21</sup>

Anna is economically empowered—and that is good—but she is far from fully flourishing. *Why would we want poor people to become just like Anna?*

### We Are Richer, but We Aren't Flourishing

It is a mistake to equate material progress—even material progress that comes from hard work and ingenuity—with full human flourishing. Recall the "paradox of unhappy growth": *countries that have experienced the greatest success from the Economic Empowerment Strategy are not getting happier, even though their hard work and ingenuity have created unprecedented wealth.* Again, despite increases in material wealth, mental health problems are rising in the US, indicating that our personhoods are crying out in some sort of pain. Our bodies and souls—our hearts!—are trying to tell us that something is wrong with the Economic Empowerment Strategy, something doesn't fit, something is moving in the wrong direction—and we need to listen.

### Gross National Happiness Versus Gross National Product

Throughout the post-WWII era, Gross National Product (GNP) per capita, which is equal to the average income per citizen, has been used as the primary measure of a country's well-being.<sup>22</sup> For example, global institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund rank countries according to their GNP per capita: countries with lower levels are considered "less developed" and those with the highest levels are deemed "developed." Similarly, national policy makers regularly use growth in GNP as the primary measure for

whether the country is improving. Simon Kuznets won the Nobel Prize in Economics for coming up with the measure, and the U.S. Commerce Department declared GNP to be “one of the great inventions of the 20th century.”<sup>23</sup> In the world of national indicators, GNP is king.

While GNP per capita is certainly a very useful measure, it is also reflective of the materialistic worldview of Western Naturalism and mainstream economics. *Homo economicus*'s happiness is determined by his or her consumption, so the source of human flourishing is never-ending increases in income achieved through relentless growth in GNP per capita.

There is no doubt that policies promoting growth in GNP per capita have resulted in unparalleled reductions in material poverty. But there is also an increasing sense, even among some economists, that something has gone profoundly wrong, as economic growth seems to be accompanied by rising inequality, environmental degradation, a loss of community, and an explosion of mental illness.

In response to these concerns, Bhutan, a small, Buddhist country nestled between India and China, adopted an alternative measure of national well-being in 2008: Gross National Happiness (GNH). The GNH Index is constructed from seventy-two indicators that seek to measure people's flourishing in nine dimensions: psychological well-being, health, culture, ecology, community vitality, living standards, education, time use, and good governance.<sup>24</sup> Bhutan surveys its population annually to construct the GNH Index, which it uses to guide its national policy decisions.

While GNH is nowhere close to replacing GNP, it is gaining considerable traction. Britain and France have started to use variations of GNH to supplement GNP in their policy making. And in 2011 the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution urging countries to move away from GNP to broader measures of well-being such as GNH. In response, the *World Happiness Report* has been annually ranking countries using measures of overall happiness that are similar in spirit to the GNH. According to the 2018 report, the top ten happiest countries are:

- |                |                |
|----------------|----------------|
| 1. Finland     | 6. Netherlands |
| 2. Norway      | 7. Canada      |
| 3. Denmark     | 8. New Zealand |
| 4. Iceland     | 9. Sweden      |
| 5. Switzerland | 10. Australia  |

What about the United States? It ranked eighteenth in 2018. Moreover, from the period 2008–2010 to 2015–2017, the United States experienced the thirty-fourth highest decline in happiness out of 141 countries.<sup>25</sup> Something has gone wrong in America, and we all can feel it.

What exactly are our personhoods trying to tell us? An expert team of scientists gathered at Dartmouth Medical School to develop an explanation for the rise in mental health problems amongst America's youth. After examining the leading empirical evidence, mostly from the field of neuroscience, the scientists concluded that

the human child is “hardwired to connect.” We are hardwired for other people and for moral meaning and openness to the transcendent. Meeting these basic needs for connection is essential to health and human flourishing. Because in recent decades we as a society have not been doing a good job of meeting these essential needs, large and growing numbers of our children are failing to flourish.<sup>26</sup>

We are wired to be like the mind-affections-will-body-relational creature depicted on the left side of Figure 3.2, but the Economic Empowerment Strategy is transforming us into the subhuman creature on the right side.

