



Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Philosophy and ethical consumption

Book Section

How to cite:

Barnett, Clive; Cafaro, Philip and Newholm, Terry (2005). Philosophy and ethical consumption. In: Harrison, Rob; Newholm, Terry and Shaw, Deirdre eds. *The Ethical Consumer*. London, UK: Sage, pp. 11–24.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [not recorded]

Version: [not recorded]

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://www.sagepub.com/booksProdTOC.nav?prodId=Book227081>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

CHAPTER ONE

Philosophy and Ethical Consumption

Clive Barnett, Philip Cafaro and Terry Newholm

Introduction

This chapter introduces some basic philosophical approaches that are useful in understanding and evaluating ethical consumption issues and ethical consumer behaviour. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section introduces the two main approaches to ethics in moral philosophy, 'consequentialism' and 'deontology', and considers how appropriate they are when applied to questions of consumption. The example of consumer responses to products made using child labour is then explored to show how these two different approaches to ethics can lead to different outcomes.

The second section considers the relevance of another approach, virtue ethics, which it is argued has the advantage of focussing on the broad contexts in which ethical issues arise. Virtue philosophy focuses on flourishing, and living a good life. Empirical evidence suggests that a sense of integrity is more fundamental to the well-being of ethical consumers than either a concern for consequences or rules (though both of these are evident).

In the third section we discuss the distinction between ethical consumption and the ethics of consumption. The former tends to see consumption as a means through which to express one's moral commitments and the latter tends to be critical of the whole panoply of modern consumerism. We also look at work which has focussed on the extent to which all consumers unconsciously consider moral issues in purchasing decisions.

In the conclusion we argue that the future lies in facilitating more widespread public participation in debates about the meaning and purpose of ethical consumption itself.

RULES, CONSEQUENCES AND THE ETHICS OF CONSUMPTION

Moral philosophy often divides ethical theories into two sorts: theories that privilege the *right*, and theories that privilege the *good*. Definitions of the good refer to the properties or outcomes that our actions should endeavour to bring about; definitions of the right refer to what people and organizations ought to do in responding to ethical imperatives. Theories of the good therefore focus upon what outcomes to *promote*, whereas theories of the right focus upon what principles to *honour*, or on questions of duty (Pettit 1991, 237). Discussions of moral philosophy inevitably distinguish between these two broad positions, if only for heuristic purposes

Calculating consequences

Theories which privilege questions of the good are often referred to as *consequentialist* - they are concerned with defining ethical conduct by reference to the consequences or outcomes of actions. These approaches are also sometimes called *teleological*, because they start by specifying an end (or 'telos') independently of moral obligations. They then define the right thing to do as acting to maximize the good. For example, utilitarianism advocates practices that maximize the overall sum happiness.

Peter Singer is an important contemporary philosopher who has employed consequentialist arguments. He is well known for his advocacy of animal welfare. Singer is opposed to the other main approach to moral philosophy – the deontological approach – because he thinks it defines ethics narrowly in terms of a system of rules. Singer argues that consequentialist approaches are more practical and realistic, in so far as starting with goals means that judgements of actions will always depend on contextual factors. Singer's animal welfare advocacy leads him to condemn most consumer uses of animals, including meat-eating and wearing fur or leather. He advocates an environmental ethics which holds that we should, as far as possible, act to avoid unnecessary harm to the environment and sentient creatures (Singer 1997, 284-288). In a recent book, he argues that wealthy westerners should forego frivolous consumption that adds little to our lives, and devote the resources saved to helping the world's poor (Singer 2002, 180-195). For Singer, all this implies that we should adopt an ethic of frugality and simplicity. High levels of consumption are a major problem in modern societies, an unjustified "using up the world" (Singer 1997, 45-64), and a foolish misallocation of resources. Consumption, from this perspective, is associated with the conspicuous and extravagant display of social position (*ibid.*, 238-9).

Singer's arguments are more complex than this brief summary suggests, but they provide a one influential template for understanding the relationship between ethics and consumption. In particular, his argument that there is no good reason to restrict the scope of concern to our nearest and dearest, or indeed only to other people, seems highly appropriate to the field of ethical consumption, in which the fact of being one link in a much wider chain of relationships with strangers in distant locations is often made the basis of appeals to alter one's consumer behaviour in order to bring about more 'ethical' *outcomes*.

Ethical consumption campaigns and policies often rely on consequentialist assumptions and appeals. They tend to assume that ethical decision-making works through the rational calculation of ethical obligations, for which the provision of knowledge, advice, and information is an essential prerequisite. Existing research on consumption therefore often depends on relatively narrow conceptualisations of ethical decision-making by consumers, companies, and public organisations. In particular, ethical consumption is understood in both theory and practice to depend on access to information. This leaves aside the questions of how the goals considered worthy of pursuit through consumption are decided upon, and by whom. It also seems to imply that there is a single measure of what 'the good' is, and of what 'acting ethically' should entail, and that the main challenge is to get consumers to adopt the appropriate forms of conduct and behaviour

Obeying universal rules

In contrast to consequentialist approaches, deontological or duty-based approaches define right action independently of its contribution to human happiness or other favoured goals. Deontological moral theories have gone through a revival since the publication of John Rawls' (1972) *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls explicitly set about developing an alternative approach to utilitarian theories of ethics and justice. He argued that teleological theories implied that it is justifiable to exploit some people, or limit their rights, in pursuit of a more general utilitarian benefit. Utilitarian theories did not "take seriously the distinction between persons", tending to assume that collective choices of whole societies were analogous to individual choices. They therefore ignored what Rawls takes to be an inevitable plurality of views as to what constitutes the good. The plurality of values led Rawls to defend the priority of the right over the good, as a means of ensuring that definitions of the collective good do not come at the cost of basic individual liberties. Rawls' work is important because it highlights the tension between the plurality of personal values and ethical positions on the one hand, and the degree of unity required to pursue collective outcomes and decisions on the other.

