Economic Consumption, Pleasure, and the Good Life

Philip Cafaro

Introduction

My topic is economic consumption, about which I make two contentions: first, that we should judge consumption on whether it improves or detracts from our lives, and act on that basis; and second, that many of the limits to economic consumption advocated by environmentalists would improve our lives. My ultimate goal is to argue this second point in detail, as part of an encompassing environmental virtue ethics. But the first point is logically prior, and it is the focus of this paper. Unless we place the issue of economic consumption in the context of living good lives and creating good societies, we cannot discuss its justifiable limits.1

The ancient Greek ethicists placed consumption, and economic issues generally, squarely within this context. The modern science of economics, contrarily, has developed methods of explaining economic behavior and a view of human beings and the world we inhabit that obscure the connection between our well-being and our economic lives. In what follows, I contrast the treatments of consumption within the ancient Western ethical tradition and the modern scientific discipline of economics and argue the superiority of the former.

To head off possible misunderstanding, let me specify the nature of that superiority. I do not assert the superior explanatory power of ancient treatments of economics. Nor do I assert the truth of any particular, detailed ethical position on the proper role of economic life in furthering the good life. I do assert that the ancients started with the proper question: How may our economic lives further our attempts to live good lives and create good societies?

If the primacy of this question is accepted, the consequences for both modern ethical theory and the modern science of economics are profound. But my main concern is with the individual facing decisions concerning what, whether, and how much to consume. The ancient viewpoint provided a framework in which she could understand her decisions and improve them. Herein lay its true superiority over modern economics.

Consumption and Ethics

How should we think about economic consumption? Popular use tends to equate consumption with the physical use and using up of some thing, as in food consumption. Modern economists define consumption as “the use of resources to satisfy current needs and wants,” and this definition does
not necessarily imply using something up or monopolizing its use. In this way we may speak of a consumer of movies, who does not destroy the film as he watches it and whose consumption does not prevent others from also watching it.

Clearly we are all consumers in both these senses. We are users, and we are users who use things up or monopolize them in the process of using them. This brings up both deontological and eudaimonist (or “virtue ethics”) ethical issues.

First, concerning those things we destroy, use up, or monopolize in consumption, there is the question of whether we have a right to do so. Two examples are eating meat, and grading and replanting a wild hillside in order to build a formal garden. Do these animals or this hillside possess some integrity or intrinsic value that I am bound to respect and that prohibits my using them in certain ways? Since my consuming this food prevents others from doing so and my leveling this hillside precludes other people from using it in other ways (as an ecological study site, for example), do the needs and wants of other human beings proscribe certain actions? Second, concerning both destructive and nondestructive and both exclusionary and nonexclusionary consumption, there is the question of whether this consumption improves our lives. Does meat eating (or a rich diet generally) improve or detract from my health and overall well-being? What possibilities for happiness or self-improvement does possessing a formal garden open up, what possibilities does losing a wild woodland preclude, and which alternative would be better for me and for my community? An eudaimonist or virtue ethics considers whether particular acts of consumption improve our lives and how much total consumption is found in a good (or the best) human life. A full ethical account of consumption must consider both deontological and eudaimonist ethical issues.

Note the different senses in which we may speak of overconsumption:

1. overconsumption as taking too much of something that is intrinsically valuable that I should hence use sparingly or not at all.
2. overconsumption as taking more than my fair share of a common resource that my neighbors or future generations also may desire or require.
3. overconsumption as harming my health or physical well-being.
4. overconsumption in one area leading me to neglect other types of consumption or nonconsumptive activities that are more in my (enlightened) self-interest.
5. overconsumption as hindering my personal development, excellence, or fulfillment.

Senses 1 and 2 refer to deontological judgments; senses 3 through 5 refer to eudaimonist judgments. It is important to specify which of these senses we mean when we refer to particular instances of overconsumption. From a deontological point of view key issues are the intrinsic value or moral considerability of the thing consumed and other people’s claims to it. From the perspective of virtue ethics the key issue is whether consumption is making me happier or better.
The foregoing simple distinctions should clarify my claim that many of the limits to economic consumption advocated by environmentalists would improve our lives. Ethical arguments for increased environmental protection often rest on the moral considerability or intrinsic value of natural entities, on our duties to neighbors or fellow citizens, or on our responsibilities to future generations. These arguments are important. But my claim is that even leaving moral considerations aside, much of the consumption that is degrading the environment and diminishing biological diversity worldwide is over consumption in senses 3–5. Such consumption is not in our self-interest, broadly and correctly conceived. It does not improve, but rather diminishes, our lives.

