
THE MORAL AND ETHICAL WEIGHT OF VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

A philosophical review

Samuel Alexander and Jacob Garrett

Simplicity Institute Report 17a, 2017



SIMPLICITY
INSTITUTE

The Moral and Ethical Weight of Voluntary Simplicity: A Philosophical Review

Samuel Alexander and Jacob Garrett

1. Introduction

A vast and growing body of scientific literature is impressing upon us that human economic activity is degrading planetary ecosystems in ways that are unsustainable. Taken as a whole, we are overconsuming Earth's resources, destabilising the climate, and decimating biodiversity (Steffan *et al*, 2015; IPCC, 2013; WWF, 2016). At the same time, we also know that there are billions of people around the world who are, by any humane standard, under-consuming. Alleviating global poverty is likely to place even more pressure on an already over-burdened planet. To make matters worse still, the global population, currently at 7.4 billion people, is expected to rise to around 9.7 billion by mid-century and 11 billion by the end of the century (Gerland *et al*, 2014), compounding already severe sustainability and social justice crises. Continuous economic growth seems socially necessary but ecologically disastrous (Meadows *et al*, 2004).

What makes this entire situation more tragic still is that the high-consumption, Western-style lifestyles driving the environmental crisis are often failing to live up to their promise of a happy and meaningful life, leaving many people alienated from their communities, disconnected from nature, unhealthy, and overworked (Hamilton and Denniss, 2005; Lane, 2000). In this context, calls by environmentalists to reject consumerist lifestyles and growth-orientated economies in favour of less impactful consumption and production practices seem powerful, even compelling, from a range of environmental, social, and even self-interested perspectives (Trainer, 2010).

Choosing to consume less while seeking a higher quality of life is a living strategy that today goes by the name 'voluntary simplicity' (Elgin, 1998; Alexander, 2009). The term was coined in 1936 by Richard Gregg (2009), a follower of Gandhi, who advocated a mindful approach to consumption which involved seeking basic material needs as directly and sustainably as possible and then directing time and energy away from limitless material pursuits in favour of exploring 'the good life' in non-materialistic sources of meaning and fulfilment. This way of life, also known as 'downshifting' or 'simple living', embraces values like moderation, sufficiency, and frugality, and eschews the materialist values of greed, acquisitiveness, luxury, and excess. By exchanging superfluous consumption for more freedom, voluntary simplicity holds out the tantalising prospect that over-consumers could live more on less (Cafaro, 2009), with positive consequences for self, others, and planet.

Despite the apparent coherency of voluntary simplicity as an appropriate response to planetary and social crises, the social movement or subculture of voluntary simplicity remains marginal. Especially in the developed regions of the world, but increasingly elsewhere, dominant consumerist cultures continue to celebrate affluence, fame, and status on the 'more is better' assumption that increased consumption is the most direct path to happiness and fulfilment (Hamilton and Denniss, 2005).

What is more, this consumerist approach to life finds a sophisticated theoretical defence in neoclassical economics, a framework which holds that pursuing self-interest in the marketplace is the best way to maximise both personal and social wellbeing. From this perspective, environmental problems only arise when prices do not accurately reflect the true costs of production (due to 'externalities'), which implies that the best way to respond to environmental problems is not to rethink consumption practices but to fix market failures from the production angle (see Princen, 2005). When prices are right, the argument goes, people will consume to an 'optimal' (utility-maximising) degree, which implies sustainability. This dominant economic perspective thus marginalises consumption as a subject of ethical concern, and based on this perspective, governments and businesses around the world argue that individuals and households should continue to consume as much as possible, because this is good for economic growth, and this paradigm assumes economic growth is the most direct path to progress (Hamilton, 2003).

Although dominant economic and cultural perspectives on consumption continue to assume that 'more is better', throughout history there have always been criticisms of materialistic values and praise given to 'simpler' ways of life (Alexander and McLeod, 2014). All the great spiritual and wisdom traditions have warned against the dangers of greed, extravagance, and acquisitiveness (see VandenBroeck, 1991), and, indeed, until quite recently, political parties across the spectrum shared a view that moderation, frugality, and humility were noble social and political values (see, Shi, 2007). Nevertheless, despite this long and venerable tradition, voluntary simplicity has received surprisingly little attention from moral and ethical philosophers (see Barnett, Cafaro, and Newholm, 2005).

Accordingly, in this article, we review and examine the moral and ethical weight of voluntary simplicity from a range of philosophical perspectives, including utilitarianism, Kantianism, virtue ethics, and Christianity, in order to assess which, if any, can provide a coherent philosophical defence of voluntary simplicity. While we do not claim to present anything like an absolute philosophical foundation to voluntary simplicity, ultimately our analysis shows that voluntary simplicity can draw strong philosophical support from a surprising range of moral and ethical perspectives. Our central argument is that this overlapping support makes voluntary simplicity a robust moral and ethical position that should guide the direction of our lives and our societies more than it does. Although we cannot detail the full complexity of the moral and ethical perspectives under consideration, and in fact we may raise as many questions as we answer, we will deem this preliminary analysis successful if it draws more attention to the issues under consideration and sparks a broader discussion.

2. Affluence, Poverty, and Voluntary Simplicity

We begin our analysis with a review and application of one of the most prominent moral perspectives of recent decades: the provocative argument Peter Singer presented in his seminal paper 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality' (1972). Although Singer did not frame his argument in terms of voluntary simplicity, the weight of his reasoning provides direct moral support for this approach to consumption, in ways that we will explain.

The essential logic of Singer's position can be easily summarised: 1. Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter and medical care are bad from a moral perspective 2. If it is within our power to

prevent something morally bad from happening, without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, then morally we ought to do it. Singer argues that these principles should take no account of distance or proximity, in the sense that it should make no difference from a moral perspective whether the suffering we can prevent is near or far away.