Ethical consumption discourses also contain elements of deontological understandings of moral obligation. They often invoke highly universalized arguments about people's responsibilities to care for others – whether this is other people, other creatures, the environment, or future generations, as in the Precautionary Principle. Ethicists who have written about the ethics of global warming, for example, tend to argue along the following lines: (1) Current energy consumption patterns are warming the earth, with unknown but potentially disastrous consequences for human life support systems; (2) current humans have a duty to future generations to pass on fully functioning life support systems; therefore (3) current humans have a duty to significantly scale back our energy consumption (Brown 2002).

It should also be noted that the concepts of human rights and workers' rights which are central to many ethical consumer campaigns, draw strongly on the deontological approach.

The limitations of universal prescriptions

Both consequentialist and deontological approaches are open to two related criticisms that are relevant to ethical consumption. Firstly, both present models of ethical conduct that appear to be far too stringent in the demands they make on the capacities of ordinary people – consequentialist arguments seem to imagine it is possible to collect, collate and calculate all sorts of information and chains of causality prior to, or even after, action. While utilitarian considerations might be relevant in relation to evaluating collective, public decisions, they seem rather unrealistic as complete models of personal choice. Similarly, deontological approaches seem to present an implausible picture of actors rationally judging the degree to which each of their actions conforms to a very abstract principle of universalization. This criticism – of over stringent or unworkable models of ethical conduct - is related to a second problem with both consequentialist and deontological approaches. They end up presenting models of ethical conduct that are highly abstract and inflexible – they seem not to leave room for the complexities and ambivalences of ethical decision making, and in turn, they therefore present a highly abstracted model of the ways in which people are implicated and involved in their actions.

To illustrate the relevance of these concerns to how we approach ethical consumption, consider a couple of examples. Firstly, there is the case of sustainable consumption initiatives, which have become increasingly important in the wake of international programmes such as Local Agenda 21. As Hobson (2002, 2003) observes, the assumption of many of these initiatives is that the exposure of the public to scientific knowledge will trigger changes in consumer behaviour. However, this assumption takes no account of the myriad ways in which consumer goods play important symbolic roles in the ordinary lives of people. As Jackson (2003) observes, material products do more than simply provide basic needs – they also serve to facilitate interpersonal interactions, senses of personal identity and worth, or as means of creativity. To use the vocabulary developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, the value of material consumer goods needs to be understood in terms of the ‘functionings’ and ‘capabilities’ they enable people to develop. Jackson’s argument is that this tendency for sustainable consumption policies to ignore social aspects of consumption accounts for the difficulty of altering consumer behaviour. Simplistic appeals to reduce or forego consumption are “tantamount to demanding that we give up certain key capabilities and freedoms as social beings” (Jackson 2003, 9). The implication of this argument is that ethical consumption cannot depend solely on either consequentialist or deontological approaches, because these fail to register the motivations behind a great deal of consumer behaviour. What may be required, then, is an approach that is more sensitive to the experiential horizons of ordinary consumers, and in particular to the ways in which particular sorts of ethical conduct is already embedded in everyday consumption practice.

A second example of the limitations of abstract models of moral responsibility is the recent emergence of concerted anti-sweatshop campaigns in the United States, especially on University campuses. It is common to think of boycott campaigns in terms of bringing to view the connections between the consumption of particular products, such as Nike sportswear for example, and the oppressive or exploitative working conditions in which these are made. It would be easy to think of these sorts of campaigns in consequentialist terms. They aim at changing individual or collective conduct by providing knowledge of spatially distant contexts and empowering individuals to accept their responsibilities. Consequentialist responsibility is understood to depend on a clear calculation of the relations between our voluntary actions and their consequences. However, the idea that ethical consumption can work simply by bringing to view the chain of consequences and connections between consumers and producers is highly simplistic. As Iris Young (2003) has argued, this notion of responsibility tends to elide important distinctions between being causally responsible for events, being a beneficiary, and being in a position to actually change outcomes. This model of responsibility ends up being overwhelming as well as highly unfair in its ascription of obligations to change things.

Young argues that, in fact, anti-sweatshop campaigns are important because they have developed a non-individualised, political sense of responsibility that departs from a wholly individualistic understanding of causality, agency, and blame. The success of anti-sweatshop movements depends, she suggests, on campaigners and activists being able to provide frames in which consumers can acknowledge responsibility for distant contexts without being overwhelmed.

