Consumption, Environment and Ethics: An Analysis of Moral and Welfare Arguments for Reducing Personal Consumption

Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer

Citation for published version (APA):

Citing this paper
Please note that where the full-text provided on Manchester Research Explorer is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Proof version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version.

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Explorer are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Takedown policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please refer to the University of Manchester's Takedown Procedures [http://man.ac.uk/04Y6B6] or contact uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk providing relevant details, so we can investigate your claim.
Consumption, Environment and Ethics:
An Analysis of Moral and Welfare Arguments for Reducing
Personal Consumption

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Faculty of Humanities

2012

Paul Knights

School of Social Sciences
Contents

Abstract 9
Declaration 11
Copyright Statement 13
Acknowledgements 15

Introduction 17

Chapter 1: An Analysis of the Concept of Consumption 23
1. Introduction 23
2. A Brief Survey of the Literature on the Nature of, Reasons for and Objects of Consumption 25
2.1 Who and what consumes? 25
2.2 What makes a human action a consumption action? 25
2.3 Why do humans consume? 27
2.4 What do humans consume? 28
2.5 What is the relation between the concept of consumption and the concept of the consumer? 28
3. An Analysis of the Concept of Consumption 29
3.1 Rivalness 30
3.2 Availability 31
3.3 Reducing Availability 33
3.4 Summary 35
4. An Argument for the Claim that Most Use Acts are Consumption Acts 36
5. The Inclusivity of the Analysis 40
5.1 Possible Counterexamples 41
5.2 Principled Boundary Counterexamples 42
5.3 Unintentional Consequences Counterexamples 47
6. The Relation Between Consumption and Welfare 49
7. The Exclusivity of the Analysis 54
8. Conclusion: Reducing Personal Consumption 61
2. The Overconsumption Claim

2.1 Evidence for the Overconsumption Claim

2.1.1 The Plateauing of Reported Happiness and Reported Life Satisfaction within Rich Countries Over Time

2.1.2 The Diminishing Effect of Income on Reported Happiness and Reported Life Satisfaction Within Nations

2.1.3 The Diminishing Effect of Income on Reported Happiness and Reported Life Satisfaction Between Nations

2.1.4 Increased Rates of Clinical Disorders, Alcoholism, Crime and Suicide Within Rich Nations Over Time

2.2 The Overconsumption Claim and the Double Dividend Argument

2.3. The Limitations and Usefulness of the Life Satisfaction Data

2.4 The Framework for the Arguments

3. The Erosion of Sociability Thesis

3.1 The Account of the Welfare Plateau

3.2 The Role of the Rise in Consumption in the Welfare Plateau

3.3 The Recommendation for Consumption Reduction

4. The Insufficiency Thesis

4.1 Jackson and Marks’ Failure Thesis

4.2 The Plateau in the Material Dimension of Welfare

4.3 The Plateau in the Non-material Dimensions of Welfare

4.4 The Recommendation for Consumption Reduction

5. The Displacement Thesis

5.1 The Role of the Rise in Consumption in the Welfare Plateau

5.2 The Recommendation for Consumption Reduction

7. Conclusion

Chapter 4: The Problem of Inconsequentialism

1. Introduction

2. The Problem of Inconsequentialism

2.1 Compliance

2.2 Promotion

2.3 Unilateral Reductions
2.4 The Requirement of All Three Strategies to Meet Environmental Problems 156
2.5 Two Problems of Inconsequentialism 157
3. Consequentialism 161
3.1 Paradigmatic Consumption Actions Constitute a Moral Wrongdoing Because They Violate the Harm Principle 162
3.2 Paradigmatic Consumption Actions Constitute a Moral Wrongdoing Insofar as They Should Be Treated As If They Violate the Harm Principle 167
3.3 Paradigmatic Consumption Actions Constitute a Moral Wrongdoing Because They Constitute Membership of a Collective that Violates the Harm Principle 172
4. Deontological Ethics 174
5. Virtue Ethics 176
6. Conclusion 181

Chapter 5: Moral Arguments for Reducing Personal Consumption 183
1. Introduction 183
2. Unilateral Reductions are Morally Obligatory 184
2.1 Johnson’s Argument that Individuals are not Morally Obligated to Engage in Unilateral Reductions 184
2.2 Public and Private Unilateral Reductions 186
2.3 Unilateral Reductions May Function As Promotion Actions 187
2.4 Unilateral Reductions May Strengthen the Effectiveness of Promotion Activities 189
2.5 Unilateral Reductions are Morally Obligatory, On Grounds of Integrity, For Those Who Accept Or Discharge the Moral Obligation to Promote 190
2.6 Unilateral Reductions are Necessary for Success 192
3. Paradigmatic Consumption Actions Constitute a Moral Wrongdoing Because they Continue Membership of a Harming Putative Group 194
3.1 The Golf Club Member 194
3.2 The First Set of Defences 196
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.2.1 The Ignorance Defence</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.2 The Group Intention Defence</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.3 The Personal Intention Defence</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.4 The Harmlessness of Membership Defence</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 The Virtue Ethics Account of Why Remaining a Member of</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a Harming Group Constitutes a Moral Wrongdoing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 The Second Set of Defences</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.1 The Wrong Kind of Group Defence</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.2 The Harmlessness of Membership, Ignorance, Group Intention</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Personal Intention Defences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.3 The Involuntary Membership Defence</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.4 The No Good from Withdrawal Defence</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.5 The Obligation to Promote Defence</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.6 The Demandingness Defence</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Conclusion</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Summary and Conclusion</strong></td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Word Count: 81,602
Abstract

This thesis constitutes a sustained engagement with a substantial and pressing practical problem: the problem of providing reasons for consumers in rich countries to reduce their levels of personal consumption in order that the environmental harm caused by rising consumption levels may be mitigated. I orient this thesis around the advancement and defence of two claims: (i) that the welfare argument for reducing personal consumption receives justification from objective theories of welfare, and (ii) that the moral argument for reducing personal consumption receives justification from virtue ethics. The welfare argument for reducing personal consumption is that a significant subset of inhabitants of rich nations could improve their welfare by reducing their consumption of material goods and resources. The moral argument for reducing personal consumption is that rich consumers are under an obligation to reduce their consumption of material goods and resources even though their personal reduction is itself inconsequential to alleviating the harm that the aggregate of such consumption causes.

In Chapter 1 I advance and defend an analysis of the concept of consumption, and provide an account of what it is for an individual to reduce their personal consumption. In Chapter 2 I defend a particular class of theories of welfare, namely, objective theories. I propose a pluralist account of the content of welfare – substantive goods such as sociability, knowledge and aesthetic experience – and articulate a procedural account of how that content may be specified. I also advance a practical judgement-based account of how welfare comparisons between different lives can be made. In Chapter 3 I argue that the claim made by environmental and social campaigners that rising levels of consumption have compromised welfare within rich countries in the past 60 years receives justification from the objective theories of welfare defended in the previous chapter. This argument is developed by distinguishing three detailed expressions of the overconsumption claim within the popular and scholarly literature, and arguing that each expression is consistent with and illuminated by practical judgements informed and justified by objective theories of welfare.
In chapters 4 and 5 I defend the second of my two central theses: that the moral argument for reducing personal consumption receives justification from virtue ethics. In Chapter 4 I explicate the problem of justifying a moral obligation to refrain from performing actions which are inconsequential in themselves but which aggregate to cause considerable harm, before considering and rejecting two attempts to justify an obligation to refrain from performing such actions made from within consequentialist ethics. In Chapter 5 I propose and defend a virtue ethics-based argument for such a moral obligation. I ground this obligation in the claim that failing to reduce personal consumption constitutes remaining a member of a harming group.
Declaration

I hereby swear that no portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.
Copyright Statement

The author of this thesis owns certain copyright or related rights in it (the "Copyright") and he has given The University of Manchester certain rights to use such Copyright, including for administrative purposes.

Copies of this thesis, either in full or in extracts and whether in hard or electronic copy, may be made only in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (as amended) and regulations issued under it or, where appropriate, in accordance with licensing agreements which the University has from time to time. This page must form part of any such copies made.

The ownership of certain Copyright, patents, designs, trade marks and other intellectual property (the “Intellectual Property”) and any reproductions of copyright works in the thesis, for example graphs and tables (“Reproductions”), which may be described in this thesis, may not be owned by the author and may be owned by third parties. Such Intellectual Property and Reproductions cannot and must not be made available for use without the prior written permission of the owner(s) of the relevant Intellectual Property and/or Reproductions.

Further information on the conditions under which disclosure, publication and commercialisation of this thesis, the Copyright and any Intellectual Property and/or Reproductions described in it may take place is available in the University IP Policy (see http://www.campus.manchester.ac.uk/medialibrary/policies/intellectual-property.pdf), in any relevant Thesis restriction declarations deposited in the University Library, The University Library’s regulations (see http://www.manchester.ac.uk/library/aboutus/regulations) and in The University’s policy on presentation of Theses.
Acknowledgements

I would firstly like to thank John O’Neill and Michael Scott for supervising my thesis. John O’Neill has been an invaluable guide. He has helped me hack my way through thickets of thorny literature and beckoned me back when I blundered towards conceptual quagmires, and he has always guided me to where I wanted to go. For providing freedom at the same time as the best kind of supervision, I am very grateful. Michael Scott has consistently asked the unnervingly difficult but always productive philosophical questions of my work, never letting me leave a concept unexamined or a distinction vague. For keeping me aspiring to philosophical rigour, I am also grateful.

I am grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for the Doctoral Award which funded this thesis.

I would like to thank several friends I made in Manchester for support and encouragement. I was lucky enough to share a corner of the philosophy postgraduate office with Gayle Impey for nearly two years. I am thankful for having such good company in which to share the agonising days when the literature was impenetrable and the words wouldn’t flow, as well as the many coffee breaks with which we assuaged that agony. I am grateful to Michael Rush for always being ready to indulge – preferably over a hot chocolate – my tendency to obscure perfectly interesting philosophical problems with the greenery of environmental concern, despite thinking I should stop obfuscating and be an honest metaphysician. Graham Stevens, a member of the faculty, was supportive in many respects, a quality I valued not least during the period we belayed for one another at an indoor rock climbing wall. Finally, Rebecca Pohl and Kathryn Dingle have been wonderfully supportive friends throughout.

The Manchester philosophy department has been a stimulating environment in which to work, and is populated by fellow postgraduate researchers who have also made it a friendly place in which to be, particularly Michael Clark, Anthony Wheatley, Phil Letts, Phil Brown, Beccy Simpson, Hichem Naar, Chris Ovenden, Andrew
Routledge, Moritz Mueller and Glyn Owen. I am also appreciative of the members of the faculty that organised and chaired the PhD seminars: Tom Smith, David Liggins, Julian Dodd, Joel Smith and Michael Scott. I would also like to thank the department for providing me with financial assistance towards my attendance at two conferences, and to Julian Dodd for organising this.

I have had my passion for applying philosophical enquiry to environmental issues shared and sustained throughout the writing of this thesis by fellow travellers on this relatively unfrequented road. Stijn Neuteleers was a visiting PhD student when I first arrived at Manchester, and we found we did our best (or at least most enjoyable) environmental philosophising while hiking through the landscapes of the north of England and Wales. I thoroughly enjoyed meeting and collaborating with Glen Deliège, with whom I found many points of common interest in the philosophy of conservation and restoration when we co-convened a seminar, with Simon James and Alan Holland, on this topic at the International Society for Environmental Ethics Annual Conference in the Netherlands. Finally, I am grateful to have had the opportunity of engaging in the rewarding but comparatively rare endeavour of co-authoring a philosophy paper, on the topic of environmental virtue, with Dan Firth and Dave Littlewood.

I am very grateful to my mum and dad for always taking an interest in my work, for much moral support during its writing, and, from the time I first took a philosophy correspondence course at college twelve years ago, through an undergraduate degree, masters degree and now PhD, never once doubting or questioning whether this was the right thing for me to do.

Lastly, and most importantly, thank you to Clare, my wife, who has been there for me every step of the way throughout the writing of this thesis. Without her unfailing, unconditional, loving support, I simply could not have done it.
Introduction

This thesis is oriented around the advancement and defence of two claims: (i) that the welfare argument for reducing personal consumption receives justification from objective theories of welfare; and (ii) that the moral argument for reducing personal consumption receives justification from virtue ethics. The welfare argument for reducing personal consumption is that a significant subset of inhabitants of rich nations could improve their welfare by reducing their consumption of material goods and resources. The moral argument for reducing personal consumption is that rich consumers are under an obligation to reduce their consumption of material goods and resources even though their personal reduction is itself inconsequential to alleviating the harm that the aggregate of such consumption causes.

The rationale for analysing these arguments is the potential importance of the reduction of natural resource consumption in mitigating the harm caused by environmental problems such as biodiversity loss and global climate change. These problems present significant threats to the well-being of the current global poor, future generations, and current and future nonhuman organisms. Reducing the consumption of material goods and the resources required to manufacture and distribute them is one of the three main possible strategies for averting environmental crises, the others being the currently favoured technological strategy consisting of measures such as improving resource efficiency, and the population strategy, consisting in the stabilisation and long-term reduction in the human population. My analysis of the consumption strategy is carried out wholly independently of considerations pertaining to the technological and population strategies. I do not argue that persuading individual consumers to reduce their personal consumption is politically feasible. Rather, I argue that the two central arguments that environmental and social campaigners appeal to – that reducing consumption is both a moral obligation but would also be in rich consumers’ enlightened self-interest – receive justification from cogent theories of ethics and welfare respectively. I take it that such sound theoretical underpinnings are a prerequisite for justified public policy decisions.
The thesis is structured into three parts constituted by five chapters. Part 1 – constituted by Chapter 1 – advances and defends an analysis of the concept of consumption. This chapter provides an account of what it is to consume, and therefore, with regard to each of the moral and welfare arguments to follow, what it is to reduce personal consumption. It develops this account through engagement with the uses of this concept in economics and sociology, as well as reflection on common usage. This chapter can be seen as belonging to the tradition of conceptual analysis in Anglo-American analytic philosophy insofar as it attempts to provide a necessary and sufficient condition for an act to count as a consumption act. Concepts traditionally subjected to analyses of this kind have been abstract and theoretical, such as knowledge and causation, but the forty years during which philosophers have applied themselves to questions concerning the human relationship with the natural environment have seen numerous attempts to analyse concepts around which public policy debates are oriented, such as sustainability, biodiversity, native species, wilderness, nature and intrinsic value. This chapter – in offering an analysis of a concept that is becoming central to debates concerning sustainability and human welfare – is part of that tradition.

Part 2 – constituted by chapters 2 and 3 – defends the first of my two central theses: that the welfare argument for reducing personal consumption receives justification from objective theories of welfare. Chapter 2 provides an account of human welfare. This account is divided into three parts. In the first part, I defend a particular class of theories of welfare, namely, objective theories. A theory of welfare is objective only if it denies any role to any class of subjective states in determining what is of prudential value to a welfare subject. I defend objective theories from two criticisms advanced by L. W. Sumner; the criticism that they do not constitute legitimate theories of welfare at all, and the criticism that they fail to account for the subject-relativity of welfare. In the second part I enumerate certain substantive goods – the content of welfare – that objective theories justify and which will be of use in advancing the thesis of Chapter 3. In the third part I develop a practical judgement-based account of welfare comparisons which will also be employed in the following chapter.
Chapter 3 argues that the claim made by environmental and social campaigners that rising levels of per capita consumption have compromised welfare within rich countries in the past 60 years receives justification from objective theories of welfare. This argument is developed by distinguishing three detailed expressions of the claim that current levels of personal consumption within rich countries are excessive to the extent that they compromise individual welfare, and arguing that each expression is consistent with and justified by informed practical judgements concerning welfare comparisons. This chapter is a philosophical response to the recent popular, policy and scholarly literature on the relation between consumption and welfare. The popular literature is burgeoning with books on how to live more simply, consume less and thereby improve one’s quality of life. The policy and think tank literature on this topic is also rapidly expanding, with annual reports such as the New Economics Foundation’s Happy Planet Index (Abdallah et. al. 2009) and the UK’s Sustainable Development Commission’s series of publications. The scholarly literature on consumption spans several disciplines, including anthropology (e.g. Douglas and Isherwood 1979), sociology (e.g. Campbell 1987), economics (e.g. Daly 1996) and psychology (e.g. Kasser and Kanner 2004). There is also an ancient pedigree to these arguments regarding the appropriate limits to wealth stretching back to Aristotle (e.g. Aristotle’s Politics (1948), Book 1, Chapter 9 and Epicurus’s “Letter to Menoeceus”). This chapter engages with the breadth of this literature while advancing a distinctively philosophical analysis of what I shall call the overconsumption claim.

Part 3 – constituted by chapters 4 and 5 – defends the second of my two central theses: that the moral argument for reducing personal consumption receives justification from virtue ethics. Chapter 4 explicates the problem of justifying a moral obligation to refrain from performing actions which are inconsequential in themselves but which aggregate to cause considerable harm, before considering and rejecting Parfit’s (1984) and Glover’s (1975) consequentialist attempts to justify an

---


2 The SDC was the UK Government’s independent advisor on sustainable development until its abolition in March 2011. One of its central research themes was sustainable consumption and its relation to societal flourishing. The culminating publication of this research was Tim Jackson’s (2009) Prosperity Without Growth: The Transition to a Sustainable Economy.
obligation to refrain from performing such actions. The context in which I develop my arguments – the case of personal consumption and the aggregation of its environmental consequences – is a special instance of this general problem, and therefore the arguments of this chapter and the next constitute a contribution to the more general philosophical literature on the debate regarding negligible individual contributions to considerable collective harms.

Chapter 5 proposes two arguments that reducing personal consumption is morally obligatory. The first argument proceeds by acknowledging that actions to promote strong collective measures that reduce collective consumption are obligatory, and then argues that publicly reducing personal consumption can serve as instances of and strengthen the effectiveness of such promotion activities. Further, on grounds of personal integrity, those who engage in promotion activities are obligated to reduce not only their public but also private consumption. The second argument grounds the obligation to reduce personal consumption in the claim that failing to do so constitutes remaining a member of a harming group. The notion of a harming group is developed, and the vices of remaining a member of – and the virtues of withdrawing from – a harming group are employed in justifying the obligation.

This thesis constitutes a sustained engagement with a substantial and pressing practical problem: the problem of providing reasons for consumers in rich countries to reduce their levels of personal consumption. The engagement of philosophy with practical issues has the potential – and it is a potential I hope this thesis realises – to yield dividends for both philosophical theory and the exploration of solutions to the problem at hand. The dividend for philosophical theory springs from the way in which engaging with practical issues can reveal dimensions to arguments that may have gone unnoticed or underemphasised in their more abstract development. Certain positions, distinctions, arguments and thought experiments which this thesis proposes may be abstracted from the practical context within which they are here proposed and applied to different practical and philosophical problems. In particular, three of the core positions I defend – (i) an analysis of a certain concept (consumption), (ii) a certain class of theories of welfare (objective theories) and (iii) the existence of a moral obligation to refrain from performing a certain class of actions (actions whose consequences aggregate to cause environmental harm) –
constitute substantial contributions to the philosophical literature on these topics. In this sense, notwithstanding their development as elements of arguments concerning environmental ethics and consumption, this thesis contributes to – and is situated within – the philosophical literature on conceptual analysis, welfare and ethics.

The exploration of the philosophical dimensions of potential solutions to practical problems can benefit the public and policy debate through, among other things, the clarification of concepts around which such debates are oriented and the uncovering of normative assumptions at work in those debates. My purpose, then, in arguing for this thesis is not only to establish the particular conclusions that are its result, but to demonstrate how philosophy can both benefit the policy and public debate regarding consumption and the environment and can itself be benefited by a sustained engagement with this debate.
1. An Analysis of the Concept of Consumption

1. Introduction

The thesis of this chapter consists in the proposal and defence of the following analysis of the concept of ‘consumption’:

- To consume is to act such that the availability of an object or resource is reduced.

I offer an analysis of the concept of consumption in order that a clear account is established that can be carried forward through this thesis. Such a clear account is desirable in part because both our everyday consumption-talk and the theoretical role that ‘consumption’ plays in a variety of disciplines is extraordinarily varied; consumption is either a direct object of enquiry, or either an orienting or background concept, for a wide range of academic disciplines, including economics, sociology, anthropology, psychology and consumer studies. Unsurprisingly, these disciplines understand ‘consumption’ in a variety of ways, both in relation to consumer behaviour and with regard to the orienting concern of this thesis, namely, its impact upon the natural environment. Further, each of the various disciplines focus on different aspects of the sphere of activity which comes under the rubric of consumption, compounding the heterogeneity of conceptions. It therefore cannot be taken for granted that it will be clear what I mean by ‘consumption’ in this thesis unless I offer an account at the outset. Further, it is a traditional task of philosophy to attempt analyses of problematic concepts, and consumption is just such a concept.

In offering a conceptual analysis, one faces a number of choices. Firstly, one has to choose between offering a descriptive analysis which attempts to capture all and only objects to which the concept is ordinarily applied, or a normative analysis which proposes an analysis the extension of which differs from its ordinary application (either excluding some objects or actions which are presently included or including others which are presently excluded). I am proposing an analysis which is descriptive, but it is not intended to be globally descriptive of all applications of the
concept. I place this restriction on the descriptive ambition of my analysis for two reasons. Firstly, the concept of consumption is too widely and heterogeneously applied for a globally descriptive analysis to be viable; no analysis which is elegant and non-disjunctive – a standard aspiration for philosophical analyses – could hope to capture all of the objects and activities to which the concept is applied. Given this, one can either offer an analysis which is maximally comprehensive, or target one’s analysis according to a certain purpose. I choose the latter, which brings me to the second reason why I do not attempt a globally descriptive analysis. I am concerned to offer an analysis which is primarily concerned with the impact of consumption upon the natural environment, and which is therefore oriented around the physical effects of our actions upon objects and resources. In being so oriented it excludes certain applications of the concept. Firstly, it excludes certain uses which have it that non-physical objects such as ideas are consumed. Secondly, it excludes certain uses which have it that physical objects are consumed in ways – such as gazing – which have no physical effects upon them. I will not, however, treat every instance of the application of the concept of consumption that my analysis excludes equally. Despite my analytical project being a locally descriptive one, I will pass normative judgement upon some of the applications that it excludes, arguing that some of these applications are legitimate and justified while others originate in a confused understanding of the relationship between the concept of the consumer and the concept of consumption.

This chapter, then, is intended to define the orienting concept of this thesis, but also to make a distinctively philosophical contribution to the burgeoning literature on consumption. I will, in section 2, explicate my analysis and its key terms, distinguishing it from the concept of rivalness in economics and comparing it to Daly’s account of consumption. Next, in section 3, I will argue that most acts of use also fall under my analysis of acts of consumption, using Arendt’s arguments to the contrary to structure my case. I will then, in section 4, defend my analysis from the charge that it is too liberal in the kinds of actions that fall under it. After a detour in section 5 to examine the possibility that the relation between consumption and welfare posited by some economic understandings of the concept has some bearing on how we should conceive of it, I will conclude in section 6 by arguing that sociological conceptions of consumption are only metaphorical and therefore the fact
that they do not fall under the analysis does not constitute an objection to its cogency. I will, however, begin in section 2 by justifying the claim that our consumption-talk is subject to an extraordinary variation such that it cannot be taken for granted that it will be clear what I mean by ‘consumption’ in the rest of the thesis. I will do this by offering a sample of consumption-talk from various academic disciplines, and from ordinary language. I will also provide some initial indications of the arguments to follow.

2. A Brief Survey of the Literature on the Nature of, Reasons for and Objects of Consumption

2.1 Who and what consumes?
According to some, consumption is always and only the consequence of human action. Stern’s (1997b: 20 (italics in original)) ‘working definition’ of consumption, for example, restricts the concept to human actions: ‘Consumption consists of human transformations of materials and energy.’ In ordinary language, however, we do say such things as ‘the birds are consuming the peanuts in the feeder at an alarming rate.’ Moreover, we also say such things as the fire consumed the forest, or the cancer is consuming our loved one, or that our friend’s passion for her hobby is all-consuming. Below, I will focus on the consumption engaged in by humans.

2.2 What makes a human action a consumption action?
Three categories of answer are available to this question: (i) the reason for which the action was performed; (ii) the character of the action itself; or (iii) the consequences of the action. With regard to (i), Stern (1997b: 15) suggests that at least one sociological understanding of consumption is that it consists in ‘what individuals and households do when they use their incomes to increase social status through certain kinds of purchases’. This appears to claim that the status of an action as a consumption action is determined by the reason for performing it; whichever actions are performed in order to achieve the particular purpose identified – namely, to increase social standing – are consumption actions. I will consider the reasons or explanations for why we consume below in 2.3.
With regard to (ii), according to which an action is classed as a consumption action in virtue of the character of the action itself, a central economic understanding of consumption is a ‘character of the action’ account, namely, consumption as purchase or exchange (Princen 1999: 349). Consumption acts are, according to this understanding, equivalent to marketplace transactions. A consumption act takes place at the point of exchange, and despite the fact that the good purchased by the consumer may last for many years (i.e. the consumer has purchased a durable good), as far as the economist is concerned, none of the consumer’s subsequent interactions with the good count as consumption acts. I will consider the acts of purchase and their relation to my proposed analysis of consumption in section 5.2.

Another account of the character of an action that determines its status as a consumption action is that of use. Brown and Cameron (2000: 28), for example, define overconsumption as ‘the excessive use of goods and services’, implying that consumption itself consists in the use of goods and services, and Cafaro (2001: 471) observes that ‘[p]opular use tends to equate consumption with the physical use and using up of some thing’ and that ‘modern economists define consumption as “the use of resources to satisfy current needs and wants”’. I will consider acts of use and their relation to my proposed analysis of consumption in section 4.

A variety of further modes of consumption are distinguishable in the literature: not only use (either functional/material or social/symbolic), purchase and exchange, but also ingestion and, according to Schroeder (2004: 229) and Urry (1990), visual consumption and ocular consumption respectively, which Schroeder characterises as ‘visually oriented consumer behaviour such as watching videos, tourism or window shopping.’ I will address these more unusual modes of consumption in section 7.

With regard to (iii) – whereby an action counts as a consumption action in virtue of its consequences – Stern (1997b: 13) provides one possible account of what the consequences of an action are which make it a consumption action: in physicists’ terms, he argues, consumption of matter/energy must be translated as transformation, since, strictly speaking, matter/energy cannot be consumed (or produced). In the background, therefore, is also an understanding (strictly incompatible with the First Law of Thermodynamics) of consumption as destruction.
The transformation that Stern argues the physicists’ sense of consumption must be understood as also has the consequence of an increase in entropy, ‘and this increase in entropy, to the extent that it takes the form of pollution or of a decrease in the usefulness of the transformed resource, is part of what is meant by “environmental impacts of consumption.”’ (1997b: 13). Marshall (1961: 63–64) is quoted by Daly (1995: 453) as having a similar consequential account of the nature of consumption: consumption of material products is ‘nothing more than a disarrangement of matter which destroys its utilities’. The analysis of consumption that I will offer is grounded in this third category of answer: it will propose that a certain kind of consequence is necessary and sufficient for an action being a consumption action, and neither any particular reasons for its performance nor any particular character are necessary or sufficient for this status.

