Ethics of Consumption

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THE OXFORD COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION was established by Mansfield College, Oxford in 1999 and is chaired by the former UK Secretary of State for the Environment, John Gummer MP. The goal of the Commission is to act as a catalyst and facilitator for the action needed from governments, business, citizens, the media and others to achieve sustainable patterns of consumption. The Commission will produce an Action Plan, setting out practical steps that can be taken to move towards sustainable consumption, to be presented at the UN Earth Summit in 2002.

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ETHICS OF CONSUMPTION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper is concerned with the ethics of consumption – that is, the concepts of right and wrong and the rules of behaviour that influence consumption. It addresses several questions: What drives us to ever-increasing consumption? What new ethical principles would be needed for sustainable development? And what resources can we draw on to develop such principles, in both traditional and emerging systems of thought?

Searching for an ethic of sustainable consumption

Sustainable development has been defined as "development that meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs". This definition encapsulates two goals: that of further economic development to meet the needs of those currently in poverty; and that of preventing environmental damage and resource depletion which may compromise the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

While many in modern society view nature as existing to serve humanity's needs, others believe that humanity has a responsibility of stewardship of nature, and that it should be safeguarded for its own sake. An ethic of sustainable consumption may have to accommodate a wide variety of views on the relationship between humanity and nature.

Governments, businesses and NGOs have been reluctant to ask what makes human needs so compelling and how they are legitimated in our society. The word "need" is used in many ways: as a strongly felt lack or want; as a positive motivation or desire; and as a necessary condition for something, such as survival, social acceptance or health. The failure to distinguish these different meanings has confused efforts to agree on the morality of need-fulfilment.

Amartya Sen has developed a more useful concept of the "capabilities" that individuals must have if they are to "flourish" or to live a good life. While some capabilities depend on material consumption, others require particular kinds of freedom or social relationship. Individuals require different capabilities to flourish, depending on their personal circumstances and the community they live in. While the good life is to some extent subjective, it is also socially defined.

In modern society, the good life is defined largely in material terms. Affluent modern lifestyles entail consumption far in excess of that needed for survival, health and happiness: an increasing level and diversity of material consumption is required to function socially. Consumption levels are driven upwards by the competitive market system, individuals' competition for social status, technological change, the culture of "progress" and rising expectations, and habituation to higher consumption levels. Any effort to invent a less consumption-oriented vision of human flourishing must take all of these forces into account.

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Values in the modern consumer culture

The consumer culture sees increasing consumption as the main route to the good life. The values and ethics of this culture emerged from traditions that developed in Europe from the 16th century onwards. The early Enlightenment brought a commitment to progress, liberty, equality, the rational individual, and an instrumental view of nature (it viewed nature as existing for human use). The later Romantic Movement placed new emphasis on

aesthetic appreciation, emotional individualism, creativity, self-expression, and the preservation of nature. These two traditions help shape the worldviews and self-images of most western individuals, and contribute to modern debates such as that over sustainable development.

The consumer society is subject to a variety of unresolved tensions caused by internal inconsistencies in these traditions and the continual dialogue with other traditions. The last two centuries have seen continuing political struggle between the ideologies of liberty and equality, between the individual and the community, and between humanity and nature. Modern culture is committed to the freedom of individuals to pursue their own version of the good life, yet many people feel tied in to the culture of consumerism, which defines human flourishing in material terms. There is also a contradiction between our ethic of just deserts, which says that we have an obligation to work if we wish to live well, and the 20th century ideal of meeting universal human needs.

Values from other cultures

Traditions from around the world are often contrasted with western culture as examples of how human beings can be less materialistic and value nature for itself. Such traditions, as well as European pre-Enlightenment traditions, may be able to offer resources for an ethic of sustainable consumption. However, while they contain much that is of value, we must recognise that modern culture is successful partly because of its rejection of traditional hierarchies and its confidence that affluence is possible for all.

Local rural traditions, including those in Europe, place great emphasis on the human relationship with nature. There have been many efforts in recent years to recreate this relationship by reviving such traditions. All of the major world traditions also provide a basis, albeit an ambiguous one, for valuing nature.

Cultural traditions, going back to the ancient Egyptians, consistently teach that wealth does not bring happiness, and see the desire for wealth as a vice. They view human beings as part of a social fabric, in which flourishing depends on developing communities and relationships, and sharing possessions.

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Emerging values

New worldviews are emerging to replace the traditions that have shaped mass consumption so far. Most people now accept that the Earth is finite and that there are limits to the extent that we can exploit nature (although not necessarily to economic growth). Modern ecological science brings continual improvements in our understanding of the connections and interdependence of humanity and nature.

Globalisation and the networked, information-rich world offer both opportunities and challenges for sustainability. We are increasingly conscious of our connections to others around the world, and of the multiplicity of valid perspectives. We see individuals as neither separate, rational-emotional beings, nor part of a permanent social fabric, but in relational terms, co-evolving with society. In the buzz of the "information age", the good life is less about having things, and more about being connected and informed. Growing mobility is contributing to cultural diversity. Individuals and communities are more prepared to experiment with their lifestyles, and feel less constrained by social rules. At the same time as we move into a complex, interconnected world it is harder for any government or intergovernmental organisation to take control. Change has to be adopted, even invented, at all levels.

The way forward

A shift in the focus of the sustainability agenda, from human needs to human flourishing and the good life, seems to be essential if we are ever to reconcile the competing claims of current generations, future generations and nature. A minimum level of consumption is a prerequisite for human flourishing but we should aim to develop ideals of the good life that can be achieved without excessive material consumption. If they are to succeed, such ideals will have to resonate with existing values and involve nurturing communities as well as individuals.

The sustainable development agenda contains a concern for equity, which resonates with the egalitarianism of the Enlightenment. But a reconciliation of equity with the modern commitment to liberty can only come about through greater solidarity. The move to a communication-rich age may strengthen global solidarity, but could contribute to continuing decline in local communities. Meanwhile, as global communication makes inequity increasingly obvious to all, there is a risk of growing envy on the part of the poor, and protectionism on the part of the rich.

Perhaps one of the greatest contributions that the Commission could make is to facilitate the development of moral communities: groups with shared ethics, based on a vision of the good life. Members of our society do not want to be told how to live, even for their own or others' good, but they are interested in entering a dialogue through which they can work out their choices for themselves. New moral communities might be based on local communities, or on individuals and institutions with shared interests at a national or international level.

The Commission can work with such communities to explore their visions of the good life and help them to develop their own ethical principles for sustainable consumption. It can also bring together the experiences of those who are already experimenting with alternative ways of life. The Commission should be able to work mainly within projects already planned. It should also seek to work with businesses, governments and the media, to explore ways of changing the incentives and traditions that work against the development of an ethic for sustainability.

1   Introduction

At its first meeting, in September 1999, the Oxford Commission on Sustainable Consumption had a wide-ranging discussion of the nature of human need, and on the social, cultural and ethical forces that shape consumption patterns. The Commission agreed on the need for a strong ethical basis for its work. It asked OCEES to prepare a background paper on human need and the ethics of consumption for its second meeting.

There have already been several efforts to make sense of the many debates that surround the ethics of consumption. At least two notable collections of papers were published in 1998 (Crocker and Linden, 1998; Westra and Werhane, 1998). Each provides a valuable insight into the wide range of views on the rights and wrongs of modern consumption patterns and the approaches that should be taken to changing them. But if recipes for sustainable consumption are to be practically feasible, they must be more than ideas about how people ought to live. There are too many conflicting ideas already at large. The contribution that this paper attempts to make is to draw together some of those many perspectives and to suggest a way forward to translate them into action.

This paper first considers, in Section 2, what might be the essential components of an ethic of sustainable consumption. It discusses in particular the attitudes to human need and to nature that underlie the sustainable development agenda. It explores different ways of understanding human needs and their relationship with the good life and human flourishing. It also considers the relationship between material consumption and the good life.