Young (2003) implies that people are likely to be moved to changing their consumption behaviour by all sorts of different considerations. This is also the implication of empirical research on consumption boycotts, which suggests that these

are not forms of collective action, but that boycotters are motivated by personal factors such as the emotional expression of individuality, so that boycotting serves as a vehicle for moral self-realization (Kozinets and Handleman 1998). This is important because it suggests that ethical consumption is not simply a matter of wholly self-less beneficence, but that when successful, campaigns will combine appeals to both other-regarding and self-regarding virtues.

One problem, then, with a narrowly consequentialist understanding of moral reasoning is that by implying that we should act in a manner wholly oriented to collective outcomes, it ignores what acting morally actually means to people. As Derek Parfit points out (1984, 27), if we all acted as pure do-gooders, it might actually make things worse rather than not better. This is because being a pure do-gooder would involve so much self-sacrifice that it would decrease the overall sum of happiness. Parfit's point is that being wholly self-less would involve acting against many of the motives that we act upon when we love others, care, show concern, and so on. The implication of this argument is that changing people's consumption practices is probably not best pursued by simply appealing to people's sense of self-sacrifice or altruism, nor by supposing that it requires a wholesale abandonment of self-interested concerns.

We saw above that one advantage of consequentialism is that it is contextually sensitive, so that it does not hold that the value of a particular course of action is determined in advance by a set of rules. However, if this is one charge made against deontological approaches, the counter-argument is that consequentialism can, in principle, lead to an indifference to the righteousness of actions – to a privileging of ends over means Parfit (1984) . We might ask whether it matters if ethical consumption campaigns realise their aims and objectives by: a) actively altering people's sense of what is the best thing to do, or; b) simply by more anonymous changes to consumption patterns. Is ethical consumption simply about aggregate outcomes – reduced pollution, less exploitative work conditions, etc – or is it also about actually changing the sense of self held by ordinary people? Many advocates of ethical consumption see the adoption of a more conscious approach to consumption as an important objective of their overall strategy.

If neither pure consequentialist nor pure deontological approaches capture the complexity of moral action, perhaps it might be better not to abandon these approaches, but recast them in less all-or-nothing ways. Amartya Sen distinguishes between consequentialism and consequentialist reasoning. He suggests that consequentialism demands “that the rightness of actions be judged entirely by the goodness of consequences, and this is a demand not merely of taking consequences into account, but of ignoring everything else” (Sen 1987, 75). However, Sen suggests that it is possible to develop what he calls “consequence-sensitive deontological” arguments (1987, 76). This requires acknowledging that rights – the primary concern of deontologists – have both an *instrumental* and an *intrinsic* value. This means that deontology is itself not immune to consequentialist considerations: rights are not only valuable intrinsically, but also because of the goals they enable people to pursue. What all of this suggests is that it is more appropriate to think of any ethical theory as combining an understanding of the good with an understanding of the right in a distinctive way (Pettit 1991, 230).

Products made using child labour

To illustrate some of the arguments made above about the complexity of ethical action, let us consider how consequentialism and deontology might be applied to the example of products made by child labour. Firstly, the deontologist might refuse to buy products made using child labour on principle, arguing that this violates a fundamental moral rule against the exploitation of children. After all, she would not wish her own children to labour, less still in exploitative conditions, and must universalise this rule. However, the dilemma arises when one is faced with the argument that the fate of children is worsened by her action – an important source of family income might be reduced (see Meiklejohn 1998). In contrast, on these grounds, the utilitarian might buy products made using child labour, since not to do so would cause more harm than good. She might also have a reasonable, but not certain, expectation that in the long-term trade conditions would improve. However, this consumer is still faced with the question of when she should withdraw support for iniquitous producer practices?

Forms of consequentialist reasoning can therefore help us to consider our external environment and our effect on the happiness of others. However, we cannot ignore our own moral beliefs in considering these sorts of issues (Norman 1998). It is not a case of *choosing* between the happiness of the many and our own egoistic morals. Our own unhappiness as ethical consumers is not simply to be weighed in the generality of happiness. That we are concerned *at all* is because we are moral agents. Any capacity for moral agency is indivisible from the sense of personal integrity upon which it is partly based in the first place. We cannot entirely derive our notion of what is the ethical thing to do from an external consideration of effects on others, thereby ignoring our own intuitions of right and wrong.

The deontologist and the consequentialist seem to make cold calculations of what it is right to do, based either on a calculation of the outcomes of buying products made by child labour, or by reference to a general rule against ever so doing. Neither approach gives adequate attention to what motivates people to be concerned by this question to begin with. This is the question that virtue theorists do address, and virtue ethics represents a third approach we consider in relation to ethical consumption. Virtue theorists are concerned with what we should do, but they relate this to the question of what kinds of people we should aim to be, and how this sort of consideration shapes our actions. So, faced with the concern about child labour, our consumer might be advised by a virtue theorist to be compassionate and generous. Clearly she should be concerned with the children's plight, not shrink from paying more for a product if that is appropriate and not overly prioritise her own interest. A generous and compassionate mother might campaign to challenge entrenched interests. Nevertheless she would have to weigh these actions against the needs of her own children. The main focus of this approach, then, in our case, would be upon the cultivation of those dispositions that enable consumers to juggle what are often equally compelling ethical imperatives in a reasonable fashion. The ethical issues raised in "decisions concerning what, whether and how much to consume" (Cafaro 2001), cannot be reduced to simple calculations of outcomes or rules, but require a more careful consideration of the complexities of ordinary ethical conduct in everyday life.