2.3 Why do humans consume?

Jackson (2005) distinguishes between functional and symbolic reasons for consuming. Clearly we consume food and liquids for biological reasons, and goods and services for other kinds of basic material needs. Mainstream, neo-classical economics’ account of why we consume may be derived from their conception of a good – ‘the objects that people value and produce to satisfy human wants’ (Parkin 2005: 3) – and their conception of the agent as a consumer, which is of a utility-maximizing rational agent, that is, a ‘self-interested, isolated individual who chooses freely among alternative courses of action after computing their prospective costs and benefits’ (Hirschman 1985: 7). We consume in order to increase our utility. I will address this understanding of consumption in section 6. This account can accommodate not only functional, but also social and symbolic reasons. It is, however, a purely formal account. To provide substance to the understanding of the symbolic nature of consumption, consider Jackson’s (2005: 31–2) lucid summary of the rich sociological literature on this topic:

It is…clear that no purely functional account of material goods is going to deliver a robust model for understanding consumer behaviour, because functionality is not the point (or at least not exclusively the point). We consume not just to nourish ourselves or protect ourselves from the elements or maintain a living. We consume in order to identify ourselves with a social group, to position ourselves within that group, to distinguish ourselves with respect to other social groups, to communicate allegiance to certain ideals, and to differentiate ourselves from certain other ideals. We consume in order to communicate. Through consumption we communicate not only with each
other but also with our pasts, with our ideals, with our fears, and with our aspirations. We consume in pursuit of meaning.

A newer strand of literature in the sociology of consumption highlights that this focus on the social-symbolic character of much consumption has led to the overlooking of the everyday, routine, habitual and inconspicuous forms of consumption, such as the repair of a lightswitch or the paying of utility bills (e.g. Gronow and Warde 2001). We consume, then, for a heterogeneity of reasons, from the most mundane to the profound, and therefore reasons do not provide a useful way of classifying actions as consumption actions.

2.4 What do humans consume?
Corresponding to the variation in the foregoing accounts of the nature and modes of consumption actions, and the reasons and explanations for why we consume is an equivalent heterogeneity in things we are said to consume: matter/energy (Stern 1997b: 13); food; fuel; global terrestrial net primary productivity (ibid.: 14); minerals (ibid.); goods and services (Cafaro 2001: 471); music (O’Hara and Brown 2006); public services (healthcare, welfare services, education) (Keat, Whiteley and Abercrombie 1994); information (Shah and Scheufele 2006); media (Shrum 2002); literature and art; tourist ‘sights’ (Urry 1990); and ideas and symbols (Bocock 1993). These items fall into a variety of ontological categories: natural physical entities (matter, energy, minerals, plants); artefacts (goods); services; and types or abstract objects (musical works, information, works of literature, works of art, ideas, symbols). To provide an exhaustive categorical scheme which matches accounts of the nature of consumption actions and their corresponding modes of consumption with classes of objects of consumption is beyond the scope of this chapter, but some of the connections will be drawn out in section 7, where I will argue that many items which are said to be consumed should not be understood to be objects of consumption actions.

2.5 What is the relation between the concept of consumption and the concept of the consumer?
In a draft of ‘Toward a Working Definition of Consumption for Environment Research and Policy’ (Stern 1997a), Stern clearly distinguished between the
concepts of consumer and consumption: ‘What people do as consumers is not necessarily consumption in the present sense [see his working definition in 2.1]. These activities may be more or less consumptive, and some may not consume at all. The pure case is the purchase of information, and some economic transactions, such as the purchase of computer software or time on the Internet, approach this ideal.’ Stern is arguing that it is not always the case that when it is appropriate to call us consumers it will be appropriate to say that we are engaged in consumption. Conversely, it will not always be appropriate to call us consumers when it is appropriate to say that we are engaged in consumption. As a first pass at explaining these ways in which the concepts of consumer and consumption come apart, it seems that the concept of the consumer is conceptually tied to the market and perhaps other social roles in the way that the concept of consumption is not, such to inhabit and perform this role need not always involve one in consuming. I will continue this examination of the relation between the concepts of consumption and the consumer in section 7.

3. An Analysis of the Concept of Consumption

As can be seen from this brief survey of the literature, the concept of consumption has been employed to denote a significant range of classes of actions, performed for the entire spectrum of human motivations, operating on almost any kind of object. The concept is clearly, as Princen (1999: 349) says, stretched. I propose the following analyses of the concept of consumption and its cognates. I offer a cluster of analyses, derived from the initial analysis of consumption, in order to aid discussion throughout the remainder of the chapter and the thesis. They respectively answer the following questions: (i) which actions are consumption actions; (ii) what it is for an agent to have consumed something; (iii) what it is for an agent to be a consumer; and (iv) what it is for an object or resource to have been consumed, or to be the current object of consumption? The analyses are:

- Consumption is the reduction in the availability of objects and resources by the actions of agents.
- An act, $A$, is a consumption act if and only if it reduces the availability of an object or resource.
• An agent, $S$, has consumed an object or resource, $O$, if and only if the reduction in the availability of $O$ is a consequence of actions performed by $S$.

• An agent, $S$, is a consumer of an object or resource, $O$, if and only if $S$ is acting in such a way that the availability of $O$ is being reduced.

• An object or resource, $O$, is an object of consumption (i.e. is something that might be consumed) if and only if $O$ may be subject to a reduction in its availability by the actions of agents.

The following sections (3–6) will argue for the cogency of this cluster of analyses. The remainder of this section will further explicate the analyses and their key terms. I will examine similarities and differences with the economic concept of rivalness; use Daly’s concept of consumption to further illuminate them; and explicate the central notion of availability and what it is for it to be reduced.

3.1 Rivalness
I begin by examining the economic concept of rivalness in consumption. Two different analyses of this concept may be found in the literature:

• The prevention-of-use analysis: A good, $G$, is a rival good only if $S$’s consumption of $G$ at $t1$ prevents $T$’s consumption of $G$ at $t1$.

As Daly and Farley (2004: 167) say, rivalness is a characteristic of a good or service whereby ‘use of a unit by one person prohibits use of the same unit at the same time by another.’ A screwdriver is a rival good in this sense; my use of the screwdriver prevents you from using it.

• The diminishment-of-quantity analysis: A good, $G$, is rival only if $S$’s consumption of $G$ at $t1$ diminishes the quantity of $G$ (for $S$ or $T$ or anyone else) available to consume at $t2$.

As Mankiw (2009: 227) states, ‘fish in the ocean are rival in consumption: When one person catches fish, there are fewer fish for the next person to catch.’ These two
analyses of the concept of rivalness can help me begin to explain the notion of availability and its reduction.

3.2 Availability

In the prevention-of-use analysis of rivalness, there is a sense in which the availability of $G$ is reduced that consists in $S$’s use of $G$ preventing $T$ or anyone else from using it. This understanding of availability reduction may be taken in either a legal or practical sense. In a legal sense, my purchase and ownership of a good prevents others from using that good (at least without my permission). In a practical sense, my use of certain kinds of good, such as a screwdriver, prevent others from using them. Neither of these prevention-of-use understandings of availability reduction are the sense I will employ in my analysis of consumption, since they would implausibly allow that locking an object up such that it is inaccessible or merely legally owning an object would count as consuming the object.

In the diminishment-of-quantity analysis of rivalness, there is a sense in which the availability of $G$ is reduced that consists in $S$’s consumption of $G$ diminishing the quantity of $G$ available to consume after that episode of consumption. The availability of $G$ is reduced as a consequence of $S$’s actions. This is closer to the sense of availability reduction I will develop below. For the moment I will postpone discussion of what it is to reduce availability and enquire into the prior question of what it is for an object to be available at all. To aid this enquiry, I will divide this question into three further questions: (i) what is it that is available?; (ii) to whom is it available?; and (iii) for what purpose is it available?

With regard to (i), consider Daly’s (1995: 451) account of consumption, which begins with a quote from Marshall (1961: 63–64):

“Man cannot create material things – his efforts and sacrifices result in changing the form or arrangement of matter to adapt it better for the satisfaction of his wants – as his production of material products is really nothing more than a rearrangement of matter which gives it new utilities, so his consumption of them is nothing more than a disarrangement of matter which destroys its utilities.” What we destroy or consume in consumption is the improbable arrangement of those building blocks, arrangements that give utility for humans, arrangements that were, according to Marshall, made by humans for human purposes. Human beings add utility to matter/energy. This is what we mean by production; we do not create matter/energy itself. Useful structure is added to matter/energy by the agency of labor and capital stocks. The value of this
useful structure imparted by labor and capital is what economists call “value added.” This value added is what is “consumed,” or used up, in consumption.

For Daly, then, consumption consists in the disarrangement of matter, and what is consumed is value.³ In the case of artefacts, this value is ‘the value we add to matter’ (Daly 1995: 458). In addition to this kind of value, Daly identifies an additional kind of value that is consumed, namely, ‘the value that was added [to matter/energy] by nature before we imported it into the economic subsystem’. This value he characterises as ‘the capacity to receive and hold the rearrangements dictated by human purpose, the capacity to receive the imprint of human knowledge, the capacity to embody value added’ (Daly 1995: 458). To translate Daly’s account of consumption into my analysis, therefore, would be to say that what is available is a certain kind of value borne by objects and resources, and to consume that object or resource is to act in such a way that makes that value less available.

With regard to (ii) – to whom this value is available – I believe Daly’s account is flawed insofar as it commits us to saying that nonhumans do not consume. Daly says that what is available for consumption is the value borne by an object or resource in virtue of possessing the property of having a capacity to receive and hold the arrangements dictated by human purpose, but this is too exclusive an account. Now, there is nothing in this account which excludes nonhumans from consuming the anthropocentric value borne by objects and resources. However, many instances of consumption by nonhumans not only do not reduce this value, but create it. Soil bears value for humans when it is rich in organic matter, and earthworms consume this organic matter through ingestion. In doing so, however, they improve the capacity of the soil to serve human purposes. According to Daly’s account, therefore, earthworms do not consume organic matter, since in doing so they do not reduce (but increase) the capacity of the soil to embody value added (as an agricultural resource, say). Indexing the value that is available to exclusively human purposes is therefore excessively restrictive on what counts as consumption. We are not the only ones to disarrange matter; deer may overgraze a woodland to the extent that the value it bore for them is used up. We may keep the general form of the account – that what is

³ Below I will make a terminological distinction between Daly’s account and my own, according to which it is not value that we consume, but the objects and resources which bear value. For now, I will continue explicating Daly’s account in terms of the consumption of value for the purpose of advancing my own account of what it is for an object or resource to be available.
consumed is value – but we must extend the range of values that are available to be consumed through disarrangement to include the value that is borne by ecosystems and their constituents to nonhumans.

With regard to (iii) – for what purpose this value is available – we may be either very general or more specific in enumerating the purposes to which the value-adding properties of objects and resources are put, and therefore in the classification of the values that are consumed. For example, we may say that an item of clothing has use value in virtue of its weave and colour and leave it at that; or we may say that it has functional value in virtue of its material and weave (for the purpose of warmth); or symbolic value in virtue of its colour and patterns (for the purpose of adherence to a social group); or social value in virtue of its design (for the purpose of securing dignity and recognition). Similarly, for nonhumans we may simply say that a tree has survival value and leave it at that; or we may say that a tree has protection value in virtue of its structure (for the purpose of predator-evasion); or reproductive value in virtue of its nest cavities; or social value in virtue of its height, allowing calls to carry over a wider area.

Daly’s account, then, of what we consume (value) helps in providing an account of what it is for an object or resource to be available. It is not merely for it to not yet be in legal ownership by another, or not currently employed by another agent such that it is available if one is entitled to it, as in the prevention-of-use analysis of rivalness in economics. It is, rather, to bear certain kinds of values (in virtue of possessing certain properties), either for humans or nonhumans, which mean the object or resource can be used for multiple purposes. What it is for an object or resource to be available just is for it to bear those properties which make it valuable for the purposes to which objects and resources of its kind have been, or are currently, put.

3.3 Reducing Availability

With the foregoing account of what it is for an object or resource to be available, we can now provide an account of what it is for an object or resource to have its availability reduced:
The availability of an object or resource, \( O \), is reduced if and only if the properties which confer the relevant value upon \( O \) are altered in such a way that either current or future value of \( O \) is reduced, or possible future use of \( O \) is constrained.

I will take the second disjunct of this analysis first. The prevention-of-use analysis of rivalness in economics identifies one dimension of constraint on future use; the availability of a resource such as fish stocks is reduced insofar as there are fewer fish to catch once the fisherman hauls his net in. This is a straightforward quantitative understanding of the constraint upon future use of this resource.\(^4\) But not all instances of availability reduction need be so understood. Consider my use of the screwdriver. When I have finished using it, there is still precisely one screwdriver for use next time. But what there has been is a marginal reduction in the quality of the screwdriver. The second disjunct of the first disjunct (future value of \( O \) is reduced) is applicable in these cases where, say, the properties which make a tool valuable are degraded in such a way that it cannot perform its task with, for example, as much precision or efficiency as before. But there are also cases where the value of the tool for performing its task is not affected, but nonetheless it has been affected in such a way that there is one less episode of use available in the future. This latter understanding of the qualitative dimension therefore can be translated as quantitative; in virtue of the head being marginally worn down, future use of the screwdriver is constrained in the sense that there are fewer episodes of future use available. Alternatively, we may express this claim in counterfactual terms: if \( O \) had not been used at \( t1 \) then there would have been more available episodes of future use.

To turn to the first disjunct, its own first disjunct (current value of \( O \) is reduced) is very close to the prevention-of-use analysis of rivalry that I rejected. I rejected that analysis of rivalness as an account of what it is to consume an object or resource on the grounds that it implausibly allows locking an object up or merely legally owning an object such that others are not entitled to use it to count as consumption. Further, to use an object or resource such that a barrier is present to others using it at the same time would also count as consumption, merely in virtue of my current use of it rather

\(^4\) Of course, fish stocks may recover if allowed; they are a dynamic resource. But immediately after the fisherman has hauled in his nets, the quantity is reduced, and future use thereby constrained.
than the physical effects upon the object. Both of these implications of this analysis are good grounds for rejecting it. But am I now letting it into my analysis via an account of availability reduction which invokes current use as one way in which availability may be reduced? Not as such. The notion of availability on the left hand side of the analysis already has built into it the purposes and values which make objects and resources valuable. Current use may temporarily reduce these values without constraining future use. It is therefore not in virtue of putting an object or resource beyond legal or practical use that makes an action count as consumption, but in virtue of reducing, even if only temporarily during use, its value. The value borne by a screwdriver is not reduced in virtue of my current use, but by the effects of my use upon it and upon its potential for being useful into the future. But the effects of my ‘use’ of, say, a natural area such as a woodland or moorland when I pursue a leisure activity within it (such as walking or cycling) do reduce at least some of the properties that such areas are valued for qua arena for such activities; solitude, peace, aesthetic beauty and so on. It is in virtue of my current use of the area that I reduce its value for others; I do this by reducing the availability of those value-adding properties of the natural area that make the pursuit of such activities within it appealing. This use reduces the current value of the environment for others, and therefore satisfies one of the sufficient conditions to fall under my analysis of consumption. But once I leave, if I have taken care and my use has been sensitive, then it may not have satisfied either of the other conditions, namely, reducing future value or constraining future use.5

3.4 Summary
To summarise: to engage in consumption is to reduce the availability of an object or resource. An object or resource is available insofar as it possesses properties which ground the values it bears for humans and nonhumans, and that availability is reduced insofar as its properties are altered, thereby either reducing current or future value, or constraining future use.6 I agree with Daly that the manner in which

---
5 Another undesirable implication of the ‘prevention-of-use’ analysis of rivalness is that we consume space all the time in virtue of existing. On my analysis, we only consume a space if that space is a valued property of an object, such as a plaza, or resource, such as an ecosystem. Such claims are debatable. I am not troubled if my analysis lets them in, however, for it would let them in for a good reason.
6 Since objects and resources may bear multiple values for humans and nonhumans, it is possible that certain actions performed on certain objects both improve a subset of their values while degrading a
consumption is executed consists in the disarrangement of matter, and that to consume is to reduce the capacity of an object or resource to serve the purposes that it does. My point of disagreement is a terminological one; it seems to me there is awkwardness in saying that what is consumed is value. I prefer to say that the objects and resources themselves are what are consumed, and that this consumption occurs in virtue of the reduction of their availability in the foregoing senses.

4. An Argument for the Claim that Most Use Acts are Consumption Acts

The argument for the cogency of my analysis of the concept of consumption continues with an examination of two claims made by Hannah Arendt: (i) there is a distinction between the processes of use and consumption; and (ii) only consumer goods, and not use objects, are consumed. I am going to defend and, in doing so, further explicate my analysis in this section by arguing that (i) the processes of use and consumption are not distinct in the way that Arendt argues; and (ii) use objects, in addition to consumer goods, are consumed. Part of the argument for these two propositions will consist in showing that an analysis of consumption that may be derived from Arendt’s claims fails to capture sequences of actions which we would ordinarily call consumption, sequences that my analysis succeeds in capturing.

Arendt distinguishes three fundamental levels of human activity; labour, work and action (Moran 2000: 309). I shall concern myself here with the first two. Labour is constituted by two kinds of tasks. Firstly, we must labour to satisfy the immediate bodily needs of hunger and thirst, and secondly, we must labour to protect and preserve the world of human artefacts from decay, which is constantly threatened by natural processes (Arendt 1958: 100–01). Both tasks of labour are endlessly repetitive and cyclical; soon after they are completed they must be begun again (Arendt 2003: 170–71; Arendt 1958: 99–100). The products of labour are consumer goods. Consumer goods are the ‘vital necessities that must be fed into the life different subset. Here we would merely have to take care in articulating under which description the object is being consumed, perhaps with *qua*-talk. That my analysis demands this level of care in specifying the precise manner in which objects are being consumed is a virtue in the arena of the analysis of environmental problems insofar as it requires close attention to be paid to consumption practices and their precise consequences.

This is not to say, of course, that in consuming an object or resource it does not succeed in serving that purpose. It is rather to say that its capacity to currently or in the future serve that purpose is constrained.
process of the human body’ (Arendt 2003: 170) and ‘through which life assures the means of its own survival’ (Arendt 1958: 94). The duration in the world of goods for consumption ‘scarcely exceeds the time necessary to prepare them’ (Arendt 1993: 209); ‘[a]fter a brief stay in the world, they return to the natural process that yielded them either through absorption into the life process of the animal or through decay; in their man-made shape they disappear more quickly than any other part of the world’ (Arendt 2003: 171). The life-duration of a consumer good is terminated either by its swift decay – consumer goods cannot be stored – or by its consumption; consumer goods are consumed (Arendt 1993: 209). For any given consumer good, its “destruction” or immediate consumption is ‘inherent in its end’ and was ‘the goal for which it was made’ (Arendt 2003: 173).

Work is, unlike labour, non-repetitive and non-cyclical; it ends when the products of work are completed (Arendt 2003: 171). The products of work are use objects. Use objects, unlike consumer goods, are durable; they significantly outlast not only the activity of their creation but also, often, the lifespan of those that produced it (Arendt 2003: 171; Arendt 1958: 136; 94). Use objects, for Arendt, constitute the common world; ‘the products of work – and not the products of labour – guarantee the permanence and durability without which a world would not be possible at all’ (Arendt 1958: 94). The duration of use objects in the world may also be terminated in two ways. Firstly, use objects are, eventually, subject to the same natural processes of decay as are consumer goods, although, unlike consumer goods, ‘they will remain in the world for a certain while unless they are wantonly destroyed’ (Arendt 2003: 173). Secondly, use objects may be used up. Since, according to Arendt, use objects are not consumed but used, if the process of using them eventually destroys them we are to say that that object has been used up, rather than consumed (Arendt 1993: 209). In further contrast to consumer goods, for any given use object its destruction is incidental to, not inherent in, its use and did not constitute the goal for which it was made; its ‘proper use does not cause [it] to disappear’ (Arendt 2003: 173).

For Arendt, then, only consumer goods, and not use objects, are consumed. Moreover, she has a strict distinction between the process of consumption, which operates on consumer goods, and use, which operates on use objects. But how would
Arendt answer the question of 2.2 above, what makes a human action a consumption action? Consider the following passage (Arendt 1958: 125–6):

[The very abundance of use objects] transforms them into consumer goods. The endlessness of the labouring process is guaranteed by the ever-recurrent needs of consumption; the endlessness of production can be assured only if its products lose their use character and become more and more objects of consumption, or if, to put it another way, the rate of use is so tremendously accelerated that the objective difference between use and consumption, between the relative durability of use objects and the swift coming and going of consumer goods, dwindles to insignificance. In our need for more and more rapid replacement of the worldly things around us, we can no longer afford to use them, to respect and preserve their inherent durability; we must consume, devour as it were, our houses and furniture and cars as though they were the “good things” of nature which spoil uselessly if they are not drawn swiftly into the never-ending cycle of man’s metabolism with nature.

It seems from this passage that in significantly shortening the life duration of use objects we are treating them as if they are consumer goods. This is not necessarily to say that use objects with shortened life-durations are to be reclassified as consumer goods, since the shortening of the life-duration does not make them products of labour; ‘vital necessities that must be fed into the life process of the human body’; or that destruction has become inherent in, rather than incidental to, their end. But it does reveal that life duration is crucial to Arendt’s distinctions between consumer goods and use objects, and consumption and use.

Why might Arendt have considered relative life-duration to be the central basis on which to distinguish between objects of use and objects of consumption, and between the processes of use and consumption? I propose an answer to this question indirectly by asking and answering two slightly different questions. Firstly, why might we be reluctant to say that consumer goods are used? It seems to me that a possible reason is that the nature of consumer goods as understood by Arendt is such that their destruction is contemporaneous with their use, thereby masking the fact that they are used at all. Secondly, why might we be reluctant to say that use objects are consumed? It is here that a direct enquiry into Arendt’s conception of a consumption act is required. To some extent, her conception is trivially defined thus: an act, A, is a consumption act if and only if A operates on a consumer good. Her conception of consumer goods as the objects of consumption is primary and consumption acts are defined as those acts which take such goods as their object. But with a new understanding of the centrality of life-duration in the determination of
those objects that are objects of consumption we can derive an analysis of a
consumption act that is independent of the conception of its object: an act, \( A \), is a
consumption act if and only if it terminates the life duration of its object
contemporaneously or near contemporaneously with its performance. By ‘the
termination of life duration’ is meant that the object has not only had its properties
slightly altered, but has been wholly transformed such that it is appropriate to say
that the object no longer exists in the form that it did before consumption. The apple,
once eaten, is no longer an item of food; the petrol, once burnt, is no longer fuel. By
‘the object of the consumption act’ is meant the object toward or upon which the act
is directed: I eat my dinner with my cutlery; the food is the object of my
consumption act, not my cutlery. With this characterisation, which avoids the
triviality of the first definition while respecting the centrality of life-duration
revealed in the passage above, we can explain the reluctance to say that use objects
are objects of consumption acts by highlighting the endurance of such objects
through repeated acts of use. Since the life-duration of use objects are not terminated
by the acts of use we bring to bear upon them, we cannot describe those acts as
consumption acts.

In both cases it is the respective life-duration of the objects that is responsible for the
reluctance to say on the one hand that consumer goods are used and on the other
hand that use objects are consumed. In the case of consumer goods, I suggested that,
while their short life-duration may be responsible for the reluctance to say that they
are used, it does not justify it. It is perfectly coherent to say that fuel is used for
warmth and locomotion, and that food is used for nutrition and social interaction.
The nature of these kinds of goods is such that their destruction is contemporaneous
with their use, but this does not, however, entail that they are not used. Indeed, that is
precisely how they are consumed; their consumption occurs through their use, and
their use results in their consumption. A similar case can be made with respect to use
objects. Their long life-duration is responsible for the reluctance to say that they are
consumed, but does not justify it. Such is the nature of use objects (and the uses to
which they are put, and the forms of that use) that they endure through repeated acts
of use, but this does not entail that they are not consumed. Indeed, each act of use
will tend to bring the object closer to the termination of its life-duration. Most use
results in their consumption, and their consumption occurs through their use. Arendt
wants to say that only acts that terminate the life duration of their object are consumption acts, and this leads her to say that only consumer goods, which have a nature such that their destruction is contemporaneous with their use, are consumed. But this is not tenable for the reasons given above. Moreover, a use act on a use object may end its life duration by breaking it, but we do not say that every other act up to that point was a use act, and the last one was a consumption act. Rather, we say that the object’s consumption was brought about by the whole sequence of use acts. Therefore, each use act is a consumption act, but under a different description. My analysis captures this: an act, $A$, is a consumption act if and only if it reduces the availability of an object or resource. Most use acts satisfy this description.\(^8\) I conclude that Arendt is wrong to maintain a strict distinction between consumption and use.

5. The Inclusivity of the Analysis

My analysis, in common with any conceptual analysis, should be subject to two kinds of assessment: (i) do objects or activities fall under it which intuitively are not consumption objects or activities, and (ii) are objects or activities which should intuitively fall under it excluded from doing so? With regard to the second kind of assessment, as I stated in the introduction, my analyses are proposed as locally descriptive (since no non-disjunctive analysis could be globally descriptive, and since I am most concerned to offer an analysis which is oriented around what is most important for assessing the impact of consumption upon the natural environment); I concede that it does not capture all applications of the concept. In section 6, where this assessment is carried out, I will argue that this does not constitute an objection to the cogency of my analyses. This section will be devoted to addressing the first kind of potential criticism. It might be worried that certain kinds of actions which are intuitively not consumption actions satisfy my analysis. I will look at three groups of actions in turn. Firstly, I address a heterogeneous group of possible counterexamples; secondly, I address possible counterexamples that turn on the claim that my analysis fails to provide a principled boundary along the chain of consequences that flow

\(^8\) Acts of use which increase certain values that objects or resources bear will not fall under my analysis. For example, certain kinds of audio equipment, such as some speakers and musical instruments, improve and become more valuable with use. In these cases, the appropriate kinds of use actions will not count as consumption actions.
from an action; and lastly, counterexamples that turn on the claim that to be said to 
be consuming an agent must have the intention to consume an object or resource.

5.1 Possible Counterexamples
Firstly, it might be thought that natural processes, such as erosion, count as 
consumption under my analysis. For example, the wooden bench in my garden is 
slowly having its availability reduced by rain, frost and sun. Eventually, it will no 
longer function as a bench. Is the weather consuming the bench? I have so far 
provided four analyses: of a consumption act, of what it is for an agent to have 
consumed an object or resource, of what it is for an agent to be a consumer of an 
object or resource, and of what it is for an object or resource to have been consumed. 
Each of these analyses contain reference to the actions of agents, and therefore 
excludes the effects of natural processes upon objects and resources.

Secondly, it might be thought that I am engaged in consumption when merely sitting 
still in virtue of breathing, since in breathing I am reducing the availability of the 
resource of oxygen. Note, however, that each of my analyses contains reference to 
the actions of agents. I am understanding ‘action’ here to mean actions that we 
voluntarily and engage in with at least a degree of conscious intention. Since 
breathing is involuntary (at least when we are unconscious or are conscious but not 
thinking about it), the reduction in availability of oxygen that is the result of my 
breathing does not fall under it; I am not performing a consumption action. It is 
difficult to say whether this need be troubling for the analysis. On the one hand, 
there is something intuitively right in saying that we are consuming oxygen, since it 
is similar to the ‘ingestion’ sense of consumption which we appeal to when we say 
we consumed the alcohol or the food. But equally, it seems strange to say that we are 
engaged in consumption in virtue of breathing. I will leave this example as 
inconclusive.

Thirdly, no matter what kinds of actions we perform, the availability to us of the 
‘resource’ of time is reduced. Does this mean that, on my analysis, we consume 
time? Although my actions necessarily take time, there is no causal connection 
between the performance of any action and the reduction in the availability of time. 
Therefore, time is not a ‘resource’ that is consumed under my analyses.
Fourthly, human bodies (and those of other living organisms) degrade over time such that their availability is reduced. In using my body, am I consuming it? Sometimes, such as during exercise, in using my body I am actually increasing its availability; that is, I may improve it as a ‘resource’, increasing its longevity and functionality. Analogous to the maintenance and repair of use objects, this therefore does not fall under my analysis of consumption. Where the use of my body does not improve it, it seems more appropriate to say that the normal processes of ageing are responsible for the reduction in its availability, rather than the actions I perform (or the refraining of the performance of actions).