Section 3 considers the forces that are contributing to continuing increase in the level and diversity of consumption in affluent societies. It goes on to explore the roots of the consumer society in the European cultural and intellectual developments of the last 500 years. It also explores some of the ethical tensions that shape some of the major current debates and may contribute to future social and cultural changes.

In Section 4, the paper considers possible resources in traditions from around the world for an ethic of sustainable consumption. It notes in particular how ideals of the good life and of the relationship between humanity and nature derive from different worldviews and perspectives on human nature. The section also briefly considers how the current globalisation trend, as well as emerging streams of thought in science, philosophy and the arts, may contribute to the invention of an ethic of sustainable consumption.

Finally, Section 5 suggests a way forward for the Oxford Commission on Sustainable Consumption. It suggests that the Commission should work with a variety of communities at different scales to support their invention of their own ethics for sustainable consumption.

2 Searching for ethics for sustainable consumption

Sustainable development has been defined as "development that meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs" (WCED, 1987). This definition identifies one good: meeting human needs.

According to this view of the good, current patterns of consumption are a cause for concern in two main ways. First, they are not meeting the needs of all of the people of the current generation. Second, by damaging the environment and overexploiting resources, they are compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

This section questions the assumption that "meeting human needs" should be taken as the highest good in the sustainable development agenda. Section 2.1 briefly reviews the motivation for a change in consumption patterns based on views on our relationship with the environment. The concept of human needs, which is so central to sustainability, is considered in Section 2.2.

2.1 Our relationship with nature

The WCED definition of sustainable development does not mention the environment; it only mentions meeting human needs. Some would consider this to be a judicious choice. Current patterns of production and consumption seem to indicate that members of most societies place very little value on the environment. Even when consumers are made aware of the environmental impacts of their consumption, they are rarely willing to change their behaviour, especially if "environmentally friendly" products are more expensive.

Consumers who are willing to adopt alternative consumption behaviour do so with a wide variety of motivations. They may justify their choices with arguments about valuing nature and safeguarding future generations, but often they are also concerned with their own health, saving money, or avoiding waste. People are more likely to adopt environmentally friendly behaviour patterns if they feel morally obliged to do so as part of an environmentally concerned community (Moisander, 1998).

The environmental concerns of WCED (1987) focus on the argument that future generations will be unable to meet their needs if environmental destruction and "consumption" (resource use) continue at their current rate. In doing so, it is accepting an instrumental view of nature as a resource for human development.

WCED has not closed off the debate on our relationship with nature and it might be worthwhile for the Oxford Commission to consider this issue further. In the current form of the debate, the instrumental view of nature is often contrasted with a "deep ecology" perspective, which views the preservation of ecological integrity as an absolute imperative. The former is often called an "anthropocentric" approach, valuing nature only to the extent that it is useful to humanity, while the latter is "ecocentric", valuing nature as an end in itself.

Between these black and white positions, there are many shades of grey. The instrumental view can accommodate an understanding of nature as having many different functions for humanity: we may enjoy it as a basis for recreation as well as a source of materials; the integrity of the environment may be important for our peace of mind. There are also many gradations of view on the extent to which human material well-being should be traded off against environmental integrity. Uncertainty is an important complicating factor, given that we do not have a universally agreed understanding either of the functioning of nature, or of the dynamics of human society. There is considerable scope for disagreement on the risks entailed either in disturbing nature or in foregoing economic development (Thompson and Rayner, 1998).

It is often suggested in derogatory terms that deep ecology is a new form of religion. Certainly it can seem like one for those who espouse the utilitarian ethics of Jeremy Bentham, centred on furthering the happiness and reducing the suffering of human beings and other sentient creatures. It perhaps does not help that some environmentalists refer to nature as Gaia, implying some form of consciousness.

It is also often argued that deep ecology is in fact an anthropocentric approach because the concern is entirely a human one; it is socially constructed; nature itself does not care what happens to it. Those who claim to value the environment in itself are nevertheless making judgements about what they value and how much they value it. As long as the valuation is made by humans, it can be viewed as anthropocentric. Environmental economists interpret the "existence value" of natural entities such as species and habitats as a contribution to human welfare.

Nevertheless, the distinction between a valuation of nature based on usefulness and one based on existence does have important implications for priorities. A usefulness-centred ethic would lead us to put more effort into preserving environmental functions that contribute directly to the economy than those that do not. An existence-centred ethic might lead us to avoid damage to natural functions even when this seems detrimental to the economy.

Some environmentalists have argued that there is a greater potential for changing behaviour through the development of an ecocentric ethic than through an anthropocentric one. Westra (1998) believes that the rights of future generations are harder to sell to the person in the street than the idea of the environment as a life support system. Campaigning organisations have had considerable success with their efforts to raise funds to help to preserve species such as the giant panda and the blue whale. They have been much less successful in trying to persuade people to drive less or turn the lights off.

The question of how we relate to nature comes down to a question about our ideas of purpose. Does humanity exist to serve nature, or does nature exist to serve humanity? For many religious people, these purposes are revealed by God, and the dispute comes down to a debate over interpretation of scripture. The current debate in the west to some extent follows the old lines of argument within Christianity (see Section 4.1).

It may be necessary for any ethic of sustainability to accommodate multiple views on the purpose of nature. It may also be helpful for existing views to be discussed more openly. Potential sources of a stronger environmental ethic will be considered later in this paper.

2.2   Perspectives on human need

The concept of human needs is a relatively new one. Like many common words, "need" is used in several different ways.

−   A need may be a necessary condition for something, such as survival, comfort, social acceptance, psychological health, or spiritual growth. Human beings have a certain range of absolute physiological needs if they are to stay alive. For example, we must regularly consume food containing certain nutrients and water free of fatal pathogens. The word "need" is sometimes used to refer to the function to be fulfilled (e.g. nutrition) and sometimes to the object that will fulfil it (e.g. food).

−   A need may also be a strongly felt lack or want – a subjective feeling such as hunger, fear or loneliness: a feeling of there being some hole to be filled. This use of the word "need" derives its power from the Romantic tradition, discussed in Section 3. We also talk about our needs for security, respect, love, and justice. Although we do not usually die if these needs are not satisfied, our ability to function as full participants in society may be impaired.

−   Most recently, the word "need" has come to be used to indicate a positive motivation or desire. Marketing professionals speak of making consumers aware of their need for new products and services, and even of creating new needs. In "I need a new dress", the use of the word "need" confers social acceptability and even obligation on the desire. It avoids the impression of selfish hedonism that may be associated with saying "I want". Implicit in the use of the word "need" is an appeal to duty and to rights. If I need something, others have a duty to provide it, and I have a right to have my need satisfied.

The failure to distinguish these different meanings has led to confusion in the political and moral debate over human needs. Human "needs" in the first sense can be defined in absolute, objective terms, provided we know what they are needed for. "Needs" in the second and third senses are subjective, and there is no objective way of evaluating one person's desires relative to another's.

This section reviews first the use of the word "need" to indicate wants and desires, reflecting in particular on the influential hierarchy of needs proposed by the psychologist, Abraham Maslow (see Table 1). It then goes on to consider needs in the form of necessities, drawing on the work of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, who have developed a theory of the *capabilities* that human beings must have if they are to flourish in a given society. A closely related approach is that taken by Doyal and Gough in their "theory of human need". Finally, the section considers the link between material consumption and meeting human needs.