Summary: Restoring the social focus

We have suggested that much of the focus of ethical consumption is on the individual. How and what individuals consume is critical to the project of ethical consumption and critical to their understanding of themselves. Both consequentialist and deontological forms of moral reasoning tend to focus on individual conduct. However, it is important to re-acknowledge that individuals consume within broader networks of social relations and cultural codes. This allows us to recognise that all consumer behaviour, however ordinary and routine, is likely to be shaped by diverse values of caring for other people and concern for fairness. The success of ethical consumption campaigns is likely to be enhanced if they connect up with these ordinary and routine values of care and concern that already subsist in everyday consumption, rather than setting off ‘ethical consumption’ as a completely different set of activities that requires a wholesale abandonment of self-concern. In the next section, with these thoughts in mind, we turn to consider the relevance of virtue ethics, which has the potential of re-focussing our attention on the whole context of social life in which questions of individual responsibility arise and are worked out.

LIVING VIRTUOUSLY AND MOTIVATING ETHICAL CONSUMPTION

Consequentialism and deontology do not exhaust the approaches to ethics that are relevant to ethical consumption. A third approach, virtue ethics, has become an increasingly important alternative in recent moral philosophy as an alternative to both outcome-oriented consequentialism and rule-based deontology (MacIntyre 1984, Swanton 2003). Virtue theories redefine the overarching question of ethical theory away from ‘What ought I do?’, to one of ‘What sort of person ought I strive to be?’. Virtue ethics makes new sorts of consumption arguments possible. Virtue theories concern themselves less with our duties toward others, and more with specifying personal excellence and societal flourishing, and the best ways to achieve them. While consequentialists and deontologists work to justify altruism against the obstacles of self-interest, virtue ethicists try to awaken us to our enlightened self-interest in caring for others. While the former’s main question is: “What are my duties to others and their responsibilities to me?” the latter’s is: “What is the good life and how can we go about living it?” Virtue theories work to specify the character traits, or virtues, that lead to human flourishing (Hursthouse 1999, Foot 2001). Such virtues include justice, compassion, tolerance, courage, patience, persistence, intelligence, imagination and creativity. Virtue, on this approach, is a synonym for human excellence and goodness (Taylor 2002, Cafaro 2004).

Virtue theory pays attention to the habits and practices through which virtues are learned. It is thus well placed to discuss which habits and practices might lead us to act in ways that are, for example, more environmentally sustainable. Virtue ethics is appropriate to the analysis of ethical consumption because there is empirical evidence to suggest that ‘ethical consumers’ are motivated primarily by a sense of personal integrity. Kozinets and Handelman (1998) speak of “[boycott] actions that remind and connect the individual to their deeper moral self.” Similarly, respondents to recent research often expressed concern for the consequences of their consumption practices but more fundamentally a desire to respond to their choices with personal integrity (Newholm 2000; Shaw and Shiu 2003). Even if consumers rarely feel able to foresee the consequences of their choices, what they seemed sure of was that, as one

respondent put it, “I couldn't bare to do nothing” (Shaw and Newholm 2003). In this concern we see a merging of the self-interested and altruistic aspects of morality.

From one perspective, virtue ethics allows us to clarify what the problem with consumption is, by asking the question whether consumption as an activity is virtuous or not. There is a long tradition of philosophers arguing that a life devoted to consumption is ignoble and limiting. Thus, Aristotle wrote in his *Nicomachean Ethics*: “The many, the most vulgar, would seem to conceive of the good and happiness as pleasure, and hence they also like the life of gratification. Here they appear completely slavish, since the life they decide on is a life for grazing animals” (Aristotle 1999, 8). This argument sees consumption as the satisfaction of pleasure, that is, as an essentially hedonistic practice. It is also assumed that consumption is essentially a passive process, and therefore it contravenes the imperative to actively develop one's capacities upon which virtue theories put considerable emphasis. On these grounds, too much emphasis on consumption could be seen to lead to a passive life that is ultimately unsatisfying.

One problem with virtue ethics, however, is that it can easily lead to a paternalist and censorious judgement of the apparent *vices* of specific social groups. This risk follows from the idea that, as Phillipa Foot puts it, the virtues are “*corrective*”, that is, that the value of different virtues (such as courage, or temperance, or charity) emerges at “a point at which there is some temptation to be resisted or deficiency of motivation to be made good” (1978,8) For example, she continues, “it is only because fear and the desire for pleasure often operate as temptations that courage and temperance exist as virtues at all” (1978 9). The main point that follows from this observation is that any contemporary conceptualisation of virtue needs to be extremely sensitive to the underlying image of human life that determines where ‘temptations’ and ‘deficiencies of motivation’ are to be identified. The virtues must not simply reproduce a highly problematic superiority that covers over a whole set of class and gender stereotypes about which sorts of people are susceptible to a relative lack of proper virtue. As Foot observes, it is possible that “the theory of human nature lying behind the traditional list of the virtues and vices puts too much emphasis on hedonistic and sensual impulses” (1978, 10). This is a particularly telling point with respect to the application of virtue theory to issues of consumption. A virtue ethics approach could easily lead to an analysis that sees the main problem in terms of unchecked hedonism and desire for pleasure by selfish, unethical consumers. Such an analysis is likely to alienate the sorts of people with which ethical consumption campaigns most need to communicate.