Upon these strikingly simple and plausible premises, Singer draws very challenging conclusions. He begins illustrating the practical implications of his theory with the example of a drowning child: we can save the child, but it means getting our clothes muddy. Based on the premises stated above, morally we ought to save the child because getting our clothes muddy is morally insignificant compared to the life of the child. Who could argue with that? Surely we would all save the child out of a sense of moral duty. The power of Singer's argument lies in how compelling this simple line of reasoning is, and yet when the implications of the theory are more broadly applied it becomes clear that many aspects of life we take for granted suddenly appear very dubious from a moral perspective. How so?

Singer's central thesis – for which he has become famous – is that people in relatively affluent societies have a moral obligation to give more of their money away to relieve the suffering of the poorest, a position that follows logically if the reasoning above is accepted. Just as we should save the child because getting our clothes muddy is a relatively insignificant cost, Singer argues that many of the things we spend our money on are trivial and of limited benefit to our lives, whereas that same money could greatly reduce suffering by feeding or housing those in extreme poverty. For example, Singer argues that spending money on new clothes to look 'well dressed' does not provide for any important need: 'We would not be sacrificing anything if we were to continue to wear old clothes, and give the money to famine relief... To do so is not charitable or generous... we ought to give the money away, and it is wrong not to do so' (Singer, 1972: 699).

Suddenly many casual acts of consumption are cast in a new and questionable moral light. People might find it easy to nod their heads when Singer argues that we should save the child despite getting our clothes muddy, but the same force of logic applies to many ordinary acts of consumption whose moral legitimacy are typically unquestioned or even celebrated and admired in consumer societies. Do we really need that magazine, that new cushion, or that extra pair of shoes? Do we really need to renovate the kitchen or go on that trip to Bali? Can we justify treating ourselves to an expensive meal out or buy our children the latest plastic toy? Most people do not consider such acts immoral, but Singer's argument implies that perhaps that is moral blindness – perhaps even wilful moral blindness. Singer argues that our lives would not be significantly affected if we were to forego many such acts of consumption but we could relieve great suffering with the money saved. Therefore, it would seem that it is our duty to forego those acts of consumption and practice voluntary simplicity in order to give more aid to the poorest around the world.

One immediate question that arises is how far to take this line of reasoning. Does the argument require us to give away everything other than what is required to meet our most basic biophysical needs? After all, if there are people who suffer greatly because they do not have those most basic needs met, perhaps all acts of consumption beyond basic needs are unjustifiable until everyone's basic needs are met. Obviously that would place a tremendously challenging moral demand on us, but that is not an argument against the validity of the demand. Indeed, it could be said that a morality that was not challenging would be no morality at all.

For present purposes, however, we feel that this boundary issue can remain unresolved without undermining our central point. While Singer's position may not be able to provide a clear cut line between justifiable and unjustifiable consumption, his argument provides a compelling moral case that we could and should forgo many acts of consumption and give the money saved to aid agencies. This could relieve great suffering without causing us any significant hardship. Indeed, according to William MacAskill (2016: 22), 'the same amount of money can do one hundred times as much benefit to the very poorest in the world as it can to benefit typical citizens of the United States [or other affluent nations].'

Perhaps part of the reason people often fail to appreciate the power of this moral position is due to the lack of proximity between acts of superfluous consumption and the individuals living in the greatest destitution. Would we be so casual in our consumption practices if we had to make our purchases before the gaze of a grossly emaciated Ethiopian child, desperate for a simple bowl of rice? Isn't that new pair of shoes morally tarnished knowing that the money spent on them could have fed that child for a year, perhaps saved his or her life? This is not an easy thought experiment to conduct – it can easily induce guilt, because so often we fail to live up to this standard. But by clarifying our moral obligations, we argue that this line of reasoning can challenge us to rethink our consumption practices in ways that could greatly reduce human suffering. In short, Singer's argument radically calls into question the legitimacy of consumer culture and provides a robust moral case for voluntary simplicity. As the Gandhian dictum goes: 'Live simply so that others may simply live.'

3. Utilitarianism and Voluntary Simplicity

We began with Singer's argument because it is so simple, powerful, and yet challenging. The example of saving the child also makes the moral theory so tangible and practically comprehensible. We now wish to step back and consider the underlying theory of utilitarianism which subtly informs Singer's argument and which may offer further insight into the moral foundations of voluntary simplicity.

Although the roots of utilitarianism can be found in ancient philosophers such as Epicurus, who held up happiness as the greatest good, the founding of the modern philosophic tradition of utilitarianism is typically attributed to Jeremy Bentham. The classic statement of this position was provided in Bentham's (2007 [1789]: 1) *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*:

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do... By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever according to the tendency it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words to promote or to oppose that happiness. I say of every action whatsoever, and therefore not only of every action of a private individual, but of every measure of government.

From this passage we can see that utilitarianism posits that the rightness or wrongness of an act is to be judged solely by its consequences, and that the only relevant factor for assessing the consequences is how much happiness or unhappiness is caused. Acting morally, therefore, implies aiming to maximise happiness and minimise unhappiness, and utilitarians tend to be egalitarian in

the sense that no one's happiness counts more than anyone else's. To the objection that humans do and should value things other than the balance of happiness, utilitarians such as John Stuart Mill (2012 [1863]: 39) argue that 'happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end; all other things being desirable as a means to that end.' We may indeed value things like health, friendship, beauty, and human rights, but utilitarians argue that, ultimately, we value these things because they promote happiness.

As noted in the introduction, our intention in this paper is not to provide a comprehensive defence of utilitarianism or any of the other moral philosophies reviewed, but rather to explore what implications these theories might have on Western-style consumer practices *if* they were accepted. Accordingly, we will look no further into the various controversies still surrounding utilitarianism and instead proceed to explore whether, or to what extent, utilitarianism might provide support for voluntary simplicity.

At first instance one may have legitimate doubts about whether voluntary simplicity – choosing to live with less stuff – could maximise net happiness. After all, all Westerners and increasingly all human beings live within a globalised market society, in which individuals and governments are able to buy things that most satisfy their most pressing needs and desires – nicer clothes, a bigger house, better schools, more exotic foods, more luxurious holidays, the best healthcare, etc. More money would seem to imply more satisfaction – more happiness or 'utility' – and, indeed, the dominant economic paradigm proceeds on that assumption (Purdey, 2010).