Table 1. Perspectives on Human Needs

Maslow	Nussbaum	Doyal and Gough
The hierarchy of needs	*Capabilities required for human flourishing*	*Fundamental needs* Survival Health Autonomy
Physiological (food, water) Safety Belonging-ness and love Esteem (by self and others) Self-actualisation	Individuals should be able to: – live a life of normal length – maintain bodily health and integrity – avoid pain and experience pleasure – use the senses, to imagine, think and reason – have attachments to things and persons, love, grieve, and experience longing, gratitude and anger – form a conception of the Good and plan their own lives in accordance – form affiliations to others – live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants and nature – laugh and play – live free from interference – choose their own surroundings and social context	*Indicators of need satisfaction* Basic needs life expectancy infant mortality under-5 mortality birth weight literacy Intermediate needs safe water calorie intake overcrowding of homes physicians/capita access to health services war dead homicides poverty level % Secondary education % Post-sec. education use of contraception maternal mortality

2.2.1   Needs as wants

Human beings are very difficult to satisfy. When we fulfil one need, another seems to take its place. Indeed, we may feel more fulfilled when we are in the process of addressing our needs than when they have actually been met. Meeting needs is not the same as improving quality of life, although meeting basic needs (such as for food, shelter, water, and education) may be prerequisites for quality of life.

Abraham Maslow (1954) developed a theory of human motivation couched in terms of needs, which has been hugely influential but also rather confusing for those considering needs from an ethical point of view. Maslow described what he proposed was a hierarchy of needs. The

most basic needs would be the most pressing as long as they remained unsatisfied, but once they were satisfied the next needs in the hierarchy would become the most urgent. His hierarchy moved from physiological needs such as hunger to safety, then needs for belongingness and love, then esteem, and then "actualisation"[1].

The Maslow hierarchy continues to be used extensively as a way of conceptualising human motivation, and is in common use in the marketing profession. It has been heavily criticised (Douglas *et al.*, 1998) on the grounds that frequent instances can be found where people have chosen to address "higher" level needs before more basic ones. In particular, people have often been known to place belongingness or esteem before survival. Maslow himself recognises that the hierarchy is often inverted. In the end, he does not provide support for any moral position regarding the urgency with which we should try to meet different needs.

2.2.2   Needs as capabilities

A more useful way into thinking about needs from an ethical perspective is provided by Amartya Sen with his concept of "capabilities". Sen (1980, 1993) is concerned with the measurement and comparison of well-being. He addresses the question, if we seek equality, what is it that we wish to equalise. His answer is that rather than being concerned about equality of wealth or access to resources, we should be concerned about equality of capabilities (to carry out valuable acts or to reach valuable states of being).

Sen links his idea of capabilities back to Aristotle's idea of the good life. Aristotle described an essential part of moral virtue, which was necessary for the good life, as a disposition to choose the mean between excess and deficiency in worldly pleasures. The good life was a life of happiness based on the exercise of the rational capacity and moral virtue, but also requiring material means and relationships with family and friends. The virtues and the material means were *necessities* for the good life.

Nussbaum (1998) has expanded on the specific capacities individuals must possess, and the societal context they require, if they are to have the full range of capabilities or freedoms needed for a good life. She draws attention to both negative freedoms (e.g. to be free from interference) and positive ones (e.g. to be free to form affiliations). However, Segal (1998b) argues that we must go beyond ensuring that people have the ability to flourish: we should be concerned with whether they actually are flourishing.

Doyal and Gough (1991) begin to address this concern. They develop more practical and specific recommendations regarding the needs that should be considered universal. They argue that it is possible to evaluate objectively whether a given society is providing

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1 Maslow describes a number of common features of "self-actualising" individuals. Essentially they seem to be people who are motivated by purposes beyond themselves rather than by needs for love, esteem, etc.

sufficiently for its citizens' needs. They propose a set of indicators to measure the extent to which needs are being met in different countries (see Table 1).

The needs proposed by Doyal and Gough fall into two categories: a) survival and health; and b) autonomy. Survival needs are fairly self-evident and are mostly physiological. The minimum requirement for physical health is that needed to permit participation in society. Needs for personal autonomy within a given society are dependent on the specific context. An individual must both have sufficient understanding of him or herself and of society and have available sufficient opportunities to function effectively as a parent, a householder, a worker and a citizen.

Despite the certainty expressed by Doyal and Gough, it is not apparent that their set of needs is truly applicable in all societies. In particular, they seem to start from a western viewpoint that places particular value on individual autonomy. In doing so they may be undervaluing aspects of human flourishing which are mentioned by Nussbaum, including being part of a community and having a strong relationship with nature.

Mulgan (1998) identifies five areas in which we need to flourish to live a good life, regardless of the society we live in. These are: belonging to a family; belonging to a community; having access to material goods for sustenance, adornment and play; living in a healthy environment; and having a spiritual dimension to life.

The capabilities and circumstances required to live the good life depend on how that life is defined. Personal autonomy is one of the most important of these requirements if the good life is presumed to be determined by each individual for him or herself, as in modern western society. However, the next two sections question whether the good life is in fact individually determined in the west, or whether it is imposed either by the existing structure of the consumer society, or by powerful players within that society. If individuals are not currently determining their own versions of the good life, perhaps we should become more conscious of our collective determination of it.

2.2.3   Material consumption and the good life

Affluent modern lifestyles clearly entail consumption levels far in excess of those needed to meet basic physiological needs. We use material goods to help define who we are, and to communicate our identity to others (Douglas and Isherwood, 1978). Our purchasing power and tastes, expressed through the homes we live in, the cars we drive, the clothes we wear and the holidays we take help to establish our position in the community (Bourdieu, 1984; Schor, 1998). While goods can be part of a competition for status, they are also needed simply to achieve a basic level of acceptability within many social groups.

Consumption for such social purposes can also be understood as helping us to meet basic needs related to autonomy, or in Nussbaum and Sen's terms, human flourishing. If we are to live a good life we must have basic capabilities to form affiliations or join communities. The

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fact that we could meet the same social needs in other societies without material consumption does not make the consumption any less necessary for flourishing, given the social context (Segal, 1998).

Recent research confirms the widespread wisdom that aiming for wealth is unlikely to lead to happiness. People do not generally get more satisfied as they get richer, once they have met their basic needs for nutrition, shelter and health (Argyle, 1987; Jackson and Marks, 1999; Inglehart, 2000). Subjective well-being seems to level off once income rises beyond around $10,000 per capita: double the current world average, but less than half of the $23,000 per capita income of the industrialised countries.

Schor (1998) and others have argued that continual striving for more consumption in a cycle of "work and spend" detracts from people's subjective well-being. Argyle (1987) finds that, at moderately high income levels, people compare themselves with those who are richer, and so are continually dissatisfied by their relative position . However, for people with very high incomes, increasing wealth does actually contribute to happiness because such people perceive themselves to be succeeding relative to others.

On balance, a society that defines social status and human flourishing in terms of material consumption is likely to have a majority of dissatisfied members. Following Hirsch (1977), many writers have argued that there is a need to find a way of diminishing the power of "positional goods" – that is, goods that are used to demonstrate social standing. We might similarly aim to diminish the power of positional lifestyles. However, any such effort must take account of the power of the forces that promote the consumer society.

3   The consumer society

The modern consumer society represents a radical break from the past. The association of material consumption with the greater good contradicts the teachings of religions and philosophers over the last three thousand years. Yet, consumerism seems to have an irresistible attraction. This section begins by reviewing the forces behind the escalation of consumption. It then discusses the cultural foundations of consumerism, and of modern cosmopolitan society more generally, in the European Enlightenment and the Romantic Movement. It goes on to explore some of the tensions that continue to threaten the stability of this new society.

3.1   Forces for the growth of consumption

Many mechanisms and forces contribute to the escalation of the consumption levels required to flourish in cosmopolitan society. Just five are considered here.

First, there seems to be an intrinsic human tendency towards an escalation of desire. We are all familiar with the process of habituation to increasingly high quality food, clothes and levels of comfort. Although we can also accustom ourselves to lower levels of quality and comfort, this seems to require considerable effort and strong motivation. This asymmetry of habituation is part of the well-known ratchet effect whereby luxuries become everyday, and everyday consumption becomes need. It is easily observable in young children and has been noted in numerous different cultures. References to the tendency can be found in the bible, Taoist, Buddhist and Vedic writings, as well as in modern psychology. Freud talked about a human urge to repetition, which causes us to form habits, so that new desires are always additional. We can also understand this tendency as resulting from our mistaken hope that additional consumption will help to displace feelings of dissatisfaction that result from the failure to meet non-material needs.