The critical question with respect to the relevance of virtue ethics to consumption issues is how to think of the relationship between individual actions, consumption, and broader conceptions of the good life. In this respect, in order to avoid the paternalism noted above, it might be more fruitful to rethink what we understand consumption to be. Rather than thinking of consumption as a set of distinct practices (shopping, eating, and so on) set off from other activities, and carried on by a particular sort of social subject (the consumer), which may be more or less virtuous, it might be more fruitful to think of consumption as one aspect of any social practice. This is the approach suggested by the sociologist Alan Warde (2004). He defines consumption “as a process whereby agents engage in appropriation, whether for utilitarian, expressive or contemplative purposes, of goods, services, performances, information or ambience, whether purchased or not, over which the agent has some degree of discretion” (2004, 5). According to this definition, consumption is not

understood as a practice as such, but rather as “a moment in almost every practice” (2004, 6). This shift of emphasis onto the sorts of practices that people are engaged in is consistent with the value that virtue ethics places on thinking about the roles and activities in which people are involved. This practice-based conceptualisation of consumption maintains the emphasis on the roles through which people cultivate different dispositions towards the world and others, but understands these primarily in relation to the collective modes for organising the conduct of everyday life. It enables questions to be asked about the sorts of consumption-effects embedded in different practices to which people may feel more or less strongly committed (e.g. being a caring parent, being a loyal friend, being loyal supporter of a football team, and so on). And it opens up these questions in such a way that makes it possible to differentiate between actors who may be differentially empowered to change these consumption effects – the key issue identified by Iris Young in developing a fully political sense of responsibility in relation to consumption practices. Being able to make these sorts of differentiations is crucial to developing an effective sense of the sorts of *actors* and the types of *agency* that are required to bring about changes in aggregate patterns of consumption.

Partiality and impartiality in ethics

One important distinction between virtue theory and both consequentialist and deontological approaches is that the latter two are both universalistic in their orientation – morality is understood according to notions of universal benevolence, or as acting in accord with principles that can be universalised to all others. In contrast, virtue theory does not argue that either universal benevolence or duty is the best motive for acting. Virtue theory tends to imply a version of partiality in ethics, in which caring for and acting to benefit some people more than others is morally acceptable. This seems to conflict with some basic principles of ethical consumption, which often calls for an extension of the scope of our concern beyond the confines of nearest and dearest, or compatriots, to distant others, to non-human animals, and to the environment. The key challenge presented by virtue ethics, then, is that of finding ways of combining *intimate caring* for particular others with *humanitarian caring* about others in general (Slote 2000, 337-339). The moral concerns that motivate love, or caring, cannot simply be extended or aggregated across all contexts without undermining the very value of those virtues. Rather than assuming that this justifies according lesser priority to general or universal principles of moral action, we might instead interpret the qualified defence of partiality in virtue ethics as raising the question of how to develop forms of practice which can successfully connect both partial and universalistic motivations. So for example, it might lead us to acknowledge that concerns over the ethics of food production – evident in campaigns around GM foods, the use of pesticides, the BSE crisis, and the growth of organic food production – are not simply motivated by abstract concerns for ‘the environment’ or for ‘future generations’, but are intimately bound up with the forms of care and concern that shape everyday social relations of domestic family life. They are manifest, for example, in a concern over the long-term health risks of the food that parents provide for their kids. While clearly a partial concern on the one hand, this type of care for others can lead to ways of living that are beneficial for all if it leads to changes in consumer activity on a sufficient scale.

This observation underscores the importance of taking account of the concerns that motivate ordinary consumption practices. Rather than thinking of ‘ethical consumption’ being set-off against ‘unethical’ consumption, we might do better to recognise the forms of ethical concern always embedded in consumption practices. If ‘ethical’ is taken, in a Foucauldian sense, to refer to the activity of constructing a life by negotiating practical choices about personal conduct, then the very basics of routine consumption – a concern for value for money, quality, and so on - can be understood to presuppose a set of specific learned ethical competencies. These competencies make up what one might call the habitual, practical dimensions of consumption practice (Hobson 2003). Daniel Miller’s ethnographic accounts of everyday consumption behaviours in North London (Miller 1998) illustrate the extent to which shopping is always laden with values, as a means of expressing concern and care for others. It has been argued that Miller’s work shows us “how far shopping is directed towards others, particularly family members, and how far it is guided by moral sentiments towards them and about how to live. Far from being individualistic, self-indulgent, and narcissistic, much shopping is based on relationships, indeed on love. It often involves considerable thoughtfulness about the particular desires and needs of others, though it may also reflect the aspirations which the shopper has for them, thereby functioning as a way of influencing them” (Sayer 2003, 353). Given this sense of the ordinary moral dimensions of shopping and other routine consumption practices, the emergence of ethical consumption as a field of marketing, campaigning, and policy-making can be understood in terms of the ways in which the practical moral dispositions of everyday consumption are re-articulated by policy-makers, campaigning organisations, academics and businesses. Formal campaigns and policies of ethical consumption involve making the ethical dispositions already implicit in routine consumption the objects of explicit strategies of changing people’s sense of the scope and quality of their responsibilities.