Of course, such general claims are of limited usefulness: they only acquire content and become debatable when the effects of particular acts of consumption are juxtaposed with a particular conception of the good life. In this paper, I neither argue for these general claims in detail, nor defend a particular conception of the good life, nor discuss how limiting particular types of consumption would improve our lives. Here I am primarily concerned to defend the possibility of such judgments, clarify their presuppositions and suggest their importance.

This importance is twofold. First, such judgments have the potential to strengthen self-interested motivations for preserving wild nature by limiting the human consumption that is destroying it. That is my primary reason for pursuing the issue. Second, a consideration of the true utility of consumption can clarify the nature of the good life and show how we may more successfully pursue it. This was the primary reason for ancient ethicists’ interest in economic consumption.

Ancient Ethics

Many writers in the ancient virtue ethics tradition argued that human lives could often be improved through decreasing consumption and indeed decreasing economic activity generally: consuming less food, avoiding ostentatious building or entertaining, thinking less about money. For Plato and Aristotle, Seneca and Epicurus, the good life was equally a life devoted to right thinking and a life not devoted to wealth getting or sybaritism. These two positions supported each other. They were held to be key to achieving eudaimonia, that complex term usually translated as ‘happiness,’ but often better thought of as ‘well-being,’ ‘flourishing,’ or ‘doing well.’

A leading issue in ancient ethical debate was whether the pursuit of the good life entailed limiting and harshly disciplining our natural desires and acquisitiveness or providing for their moderate fulfillment. This question in turn was related to the role that pleasure and physical satisfaction were thought to play in a good life: whether defining of it, irrelevant to it, or a more or less important part of it. A wide variety of positions were staked out on these issues that I will not attempt to summarize here. My main point is that almost all of the ancient writers argued for limiting material acquisition and limiting our attempts to satisfy our physical desires through consumption. This was true for those who thought pleasure the greatest human
good and for those who declared physical pleasure irrelevant to questions of how humans should live their lives. It was true for those who argued that people should set moderate goals and accept moderate successes in life and for those who advocated the pursuit of perfection. The major philosophical schools all accepted the idea that statements concerning the proper level of consumption should refer to the role of consumption in a good human life.

This agreement rested on a shared, affirmative answer to the following key question: Should ethical considerations trump economic considerations? There is a strong argument that they should, that it is “only rational” to view economics within the compass of eudaimonist ethics. Aristotle gives such an argument in *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 1, where he considers the most likely candidates for the best human life and rejects the life of the moneymaker:

> The money-maker’s life is in a way forced on him [not chosen for itself]; and clearly wealth is not the good we are seeking, since it is [merely] useful, [choiceworthy only] for some other end. Hence one would be more inclined to suppose that [any of] the goods mentioned earlier is the end, since they are liked for themselves.9

Wealth is useful only as a means to some further end. A heap of money is worth nothing in itself, but solely in terms of what it can buy. What are primarily valuable are those goods that are valued in themselves: pleasure, personal excellence (*arete*), and knowledge. It makes sense to value wealth as a means to these and to devote some of one’s time to acquiring wealth (to play the role of moneymaker, in order to acquire a sufficiency of wealth, in order to achieve these primary goods). Aristotle believes, in fact, that wealth can contribute to achieving these goods. But a life devoted to moneymaking for its own sake is irrational.

Even if it turned out that a life devoted to moneymaking was more likely to lead to those primary goods than lives devoted directly to their achievement (perhaps those who set out to make money in fact achieve more pleasure, acquire more virtue, and learn more about the way the world works), it would still be the best life only in view of its connection to those primary goods. Aristotle takes the view that lives consciously directed toward achieving those primary goods are in fact more likely to achieve them than lives directed toward proximate ends, such as moneymaking. So he can confidently dismiss the life of the moneymaker as a candidate for the best human life.