Second, recent acceleration of the growth of consumption may be related to specific technological and institutional developments, in particular the urbanisation enabled by motorised transport, and recently the development of television and the car. Both of these technologies have contributed to the decline of local communities, potentially making conspicuous consumption more important as a means of indicating social status.

Third, the use of material consumption to meet social needs, especially needs for status display, leads to a kind of consumption arms race which has been extensively described by Veblen (1899), Hirsch (1977) and Schor (1998), among others. In a society where income level is an indicator of social status, there is a continual incentive to earn and consume more to maintain and improve that status. While Inglehart (1990) finds from values surveys that this motive is fading, our income relative to our peers does remain an important contributor to our self-reported happiness (Argyle, 1987). The spread of television amplifies this mechanism by leading people to compare themselves with celebrities and TV characters rather than their neighbours (Schor, 1998).

Fourth, within the competitive market system, there is continual pressure to increase and diversify the production of goods, to reduce their costs, and to increase the productivity of labour and increase wages. Hence, per-capita income has risen ten-fold since 1800, and labour productivity has increased twenty-fold, while there is an increasing range of goods and services that can be purchased with the income. The new consumer credit industry has provided a substantial additional set of incentives to increase consumption, and helped to remove the constraints on consumption, in the last three to four decades.

Fifth, there is a general expectation that the material quality of life should improve continually. Citizens of modern countries are encouraged by politicians and the media to expect to have more disposable income and a better physical quality of life each year than the year before.

All of these factors mean that, not only are the material requirements to achieve the main components of the good life much greater than they were 200 years ago. The good life is also increasingly viewed in material terms. Any effort to develop a less materialistic vision of human flourishing would need to take all of these forces into account.

3.2   Cultural roots of mass consumerism

Human beings, like all animals, have to consume food to stay alive. We have always been consumers. There is also a long history for the use of material artefacts as a medium for displaying our identity and status to each other. Nor is there anything new in superfluous consumption by the wealthy. The court burials in the ancient Egyptian pyramids bear witness to this; so does the Romans' custom of using emetics to induce vomiting during banquets to be able to continue eating. Nevertheless, the consumerism of modern society represents a new cultural form – a new tradition. It has several important characteristics which have been described and criticised in various ways (e.g. Brenkert, 1998; Fromm, 1976; Galbraith, 1958; Hirsch, 1977).

- Human well-being is largely equated with increasing material consumption, which is emphasised as a dominant goal in the consumer society. More consumption is generally taken to be a good in itself, and consumerist societies are committed to continually increasing consumption levels at a personal and at an aggregate level.

- Material consumption is a major route to belonging to a community and achieving status within that community.

- The culture is essentially competitive rather than co-operative – members of the community strive to be materially better off than others.

- The culture emphasises individual rights (and just deserts) more than responsibilities to others.

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- Individual freedom to own property and to consume is taken to be a fundamental right of all human beings: the only legitimate argument for limiting anyone's consumption is that it causes direct harm to somebody else.

- The natural world is viewed as a source of commodities which provide the basis for consumption, and is not valued in itself.

Although critics of modern society often talk as if the values of consumerism were almost universally shared, they are not. Modern societies also include large sub-cultures that adhere to more traditional community or religious value-systems with their own views on the good life. There are also sub-cultures that have rejected consumerism and are seeking to develop new principles to live by.

OCSC (1999) briefly described the economic, technological and cultural background from which consumerism emerged in Europe and North America. Developments in religion, science, politics, and demography all played important roles.

Consumerism, among other traditions, has evolved from the values, ethics and worldviews that developed in Europe during the early Enlightenment in the 16th - 17th century, and the Romantic movement in the 18th - 19th century (Corrigan, 1997; Taylor, 1989). The early years of the Enlightenment brought us the commitment to progress, human rights, liberty, equality, the rational individual, and a utilitarian or instrumental view of nature. It also adopted the Puritan idea that everyday life was valuable in itself – God was to be honoured through work as much as through prayer. The Industrial Revolution and the resulting increase in productivity could not have occurred without this new way of thinking. The Enlightenment drew on the work of scientists such as Galileo and Newton, and philosophers such as Descartes, Locke and Hobbes. It is the foundation of the popular modern understanding of the individual (Taylor, 1989) and of modern economic and political institutions.

The Romantics brought an emphasis on aesthetic appreciation, emotional individualism, personal creativity and self-expression. The original movement was largely a reaction against the rational, instrumental worldview of early Enlightenment thinkers. While the instrumental worldview made modern production patterns possible, it is arguably the Romantic idea of an emotional, interior, expressive human being that is the cultural driver of consumption (Campbell, 1983). Consumption of goods becomes an important form of aesthetic appreciation and a means of self-expression. Perhaps more importantly, emotions, desires and wants are given a new validity. The Romantic movement made it respectable or even noble to succumb to both desire for, and enjoyment of, material goods. Consumerism, then, is partly a result of a somewhat uneasy marriage between Enlightenment science and the Romantic view of the individual.

To some extent, the two worldviews are represented in our society by different people, or at least by different roles. However, both are present to some extent, and are a source of internal conflict, in most western individuals. The rational, instrumental worldview is dominant in bureaucratic management, whether in industry or government, and in markets. The Romantic

worldview is more important in our home and recreational lives, in the cinema and the novel, and in the marketing and advertising industries.

3.3   *Ethical tensions*

Like any functioning cultural tradition, Consumerism is subject to tensions caused by internal inconsistencies and its continual dialogue with other traditions. Some of these tensions arise within the Enlightenment tradition, or between the Enlightenment and Romantic traditions. Others arise because of the persistence of older traditions in the west and because of the emergence of new reactions to consumerism.

Despite the best efforts of Enlightenment philosophers, modern ethics and culture have not been constructed as a comprehensive, logical system from a set of fundamental principles. Rather they have evolved, incorporating several conflicting elements from earlier traditions along with new developments from within. The enlightenment philosophers have developed a variety of ethical systems based on rational arguments starting from principles that are intended to be universal. Three major sets of principles have emerged:

a) Bentham's concept of utilitarianism (the idea that right action is that which leads to the greatest pleasure and least pain for humanity as a whole);

b) Kant's idea of duties being universal rules (right action is that based on principles that could be universally recommended); and

c) The theory of the social contract, and in particular its recent development by Rawls (right action is that which would be endorsed by a social contract of a type which anyone would be prepared to enter, regardless of their race, creed, gender, or position in society).

While philosophers have debated which of the principles should be applied, in practice they often function in combination, along with older ethical principles (such as scriptural revelation). Of the three new principles, utilitarianism is perhaps the most influential in formal policy thinking, as it forms the ethical basis for most practical welfare economics. The theory of the social contract is also highly influential. It is grounded in, and provides formal expression of, the egalitarianism and the belief in human rights that lies at the heart of modern civic affairs. Kant's concept of duty is used less in formal economics and politics, but it is perhaps the dominant basis for our everyday perceptions of fairness.

None of these principles is fully consistent with most people's intuition about what is right. All of them claim to be founded on reason, but require *a priori* assumptions that are not generally accepted. In addition, the theories of Bentham and Rawls are founded on the modern concept of the individual, which underplays the complex social nature of human beings. Ethical debates in western society are frequently impossible to resolve.

The tension between modern western ethics and traditions from other parts of the world and other times may motivate future cultural changes. Indeed, some of those other traditions may contain important cultural resources for sustainable development. The tensions within modern culture will also help to determine its future. In some cases they may help to maintain equilibrium. In others, they may be the source of innovation or cause of collapse.

The following sections will review some of the major sources of ethical tension in modern western society, as well as those between the modern tradition and older value systems that persist in Europe and elsewhere.