Nevertheless, things are certainly not that simple. First of all, as noted above, throughout history there have been prophets and philosophers who have argued that true satisfaction in life does not consist in the accumulation and consumption of ever-more material things and, in fact, that materialism or consumerism implies a counter-productive approach to life that can never provide the happiness it promises. Examples in this tradition include figures as diverse as the Buddha, Diogenes, the Stoics, Jesus, Thoreau, and Gandhi (see Alexander and McLeod, 2014), all of whom would argue in their own way that many people could increase their happiness by giving up materialistic lifestyles and embracing lifestyles of voluntary simplicity. More recently, philosopher Kate Soper (2008) has defended voluntary simplicity as a pleasure-maximising lifestyle in terms of what she calls 'alternative hedonism'. Similarly, prominent 'degrowth' advocate, Serge Latouche (2014), defends the notion of 'frugal abundance' (see also, Trainer, 2010).

Interestingly, in recent decades a vast body of sociological and psychological literature has provided some robust empirical support for this ancient line of reasoning (e.g. Lane, 2000; Diener and Seligman, 2004; Diener, Helliwell, and Kahneman, 2010). For instance, Tim Kasser (2002) has shown that people with materialistic value-orientations (that is, people who highly value possessions and the status they bring) tend to have lower psychological wellbeing than those who are less materialistic. Richard Easterlin (1995, 2013) and others (Layard, 2005; Layard *et al*, 2010) have provided evidence from subjective wellbeing surveys that indicate that economic growth is not increasing life satisfaction or 'evaluative happiness', particularly in the developed world. Likewise, Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton (2010) provide evidence that, in terms of emotional wellbeing or 'affective happiness', there seems to be a satiation point above which getting richer does not contribute to happiness. Without going into the intricacies of this diverse literature, suffice to say that there is now a compelling body of social science suggesting that many people in the most

developed regions in the world are not only overconsuming from an environmental perspective but also mal-consuming from a personal wellbeing perspective.

It would seem, then, that many people living high-consumption lifestyles could increase their happiness – counter-intuitively perhaps – by redirecting their life energies away from materialistic pursuits and seeking the good life in non-materialistic sources of happiness. Indeed, the largest empirical survey of voluntary simplicity movement (Alexander and Ussher, 2012) shows that 87% of people choosing to live more simply in a material sense are happier for doing so (with the other 13% being about as happy as before doing so and only a negligible amount being less happy). While most of us are exposed to advertising messages thousands of times everyday, imploring us to seek satisfaction through increased consumption, the modern voluntary simplicity movement, in line with ancient wisdom, is suggesting that there may be a more direct path to happiness – not by acquiring ‘more’ but by embracing ‘enough’.

While we suggest that this ‘self-interested’ defence of voluntary simplicity should be taken more seriously by utilitarians, voluntary simplicity arguably has even greater moral importance to the extent it could reduce the suffering of others, both immediately and in the future. This links back to Singer’s arguments. If it is the case that the pursuit of increased consumption, especially in affluent societies, is no longer increasing happiness, then the case for reducing consumption and redistributing that superfluous wealth to those in poverty becomes even stronger. Indeed, there is something morally perverse about consuming in ways that does not advance personal happiness while others suffer in material destitution.

What is more, to the extent that overconsumption of the world’s resources is putting in jeopardy the viability of the planet for future generations, then this also provides utilitarian support for voluntary simplicity. After all, if we take the happiness of future generations into account and recognise the vast suffering that would flow from ecosystemic collapse, then it would seem the moral scales fall heavily in favour of voluntary simplicity. By consuming modestly and thereby helping avoid ecosystemic collapse, this will help maintain a healthy biosphere for millions of years within which human beings can flourish. Continuing to consume recklessly, on the other hand, is likely to lead to unfathomable suffering, with runaway climate change being one of the greatest humanitarian threats (Gardiner, 2011).

In closing it is worth noting that the moral scope of utilitarianism arguably extends beyond humanity and should include, as Mill (2012 [1863: 13) argued, ‘the whole of sentient creation’. That is, the entire animal kingdom, not just humans, should be included in the hedonic calculus, for as Bentham (2007 [1789: 311) asked, rhetorically: ‘The question is not, Can they [animals] *reason*? nor, Can they *talk*? but Can they *suffer*?’ And the answer to that final question is obviously yes – animals can suffer – and therefore morality arguably demands their consideration (Singer, 2009).

While including the concerns of non-human animals seems to rest on plausible utilitarian foundations, doing so further calls into question the legitimacy of Western-style consumption practices and the economies of growth those consumption practices both drive and depend on. A recent study (WWF, 2016) reports that over the last 40 years alone, human economic activity has reduced the populations of invertebrate species by, on average, an alarming 58%, with trends

indicating that this impact will rise to 67% by 2020 if business as usual persists. Another report (Ripple *et al*, 2016) holds that over 300 species are at grave risk of being eaten into extinction.

All this suggests that humanity, as a whole, is disregarding the moral worth of animals. Factory farming is but the most egregious example of a more general lack of moral concern. While we will not attempt to set out a complete 'solution' to this complex problem, it can be argued that a necessary *part* of any coherent and effective response will involve human beings make fewer demands on the natural habitats of Earth's declining biodiversity and taking more seriously the moral arguments for vegetarianism or veganism (Singer, 2009), strategies which are consistent with a cultural embrace of voluntary simplicity.

In sum, respecting animal life provides further moral grounds for arguing that high-impact consumers should be embracing lifestyles of voluntary simplicity. This is part of the broader utilitarian argument contending that, if voluntary simplicity maximises happiness – human or otherwise – and minimises suffering, then living in such a way is part of what morality requires of us. From this utilitarian perspective, voluntary simplicity is morally required because it is the path to greatest net happiness for the entire community of life.