A confirmed chrematist10 might challenge this view, saying that he enjoyed the attempt to make as much money as possible; that the pursuit of money was a fascinating game, which he found pleasurable.11 But this sets up pleasure as the criterion of a good life. If the moneymaker argues in this way, he opens himself up to the rejoinder that his life might be more pleasurable if it incorporated a wider range of activities. A flexible, empirical interest in and willingness to try different activities and pursuits would seem to be a necessary part of a rational hedonism.

Hedonism is arguably a consistent and reasonable ethical position; still, it remained a minority position within ancient ethical philosophy. Aristotle,
for one, considers and rejects it. He is unwilling to accept pleasure as the primary criterion for judging the goodness of our lives, although pleasure is indeed good in itself and must be part of the best human life. Aristotle rejects the life of pleasure seeking as best, because he believes it slights human nature:

The many, the most vulgar, would seem to conceive the good and happiness as pleasure, and hence they also like the life of gratification. Here they appear completely slavish, since the life they decide on is a life for grazing animals.12

A human being has capacities and is capable of achievements that far outstrip those of the other animals. To ignore these possibilities and, for example, to focus solely on consuming is to sell ourselves short. The question is not which sort of life furnishes the most pleasure, but which is the best life. Although pleasure and human excellence are both goods-in-themselves, a life devoted solely to maximizing the gross physical pleasures is poor and ignoble.13

Aristotle says quite a bit more in arguing against views that put pleasure at the center of the good life, but I will not discuss his views further here. The quotation above pithily indicates the issues raised: the appeal to higher capacities; the appeal to either a real or a better human nature (higher than the nature of “grazing animals,” who do not look up at the stars and wonder, but look down at the ground and masticate); the insinuation that to live a life devoted to pleasure is in some sense to abdicate our freedom and become passive (“slavish”); the counterthought that Aristotle’s position is elitist, perhaps a counsel of perfection but in any case unsuited to the mass of people, who lack ambitions higher than pleasure seeking (“the many, the most vulgar” are said to prefer pleasure over honor or the pursuit of knowledge).

Our responses to these two short arguments of Aristotle are important. Whether a person sees moneymaking as an end in itself or merely as a means and whether she primarily values pleasure or personal excellence are defining of her vision of the good human life.14 Our positions on these two issues help set the framework within which we make our important life decisions. They also help set the framework within which we debate public policy issues, including environmental ones, in our role as citizens.

My own position is Aristotelian. I believe that money and possessions have a certain, limited value and that the good life includes pleasure but is not properly defined in terms of it. Lives devoted to personal excellence and to the pursuit of knowledge are better than lives devoted primarily to pleasure. Believing this, I also believe we should preserve nature in order to live better lives. In particular we should limit our gross physical consumption, which is key to preserving healthy environments for our own physical well-being and that biological diversity that is a fit object of our knowledge and contemplation.15
Modern Economics: Preference Neutrality

Although ancient ethics provided a framework within which to articulate such a view of consumption, the modern science of economics renders its articulation difficult. In contrast to the ancient moralists, modern economists generally equate increased consumption and wealth with a better life. They arrive at this position, however, in a roundabout way.

Economists tend to be neutral concerning individuals’ personal consumption decisions. To the positive microeconomist, one set of preferences is as good as another. This is usually presented as a methodological move, part of constructing a satisfactory model for explaining consumer behavior that does not prejudge whether some preferences (or actions based upon them) are ultimately good or bad. But some economists also argue that ethical judgments concerning consumer preferences or choices are misguided and paternalistic: misguided, because each individual knows best what conduces to his own happiness; and paternalistic, because the good life depends importantly on freedom of choice in such matters. On this view, abstaining from judging preferences is part of leaving decisions at the level at which they are most efficiently and properly made. These economists take a definite normative position: one anchored in a high valuation of material wealth, economic freedom, and individual choice.