Fifthly, if I wilfully damage or destroy a use object, or dispose of it before the end of its useful life, I have reduced its availability, and I have done so through the performance of an action. On my analysis, these kinds of actions count as consumption actions. But there appears to be a tension between an understanding of consumption as the gradual wearing out of a use object through its use, and the idea that wilfully damaging or destroying it could count as consumption. This kind of example provides the opportunity to reiterate that, although one and the same action or sequence of actions may count as both use and consumption, it is different features of the actions which enable it to fall under these different descriptions. While putting an object or resource to some purpose is the feature that characterises an action as a use action, the consequent reduction of the availability of the object or resource is the feature that characterises the action as a consumption action. Actions other than use actions will exhibit the latter feature, although use actions, since humans are purpose-driven creatures, are the paradigmatic example. Although wilful damage or destruction, or wasteful disposal will be most appropriately described as such, since they also result in the relevant consequence, they will also count as consumption actions.

5.2 Principled Boundary Counterexamples

I turn now to actions which are intuitively not consumption actions but which appear to fall under my analysis for the following reason: among their distant (rather than the normal proximal) consequences are reductions in the availability of objects and resources. These kinds of actions thus raise the problem of where to draw a principled boundary along the chain of consequences that flow from an action.
Firstly, if I recommend a particular product, or some activity, to a friend, and she later purchases and uses that product, or pursues that activity, and in doing so reduces the availability of various objects and resources, it appears that my recommendation is an instance of an action with availability-reducing consequences and therefore counts as a consumption action. Intuitively, however, it is not. Clearly, what has gone wrong here is that the reduction in the availability of the objects and resources used by my friend has been attributed to me instead of her. The principled boundary in this context must be drawn between the actions of separate agents and the consequences of those actions. Recommendations (which are subsequently acted upon) do not count as consumption actions on my analysis.

Secondly, Young (2001), in the course of arguing that overconsumption and procreation are morally equivalent, attributes to the parent the consumption that the child will engage in. If Young is correct, then procreation is a consumption action. Again, it seems to me that this argument falls prey to a failure to appropriately separate the actions of agents and, thus, their consequences. Even if it is arguable that the consumption of clothes, toys and so on of a child’s early years is attributable to the parents, clearly the consumption through the child’s adult life is their own and not their parents’. Procreation is not a consumption action on my analysis.

A third kind of action which is intuitively not a consumption action but which it might be argued falls under my analysis are acts of purchase. Now of course purchase is ordinarily thought of as consumption in a straightforward economic sense: as Røpke (2005: 6) says, in ‘neoclassical microeconomics consumption is defined as the act of buying goods and services’. I will properly distinguish my sense of consumption from this economic sense in the following section. For the present, though, consider the economic concept of consumer sovereignty, which can be traced back to Adam Smith (2009 [1776]: 390), who claimed that ‘[c]onsumption is the sole end and purpose of all production; and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer.’ Ludwig von Mises (1946: 20) adopted the term (from W. H. Hutt) to stand for the following idea:
The capitalists, the enterprisers, and the farmers are instrumental in the conduct of economic affairs. They are at the helm and steer the ship. But they are not free to shape its course. They are not supreme, they are steersmen only, bound to obey unconditionally the captain's orders. The captain is the consumer....They, by their buying and by their abstention from buying....determine what should be produced and in what quantity and quality....They are full of whims and fancies, changeable and unpredictable. They do not care a whit for past merit. As soon as something is offered to them that they like better or is cheaper, they desert their old purveyors.

This and other presentations of the principle are ambiguous between normative and descriptive readings. If it is normative then it says that patterns of production and distribution ought to be determined by consumer preferences. This reading is motivated by anti-paternalism. If it is descriptive, it merely says that, as a matter of fact, in free market economies patterns of production and distribution are determined by consumer preferences. It is this latter reading which suggests the possibility of acts of purchase falling under my analysis of consumption. For when I make a purchase in a market I stimulate demand, so contributing to the continued or increased production of goods of the kind I purchased and the associated consumption of goods and energy required to manufacture and distribute them. My act of purchase therefore has the consequence of the reduction in the availability of objects (e.g. equipment used to manufacture those future goods and transportation used to distribute them) and resources (materials out of which those future goods will be made and energy sources used in their manufacture and distribution).

Above, I argued against acts of recommendation falling under my analysis of consumption on the grounds that the consequences of the actions of the person I made the recommendation to are attributable to them and not to me. Is an act of purchase not a form of recommendation? Am I not recommending to the producers that they ought to continue manufacturing goods of this kind, and are their actions in producing them, and the consumption that this involves, not attributable to them and not to me? There is a distinction made by economists which justifies this kind of claim, between ‘intermediate consumption’, which consists in the ‘goods and services consumed as inputs by a process of production’, and ‘final consumption’, which ‘consists of goods and services used up by individual households or the

---

9 Contrast the act of purchase with finding a use object (say, one that has been abandoned or lost). My acquiring it in this manner has no further consequences in the way that purchasing a similar good does in sending a signal to the market to continue producing goods of this kind.

community to satisfy their individual or collective needs or wants.’\textsuperscript{11} The consumer is responsible for final consumption, and the producer for intermediate consumption. My act of purchase, if this distinction holds, is not an act of consumption on my analysis.

Attfield (2009: 226), however, develops the notion of \textit{mediated responsibility} which suggests otherwise: ‘Mediated responsibilities include cases where one agent, A, brings it about that another agent B (or other agents) act(s) or abstain(s) from action with foreseeable consequences for which (on some views) A may be held responsible, at least in part’. Attfield (2009: 232) argues that the relation between the producer – who is directly responsible for the consumption of manufacturing equipment, energy and so on – and the consumer – who is indirectly responsible for the producer’s consumption – is an instance where mediated responsibility obtains:

Those directly responsible for such emissions are agents in distant places. But the incentives for them to initiate and develop these practices are the purchasing power of Western consumers, and in the absence of our behavior as consumers, these practices of manufacture would probably either not take place, or would adopt different forms better suited to local markets. So here we have a case where one set of agents brings it about that others engage in polluting activities. Responsibility is mediated through the actions of others....

Attfield’s claims regarding responsibility here may be understood as causal responsibility, although such claims will of course bear on the attribution of moral responsibility for the cumulative harm caused by, for example, greenhouse gas emissions (and thus consumption).

It has become common and surprisingly accepted in recent years to provide information to consumers regarding various kinds of environmental impacts that the manufacture of products have had based on life cycle analyses which are conducted from ‘cradle to grave’, taking into account prospecting, extraction, refinement, design, manufacture, packaging, distribution, use, maintenance, repair and disposal.\textsuperscript{12} Most commonly the information provided regards the total CO\textsubscript{2} emissions of the life cycle, but it may also concern the consumption of water, energy, oil or certain other kinds of chemicals or minerals. This provision of information is

\textsuperscript{12} See for example The American Center for Life Cycle Assessment. http://www.lcacenter.org/
intended to enable consumers to inform their purchase decisions, but there is an additional implication that, whatever product the consumer purchases, they may in some sense be attributed the intermediate consumption of water, energy and so on, and the information is to allow them to see how much responsibility they are taking on. The resources (or their associated emissions) are said to be ‘embodied’ in the product, and the consumer is said to be responsible for the consumption of these embodied resources. The consumer directly consumes the product (by using it), but indirectly consumes the resources embodied in it. This is a practical example of the importance of determining the answer to the question of whether the act of purchase falls under my analysis of consumption.

Firstly, since the consumption of an object or resource is an effect of our actions, and the resources that are embodied in products have already been consumed, their consumption cannot strictly be attributed to the consumer, since this would be a case of backward causation. The claim, then, can only be that it is as if the purchaser of the product consumes the resources embodied in it. The purchaser is assigned (non-causal) responsibility for the consumption occasioned by the manufacture of the product they have purchased (neither is it moral responsibility, since no evaluative judgements are being made here), and this assignment of responsibility is justified by the consumption of resources and objects that their purchase stimulates or supports in the future. The precise extent of this consumption and the particular consumption actions it resulted in is, if not indeterminate in large companies operating in global markets, then certainly epistemologically indeterminate. Accordingly, it seems reasonable to refer to what past production of the kind of good in question occasioned in terms of the consumption of resources. While, therefore, the act of purchase has no consequence regarding resources and objects already consumed in production, it is a good guide to the objects and resources that will be consumed as a result of demand stimulated by that purchase.

Can the act of purchase therefore be considered an act of consumption under my analysis? Insofar as my arguments concerning the proper separation of the consequences of different persons are sound, it cannot. However, in the context of an examination of the environmental consequences of consumption, acts of purchase cannot be ignored. Even if acts of purchase do not fall under my analysis of
consumption (and therefore my analysis does not fall prey to the objection that it is too liberal concerning the kinds of actions it counts as consumption), they are still highly relevant to normative assessments of consumption. Purchase is the most common way we come into the possession of goods that we subsequently consume, and although the act of purchase itself is not a consumption act, it stimulates further (intermediate) consumption acts on the part of producers such that consumers are to some degree responsible for the consequences of those actions. Attfield’s notion of mediated responsibility is relevant in this sense of the attribution of the consumption of producers to consumers.

5.3 Unintentional Consequences Counterexamples

A distinct formulation of the concern that my analysis of consumption is too liberal that is related to the principled boundary counterexamples is that it might be argued that to be justified in claiming that an agent is consuming an object or resource requires that the agent is doing so intentionally. For example, when I pull on my walking boots and go for a hike, it seems odd to say that I am consuming my boots. Surely what I am doing is hiking, not consuming. But when I eat a plum, it seems perfectly appropriate to say that I am consuming the plum, and the comfort with this locution seems attributable to the fact that I am intending to consume it. In contrast, when I go for a hike, I am not intending to consume my boots; rather, this is an unintentional consequence of my activity. Should any plausible analysis of what it is to consume an object or resource exclude actions where consumption does not form part of the intention behind the action?

I do not think so. In fact, I think that this distinction between actions where we intend to consume and actions where we do not is barely a useful distinction at all, since most of the actions which appear to fall on the side of intentional consumption actually fall on the other side. Recall Arendt’s claim that “destruction” or immediate consumption is ‘inherent’ in the end of consumer goods and was ‘the goal for which’ they are made, whereas destruction is incidental to, and not inherent in, the use of use objects and does not constitute the goal for which they are made. I argued that this distinction was not tenable on the grounds that we consume use objects over time, and that we use consumer goods. This use occurs typically at a time rather than over a period of time, since such is their nature that their destruction is
contemporaneous with their use, as Arendt points out. While it is plausible to say that destruction or immediate consumption is ‘inherent in their end’, in the sense that they cannot be used for their standard purposes without destruction occurring, it seems to me less plausible to say that destruction is the goal for which they are made. The content of the intention to eat an apple or light the gas hob is unlikely to contain reference to the destruction or consumption of the food or fuel. Rather, such kinds of actions are likely to contain reference to alleviating our hunger, quenching our thirst, socialising over a drink, creating a cheery glow in the living room or barbecuing the sausages. On reflection, it seems just as odd to say that I intend to consume the apple as it does to say I intend to consume the boots.

Can we reinterpret what it is to intend to consume in a way which takes account of the fact that individuals do not intend, as such, to consume objects and resources? Perhaps we may still say that although I do not intend as such to consume – in the sense of immediately destroy – the apple, I fully accept its destruction as an unavoidable consequence of my eating it. In contrast, I accept no such thing with regard to my walking boots; I fully expect, barring accident, for my boots to be usable next weekend. Perhaps we can reinterpret what it is to intend to be engaged in consumption as acting in such a way that acceptance of the necessary consequence of availability reduction may be implied. If we interpret ‘intention to consume’ as ‘(implied) acceptance of immediate destruction as a necessary consequence of use’, then perhaps we can modify the kinds of actions that ought not fall under my analysis to those which are engaged in without acceptance that immediate and significant reduction in the availability of the object or resource is a necessary consequence of use. I may intend to use the firewood in such a way (i.e. burning it) that it is turned to embers and ashes, and in this sense may be said to be intending to consume it. But I do not intend to use my boots in such a way that this or any other similar consequence ensues, and in this sense may not be said to be intending to consume them.

This reinterpretation of what it is to intend to consume is, however, tenuous. It is a very weak sense of what it is to intend to consume, and it is not at all clear that it should count as such. If it does not then the initial distinction drawn does not hold and the objection that my analysis is flawed insofar as it includes actions where we
do not intend to consume loses force. Rather, my analysis characterises consumption for what it is: a consequence of our actions, where those actions perhaps never intend to consume as such, i.e. reduce availability, at all.

6. The Relation Between Consumption and Welfare

Before turning to the converse criticism of my analysis – that it is too exclusive to capture legitimate applications – I will return to economics and consider a wider understanding of consumption employed by economists. The final part of Røpke’s (2005: 6, my emphasis) characterisation reveals this additional component: in ‘neoclassical microeconomics consumption is defined as the act of buying goods and services, and it is assumed that consumption yields utility.’ Economists sometimes employ a sense of consumption which goes beyond purchase, and which exhibits some form of relation between consumption and welfare or utility. Why might economists have taken the relation between consumption and welfare to be important? Consider their conception of the consumer. The performers of consumption acts, according to economists, are rational agents. This theoretical construct is sometimes referred to as ‘homo economicus’. Such an agent is a ‘self-interested, isolated individual who chooses freely among alternative courses of action after computing their prospective costs and benefits’ (Hirschman 1987: 142). The performer of consumption acts, that is, the consumer, is a utility maximizer. The significance of utility or welfare to the economic understanding of consumption thus lies in this model. But is it plausible? There are significant flaws with the neoclassical economic model of the rational consumer. On the one hand, it has been criticised both on the grounds that economic actors are not rational by its own lights of what rationality consists in, as well on the grounds that its model of rationality is flawed and unjustified. Both of these kinds of criticism undermine the relation between consumption and utility in the sense of consumption being a guaranteed yielder of utility.

I will outline these criticisms in the course of examining two possible understandings of the relation between utility and consumption. Firstly:

- An act, A, is a consumption act only if it yields utility for the agent.
This posited relation between consumption and welfare says that it is a necessary condition for an act counting as a consumption act that it yields utility. But is it not clear that there are some actions we would wish to call consumption actions that fail to yield utility for the agent? For example, if I eat poisoned food and the poison instantly takes effect, I have clearly consumed the food but this action has yielded disutility. I will briefly outline some more robust evidence, and accompanying theories that are founded in this evidence, that not every consumption action is a guaranteed yielder of utility.

This evidence is oriented around criticisms of the neoclassical theory of consumer behaviour. The criticism is that it wrongly assumes that consumer preferences are both fixed and given, and therefore lacks sensitivity to various kinds of social psychological evidence. For example, it cannot accommodate the evidence for the phenomenon of social learning (Badura 1977; Halbern et. al. 2004: 24–5); it seems that, at least some of the time, our choices are influenced to at least some degree by the behaviour of others. This fact in turn undermines rational choice theory’s commitment to the deliberative model of consumer choice. Other theories and evidence which undermine this deliberative assumption is Festinger’s (1957) cognitive dissonance theory – some components of our motivation stem from a desire to reduce feelings of discomfort originating in conflicts either between two or more attitudes or values, or between attitudes or values and our actions, such that we will seek to reduce or eliminate inconsistencies or conflicts – and the importance, in the face of time constraints, unavailability of full information and other cognitive limitations, of habit, routine and the use of heuristics (Tversky and Kahneman 1974; Jackson 2005: 35–6). Further, the assumption that consumers are fully competent rational calculators with no non-rational biases is deeply flawed. We are, in fact, subject to a range of biases which confound our capacity to calculate prospective costs and benefits:

- we are subject to framing effects, where we distinguish between two identical but differently framed outcomes (Kahneman 2003: 1459; see also Tversky and Kahneman 1981);
- we exhibit time inconsistent preferences, where we discount the future and choose immediate gratification and defer unpleasantness in the face of
rational choice theory’s assumption of the time consistency of intertemporal preferences (O’Donoghue and Rabin 2000: 233);

- we are loss-averse (Kahneman and Tversky 1979), where an outcome that is strictly worse may be chosen merely because it avoids losing something that one is already in possession of, in the face of rational choice theory’s assumption of neutrality between loss and gain (Dawnay and Shah 2005: 9);
- our willingness to pay for something and our willingness to accept compensation for its loss are not equal (Kahneman, Knetsch and Thaler 1991; Pearce 2002: 4); and
- we adhere to default behaviours set by authorities (Dawnay and Shah 2005: 10).

Even if we accept rational choice theory’s conception of what it is to be rational, the evidence outlined above strongly suggests that agents are frequently irrational in the sense that they do not act so as to maximise utility (cf. Simon 1957). For my purposes, this is enough to suggest that it is not merely the case that agents will often fail to maximise utility, but that they will also often fail to yield any positive utility at all, thus undermining the conceptual link posited between utility and consumption above.

Consider the second possible understanding of the relation between consumption and utility:

- An act, A, is a consumption act only if the agent performed A with the purpose of yielding utility.

This posited relation between consumption and welfare says that it is a necessary condition for an act counting as a consumption act that it was engaged in for the purpose of yielding utility. But is it not the case that there are some acts which we would wish to call consumption acts that are not engaged in for the purpose of yielding utility? If I am forced to eat a poisoned apple in order to save a loved one from the same fate, then I consume the apple, but not for the purpose of enjoying its taste or realising its health benefits. Again, there is a copious literature on this kind
of criticism of rational choice theory and its picture of consumers as utility-maximizers.

The criticism is that it mistakenly omits that component of our motivation concerned with moral norms. Sen makes a distinction between sympathy and commitment. Sympathy is where a ‘person’s sense of well-being is psychologically dependent on someone else’s welfare’ (Sen 1977: 327). Commitment is where a person is motivated to act on the basis of concern for others, but where it is anticipated that the action will result in a diminishment of one’s own expected welfare (Sen 1977: 328). Commitment, for Sen, is ‘closely connected with one’s morals’, broadly construed, deriving from sources from the religious to the political (Sen 1977: 329). The existence of commitment as a component of motivation presents a problem for rational choice theory because ‘it drives a wedge between personal choice and personal welfare, and much of traditional economic theory relies on the identity of the two’ (Sen 1977: 329; see also Sen 1973: 254). The foundational part of neoclassical economic theory he is referring to is revealed preference theory (Sen 1977: 322):

If you are observed to choose \( x \) rejecting \( y \), you are declared to have “revealed” a preference for \( x \) over \( y \). Your personal utility is then defined simply as a numerical representation of this “preference” alternative. With this set of definitions you can hardly escape maximizing your own utility, except through inconsistency.

Sen’s objection may be summarized thus: my choices may reveal not my preferences, but my commitments. The failure of the rational choice model to predict a range of behaviours exemplifies its deficiency regarding motivation relating to commitment. For example, rational choice theory is unable to account – using as it does a negative relationship between tax evasion on the one hand and the probability of being caught and the size of the fine on the other (Frey et al. 2004) – for the high level of taxpayer compliance. Frey et al.’s (2004) concept of procedural fairness – that it is not only the outcome but also its method of implementation that is of concern for people – is supported by evidence from Feld and Frey (2002) and Frey and Feld (2002) that when tax authorities treat taxpayers with a higher degree of respect they are more willing to pay their taxes. An apparent commitment to fairness also motivates a willingness to pay a greater amount for public goods if they are perceived to be fairer (Ajzen et al. 2000: 2448). The same phenomenon can be seen
with regard to monetary compensation offered to communities that stand to bear a
cost in relation to public works. Those in receipt of compensation tend to perceive it
as a bribe rather than a redress, and are much more receptive to measures that
directly and practically address the cost that they are to bear (Frey et al. 2004). A
commitment to fairness also appears to motivate a desire to punish the wrongdoing
of others even at great personal cost and to not exploit strong bargaining positions
(Dawnay and Shah 2005: 6). Evidence also shows that we perform certain actions
from an intrinsic motivation – the reward or satisfaction consisting in the
performance of the action itself – rather than from an extrinsic motivation
concerning the consequences of performing the action, including monetary reward
(Frey and Goette 1999: 4). Frey and Goette (1999: 14) found that volunteers who are
financially rewarded work on average four hours less than those who are not (who
work on average fourteen hours per week). Such behaviours cannot be accounted for
by rational choice theory; it would always predict that financial rewards would
encourage and penalties discourage, that strong bargaining positions would be
exploited, taxes evaded and wrongdoers appeased if pursuing their punishment
involved personal cost. It has, however, no apparatus to account for commitment.
For my purposes, the relation between consumption and utility posited above is
implausible; at least some consumption actions are performed for purposes other
than yielding utility. For example, we might perform a consumption action out of a
commitment to fairness, even if it results in negative utility for us.

To conclude, this broader understanding of consumption that economists employ
tells us nothing about the concept of consumption. Rather, it either makes claims
regarding what accompanies or follows from consumption, or regarding the
motivation for engaging in consumption. On the one hand, consumption actions do
not necessarily result in welfare or utility; this relation is only contingent. Moreover,
this relation often fails. On the other, consumption actions do not necessarily flow
from a motivation to yield utility, but only contingently do so. Moreover, it is often
the case that they flow from other motivations not related to utility. My analysis, in
making no such claims regarding a relation between utility or welfare and
consumption, or regarding the motivations for consumption actions, is consistent
with such evidence.
7. The Exclusivity of the Analysis

A second common objection to any conceptual analysis is that it is too restrictive. To advance such an objection consists in offering counterexamples of applications of the concept which the analysis fails to capture. I will draw these potential counterexamples – (i) of which objects count as objects that are consumed, and (ii) of alternative accounts of the nature, or potential modes, of consumption – from the rich sociological literature on consumption. Sociology has, perhaps more than any other discipline, taken consumption as a serious field of enquiry, with some going so far as to suggest that sociology as a discipline ought to re-orient itself from a production-dominated to a consumption-oriented discipline (Saunders 1990, as characterised by Campbell 1995: 96; Aldridge 2003: 28). According to Campbell (1995), there have been two strands to the development of the sociology of consumption. Firstly, there is the ‘material-economic’ paradigm, and, secondly, a ‘psychological-cultural’ paradigm. The material-economic paradigm of understanding consumption cleaves closely to the popular usage of the term ‘consumption’, understood as acts involving marketplace exchanges concerning goods and services. The psychological-cultural paradigm, which emerged out of critical theory, cultural studies and the postmodernism debate, conceives of consumption acts as symbolic acts involving the construction of identity and the conveyance of meaning (Campbell 1995: 111). Campbell has noted (ibid.: 100) that these two seemingly irreconcilable understandings of the nature and significance of consumption have ‘begun to mix and mingle to form that diverse body of observation and analysis that currently passes for ‘the sociology of consumption’.‘

Sociologists have, in developing a sociology of consumption, focused on a spectrum of objects of consumption acts, and a corresponding spectrum of conceptions of the nature of a consumption act. Those positioned toward the material-economic end of the spectrum are exemplified by Campbell’s (1995: 102) working definition of consumption: ‘the selection, purchase, use, maintenance, repair and disposal of any product or service’. I will take each of the components of this definition in turn. Firstly, what it is that is consumed are products and services. This is a standard economic understanding of the objects of consumption. However, while many products may be physical objects such as pieces of jewellery or rowing machines,
they are also often non-physical items such as downloaded music albums. While my analysis accommodates products that are physical objects, it cannot accommodate items which cannot have their availability reduced in the relevant sense, and it is not clear that items such as software or downloaded music albums can do so. While the hardware on which such things are stored may be degraded and have their availability reduced in the relevant sense as a result of using them, it is not clear that listening to the album or using the software reduces the availability of that token of it as such. Further, it is not clear that services that are purchased and delivered in the marketplace have their availability reduced. For example, when a feng shui consultant comes to my house and rearranges my furniture, it is not clear how the availability of this service is being reduced. Certainly, the consultant cannot be engaged elsewhere at the same time, but as I have established, this is not the relevant sense of availability reduction. Nothing about the service, considered as such, is being degraded. Both of these kinds of items (‘non-physical’ products, and services) are excluded from my analysis. To determine whether this presents a problem for my analysis will require continuing and assessing the modes by which it is proposed such non-physical products are consumed. If there is a plausible manner in which they can be said to be consumed, then I will have to concede that they are appropriate objects of consumption.

So, to consider the modes of consumption that Campbell enumerates, firstly consider selection. To select a product (or service) seems to be a prerequisite for, not a mode of, consumption. My analysis rightly excludes this kind of activity. Secondly, purchase, in the economic sense of an act of exchange, does not consume the product (or service) according to my analysis. For economists, the consumption of a good is equivalent to a marketplace transaction; a consumption act takes place at the point of exchange, and despite the fact that the good purchased by the consumer may last for many years, as far as the economist is concerned, none of the consumer’s subsequent interactions with the good (use, maintenance, repair, disposal) count as consumption acts. For economists, the objects of consumption acts are goods and services. Goods are ‘the objects that people value and produce to satisfy human wants. Goods are physical objects such as golf balls. Services are tasks performed for people such as haircuts’ (Parkin 2005: 3). Goods and services that are purchased by firms to aid in production are counted as investment goods rather than consumer,
or ‘final’, goods. Final goods may be either durable goods, enduring repeated or constant use over time (e.g. an automobile), or non-durable, being exhausted or extinguished such that they cannot be used or consumed again (e.g. petrol). This understanding of consumption as purchase or exchange is not equivalent to mine. Although purchase is the most common way in which we come into possession of the goods we subsequently consume, the act of purchase, considered as the transaction whereby ownership of a good, or the entering into a contract for a service, is transferred or agreed upon, does not, in and of itself, reduce the availability of goods or resources. As was explained above, to reduce availability is not to deny others the right to use a good (or to avail themselves of the very service that one has purchased) through the legal means of property ownership or contractual obligation. It is to act in such a way that there are physical consequences for objects and resources, and acts of purchase considered as such (rather than acts to facilitate the transaction, such as driving to the shop or writing a cheque) do not have such consequences. According to the economist, then, to purchase a good is to consume but to use it is not. My analysis of consumption is precisely opposite; to use a good is to consume it but to purchase it is not. Further, on my analysis the recipient of a gift, rather than the one who purchased it, is the one to consume it, and using a use object that one has found or that one has made from found natural materials counts as consumption. As I stated above, I concede that my analysis is not globally descriptive, and this is one kind of application of the concept that it cannot capture. While I could add a second component to accommodate it and make my analysis a disjunctive one, I choose not to based on the wish to capture the direct sense in which consumption has environmental impacts. The ‘purchase’ understanding of consumption is legitimate and well-used and I do not wish to argue that my analysis shows that it is mistaken or that there are grounds for abandoning it. It has, however, been necessary to show how my analysis is related to, and distinct from, this conception.

Thirdly, I have already argued that, typically, acts of use will fall under my analysis. Fourthly, maintenance and repair do not fall under my analysis since they will (if executed well) increase the availability of the product (although they will, of course, contribute to the consumption of any tools and other objects used to effect the works). My analysis is right to exclude them; the fact that they are activities
associated with consumer products does not justify bringing them under the rubric of consumption. Fifthly, with regard to disposal, it may seem like it is the culmination of one’s consumption of a product, forever eliminating its availability as it decays in landfill or is incinerated. However, once again we have to be careful when applying my analysis not to confuse my sense of availability reduction with that of the prevention-of-use analysis of rivalness in economics. Disposal does reduce availability by making the product inaccessible. But until the product begins to degrade in landfill, or is incinerated, its availability has not been reduced in my sense of its properties being altered in such a way that either its current or future value is reduced, or the possibility of its use in the future is constrained. Typically, if one disposes of a product, say, a microwave oven, in a manner which leaves its properties intact, it will not be one’s actions but the natural process of decay as it lies buried in landfill, or is incinerated, that will reduce its availability. In this sense, then, disposal, considered as the act of depositing an object in a waste bin or at the municipal waste disposal site, is not an act of consumption under my analysis. Again, the fact that disposal is a hallmark of a consumer society does not justify labelling it as a component of what it is to consume a good.