What exactly is causing this breakdown of relationships with other people and with the “transcendent”? Jean Twenge, professor of psychology at San Diego State University, explains, “We have become a culture that focuses on material things and less on relationships.”<sup>27</sup> Considerable evidence suggests that America's dramatic economic growth during the post-WWII era has been accompanied by substantial increases in individualism and materialism, which research has found to be highly destructive, resulting in lower self-reported happiness, poorer interpersonal relationships, higher levels of anxiety and depression, greater antisocial behavior, and poorer health.<sup>28</sup> The future looks even bleaker when we look at the emerging millennial generation—an age cohort that researchers are finding to be far more materialistic, self-centered, and depressed than previous generations.<sup>29</sup> Something is apparently wrong with the Economic Empowerment Strategy, for its greatest success story—the United States—is struggling terribly. Don't you think we should at least have



some pause before we blindly impose this strategy onto poor people?

We were not created to be wealthy, autonomous consuming machines, so as the deadly virus of Western Naturalism strips away our relationships—as the spokes in the wheel are removed—our minds, affections, wills, and bodies are distorted as we collapse in on ourselves. Of course, this stripping, collapsing, distorting process is painful, causing our personhoods to cry out in agony. But, unlike most forms of oppression, the victims of this oppression don't even realize it's happening. Indeed, we gladly tell ourselves that this is the good life. And we tell poor people that this is the good life for them as well.

To be clear, no human being is ever fully transformed into *homo economicus*. The basic wiring of our mind-affections-will-body-relational personhood resists this complete transformation. And despite the increasing dominance of the marketplace, Western Naturalism's story of change is not the only story shaping our lives. Narratives of love, of family, of community, and of various forms of spirituality are also present in Western civilization—and, to some degree, they dilute the impact of Western Naturalism. As we saw in Figure 2.3, American culture is not completely located in Western Naturalism's corner of the triangle.

### The Causes of America's Recent Decline in Happiness

The *World Happiness Report 2017* tries to explain the decline in America's happiness that has been observed from 2006–2015 (See Figure 1.2 on page 32). Researchers estimated the impacts of six variables on self-reported happiness for 155 countries: 1) income per capita; 2) healthy life expectancy; 3) social support;<sup>30</sup> 4) freedom to make life choices; 5) generosity;<sup>31</sup> and 6) perceived corruption of government and business. The first two variables get at people's material well-being, while the last four variables capture the overall social climate.

America's material condition (variables 1 and 2) improved over this decade. All else equal, this would have caused happiness to increase. But not all else was equal: the four social variables declined substantially, more than offsetting the effects of the increases in material well-being. As a result, happiness declined overall.

To offset the reduction in happiness caused by the decline in the four social variables,

the report estimates that average income per capita would have to increase from \$53,000 to \$133,000, an astronomical rise that would require decades to accomplish. And this assumes that such growth would not cause any further deterioration in the social variables, which is highly unlikely. An alternative strategy would be for America to pay more attention to repairing its social fabric, for as the authors of the report state, "America's crisis is, in short, a social crisis, not an economic crisis."<sup>32</sup>

### The Final Verdict on Western Naturalism's Economic Empowerment Strategy

So, is Western Naturalism's Economic Empowerment Strategy a good or a bad approach to poverty alleviation?