The phrase ‘consumer sovereignty’ neatly captures the way these two positions coexist peacefully within the discipline of economics. It is ostensibly a descriptive, nonethical phrase, expressing “the idea that consumers ultimately dictate what will be produced (or not produced) by choosing what to purchase (and what not to purchase).” But the term ‘sovereignty’ has strong overtones of power and freedom, and the doctrine or hypothesis itself asserts the great importance of the consumer in determining the structure of his society.

Aristotle conceived of citizens deliberating over economic issues and determining the economic structure of their city in the name of a consciously articulated common good. The modern economist conceives of consumers satisfying individual desires and preferences and determining the structure of their society through discrete acts of consumption. Such ‘sovereignty’ emphatically need not involve any articulation of the common good or even the individual’s own good, comprehensively considered. It need not involve thought at all—merely continued consumption.

Note that both positions in favor of preference neutrality—the positivist methodological position and the laissez-faire normative position—leave room for the individual who chooses to spend less time and resources consuming gourmet meals and expensive clothes and more consuming advanced university courses. They leave room for individuals who care little for consuming and focus instead on producing things of value, such as music, fine art, or health care for the indigent. They just avoid the question of whether such individuals are following better paths than their neighbors: by ignoring it in the first case, by challenging its legitimacy in the second.

Such preference neutrality, however, is certainly mistaken. No matter how strong my preferences I may still consider whether or not to act on
them, and the strength of my preferences is not always a good reason for
doing so. If I am an alcoholic, I should fight my preference for alcohol, in the
name of a better life. If I fail to do so, I do not merely make it more likely that
I will fail to achieve whatever preferences I happen to have in the future: I
harm my physical health, blunt my mental capabilities, and make myself a
worse person. Physical health and a degree of intelligence and alertness are
not merely contingent ends we are at liberty to have or not have, much less
“preferences”; they are necessarily part of the best human lives. Our deci-
sions on what, how and how much to consume have a large impact on our
health and intelligence. Because we reason and act more or less well con-
cerning such consumption, and because some lives are in fact better than
others, preference neutrality must be rejected. Sometimes we should change
our preferences.

To take another example: a student might lack all desire to study, yet
overrule her current preferences and work hard in her classes because she
believes her intellectual growth, usefulness to society, or future earning
power depend upon it. Even if none of these goals could be objectively
shown to have any connection to human flourishing generally, as long as
she in fact has such goals, reason demands that she consider them as she
goes about satisfying her preferences. That is what “having goals” means,
and having goals is essential to living one’s own life. Economic freedom
may be a necessary part of living a good human life, but such freedom
involves both freedom from outside control and freedom to fashion a life
that one understands and of which one approves. This involves organiza-
tion and discipline, as well as preference satisfaction. It involves reasoning
about our preferences, ranking them in importance, and passing them
through moral and prudential filters before acting on them. Otherwise put,
preference neutrality cannot be operationalized by individuals within their
own lives without undermining that personal freedom that economists
wish to uphold. Those who consume blindly are not free.

Preference neutrality also undermines fellow citizens’ attempts to consider
proper levels of overall social consumption. This fits in well with mainstream
economists’ bias toward laissez-faire economic policy. But it assumes that
societies rarely or never have good reasons for reining in overall consump-
tion. Environmental problems clearly give the lie to this assumption, for the
obvious reason that economic activities can overwhelm our physical life sup-
port systems. It is rational to limit social consumption in order to protect these
systems from the damaging effects of pollution, just as it is rational for an
individual to limit his diet in order to preserve his own health. It is rational to
limit our freedom to own enormous, polluting automobiles in order to pre-
serve our freedom to breathe clean air. Economists cannot reasonably deny
this, yet they cannot accept limits here without giving up preference neutral-
ity, indeed, without accepting the fact that sometimes less consumption and
less associated economic activity are objectively better than more.20

Economic Consumption 477
Instead, mainstream economists’ ethical neutrality concerning individual consumption decisions (with perhaps minimal, grudging concessions to prudence and morality) is replaced, when they judge large-scale trends affecting whole societies, by a strong bias in favor of “more is better.” Under the definition of ‘growth’ in a leading economics textbook, for example, we read that

as the result of technological change, the building of capital, and the acquisition of knowledge, societies learn to produce new things and to produce old things better. . . . When we devise new and better ways of producing things we use now and develop new products and services to satisfy our wants, the standard of living rises . . . when an economy grows, there is more of what people want. . . .21

This definition follows a careful discussion of the difference between positive and normative economics several pages earlier. Nevertheless, the bias here is evident.