Insofar as Campbell’s definition exemplifies the material-economic end of the spectrum of sociological understandings of consumption, it can be seen that working with a very open and loose characterisation of consumption results in classes of actions being considered which, although associated with consumer behaviour, consumer products and consumer society, are not acts of consumption as such. My analysis reveals this. Sociologists are often, it seems to me, concerned to understand our behaviour as consumers, that is, as actors in a certain social role within a market, and shopping (selection, purchase) and various kinds of interaction with the products we purchase (use, maintenance, repair, disposal) are paradigmatic consumer behaviours. However, as was observed above, just because I am engaged in consumer behaviour, this does not entail that I am consuming. Selection, purchase, maintenance, repair and disposal, while examples of consumer behaviour, are not modes of consumption, and my analysis is consistent with this plausible claim.

Those positioned further toward the psychological-cultural end of the spectrum are exemplified by Silverstone and Hirsch (1992), who consider intangible (by which I
take them to mean non-physical) goods, such as information, images and music, as well as artefacts that one does not purchase or use, such as museum artefacts, gallery exhibits and tourist ‘sights’, to be objects of consumption. The mode of consumption for such writers appears to consist in certain kinds of mental interaction – reading, listening, gazing, imaginative engagement, aesthetic attention – with both abstract objects and non-use material artefacts. Schroeder (2004: 229), for instance, employs the notion of visual consumption, which he characterises as ‘visually oriented consumer behaviour such as watching videos, tourism or window shopping.’ Each of these kinds of objects and modes of consumption requires careful consideration as to whether it falls under my analysis, and whether, if they do not, this constitutes a counterexample.

Firstly, consumption of information, according to my analysis, only occurs insofar as the media on which it is stored – hard drives, CDs, DVDs, paper – itself degrades through use. It does not allow that the information as such – considered as a body of propositions, say – rather than just what the information is stored or reproduced upon, is what is degraded. A similar point can be made with regard to reproductions of works of art, such as famous paintings or novels. I do not consume the artwork itself when I hang a reproduction of Van Gough’s *Sunflowers* (fourth version) on my wall. The original in the National Gallery will itself be being consumed, but only in the same sense in which I am consuming my reproduction by displaying it. The gallery, of course, will be much more careful and practiced at slowing, and sometimes even reversing, that consumption. What I consume when thumbing through a paperback is a token of the work, and unlike paintings, there is not obviously an original for anyone to consume. If the work is considered as a type – an abstract object, or a set of instantiation conditions – then this is not the kind of object that can be consumed. We might be tempted to say that a type is consumed insofar as its tokens are consumed; this would be tantamount to saying that a type is nothing more than the collection of its tokens. But it would still not be the case that what we are consuming is the type as such; it is the tokens that we are consuming, for it is the tokens that we interact with, primarily through use. With regard to music, it is unclear how we might be said to be consuming a musical performance, which is

---

13 See also Urry’s (1990) notion of ‘ocular consumption’.
itself a token of the musical work type. We listen to, and, if we are in the concert hall, watch a musical performance, but how we consume it is not obvious. While other senses of consumption, such as purchase, have a clearer meaning and a more widespread use beyond the discipline of economics such that my analysis is not intended to replace or undermine it, the sense of consumption of information, works of art and literature, and of musical works seems to me to be much less clear.

Each of these results of my analysis seems justified. We consume the physical substrate that artworks or information are (re)produced upon, but not the works or propositions or musical works themselves. Although there is a sense in which we ‘take in’ information, visual images, literature or musical sounds, it seems to me merely metaphorical. Perhaps what has lead sociologists to label such activities as consumption is their concern to understand consumer society or consumer culture, and of the behaviours of individuals and groups within it *qua* consumers, and since consumption is a cognate of consumer, have found a convenient term to distinguish our activities *qua* consumer, namely, consumption, from our activities *qua* citizen.\(^{14}\)

Thus, perhaps we can understand the consumption of musical works, for example, as something that we pay for. We are, after all, engaged in consumer expenditure when we attend a concert, or purchase a novel or artwork reproduction. Similarly, while we do consume tourist ‘sights’, such as a cathedral or a public square or even a natural area, in the sense of reducing the availability of the properties that make it valuable, either temporarily or permanently, we are also engaged in what is now a large sector of consumer spending. We are, in both the availability reduction sense and in the purchasing sense, engaged in consumption, but the modes of consumption that sociologists posit – gazing, exploring, interpreting – does not match these senses. These same points also apply to museum artefacts and gallery exhibits in certain circumstances. However, since our gazing at them does not alter their properties, and since in many cases museum entry is free, there is no clear sense in which we are consuming them at all.

\(^{14}\) Note that in my analysis of what it is to be a consumer, I deliberately did not try to capture the sense in which we occupy a market or social role as a consumer, but rather characterised what it is to be a consumer of something.
Finally, at the extreme psychological-cultural end of the spectrum, consumption is understood as ‘a social and cultural process involving cultural signs and symbols, [and] not simply as an economic, utilitarian process’ (Bocock 1993: 3). What, for instance, Baudrillard (1970) considers to be the objects of consumption are symbolic signs. As Bocock (1993: 67–8) explains:

Clothes, perfumes, cars, food and drinks…signify that someone is x or y to the person themselves and to others who share the same code of signifiers, the same system of signs/symbols…In his [Baudrillard’s] sense of the term ‘consumption’ involves the consumption of signs and symbols, not of…simple material objects…[C]onsumption is not to be conceptualised as a material process. It is an idealist practice. This means that it is ideas which are being consumed, not objects.

Neither symbols nor ideas can have their availability reduced by our actions; indeed, in using symbols and ideas, we serve to perpetuate them. In any case, the move from claiming that material objects serve as symbols to claiming that what is consumed is not the material object but the symbol seems to me unnecessary. As the quote from Jackson (2005: 31–2) above illustrates, sociology has rightly drawn attention to the variety of reasons beyond the strictly material, economic and utilitarian for which we consume, but it also illustrates that there is no need to make any claims about what is consumed (it remains material objects) or the mode of consumption (it remains material interaction with those objects).

In conclusion, my analysis of consumption (what makes an action a consumption action, what it is to consume, what it is to be a consumer, what it is for an object to be consumed), while it does not capture some of the objects that sociologists have claimed are consumed (information, music, museum exhibits, works of art and literature, symbols, ideas) or some of the modes of consumption that sociologists have proposed (gazing, listening, reading), I do not see this as a problem for my analysis. I am not troubled by these understandings failing to be captured because of what seems to me their metaphorical nature. Whether or not my diagnosis of how sociologists have come to call such activities consumption is correct, the fact remains that they are so far from the core sense in which consumption occurs that no non-disjunctive analysis could capture them.
What *are* objects of consumption under my analysis are books, concert venues, museums and galleries, musical instruments, tourist ‘sights’, the media on which information is stored and the material objects which comprise symbols in a consumer society. Thus we can still talk about their consumption if we wish, on the understanding that the mode of consumption is use. Of course we may wish to describe that mode in more fine grained terms for certain purposes; we read a book, but in doing so we consume it (and not the work of literature itself); we attend and enjoy a concert, but in doing so we consume the chairs we sit on and the carpet in the concert hall foyer such that one day they will need to be replaced (and we do not consume the performance or the work); we absorb, or take in, information, and in doing so we consume the computer or the encyclopaedia (but not the body of propositions it contains); we visit a tourist ‘sight’, and in doing so we wear down, and thus consume, the steps of the cathedral tower (and we do not do so by gazing at the tower); we wear the clothes and jewellery, drive the car, install a new floor in the living room and put decking in the garden, and in displaying those things to construct and confirm our identity and engage in other forms of social communication with these symbolic items, we consume them – not symbols, but material artefacts. This latter point is the central theme of this chapter; that consumption is a physical process operating on physical objects. It has been stretched to be applied to non-physical processes operating on non-physical objects, and to be conceptually tied to certain kinds of motivations and to welfare. My analysis brings it back to its core sense, but I have also shown that this analysis is surprisingly versatile in allowing us to talk of the consumption of many of the things that we currently do. I will carry this understanding forward through the rest of this thesis, and in doing so, continue to demonstrate its cogency and versatility.

8. Conclusion: Reducing Personal Consumption

To reduce one’s personal consumption is to reduce the degree to which one’s actions reduce the availability of objects and resources. With regard to objects, it is required that the degree to which you reduce their future value or constrain their future use is itself reduced. As an example, take a car. The consumption of this object consists in acts of use which reduce its future value (for example, wearing down the brakes) and constrain its possible future use (by reducing the episodes of use available in the
future. To assess whether consumption has been reduced, a typical period of time must be stipulated which reflects the current rate of use. Consumption is reduced by, over the same period, reducing the degree to which the future value of the car is reduced or the possible future use of the car is constrained. This will typically be a reduction in the frequency, duration or intensity of use. But it may also be by a change in the manner of use, for example driving more slowly, braking earlier and changing gear more carefully.

To reduce one’s personal consumption with regard to the direct use of resources requires that the degree to which you constrain the possible future use of the resource is itself reduced. As an example, take coal. The consumption of this resource consists in acts of use which constrain its possible future use by reducing the quantity available to use in the future. To assess whether consumption has been reduced, again a typical period of time must be stipulated which reflects the current rate of use. Consumption is reduced by, over the same period, reducing the degree to which the possible future use of the resource (either considered as a whole or the part which one has purchased) is constrained.

The exhortation for individuals to ‘reduce personal consumption’ is always directed, albeit often implicitly, at some particular class of classes of objects and resources and to achieving some purpose. For example, it may be recommended that we reduce our consumption of meat for health reasons or of goods manufactured by a certain company for social justice reasons. The welfare arguments for reducing personal consumption which are analysed in Chapter 3 focus on reducing consumption of material goods rather than on natural resources as such. The moral arguments for reducing personal consumption analysed in chapters 4 and 5 focus on reducing consumption of natural resources (both directly and also indirectly through the purchase of material goods). However, there is no sense in which all resource consumption can be aggregated and understood to be consumption of a ‘super-resource’; hard choices will often have to made between reducing consumption of one resource (say, coal) and replacing it by increasing consumption of another (say, wood). The welfare and moral arguments are believed by environmental campaigners to be synergistic (Wenz 2005); to the extent that an individual reduces her consumption of material goods for welfare reasons, she will also reduce her
consumption of natural resources, and to the extent that an individual reduces his consumption for moral reasons, this will typically involve a reduction in his consumption of material goods which will realise a welfare dividend.

If we include in our calculation of personal consumption those resources that are embodied in the material goods we purchase, then a distinction must be drawn between personal consumption being reduced in virtue of improvements in the resource efficiency of manufacturing and personal consumption being reduced in virtue of individual actions to reduce the frequency, intensity and duration, and change of the patterns of use, of objects and resources. Typically, if consumption reduction is mentioned at all in the public policy arena it is only the former sense in which it is discussed. That is, per capita consumption is to be reduced not by the decisions and efforts of individuals, but only by supply-side improvements such that the quantity of resource consumption attributable to each consumer can be said to have been reduced. This thesis is only concerned with the latter understanding, whereby personal consumption is reduced through the choices and actions of individuals. This is not at all to downplay the importance or efficacy of improvements in resource efficiency, but rather to explore a supplementary avenue to consumption reduction. Moreover, as already noted, the welfare arguments for reducing personal consumption are not related to resource use as such, but to reducing personal consumption of material goods.
2 A Defence of Objective Theories of Welfare

1. Introduction

This chapter has two aims: to defend an account of human welfare and to advance an account of welfare comparisons. These accounts – together with that of what it is for an individual to reduce her personal consumption – will enable Chapter 3 to carry out one of the two central tasks of this thesis: an analysis of welfare arguments for reducing personal consumption. These arguments for consumption reduction are oriented around what I will call the overconsumption claim: the claim that rising consumption in rich countries has been responsible for compromising the welfare of their inhabitants, and that reducing consumption is not only consistent with maintaining current levels of welfare but perhaps even improving them. An assessment of the cogency of the overconsumption claim is therefore not possible without an account of the nature of welfare and what it is for an individual to undergo welfare losses and gains. In particular, this assessment will consist in an evaluation of the extent to which our best theories of welfare can provide justification for this claim.

I will now explain what it would be for a theory of welfare \(^\text{15}\) to provide justification for the overconsumption claim. Firstly, a theory of welfare may advance a content thesis, consisting in an enumeration, at a very general level of description, of the states, activities and relations which are good for people. I shall call the items of content that make up this enumeration substantive goods. Enumerations of such goods typically include bodily and mental health, friendship, knowledge, autonomy and pleasure. Secondly, a theory of welfare may advance a determination thesis, \(^\text{16}\) consisting in an account of what justifies the status of any given item of content as a substantive good. A theory of welfare requires as an adjunct an account of intra- and interpersonal welfare comparisons, that is, what it is for one life to be better or worse than another, and for an individual to undergo gains and losses in welfare across time. The overconsumption claim will receive justification from a theory of

\(^{15}\) I will use the term ‘welfare’, but I may equally have used the term ‘well-being’.

\(^{16}\) The distinction between the content and determination elements of theories of welfare is to be found in O’Neill (1998: 38).
welfare if its account of the manner in which rising consumption has compromised welfare and of how reducing consumption can maintain or improve welfare is justified by the theory's account of the content of welfare together with an account of welfare comparisons. For example, if a given expression of the overconsumption claim stated that the amount of pleasure afforded by living in a consumer society has diminished as per capita consumption has risen, then it would only receive justification from a theory of welfare that specified pleasure among its items of content and accommodated an account of welfare losses which was consistent with the claim that a diminishment in the amount of pleasure constituted a welfare loss. My task in Chapter 3 is to analyse three expressions of the overconsumption claim. To do this therefore requires an account of the content of welfare, and of welfare comparisons.

However, while I will offer these accounts in this chapter, they will be preceded by a defence of a particular class of determination theses. This defence is necessary because an enumeration of the content of welfare without a determination thesis to justify it is arbitrary. In that sense, if I merely offered an account of the content of welfare and of welfare comparisons, even if it could be shown that these accounts justified the expressions of the overconsumption claim I examined, this justification would be weak, for I could have arbitrarily chosen the items of content which best served the expressions of the overconsumption claim. A defence of a determination thesis is therefore necessary not only to advance a complete theory of welfare comprised of all three elements, but also to offer a full justification of the overconsumption claim.

With regard to determination theses, one faces a choice between two classes: subjective and objective. To explain this choice requires exploring and clarifying the standard distinction between theories of welfare according to whether they are subjective or objective, since it is ambiguous between whether it is applied at the level of content or determination. The distinction between subjective and objective theories of welfare is drawn in the following way when concerned with their content thesis. A subjective theory of welfare is a theory whose enumeration of the particular states, relations and activities that are prudentially good for a person exclusively contains subjective states. An objective theory of welfare is a theory whose
enumeration of the particular states, relations and activities that are prudentially good for a person contains no subjective states. A theory may have a mixed content thesis in two senses. Firstly, it may either have both subjective and objective items amongst its enumeration of content, or the substantive goods it specifies may themselves be composites of subjective and objective elements. These distinctions between the nature of items of content will be further discussed in section 5.

The distinction between subjective and objective theories of welfare is drawn in the following way when concerned with their determination thesis. A subjective theory of welfare is a theory in which a necessary role is given to some class or classes of subjective states of the welfare subject (such as attitudes, values or beliefs) in justifying what is good for that welfare subject. For example, a desire-fulfilment thesis holds that the content of welfare is determined by what the welfare subject desires. An objective theory of welfare is a theory which denies any role to any class of subjective states in determining what is of prudential value to a welfare subject. For example, perfectionism holds that the content of welfare is determined by the nature of the welfare subject. A determination thesis may also be mixed, containing necessary roles for both subjective and objective elements. For example, a hybrid theory might hold that for any given substantive good, that good only contributes to the subject’s welfare if it is both desired for the subject and it contributes to or constitutes the realisation of her essential nature. There are no necessary restrictions on how these determination and content theses may be combined in a given theory of welfare; objective determination theses may specify exclusively subjective content (e.g. certain forms of hedonism) and subjective determination theses may specify exclusively objective content (e.g. a desire-fulfilment thesis which holds that we desire only bodily health). Both kinds of determination theses may specify a mixed content in either of the senses distinguished.

Having clarified the distinction between subjective and objective theories, it can now be stated that, in sections 3 and 4, I will be defending the class of theories that offer an objective determination thesis. Throughout the remainder of the thesis, then, ‘objective theories of welfare’ should be taken to mean ‘theories of welfare that offer an objective determination thesis’. I will be defending this class of theories from two significant criticisms advanced by L. W. Sumner in his 1996 book, Welfare, Ethics
and Happiness. I defend this class of theories rather than subjective theories in large part because of the well-rehearsed argument (e.g. O’Neill 1993: 80) that the most plausible subjective determination theses – those that claim the status of a candidate substantive good is justified by the fact that a given welfare subject would desire that good were she properly informed and properly rational – collapse into objective determination theses. This collapse occurs in virtue of the fact that reference to the welfare subject’s (informed) desires is rendered redundant by an implicit appeal to the objective properties of the candidate substantive good that make it desirable to the informed and rational agent. Plausible subjective determination theses and objective determination theses, in virtue of this implicit appeal, converge on the same enumerations of the content of welfare. Therefore, while the expressions of the overconsumption claim assessed in Chapter 3 could in principle be examined while remaining neutral between subjective and objective determination theses, I will defend objective determination theses for the reasons given above: a fully developed theory of welfare – and the strong justification that full development enables – requires the advancement and defence of a determination thesis. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to defend or develop a particular objective determination thesis. Rather, I defend objective theories as a class. I do so by canvassing a number of responses to Sumner’s objections to objective determination theses and showing how each response can defend either this class as a whole or a particular member. This is sufficient for my purpose of assessing whether the overconsumption claim receives justification from cogent theories of welfare.

This argument will proceed through the following stages. Firstly, in section 2.1, I will introduce the concept of prudential value and its relation to welfare evaluations. In section 2.2 I will outline Sumner’s criteria of descriptive adequacy for theories of welfare, two of which underlie his criticisms of objective theories. I will also establish that Sumner’s criticisms are indeed targeted at theories that are objective in determination rather than objective in content. In section 2.3 I will outline three objective theories of welfare, two of which I will defend in the arguments to follow. Next, in section 3, I will defend objective theories from Sumner’s criticism that one kind of objective theory fails to offer a determination thesis and another kind fails to be a theory of welfare at all. I will argue that the kind of objective theory which Sumner alleges fails to offer a determination thesis has the resources to offer one,
and the kind which he claims fails to be a theory of welfare may legitimately be considered to be so. In the course of advancing these arguments I will offer an original understanding of what it is for a determination thesis to be objective. I will then, in section 4, defend objective theories from Sumner’s criticism that they fail to account for the subject-relativity of welfare. I will distinguish three ways in which this challenge may be conceived, and rebut each interpretation in turn. In section 5 I will enumerate six items of content – that is, substantive goods – that any plausible objective theory of welfare would specify and which will be invoked in the arguments of Chapter 3. Finally, in section 6 I will develop an account of intra- and interpersonal welfare comparisons.

2. Objective Theories of Welfare and Sumner’s Criteria of Descriptive Adequacy

2.1 Prudential Value

Human lives can be subjected to different kinds of evaluative assessment of how well they are going. These assessments may take the form of judging how much value a particular life possesses. Sumner (1996: 20–25) distinguishes four kinds of value a life might possess: aesthetic, perfectionist, ethical and prudential. The aesthetic value a life possesses will be a function of the extent to which it exhibits valuable aesthetic properties, such as balance or unity. The perfectionist value a life possesses will be a function of the extent to which it ‘is a good instance or specimen of its kind, or that it exemplifies the excellences characteristic of its particular nature’ (Sumner 1996: 23). The ethical value a life possesses will be a function of the extent to which it meets our favoured standards of ethical conduct. The prudential value of a life will be a function of ‘how well it is going for the individual whose life it is’ (Sumner 1996: 20, emphasis in original). Sumner attributes the expression ‘prudential value’ to Griffin (1986). It has since been adopted in the philosophical literature on welfare; for example, by Arneson (1999: 113), Lebar (2004: 204) and Fletcher (2012: 78). However, as Tiberius (2008: 373) notes, the nature of prudential value and the grounds on which we justify its attribution to any given life is precisely what is at issue between subjective and objective theorists. I therefore present only a preliminary and neutral sketch of the concept here: to evaluate a person’s level of welfare – the extent to which their life is going well for
them – is to make an assessment of the prudential value of their life. Arenson (1999: 113) introduces the concept of prudential value thus:

A prudent person seeks her own good efficiently; she selects the best available means to her good. If we call the value that a person seeks when she is being prudent ‘prudential value,’ then an alternative rendering of the question to be addressed in this essay [What is the good for human persons?] is ‘What is prudential value?’ We can also say that an individual flourishes or has a life high in well-being when her life is high in prudential value.

I turn now to the standards to which Sumner holds theories of welfare.

2.2 Sumner’s Criteria of Descriptive Adequacy
A theory of welfare is descriptively adequate, according to Sumner (1996: 8), only if it ‘fit[s] with our ordinary experience of welfare and our ordinary judgements concerning it’. He distinguishes four criteria of descriptive adequacy that a theory of welfare must meet: fidelity, generality, formality and neutrality. Firstly, a theory of welfare that meets the fidelity criterion will be faithful to ‘our pretheoretical beliefs about well-being....and also the role of these beliefs in our practical deliberations and our common-sense explanations’ (ibid.: 13). Secondly, a theory of welfare that meets the generality criterion will ‘give us truth conditions for all the different sorts of welfare assessments we make’ (ibid.). This criterion pertains to both (i) assessments regarding a welfare subject’s level of welfare at a given time and the gains and losses in welfare that they undergo over time, and also (ii) assessments regarding different kinds of welfare subjects, including non-humans. While I agree with Sumner that one ‘obvious desideratum in a theory of welfare is completeness’ (ibid.), my arguments will apply only to human welfare subjects, since such is the normative role for my theory – to underpin a critique of current levels of consumption – that I wish to have the resources at hand for a richer exploration of these normative issues than a theory that fully met the generality criterion concerning the class of welfare subjects would allow. Thirdly, a theory of welfare that meets the formality criterion will provide a formal account of ‘the conditions which constitute someone’s being benefited by something....[not merely a list of] any of the particular things capable of being beneficial’ (ibid.: 16). In other words, it will offer a determination thesis as well as a content thesis. Fourthly, a theory of welfare that meets the neutrality criterion will offer an account of the nature of welfare which is unbiased toward any
particular goods or ways of life (ibid.: 17–18). This criterion is one which I must be careful not to transgress, since my normative project is to assess the prudential value of lives that involve high levels of material consumption. The neutrality criterion is founded on the recognition that because of the ‘formidable diversity of human cultures, patterns of socialization, tastes, and conditions of life, rich and rewarding human lives come in a variety of forms’, such that if high levels of material consumption compromise human welfare, this must ‘fall out as a confirming implication of a formally neutral theory; it must not be built in as one of its presuppositions’ (ibid.: 18). Sumner’s criticisms of objective theories of welfare that I will respond to in sections 3 and 4 pertain to the formality and fidelity criteria.

While Sumner does not explicitly distinguish between determination and content theses, it can be seen from his distinction between objective and subjective theories that these criteria of descriptive adequacy are intended for determination theses. I will quote in full from Sumner’s (ibid.: 38–9) account of the distinction between subjective and objective theories of welfare to demonstrate that his criticisms are indeed levelled at theories which are objective in determination:

[A] theory treats welfare as subjective if it makes it depend, at least in part, on some (actual or hypothetical) attitude on the part of the welfare subject. More precisely, a subjective theory will map the polarity of welfare onto the polarity of attitudes, so that being well off will depend (on some way or another) on having a favourable attitude towards one’s life (or some of its ingredients), while being badly off will require being unfavourably disposed toward it. Likewise, something can make me better off on this sort of account only if I have (or would have under the appropriate circumstances) a positive attitude (of the appropriate sort) toward it.....[A] theory is subjective if it treats my having a favourable attitude toward something as a necessary condition of the thing being beneficial for me....Subjective theories make our well-being logically dependent on our attitudes of favour and disfavour. Objective theories deny this dependency. On an objective theory, therefore, something can be...good for me though I do not regard it favourably, and my life can be going well despite my failing to have any positive attitude toward it....[O]bjective theories do not merely deny the sufficiency of a reference to my attitudes in an analysis of my well-being, for most subjective theories would join in this denial. The crucial differentiating question is the necessity of such a reference.

Sumner’s criteria of descriptive adequacy reveal that he possibly equivocates between two senses of descriptive adequacy. On the one hand, the fidelity and generality criteria seem to be concerned that a theory provides an account that is faithful to our commonsense understanding of welfare. On the other hand, the formality and neutrality criteria seem to hold a theory to account in such a way that
allows it to be revisionary of our commonsense understanding. I will take Sumner’s two criticisms, which are based on the fidelity and formality criteria respectively, on their own terms. His criticism based on the fidelity criterion is that objective theories do not do justice to our commonsense understanding of welfare. This is a legitimate criticism of a theory of welfare, and deserves a response. His criticism based on the formality criterion is that objective theories fail to offer a determination thesis. Again, this warrants rebuttal. Sumner’s possible equivocation concerning descriptive adequacy does not undermine his objections.

2.3 Three Objective Theories of Welfare
Below I outline three theories of welfare that are objective in determination which I will invoke in my defence of this class of theory.

2.3.1 Needs-based Theories of Welfare
An example of an objective theory of welfare is a needs-based one, since needs are a strong candidate for what objectively determines the content of welfare. Needs are states of dependency. By ‘need’ in this context I am referring to categorical (or absolute or fundamental) rather than instrumental needs. An instrumental need is one which must be satisfied in order for some non-essential goal or end to be met. A categorical need is one which must be satisfied in order for some essential goal or end to be met. The distinction, in turn, between essential and non-essential goals is grounded in the harm that results to an agent; non-essential goals are not necessary to meet to avoid harm, whereas essential goals are necessary to avoid harm (Wiggins 1998: 10).

I do not believe a theory of welfare based solely on needs can be descriptively adequate. As Sumner (1996: 54) argues, while it is true that ‘we are standardly benefited by the satisfaction of basic needs for nourishment, sanitation, security, companionship, and the like….it is equally true that we can profit by satisfying mere likes or preferences or even whims….precisely because they are basic, the needs which seem most hospitable to an objectivist treatment cannot be the whole story about well-being.’ O’Neill, Holland and Light (2008: 25, my emphasis) agree, stating that ‘[o]ne concept that forms part of a more objectivist account of well-being….is that of needs.’ This seems correct. It does not seem right to say that a life
in which all needs are satisfied is one in which the full measure of human welfare attainable is realised. This is not to say that there is some particular quantity of welfare that is possible for each agent, but rather that for any agent, if that agent has all their needs met there will typically be more welfare available. Needs are associated with the more basic conditions of life, with that which is necessary to even begin to live a good life. Once we have what we need, then we can set about building upon that. There must be room in our account of welfare beyond the satisfaction of need. A theory of welfare exclusively based on needs fails to take into account this feature of humans. That is, while we might be comfortable in saying that certain non-human animals are faring well – and as well as they can fare – when their needs are met, a theory of human welfare should leave room for welfare to increase beyond the point where needs are met. I will therefore not invoke an exclusively needs-based theory of welfare in this chapter to show how the class of objective theories of welfare can meet the criticisms advanced by Sumner.