This same point also implies that certain sorts of consumption, and certain sorts of commodities, might lend themselves better to ethical consumption initiatives than others. This might depend on the degree to which particular commodities are embedded in everyday practices of care that enable the mobilisation of partial modes of concern to be re-articulated with more extended and expansive forms of concern. This section has argued that virtue ethics moves us beyond stringent models of universal rules or the sense that universal benevolence requires the abandonment of self-interest. This approach points towards the importance of finding ways of connecting up self-regarding concerns and other-regarding concerns, and with combining partiality and universality in creative ways. As Colin Campbell argues, “both self-interested and idealistic concerns are involved in consumerism” (1998, 151-2). Consumption, therefore, cannot be simply divided into good and bad or condemned and extricated from our cultures to leave some untainted good.

Summary: Ethical consumption and ordinary consumption

Conventional discourses on ethical consumption tend to polarise arguments: fair trade conjures an unequivocally unfair trade; voluntary simplicity presupposes consumerism; vegetarianism problematises omnivory; veganism problematises vegetarianism; and in the broadest sense ethical consumption conjures unethical consumption. However, not all ‘free’ trade is necessarily unfair. Consumerism is always wrapped up with morality, as when someone buys a bigger car to take the elderly to church. Pork can be bought by a parent who believes they are doing their

best for their offspring, since beef was contaminated with BSE. It is the way that a simply defined ethical consumption creates pejorative dualities that we are questioning here. Social science research on consumption has found that much ordinary consumption is suffused with moral rhetoric and ethical concern. Much of the moralising is localised around family and friends, but can be seen as part of peoples' self image, their integrity. Three important points follow from this. Firstly, without this ordinary ethics of consumption there would be no basis upon which to build an ethical consumption agenda. Secondly, to cast ordinary consumption as unequivocally unethical threatens to alienate ordinary people rather than recruit them. And thirdly, ethical consumption should refer to discussions that seek to refine consumption and non-consumption towards more broadly ethical practices. This is not to argue that all ordinary consumption is acceptable. Rather it is to recognise that the basis for an ethical consumption is to be found in the morality of ordinary consumption.

ETHICAL CONSUMPTION OR THE ETHICS OF CONSUMPTION?

The preceding discussion of the pitfalls of moralizing in discussions of ethical consumption suggests that it might be useful to distinguish between two senses in which ethics and consumption can be related. On the one hand, there is a set of debates concerning the 'ethics of consumption', where what is at stake is a judgement concerning the morality of a whole system of provisioning, that of capitalist commodity production (see Crocker and Linden 1998). This is perhaps the dominant sense in discussions of environmental problems, debates about sustainable consumption, and in movements such as voluntary simplicity and the slow food movement. Here, it is 'consumption' itself that is the object of moral evaluation. The objective of these projects is the reduction of levels of aggregate consumption.

On the other hand, ethical consumption also refers to a set of debates and strategies in which consumption is not so much the *object* of moral evaluation, but more a *medium* for moral and political action. This is the dominant sense in the case of consumer boycotts, ethical audits, corporate social responsibility initiatives, and fair trade campaigns. In these cases, there is no *necessary* implication that 'ethical consumption' implies less consumption, quite the reverse. Commodity consumption as a mode of provisioning is taken as given - assumed to be open to some transformation certainly - but not taken as the object of moral evaluation as such. Rather, the fact of commodity consumption as a means of social reproduction is understood as being a potential resource for changing other practices and patterns: consumption as voting.

These two senses of ethics and consumption are not completely separate. Lots of ethical consumption campaigns are geared towards reducing overall levels of consumption. Others also play upon the standard desires and motivations of consumer behaviour, deploying the strategies of advertising, marketing, branding and so on. Many combine elements of both emphases. But the distinction is important to keep in focus for two reasons. Firstly, it raises questions about how these two distinct concerns – consumption as the *object* and the *medium* of moral action – are connected in different contexts. Secondly, it raises the question of just what are the moral and political issues most at stake in discussions of ethical consumption.

The moralization of consumption

One recurring concern of those promoting ethical consumption is the worry that this set of practices is the reserve of a relatively privileged stratum of highly affluent consumers. The niche comprises those able to spend the time, energy, and money to buy organic, drink fair trade, and invest ethically. This sense of ethical consumption as a practice of social distinction, to use Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) idea, is connected to the sense of ethical consumption being associated with highly moralistic forms of discourse. This moralistic stance extends to a great deal of academic, policy, and campaigning research and debate about consumption. There is a long tradition of criticizing mass commodity consumption as a means of criticizing much wider objects such as capitalism, modernity, the materialism of popular culture and planetary destruction.

Danny Miller (1998) argues that the moralistic tone of so many debates about consumption is itself open to criticism. Miller's argument is based on a particular philosophical position, one which is suspicious of the romanticised notions of authenticity that often underlie criticisms of consumption as a realm of social and cultural alienation. Miller holds to a philosophy of subject-object relations, according to which subjectivity and inter-subjectivity is always mediated by material objects. From this perspective, attention is focussed upon the symbolic meaning of material objects as mediators of social interaction. As we already noted, Miller has demonstrated in empirical depth the ways in which love and care are mediated by practices of commodity consumption. In the modern world, Miller argues, commodities become the mediums for objectifying and performing values and moral orders, perhaps most obviously through various forms of gift-giving. Consumption is a sphere in which people routinely negotiate moral dilemmas. As Robert Wilk observes, "consumption is in essence a moral matter, since it always and inevitably raises issues of fairness, self vs group interests, and immediate vs delayed gratification" (2001, 246).

