**In my next life, I want to be born a dog**

Let me start with a caveat. This is not a write up on economics but about “rational” decisions that we, as humans, make in our everyday lives. According to most economists and even some psychologists, as humans, we consider the costs of our actions against the benefits those actions could bring. We then choose to pursue actions where the expected benefits exceed the costs. For example if I decide to buy a flat screen television, it is because I expect the years of entertainment benefit I get from the television to exceed the purchase price of the television. If I pursue an M.B.A degree, it is not necessarily because of my love of education; it is because I expect to be employed in a high paying job in the future.

But, when I look in retrospect at many of my own decisions in life, I notice that for every one rational decision that I had made in my life, I had made nine decisions that were irrational or difficult to justify. Let me give a few examples. What made me purchase two boxes of detergent that was on sale when I already had four boxes of detergent in stock at home? What made me purchase a $50 tool box from Home Depot that I never used? What makes us take such impulsive and irrational decisions? Is it occasional blackout in our brains? Professor Dan Ariely, Professor of M.I.T. says, “Our irrational behaviors are neither random nor senseless – they are systematic. We make the same mistakes over and over.” Ariely also declares that we not only make the same mistakes repeatedly but we are also incapable of recognizing them as errors or as irrational. Is Professor Ariely right?

Years ago, when I had just moved into the U.S., one of the things that amused me the most about American culture was garage sale. Why do ordinary Americans acquire so many items that, after a year or two, they no longer find useful and put on a garage sale at less than a tenth of the price at which they had originally bought them for. I was amused not because it made no economic sense but because, people purchase items they may not need and soon find out that they are cluttering their household.

We must accept that, as humans, we are equal opportunity irrational decision makers. We are not only quick to acquire things but often we are also reluctant and unhappy to dispose of things that we no longer need or use. About a year ago, one of my friend’s daughter sold her ten year old car that was dented, had scratches all over and broke down every other day. Yet, when she sold the car for a cheap price to a buyer and the buyer came to take possession of the car, she was nearly in tears. She did not want to part with her car, as if the car was her baby who has just been sold to a child abuser. Perhaps Professor Ariely is right in calling humans irrational.

Although neither a psychologist nor a philosopher, as a lay person, I began wondering what makes us act irrationally. Why do we go shopping so frequently, acquire junk that we neither use nor ready to throw out? I am sure you know the answer. We go shopping because it makes us happy. The more things we purchase, the happier we are. I wanted to find an answer to the question: does acquiring things really make us happy? What best place to start than observing my own friends and relatives. All of them are well placed in life, own enough things to hold garage sale everyday for the next five years continually. Yet, none of them seem to be completely happy (myself included). They are always whining and complaining about their lives and how terrible their life is. “The stock portfolio has dropped by 40%; the family has to adjust with just two cars - one of them is already five years old, the husband was refused a promotion by his boss – he hates Indians.” Luckily, my complaints about life are not as big as my friends although, my decibel level of whining is equal to theirs. I love to start my day with complaints; “I have an office meeting at 8:30 A.M., my chairman must be out of his mind. Why can’t he schedule the meeting to a later hour instead of so early in the morning? Now, I have to get up early and beat the downtown traffic. This is terrible: I feel like resigning my job right away (Luckily, I am not irrational enough to resign my job yet).

Obviously, all the possessions that my friends and I own do not appear to make us happy; on the contrary, it seems to be making us cranky and complaining. Since our possessions is not making us happy, is it possible that giving up all the possessions would make us happy? I did not have to look far to find an answer to this question. As I lifted my head from my the computer, I saw my eight month old grandson looking at me from his crib and giving me a big smile. He needs no reason to smile; he just lets out a big smile at regular intervals. According to psychologists, young children below five, smile at least thirty to forty times during a day while a grownup adults smile less than three times a day. What possessions does a child have that makes the child so happy? To my knowledge, the only item that my grandson possesses is his diaper; that too purchased by his parents for his use. He is happy regardless whether he has a diaper or is without one. Definitely, he seems far happier than his grouchy grandfather who owns enough material possessions that requires him to smile at least three hundred times a day.

Young children are not the only ones who are happy in spite of not having any material possessions. Recently one of our friends moved to a new home. They had two truckloads of household items to move to their new home. After all the items were transported, the only chore remaining was to lock their old home, take their two pet dogs and drive to their new home. When they were ready, they beckoned their two dogs to hop into their car; the dogs joyfully jumped into the back seat of the car. The dogs did not want to know in advance which bedroom they will be occupying in the new home or how soft the carpet in the living room is. None of these mattered to them. They were perfectly happy to get into the car and go with their masters to wherever they were taking them to; no questions asked. The only possession these two dogs had were their food and water bowls. What makes these dogs to be so happy with no care in this world? I was very envious of these two dogs. In my next life, I want to be born a dog and live without possessions and without every visiting a shopping center.

Dr. Ram Sriram

[sriramgsu@gmail.com](mailto:sriramgsu@gmail.com)