4. Kantianism and Voluntary Simplicity

It is not only in the pursuit of maximal happiness and minimal suffering that strong ethical warrant for voluntary simplicity can be found. We now begin our analysis of various non-utilitarian approaches by turning our attention to Immanuel Kant, the founder of deontological ethics. On his account, our moral duties can never be accurately derived from our fallible predictions of consequences or from how we imagine happiness might be obtained. Instead, Kant insisted that the only legitimate foundation for a system of morals is upon the universal principles of reason and their inescapable requirements of us as rational agents. Along these lines he argues that the only thing good in itself is a good will, for it alone among all other things often considered good – such as good circumstances, good temperaments, or good talents – is good apart from the ends it aims at or achieves. According to Kant, all other goods can be produced by accident without the good will of a rational agent, whereas the highest and unconditional good is sought out and produced only by good will *because it is good*, and for no other reason.

By 'good will' Kant does not mean some vague feeling of benevolence towards others, but rather to have a will is to have 'the ability to act according to the thought of laws' (Kant, 1785: 18), that is, the ability to act on the basis of principles and reasons. Only rational beings can do this, and so a good will is one that is motivated by the recognition of one's duty as a rational being to act according to the laws of reason. Thus if anyone fails to act in accordance with the laws of reason, he or she is not only acting irrationally, but also immorally.

In this way Kant maintains that the precepts of the rational and moral law are binding on us in ways we cannot choose to ignore: we ought to act according to the laws of reason to the extent that we are rational; to act against these laws is to shirk our inherent duty as rational beings. It is within this framework that Kant advances his famous categorical imperative, the first and most common formulation of which is, 'I ought never to act in such a way that I couldn't also will that the maxim on

which I act should become a universal law' (Kant, 1785: 11). Kant takes this to be the principle of action to which all rational beings must conform and he holds that it cannot be rationally rejected.

He illustrates the force of the imperative with the example of telling a lie. Since lies rely on a background expectation that people normally tell the truth, Kant says that a rational being cannot choose to lie simply when it is convenient or beneficial. This is because if the rule or maxim 'I will lie when it is to my benefit' were to be made universal law – if everybody acted that way – then the general attitude of trust presupposed by the lie would be undermined and the lie itself would be rendered ineffective. In this way, Kant proposes that the only rationally and morally acceptable acts are those which do not treat one's own situation, needs, or desires as special or privileged above those of others, for we are all rational beings worthy of equal dignity and respect as such. In Kant's own words:

If we attend to what happens in us when we act against duty, we find that we don't (be we *can't*) actually will that our maxim should become a universal law. Rather we are willing that the opposite of the maxim on which we are acting should remain as law generally, but we take the liberty of catering to our preferences by making an exception – 'just for me, just this once!' (Kant, 1785: 26).

On this basis we contend that there are compelling reasons on the Kantian view to reject patterns of consumption common in the Western world (and increasingly elsewhere) in favour of a lifestyle of relative material simplicity. Right now an expanding consumer class of more than one billion people is consuming Earth's resources in a manner that is unprecedented and entirely exceptional. With the ecological future of the planet already being jeopardised by current rates of consumption, it would be utterly catastrophic from an environmental perspective if such practices were universalised to all 7.4 billion human beings, to say nothing of the ten or eleven billion expected by 2100 (Gerland *et al*, 2014). From a Kantian perspective, then, it seems consumer lifestyles as they exist today in wealthy, technologically developed nations are being pursued in a moral and rational vacuum, consisting as they do of numerous daily decisions which treat those making them as exceptions to the rules of reason and equality under the moral law.

Yet Kant understood that, despite being capable of rational deliberation and choice, our wills regularly come under the influence of motivations which do not always find accord with our reason: we do not always do the right thing simply because it is the right thing. The fact is, Kant says, human beings cultivate and fall prey to their own personal preferences which impede the free action of their rational wills; if it were not so, he claims, a perfectly rational will would never feel constrained by its moral duty. Unfortunately for the Kantian, humans are far from being perfect moral agents, but this in no way provides us an excuse for ignoring our duty. Even with the perhaps enticing prospect of that new car, big house, or even phone upgrade or cup of coffee, from the Kantian perspective we are all still bound by the categorical responsibility to live in a way which is sustainable and universalisable, and which considers the whole of humanity both now and in the future. For Kant, blindly following the standard practice of our friends, neighbours, or society at large is no justification at all.

5. Virtue Ethics and Voluntary Simplicity

So far we have discussed how some relatively modern ethical and moral positions may warrant decreased material consumption, yet some of the oldest and most influential advocates of the relationship between the good life and material simplicity come from the ancient Greek philosophers who, despite deep disagreement on various matters, found considerable accord in their praise and practice of simple living. Perhaps this should be no surprise, given the natural overlap of simplicity with the traditional virtues of temperance, frugality, prudence, and self-control. However, the case for material simplicity as a virtue in its own right has not often been stated by philosophers. In this section, following the work of Cafaro and Gambrel (2009), we will briefly outline and discuss the possible place of voluntary simplicity within a virtue ethics framework that dates back to the ancient Greeks.

Broadly defined, the virtues are those qualities which, to the extent they are present in any given person, society, or institution, make that person, society, or institution a good one: traits on which depend the present and future flourishing of those immediately concerned, as well as that of all others worthy of consideration. The ancient Greeks held that possession of the virtues led to *eudaimonia*; an essential component in a good life but notoriously difficult to translate, perhaps being best approximated as 'flourishing' or 'true happiness.' Naturally, any account of the virtues will thus be determined in large part by the form one believes the good life to take and in what true happiness and flourishing are thought to consist. Yet *eudaimonia* as conceived by the Greeks is not a subjective self-assessment or merely the personal sense of happiness, for even if one thinks oneself to be happy, *eudaimonia* is impossible wherever the virtues are lacking or have been misidentified. The genuine virtues are only those which in fact do lead to *eudaimonia* in its true form, and which are applicable and relevant to all human lives, irrespective of place or time.

Furthermore, the virtuous person acts virtuously out of motivation from the virtues, rather than only as a means to some other end. As a result, even many honest actions do not make a person honest, for he or she may be acting honestly only in order to garner a good reputation or to avoid the consequences of being caught in lies. Additionally, the truly virtuous person knows how and when to act, and knows what kind of action is called for by the virtues in a given situation. Such a person has *phronesis*, or practical wisdom; the ability to properly discern what is right rather than act in obedience to immature or simplistic notions of virtue. The honest person tells the truth, but with *phronesis* knows when tact is in order. In the same way, without *phronesis*, the generous person may not know what to gift or when to stop giving. The wisdom to see the big picture as well as the critical details of specific circumstances is therefore indispensable to the understanding and practice of real virtue.