Miller's argument is that, in a world of commodities, consumption *per se* is neither moral nor immoral, rather the key issue is whether "people appropriate this plethora of goods in order to enhance and not to detract from our devotion to other people" (1998, 231). And Miller makes the provocative argument that ensuring this depends on the consumption of more, not less, industrially produced commodities. This runs counter to the general positions of recent movements around consumption, such as the voluntary simplicity movement, which hold that poverty is a product of particular modes of consumption (see Wilk, 2001, 257). Such movements do aim more directly at reducing consumption levels.

Miller's is very much a conception of consumption as a *medium* of ethical conduct. He is highly critical of traditions of thought and activism that see the ethics of consumption in terms of excess. These are guilty, he suggests, of adopting "an ascetic repudiation of the need for goods *per se*" (ibid., 241). Miller places poverty at the centre of the moral analysis of consumption, with surprising and provocative results. Poverty, he argues, is constituted by a lack of material resources. Arguments about over-consumption, which define the objectives of ethical consumption in terms of the reduction of overall levels of consumption, work against "an ethics based on the passionate desire to eliminate poverty. We live in a time when most human suffering is the direct result of the lack of goods. What most of humanity desperately needs is more consumption, more pharmaceuticals, more housing, more transport, more books, more computers" (Miller 2001, 227-8). The distinction between ethical consumption

and the ethics of consumption is, then, a key tension within the whole field of the ethics and politics of consumption. It draws sharply into focus the question of just what are the moral or ethical stakes in consumption, and in particular, whether it is possible to square different moral values such as freedom and sustainability, autonomy and responsibility.

Questioning consumption

Bernard Williams (1985) has argued that what he calls the ‘morality system’ has led to philosophers focussing on abstract models that narrowly define ethics in terms of a chain of relations between agency, obligations, and blame. His argument is that a focus on universal, often prescriptive understandings of moral action excludes from consideration factors that are not easily reduced to obligations, consequences, or rights. Following Williams’ argument, that the morality system is just one particular frame in which ethical concerns are interpreted, we might return to the observation that consumption has become increasingly politicized as an area of activity with a new critical agenda. As Robert Wilk (2001) suggests, the moralism that pervades discussions of consumption is itself worthy of study. The questions of who makes moral arguments about consumption, about how these arguments are deployed, and about what effects they have on different people, are important if we are to understand the complexities through which changing consumption patterns develop and evolve over time, and the ways in which interventions may be made into these processes.

It is important to recognise that consumption is itself an arena through which people learn the meanings of what it is to act morally (Barnett and Cloke 2004). In this respect, the emphasis found in the work of Sen and Nussbaum on the role of material goods providing a means through which people are able to cultivate certain sorts of competencies and capacities, including those of caring for others and participating in public life, is valuable. It suggests that the ways in which ethics and consumption are related are much more complicated than simply quantifying the extent to which particular practices or products do or do not conform to a particular measure of ‘ethicality’. This is not to undervalue the campaigns that develop accessible discourses to boycott the unethical or promote the ethical and rally collective action. Rather it is important to acknowledge both the intrinsic and instrumental value of involving ordinary people in the decisions and debates about what goals and objectives, rights and obligations should guide the ethical evaluation of consumption practices.

Such debates, however, do not take place in a vacuum. As Cafaro argues (2001), affluent cultures are suffused with a discourse of individual self-interest and collective economic growth. Economics abstracts Adam Smith’s theory of the good flowing from self-interested action from its moral grounding to produce a mere multiplicity of consumer preferences. Economic growth results and is presented itself as a moral good. In this sense no one and no society need question its preferences. We have argued for the counter position. Much open debate, continuing discussion and some introspection about our ordinary consumption are valuable to prevent ossification into the moral or immoral imperatives of others.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have outlined some basic philosophical approaches to ethics that are relevant to the area of ethical consumption. These include deontological

approaches and consequentialist approaches, which focus on notions of obligation and on good outcomes, respectively. We have argued that such formalistic philosophical positions can be too demanding and abstract for application in everyday consumption. Consequentialism would presuppose the individuals' capacity to make demanding and overly disinterested calculations about what action would produce the most desired aggregate outcomes. Deontology draws the consumer into a set of universal obligations whose development he or she need not be party to. These approaches are also too demanding in the sense that they imply stringent accounts of what is required to act ethically. Imagine how focused you would have to be on consequential calculations or rule following to be a comprehensive ethical consumer! Being constrained to act within dictates or calculations also implies that something important about one's own moral motivations would be lost.

Nonetheless, both of these theoretical traditions are an indispensable part of an applied ethical consumption:

- 1). Consequentialist philosophies necessarily draw our attention to the outcomes of our consumer practices.
- 2). Deontological philosophies cause us to generalise our consumer practices and therefore to think from the position of others.