3.3.1   Liberty vs. equality

Without individual rights to liberty, property and the pursuit of happiness, capitalism would not function. It is a system that relies on individual self-interest to fuel innovation and drive the economy. One of the most fundamental commitments of the Enlightenment is that individuals should have these rights in equal measure. Yet the ideals of equality and liberty are in constant tension. In the 20th century the tension was highly visible – between east and west, political right and political left.

At the end of the 20th century and in the context of economic and cultural globalisation, political rhetoric in the west sometimes gives the impression that liberty has won out over equality. This tendency may be a source of new social instability. The tension is now between those within the mainstream western culture, and those who feel excluded from it. With continuing growth in the differences in wealth, income and material consumption, both between north and south, and within some industrial countries, the poor appear to have a diminishing voice in the international community. They are perceived increasingly by the rich as a force from outside society that must somehow be kept under control, through immigration controls and measures to remove beggars from the streets.

Given the Enlightenment assumption (from Hobbes) that individuals are inherently selfish, equal rights can only be achieved through the "social contract" enforced by government. However, unless governments have far-reaching powers, there will be considerable scope for cheating, or abuses of rights.

Reconciling liberty and equality probably requires a third value, recognised in the rallying-cry of the French Revolution. This is fraternity, or solidarity. It may well be possible for people with a strong community orientation to find a balance between liberty and equality. Certainly the early success of Capitalism seems to have been built on a more social model of the individual. The most successful early capitalists were devout Christians who were trusted by their clients and customers because they were known to follow an unselfish moral code. However, an increasing adherence to Hobbes' view may be one of the more self-destructive features of the turn Modernism has taken in recent years.

3.3.2 Individual vs. community

The tension between the good of the individual and that of the community has also been a central theme in the Enlightenment, and in the political debates of the last two centuries. Bentham (1789) asserted that society is no more than the sum of the individuals that constitute it, a view more recently espoused by Margaret Thatcher. Others, most notably Marx, have viewed society as an entity in itself and the individual as a product of, and role-player in, society. In his description of "commodity fetishism", Marx (1867) also describes commodities as the embodiment of social relations, endowed in our imaginations with life.

Collectivist views precede individualism and are apparent in Plato's *Republic* and More's *Utopia*. On the whole, the pictures painted by these authors of ideal societies are unpalatable to modern westerners, as they seem to involve strong bounds on individual liberty. Efforts to build collectivist states were given a particularly bad name in the 20th century by Nazi Germany and by the so-called Marxist regimes in the former Soviet Union, China and North Korea. Reification of the collective has had fatal results in many states, where the government has claimed to be carrying out, or acting for, the collective will. Much of the modern commitment to individual liberty is a reaction against the experience of such regimes.

Political debate continues on the extent to which we should emphasise the liberty of the individual *vis-a-vis* the collective. But many, like Marx, have argued that individual freedom is at least partly illusory and that individual thought and action often derives from the collective (Dennett, 1993; Commons, 1950). If this is true, there is a need for us to understand better what are the mechanisms that shape our supposedly free choices and to explore ways of making collective choice more transparent.

3.3.3 Just deserts: rights vs. needs

The Reformation of European Christianity and the theological and philosophical tensions among Protestant sects played an important role in shaping Enlightenment society. A major theme in Protestantism is the idea that God is honoured through every kind of work that contributes to the good of humanity. Hence, productive work, however base, was a duty. Weber credited this "Protestant work ethic" with being one of the main drivers of the Industrial Revolution and of capitalism on the European continent. Taylor also notes the strength of this ethic in North America. But the ethic of the duty to work has given way in Anglo-Saxon countries to an ethic of just deserts, which says that we have an obligation to work if we wish to live well, and that we have the right to enjoy what we have earned. According to this view, those who do not have the means to support themselves, whether individuals or countries, cannot have worked hard enough.

For a time, from about 1950 to 1980, it appeared in OECD countries that liberty could be reconciled with meeting human needs through the Welfare State, where the government redistributed the wealth created through the liberal market to ensure that the needs of the poor were met. However, in the Anglo-Saxon world at least, taxation is increasingly seen as an infringement of the rights of the hard working.

The rich do not generally see other people's needs as a reason to forego their own rights, unless those needs are highly visible and urgent. Industrialised country citizens are prepared to contribute in response to TV pictures of starving and homeless people. However, bilateral aid for capacity building is declining. While the rich might agree in theory that economic convergence is desirable, they do not see it as their obligation to facilitate that convergence. On the one hand, developing country economies might present some real or imagined competition to workers in the industrialised countries. On the other, there is a view that concessions do not work, and the poor must simply learn to help themselves and to compete in the real world of the market.

3.3.4   Humanity vs. nature

The modern separation of most people from nature began with the land reforms that occurred throughout Europe during the 16th to 19th centuries. Increases in agricultural productivity (resulting in declining labour requirements) and rising wages in factories led many former peasants to seek work in manufacturing.

Industrialisation then led to the creation of a human world that is substantially separated from nature. Other profound changes have come from the development of electric light, food transport and storage technologies, and more recently central heating, air conditioning and the car, which allow us to ignore the cycles of day and night, the weather and the seasons. Most of the world's population now lives in a largely artificial urban environment.

John Locke expounded a view, based on an interpretation of biblical sources, that nature exists essentially as a resource for humanity and should be developed (Locke, 1598). The colonisation of the Americas by Europeans being relatively recent, Locke expressed the view that there was more land on the Earth than the human population could wish to develop. There are two key issues here: one is the type of relationship people should have with nature; the other is the extent to which nature can accommodate human exploitation.

The strongest modern counterpoint to the instrumentalist view of nature is that from the Romantic movement, which coincided with the Industrial Revolution in England and America. Romantic artists and writers placed considerable emphasis on the appreciation of nature, rejecting the "dark satanic mills" of the industrial world and creating a "rural idyll", sentimentalising rural life.

Romantic ideals continue to play a strong role in the modern environmental movement, in particular in its appeals to protect wildlife. This 200-year-old history of opposition between the business community and environmentalists probably continues to shape the current debate. The last decade has seen dramatic breakthroughs in mutual understanding as the protagonists in the debate have stopped arguing about fundamental principles. However, a fundamental disagreement remains and may become important again in the future. This disagreement has roots in the Christian basis of western society and relates to views about God's purpose for humanity and nature. Did God create nature to give sustenance to

humanity, or did He create humanity to act as steward to nature? The book of *Genesis* offers several different views, which continue to provide fuel for disputes.

The Romantics were not the only critics of the Enlightenment ideal of progress. Thomas Malthus in 1798 did not dispute Locke's instrumental view of nature but he believed that the human population, in England at least, had already expanded to the maximum level that the land could accommodate. Any improvements in land productivity would simply result in population growth, maintaining the level of poverty but increasing the level of crowding.

Malthus has not (so far) been vindicated, as agricultural productivity has outpaced population growth over the last two centuries, and most countries appear to be on the path to stable or falling birth rates. The concerns expressed by the Club of Rome in 1972 related as much to the growth of the economy and the associated use of resources as to the growth of population.

On the whole, these limits-to-growth arguments have fallen on stony ground. The predominant modern view is that the Earth's surface may be finite but human ingenuity is not. Technological and institutional innovation will continue to enable us to get more from less. Our experience with technological progress suggests that we will continue to find ways of making agriculture and industry less wasteful of land and resources, and less polluting.

While it is true that technological progress has led to a cleaning up of industry, our economies still rely on growing extraction of fuel, water and materials from the environment. According to mainstream economic wisdom, we should not be concerned about this. If resources become scarce, their prices will rise, bringing demand under control and encouraging innovation to find more resource-efficient ways of living. However, scientists and some economists are concerned that the market mechanism does not take adequate account of the risk of irreversible damage to the environment; nor can it take account of potential catastrophes of a type that we have never experienced before and do not fully understand.