Economic growth involves producing things “better” rather than the ethically neutral “more efficiently.” The information that economic growth will provide “more of what we want” is not necessary to explain growth, nor is it part of its technical definition: the phrase serves rather to commend growth to us. If we can better satisfy our wants, we are told, “standards of living” rise, which is accepted here and throughout the text as self-evidently good. There is no room for questioning those wants themselves, for “the ultimate purpose of an economic system is to produce what people want . . . it is the people themselves who define what ‘better off’ means.”22 People “define” this, of course, by consuming—not by rationally considering the issue or debating it among themselves.

Increased consumption, on this view, literally cannot be bad, at least in terms of its effects on the members of a society. Should they all decide to spend their days and nights continually gorging themselves, the discipline of economics can say nothing against this. More: as long as economic output and wealth continue to grow, it must pronounce the experiment a success. Increased consumption can be judged bad only if it harms the economy itself, rather than the individuals making up society, by eating into investment capital and thus slowing future economic growth, for example.

Mainstream economists’ bias in favor of increased consumption is just as clear in the literature on economic development. Here increased energy consumption or the increased purchase of consumer goods is often taken to directly and objectively measure progress for developing countries.23 And in considering the poorest countries, where a majority of the population may face malnutrition or lack decent shelter, a proconsumption bias makes prima facie sense, provided it is supplemented with a concern for distributive justice and includes development indicators that measure consumption among the poorest segments of society.24
Nevertheless, from an environmental or a human health perspective, such indicators as increased automobile purchases and declining use of bicycles or increased meat eating and a decline in the dietary importance of grains represent questionable social progress for developing nations. If we assume these changes in consumption represent increased preference satisfaction—a significant assumption—we still must ask whether such increased satisfaction is trivial or important and consider all the effects, intended and unintended, of such consumption on people’s lives. Without some independent standards of human well-being, we cannot clarify which economic changes are most likely to improve poor people’s lives. With such standards, efforts to create just and prosperous societies are more likely to succeed.

Some development economists have come to accept this view; Paul Streeten writes that “development thinking has evolved over the years from its original focus on economic growth, to emphases on employment, jobs and justice, redistribution with growth, basic needs, and, most recently, human development.”25 One particularly influential recent approach is Amartya Sen’s, which specifies human well-being in terms of standard “functionings and capabilities,” then judges a society’s level of development based on how well and how widely it promotes such functionings and capabilities among its members.26 Still, most development economists continue to define development primarily in terms of structural changes and increased output in developing economies themselves and to see human beings as an important, subordinate factor in creating better economies.27 They resist attempts to define development in terms of improvements in the lives of members of developing societies, despite such approaches’ evident promise for distinguishing genuine development from mere increased economic activity. This is due partly to skepticism about the objectivity or measurability of human well-being, partly to a continued faith in economic growth as an absolute and self-sufficient good.

In the case of wealthy, developed nations, too, mainstream economists generally view ever more wealth and consumption as good in an absolute sense—with much less justification. The United States is unquestionably wealthier today than it was fifty or one hundred years ago, in terms of both the average individual’s purchasing power and the quality and range of things available for purchase. Mainstream economists take this to be genuine progress, extolling both increased levels of consumption and increased consumer choice.28 The more of both, the better, now and indefinitely into the future. This view is widely shared by the general public; an easy way to confirm this is to listen to news about the economy on radio or television. Increases in all measures of economic activity are simply assumed to be good. Increased gross national product, increased consumer spending, increased sales of cars or Christmas presents, increased employment: the more activity and consumption and wealth generated, the better.