Within this approach, we hold that simplicity may rightly be considered one of the virtues, essentially agreeing with Cafaro and Gambrel (2009: 90) in defining it as 'the virtue disposing us to act appropriately within the sphere of our consumer decisions,' whether these decisions are large or small, once-off or repeated. Understood this way, simplicity helps us see clearly what we need to flourish and be happy when it comes to things we purchase and acquire, and also identify which things are ultimately irrelevant to *eudaimonia* or how those things, if pursued, may diminish or hinder it in our lives. Additionally, simplicity would include the wisdom to understand where and

how our consumer decisions will impact the happiness and flourishing of others, making us more able to perceive the kind of society and world to which various decisions would lead.

Accordingly, the virtue of simplicity implies regular, thoughtful introspection and reflection, leading to more conscious consumption in line with a deeper understanding of what is truly valuable and important in life. As such, we suggest that the earnest practice of simplicity will typically result in significantly decreased and alternate forms of consumption when compared to the average in the most developed countries. It is also worth noting that while over-consumers in these nations are the clear focus for the present discussion, simplicity likely remains a virtue even for those with very little opportunity to consume material objects, many of whom are quite justified in trying to increase their level of material consumption. While we acknowledge that the moral burden of simplicity falls squarely at the feet of those who have much, we cautiously suggest that those with little (but sufficient) may still benefit from conscious consideration regarding the right material goods to consume, as well as the cultivation of discipline to avoid making unwise decisions in this sphere.

But can simplicity rightly be called a virtue? That is, does the ability to make wise and appropriate consumer decisions promote and help maintain individual, societal, and planetary flourishing? First of all, we suggest that the wise and virtuous person will see that the planet's ecological systems are already strained, especially by the consumption practices of roughly the richest 1.5 billion of its inhabitants, and that the continuation and extension of such practices risks ecosystemic collapse, thereby endangering the lives and wellbeing of the millions or even billions most vulnerable to environmental change (Gardiner, 2011). In the face of this reality, it is relatively simple to see how careful moderation of consumption and the ability to make informed and appropriate consumer decisions directly impacts human (and non-human) flourishing on a global scale.

Yet despite the pressing environmental need to moderate consumption, many see this limitation as antithetical to personal happiness and good living. Does virtue simply demand that we sacrifice our own pleasure for the good of the planet and the human race as a whole? Fortunately, it does not seem that this is so. As note above, a growing body of work is emerging which suggests that by de-emphasising material things, we stand to gain in diverse and often profound ways in the non-material aspects of our lives. By resisting the consumerist impulses to needlessly upgrade and acquire, many of us can save ourselves from financial stress due to over-commitment and debt, while simultaneously freeing up time and money we can spend on non-material pleasures such as time with friends and family, as well as in pursuit of personal passions, projects, and goals. In a wider social context, this time and money can also be directed into volunteer and community groups, making it easier and more enjoyable for us to develop and express other virtues including generosity, compassion, and kindness. Deeper community involvement also affords us the opportunity to form and strengthen bonds across social boundaries, minimising tensions and curtailing a host of social ills. Furthermore, even affluent societies depend fundamentally upon basic ecosystem services that are being eroded by overconsumption; simplicity helps to maintain and protect these and in so doing allows for flourishing societies into the future. In many ways then, irrespective of the modern environmental crises facing us, simplicity remains a virtue as it serves to maintain and promote a balanced positive personal and social outlook while fostering other, overlapping virtues and cultivating fertile ground for the growth of others.

Finally, even with these strengths, it is commonly objected that since a healthy economy is essential for a flourishing society, simplicity should be opposed on the grounds that it threatens economic growth. Unfortunately, a proper response to this important objection cannot be offered here, so it must suffice for us simply to echo Cafaro and Gambrel in their conviction that ‘the endless growth economy is an ecological impossibility and a blind alley in the human career’ (2009: 105). Perhaps the first step to a better world involves learning to appreciate the virtue of voluntarily moderating our consumption as we choose to live out the fact that true happiness will never come from the things we can buy. Genuine flourishing lies beyond consumer culture.

6. Christianity and Voluntary Simplicity

Throughout history, many diverse religious and spiritual traditions have defended simple living in some form, eschewing materialism and cautioning against greed. This remarkable consensus is likely due, in part, to the realisation that the more time and energy one dedicates to materialistic pursuits, the less one has to devote to the non-material aspects of life, including the spiritual dimension.

However, the consumer cultures of the modern world first appeared and remain strongest in nations with a dominant Christian heritage, and even with more than two billion people worldwide professing Christian faith, many Christians live in countries with the greatest material affluence and consumption. Therefore, while various religious and spiritual traditions can and do mount forceful arguments for simple living, among these the Christian case for voluntary simplicity and against materialism likely holds the strongest pull for much of consumer society today, due to its cultural influence in the West, and it is for these reasons it receives in-depth treatment here. The discussion that follows focuses on the biblical grounds for material simplicity and rejecting the consumerist craving for money and things. Unsurprisingly, however, many prominent Christian thinkers including St. Francis, Aquinas, Calvin, Wesley and, most recently, Pope Francis, have put forward critiques of unnecessary consumption, especially where it causes or contributes to spiritual, social, and environmental ills.

A core element of the Christian message is the recognition that human lives are mis-oriented; that our hearts and minds are regularly not set on the things they should be, and our attentions too easily wander from the good things which truly enrich us, deeply nurture us, and for which we are intended to live. As such, the call for a radical reorientation of one’s life was fundamental to Jesus’ ministry and is clearly evident in the gospel accounts from his early public teaching onwards, his first words recorded in the Gospel of Mark commending the people of Galilee to ‘Repent and believe the good news!’ (Mark 1:15).¹ To ‘repent’ means to change one’s mind or purpose; to think differently than before, or to turn away from one thing and towards another. What would Jesus have us turn away from? Anything that distracts us from following him or which keeps us from living our lives according to the good purposes God intends for us.