We have suggested that recent work in the area of virtue ethics is useful for approaching ethical consumption. This is because it focuses on a broader and more practical array of life's considerations than either deontology or consequentialism. Virtue philosophy focuses us on *flourishing*, and living a good life is within our immediate grasp. Empirical evidence suggests that a sense of moral-integrity is more fundamental to the well-being of ethical consumers than either a concern for consequences or rules (though both of these are evident). Virtue theory implies a degree of partiality when having to decide between competing claims. This is a necessary introspection that we think cannot be avoided in ethical consumption. However, this flexibility and self-concern can lead to unwarranted ideas of superiority and inferiority. This tendency can be moderated, we argue, by acknowledging the forms of morality embedded in ordinary consumption practices.

Thus, the mere application of consequentialist, deontological or virtue philosophies does not in itself unravel the conundrums of contemporary consumption. We have illustrated this with examples of the conflicting conclusions that might be drawn from applying them. This divergence of conclusions occurs not least because good consumption practices might have temporally limited applications; what is good one time might be detrimental another. Since a simple set of unchanging ethical consumer practices is neither possible nor desirable, we conclude that they must be formulated and reformulated in a continuous, open social debate. An important dimension of ethical consumption initiatives therefore becomes finding ways not just of enabling people to change their consumption practices, although that is important, but also of facilitating more widespread public participation in debates and decisions about the meanings, objectives and responsibilities involved in contemporary consumption.

References

- Aristotle (1999). *Nicomachean Ethics*. 2nd ed. Translated by Terence Irwin. Indianapolis: Hackett Press.
- Barnett, C. and Cloke, P. (2004). 'Consuming Ethics: Articulating the Subjects and Spaces of Ethical Consumption', *Antipode*, In Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction* London: Routledge.
- Brown, Donald (2002). *American Heat: Ethical Problems with the United States Response to Global Warming*. Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Cafaro, Philip (2001) 'Economic Consumption, Pleasure and the Good Life' *Journal of Social Philosophy* 32, pp.471-486.
- Cafaro, Philip (2004). *Thoreau's Living Ethics: Walden and the Pursuit of Virtue*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Campbell, C. (1998) 'Consuming the goods and the goods of consuming' pp139-154 in David Crocker and Toby Linden (eds.), *Ethics of Consumption: the good life, justice and global stewardship* London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Crocker, David & Linden, Toby: (1998) (eds.), *Ethics of Consumption: the good life, justice and global stewardship* London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Foot, P. (1978). *Virtues and Vices and other essays in moral philosophy*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Foot, P (2001). *Natural Goodness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hobson, K. (2002). 'Thinking Habits into Action: the role of knowledge and process in questioning household consumption practices' *Local Environment* 8, 95-112.
- Hobson, K. (2003). 'Competing Discourses of Sustainable Consumption: Does the 'Rationalisation of Lifestyles' Make Sense?' *Environmental Politics* 11, 95-120.
- Hursthouse, R. (1999). *On Virtue Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jackson, T. and Michaelis, L. (2003). 'Policies for sustainable consumption'. Report for the Sustainable Development Commission. London.
- Kozinets, R. V. and Handelman, J. M. (1998). 'Ensouling consumption: A netographic exploration of boycotting behaviour' *Advances in Consumer Research* 25, 475-480.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair (1984). *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Meiklejohn, David: (1998) 'Child Labour' *Ethical Consumer* No.51 p30.
- Miller, D. (1998). *A Theory of Shopping* (Cambridge, Polity Press).
- Miller, D. (2001). 'The Poverty of Morality' *Journal of Consumer Culture* 1(2), 225-243.
- Newholm, T. (2000). *Understanding the ethical consumer: Employing a frame of bounded rationality*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. Milton Keynes: The Open University.
- Norman, Richard (1998) *The Moral Philosophers: an introduction to ethics* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pettit, P. (1991) 'Consequentialism', in P. Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers. pp. 230-240.
- Rawls, J. (1972). *A Theory of Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sayer, A. (2003). '(De)commodification, consumer culture, and moral economy' *Environment and Planning D; Society and Space* 21: 341-357.
- Sen, A. (1987). *On Ethics and Economics*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

- Shaw, Deirdre and Newholm, Terry (2003). 'Consumption Simplicity among Ethical Consumers' Serge P. Shohov (Ed.) *Advances in Psychology: Volume 20* pp.175-192.
- Shaw, D. S. and Shiu, E. (2003) "Ethics in Consumer Choice: A Multivariate Modelling Approach". *European Journal of Marketing*, 37 (10).
- Singer, P. (1993). *Practical Ethics* (2nd Edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Singer, P. (1997). *How are We to Live? Ethics in Age of Self-Interest*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Singer, Peter (2002). *One World: the Ethics of Globalization*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Slote, M. (2000). 'Virtue ethics', in H. LaFollette (eds.), *The Blackwell Guide To Ethical Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, pp. 325-347.
- Swanton, Christine (2003). *Virtue Ethics: a Pluralistic View*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, Richard (2002). *Virtue Ethics*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Warde, A. (2004). 'Theories of practice as an approach to consumption' ESRC/AHRB *Cultures of Consumption Programme Working Paper* No. 6. Available at <<http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk/publications.html>>
- Wilk, R. (2001). 'Consuming morality' *Journal of Consumer Culture* 1(2), 245-260.
- Williams, B. (1985). *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. London. Fontana.
- Young, I. M. (2003). 'From guilt to solidarity: Sweatshops and political responsibility' *Dissent*, Spring, 39-44.