2.3.2 Perfectionist Theories of Welfare

A perfectionist theory of welfare holds that human welfare consists in ‘the development and exercise of one’s natural or essential capacities’ (Dorsey 2010: 59). It is objective in determination since it is the nature of the welfare subject rather than its subjective states that determine the content of its welfare. This content will vary according to the account of the nature of the welfare subject provided by the theory, but in principle it may specify both objective, subjective and composite states, relations and activities. Perfectionism can also be interpreted as a theory not of welfare but of the good life in a moral sense. Hurka (1993: 17–18), for example, says that ‘[w]ell-being itself is often characterized subjectively, in terms of actual or hypothetical desires. Given this subjective characterization, perfectionism cannot concern well-being.’ But as Dorsey (2010: 60) argues, since it is a matter of dispute whether welfare is subjective or objective in nature, this rejection of perfectionism as a theory of welfare on the grounds that welfare is subjective is premature. Those who advance perfectionism are therefore at liberty to advance their theory as a theory of welfare. Perfectionism is one of the objective theories of welfare that I will invoke in this chapter to show how this class of theories can meet the criticisms advanced by Sumner.
2.3.3 Objective List Theories of Welfare

An objective list theory\(^{17}\) of welfare consists of two elements. Firstly, a specification of the content of welfare is offered – which may be either objective or subjective states, or a mixed content of both (Crisp 2008) – and frequently include such items as friendship, knowledge, beauty and autonomy. Secondly, it is often asserted or stipulated rather than argued that these items of content are objectively good for a person, that is, good for them independently of their attitudes towards or beliefs about them. This is not to say, however, that no argument can be offered to support this assertion, as I will demonstrate below.

A prominent and recent expression of objective list theory is the capabilities approach. The capabilities approach is primarily a way of assessing social arrangements, but it is founded on a theory of welfare that holds that individuals’ quality of life is a matter of their freedom to achieve valuable functionings. Functionings are ‘what people are actually able to do and be’ (Nussbaum 2000: 5), and capabilities are the freedoms or opportunities individuals have to achieve those functionings, even if they do not choose to. Nussbaum (2000: 78–80) advances a list of central capabilities – such as affiliation, play and bodily health – that political institutions should protect which can be understood as a kind of objective list theory. Perfectionism and objective list theories may or may not be related. On the one hand, while objective list theorists may offer their list as a brute fact of which things are good for us (Kitcher 1999: 59), Crisp (2008) observes that perfectionism may serve as justification for why an objective theory’s list has the constituents that it does, namely, that each of the goods on the list perfect human nature. One the other hand, perfecting one’s nature – an item of objective content – may also appear on the list. Objective list theories are the other objective theory of welfare that I will invoke in this chapter to show how this class of theories can meet the criticisms advanced by Sumner.

\(^{17}\) Objective list theories have been offered by Brink (1989: 221–36), Hooker (1998) and Scanlon (1993).
3. The Formality Criterion

The first of Sumner’s criticisms that I will respond to is that theories which purport to be objective in determination fail to meet the formality criterion of descriptive adequacy. The formality criterion states that a theory of welfare must provide a formal account of ‘the conditions which constitute someone’s being benefited by something....[not a list of] any of the particular things capable of being beneficial’ (Sumner 1996: 16). That is, a theory of welfare which meets the formality criterion of descriptive adequacy will ‘offer us, not (merely) a list of sources, but an account of what qualifies something (anything) to be on that list’ (ibid.). To meet the formality criterion, therefore, a theory which aspires to be objective in determination must offer a determination thesis; an account of what determines or justifies the theory’s account of the content of welfare. Sumner’s criticism is not that the determination theses offered by objective theories fail. It is that theorists who claim to be offering a theory of welfare that is objective in determination fail to offer a determination thesis at all:

Although it is easy to find philosophers who count themselves as objectivists about welfare, it is surprising how few of them have anything like a genuine theory to offer. Recall the distinction...between the nature of welfare and its sources. We are seeking an explication of the former, not merely a list or inventory of the latter. Yet such a list is all that most objectivists give us. (1996: 45)

Below I will advance three responses to the charge that theories which purport to be objective in determination fail to offer a determination thesis. Firstly, perfectionist theories of welfare do offer a determination thesis. Sumner, however, dismisses perfectionist theories as constituting theories of welfare at all. I will rebut his arguments to this effect. Secondly, I will argue that Sumner’s criticism is misplaced with regard to objective list theories insofar as such theories are not necessarily aspiring to offer a determination thesis. However, I will propose that determination theses may be derived from them on a certain understanding of what such a thesis requires. Thirdly, I will argue that Sumner’s understanding of the form that a determination thesis must take is excessively narrow, and that an alternative approach to the specification of the content of welfare can justify the claim that a given theory is objective in determination.
3.1 Perfectionist Theories

A perfectionist theory may be offered as a determination thesis: for any given item of content, A, A is prudentially valuable for all the welfare subjects of the theory domain in virtue of it perfecting the nature of those subjects. However, Sumner argues that perfectionist theories are not theories of welfare. Sumner contends that in locating welfare in the degree to which a living entity is ‘a paradigmatic or exemplary specimen of its kind – one which displays to a high degree the capacities characteristic of its kind’ (1996: 77) – this theory fails to be a theory of welfare at all.

A theory of welfare must be a theory about the nature of prudential value. A thing has perfectionist value if it displays the excellences appropriate to its kind…. [This theory] equates a creature’s welfare with its distinctive excellence. But…. [in doing so it] conflate[s] prudential and perfectionist value’. (p. 78)

If perfectionist theories are not theories of welfare, then they cannot provide determination theses and thus fail to meet the formality criterion of descriptive adequacy for such theories.

Sumner offers two arguments for the claim that perfectionist theories are not theories of welfare. Firstly, he argues (1996: 24) that perfectionist and prudential value are distinct by appeal to a thought experiment. Imagine having spent a lifetime devoting yourself to developing and perfecting the excellences of creatures of our kind, but at the end of your life regretting this and wishing you had led a life that had been ‘more rewarding or fulfilling’ for you. The coherence of this possibility, Sumner claims, establishes that the perfectionist value of a life may be raised without a prudential payoff, and thus that perfectionist and prudential value are distinct from one another. But as Murphy (2001: 78) argues, this argument is question begging: ‘In order to evaluate one’s life as not possessing great prudential value in spite of its perfectionist value, on the basis that it was not “rewarding” or “fulfilling,” one must presuppose the truth of some version of subjectivism about well-being.’ This is therefore not a legitimate line of argument on the grounds that it is question-begging.

Secondly, Sumner (1996: 79) offers an open question argument to the effect that perfectionist and prudential value are distinct:
It is a contingent matter whether the possession of some particular excellence makes us better off. There may, of course, be a strong empirical correlation between the excellences of mind and body and the well-being of their owners; it would be surprising if there were not. But as a conceptual matter the inference for any agent from perfectionist to prudential value is never guaranteed; there is always a logically open question. The gap between the two is opened by the agent’s own hierarchy of projects and concerns, which is but one manifestation of her subjectivity.

But again, this argument fails to tell decisively against perfectionism’s status as a theory of welfare. As Sobel (1997: 507–8) argues, Sumner’s open question argument – the argument that it is an open question that a particular excellence makes us better off – applies as much to subjectivism as it does to perfectionism, since ‘we could also sensibly wonder if our life would have gone better for us if we had spent less time pandering to our attitudes.’ As noted above, perfectionist theories may be offered as theories of welfare or of other senses of the goodness of the subjects of its domain. But Sumner offers a principled objection to such theories’ status as theories of welfare. This objection is unjustified, and therefore perfectionist theories stand as a counterexample to Sumner’s claim that theories of welfare that purport to be objective in determination fail to meet the formality criterion of descriptive adequacy.

3.2 Objective List Theories

Sumner’s criticism that most theories of welfare that purport to be objective theories fail to offer a determination thesis and thus meet the formality criterion of descriptive adequacy is most plausible when applied to so-called objective list theories. Such theories are best characterised as specifications of the content of welfare, consisting as they do in a list of such items as friendship, autonomy, knowledge and aesthetic experience. Therefore, if we want to know whether something is good for us, it is a legitimate move to consult the list the theory offers and consider whether the state or activity in question is an instance of one of the substantive goods which appear on the list. However, Sumner’s question is not how we determine whether, for any given object, that object is good for us. If it were, then answering with ‘consult the list of things which are good for us’ would be legitimate. Rather, Sumner’s question is how the contents of the list are determined in the first place. Insofar as a theory purports to be an objective theory of welfare they are committed to – even if they do not themselves offer – an objective
determination thesis which tells how any given item secures its place on the list. In virtue of failing to offer a determination thesis, Sumner dismisses their status as ‘genuine’ theories of welfare (i.e. theories which meets the formality criterion).

The distinction between a determination thesis and a content thesis is the same as a distinction that Crisp (2006: 102–3) draws between enumerative and explanatory theories of welfare. Enumerative theories answer the question ‘Which things make someone’s life go better for them?’ with an enumeration of ‘substantive goods’ such as enjoyable experiences, accomplishment or knowledge. Explanatory theories answer the question ‘But what is it about these things that make them good for people?’ with an account of a ‘good-for-making property’. For Sumner, only explanatory theories may satisfy his formality criterion of descriptive adequacy. But objective list theories, he assumes, offer no such account, and thus fail to meet the formality criterion.18

I will argue that a determination thesis may be derived from objective list theories. Arneson (1999: 118) makes such an attempt:

There is a rudimentary theory associated with the objective-list account of the good. The theory holds that what is intrinsically good for an individual, good for its own sake rather than as a means to some further good, is to get or achieve the items that are specified on a correct and complete list of such goods. The more that one gets or achieves the listed goods over the course of one’s life, the better for oneself is the life that one has lived.

I take it that Sumner would be dissatisfied with such an answer to the formality criterion, justifiably claiming that it is inadequate to answer the question ‘What determines or justifies the account of the content of welfare?’ with the answer ‘The content of welfare’. This strategy merely pushes the problem back to the question of how it is determined which alleged goods make it onto the list. The challenge for the objective list theorist that the formality criterion presents is not met by claiming that welfare consists in obtaining the substantive welfare goods, but by providing an account of what makes these goods good for people.

---

18 Brink (2008: 32) also makes this criticism.
But consider also Crisp’s (2006: 102–3) observation in illustrating his distinction between explanatory and enumerative theories that it would be perfectly legitimate for an objective list theorist who enumerated, say, accomplishment as one of the substantive goods to offer ‘being an accomplishment’ as the good-for-making property which explained the presence of this good on the list. This could be done for each of the substantive goods on the list. For example, the good-for-making property of an instance of gaining knowledge could be ‘being an instance of knowledge’, and the good-for-making property of my friendship with a work colleague could be ‘being a friendship’.

Would Sumner accept the disjunctive determination thesis that emerges from this strategy? I suspect not, but I will argue that this rejection would be unjustified. Sumner will still insist that, in order to offer a genuine theory of welfare, the items of content must be united by a non-disjunctive determination thesis; there must be a commonality to each of the substantive goods which justifies their presence on the list and explains what makes them good for people. In other words, while both subjective theories and objective list theories can be – and frequently are – pluralist regarding content, genuine theories must also be monist regarding determination. This distinction between different levels to which the pluralism/monism distinction can be applied can be seen in Sumner’s characterisation of his formality criterion and the way it presupposes that a descriptively adequate theory of welfare must be monist regarding determination. Consider the monist assumption in his presentation of a formal schema (1996: 16), where a theory of welfare should ensure that the value of $R$ (the nature of welfare) must be neither disjunctive nor conjunctive:

A theory about the nature of welfare...must tell us what it is for someone’s life to go well or badly, or for someone to be benefited or harmed [what determines its place in the list of content]. In order to do so it must provide the appropriate relation to complete such formulas as ‘$x$ benefits $y$ if and only if $x$ stands in relation $R$ to $y$’.

He is more explicit regarding his assumption of monism regarding determination in the following passage (1996: 17):

The search for a unitary theory of welfare is based on the hypothesis that, however plural welfare may be at the level of its sources [content]....it is unitary at the level of its nature [determination]. There is therefore one answer to....[questions such as ‘What does the good or well-being of all of these creatures consist in?’ ‘What is it for their
But Sumner’s demand for monism regarding determination is unjustified. It is not at all clear why there must be unification regarding what makes a given source of welfare good for us, or why there must be only one good-for-making property to be possessed by all of the substantive goods. Monist subjective determination theses such as desire-fulfilment theories, as well as the monist objective determination thesis offered by perfectionist theories are plausible, but given our complex biological, psychological and affective natures, it seems that we should not rule out pluralist determination theses as a matter of principle. To stipulate monism regarding determination as a necessary condition of a theory of welfare that meets the formality criterion begs the question against pluralism regarding determination. The strategy of deriving a determination thesis from an objective list theory results in such a pluralistic (or disjunctive) objective determination thesis.

### 3.3 Specification of the Substantive Goods

The formality criterion of descriptive adequacy is the requirement that a theory of welfare provide a determination thesis; a thesis of what determines the content of welfare. This requirement is motivated by the desire that for any given item of content, that item is not present amongst our enumeration of the sources of welfare on arbitrary, biased or parochial grounds. The formality criterion may therefore be characterised as the requirement that for any given item of content, that item’s presence amongst our enumeration can be justified. Sumner assumes that the criterion approach is the only way of engaging in and justifying an enumeration of the substantive welfare goods. For example, a subjective determination thesis such as desire-fulfilment may function as a non-disjunctive criterion that justifies any and all items of content that a theorist of this kind may wish to enumerate. But as I argued above against Sumner, it is not necessarily the case that that criterion cannot be disjunctive. I will further argue here that the criterion approach is not the only way of engaging in a specification of the sources of welfare. I will propose an alternative, suggested by Finnis’s (1980: 85) remark that the project of specifying the substantive goods is ‘an essentially critical and practical’ question, and Nussbaum’s (2011: 108) clarification that ‘the capabilities list [a version of the objective list
theory] is the outgrowth of a process of critical normative argument....Like all respectable philosophical arguments, this one is set forth to be criticized, rebutted, engaged: people can ponder it and, if they find it persuasive, accept it. The list is open-ended and subject to ongoing revision and rethinking.’ This alternative to the criterion approach I will call the *procedural approach*. I will argue that this proposed alternative may be considered objective in a sense which justifies characterising it as an objective determination thesis.

3.3.1 A Basic Procedural Approach

I propose the following procedure for specifying the substantive welfare goods. Firstly, a candidate good is added to one of two lives that are uncontroversially equal in prudential value. This need not involve beginning with assumptions about what makes two lives equal in prudential value; we could just stipulate in our thought experiment that the two individuals have similar personalities, interests, tastes, living conditions, education standards, opportunities and life histories. After the candidate substantive good is added to one of the lives – such that it now includes states or activities that realise this good and the other life carries on as before – a judgement of the relative prudential value of those lives is made. This judgement will be guided by standards I will explain below. If the life which contains the candidate good is judged to be going better for the person whose life it is than the life of the individual whose life lacks it, then the candidate good earns a place on the list of content. For example, take two lives, *A* and *B*, that are equally good for the people whose lives they are in every respect except for the following difference: life *A* is one in which there are rich friendships based on shared interests, mutual concerns and in which each is disposed to act for the sake of the good of the other, but life *B*, although it contains whatever other goods life *A* contains, is one which contains no friendships; although there are work colleagues and acquaintances, the individual has never found anyone to share in the pleasures and pains of life in the distinctive way that friends do. If we judge – after careful deliberation and reflection – life *A* to be better than life *B* in respect of its prudential value, then friendship is a substantive good and should be on our enumeration of the content of welfare as such.

Now this step in itself is only a beginning, because all we have done is add something that we take to be good to one of the lives being compared. But while we
may have taken care to ensure in our thought experiment that this good is not merely an instance of some basic good that is contained by the life to which it is being compared, we should make this further test an explicit step in our procedure. Therefore, for the next candidate good to undergo this assessment, it must be ensured – again through deliberation and judgement – that it is not merely an instance of the first good, and that the first good is not merely an instance of the new candidate. For example, if a particular kind of friendship were proposed – such as the friendship distinguished by an intense shared experience – then it is likely that we would judge that to be an instance of the good already on the list and therefore not deserving of a separate entry. If, on the other hand, lifelong relationships with a sexual dimension of the kind exemplified by marriage in most cultures were proposed, we would need to deliberate carefully over whether we would wish to allocate this good a separate place on the list, count it as an instance of friendship, or subsume both under a more general category, such as ‘human relationships’. This step is made part of the procedural approach to ensure that the enumeration of the substantive welfare goods is made at the most general level of description possible. Not only will it ensure a more manageable list, but it will also allow for a plurality of specifications of each of the goods, since each good will be realisable in many ways.

3.3.2 Intelligibility and Practical Reasoning

At least part of what will comprise the deliberation and inform the judgements involved in this approach will be the extent to which the candidate substantive goods make our actions intelligible and can plausibly serve as foundational practical principles. Finnis takes knowledge and its pursuit for its own sake as an example. Knowledge, Finnis states (1980: 62), is ‘an intrinsic good, i.e. that is considered to be desirable for its own sake’, and that ‘reference to the pursuit of knowledge makes intelligible....any particular instance of the human activity and commitment involved in such a pursuit.’ Not only do the ‘basic goods’ such as knowledge make our actions intelligible (to ourselves as well as to others), but they are also distinguished insofar as they serve as sufficient explanations for our actions:

In explaining, to oneself and others, what one is up to, one finds oneself able and ready to refer to finding out, knowledge, truth as sufficient explanations of the point of one’s activity, project, or commitment. One finds oneself reflecting that ignorance and muddle are to be avoided, simply as such and not merely in relation to a closed list of questions. One considers the well-informed and clear-headed person as, to that extent,
well-off (and not only for the profitable use he can make of his knowledge). ‘It’s good to find out…’ now seems to be applicable not merely to oneself…[but] for anyone. (1980: 61)

The basic practical principles – such that knowledge is a good to be pursued – are self-evident, for Finnis (1980: 69), in the following respects. Firstly, they are ‘not demonstrable, for they are presupposed or deployed in anything that we would count as a demonstration.’ Secondly, they are objective, in that ‘their validity is not a matter of convention, nor is relative to anybody’s individual purposes.’ Thirdly, while they ‘can be meaningfully denied’, to do so is ‘as straightforwardly unreasonable as anything can be.’ Fourthly, each practical principle is ‘an underived principle’ insofar as neither ‘its intelligibility nor its force rests on any further principle.’ This self-evidence extends to the claim that a life in which the basic goods are realised is better than one in which they are not: ‘It is obvious that a man who is well informed, etc., simply is better-off (other things being equal) than a man who is muddled, deluded, and ignorant, that the state of one is better than the state of the other, not just in this particular case or that, but in all such cases, as such’ (1980: 72). The procedure I proposed above mitigates to some extent any discomfort with the notion of self-evidence, although it still relies on intuitions we have regarding which kinds of lives are high in prudential value (and in doing so it ensures that the resultant list of objective goods meets the criterion which Sumner is clear he considers to be the most important of the criteria of descriptive adequacy, namely, the fidelity criterion (1996: 19)). Finnis holds that reflection on the basic practical principles reveals seven basic goods, of which I shall be concerned with five (leaving out practical reasonableness and ‘religion’):

1. **Life itself**, which is constituted by ‘every aspect of the vitality…which puts a human being in good shape for self-determination. Hence, life here includes bodily (including cerebral) health, and freedom from the pain that betokens organic malfunctioning or injury’ (Finnis 1980: 86).

2. **Knowledge**, which is constituted by being in a state of knowing, or understanding, and by not being ignorant, and by the engagement in inquiry ‘out of curiosity, the pure desire to know, to find out the truth about it simply out of interest in and a concern for truth and a desire to avoid ignorance or error’ (ibid.: 60).
3. *Play*, which may be constituted by engagement in any of the various forms of play humans may engage in, whether ‘solitary or social, intellectual or physical, strenuous or relaxed, highly structured or relatively informal, conventional or *ad hoc* in its pattern’ (ibid.: 87).

4. *Aesthetic experience*, which is constituted by precisely this kind of experience: ‘what is sought after and valued for its own sake may simply be the beautiful form ‘outside’ one, and the ‘inner’ experience of appreciation of its beauty.’ This good may also be constituted not only by passive appreciation of beauty, but also engagement in ‘creation and/or active appreciation’ (ibid.: 88).

5. *Sociability*, which is constituted by ‘peace and harmony amongst men,…the forms of community…[and] in the flowering of full friendship…[which] involves acting for the sake of one’s friend’s purposes, one’s friend’s well-being’ (ibid.: 88).

The second step in my proposed procedural approach to specifying the substantive goods of human welfare is implicit in Finnis’s conviction that other candidate basic goods will be found, on analysis, to be ‘ways or combinations of ways of pursuing….and realizing….one of the seven basic forms of good, or some combination of them’ (ibid.: 90). Human welfare, on this account, is pluralistic: ‘[N]one [of the proposed seven basic goods] can be analytically reduced to being merely an aspect of any of the others, or to being merely instrumental in the pursuit of any of the others’ (ibid.: 92).

Chappell (1998: 37) also proposes a practical reasoning method for specifying the basic goods: ‘The method is to examine the chains of practical reasoning that people actually engage in. Tracing such chains back to their origins always means tracing them back to the specification of some basic good(s).’ He suggests (ibid.: 43) friendship; aesthetic value; pleasure and the avoidance of pain; the contemplation of God (if God exists); life; physical and mental health and harmony; reason, rationality, and reasonableness; truth and the knowledge of the truth; the natural world; people; fairness; and achievements.\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{19}\) While Finnis offers his list as complete and closed, Chappell (1995: 44) believes that his list, and indeed any list of objective goods, could not be completed because ‘of a remarkable fact about...
The procedural approach to the specification of the content of welfare is objective insofar as the norms of practical reasoning are objective. An implausible substantive good cannot make an action intelligible unless it adheres to these norms and a chain of practical reasoning which adheres to these norms will terminate in a plausible substantive good. This objectivity satisfies my formal presentation of objectivity in determination (for any given item of content, A, A’s status as a substantive good is justified by a fact that makes no reference to actual or hypothetical subjective states), but its objectivity also resides in the norms which govern the deliberation which justifies the presence of each item of content amongst the enumeration of substantive goods.

3.4 Summary
I have provided three arguments as responses to Sumner’s challenge to theories which purport to be objective in determination that they fail to meet the formality criterion of descriptive adequacy. Firstly, I rebutted Sumner’s arguments that perfectionist theories do not constitute theories of welfare and may therefore be advanced as theories of welfare that provide an objective determination thesis. Secondly, I argued that objective list theories, although ostensibly content theses rather than determination theses, provide the resources to construct a pluralist explanatory theory that may serve as a disjunctive objective determination thesis. Thirdly, I argued for an alternative critical procedural approach to Sumner’s criterion approach to specifying the substantive goods which may serve as an objective determination thesis. Sumner is justified in claiming that fully developed objective determination theses rarely accompany assertions of the content of welfare, but is unjustified in inferring that such theses are not available.

4. The Fidelity Criterion and the Challenge of Subject-relativity

The second of Sumner’s criticisms of theories of welfare that are objective in determination that I will consider is that they cannot account for the subject-relativity of prudential value. If this is indeed the case then objective theories cannot meet the

humans. This is the horizons of what they are and what they do are open in a radical way....They can....discover new types of basic goods. Art is an example. There was, presumably, a time when there were humans but no art....The list of basic goods is in fact impossible to close while humans are still developing as a species’.
fidelity criterion of descriptive adequacy. Unlike the aesthetic and ethical value of a life, a life is prudentially valuable only if it is going well for the person whose life it is. Sumner argues that while, say, the aesthetic value of a life can be raised or lowered regardless of the perspective of the person whose life it is, the prudential value of a life can only be raised (or lowered) from the perspective of the person whose life it is. Prudential value is relativized to ‘the proprietor of the life in question’ since ‘however valuable something may be in itself, it can promote my well-being only if it is also good or beneficial for me’ (Sumner 1996: 20). Subjective theories can, he argues (ibid.: 42–3), account for the subject-relative nature of prudential value:

[T]he defining feature of all subjective theories is that they make your well-being depend on your concerns: the things you care about, attach importance to, regard as mattering, and so on. What is crucial on such an account is that you are the proprietor or manager of a set of attitudes, both positive and negative, toward the conditions of your life. It is these attitudes which constitute the standpoint from which these conditions can be assessed as a good or bad for you….Prudential value is therefore perspectival because it literally takes the point of view of the subject. Welfare is subject-relative because it is subjective.

Objective theories, Sumner (ibid.: 45) claims, face the formidable challenge that ‘without recourse to the subjective point of view they must somehow account for the perspectival character of prudential value’. I will argue that there are three strategies open to objectivists, each strategy corresponding to an interpretation of the nature of subject-relativity and the challenge it presents. Each strategy and the response they embody are successful – contra Sumner’s (ibid.: 80) claim that there is no ‘prospect of constructing a descriptively adequate [objective] theory of welfare’ – in rebutting this challenge to their descriptive adequacy.

4.1 The Hybrid Theory Strategy

Firstly, it might be accepted that the subject-relativity of prudential value can only be accounted for by subjectivity and that the project of advancing a purely objective theory must be abandoned. However, a degree of objectivity may be preserved in a theory which hybridizes objective and subjective elements. Theories of welfare may be hybrids between subjective and objective elements either with regard to their content or their determination. A theory which is a hybrid with regard to its content has both objective (e.g. bodily health) and subjective (e.g. pleasure) entries among its
enumeration of the substantive goods, as well as composites of subjective and objective elements (e.g. friendship). It might be argued that the challenge of subject-relativity can be met by incorporating a subjective item of content such as Arneson’s (1999: 135) ‘being psychologically related in the right way to one’s achievements of other goods on this list’. This item would have to be necessary, otherwise, as Arneson (ibid.) observes, ‘[t]he possibility is still open that one could score sufficiently high on the other dimensions of the good that register on the list that one could qualify as living a fine life even though one lacks any positive attitude toward any of the items that constitute one’s well-being.’

However, Sumner’s demand for an account of the perspectival nature of prudential value is best understood as requiring the account of subject-relativity to be at the level of determination rather than content. Sumner’s concern is not that items of content must be subjective, but that for any given item of content, its status as a substantive good is justified in virtue of a criterion which incorporates some necessary role for some class or classes of subjective states of the welfare subject (such as attitudes, values or beliefs). A theory that is a hybrid with regard to determination is one which combines objective and subjective elements in its account of what determines and justifies the content of welfare. Parfit (1984: 501–2) proposed such a theory which makes both objective goods and pro-attitudes individually necessary and jointly sufficient for something being good for a person:

[What is best for people....is not just their being in the conscious states that they want to be in. Nor is it just their having knowledge, engaging in rational activity, being aware of true beauty, and the like....[I]f we had either of these without the other, what we had would be of little or no value...[W]hat is good or bad for someone is to have knowledge, to be engaged in rational activity, to experience mutual love, and to be aware of true beauty, while strongly wanting just these things. On this view, each side in this disagreement saw only half the truth. Each put forward as sufficient something that was only necessary.

Kagan also proposes a hybrid theory of this type: well-being as ‘enjoying the good’, where well-being ‘involves various objective goods – things like accomplishment, or knowledge, or love – but....one is well off only if one also takes pleasure in having these things’ (2009: 255). This view, Kagan argues, recognises the truth in hedonism of ‘the importance of pleasure in being truly well-off’, but also the truth in objective
theories that ‘my enjoyment is hollow or empty – of little or no value – if it is not properly “connected” to objective value’ (ibid.).

Subject-relativity is accounted for by whichever subjective element the theory incorporates – pleasure, desire-fulfilment, or whatever – while the theory retains essential reference to certain things being objectively good for a person. Sumner (1996: 54) asserts that theories which are hybrids of subjective and objective elements are in truth subjective theories, since ‘a theory can succeed in being objective only by assigning no essential role to subjectivity. It follows that a hybrid theory counts, overall, as subjective. In this sense subjectivity is dominant, objectivity recessive.’ But it is not clear why subjectivity is given this dominant position within hybrid theories. We might equally say that a theory can only count as subjective if it assigns no essential role to objectivity. If a hybrid theory assigns a necessary role to each element, then it is genuinely a hybrid, rather than subjective.