But there is no evidence that Americans are happier or better people now than we were during earlier, less wealthy periods of history. Furthermore, empirical studies have repeatedly shown that for most people, income bears a statistically insignificant relationship to feelings of overall satisfaction or
happiness. In studies in the United States, beyond the poorest 10–15 percent of the population, people’s incomes do not correlate with their subjective satisfaction with life. Contrarily, whether a person is satisfied with his or her income bears a strong correlation. Further important noneconomic factors that correlate significantly with happiness include having close friendships and a strong social network, being married rather than single, having interesting work, and having the respect of one’s coworkers. Apparently, for most individuals and for society as a whole, greater wealth is not the key to happiness or personal development.

To state this is to assert that there is a good beyond increased wealth and consumption. Progress toward this good is genuine progress. Increased material wealth and increased consumption may either partially constitute or indirectly indicate such progress; they certainly do not define it. Too often economists assume that they do. Even worse, economists’ basic assumptions undermine the attempt to make such judgments intelligently. This is the crux of the disagreement between mainstream economists and their critics.

A Choice

We thus see a fundamental difference in attitudes toward consumption in ancient ethical thought and modern economics. It is, I think, fair to say that the modern science of economics is predicated upon denying the truth of Aristotle’s two arguments concerning the irrationality of pure chrematism and the ignobility of pure hedonism. Conversely, I believe that current efforts within philosophy to restore virtue ethics and reinvigorate the ancient debate on the nature of the good life depend on affirming these arguments. There is a clear choice here.

As I said at the outset, this paper is propaedeutic to the development of an environmental virtue ethics (EVE). Such an ethics, as I conceive it, specifies the good life in terms of our knowledge and connection to wild nature, our place within healthy and beautiful human environments—and in terms of harmonious social relations, intellectual development, and other components of the good life traditionally recognized by virtue ethicists. An EVE thus invites us to consider environmental decisions (and all our decisions) in terms of their effects on our enlightened self-interest, comprehensively defined. I take specifying this enlightened self-interest clearly, truly, and in detail to be the goal of virtue ethics generally.

An EVE challenges the view that “more is better” by moving in an opposite direction from the current science of economics. Rather than refining an abstract concept of consumption as the use of essentially substitutable commodities and services with values defined by a common monetary metric, it looks at our consumption concretely, as the use of particular things and the changing of particular things through that use. It then analyzes their effects on us (leading to eudaimonist ethical judgments) and our effects on them (leading to deontological ethical judgments). The key is to return to things themselves.
Such an analysis moves beyond economic abstractions to the physical effects of our acts of consumption and to our experience of those acts. This makes possible arguments of the following sorts:

1. You might enjoy eating a rich diet and drinking a lot of alcohol. But you are likely to impair your health in doing so, thus shortening your life and making it less possible to enjoy other good things.
   
   You should eat and drink moderately.

2. You might enjoy taking a helicopter tour of the Grand Canyon. But that sort of use shows insufficient respect for the canyon and does nothing to develop your self-reliance or skills as a naturalist.
   
   You should explore the canyon in a less mechanized, less intrusive way (horse, foot, or raft).

3. As a community, we might want to develop that land along the river, because we would enjoy built-up park lands more than a swamp. But if we do so, we will increase the risk of catastrophic floods and destroy several rare old-growth cedar stands.
   
   We should avoid developing that land.

Note that a recognition of the physical and experiential aspects of our consumption makes such arguments possible, not decisive. Counterarguments may be given.

Economic theory has its part to play in clarifying such discussions, but so do biological, ecological, and ethical theory; so does a detailed knowledge of cultural and natural history; so does the intelligent interrogation of our own experience. If we allow economics to obscure these other avenues of knowledge, either through reification of its abstract categories or through forgetting that it focuses only on certain aspects of reality, we lose sight of “the things themselves.” Economics then becomes more misleading than useful.

Rather than narrowing the context, we should enlarge it. In fact, enlarging the context tends to be a part of most arguments to limit or change consumption patterns. The arguments above ask us to change our focus

1. from short-term to long-term enjoyment.
2. from the intended consequences to all the consequences.
3. from monetary benefits to physical and spiritual benefits.
4. from benefits to benefits and disvalues.
5. from personal enjoyment to personal excellence.