As mentioned earlier, globalization is spreading Western values and institutions to the rest of the world. Many countries, therefore, are now reaping the same benefits from economic growth that the West has enjoyed since the Industrial Revolution, including a dramatic reduction in global poverty.<sup>33</sup> Since 1990, for example, the number of people living on less than \$1.90 per day—the World Bank's poverty line—has declined by more than half, falling from 1.95 billion in 1990 to 896 million in 2012.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, researchers are finding that the vast majority of this reduction in poverty is due to rapid economic growth,<sup>35</sup> as Majority World countries have adopted the institutions and policies of Western Naturalism's Economic Empowerment Strategy. In fact, many global leaders believe that, should such growth continue, it may be possible to lift the entire world above the \$1.90 poverty line by the year 2030.<sup>36</sup> *Undoubtedly, the massive reduction in global poverty over the past three decades is one of the most dramatic events in all of human history, so there is definitely much to appreciate about the spread of the Economic Empowerment Strategy.*

Should we promote macroeconomic growth? Yes! Should we work at a micro level to empower poor people to benefit from such growth? Yes! Are our ministries' job training courses, microenterprise development initiatives, and after-school tutoring programs—all of which help poor people to be more successful in the marketplace—worthwhile initiatives? Yes!

Yet, somehow we need to do all these differently, for the body and soul of Western civilization is screaming out that something has gone terribly wrong: we are both increasingly rich and increasingly unhappy. And through our efforts to alleviate poverty, we are bringing *both* these realities to poor people. Evidence shows that as Majority World countries successfully pursue Western Naturalism's Economic Empowerment Strategy, they too are experiencing the "paradox of unhappy growth," becoming simultaneously richer and less happy.<sup>37</sup>

Consider China, for instance, whose move toward a more market-based economy has resulted in both mind-blowing economic growth and colossal reductions in poverty over the past twenty-five years. As economist Richard Easterlin and his colleagues explain:

In the past quarter century China's real [income] per capita has multiplied over five times, an unprecedented feat. By 2012 virtually every urban household had, on average, a color TV, air conditioner, washing machine, and refrigerator. Almost nine in ten had a personal computer, and one in five, an automobile. Rural households lagged somewhat behind urban, but these same symptoms of affluence, which were virtually nonexistent in the countryside in 1990, had become quite common by 2012. In the face of such new-found plenitude, one would suppose that the population's feelings of well-being would have enjoyed a similar multiplication. Yet . . . well-being today is probably less than in 1990.<sup>38</sup>

China is becoming just like us, in the sense that they too are experiencing the paradox of unhappy growth. And similar results have been found for a number of other Majority World countries, which led economist Carol Graham to write the provocatively titled book, *Happiness around the World: The Paradox of Happy Peasants and Miserable Millionaires*.<sup>39</sup>

And closer to home, research has shown that low-income

children in the United States are even more materialistic and more susceptible to consumerist messages than their wealthier peers, making them even more likely to be seduced by the lie at the heart of the Economic Empowerment Strategy: happiness comes from consuming more material things.<sup>40</sup>

So what's the final verdict on the Economic Empowerment Strategy? On one hand, being economically empowered seems better than being enslaved by either disempowering handouts or by material poverty. On the other, despite its apparent success, the individualistic, materialistic consumerism at the very foundation of the Economic Empowerment Strategy has its own form of enslavement, making it a very subtle, albeit incredibly dangerous, case of *when helping hurts*.

We need a different story of change for poor people—and for ourselves—than that of Western Naturalism. At its worst, this story of change provides ongoing handouts of material resources to able-bodied people, thereby undermining their dignity and capability. At its best, it runs the risk of putting poor people onto the same consume-earn-consume-earn treadmill that is destroying the very fabric of mainstream Western civilization. Both outcomes tend to transform poor people into the god of Western Naturalism: a materialistic, individualistic, self-centered, consuming machine.

*We become what we worship, and the god of Western Naturalism and its poverty alleviation strategies is less than human.* Again, the goal isn't to turn Zimbabwe into the United States or to turn decaying neighborhoods into wealthy suburbs. Rather, the goal is to turn all these places into the New Jerusalem. To achieve that goal, we need a different story of change, one that is centered on the person of Jesus Christ. But as we shall see in the next chapter, immersing ourselves in that story is easier said than done.