4.2 The Locative Analysis of Good-for

In this section I will advance a second strategy which enables objective theories of welfare to meet the challenge of the subject-relativity of prudential value. This strategy is in response to a particular interpretation of the nature of the challenge. I will outline this interpretation before invoking Fletcher’s (2012) locative analysis of good-for as a way of meeting the challenge this interpretation amounts to. I will then consider Sumner’s likely objection to this analysis and argue that this objection begs the question against theories that are objective in determination and reveals that Sumner’s own account of subject-relativity is vacuous.

This interpretation of the challenge of subject relativity may be introduced with the following example (from Portmore 2007: 28) of what Arneson (1999: 125) calls ‘the problem of nonprudential desire’:

Imagine, for instance, that Abe is a fan of large prime numbers and so wants the total number of atoms in the universe to be a prime. On the unrestricted desire theory, then, we would have to say that he is worse off if, in fact, the total number of atoms in the universe is not a prime. But this is absurd. How could something so remote from him

---

20 Pleasure is more typically understood as an item of content in theories of welfare. However, since Kagan invokes it as part of what justifies a given state or activity as making a contribution to an individual’s welfare, it is properly understood here as comprising an element of a determination thesis. See also Heathwood (2010: 652–3) on hybrid theories.
possibly affect his welfare? It would seem that a theory of welfare must explain which facts constitute his being harmed or benefited.

This problem, here expressed with regard to desire-fulfilment theories, requires some restriction to be placed on which states of affairs, and which instances of non-instrumental goods, can count towards a person’s welfare. Another way of expressing this demand comes from Sobel (1997: 501), who interprets Sumner’s demand for an account of the perspectival nature of prudential value thus: ‘Objective accounts of well-being, according to Sumner, are embarrassed by their inability to explain adequately what makes an agent’s well-being especially hers. Thus he hopes to show that all objective theories of well-being are inadequate.’ As Sobel points out, what Sumner requires for subject-relativity is a ‘connection’ between the alleged good and the welfare subject. Again, ‘[a]n explanation of what makes my good especially mine is needed’ (Sobel 1997: 507). The challenge of subject-relativity, on this understanding, is the challenge of showing how the alleged instance of welfare-enhancement is related to the individual whose welfare has allegedly been enhanced.

Objective theories may employ the locative analysis of good-for as developed by Fletcher (2012: 3) to provide the account of this relation.

Locative Analysis of good-for. G is non-instrumentally good for X if and only if (i) G is non-instrumentally good, (ii) G has properties that generate, or would generate, agent-relative reasons for X to hold pro-attitudes towards G for its own sake, (iii) G is essentially related to X.

‘The relation of being essentially related to X holds between something (G) and a subject (X) if and only if the following conditions hold’ (p. 5):

- G requires the existence of X in order to be the case.
- G cannot persist in the absence of X.
- G could not be the case without being X’s.

Fletcher (2012: 5–6) contends that three plausible substantive goods – pleasure, knowledge and friendship – meet these conditions. Firstly, pleasures ‘require particular agents to experience them and can neither predate not outlast them’. Moreover, the pleasure that I experience from eating this apple is not the same pleasure that you would have if you had eaten it. Secondly, if certain kinds of knowledge are good for X, and X has that knowledge, then the token of knowledge
that X has ‘requires the existence of X in order to be the case and cannot persist in
the absence of X’. Moreover, the token of knowledge that I acquire from reading a
book is not the same as the token that you acquire from reading the same book.
Pleasure and knowledge are what Fletcher calls single-subject goods. Friendship is a
multiple-subject good, since it is essentially related to more than one subject. The
requirements for such goods are therefore slightly different (p. 6):

F requires the existence of X and Y in order to be the case.
F cannot persist in the absence of X and Y.
F could not have been the case without being X and Y’s.

‘My friendship with Y could not have arisen in our absence and cannot outlast us....
No one else could have, or could have had, our friendship’ (p. 6). Fletcher claims
(ibid.: 6–7) that ‘every plausible candidate for being part of well-being – pleasure,
friendship, knowledge, happiness, virtue, health, achievement, self-respect, aesthetic
appreciation – meets this condition.’ He argues (ibid.: 7) that two features of the
locative analysis ‘can plausibly explain intuitions about the subject-relativity of
prudential value’. Firstly, something is only good for someone if it ‘has properties
that generate, or would generate, agent-relative reasons to desire the thing can be
good for them.’ Secondly, something is only good for someone if it ‘has the feature
of being essentially related to the agent’.

The challenge of subject-relativity is therefore the challenge for a theory of welfare
to ensure that what it is claiming is non-instrumentally good for a person is
genuinely and plausibly related to that individual in such a way that the alleged good
contributes to their welfare, i.e. is good for the individual. Sumner believes that
subjectivity in determination provides an account of this relation, but that theories
which are objective in determination fail to provide an account of the relation. But
would Sumner accept Fletcher’s account of the relation which comprises a
constituent of his locative analysis account of good-for? It seems to me that he may
agree that it rules out states of affairs and instances of goods that are radically
unconnected to a welfare subject’s life – such as the number of atoms in the universe
– but object that it does not deal with instances of goods that the welfare subject does
not have pro-attitudes towards. That is, a non-instrumental good such as knowledge
may be realised in the life of a welfare subject, but if they do not have pro-attitudes
towards this knowledge then it is still in some sense unrelated to the agent’s own good in such a way that it does not contribute to their welfare. If this is the stance that Sumner would adopt with regard to Fletcher’s account of ‘being essentially related to’, then it would reveal that he is begging the question against objective theories. Sumner claims (1996: 43) that subjectivity is a substantive account of subject-relativity:

All we are given by the concept of prudential value is its characteristically positional or perspectival character; the claim that it is rooted in its subjectivity is a substantive thesis....[P]erspective need not be ultimately subjective...The thesis that welfare is subjective is therefore not merely a reaffirmation of the fact that it is subject-relative; instead, it is a putative interpretation or explanation of this fact.

However, either he must accept that Fletcher’s locative analysis and its related analysis of what it is for a good to be essentially related to a welfare subject is, like subjectivity, a ‘putative interpretation or explanation’ of subject-relativity, or he must reject it as such. The only plausible principled grounds to reject it as an account of subject-relativity is that it does not relate alleged goods to welfare subjects in the correct way, namely, by way of their attitudes. But this is to beg the question, and reveals that the way he understands subject-relativity entails that the claim that welfare is subjective is merely a ‘reaffirmation’ of the fact that it is subject-relative. But on a plausible understanding of what subject-relativity requires, objective theories that incorporate the locative analysis of good-for can meet the requirement.

4.3 Perfectionism and the Evaluative Perspective
The third strategy that enables theories of welfare that are objective in determination to meet the challenge of the subject-relativity of prudential value is one that Sumner himself concedes is available but rejects on independent grounds. This strategy is a response to different interpretation of the nature of the challenge. The previous interpretation had it that a theory was required to provide an account of the nature of the relation between alleged goods and the welfare subject such that alleged goods which did not plausibly contribute to an individual’s welfare were ruled out. A different interpretation has it that a theory must refer to some evaluative perspective – in the sense of a norm or standard – according to which a subject’s welfare gains and losses can be measured. I will firstly outline Sumner’s distinction between subjective and objective perspectives, before further explicating the nature of the
challenge presented by Sumner’s claim that the evaluative perspective embodied in the 
determination thesis of a theory of welfare must be subjective. I will then 
explain, using Sumner’s own examples, how perfectionist theories can supply an 
objective perspective, before rebutting once again Sumner’s argument that 
perfectionist theories – although in principle able to supply an objective evaluative 
perspective – are not theories of welfare.

Sumner (1996: 43) provides one example each of ‘perspective’ being subjective and 
objective:

When one thing is described as being to the left of another, the reference is to their 
relative positions within the perceptual field of an (imagined) observer; the one thing 
is further to that subject’s left than the other. The perspective underlying our left/right 
ordering is therefore subjective. Contrast this with the perspective underlying our use 
of compass directions. When one thing is described as being to the north of another, 
the reference is to their positions relative to the earth’s poles. Our north/south spatial 
ordering is perspectival (it makes no sense in spatial regions where the polar reference 
cannot be supplied), but it is not subjective.

The challenge presented by the subject-relativity of prudential value on this 
interpretation is to supply a perspective which underlies evaluations such as ‘S’s life 
is going better for her this year than it did last year’ or ‘S’s life is going better for her 
than T’s is for him’. Subjective theories supply this perspective with reference to 
various subjective states. For example, S’s life is going better for her this year than 
last year only if more of S’s desires are fulfilled this year than they were last year. 
The challenge for objective theories is to specify ‘some aspect of the nature of 
welfare subjects, other than their subjectivity, which can supply the standpoint or 
perspective characteristic of prudential value’ (ibid.: 69).

Sumner concedes that perfectionist theories can supply this perspective and therefore 
also meet the requirement of providing an account of subject-relativity. He examines 
Aristotle’s account of the nature of welfare, which he characterises in the following 
way (ibid.: 71): ‘(1) something promotes my well-being just in case it enhances my 
distinctive function, (2) something enhances my distinctive function just in case it 
expresses my distinctive excellence, therefore (3) something promotes my well-
being just in case it expresses my distinctive excellence.’ This account is objective in 
determination since ‘identifying a thing’s function seems to require no reference to
its purposes or concerns’ (ibid.). More recent accounts that follow Aristotle’s broad line eschew reference to an organism’s function, and instead hold that flourishing is a matter of whether an organism is ‘functioning well (or badly) by the standards appropriate to its kind’ (ibid.: 72). For example, Attfield (1981: 42) holds that ‘the flourishing of an x entails the development in it of the essential capacities of x’s.’ Taylor, another teleological theorist, states (1986: 61) that if it ‘makes sense to speak of what is good or bad for the thing in question….without reference to any other entity, then the entity has a good of its own’, but the evaluative standpoint of the entity does not require subjectivity since there are non-sentient and non-conscious living entities of which it ‘makes sense to speak of their being benefited or harmed…. [but which] can experience neither satisfaction nor dissatisfaction, neither fulfilment nor frustration’ (p. 63). Sumner (1996: 77) grants that this objectivist theory has risen to the challenge – with the notion of functioning – of providing an ‘alternative account of the evaluative standpoint of the welfare subject, so as to explain the perspectival nature of prudential value.’

[T]he proper functioning of a thing seems a promising candidate for the standpoint which underlies the peculiarly perspectival character of prudential value. After all, if I can function either well or badly, then the impact on my functioning of states of the world seems able to explain how these states can be either good or bad for me. (Sumner 1996: 71).

Or, as Sobel (1997: 507) puts it, ‘[t]he well-being is mine, on this view, because the perfection is mine.’

But, having conceded that perfectionist theories provide an account of subject-relativity, he rejects this class of theories as theories of welfare with the same argument as that which was rebutted above in section 3.1. I will not rehearse Sumner’s arguments for this claim or the rebuttals of his arguments outlined above. But it is clear that if perfectionist theories cannot be decisively rejected as theories of welfare then a third strategy to meet the challenge of the subject-relativity of prudential value is open to those who wish to advance theories of welfare that are objective in determination.
4.4 Summary

This section has defended theories that are objective in determination as a class – invoking both objective list and perfectionist theories – from the charge that they cannot account for the subject-relativity of prudential value and thus fail to meet the fidelity criterion of descriptive adequacy. It offered three strategies – each amenable to different kinds of objective theory – to meet this challenge. Firstly, pure objectivity in determination could be abandoned in favour of a hybrid theory which nonetheless preserved essential reference to certain goods being good for us without recourse to our attitudes or beliefs about those goods to justify this claim. Secondly, Fletcher’s locative analysis of good-for and its notion of ‘being essentially related’ to the welfare subject was used to rebut the interpretation of subject-relativity which demanded an account which ruled out states of affairs and instances of goods which were not connected to the welfare subject in a way which plausibly contributed to his welfare. Thirdly, the interpretation of the challenge which required an objective evaluative perspective to assess welfare gains and losses was shown to be adequately met by perfectionist theories. Since Sumner’s arguments to the effect that such theories are not theories of welfare have already been rebutted, this constitutes a further strategy to account for the perspectival nature of prudential value within theories that are objective in determination. Objective theories as a class are thus preserved from what Sumner took to be a decisive objection in favour of subjective theories.

5. The Content of Welfare

I have argued that theories of welfare which are objective in determination may be defended from two formidable criticisms which seek to undermine their claim to descriptive adequacy. To defend objective determination theses, however, does not commit one to any claims regarding which states, activities and relations constitute human welfare. That is, it does not commit one to any claims regarding the content of welfare. In principle, the content of welfare is determined, of course, by the determination thesis. But this is not to say that the undertaking of specifying the content of welfare will be a straightforward matter of ‘reading off’ from this thesis what the substantive welfare goods are. While, for example, different perfectionist theories incorporating different accounts of human nature will constrain which
welfare goods may plausibly be enumerated, the task of enumerating them will still require substantial and careful deliberation, reflection and practical judgement. It is for this reason that, as I demonstrated above, specifying the substantive welfare goods and formulating a determination thesis need not, and perhaps cannot, be independent endeavours. The suggestion that determination theses are not necessarily unitary (i.e. non-disjunctive and non-conjunctive) emerged from reflection on objective list theories. These theories are essentially an enumeration of the content of welfare. Similarly, the argument that determination theses may be objective in the sense that the specification of the substantive welfare goods is a task governed by objective norms of practical reasoning also emerges from pursuing the critical undertaking of enumerating the content of welfare.

Two fundamental issues may divide different attempts to specify the substantive welfare goods. Firstly, there is the matter of whether one or more welfare goods are enumerated. A theory which enumerates only one substantive good is *monist regarding content*. A theory which enumerates more than one substantive good is *pluralist regarding content*. Pluralism is more plausible than monism; for example, on one account I provided of the procedure for content specification, it is improbable that all chains of practical reasoning terminate in the same practical principle. I will indirectly defend pluralism regarding content by demonstrating throughout Chapter 3 that it enables many rich and illuminating explanations of normative positions regarding welfare and its relation to consumption. Secondly, there is the matter of whether the good or goods specified are subjective or objective goods, or goods which are composites or subjective and objective elements; that is, whether we are subjectivists or objectivists regarding content, or advance a mixed account. Again, in principle it seems likely that a mixed account is the most plausible, whereby some items of content are wholly objective, some wholly subjective and others composites of subjective and objective elements.

I do not propose to demonstrate my procedural approach to arrive at an enumeration of the substantive goods, since it is not my purpose here to propose and defend a complete content thesis, just as it was not my purpose above to defend a particular determination thesis. Rather, I will employ a number of substantive goods that have been proposed by many welfare theorists (of both determination persuasions) who
have engaged in enumerating them which would plausibly survive my procedural test. These goods will suffice – along with the account of welfare comparisons I will develop below – for assessing the overconsumption claim in Chapter 3. I propose to employ the five substantive goods enumerated by Finnis: life itself, sociability, play, aesthetic experience and knowledge. These goods appear on the lists of goods of many objective list or perfectionist theories, e.g. Chappell’s (1998) and Nussbaum’s (2011). They are both sufficiently general to allow a plurality of realisations, and cannot plausibly be reduced to one another. As I stated, I do not take this list to be complete or exhaustive. Two popular candidates for further substantive goods – pleasure and autonomy – also seem to me compelling. But I will restrict my list to those which will best serve my assessment of the overconsumption claim in Chapter 3.

With regard to their nature, life itself seems to me the most strongly objective, in the sense that it consists in being in a state that does not require particular subjective or experiential states. The others are best conceived of as composite goods, with both objective and subjective elements. Take sociability; one does not have a friend unless one engages in some activities with them, no matter how much one feels such things as affection, empathy and concern for them which comprise the subjective element of friendship. For example, Joe believes he is friends with a Hollywood movie star; he takes a keen interest in their welfare, keeps up to date with their plans and achievements, is dismayed for them when their relationship falters and elated for them when they win an Academy Award. But Joe has never met the star; he does not have them round to his house for dinner, exchange birthday gifts or phone them up to see how their latest audition went. In other words, he satisfies the necessary condition of realising this composite good that consists in its subjective elements, but he does not satisfy its other necessary condition which concerns objective elements. Conversely, Kaye spends a lot of time with this movie star; she attends parties with them, they always go to their stylist together and she is there to console them when some sensitive detail concerning their private life has been splashed over the newspapers. To outward appearances, Kaye and the movie star are firm friends. But Kaye detests the star. She believes them to be shallow, vain and a terrible actor. However, Kaye believes that the star may open doors for her fledgling career as a screenwriter, so she acts as if she is the star’s friend. While Kaye satisfies the
necessary condition concerning the objective elements of friendship, she fails to satisfy the necessary subjective condition concerning the affective dimension of friendships. Similar cases could be made with regard to knowledge, aesthetic experience and play; all such goods, realised in specific forms such as reading, debating, listening to music and engaging in a competitive sport, are only realised if an appropriate mode of engagement is also present. These modes may be, for example, intellectual, aesthetic or affective.

That some form of engagement is a necessary condition of realising these goods possibly goes some way to addressing what is at the heart of subjectivist concerns regarding welfare; that something cannot be good for you unless you have an appropriate attitude, desire or other psychological state towards it. If appropriate forms of engagement are necessary to realise these central welfare goods, and if it could be argued that engagement of the appropriate form could not be achieved without some level of endorsement, then this could go some way to accounting for the subjectivist’s concern. But this need not be built into the determination thesis, which can remain objective. Rather, it is accounted for in the nature of many welfare goods; one just fails to realise these goods without the appropriate attitude of approval or endorsement. Chapter 3, in employing the six welfare goods that I enumerated in the service of assessing the overconsumption claim, will develop substantive accounts of them, as well as the further explain and defend their composite nature.

There are two final issues regarding the content of welfare. Firstly, there is the question of whether each of the substantive goods contributes equally to welfare. This question is, I believe, a misnomer, because each good can be realised in a plurality of ways. There is therefore no way of formulating the extent of the contribution of a substantive good to welfare independently of considering the particular instances which realise it. In the account of welfare comparisons to follow, I will assume that each good is capable of contributing equally to welfare, but this is to say nothing other than there is no determinate extent to which a good may contribute and that therefore we should treat each as having equal potential to. This claim will be further explained below in section 6.5. Secondly, there is the question of whether realising at least some of all of these goods is necessary to live a good
life, or whether any or all of them are optional. A supplementary step in the proposed procedural approach may be used to reflect on this issue. Instead of reflecting on whether a given substantive good’s presence in a life makes a life better, we should deliberate on whether its absence blights a life. A blighted life is one which lacks a substantive good for which no amount of other substantive goods can compensate. For example, it is arguable that a person who lacks any access to, or appreciation of, beauty, lives a blighted life, no matter how well their life is going according to the other dimensions of value. This is not necessarily to say that a good life cannot be lived if one lacks one or even several of the substantive goods, but that this lack is a cause for regret. In the account of welfare comparisons to follow, I will assume that realising at least some of each good is necessary to avoid having one’s life blighted by its lack. The issue of lower thresholds to the substantive goods will be explored in Chapter 3 in section 5.2.

6. Welfare Comparisons Across and Within Lives

In Chapter 3 I will argue that objective theories of welfare provide theoretical justification to a welfare-based critique of current levels of consumption. Environmental and social campaigners advance the overconsumption claim: that rich consumers are compromising their welfare with excessive consumption of material goods and resources. This claim is supported by appealing to empirical data on reported happiness and life satisfaction which appears to show that while per capita consumption has risen in the past 60 years within rich countries, aggregate welfare has plateaued over this period. The overconsumption claim is thus committed to two kinds of welfare comparisons. Firstly, since some individuals will have lived throughout the period in question, it is committed to their welfare at the beginning of the period in question (the 1950s) being roughly equal to their welfare now. This is an intrapersonal welfare comparison, that is, a comparison of welfare over different periods within a single life. Secondly, for those individuals who were born within the period in question, it is committed to their current welfare being roughly equal to those who lived at the beginning of the period. This is an interpersonal welfare comparison, that is, a comparison of welfare levels between two different lives. In this section I will explore whether such welfare comparisons are possible by the lights of the class of theories of welfare I have defended. I will firstly explain how
accounts of welfare comparisons – and indeed of welfare evaluations of any kind – are shied away from in the literature on objective theories. In sections 6.2–6.4 I will distinguish different sources of scepticism regarding the possibility and meaningfulness of welfare comparisons. I will rebut each in turn, and in section 6.5 I will provide a practical judgement-based account of how welfare comparisons can be justifiably engaged in.

6.1 Welfare Status According to Objective Theories
A theory which accommodates an account of welfare evaluations and comparisons will meet Sumner’s generality criterion of descriptive adequacy, according to which a theory must ‘give us truth conditions for all the different sorts of welfare assessments we make’ (1996: 13), including assessments of the gains and losses in welfare that they undergo over time. As was seen above, Sumner intended his criteria to apply to a theory’s determination thesis. But it seems to me that an account of intra- and interpersonal welfare comparisons is more straightforwardly and intuitively explicated by invoking the content of welfare. After all, it is much more satisfactory to say that our lives are going well if we have the things that are good for us, not if we have that which makes the things that are good for us good for us.

Explicit accounts of what constitutes welfare gains, losses and maintenance within a life and welfare differences across lives are either omitted altogether from accounts of objectivist theories, or are severely lacking in detail. Arneson (1999: 118), for example, merely offers, ‘[t]he more that one gets or achieves the listed goods over the course of one’s life, the better for oneself is the life that one has lived.’ This quantitative understanding of welfare evaluation is the most intuitive account; the greater quantity of prudential value a life bears (which, at first pass, would appear to be the aggregate of the quantity of each individual substantive good it realises), the better that life is for the person whose life it is.

We first require a locution with which to express the welfare status of lives according to an objective theory of welfare. Heathwood (2010: 646), for example, uses the notion of ‘presence’ when he explains that objective list theories are those which hold that there is a list of objective goods ‘the presence of which seems to make a life more....desirable to live.’ Arnseon (1999: 118) favours the notion of
‘achievement’ in his explication of objective list theories, stating that they hold that ‘what is intrinsically good for an individual, good for its own sake rather than as a means to some further good, is to get or achieve the items that are specified on a correct and complete list of such goods.’ Griffin (1986: 54) opts for the more neutral notion of ‘appearance’: ‘[W]hen they [the substantive goods] appear in a person’s life, then whatever his tastes, attitudes, or interests, his life is better.’ Kagan (2009) variously characterises the relevant relation as a life ‘containing’ objective goods (p. 254), or as a life or the owner of a life ‘having’ or ‘possessing’ such goods: ‘[T]here are certain goods – things that are objectively valuable – and well-being consists in the possession of those objective goods....[O]ne is better off to the extent that one has these things’ (p. 254). On the one hand Heathwood’s ‘presence’, Griffin’s ‘appearance’ and Kagan’s ‘containing’ are too passive to accommodate instances where an agent has striven to gain some good, such as studying hard to gain knowledge. On the other hand, Arneson’s ‘achievement’ is too active, since at least some goods will be the result of luck or natural predisposition, such as with aspects of bodily health. An alternative notion would be that of ‘instantiation’, but again I consider this to be too passive. I favour the notion of ‘realisation’ insofar as it is intermediate between these defects and accommodates both passive and active modes: a life is better to the extent that it realises the substantive goods.

6.2 Scepticism of the Possibility of Welfare Comparisons

The literature on welfare comparisons – particularly interpersonal comparisons – is most developed within economics and the philosophy of economics, and here the possibility of such comparisons finds few supporters. While the ethical theory with which the modern discipline of economics is most closely associated with – utilitarianism – incorporated the possibility of interpersonal welfare comparisons as foundational, economists themselves have long been wary of making them. There is nonetheless debate amongst economists and philosophers of economics over the possibility of interpersonal welfare comparisons. For example, there have been proposals such as Harsanyi’s (1977: 50), whereby ‘if we have enough information about a given person, and make a real effort to attain an imaginative empathy with him, we can probably make reasonably good estimates of the utilities and disutilities he would obtain from various alternatives’, thus allowing at least a partial set of welfare comparisons. However, among others, MacKay (1986) and Barrett and
Hausman (1990: 294) argue that our sympathetic and imaginative capacities are not such that we are capable of making ‘coherent and nonarbitrary interpersonal comparisons of utility.’ The orthodox position within economics is that there are such theoretical and practical difficulties with making interpersonal welfare comparisons that they ought – for the purposes of social choice – to be avoided, and instead the criterion of Pareto optimality is used, whereby ‘social welfare is maximised when it is no longer possible to find a change in which the money value of the gains to the gainers exceeds the money value of losses to the losers’ (Williams 1996: 14).\(^\text{21}\)

The first source of scepticism of the possibility of welfare comparisons that I will examine finds a classic statement in Jevons (1957 [1871]: 14):

> The reader will find, again, that there is never, in any single instance, an attempt made to compare the amount of feeling in one mind with that in another. I see no means by which such comparisons can be accomplished. The susceptibility of one mind may, for what we know, be a thousand times greater than that of another. But, provided that the susceptibility was different in a like ratio in all directions, we should never be able to discover the difference. Every mind is thus inscrutable to every other mind, and no common denominator of feeling seems to be possible.

Robbins (1935: 139–40), in another classic statement, agrees:

> There is no means of comparing the magnitude of A’s satisfaction as compared with B’s. If we tested the state of their blood streams, that would be a test of blood, not satisfaction. Introspection does not enable A to measure what is going on in B’s mind, nor B to measure what is going on in A’s. There is no way of comparing the satisfaction of different people.

Firstly, this epistemological scepticism concerning our access to others’ mental states is arguably unjustifiably strong in relation to this context. Epistemic contextualists distinguish between high-demand epistemic contexts – which are constituted by the requirement to exclude potential sources of error or alternative explanations such that ‘ordinary judgments based on perception, memory and testimony’ turn out false and sceptical hypotheses turn out true (Connee 2005: 51) – and low-demand epistemic contexts. There is a case to be made that our ordinary judgements concerning the intensity of others’ preferences and the degree to which

\(^{21}\) This is known as the Kaldor-Hicks compensation test. It is open to the criticism that it is morally objectionable on the grounds that the compensation invoked is only hypothetical for the purposes of the test (see O’Neill, Holland and Light 2008: 56).

101
they are satisfied is a low-demand epistemic context and that the level of scepticism apparent in Jevons’s and Robbins’s concerns is unjustified. This level of scepticism would, as Brink (1989: 253–4) notes, infect not only theories of welfare, but all our most plausible moral theories and theories of rationality. But as Little (1957: 54–55) effectively argues, if welfare comparisons are treated appropriately as a low-demand epistemic context, then ‘if one can say that A is happy and pleased, and B is miserable and angry, then one has compared their mental states....[W]e use different men’s behavior, in a wide sense of the word, to compare their mental states.’

While this sceptical concern is standardly applied to the strength of preferences, it may also be applied to the modes of engagement that I argued above constitute a subjective element of composite goods. While we have observable features of lives on which to base our comparisons, such as the frequency and nature of the time friends spend together, the modes of engagement are private in a similar sense to pleasure. However, the sceptical worry is again taken too far here. The concern is not merely that, like Kaye who outwardly acts as the movie star’s friend but secretly abhors them, it is possible for the appropriate modes of engagement to be hidden from observers, but that it is in principle inaccessible. It is far from clear that, for example, Kaye’s confidant who is privy to her plan to use the movie star for her own ends is not justified in believing that Kaye fails to realise the substantive good of sociability in this context. Objective theories which specify subjective goods and composite goods with subjective elements are not subject to the extreme scepticism advanced by Jevons and Robbins.