In sum, these arguments ask us to move from a narrow, simplistic self-interest to a comprehensive, enlightened self-interest.
A complete ethical analysis would have to enlarge the context even further, to consider the full effects of our consumption:

6. from the effects on ourselves to the effects on the human and natural communities to which we belong.
7. from the effects on our own communities to the effects on other human and natural communities.
8. from the effects on individuals and communities to the effects on the long-term projects that give our lives meaning (science, America).

Of course, we do not wish to create unnecessary complications or obscure ethics altogether in enlarging contexts; step 8 in particular may seem an unjustified reach. But considered cumulatively, our consumption decisions have wide ramifications. How and how much Americans consume will play a greater role in creating the America of one hundred years hence than most of the political and cultural matters that currently hold our attention. The meaning of science, one of the great achievements of humankind, will depend partly on whether science becomes a tool for the further commodification and domestication of the wild world or a tool for its preservation—on whether science is used to know and appreciate nature or to consume it.

Enlarging the context does not by itself prove the superiority of decreased consumption. It could be the case, for example, that on a considered judgment my short-term enjoyment of this sacher torte outweighs all other considerations: personal, social, ecological, and cosmic. It is sometimes the case that increased consumption makes us better people and supports our self-development: perhaps I am harming my health with a strict diet; perhaps I would improve my mind by “consuming” a course of study at the local university. Furthermore, it is not clear whether decreasing overall consumption or changing patterns of consumption is more important in limiting harmful environmental effects.

There are yet further complications. It is difficult to find a principled procedure for balancing the value of pleasure against the value of personal excellence and achievement. But our judgments concerning consumption depend importantly on how we balance these. They also depend on how we define personal excellence. Does the connoisseur’s ability to distinguish and appreciate fine wine or food show personal excellence, or are these matters trivial and not worth an intelligent person’s time? Most contentious of all, such judgments depend on how we balance the pursuit of personal excellence and our responsibilities toward others, for it sometimes happens that increased consumption genuinely benefits an individual consumer while seriously harming others.

Clearly, in enlarging the context and considering consumption more concretely, we have made arguments for or against consumption possible, but not settled them. This, though, is already an improvement on mainstream economists’ treatment of consumption, which systematically undermines such discussion. For those of us who believe that there are right and wrong answers here, these are necessary first steps.
I would like to thank Jacek Kochanowicz, Kris Cafaro, and two anonymous referees for helpful comments on various drafts of this paper. Thanks as well to Jack Weinstein for putting together the Junior Visiting Fellows Conference at the Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen (Vienna), at which a version of this paper was presented. Finally, thanks to the staff and fellows of the Institut for their support and collegiality during my too short stay.

Notes


3 I take deontology and virtue ethics to be the two halves of a complete ethics, rather than competing, comprehensive ethical theories. The one describes and grounds our duties toward others, the other describes and explains our own possibilities for self-development and personal excellence. The best short introduction to virtue ethics remains Richard Taylor, *Virtue Ethics* (Interlaken, N.Y.: Linden, 1991).

4 Regarding sense 3, I take health and ethics to overlap broadly. The practice of medicine implies virtue ethics judgments: health is good and illness bad.


9 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), 7 (bk. 1, chap. 5). Translated by Terence Irwin; bracketed words added by translator.

10 “Chrematistics . . . can be defined as the branch of political economy relating to the manipulation of property and wealth so as to maximize short-term monetary exchange value to the owner. Oikonomia, by contrast, is the management of the household so as to increase its use value to all members of the household over the long run.” Herman Daly and John Cobb, Jr., *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* (Boston: Beacon, 1989), 138.


13 There are other pleasures besides gross physical pleasures. For this reason, hedonism can be more or less ignoble and more or less opposed to the ethical ideals favored by Aristotle. Furthermore, even a relatively gross hedonism that refuses to differentiate between better and worse pleasures and that judges the goodness of states of affairs...
solely in terms of maximizing pleasure (and minimizing pain) must still recognize that increased consumption does not necessarily equal increased pleasure. Hedonists too may recognize overconsumption, a fact that my focus on an Aristotelian, perfectionist ethics should not obscure.

14 If one values personal excellence, the further question arises as to whether excellence consists primarily in personal development or personal achievement. See Amartya Sen, On Ethics and Economics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 43–46.