4 Ethical resources for sustainable consumption

This section explores the resources that can be found in existing traditions from around the world, and considers how they might contribute either local or global ethics for sustainable consumption. It addresses three elements of the traditions:

- the way they explain our relationship with nature, and the implications for the way we should treat it

- how they view the good life, and the implications for the attitude we should have to wealth and consumption

- how they view our relationships with each other, the basis for justice, and the implications for equity

Table 2 provides an overview of the basic ethical principles of a number of ethical traditions and the worldviews that underlie them. For reasons of space, it is not possible here to review all of the world's major traditions. The table includes three traditions that are current in modern western society: the dominant Enlightenment tradition; the Romantic tradition, which has a symbiotic relationship with the Enlightenment tradition; and the Christian tradition (note that this has several different branches). Two other traditions, Hinduism and Buddhism, are included to provide a contrast with these European cultures.

Table 2. Illustrative Comparison of Some Major Traditions and their Ethics

	Enlightenment science and economics	Romanticism	Christianity	Hinduism	Buddhism
Human origin	Darwinian evolution	Emergence from nature	Divine creation in image of God	Evolution out of primordial substance	Chain of causation; starts with ignorance
Human nature	Separate pleasure-seeking individuals. Rational mind + emotional body	Emotional individual, social, expressive, complex Manifestation of archetypes (Jungian)	Individuals with immortal soul and mortal body	Multiple functions: thought, emotion, volition,	Illusions of thought, knowing, emotion, volition, form
Nature of the world	Material, inanimate, infinite, non-anthropocentric	Organised around principles such as love, beauty, anthropocentric	Material, created by God	Material, created by God	Illusory

Ethical principles	Liberty, equality, maximising happiness, rights and duties	Follow the voice within: return to nature as source; rights and needs of the individual	Development of the virtues (e.g. faith, hope, charity). Duty based on scripture	Duties and virtues	Duties and virtues; compassion
Relation-ship to nature	Use	Individual as part of nature	Dominion, stewardship, subduing	Common ground of being (Atman-Brahman)	Common illusory nature
The good life	Individually determined: the pursuit of happiness	Harmony with nature; following inner leadings	Obedience to God, development of virtue	Right action, knowledge of true nature, spiritual devotion	12-fold path to release from the illusion of ego and material existence. Right action, right knowledge, right concentration
Attitude to consump-tion and wealth	Support consumption in pursuit of happiness	Support consumption for aesthetic appreciation and expression	Wealth is a source of temptation and should be shared. Frugality is encouraged.	Upanishads advocate non-attachment and sometimes asceticism	Non-attachment to possessions but asceticism also rejected
Societal goal	Progress	Harmony with nature	Universal practice of the true religion: God's kingdom; peace	Freedom from material existence	Universal release from suffering

4.1 Our relationship with nature

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges in developing an ethic of sustainable consumption is to recreate an awareness of our link to nature, of the impacts of our consumption choices on it, and of the need and responsibility to nurture our environment.

Attitudes to nature in different cultures are shaped by beliefs about the nature and origin of the universe and of human beings, and in particular by conceptions of God or the transcendent. The western instrumental view of nature is often contrasted with perspectives from the east, from Africa, and from native Americans and Australians, which seem to value nature more for itself. However, pre-Enlightenment Europe maintained many beliefs and practices that bore similarities to those of other regions. The modern disregard for the environment seems to stem mainly from shifts in worldview that begun in about the 16th century.

Most agricultural societies, including those in Europe, have ancient traditions that emphasise the unity of human life with the rest of nature. Their creation myths often involve food plants having grown from the dismembered parts of the body of a primordial man (Campbell, 1959). The symbolism of the Green Man, disgorging vegetation from his mouth and sometimes other orifices, remains common both in the carvings on European churches and in similar iconography in other parts of the world. Much of the annual cycle of rituals of both Judaism and Christianity is bound up with nature.

The major traditions and religions – Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam and Taoism – were developed in societies where cities were the centres of power. It is therefore unsurprising that the human link to nature is weaker than that in many of the more localised animist traditions. Nevertheless, these traditions offer a variety of perspectives on that link.

The Judaeo-Christian view is somewhat ambiguous about the human relationship with nature, partly because of the different versions in *Genesis* of the creation story. In Chapter 1, God creates humanity to rule over nature and to make use of it. In Chapter 2, He makes a man to care for the Garden of Eden. In both cases, humanity is placed between God and nature, to carry out God's purpose for the world.

In Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the relationship with God is at least in some ways contractual. If we are good we will go to heaven; if we are bad we will be sent to hell. The model for the contract is God's covenant with Abraham and the Law (the *Torah*) given to Moses. Ethics are based, to a large extent, on interpretation of the scriptures and the duties they impose on us. These duties do include obligations to care for nature, but this care is aimed more at increasing the usefulness of nature to humanity that at preserving its integrity.

In contrast, the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* on which much Hindu philosophy is based, and which strongly influenced Buddhism, view humanity and the universe as manifestations of the same essence. Underlying the individual self is a universal Self or Atman, which is the same as Brahman, the universal ground of being. The goal of spiritual practice is to recognise this truth, which has profound implications for the way we choose to treat other people and the world around us. Our relationship is one of a common identity and solidarity rather than a contract. Because of this, the principle of non-violence to all sentient life is a central theme in Hinduism, while compassion is central to Buddhism. Vegetarianism is widespread in both Hindu and Buddhist communities.

On the other hand, while Hinduism celebrates the joys of material existence, Buddhism views the material world as an illusion having no purpose. In both traditions, the highest goal of human life is to achieve release from the suffering of material existence. Hence, although there is a strong ethic of non-violence to avoid causing suffering to other sentient life, there is not necessarily any strong reason for positively caring for nature.

The philosophy of the *Upanishads* has parallels in Europe. Plato's philosophy, which found its way into Christianity through St. Augustine, sees humanity and nature as expressions of the same "Ideas" or essences. The medieval systems of astrology and alchemy, as well as much popular belief, were founded on similar ideas and assumed a strong underlying connection between the individual and the universe. This view of the world was weakened with the translation of the bible into the vernacular in the 15th century, and with the emergence of Protestantism. But it did not really decline until the industrial revolution led to the separation of most of the European population from the land.

There have been several efforts over the last 200 years to recreate the pre-industrial connection to the land, often linked to the aim of reviving the pre-urban sense of community. In recent years, there has been some revival in Europe of pre-Christian traditions that view humanity as part of nature and that equated nature with the divine, in the person of The Goddess (Cempbell, 1959). The modern sciences of evolution and ecology also point us back towards a view of humanity as part of nature, as sharing a common identity.

Frefoyle (1998) argues for the development of the concept of "land health". The "bioregionalism" movement aims to bring people closer to the land and to encourage a more sustainable lifestyle based on consuming only local products, within the carrying capacity of the local ecosystem.

In conclusion, then, there does seem to be a widespread basis in many parts of the world for an ethical system that values nature in itself, but such traditions have not been able to compete effectively with modern culture. Progress in the continuing debate over the attitude we should have to nature depends on developing a better understanding of our various assumptions about the purposes of humanity and nature. We will return to the question of the purpose of humanity in the next section, which discusses conceptions of the good life.

4.2   The good life

Section 2 noted that human needs are context-dependent. In particular, within a given culture, the capabilities an individual must possess in order to flourish depend on that culture's conception of the good life.

Modern western society is unusual in its view on the good life. Firstly, there is a commitment to making it attainable for all citizens. Conceptions of the good life in most other societies are only attainable for the minority who are able to step out of the normal life of working and maintaining a household. Secondly, modern society is reluctant to impose any one vision of the good life on its citizens. Rather, there is a commitment to the right of individuals to the freedom to pursue their own vision of happiness.

While the Oxford Commission is unlikely to achieve much by recommending any particular form of the Good, there is a great deal that can be learned from experience. First, we can draw on the various traditional views (while bearing in mind that these versions of the good life were intended for a minority). Second, there is a growing body of literature in the social sciences on the factors that make people happy. There are also numerous communities experimenting with alternative ways of living.

