

Part 5

You are going to read a newspaper article about people's attitudes to their possessions in a digital age. For questions 31–36, choose the answer (A, B, C or D) which you think fits best according to the text. Mark your answers on the separate answer sheet.

Less is More

How do people cut down on their possessions in a digital age

The 17th century French artist Poussin is well-known for his paintings, usually set in serene and idyllic pastoral landscapes, which convey serious lessons for mankind. These messages are sometimes a bit obscure, and some continue to puzzle art historians, but in the picture *Landscape with Diogenes*, things seem relatively straightforward. The ancient philosopher Diogenes is depicted casting away his last possession, a drinking bowl. He realises he doesn't need it after seeing a youth cupping a hand to drink from a river. The significance for us is that Diogenes' spiritual descendants known as 'new minimalists' are now everywhere, if not as radically possession-free as he was.

There are hundreds of websites extolling the virtues of uncluttered living. 'I can carry everything I own,' says Kevin. 'I have a few changes of clothing, laptop, two pots, bowl, spoon, fork, futon and flask. I like sitting on the floor eating fruit, nuts, vegetables and rice.' At this point I really hated Kevin, but I should have known better because he continued, 'The nice thing about a bare room is that you begin to notice other things like the changing sunlight during the day. Many possessions tend to tie one down mentally and physically – seeing too much permanence in inanimate objects rather than being aware of the vitality of the outside world of nature.'

Everyone is trying to cut down on things these days. People are trying to reduce their carbon footprints, their waistlines, their monthly outgoings. What's more, there's a general fear that people are becoming asphyxiated by their possessions, and this is fuelled by the knowledge that, according to innumerable sociological surveys, the leading pastime these days seems to be shopping. It's true, sales of e-readers and e-books outstrip those of paperbacks, and we know that only losers and reactionaries buy camera film today. As a result, the need for bookshelves and photo albums is cut out.

However, today's new minimalists don't urge us to burn our books and crush our CDs, but just make sure we have them as digital files. So, for example, I have digitised versions of some of my old vinyl LP records and haven't, as yet, stirred myself to take the LPs to the nearest charity shop – and I admit I shall probably go on keeping them. Technology has, perhaps, gone beyond our dreams and there is always the lurking suspicion that our hard drives will crash and all will be lost. Far more important, however, is the fact that our memories are so inextricably tied to our possessions that we can't get rid of stuff. No matter how much glossy magazines insist that we should.

We are not exactly suffering withdrawal symptoms as we try to break our addiction to objects. We are just acquiring new stuff that means we can bin or recycle our old stuff. Diogenes, who was quite the cynic philosopher, would have seen through this imposture in seconds. Those who can afford to, buy the kit to make the minimalist dream a reality, but they are still investing in commodities, just different ones from those they collected a decade earlier.

A few years ago I wrote a piece predicting the demise of incredibly expensive watches, believing that they would inevitably be eclipsed by the amazingly more versatile mobile phone, no matter how beautifully crafted and elegant they might be, but they still seem to be covetable objects of conspicuous consumption. Clearly the ostensible function of a £20k watch is negligible enticement to owning it. Here then is another manifestation of the lure of possessions – we are not only sentimental in our attachment to them, but also status driven.

I'm happy to have found another website which seems to solve a whole lot of problems at once – a thriving online advice surgery offering storage solutions. The interior designer responsible for this does not counsel getting rid of stuff, but rather recommends buying more stuff (elegant flexible trugs, colourful lidded containers) to hide the first lot of stuff from view. I love this philosophy – get that decluttered minimalist look, convince yourself you've got your desire for possessions under control, without having to lose a thing. There's no reason to think such bad faith will change soon: we aren't ruthless enough to emulate Diogenes and cast away all our possessions.

- 31 Why does the writer refer to a painting by the artist Poussin?
- A Its message is not as simple as it appears.
 - B Its meaning is only now becoming clear.
 - C It illustrates a very modern trend.
 - D It portrays a very wise philosopher.
- 32 What lesson did the writer take from his own reaction to Kevin's blog?
- A Learn to enjoy your natural surroundings.
 - B Don't be too quick to judge people.
 - C Take pleasure in the simple things of life.
 - D Don't become tied down by possessions.
- 33 In the writer's opinion, what prompts people to want to reduce their possessions?
- A unease about the acquisitive nature of modern society
 - B a desire to take advantage of new technology
 - C a concern about wasting money
 - D an urge to simplify their lives
- 34 The writer thinks minimalism will not succeed in the long term because of people's
- A lack of faith in digital hardware.
 - B laziness in the face of change.
 - C nostalgia for physical objects.
 - D resistance to media pressure.
- 35 The writer suggests Diogenes would have viewed modern attempts at minimalism with
- A indifference.
 - B sympathy.
 - C approval.
 - D contempt.
- 36 According to the writer, people invest in smart new storage in order to
- A ease their conscience over having too many things.
 - B provide a temporary solution to a problem.
 - C make attractive additions to their homes.
 - D indulge their desire to make purchases.