15 An Aristotelian philosophical outlook strongly supports the preservation of biological diversity. As Aristotle wrote in his Parts of Animals: “Having already treated of the celestial world, as far as our conjectures could reach, we proceed to treat of animals, without omitting, to the best of our ability, any member of the kingdom, however ignoble. For if some have no graces to charm the sense, yet nature, which fashioned them, gives amazing pleasure in their study to all who can trace links of causation, and are inclined to philosophy. . . . Every realm of nature is marvellous. . . . every kind of animal . . . will reveal to us something natural and something beautiful” (Jonathan Barnes, ed., The Complete Works of Aristotle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1004 (bk. I, chap. 5)).


17 A classic exposition is Milton Friedman, Capitalism and Freedom (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

18 In addition to the methodological and normative positions already mentioned, a third, widely held meta-ethical position also supports preference neutrality: ethical subjectivism. Some economists argue against judging preferences on the ground that there is no right or wrong here, no better or worse, but only subjective desires, more or less efficiently pursued. It is difficult to find economists who defend ethical subjectivism explicitly. However, it is often implied in their writings. Consider the definition of ‘value judgment’ offered in a popular dictionary of economics: “a proposition which cannot be reduced to an arguable statement of fact but which effectively asserts that something is good or that something ought to happen” (Bannock et al., Penguin Dictionary of Economics, 416). If value judgments do not state facts and are not arguable, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that they are objectively arbitrary.


20 Economists may attempt to deal with such issues by specifying “externalities”: disutilities to individuals who are not direct parties to the processes of consumption or production that bring them about. But specifying and addressing externalities, although necessary, cannot substitute for a genuine political discussion concerning the proper levels of overall social consumption. In any case, the existence of externalities indicates objective limits to beneficial consumption that call preference neutrality directly into question.

21 Case and Fair, Principles of Economics, 21.

22 Ibid., 20.


24 Case and Fair accept such a modified materialistic definition of economic development and progress. Like most economists, they believe that increased per capita consumption equals a higher level of material well-being equals a better life (Principles of Economics, 952). But they supplement their definition of development, based on increased wealth and economic output, with basic indicators of health and education (953) and also include a measure of distributive justice: “economic growth does not guarantee economic development and . . . concerted efforts may be required to transform growing output capacity into economic benefits that reach most of a nation’s people” (961). Thus growth (here ethically neutral) is differentiated from
development (ethically positive), an important step. But questions such as how much growth might be sacrificed to distributive justice or when economic growth is beneficial and when it is not are not discussed. This is a serious, but typical, failure in an introductory economics textbook.


29 These studies are summarized in Robert Lane, The Market Experience (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); see esp. 451–52 and 527–33.

30 The preceding discussion may be criticized on the grounds that it fails to differentiate fully between positive and normative economics and between such disparate approaches as Austrian and mainstream neoclassical economics. Nevertheless, I believe that most economists have a bias in favor of increased growth and increased consumption; that such a bias is the basis of most economic policy prescriptions, even those directed toward protecting the environment, where prima facie less economic activity and less economic consumption are called for; and that the theories, analytic categories, and general approach favored by most economists all tend to obscure the issue of overconsumption rather than clarify it.

31 In my opinion, the recent revival of virtue ethics has not included sufficient attention to economic issues. The space devoted to them by Plato in the Republic, Aristotle in the Nicomachean Ethics, Thoreau in Walden, and other past virtue ethicists suggests their importance. A notable exception to this neglect is James Murphy, The Moral Economy of Labor (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).


33 Some writers, however, doubt the possibility or the desirability of a general, theoretical account of the good life. Perhaps the proper goal of critical reflection in virtue ethics is instead an improved understanding of the options open to individuals within particular historically and spatially delimited communities. An excellent collection of papers treating this issue may be found in Stanley Clarke and Evan Simpson, eds., Anti-Theory in Ethics and Moral Conservatism (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).
Daly and Cobb see the besetting sin of mainstream economics as “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness,” first defined by Alfred North Whitehead as “neglecting the degree of abstraction involved when an actual entity is considered merely so far as it exemplifies certain categories of thought” (For the Common Good, 36).