4.2.1   Traditional views on the good life

Often, the good life is defined as that which brings happiness, or that which satisfies. Plato and Aristotle, for example, saw happiness as the ultimate good. In Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the good life is that which God would have us live.

The Hebrew *Torah* is to a large extent a blueprint for living such a life, providing a system of rules to allow the Israelites to live in harmony in the "promised land", "flowing with milk and honey". The Jewish prophets go further, in particular with Isaiah's vision of the reign of peace when even the lions will be vegetarians and "they shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord".

While the good life is often intended to be a joyful one, the joy is supposed to be connected with being closer to God. Our motivation for living well is not supposed to be material well-being. In Christianity, Islam and Judaism, reward and punishment by God are important themes and are often portrayed as the primary motivation for living well. Christianity especially places the emphasis on the reward of future happiness in heaven.

In Hinduism and Buddhism the good life is portrayed more as a path that should be followed to achieve Moksa or Nirvana – release from the cycle of rebirth, or from the illusion that we exist.

There has long been a recognition that wealth does not in itself lead to happiness. In many cultures, wealth has been seen as a result of virtue or divine favour which is both part of, and a sign of, living the good life. Islam and Judaism view wealth in a positive light provided it is earned[2] and shared with the poor – although the book of *Job* represents an early questioning in Judaism of the link between wealth and virtue.

The pitfalls of wealth and acquisitiveness were widely recognised in the surge of philosophical and religious development during the five centuries from 800BC. At the beginning of this period, the Indian *Upanishads* proposed new ideals of austerity and non-attachment, which remain central values in Jainism and were strongly espoused by Mahatma Gandhi. Although non-attachment is usually portrayed as an Eastern value, it is also important in Greek philosophy and in Christianity. Hindu, Greek and Christian ascetics adopted extremes of self-denial and self-castigation.

Buddha (about 500BCE) rejected both the extremities of over-consumption and asceticism as forms of striving and attachment, which lead to pain and suffering. Taoists also noted the addictive nature of wealth and advised moderation in consumption habits.

Many moral systems expound the virtues that form part of a good life and the vices that detract from it. The Hindu *Bhagavad Gita* lists the attributes of those of divine nature, which include fearlessness, purity of mind, charity, self-control, modesty, sacrifice and austerity; those of demonic nature are arrogant, conceited, give themselves up to insatiable desire, and strive to amass hoards of wealth. Taoist and Confucian writings are similarly concerned with virtues.

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2 Both the *Torah* and the *Koran* contain prohibitions against charging interest on loans.

Plato's view of the good life was one that is ordered by the Idea of the Good. For him, the ultimate happiness was to be found in rational contemplation of the Good. The good life was open only to those able to engage in philosophical inquiry. His version of a utopia, described in *The Republic*, is a hierarchical society without private property, ruled by a corps of "guardians", who are essentially philosophers and live the good life.

Aristotle's view of the good life has already been mentioned in Section 2. It involves the possession and exercise of a range of virtues, such as courage, moderation, justice, generosity, hospitality, truthfulness, perceptiveness, knowledge, and practical wisdom. It also requires basic preconditions in the form of material well-being and stable family relationships. Aristotle, like Plato, saw the good life as something that could be achieved only by a minority – not, for example, by traders and artisans.

MacIntyre (1985) notes the link between the conception of the good life and the virtues required to achieve it. Plato's and Aristotle's ideas were adapted to Christianity by St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas, respectively. For St. Augustine, the Good is God, and the good life is one of contemplation of God. The virtues required to live that life are faith, hope and love. St Thomas Aquinas similarly defines the greatest good in life as the contemplation of God and argues that happiness does not lie in worldly pleasures, wealth, glory, or even in the exercise of the virtues. For both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, the Good is to be achieved through life in the cloister: it is not available to the majority of the population.

The Reformation of the church in Europe, which forms the backdrop to the Enlightenment, was partly a reaction to the perceived elitism of the monastic system. With the invention of printing and the translation of the bible, it became possible to imagine every citizen having a direct relationship with God in the "priesthood of all believers". A new conception of the good life arose. Instead of finding God in the silence of a monastery cell, He was to be found in everyday life and work.

4.2.2   The good life in modern society

In modern society, different traditions and hence rationales for the good life co-exist. Many philosophers defend the individual's freedom to determine his or own conception of the good (e.g. Nussbaum, 1998). Bentham (1825) argued that the societal Good is determined by whatever makes people happy. However, there are a number of drawbacks to this. The market economy contains structural incentives for businesses to market conceptions of the good life that support sales of their own products. Many other circumstances, including social norms, work culture, and infrastructure constraints, provide strong pressures for individuals to adopt particular conceptions of the good life. Hence, by adopting a hands-off approach, governments may actually be failing to protect an important freedom. On the other hand, the freedom to choose a conception of the good may be unattainable in any case, to the extent that individual's wills are reflections of their social milieu.

For many people, having all of their needs met and having a full range of Nussbaum's "capabilities", including the freedom (perhaps illusory) to choose their own goals, can be

debilitating. Viktor Frankl (1984) describes how having a meaning, a purpose beyond ourselves, can bring happiness even in a life that is full of pain and suffering. He observes that the lack of meaning is a major cause of psychological problems in modern western society.

MacIntyre (1985) has lamented the state of ethics in modern society, in particular the interminable debates over the ramifications of different ethical principles. He traces the problem to our reluctance to agree on a vision of the good life, and the decline in the cultivation of the virtues as means of achieving that vision. He argues that we need to revive the ideal of the good life in order to have a clear idea of how we should behave. If we knew how we wanted to live, it would be relatively straightforward to identify the virtues that we should cultivate in order to achieve that state. MacIntyre's thesis suggests that, if we wish to develop an ethic for sustainable consumption, we must first of all clarify our vision of the sustainable life: we need a compass to steer by.

The work of another contemporary philosopher, Charles Taylor (1991), suggests that western society has not lost its ethical way but has created a new system of ethics. This system is motivated by:

- a defence of the "ordinary life", and a suspicion of the "higher goods" that have often been advocated by elites or by paternalistic or despotic rulers

- strong principles of individual freedom

- a general benevolence deriving from Christianity

- a desire for a universal basis for ethics

Members of our society do not want to be told how to live, even for their own good. They are far more interested in entering into a dialogue through which they can work out their choices for themselves (Hobson, 2000). Such a dialogue needs to be informed by robust information on what works and what doesn't, and why. The work of Argyle, Inglehart and others (mentioned in Section 2) seems to confirm the message from the various traditions, that material consumption does not make us happy, and that we should devote more of our time to developing healthy family and community relationships. However, there is a difference between knowing what is good and being motivated to achieve it. Motivation appears to result as much from belonging to a community of people who share our conception of the good as it does from our own knowledge of the good.

4.3 Our relationship with other people: justice and equity

Cultural traditions have widely differing views on the basis for, and nature of, social solidarity – that is, our relationships with others. Different societies have adopted particular forms of

solidarity partly to fit with their demographic, economic and technological circumstances, but also emerging from their cultural traditions.

This section addresses two aspects of ethics that are important for sustainable development, and relate to human relationships. The first is the principle of egalitarianism, which is central to Enlightenment thought and is reflected in much of the advocacy for sustainable development. The second is the question of supporting others, which must be addressed given that we start from a position of inequality.

4.3.1   Egalitarianism

Many cultural traditions assume some hierarchy of relationships. As described in the last section, there is often an elite group that is at the core of the tradition, eligible to participate in the good life. However, others in society may fill a subservient role. This is the case in Plato's *Republic*, where the philosopher-guardians form the elite. In Hindu society the elite are the Brahmins. In Augustinian Christianity, based as it was on the ideas of Plato, the elite was the priesthood and the fellowship of monks.