Thus the ‘good news’ Jesus preached is that ‘The kingdom of God is near’; that God has approached us, promising that all who trust in him – our true orientation – will ‘have life, and have it to the full.’ (John 10:10). For Jesus, as well as the biblical authors, even placing too great an emphasis on things

¹ All biblical references are from the New International Version (NIV), Holy Bible.

that are not inherently bad can lead to unhealthy obsession which causes God to become increasingly ignored and our conduct to falter. For example, the desire to see one's children make wise decisions, if not balanced, can easily morph into overbearing parenting, or the desire to be agreeable, if unchecked, can lead to cowardice in the face of conflict with majority opinion (Colossians 3:21, Exodus 23:2).

However, one of the primary dangers Christians are exhorted time and again to guard themselves against is the love of money and material affluence, lest it fatally distract from appropriate love of God. Yet it should be made clear that this is not because money or material objects themselves are evil; indeed, these things are given by God for good and ultimately belong to him (see, e.g., Gen. 1, Deut. 10:14, Psalm 89:11, Psalm 24:1, Job 41:11, Heb. 2:10). Thus, humans are stewards rather than outright owners of all material wealth, and are therefore expected to think and act accordingly.

Millennia before modern-day consumer culture the biblical authors seamlessly brought together deep theological truth and commonsense wisdom in their advice and warnings regarding the desire for wealth. The apostle Paul – while imprisoned for his faith – writes to the church in Philippi that contentedness with one's situation does not ultimately come from material circumstance, but from an attitude of thankfulness for all that one has, material and immaterial, 'whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want' (Phil. 4:12). Such an attitude refuses to look jealously to others who have more than we do and shuns the grasping desire always to want more than we have, for it acknowledges that our lives are not ultimately founded upon material things.

As the writer to the Hebrews puts it, 'Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have. For God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you"' (Heb. 13:5). This approach comes into pointed conflict with the increasingly popular message of 'prosperity theology' which casts the godly life as a means to material abundance, an outlook which is antithetical to scripture and the mission of Christ. Moreover, Paul laments in his letter to Timothy, a church leader in Ephesus, that 'Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs', leading not only to spiritual affliction, but apparently outward troubles as well (1 Tim. 6:10). In this way focussing heavily on material things diverts our attention from the non-material dimension of being, which we neglect to our own harm.

Similarly, much of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament stresses the folly of prioritising wealth and material gain too highly, cautioning 'not [to] wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint' (Prov. 23:4). Instead, the wise favour the path of sufficiency: 'give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread' (Prov. 30:8), for anything else can easily lead to the dishonour of God. The Teacher in the book of Ecclesiastes observes that 'Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income' (Ecc. 5:10), but rather lives life on an ever-dissatisfying consumer treadmill. This Teacher identifies himself as king in Jerusalem, detailing his life of conspicuous consumption in which he denied himself nothing his eyes desired, yet he reflects that 'when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind' (Ecc. 2:11). He elaborates further, remarking upon the simple but powerful truth that no matter how wealthy you become, you cannot take it with you when you depart this life, for a man 'takes nothing from his labour that he can carry in his hand' (Ecc. 5:15), therefore why fixate on needless gain?

However, nowhere is the conflict between love of God and love of money put in more stark terms than by Jesus, who gave uncompromising warnings that ‘where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,’ and ‘No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve both God and money’ (Matt. 6:21-24). Jesus knows that there are many things vying for the place of God in our lives; that we can come to idolise money and make it our new god. Jesus recognises that if our ultimate goal and greatest love is the acquisition and maintenance of material abundance, from which we hope to derive our security, sense of worth, freedom, the esteem of others, or anything else, we cannot at the same time look to derive them from God. Jesus’ strongest language is reserved for such things, for he is in no doubt of the allure and the promise of satisfaction that material objects hold for human beings. Yet he is equally sure of their inability to ultimately satisfy the deep desires of our hearts, saying, ‘Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions’ (Luke 12:15). For the Christian, then – and arguably for the spiritual seeker more generally – a life measured by the things you possess is a life disastrously disoriented, for even if you have much, it cannot provide the sense of meaning and purpose most of us seek.

Yet Christians are not only powerfully urged against living for the present material world at the risk of their souls (Matt. 16:26), but this kind of covetous desire also comes into direct conflict with the constant biblical exhortation towards generosity, kindness, and mercy, especially towards the most needy and afflicted (see, e.g. Lev. 19:9-10, Deut. 15:7-11, Psalm 10:17-18, Prov. 14:31, Isaiah 1:17, Micah 6:8, 2 Cor. 9:7, Phil. 2:1-4, Heb. 13:16, 1 John 3:17-18). A full discussion of the seeming conflict between unbridled consumerism and Christian social justice is beyond the scope of this paper. Yet with billions of people in material need in the world today, as well as hundreds of millions more predicted to become so due to the effects of continued environmental degradation, a compelling Christian case can be made that to neglect the present and future suffering of so many, as well as to actively contribute to the circumstances which create and exacerbate this suffering through excessive material consumption, is both thoroughly unbiblical and in opposition to the heart of God.

7. Foucault’s Ethics and Voluntary Simplicity

We will now conclude our philosophical evaluation of voluntary simplicity by exploring whether, or to what extent, Michel Foucault’s work on ethics may also support or enrich this sufficiency-orientated way of life (see Alexander, 2015b). At first this may seem like a tangent but it should become clear that Foucault’s ethical position can be fairly described as a post-structuralist reinterpretation of virtue ethics, and indeed Foucault regularly and openly acknowledges his debts to the ancient Greeks, especially the Cynics and the Stoics (see Foucault, 1985). As we hope to show, examining voluntary simplicity through this post-structuralist lens can offer important new insights into the complexities of moral and ethical thinking and practice. At the same time, even more than previous sections, we accept that the brevity of the following analysis may raise more questions than it answers, but we trust that those questions will nevertheless enrich the discussion if only by problematizing it.