An extension of the sceptical concern of access to other minds is that, since we cannot know the relative intensities of satisfaction experienced by other people, we must make the assumption that they are equal. However, this assumption is not only unjustifiable, but also evaluative. Robbins (1938: 637, italics in original) advances this concern claiming that it would be better ‘to acknowledge that the postulate of equal satisfaction came from outside, that it rested upon ethical principle rather than upon scientific demonstration, that it was not a judgement of fact in the scientific sense, but rather a judgement of value’. The rebuttal of the sceptical worry on which this concern is based presented above also undermines this concern. To the extent that it is sustainable, however, we may also ask whether its general disquiet
regarding the intrusion of value judgements into welfare comparisons is warranted. As Scanlon (1991) argues, value judgements are unavoidable in the endeavour of advancing and defending a theory of welfare and its content; they are already implicated in welfare comparisons insofar as these comparisons are founded in a theory of the content of welfare. It is therefore uncertain whether Robbins’s aspiration of keeping welfare comparisons value-free is ascertainable. The expectation appears to be that there should be an analogy between a theory of welfare and the comparisons it allows, and a theory of mass and the comparisons it allows. While we may not be able to keep value judgements out of our articulation and defence of the theory of welfare, we should, in the manner of the comparisons a theory of mass allows, be able to keep them out of our welfare comparisons. But we should not expect this to be the case. Take a theory of welfare that specifies knowledge as a substantive good. Value judgements will inevitably enter into comparing the particular forms in which that good is realised in two different lives. Value judgements are unavoidable in welfare comparisons, but this should not trouble us; it is in the nature of that which is being compared.

### 6.3 Incommensurability

Having rebutted two initial reasons for thinking that welfare comparisons are impossible and should be avoided, I turn now to a more substantial concern for pluralist theories of welfare of the kind I have defended. The concern raised in this section for the possibility of welfare comparisons is that the plurality of substantive welfare goods are incommensurable with one another and that therefore human lives are incomparable with respect to their prudential value. Following Hsieh (2007), I hold that it is abstract values (such as aesthetic experience and sociability) that may be commensurable or incommensurable with respect to one another and concrete bearers of value (such as lives or periods within lives) that may be comparable or incomparable. To say that two abstract values are incommensurable with one another is to say that they cannot be measured on a common scale.

To make a welfare comparison – either within or between lives – is in effect to rank them. Two different kinds of ranking are possible. Take the example of having two objects that we want to compare and rank in terms of mass. We can use a traditional balance scale to rank them in these two different ways. Firstly, we could place the
first object in one pan, and then use standard weights placed in the other pan to
determine the object’s mass. We then repeat the procedure with the second object,
and thus we will have a cardinal ranking of the objects in terms of their mass. That
is, we will have information on how much the objects differ with respect to their
mass. Secondly, we could simply place one object in each pan. This would provide
us with an ordinal ranking. That is, we would know which object has the greater
mass, but not how much greater its mass is.

Ideally, cardinal rankings of lives and periods within lives with respect to their
welfare would be possible so that the effect of different activities and policies on
individual and aggregate welfare levels could be accurately determined. What must
be the case to be able to make welfare comparisons of this kind? Take two lives, one
of which is rich in friendships and sporting activities, the other of which is rich in
knowledge and aesthetic experience. Let us say for the sake of argument that the first
life possesses greater prudential value than the second. To be able to say how much
more prudential value it possesses, it seems that each of the substantive goods that
the different lives realise must be reducible to – or contribute to the realisation of – a
more basic good, which can then be measured on a common scale such that the lives
can be ranked against one another. That is to say, in order for lives to be comparable
with respect to their prudential value such that cardinal ranking is possible, it must
be the case that the various substantive goods are strongly commensurable insofar as
‘apparently different kinds of value can be seen as instances of a single super-value
which provides a unique best ranking of a set of values’ (O’Neill 1993: 103; but cf.
Aldred 2002: 37). This is tantamount to a commitment to monism regarding the
content of welfare, which was argued against above, and an abandonment of our
commitment to pluralism.

If a cardinal ranking of lives with respect to their prudential value is not possible,
what about an ordinal ranking? This kind of ranking only requires us to be able to
say that, for example, life $L_1$ possesses more prudential value than life $L_2$. It does
not require us to be able to place a value on the difference between the two lives.
Such ranking does not require monism about content, but it does require the plurality
of substantive goods to be weakly commensurable (or strongly comparable),
whereby ‘while there may be no single value in terms of which all states of affairs
and objects can be ranked, there does exist a single comparative term in terms of which they can be ordered’ (O’Neill 1993: 104). Standard comparative terms include ‘better than’, ‘at least as good as’ or ‘is more valuable than’. Thus, to engage in welfare comparisons that result in an ordinal ranking of lives entails that an evaluation of the plurality of substantive goods that they realise can sensibly issue in a judgement that life $L_1$ is more valuable than, or is better than, life $L_2$. But generic comparative terms such as these are elliptical with respect to human lives; they must be qualified by the respect in which the lives are being compared, otherwise they are vacuous (O’Neill 1993: 105). One life might, for example, be better than another not just with respect to the prudential value it possesses, but also with respect to its moral worth, or the extent to which the individual has developed her talents.

To counter this concern which appears to undermine the possibility of even ordinal rankings of lives, it might be suggested that we can indeed qualify whichever generic comparative term we employ to rank lives with the respect in which we wish to compare them. So, rather than the generic ‘better than’, the comparative term should rather be the specific ‘better than with respect to prudential value’. This is the comparative term we are interested in for welfare comparisons. But this move fails. It fails because ‘prudential value’ is not a covering value in a robust sense. A covering value is the value in terms of which an evaluative comparison is made, and most covering values will have multiple contributory values which contribute to its content to different extents (Neuteleers 2012: 205–6). But the argument for pluralism about the content of welfare presented above is also an argument that ‘prudential value’ is not a covering value in a robust sense that can serve as a comparative term with which to ordinally rank lives with respect to their welfare. If this were the case, the various substantive goods would count merely as contributory values, in the sense of being instances of the super-value of prudential value. In other words, in trying to justify the weak commensurability of the substantive goods, we have arrived back at monism about the content of welfare. If the incommensurability of the substantive goods blocks both cardinal and ordinal rankings of lives with respect to their prudential value, there look to be perhaps insurmountable problems for making welfare comparisons. In section 6.5 I will argue that incommensurability need not block comparability. Before this, however, I seek to undermine the approach to welfare evaluation and comparison that has been assumed thus far.
6.4 The Maximisation Approach

Even if the problems with incommensurability could be overcome, the approach to welfare comparison that has so far been assumed is flawed. I shall call this the maximisation approach; it assumes that a person’s life goes best when he or she maximises either the aggregated value of each of the substantive goods or (if we accept the incommensurability of the substantive goods) the value of each of the substantive goods considered individually. I will raise two problems for this approach, which stem from the assumption that the substantive goods and the way in which they are realised within a life can be considered and evaluated individually. O’Neill (1993: 114) calls this the fallacy of the separability of values: the assumption ‘that each value can be treated like a discrete item on a list, its contribution to the final appraisal of a particular item’s worth being separable from that of others’. 22

This assumption ignores two elements that should be taken into account in welfare evaluations: coherence and narrative.

Firstly, the way in which the substantive goods are realised within a life may cohere or fail to cohere well. Take a wildlife photographer. To pursue this activity, he has acquired and regularly exercises substantial knowledge regarding the behaviour of his subjects; he regularly gets to engage in adventure-type activities such as mountaineering and kayaking that enable him to reach areas where he can photograph rare animals; and he chooses lenses and filters, and composes his photographs, to achieve attractive and striking aesthetic effects. It is unclear how we could assess a life like this by separately evaluating the knowledge, play and aesthetic experience aspects of this pursuit which comprises a substantial part of his life, or, indeed, whether this would be an appropriate way to evaluate its contribution to his welfare. Moreover, the various substantive goods realised in a life such as this cohere in a way that arguably amplify the contribution that the realisation of each the substantive goods makes to his welfare. This is not to say that a life in which a person pursues different activities which realise each of the substantive goods separately would necessarily be better off if she realised them through the pursuit of

22 See also O’Neill and Ubel (2004: 96) on Neurath’s denial of this assumption: ‘not only do welfare concepts have a multidimensional structure, those different dimensions are not additively separable: ‘We cannot regard [the standard of living] as a weight made up of the sum of the weights of the various parts’. (Neurath quote from Neurath (1937: 143).) I am here not using ‘separability’ in the technical sense employed by Broome (1991: 65–70).
an activity that realised them together; it would depend on the particularities of the manner in which she pursued her various discreet activities. If the wildlife photographer felt that his pursuit meant spending too much time on his own and his long expeditions meant he was losing contact with old friends who had different interests, he might decide to re-orient his career to documenting wildlife in his home patch, enabling him to reconnect with his friends. Let us say he keeps up his pursuit of outdoor and adventure sports, but in a way which is not connected to his photography. He now arguably ‘scores’ the same on the dimensions of knowledge, aesthetic experience and play, and higher on sociability. But these goods now lack the degree of coherence that they formerly exhibited. For this individual it does not seem to have necessarily been the case that seeking to maximise his ‘score’ on each individual dimension achieved the intended improvement in welfare. The maximisation approach does not respect the way in which specific combinations of goods in a life may cohere well.

Secondly, the assumption of the separability of values ignores the narrative dimension to an evaluation of the prudential value of a life. O’Neill, Light and Holland (2008: 195–6) argue that what I am calling the maximisation approach can lead to a failure to appreciate the role of history and narrative in appraising how well a person’s life goes....Answering a specific question about how a person’s life can be improved is never just a matter of how to optimise the score on this or that dimension of the good, but how best to continue the narrative of a life. The temporal structure of a life matters. The question is: ‘given my history, or our history, what is the appropriate trajectory into the future?’ Consider for example the case of a visiting rural social worker who finds an old man struggling to look after himself on an isolated farm. She suggests that he move to a retirement home. The advice of the social worker might appear perfectly sensible. It may be that from some static maximising perspective, the best course for the person would be to abandon the isolated farm that he has farmed for the last sixty years and which was farmed by his family before him, and to move to a retirement home. His material, social and cultural life might all improve. But given the way his life has been bound up with that place, the move would involve a disruption to the story of his life. The desire to stay, despite all the improvements on offer, is quite a rational one.

Let us say our wildlife photographer had spent much of his career engaged in an endeavour to photograph, and create a culminating portfolio of, every mammal on Earth. His decision to attempt to improve the social dimension of his welfare entails abandoning his lifelong project and it is never completed. Again, the maximisation approach fails to capture this element of welfare evaluation; even if he achieves a
higher ‘score’ on each dimension as a result of his decision, it seems reasonable to judge that the completion of the narrative which had structured his life thus far would have realised greater welfare gains.

6.5 Practical Judgement

In the face of the scepticism from economists, the incommensurability of the substantive goods and the doubts raised regarding the maximisation approach, it may seem unclear how welfare comparisons should be made, and, indeed, if it is possible to make them at all. I wish to defend here the possibility of reliable and justifiable practical judgements concerning intra- and interpersonal welfare comparisons. A common admission within the economics literature on interpersonal welfare comparisons before going on to cast doubt on the notion is that such comparisons are routinely performed in daily life. For example, Narens and Luce (1983: 247) observe that

most of us agree....that such interpersonal comparisons are more or less successfully made in our daily lives. After all, what else could be involved when one spouse agrees to forego some desired object or activity in order to let the other have or do what he or she wishes because “It means more to my spouse than it does to me”? It is a common experience for most of us that as we get to know someone, we increasingly learn more about their preferences and how the strength of those preferences compare with our own.

Despite the scepticism, therefore, there is an acknowledgement that welfare comparisons are made, and appear to be reasonable and successful. It is this recognition that forms the starting point of the argument that incommensurability and the misguided nature of the maximisation approach should not lead us to abandon the possibility of welfare comparisons. The alternative, as O’Neill (1998: 126) states it, is to ‘use your judgement after the best possible deliberation’. This judgement should be informed and tutored, and based upon developed capacities of perception and knowledge founded in education and experience (O’Neill 1993: 117). This approach is neither calculative nor algorithmic, but deliberative. O’Neill, Holland and Light’s (2008: 85) point regarding the difference between algorithmic and deliberative decision making is apt: 23 the deliberative approach recognises that there may not be a complete ordering of lives when engaged in choosing between

23 One way to conceive of welfare comparisons is as the task of determining which of the lives being compared it would be rational to choose to live.
options (whether they are policies, individual actions or kinds of lives) such that we can identify the best life, the second best life and so on, but only a partial ordering whereby what we have is ‘a set of admissible solutions [or lives] which themselves are not ordered. It is possible that one might simply have a variety of options, each with their own bundle of goods, each coherent and making sense, and with no ordering between them.’

To illustrate the practical judgement-based approach, I will consider a number of examples where reasoned judgements are justifiable. The first has already been outlined, namely, instances where the narrative structure of a life justifies a judgement that the individual has undergone welfare gains, losses or maintenance. Secondly, it is reasonable to judge that a life which is worse off in every dimension than the life to which it is being compared is worse off overall. Consider this judgement in an intrapersonal comparison case of welfare losses. Take an individual’s life which has remained more or less the same for a number of years, but then all dimensions of it suffer a decline. For example, imagine a violinist who suffers a hand injury. She not only is prevented from playing her instrument, but in bitterness at the tragedy becomes unable to listen to music which used to give her joy, loses the friends she made in the orchestra, and is unable to continue improving her technique. Her life, let us say, has suffered losses on every dimension of welfare. Even if the substantive goods are incommensurable with respect to one another, it still seems entirely reasonable to judge that she has suffered welfare losses, since she is worse off in all dimensions.24

Thirdly, it is reasonable to make welfare comparisons founded in practical judgements in cases where we judge one individual to be better off than another in some dimensions and worse off in others. Again, consider this in an intrapersonal comparison case to see the failure of an algorithmic, calculative approach. On such an approach it has to be calculated whether the losses outweigh, or are compensated for by, the gains. As noted above, if the substantive goods were to be thought of as contributory values to the covering value of prudential value, then we would expect to have to assign weights to these goods, which would allow us to trade off goods

---

24 This ‘dominance’ ordering is argued for by Sen (1993: 32).
against one another in decisions and evaluations. But this model – and the maximisation approach with which it is associated – is further undermined by the following argument: it is incoherent to assign weights to the substantive goods in the abstract, since these goods are realised in particular lives in a plurality of ways. How could we say in advance of considering particular contexts that sociability is worth twice as much (or even just more than) knowledge? Say, for example, an individual finds herself with an opportunity of taking a night class in some particular subject she has always been interested in, but finds that the class is on a day of the week on which she typically spends the evening with a group of friends. Let us say our theory of welfare assigns more weight to sociability than knowledge. Does it make sense for the individual to consult the weights and decide not to enrol in the class? No: the decision requires her to reflect on the particulars of her situation. These may be very close friends and that evening may be the only opportunity to see them regularly, or she may have been growing tired of them recently and have felt that she would do well to spend less time with them. She should talk to people who have taken this class before and find out about the quality of the teaching. The substantive goods cannot be weighed – either in advance or in retrospect – in the abstract. To weigh gains and losses requires careful deliberation concerning the particular manners in which the goods are realised; there can be no weights pre-assigned to the substantive goods.

Nonetheless, overall judgements of welfare in circumstances of gains on some dimensions and losses on others may still be reasonable. Take a person who overcomes a serious health condition after many years of suffering around the same time that they go through an acrimonious separation from their spouse. It may be reasonable for them to judge that, taking all things into consideration, their life is roughly as good as it was while they suffered from the health condition but enjoyed a good relationship from a supportive spouse. Pluralists about the content of welfare need not – and perhaps should not – think of the gains as compensating for the losses, for this suggests commensurability; they only need say that the life is better on some dimensions and worse on others. But again, this does not entail that pluralists are barred from making the reasonable practical judgement that, taking this into account, the life now is equally good for the individual as it was before.
The first three examples concern making overall prudential evaluations and comparisons that encompass all dimensions of welfare. For the fourth and fifth examples I turn to considering comparisons between individual substantive goods. Fourthly, then, a reasonable basis for welfare comparisons is the duration and frequency which a particular substantive good is realised within a life. Consider that we ordinarily judge a life that is cut short – by suicide, accident or illness – to be tragic. One aspect of the tragedy is that the individual got to enjoy the good things of life for less time than most people. They may have had friendships which were set to last or a flourishing relationship; been embarking on studies which would have provided years of fulfilling absorption; and enjoyed and been developing skills in some sport or adventure activity. A life which contained less sociability, aesthetic experience, play and knowledge than is normal is ordinarily judged to be a worse life. This need not be because the life was cut short; it may be through a lack of opportunity, repression or due to a clinical disorder. More mundanely, it may simply be because the individual has made a decision to devote more time to some other good; more time at work to gain promotion means less time for family and friends, and the corresponding losses in this dimension can typically be explained by the reduction in the duration for which the good of sociability is realised.

Fifthly, reasoned comparisons can be made by reflecting on the manner in which it is concretely realised in the lives being compared and how it fulfils or fails to fulfil the potentialities of a given substantive good. The above argument that the substantive goods are realised not in the abstract but through engagement in particular relations and activities reveals that the reason why we cannot determine in advance the weights that should be assigned to different substantive goods in a welfare comparison is that each particular state, activity and relation that realises them must be judged on its own merit. One way of expressing this thought is that it is possible to realise a good through engagement in an activity that realises that good’s potential to a greater or lesser degree. Each good admits of a plurality of aspects, and different forms of realisation may realise different aspects. The good of play can be realised in forms that require physical exertion (a marathon) or mental agility (card games); the good of knowledge can be realised through debate and dialogue in groups (a

---

25 Each good is in this sense internally plural, further justifying embedding practical judgements as central in any account of how to make welfare comparisons.
university tutorial) or through solitary research and contemplation (the independent and amateur historian); the good of sociability can be realised in lifelong friendships founded on abiding mutual concerns (the fellow trade unionists) or in brief meetings and intense experiences (the student backpackers); the good of aesthetic experience may be realised in slowly-unfolding absorption (a novel) or immediate and transitory events (a shooting star). Reflection on the kinds of affective, social and intellectual rewards a given good can afford can enable us to judge when those rewards are forgone, through misfortune or neglect. For example, I forgo some of the potential of the good of aesthetic experience when I allow my attention to be frequently diverted from a novel such that I fail to fully appreciate its subtle characterisations; the full potential of the good of knowledge may fail to be realised if I have a propensity to believe conspiracy theories and seek their confirmation in my reading of history; the potential of the good of play may be marred by a petty feud with a fellow teammate; the potential of the good of sociability may be compromised because of an arrogant presumption that I could do a work colleague’s job better than her. In each case I am engaging in activities and relations which are apt to realise various substantive welfare goods, but only if they are pursued in conditions which allow the good’s full expression and if pursued with due skill and attention. In each case the potential of the good is undermined. I have characterised each of the sources of this undermining as internal to the agent, but they might equally be external; it might be through no fault of my own that my attention is diverted from the novel, or it might be another teammate who spoils my engagement in the competitive sport. Welfare comparisons can proceed, therefore, by considering, amongst other things, the potentialities of the substantive goods in question, and the manner in which the particular forms in which they are being realised fulfil or fail to fulfil those potentialities, both separately and in combination.

I have argued in this section that despite the incommensurability of the substantive goods and the sceptical concerns in the economics literature, welfare comparisons can and should be made, and I provided five examples of reasonable judgements of this kind. None of these examples, however, can be generalised into a rule or principle for use in an algorithmic, calculative and maximising approach. Welfare comparisons should proceed by careful attention to the particularities of the lives or sets of lives being compared coupled with reflection on the nature and potentialities
of the various substantive welfare goods that a cogent theory of welfare specifies. It is in this sense, as I shall argue in the next chapter, that a theory of welfare may provide justification to a welfare comparison: a cogent theory informs and justifies practical judgements concerning the relative welfare of different lives or periods within lives. It does so by specifying the substantive welfare goods, and through the kinds of deliberation involved in their specification, revealing the nature and potentialities of those goods.

7. Conclusion

In this chapter I have provided accounts of human welfare and of the nature of welfare comparisons which will be employed in the following chapter to assess the overconsumption claim. I firstly defended objective determination theses as a class from two significant criticisms advanced by Sumner. In the course of this defence, I proposed an alternative, procedural form which determination theses may take and an alternative understanding of what it is for a determination thesis to be objective. I next proposed six items of content that I claimed any objective determination thesis would justify, and explained the nature of the composite goods on that list. Lastly, I developed an account of intra- and interpersonal welfare comparisons. This practical judgement-based account emerged from a rebuttal of the scepticism amongst economists and philosophers of economics of the possibility of welfare comparisons, and a rejection of the maximisation approach to welfare evaluations and comparisons.
3 Welfare Arguments for Reducing Personal Consumption

1. Introduction

The thesis of this chapter is that objective theories of welfare provide theoretical justification to a welfare-based critique of current levels of consumption. This critique is embodied in a claim advanced by environmental and social campaigners that I shall call the *overconsumption claim*. This claim takes as its starting point the occurrence of two phenomena: (i) the rise in per capita consumption within rich countries since the Second World War and (ii) the plateau of aggregate welfare within rich countries over the same period. Those who advance the overconsumption claim argue that the rise in per capita consumption over the past 60 years is related to the plateau in aggregate welfare and has led to levels of consumption that are excessive. In the popular and scholarly literature, consumption levels are argued to be excessive either in virtue of the additional consumption in this period having failed to improve welfare, implying that current welfare levels could be achieved with considerably less consumption, or the additional consumption being implicated in the plateauing of aggregate welfare, implying that welfare levels could have continued to rise instead of plateauing had the rise in consumption been moderated. I will argue that both these senses in which current levels of consumption are claimed to be excessive receive justification from the class of theories of welfare defended and developed in the previous chapter. That is to say, the account of the content of welfare provided by objective theories – enumerated with reference to determination theses which were defended from two significant criticisms – informs and justifies practical judgements that support the overconsumption claim’s contention that aggregate welfare has plateaued.

This argument will take place within the framework of an analysis of three expressions of the overconsumption claim, each of which advance specific explanations of the role of rising consumption in the plateauing of aggregate welfare. These expressions – insofar as they are empirical hypotheses that also make assumptions concerning the nature of human welfare and what it is for an individual to undergo welfare gains and losses and for one individual to enjoy greater welfare than another – require both empirical and theoretical justification. I will argue that
each of these expressions receives theoretical justification from various features of objective theories of welfare. The two sets of lives being compared for the purposes of this argument are the lower consumption lives lived 60 years ago and the higher consumption lives that are now prevalent within rich countries. I will also derive a recommendation from each expression of the overconsumption claim for the manner in which reducing personal consumption can promote welfare gains for individuals such that aggregate welfare can resume its ascent. Before the analyses of the three expressions in sections 3, 4 and 5, in section 2 I will outline the evidence that is appealed to in support of the overconsumption claim. As with all the empirical evidence cited in this chapter, I do not reference it in order to provide support for the overconsumption claim or motivate acceptance of this claim by the reader, but rather to make clear the nature of the overconsumption claim and the kinds of considerations to which those who propound it appeal, and to orient my analysis of its philosophical foundations in assumptions regarding the nature of human welfare. While, therefore, I have not cited any empirical evidence that I know or have good reason to believe is false or has emerged from flawed studies, I acknowledge that at least some of the empirical evidence referenced below, as well as its alleged relationship to the overconsumption claim, is open to question. Further, I do not consider or assess evidence which substantiates the undoubted positive relationship that obtains between consumption and welfare in many contexts, for example consumption in the realm of healthcare that is responsible for the increase in life expectancy in general and the quality of life of disabled people in particular. This is so because it is not my purpose here to come to a conclusion regarding the truth or falsity of the overconsumption claim, but to assess the justification offered by objective theories of welfare to the claim as it is advocated by environmental and social campaigners.

Section 2 will also provide examples of the explicit statements of the overconsumption claim and the role it plays in the double dividend argument for reducing personal consumption; justify my use of the data concerning reported life satisfaction as a device to guide my arguments; and explain the framework which will structure my examination of the three expressions of the overconsumption claim.
2. The Overconsumption Claim

2.1 Evidence for the Overconsumption Claim

This section is intended to demonstrate both that the overconsumption claim is advanced in both the popular and scholarly literature, and that there is at least prima facie reason to take it seriously. I distinguish four categories of empirical evidence that are offered as justification for the general overconsumption claim. The data is based on reported happiness and reported life satisfaction, as well as statistics on Gross Domestic Product (GDP), real income, and the incidence of suicide, depression, crime and alcoholism. I take rising GDP and rising real incomes to be a proxy for rising levels of personal material consumption.

2.1.1 The Plateauing of Reported Happiness and Reported Life Satisfaction within Rich Countries Over Time

Firstly, growth in gross domestic product (GDP) and real income has been accompanied by the plateauing of reported happiness and reported life satisfaction in rich countries for between the last 40–60 years. In the United States, for example, Schitovsky’s early data (1992 [1976]: 134–5) showed that ‘[o]ver this period [1946–1970]….per capita real income rose by 62%, yet the proportion of people who consider themselves very happy, fairly happy, and not too happy has hardly changed at all. Our economic welfare is forever rising, but we are no happier as a result.’ In fact, 1957 was the year that ‘the percentage of Americans describing themselves as “very happy” reached a peak’ (De Graff, Wann and Naylor 2001: 24), and moreover, ‘[e]ven though Americans earn twice as much in today’s dollars as they did in 1957, the proportion of those telling surveyors from the National Opinion Research Center that they are “very happy” has declined from 35 to 29 per cent.’ (Myers and Diener 1996: 54). In the UK, Layard (2005) reports that ‘happiness has been static since 1975 and (on flimsier evidence) is no higher than in the 1950s. This has happened despite massive increases in real income at every point of the income distribution.’ The picture in many European nations is similar, with some countries showing very slight increases and some showing falls in happiness (Oswald 1997: 1827).
2.1.2 The Diminishing Effect of Income on Reported Happiness and Reported Life Satisfaction Within Nations

Secondly, within nations, while rich people report higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction than poor people, the differences between them remain static while the real income of all grows. As Layard (2005) observes, ‘in any given society richer people are substantially happier than poorer people….So when people become richer compared with other people, they become happier. But when whole societies have become richer, they have not become happier’. Further, beyond a certain income, the correlation between extra income and extra happiness and life satisfaction declines sharply. Myers (2000: 131), quoting Inglehart (1990: 242) notes that ‘within affluent countries, where nearly everyone can afford life’s necessities, increasing affluence matters surprisingly little. In the United States, Canada, and Europe, the correlation between income and happiness is, as Inglehart noted in the 16-nation study, “surprisingly weak (indeed, virtually negligible).”’ Lane (2000: 16) summarises: ‘All the evidence shows that although more money to the poor decreases their unhappiness and also increases their satisfaction with their lives, in advanced countries, above the poverty line this relationship between level of income and level of SWB [subjective well-being] is weak or nonexistent. Thus, the rich are no more satisfied with their lives than the merely comfortable, who in turn are only slightly, if at all, more satisfied with their lives than the lower middle classes.’

2.1.3 The Diminishing Effect of Income on Reported Happiness and Reported Life Satisfaction Between Nations

Thirdly, between nations, while people in rich countries on average report higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction than people in poor countries, above a certain level of income, the correlation between income and happiness declines sharply. The so-called ‘Easterlin paradox’ was first noted in 1974: drawing on thirty surveys from 1946 to 1970 from eleven countries, Easterlin (1974: 118) found that although ‘[w]ithin countries there is a noticeable positive association between income and happiness….whether any such positive association exists among countries at a given time is uncertain. Certainly, the happiness differences between rich and poor countries that one might expect on the basis of the within-country differences by
economic status are not borne out by the international data.’

Jackson (2008: 706–7) reports on Inglehart and Klingeman’s (2000) study of the statistical link between subjective well-being and income growth contained in data from the World Values Survey: ‘For low-income countries….there is a very wide range of reported life satisfaction, but in broad terms, as incomes increase so does happiness. But any correlation between rising income and rising happiness begins to diminish as incomes rise further. Across most developed countries, there is at best only a weak correlation between increased income and reported happiness. And among countries with average incomes in excess of $15,000, there is virtually no correlation at all between increased income and improved life satisfaction.’ Further, Myers and Deiner (1996: 55) call into question whether the extra consumption that increased income enables is the sole explanation for the increased reported life satisfaction, when they argue that while people in rich countries tend to be happier than people in poor countries, ‘other factors, such as civil rights, literacy and duration of democratic government, all of which also promote reported life satisfaction, tend to go hand in hand with national wealth. As a result, it is impossible to tell whether the happiness of people in wealthier nations is based on money or is a by-product of other felicities.’