However, hierarchical relationships are not universal. Buddhism and Islam are both egalitarian cultures, and in India their ranks have been swelled by the conversion of lower-caste Hindus. In Buddhism the basis for equality is the Buddha-nature that exists in everyone, analogous to Luther's "priesthood of all believers".

It was also mentioned in the last section that the modern western rejection of traditional concepts of the good life is closely linked to a rejection of elitist social structures. Taylor (1989) explains this rejection as emerging from the Reformation and the return to the Judaeo-Christian scriptures, which provide a more egalitarian basis for social solidarity. The Israelites were supposed to be a "nation of priests". There were many distinctions within that nation – in particular between men and women and between members of the tribe of Levy and others. However, the Law and the implied vision of the good were intended for all Israelites, and justice was even-handed between them. The important distinction was between Israelites, who had a covenant with God, and non-Israelites, who did not.

Early Protestant groups drew parallels between themselves and the Israelites, viewing themselves as a small group of the enlightened, surrounded by hostile papists. They were determinedly egalitarian in their treatment of each other, often describing themselves as "brethren".

Although modern society retains a commitment to egalitarianism, this often seems to conflict with other values. Part of the difficulty lies in the modern commitment to competitive individualism (deriving from the thought of Hobbes, Smith, Bentham, and others) and .the rejection of communism as discussed in Section 3. However, there may be more fundamental blocks to social solidarity in modern urban society, as it is very difficult for people to feel like "brethren" in a community of several million.

4.3.2 Supporting others

Practically all cultural traditions include some encouragement for the rich to share with the poor. Some of the earliest records of such an ethic come from ancient Egypt, from advice apparently written for the education of the sons of the nobility. In the *The Instruction of Ptah-Hotep* (c. 2200BC) there are numerous injunctions for those who have bread to share it with those who do not, for "…the gift of affection is worth more than the provisions with which your back is covered". Similarly the *Rig Veda* states that "He is the liberal man who helps the beggar…and…immediately makes him a friend thereafter."

Later philosophical and religious scriptures introduce additional reasons for generosity. In the *Torah* generosity to strangers is frequently encouraged "for you were strangers in Egypt" – that is, apparently for reasons of sympathy.

The concept of the reward in heaven (or a more pleasant future incarnation) for a righteous life brought new arguments for generosity. The *Koran* states that the "…truly righteous are those who believe in Allah…and spend their wealth, for love of Him, on the kindred and the orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and those who ask, and for procuring the freedom of captives…" In Christianity, the message is even stronger: "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven" (*Matthew*, 19:21).

Indian philosophy provides a rather different reason for sharing with the poor: that of a shared identity. The belief in reincarnation also provides a strong argument for kindness to other sentient beings – practised in an extreme form in Jainism.

There is clearly no shortage of reasons for sharing what we have. Giving money away, then, can help to make friends, can be a source of satisfaction, and can be of spiritual benefit to us (Argyle, 1998). However, it was noted in Section 3.2 that generosity seems to have declined in the midst of a conflict of core values in modern society – in particular the principles of "just deserts" and "human rights". While we have sympathy with the rights of the poor we increasingly believe that people deserve what they get.

If it is difficult to foster egalitarianism within a modern city, it is even harder to do so on a global scale. This is especially true given the modern materialist conception of the good life: there is a profound fear that there is not enough to go around. Yet, with global communication and the plummeting cost of travel, the inequities are increasingly obvious to both rich and poor. The current response by the rich is to strengthen immigration controls. Despite international agreements on technology transfer, the rich countries remain reluctant to support the degree of capacity building that would be necessary for poor countries to become equal competitors in world markets. One way of escaping from this tension would be for the citizens of the north to rethink their conception of the good life so that it is based on ideals such as community and education, which are not limited by finite physical resources.

4.4   After Modernism

While the uneasy marriage between Enlightenment rationality and Romantic emotionalism remains the dominant culture in modern society, its foundations have been seriously eroded in the last half-century. The tensions described in Section 3 are partly responsible, but forces for change have also emerged from developments in science, technology and human institutions. They take several forms:

- The 1960s saw a recognition in the west of the pointlessness of the modern drive for growth and consumption.

- Space travel is often credited with having given us a new perspective on the Earth as a finite, fragile and lonely planet which we must nurture if we are to survive.

- There is a growing awareness of the multiplicity of valid points of view, religions and forms of human flourishing. The new pluralism derives partly from the high levels of migration, travel, trade and communication that make up "globalisation".

- New scientific approaches are emerging to deal with the complexity and interconnectedness of the real world, leading to a decline in the mechanistic worldview of the Enlightenment.

- Growing understanding of human psychology and consciousness is leading us towards a relational view of human nature: we increasingly view individuals as shaped by, and helping to shape, their social milieu.

These and other developments clearly carry some of the seeds of an ethic of sustainability. Ronald Inglehart (1990) finds evidence from numerous surveys of values in different countries that there is a growing "postmaterial" culture that emphasises developing relationships rather than owning things. But the emerging worldview also presents a risk. We have recognised the emptiness of modern culture but we have no universal truths to replace it with.   The Enlightenment ideal of society as a machine managed by a democratically elected government is giving way as we find it increasingly difficult to locate responsibility and influence in our society. Post-modern literature and art can be quite nihilistic. Modern culture has sought to find absolute and universal truth through science; the recognition that all truth is relative, filtered through individual perception, can leave us feeling as if we have no reference points. And without external sources of meaning, we have no motivation towards the good, or even for our own survival (McIntyre, 1985; Frankl, 1946).

Individuals in this post-modern society are confronted, then, with the need to construct or choose their own sources of meaning, and their own personal traditions to live by. They can, of course, buy into a ready-made package, in the form of an older cultural or religious tradition, but this now has to be a choice rather than an accident of birth.

5 Conclusions: research needs and challenges for the Oxford Commission

The ethics of modern consumer societies seem to be in many ways at odds with the aim of achieving sustainable consumption. Modern conceptions of individual liberty and rights, property and just deserts, make it hard to imagine our society adopting controls on the type or volume of material consumption. There also seems little immediate prospect for a reversal of the trend towards greater disparity in consumption levels.

Yet, many people are dissatisfied with the morality of the market place. They know from folklore and experience that consuming more will not make them happier, and they are conscious of the lack of purpose in modern life. They continue with their current lifestyles because they feel that they have no choice: material consumption is an integral part of meeting social needs in our society.

Because of the social importance of much of our consumption, a shift to more sustainable consumption is unlikely to be readily achievable on an individual basis. It is likely to require a cultural change to which many different parts of society will have to contribute. It may involve deciding collectively how the good life should look, and to modify our behaviour accordingly.

There are many candidates for a vision of the good life and a related ethic of sustainable consumption, deriving from cultural traditions around the world. Practically all traditions, apart from that of the modern west, recommend that material consumption should be moderated. However, the consumer society is partly a reaction against these traditions. Sustainable consumption is unlikely to be achieved through the imposition of earlier ethical systems.

A more promising path might be to encourage dialogue on ways in which individuals and communities can address their social needs without material consumption, and to foster the grass-roots development of more sustainable ideals of the good life.

The Oxford Commission on Sustainable Consumption can play a useful role in working with different communities to explore their visions of the good life and their views on the ethical principles that would support such a life. It can also draw together and evaluate the experiences of those who have already made a decision to pursue their own version of the good life.

To a large extent, it should be possible to work within the projects already planned. In particular, the Commission's project on Sustainable Consumption Action Plans will involve developing visions for sustainable consumption and the good life at the local level. The project on Youth Consumption Patterns will also involve working with young people to explore their visions for sustainable consumption and the good life. The project on media influences on consumption will also be helpful in aiming to understand how the images and

narratives conveyed by the media influence its audience's understanding of and aspirations for the good life.

Additional projects could be considered. In particular, the Commission should be working with the business community to explore the systemic incentives in our economic framework that encourage them to market a materialistic vision of the good.

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