We will begin by outlining in the most general terms the implications Foucault’s post-structuralism has on moral philosophy. His critique arises out of a deep scepticism about the very search for universal or objective moral truths that are applicable to all people, in all places, irrespective of

context. As Foucault and the broader school of post-structuralists, neo-pragmatists, and deconstructionists argue, truth, including moral truth, must be expressed in language, and since language is a human creation, so must truth, ultimately, be a human creation. Furthermore, since language is inherently shifting and unstable and always subject to various interpretive ambiguities, there will never be one and only one moral code that is true for all people in all places, times, and circumstances. For even if we knew which moral code was the one and only one to obey – the Ten Commandments, for example, or Bentham’s ‘greatest happiness principle’ – its context-dependent application would inevitably require interpretation, and interpretation is always a function of one or other paradigm of understanding and not an objective reflection of a pre-existing and eternal metaphysical reality.

But what becomes of moral discourse if the search for a universal moral code is given up? This is the question Foucault put his mind to in his books and essays that make up his so-called ‘ethical turn’. It is in these texts where Foucault develops his notion of ethics as ‘an aesthetics of existence’ (Foucault, 1985; Foucault, 2000), which he presents as an alternative mode of ethical practice that can be taken up, by default, one might say, in the absence of a knowable and universalisable morality.

Foucault’s strategy is to problematise the notion of ‘selfhood’ by arguing that the ‘self’, far from being as independent and autonomous as philosophers such as Kant have typically supposed, is in fact inextricably shaped by linguistic and contextual forces, such that *who we are* as individuals is not the determinate product of free decisions made by some autonomous agent, but is instead the product of social and linguistic forces that are largely beyond our control. Foucault does not deny or exclude the possibility of human freedom, however, as some might infer from his early work. Foucault does insist that our identities are socially constructed entities and that we lack a transcendental or purely rational ‘self’, but he nevertheless carves out a certain, albeit limited, degree of space within which our socially constructed identities can *act upon themselves* for the purpose of ‘self-fashioning’. We may not get to choose the raw material of which our identities are constituted, but it nevertheless lies within our power to shape that raw material in various ways, just as the sculptor may make various things from a given lump of clay (a metaphor Foucault borrowed from the Greek Stoics).

According to Foucault, this relationship of the self to the self is the terrain of ethics, and when engaging the age-old ethical question, ‘How am I to live?’, Foucault suggests that we avoid the traditional search for a moral code and instead ask ourselves (as recommended by the virtue ethicists): ‘What type of person should I become?’. Using aesthetic metaphors to describe and develop this process of self-fashioning, Foucault (2000: 262) summarises his ethics by arguing that ‘we have to create ourselves as a work of art.’

To be clear, Foucault here is not so much arguing that we should aspire to be beautiful in any cosmetic sense; rather, he is seeking to highlight the fact that, in the absence of a knowable moral code that guides or constrains our actions, we must accept the unavoidable creative or aesthetic burden of shaping ourselves and our actions through deliberate practices or technologies of the self.

How, then, is this relevant to our discussion of voluntary simplicity? To begin with, it can be argued the social and institutional celebration of consumer lifestyles within the most developed societies has been internalised to some extent, socially constructing our identities and our worldviews, often

in subtle ways. If it is also the case, however, that our cultures and structures of overconsumption are driving several of the world's most pressing problems – both social and environmental – then it may be that ethical activity today requires that we engage the self by the self for the purpose of *refusing who are* – so far as we are uncritical consumers – and creating new, post-consumerist forms of subjectivity. In other words, ethical practice arguably calls for a rethinking of our assumptions, attitudes, and practices concerning consumption, and this might involve a deliberate reshaping of the self by the self for the purpose of making someone new.

Although the question of 'how one ought to live' is timeless, answering that question inevitably takes place relative to one's own time and circumstances, relative to one's own place in history. Let this acknowledgement of our deep and inescapable historicity provide this paper with its closing theme. Humans are both creatures and creators of their time. As creatures, many of us have been shaped, in many ways, to varying degrees, into uncritical, high-impact consumers. But as creators, our future (including our future 'self') is always and already opening up, challenging us to confront the question: what type of person should I become? It is hoped that some people might find value in exploring the notion of 'voluntary simplicity as an aesthetics of existence' (Alexander, 2015b), although in Foucauldian spirit, we acknowledge that this need not provide answers to all readers or complete answers to anyone.

8. Conclusion

This paper has reviewed a range of moral and ethical perspectives and attempted to assess, in a preliminary way, the extent to which those perspectives lend support for the sufficiency-orientated consumption practices of voluntary simplicity. We are the first to admit that we have not provided a comprehensive or 'knock down' philosophical case for voluntary simplicity and recognise that each perspective we reviewed could justify and arguably deserves a paper-length, if not a book-length, treatment. Furthermore, in an age where varieties of post-structuralism or post-modernism retain prominence in philosophical circles, we acknowledge that all our arguments are prone – as all arguments are prone – to deconstruction. Certainly, much more could be said both in defence and criticism of the perspectives reviewed.

Nevertheless, we maintain that a very plausible moral and ethical case has been made for voluntary simplicity, from the range of perspectives reviewed. This suggests, without proving, that there is something of moral and ethical significance to this way of life that is not sufficiently recognised in theory or practice. To the extent that we are correct, the main practical implication is that voluntary simplicity should take a more central place in our moral and ethical education and that the casual acceptance of consumer cultures should be more explicitly and regularly challenged. This may be particularly confronting for those of us in affluent societies, whose lifestyles are being called into question. Nevertheless, we hope that this paper provokes a broader discussion about the moral and ethical weight of voluntary simplicity, especially in an age of consumer malaise, gross inequality, and ever-deepening environmental crises. Just perhaps voluntary simplicity provides part of a necessary but elegant response to those overlapping challenges.

