

Do We Need to Justify Our Spending?

Badi Shams



Do we have to justify our spending to anyone? Most people would answer “No—my money is mine, I earned it, and I can spend it any way I want!”

There are some people who consider themselves hedonists; hedonism is a school of thought which argues that pleasure and happiness are the primary or most important intrinsic goods and the proper aim of human life. Hedonists strive to maximize net pleasure, so for them spending any amount of money in the pursuit of pleasure would seem justifiable.

Entire philosophies have been built around this idea, including one that is called ethical hedonism—the idea that all people have the right to do everything in their power to achieve the greatest amount of pleasure possible. Ethical hedonism maintains that every person's pleasure should far surpass their amount of pain. Started by Aristippus of Cyrene, a student of Socrates, ethical hedonists hold the idea that pleasure constitutes the highest good.

While not denying the importance of pleasure in our lives, of the Baha'i Faith and most religions, look at life differently. Rather than living solely to maximize our own pleasure, we should be trying our best to love the Creator, seek God's pleasure, and therefore love His creation—humanity. Instead of focusing solely on personal pleasure, the religious writings say, we should

turn away from ourselves and focus on a higher purpose in life. I personally know people who are mindful of their spending in order to save so that they can give to charitable causes. My personal guidance is:

"You must assist the poor as much as possible, even by sacrifice of yourself. No deed of man is greater before God than helping the poor. Spiritual conditions are not dependent upon the possession of worldly treasures or the absence of them." -Abdu'l-Baha

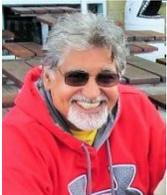
So let us try to look at our personal spending in that light.

In one way, my spending reflects my values. "You are what you buy," as one writer put it. If I spend primarily on myself and my pleasure, it may indicate a lack of empathy for or awareness of the needs of other people. On the other hand, if much of my spending goes to help others, obviously I have come to recognize the extreme poverty in the world. If I am fully aware of the great poverty in the world today, I soon recognize that I'll have to answer to my conscience for any unnecessary or selfish spending. That compassionate awareness and the actions that accompany it can shift my material choices to reflect spiritual decisions. An added benefit of this is combating materialism and consumerism, which weaken our sense of humanity.

No power in the world can force people to re-examine or justify their spending habits, except the power of our own realization and awareness of the level of poverty of our fellow human beings, many of whom are barely surviving.

If only I could see others as members of my human family then I would not let my relatives live in abject poverty, hunger and want, while I spend my resources on luxuries and pleasures for myself.

I believe that humanity is gradually waking up to the fact that we have a very important responsibility and duty to look after the poor and needy, to make sure that they are cared for and live happily. This is a God-given duty. They have been entrusted to us, and by caring for them, we take a step towards a future society in which there are no poor.



Badi Shams is a Baha'i and a mystic at heart whose field of interest is in economics. He has published a compilation "Economics of the Future," and also more recently the book "Economics of the Future Begins Today." He is retired from the educational system. You can read more of Badi's materials on his website www.badishams.net