References

- Alexander, S. (ed.) 2009. *Voluntary simplicity: The poetic alternative to consumer culture*. Whanganui: Stead & Daughters.
- Alexander, S. 2013. 'Voluntary simplicity and the social reconstruction of law: Degrowth from the grassroots up'. *Environmental Values* 22: 287-308.
- Alexander, S. 2015a. *Prosperous descent: Crisis as opportunity in an age of limits*. Melbourne: Simplicity Institute.
- Alexander, S. 2015b. 'Voluntary simplicity as an aesthetics of existence: the art of ethics in a consumer age' in Alexander, S. 2015. *Prosperous descent: Crisis as opportunity in an age of limits*. Melbourne: Simplicity Institute, pp. 253- 291.
- Alexander, S. and McLeod, A. (eds) 2014. *Simple living in history: Pioneers of the deep future*. Melbourne: Simplicity Institute.
- Alexander, S., and Ussher, S. 2012. 'The voluntary simplicity movement: A multi-national survey analysis in theoretical context' *Journal of Consumer Culture* 12(1), 66-88.
- Barnett, C., Cafaro, P., and Newholm, T. 2005. 'Philosophy and ethical consumption' in Harrison, R., Newholm, T., and Shaw, D. (eds) *The Ethical Consumer*. London: Sage, pp.11-24.
- Bentham, J. 2007 [1789]. *Introduction to principles of morals and legislation*. New York: Dover.
- Burch, M. 2013. *The hidden door: Mindful sufficiency as an alternative to extinction*. Melbourne: Simplicity Institute.
- Cafaro, P. 2009. 'Less is more' in Alexander, S. (ed) 2009 *Voluntary simplicity: The poetic alternative to consumer culture*. Whanganui: Stead & Daughters, pp127-133.
- Cafaro, P., and Gambrel, J. 2009. 'The virtue of simplicity' *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 23(1): 85.
- Diener, E., Helliwell, J., and Kahneman, D. 2010. *International differences in well-being*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Diener, E. and Seligman, M. 2004. 'Beyond money: Toward an economy of well-being'. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 5: 1-31.
- Easterlin, R. 1995. 'Will raising the incomes of all increase the happiness of all?' *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 27: 35-47.
- Easterlin, R. 2013. *Happiness and economic growth: The evidence*. Discussion Paper No. 7187, January 2013: 1-30.

- Elgin, D. 1998 (revised ed). *Voluntary simplicity: Toward a way of life that is outwardly simple, inwardly rich*. New York: William Morrow.
- Foucault, M. 1985. *The uses of pleasure: The history of sexuality Vol 2*. New York: Random House.
- Foucault, M. 2000. 'On the genealogy of ethics', in Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Essential works Vol. I*. London: Penguin.
- Gardiner, S. 2011. *The perfect moral storm: The ethical tragedy of climate change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gerland, P., Raftery, A., Sevcikova, H., et al 2014. 'World population stabilization unlikely this century' *Science* 346(6206): 234-7.
- Gregg, R. 2009 [1936]. 'The value of voluntary simplicity' in Alexander, S. (ed) *Voluntary simplicity: The poetic alternative to consumer culture*. Whanganui: Stead & Daughters, pp111-126.
- Hamilton, C. 2003. *Growth fetish*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Hamilton, C and Denniss, R. 2005, *Affluenza: When too much is never enough*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- New International Version (NIV), Holy Bible (1984 and 2011 translations). Grant Rapids: Zondervan.
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2013. 'Climate Change 2013: The Physical Science Basis (Fifth Assessment Report)'
- Kahneman, D. and Deaton, A. 2010. 'High income improves evaluation of life but not emotional well-being' *PNSA* 107(38): 16489-16493.
- Kant, I. 1785. *Groundwork for the metaphysics of morals*. Available at: www.earlymoderntexts.com (accessed 16 December 2016).
- Kasser, T. 2002. *The high price of materialism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Lane, R. 2000. *The loss of happiness in market democracies*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Latouche, S. 2014. 'Essays on Frugal Abundance' *Simplicity Institute Reports*. Available at: <http://simplicityinstitute.org/publications> (accessed 20 December 2016).
- Layard, R. 2005. *Happiness: Lessons from a new science*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Layard, R. et al. 2010. 'Does relative income matter? Are the critics right?' In Diener, E., Helliwell, J., and Kahneman, D. (eds). *International differences in well-being*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- MacAskill, W. 2016. *Doing good better: How effective altruism can help you help others, do work that matters, and make smarter choices about giving back*. New York: Avery.

- Meadows, D., Randers, J. and Meadows, D. 2004. *Limits to growth: The 30-year update*. White River Junction, Vt: Chelsea Green Publishing.
- Mill, J.S. 2012 [1863]. *Utilitarianism*. Nelson: Renaissance Classics.
- Princen, T. (2005) *The Logic of Sufficiency*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Purdey, S. 2010. *Economic growth, the environment, and international relations: The growth paradigm*. New York: Routledge.
- Ripple, W. et al. 2016. 'Bushmeat hunting and extinction risk to the world's mammals.' *Royal Society Open Science* (19 October 2016). DOI: 10.1098/rsos.160498
- Shi, D. 2007 (revised ed). *The simple life: Plain living and high thinking in American culture*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Singer, P. 1972. 'Famine, affluence, and morality.' In Sher, G. (ed.) 1996. *Moral philosophy: Selected readings* (2nd ed). Fort Worth, Harcourt Brace College Publishers: pp. 694-704.
- Singer, P. 2009. *Animal liberation: The definitive classic of the animal movement*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Soper, K. 2008. 'Alternative hedonism, cultural theory and the role of aesthetic revisioning'. *Cultural Studies* 22(5): 567.
- Steffan, W. et al 2015, 'Planetary boundaries: Guiding human development on a changing planet,' *Science* 347(6223) DOI: 10.1126/science.1259855.
- Trainer, T. 2010. *The transition to a sustainable and just world*. Sydney: Envirobook.
- Vanenbroeck, G. (ed.) 1991. *Less is more: An anthology of ancient and modern voices raised in praise of simplicity*. Vermont: Inner Traditions.
- WWF, 2016. *Living planet report 2016*. Available at: <http://www.worldwildlife.org/pages/living-planet-report-2016> (accessed 16 December 2016).