2.1.4 Increased Rates of Clinical Disorders, Alcoholism, Crime and Suicide Within Rich Nations Over Time

Fourthly, increasing incidences of clinical depression and other anxiety disorders, alcoholism, and crime and suicide rates within rich nations are appealed to in order to call into question the purported correlation between increasing income and consumption and increasing welfare. Oswald (1997: 1827) reports that the rich countries have high suicide rates compared to poor countries, and that the suicide rate for men ‘has risen, in almost all Western nations, from the 1970s to the present.’ Jackson (2005: 24) reports Wright’s (1994: 53) observation that ‘rates of depression have been doubling every decade, suicide is the third most common cause of death among young adults in North America, [and] 15% of Americans have had a clinical anxiety disorder’. Lane (2000: 21–3) notes that depression is ten times more prevalent in the United States than 50 years ago. Layard (2005) reports that

---

alcoholism ‘has soared [since 1950] in most countries except France and Italy, where it was already very high…. [Y]outh suicide has increased in almost every advanced country…. [I]n most countries between 1950 and 1980 recorded crime increased by at least 300%…. Since 1980 there have been significant reductions in crime in the United States, Australia and Canada, and since 1995 in Britain. But crime is still way above its level of 1950.’

2.2 The Overconsumption Claim and the Double Dividend Argument

The above ‘presents a clear challenge to the conventional model of development which suggests that increases in consumption should be associated with increases in wellbeing’ (Jackson 2008: 712). Lane (2000: 64) calls the conviction that ‘happiness is in some sense proportionate to income’ the economistic fallacy. Jackson (2008: 704) summarises the data in the following way: ‘beyond a certain threshold, growing income and consumption levels do not appear to contribute additionally to societal wellbeing and may even detract from it’. He calls this phenomenon the wellbeing paradox. Myers (2000: xi) calls it the American paradox: ‘We now have, as average Americans, doubled real incomes and double what money buys…. And we have less happiness, more depression, more fragile relationships, less communal commitment, less vocational security, more crime (even after the recent decline), and more demoralized children.’ This leads such authors as Wachtel (1989), Sagoff (2008: 111) and Durning (1992) to propose the overconsumption claim. Jackson (2008: 712) puts it succinctly: ‘Taken together, these findings suggest that it might be possible to live better by consuming fewer resources’. The overconsumption claim is one half of the double dividend argument, which holds that since ‘much of the consumption that is degrading the environment and diminishing biological diversity….does not improve, but rather diminishes, our lives’ (Cafaro 2001: 473), and since ‘we are not only damaging our environment but we are in addition degrading our own psychological and social well-being’ (Jackson 2004: 9), reducing our consumption levels will not only enable us to meet our environmental challenges but also to live better lives. This enables a response to the portrayal of ‘the demand to reduce the material impact of human activities….as constraining human welfare and threatening our quality of life’ (ibid.).
2.3. The Limitations and Usefulness of the Life Satisfaction Data

My claims will be oriented around the data which shows a plateauing of reported life satisfaction within rich countries over time. I presented a wider range of data above in order to fully reflect the variety of sources that are appealed to in the recent policy literature and to motivate the assumption that the overconsumption claim is worth taking seriously. I now restrict my attention to the life satisfaction data so that I can refer to a clear and consistent data set. I also only attend to the life satisfaction data within rich countries because it is to this data that the double dividend argument has relevance; it is the aggregate of the consumption within rich countries which has by far the most environmental impact.

For my purposes, I will assume that (i) the life satisfaction data is a (subjective) measure of both subjective, objective and composite items of content, and (ii) these subjective assessments are accurate (that is, a large subset of individuals in rich countries are indeed no better off with respect to their welfare now than they were 40–60 years ago). The first assumption goes against the standard understanding of the life satisfaction data as a measure of subjective welfare only. But as O’Neill (2006: 170) has argued, it is highly plausible that the life satisfaction survey question – ‘How satisfied are you with your life these days?’ – is understood by respondents to be calling for them to assess not only their subjective states of feeling good and feeling bad, but also the more objective conditions of their life, such as the quality of their neighbourhood for bringing up their children, housing, opportunities for leisure, employment and training prospects, and so on. This latter interpretation of the nature of the assessment that respondents make justifies understanding the plateau in the life satisfaction data to pertain to the kinds of items of content that I argued objective welfare theories specify. I will leave this argument as inconclusive since I am merely proposing to use the life satisfaction data as an orienting device for my arguments.

---

27 See for example the UK’s Office for National Statistics’ (ONS) (2010), which understands the life satisfaction question to be a measure of subjective well-being.

28 See for example the New Economics Happy Planet Index (Abdullah et. al. 2009), which in addition to data on longevity and ecological footprint, is primarily based upon data from the World Values Survey and the Gallup World Poll, both of which ask the question: ‘All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?’ Respondents rank their answer on a scale from 1 (dissatisfied) to 10 (satisfied).
The second assumption – that the subjective assessments in which the life satisfaction data is grounded are reliable – may also be questioned. On the one hand, objective measures of subjective welfare reveal that people may be mistaken about how much pain they have experienced (Kahneman et al. 1993: 404). On the other hand, people are subject to satisfaction or aspirational treadmills such that, even as objective conditions improve, they take those new conditions to be entitlements and therefore assess their conditions as equally good or even worse than before (O’Neill 2008: 140). I acknowledge that it is possible that the assessments that respondents conduct of their quality of life over time, insofar as they are subject to a satisfaction treadmill, may mean the life satisfaction data should not be taken to show that welfare has plateaued. However, much of the empirical data I will refer to below, as well as the data concerning clinical depression, crime and suicide above, does not relate to subjective assessments and therefore provides additional justification that aggregate welfare has in fact plateaued. Further, my purpose is not to establish that welfare has plateaued, but to argue that if it has, then objective theories of welfare can provide a rich and illuminating articulation of this phenomenon and the ways in which the rise in consumption has contributed.

2.4 The Framework for the Arguments

In this section I will introduce the framework for this chapter’s thesis that three expressions of the overconsumption claim which may be distinguished in the popular and scholarly literature receive justification from objective theories of welfare of the kind I defended in Chapter 2. Firstly, I will understand the overconsumption claim to be grounded in a comparison of the following two sets of lives: (i) the lives lived currently by a subset of inhabitants of rich countries in which it is claimed the level of consumption is excessive (henceforth, high consumption lives) and (ii) the lives lived 40–60 years ago by a subset of inhabitants of rich countries (henceforth, low consumption lives).\(^29\) For those individuals who are members of both sets, the overconsumption claim is committed to saying that their lives earlier in the period possess roughly equal prudential value to their lives lived later in the period. For all other individuals who are members of only one set or another, the overconsumption claim is committed to saying that their lives possess roughly equal prudential value

\(^{29}\)I stipulate in each case that it is a subset of inhabitants of rich countries because clearly within rich societies there are those who consume very little either through poverty or through choice.
to one another. The overconsumption claim assesses the lives of the members of the two sets as typically roughly equal in prudential value in order, as I stated above, to respect the life satisfaction data. That is, although a stronger version of the overconsumption claim might claim that welfare has declined such the first set of lives possess less prudential value than the second, this would go beyond what the life satisfaction data can justify. I will orient my arguments around the weaker claim.

Secondly, my examination of each of the three expressions of the overconsumption claim will treat three elements. Firstly, I will characterise each expression’s thesis regarding what has happened in the past 40–60 years such that the life satisfaction data shows a plateauing of welfare. I will do this by appealing to certain items of content which I claimed in Chapter 2 objective theories of welfare enumerate, and to practical judgement-based welfare comparisons informed and justified by appeal to this content. Secondly, I will characterise each expression’s account of the role the rise in consumption has played in the plateauing of welfare as being an instance of one of two kinds of thesis. On the one hand, it may offer an implication thesis and claim that the rise in consumption is implicated in the plateauing of welfare. If consumption is implicated in the plateau, then inhabitants of rich countries are overconsuming – and their consumption levels are excessive – in the sense that a subset of their consumption is compromising their welfare. On the other hand, the expression may offer a failure thesis and claim that the extra consumption has merely failed to realise the welfare gains that might have been expected on the basis of those attributed to similar rises in consumption prior to the occurrence of the plateau. If the extra consumption has merely failed to realise additional welfare, then rich consumers are overconsuming – and their consumption levels are excessive – in the sense that current levels of consumption are unnecessary to realise current levels of welfare. Examining the popular and scholarly literature on consumption and welfare, I will distinguish and examine two implication theses (the erosion of sociability thesis and the displacement thesis) and one failure thesis (the insufficiency thesis).

Thirdly, I will derive from each expression a recommendation for what individuals should do in order to mitigate the compromise that it alleges current levels of consumption causes to their welfare. Recall that this thesis is an examination of
moral and welfare arguments for reducing personal consumption. That is, rather than an examination of arguments for why we should collectively reduce consumption, or why we should campaign for the passing of legislation or the implementation of institutional measures that would succeed in reducing aggregate consumption, it is an examination of reasons that individuals have to reduce personal consumption even in the absence of such collective measures. Therefore, the recommendation of each expression of the overconsumption claim is a recommendation for individual behaviour which is responsive either to the failure that increased consumption has had in improving welfare or the manner in which rising consumption is alleged to have compromised welfare.

3. The Erosion of Sociability Thesis

The first expression of the general overconsumption claim that I will examine posits that the plateau in welfare over the past 40–60 years has occurred because of a decline in the social dimension of the welfare of inhabitants of rich countries. In particular, it claims that there has been an erosion of the quality of family life, intimate relationships, wider social relationships, communities, and civic and political involvement. It is argued that the rise in consumption is indirectly implicated in either causing or exacerbating this erosion. Jackson (2008: 715), for example, argues that the ‘pursuit of consumption growth – a specific model for the pursuit of well-being – appears to have systematically undermined some of the conditions (family, friendship, community, trust and so on) on which we know that people’s well-being depends.’ Lane (2000: 13) argues that ‘[t]he sources of our unhappiness and depression certainly include the tragic loss of family solidarity and other human ties, a loss which is, I think, exacerbated by the market economy’. De Graaf et al. (2001: 60) claim that ‘[w]hat began as a quest for the good life in the suburbs degenerated into private consumption splurges that separated one neighbor from another, and one family member from another.’ Kasser et al. (2002: 18) claim that ‘market capitalism strikes at the heart of family structure, decreasing resources that provide for quality caretaking and breaking apart a sense of relatedness with one’s extended family and community’. I will argue that objective theories of welfare inform and justify practical judgements that support and illuminate this expression of the overconsumption claim.
3.1 The Account of the Welfare Plateau

Firstly, to provide justification for this expression a theory of welfare must have a substantive good that corresponds (or set of substantive goods that together corresponds) to the dimension of life that the expression alleges has declined in quality. In Chapter 2 I stated that I would employ Finnis’s ‘basic good’ of sociability, and it is this substantive good to which I refer here. It is my contention that any plausible theory of welfare would have this substantive good among its items of content, and therefore this expression of the overconsumption claim could receive justification from a variety of well-developed objective theories.

Secondly, a theory of welfare must be able to inform and justify a practical judgement that the kinds of social changes that have taken place and which are attributed in some way to the rise in consumption constitute losses in the social dimension of welfare. Recall in Chapter 2 that I argued that welfare comparisons between individuals and between different periods within individuals’ lives cannot be arrived at by algorithmic procedures or reference to generalised rules. Rather, practical judgements are required which take into account the particularities of the context. Such judgements are likely to be correspondingly more reliable to the extent that they are informed and guided by reflection on a cogent theory of welfare and its content. With this in mind, given two expressions of the overconsumption claim I am examining (this one and the displacement thesis in section 5) argue that there have been welfare losses on certain dimensions, it seems reasonable to suppose, given the plurality of substantive goods, that there have been gains in other dimensions which, taking everything into consideration, justify a judgement that welfare has plateaued. Since the literature to which I refer does not make claims regarding which other dimensions of welfare may have improved, I will refrain from speculating which substantive goods might have seen improvements such that this judgement is justified. Instead, I will focus on the arguments made to the effect that there have been losses in the social dimension of welfare, and how objective theories may inform and justify this claim.

I will distinguish three kinds of practical judgements which may illuminate the claims of losses in the social dimension of welfare attributable to the rise in consumption, and the evidence appealed to for support. Firstly, the erosion of
Sociability thesis appeals to declining levels of interpersonal trust. For example, Sandler’s (2007: 55–60) criticism of ‘consumptive dispositions’ (greed, intemperance, profligacy and envy) cites an OECD (2001) report to justify his claims regarding the effect of the prevalence of such dispositions on levels of trust. This report finds that there has been a decline in general levels of interpersonal trust in the United States, the UK and Australia (p. 100). A study by Hall (1999) is cited in this report (p. 101), which shows that ‘[i]n 1959, 56 per cent of all respondents to the UK Civic Culture Survey said they generally trust others, while the corresponding figure for 1995 was only 31 per cent (UK World Values Study).’ With regard to relationships and friendships, a study by Solberg et al. (2002: 43, 45) concludes that materialists have lower quality relationships and social lives. Kasser et al. (2002: 20) report on a study (Kasser and Ryan 2001) which shows that ‘the love relationships and the friendships of those with a strong MVO [materialistic value orientation] are relatively short and are characterized more by emotional extremes and conflict than by trust and happiness’.

In Chapter 2 I outlined an example of a practical judgement regarding welfare losses which turned on the way in which activities and relations could be engaged in in such a way that the potentialities of the good in question failed to be fulfilled. Here we have an example of where we might argue that the forms of sociability engaged in within current high consumption lives have been undermined insofar as levels of interpersonal trust have declined. Trust is a fundamental aspect of social relationships, and to the extent that trust is undermined, this also undermines the quality of the relationship as a whole. If the empirical data is correct and levels of interpersonal trust have declined, then it is arguable that the good of sociability is realised in such a way that a judgement of welfare losses in relation to the low consumption lives to which they are being compared is justified.

A second kind of practical judgement concerning welfare losses I outlined in Chapter 2 regards the duration for which the substantive goods are realised within lives and periods within lives. Since a decline in the duration for which social contact is engaged in is a central element of the erosion of sociability thesis, this thesis finds support from objective theories of welfare insofar as they ground practical judgements concerning the welfare losses resulting from a decline in the duration for
which the good of sociability is realised. With regard to family, Putnam (2000) draws on survey data to argue that there has been a 43% drop in family dinners,\(^{30}\) and De Graaf et al. (2001: 45) cite studies which suggest that the time parents spend with their children has declined by as much as forty percent. Sandler (2007: 58) links the increase in the average size of a family home (from 1,400 square feet in 1970 to 2,265 square feet in 2000 (p. 156, n. 37)) and the proliferation of non-social forms of entertainment (e.g. the increase in the percentage of sixth-graders [11–12 year olds] with television sets in their bedrooms from 6% in 1970 to 77% in 1999) to family members spending longer periods apart. With regard to intimate and social relationships, De Graaf et al. (2001: 45) cite studies which suggest that ‘American couples now find just twelve minutes a day to talk to each other’, and Putnam (2000) finds amongst data on social trends a 35% drop in having friends to visit one’s house in the past 25 years. With regard to communities, De Graaf et al. (2001: 66) claim that ‘[s]ince 1950, the amount of land in our communities devoted to public uses – parks, civic buildings, schools, churches, and so on – decreased by a fifth....[W]e’ve disinvested in the public areas and “privatized” our lifestyles, and often left citizenship and care at the front door.’ The OECD (2001) report cited above finds that ‘[v]arious forms of informal social connectedness (such as incidence of eating dinner together regularly with family, picnics, card-playing, having friends for dinner, visiting and eating out, etc.) have....waned over a long period of time’ (p. 100). With regard to civic and political involvement, the report also cites Hall (1999), who suggests ‘the possibility of important shifts in values and attitudes over time which impinge on the quality of civic engagement and trust. This seems to be part of a more general trend towards more materialistic and individualist values’ (p. 101). Putnam (2000) claims that social trend data reveals a 58% drop in attendance of club meetings. The OECD (2001: 99) report finds that there have been ‘significant declines in group membership’ and ‘intensity of participation’ in the United States. Sandler (2007: 58) claims that ‘[c]ommuting times are increasing in part because people desire larger homes that can accommodate more consumer goods, and these can only be afforded by moving further away from city centers. But an increase of 10 minutes of daily commute time is associated with a 10 percent decrease in civic involvement.’ Commute times are exacerbated by traffic jams, with the US national

---

\(^{30}\) The three figures I quote from Putnam (2000) in this section are more recent figures available on Professor Putnam’s website, http://bowlingalone.com/
average for urban drivers to be stuck in jams is 34 hours per year, with Los Angeles residents wasting 82 hours per year (De Graaf et. al. 2001: 34). Appeals are also made to longer working hours as being responsible for a decline in community involvement. While acknowledging that there is uncertainty (see also Lane 2000: 163–4) in these claims, De Graaf et. al. (2001: 42) report the research of Juliet Schor (1993), who finds from labor department statistics that full-time American workers are ‘now toiling 160 hours – one full month, more, on average, than they did in 1969’ and that the pace of work has also increased, adding that ‘forty-two percent of American workers say they feel “used up” by the end of the day.’ If this data is accurate, therefore, there has been a significant decline in the duration and frequency for which familial, intimate and wider social and civic relationships are engaged in, and this decline is connected in a variety of ways to central features of a consumer society. This expression of the overconsumption claim receives justification from objective theories of welfare insofar as such theories illuminate its appeals to the decline in the time spent engaging in social interaction of one form or another and justify a reasoned judgement that this decline constitutes a compromise to welfare.

Thirdly, I outlined in Chapter 2 the dimension of welfare assessment that consists in considering the narrative structure of lives. Consider those who have lived to see the communities in which they reside gradually become more individualised. It is a commonplace amongst those who lived in the 1950s and 1960s that they knew everybody in their neighbourhood, that they rarely locked their doors and that there was a community spirit which is now, in large swathes of urban communities in developed nations, much weaker than it once was. If, as anecdotal evidence indicates, this is a widespread phenomenon, then the impact of a decline in the quality of residential communities should be taken into account in an evaluation of the social dimension of the welfare of those who have lived to witness and lament it. It is not just, therefore, that the quality of social relationships has declined, or that the duration for which social contact is engaged in has reduced, but also the narrative structure of decline and loss amongst those who remember what has been lost that justify the unfavourable welfare comparison between low and high consumption lives that this expression makes.
3.2 The Role of the Rise in Consumption in the Welfare Plateau

This expression advances an implication thesis insofar as it takes rising consumption levels to be an inextricable element in the societal changes of the last 40–60 years that have led to an erosion of the social dimension of welfare.\(^{31}\) These societal changes are variously characterised as modernisation (Jackson 2008: 715), commercialisation (De Graaf et al. 2001), commoditisation (Jackson 2008: 715), the expansion and hegemony of the capitalist market economy, which hands over cultural functions to consumption (Evans and Jackson 2008: 7), economic growth (Jackson 2008: 718), materialism (Kasser et al. 2002), and consumerism (Wenz 2005). I recognise that this is a heterogeneous class of alleged drivers of social change; for example, growth is an economic process while materialism is a value orientation. However, I have chosen to treat them together under the erosion of sociability thesis because of the way they are closely associated in the criticism embodied in the overconsumption claim. Modernisation is often equated with the move to a capitalist market economy, while commercialisation and commoditisation are integral to such an economy. Capitalist market economies are structurally committed to growth as a condition of their stability (Jackson 2009: 61–65) such that, even after evidence becomes available that the correlation between growth and welfare no longer holds, growth must continue. As Lane (2000: 60) suggests, ‘the belief that more money and goods will make us happy is a product of a cultural lag. Like other successful societies, market democracies must, by the logic of their own success, continue to emphasize the themes that have brought them to their current eminent positions.’ Capitalist market economies must therefore promote consumption, and it is argued that the ideology of consumerism – ‘society should maximise consumption, pursue consumption without limit’ (Wenz 2005: 198) – and the value orientation of materialism – ‘the belief that it is important to pursue the culturally sanctioned goals of attaining financial success, having nice possessions, having the right image (produced, in large part, through consumer goods), and having a high status (defined mostly by the size of one’s pocketbook and the scope of one's possessions) (Kasser et al. 2002: 12) – are promoted in order to secure the

\(^{31}\) For an alternative perspective, see Miller (2001: 232), according to which ‘we need to consider the possibility that the sheer quantity of contemporary material culture might, amongst certain peoples and in certain circumstances, enhance their humanity and develop their sociality.’ (For the defence of this claim see pp. 226–33.)
participation of consumers in the ‘moral imperative’ (Jackson et al. 2004: 5) of growth.

**3.3 The Recommendation for Consumption Reduction**

The recommendation for individuals which may be derived from the erosion of sociability thesis consists largely in increasing one’s social connectedness. This recommendation ranges over spending more time with one’s partner and children, having more family dinners, engaging in more social forms of entertainment within the family, visiting friends more frequently and increasing participation in civic activities. Whether such efforts on the part of individuals in the absence of societal-level changes to support them would succeed in reducing personal consumption in such a way that they realise the double dividend of raising the individual’s welfare and reducing their environmental impact is an empirical question for which the data is unavailable. However, several intuitive claims have already been cited which support the claim that the personal consumption of individuals who did increase their social connectedness in the above ways would be reduced. For example, the claim that the size of family homes and the quantity of private electronic entertainment equipment decrease the time families spend together clearly recommends a reduction in consumption, as does the claim that lengthier commuting times translates into less time spent engaged in civic involvement. Building trust in one’s own community, as well as informal social recreation with others, also requires more time spent in the company of others which, while sometimes entailing greater expenditure on food or other items for special occasions, often means that only one house is lit and heated for the evening rather than two or more.

I have argued that the erosion of sociability thesis – the first of the expressions of the general overconsumption claim I will examine – receives justification from objective theories of welfare. These theories inform and justify practical judgements to the effect that the social dimension of human welfare has declined in certain respects. If the reduction in personal consumption is engaged in sensitively such that gains in the

---

32 I acknowledge that a modern form of social connectedness which requires electronic equipment is through internet-based social networks. My argument here, though, is merely that increasing the time spent in ordinary contact within the family will entail, given its very recent increase, a reduction in the use and consumption of computers and TVs. It makes no claims regarding the quality of the social contact enabled by computers or its substitutability for face-to-face social contact.
dimension of sociability are realised without compromising other goods, then the double dividend of welfare gains and the mitigation of environmental impact may be realised by the widespread adoption of the recommendations of this thesis.

4. The Insufficiency Thesis

The second expression of the overconsumption claim that I will examine posits that the plateau in welfare over the past 40–60 years in rich countries has occurred because there has been no welfare gains (or losses) with regard to any of the substantive goods. In particular it offers a failure thesis regarding the role of the rise in consumption in the welfare plateau; the rise has failed to promote further welfare gains in any dimension, and current levels of consumption are therefore excessive in the sense that reduced levels of consumption could realise the same welfare levels. I will concentrate on Jackson and Marks’ (1999) version of this expression of the overconsumption claim. Their arguments are framed within a needs-based theory of welfare whereby welfare consists in the satisfaction of needs. Below I will explain their theory and how I will recast their arguments in terms of the class of objective theories whereby welfare consists in the realisation of the substantive goods. For now, I will characterise their claims in these latter terms.

4.1 Jackson and Marks’ Failure Thesis

Their thesis is that the increase of 160% in per capita consumption of material goods in the UK between 1954 and 1994 targeted at realising the ‘non-material’ substantive goods of knowledge, sociability, aesthetic experience and play failed to do so. A further sub-thesis to be found amongst their arguments is that the 50% increase in per capita consumption targeted at realising the ‘material’ substantive good of life itself also failed to do so. I will argue that objective theories of welfare may provide justification to these claims in virtue of informing and justifying practical judgements that are consistent with and elucidate the thesis, as well as providing the resources to explain (in conjunction with appropriate empirical evidence) the manner in which the thesis suggests additional consumption has failed to realise additional welfare.
Jackson and Marks employ Max-Neef’s (1991) conception of needs, according to which needs are states of deprivation ‘in the sense of something being lacking’ and potentialities which can ‘serve to motivate or mobilise the subject’ (1999: 428). Nine needs are distinguished: subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, idleness, creation, identity and freedom. The authors adopt a needs-based theory of welfare according to which welfare consists in the satisfaction of the above needs. As I argued in Chapter 2, although needs satisfaction should constitute part of an objective theory of welfare, such a theory would be inadequate and incomplete if solely based on needs satisfaction. However, I contend that little if anything is lost in translating Jackson and Marks’ argument into the class of richer objective theories of welfare that I have been employing whereby welfare consists not only in the satisfaction of needs but in the realisation of the substantive goods. I will continue to explicate Jackson and Marks’ arguments in their own terms of needs satisfaction, but I will briefly make explicit the relation between Max-Neef’s needs and the substantive goods I specified in the previous chapter: the needs of subsistence and protection clearly relate to the substantive good of life itself; understanding to knowledge; participation and affection to sociability; idleness to play; and aspects of creation to play and aesthetic experience. I have not specified prudential values that straightforwardly relate to the needs of identity or freedom.

The authors distinguish between material and non-material needs:

[M]aterial needs [subsistence and protection] are needs which could not possibly be satisfied without a minimum level of material throughput, the nature of the needs is a requirement for certain material inputs; non-material needs [affection, understanding, participation, idleness, creation, identity and freedom] could, at least in principle, be satisfied without any requirements for material throughput over and above those needed to satisfy the material needs....They are far more about processes (personal, social, cultural) than they are about objects.... It is possible, at least in principle, to conceive of addressing these needs without – or at least with vanishingly small – material intervention.

To reflect this distinction I will, in the discussion to follow the explication of Jackson and Marks’ arguments, characterise the substantive good of life itself as constituting the material dimension of welfare, and the substantive goods of knowledge, sociability, aesthetic experience and play as constituting the non-material dimensions of welfare.
Jackson and Marks’ argument may be summarised thus: material goods and their consumption are at best pseudo-satisfiers of non-material needs, and at worse inhibiting satisfiers or even destroyers or violators (p. 439). Satisfiers are different forms of having, being, doing and interacting. They ‘actualise’ the deprivations and potentialities of needs. For example, food and the system for the distribution of food is a satisfier for the need of subsistence; medicine for the need of protection; education for the need of understanding; and sport for the needs of idleness, participation and identity. These examples of satisfiers are provided at a very general level of specification, for there are very many different kinds of food and medicine, systems of education and sports. As the authors observe, cultures are characterised by the satisfiers that predominate, and cultural change is the process of exchanging one set of satisfiers for another (p. 428). However, not all satisfiers will be equally successful in meeting the needs they are targeted at satisfying. Max-Neef distinguished five categories of satisfiers (p. 428–9):

- **destroyers or violators** occupy the paradoxical position of failing completely to satisfy the need towards which they are directed;
- **pseudo-satisfiers** generate a false sense of satisfaction of the need;
- **inhibiting satisfiers** satisfy one need to which they are directed but tend to inhibit the satisfaction of other needs;
- **singular satisfiers** manage to satisfy a single category of need without affecting satisfaction elsewhere;
- **synergistic satisfiers** manage simultaneously to satisfy several different kinds of needs.

The authors suggest chocolate as a pseudo-satisfier for the need of affection (p. 430), and Jackson et al. (2004: 14) suggest as inhibiting satisfiers cigarettes (satisfying needs of participation, idleness and identity, but inhibiting the needs of subsistence and protection) and television (satisfying the need of idleness and inhibiting the need of creation).

The authors conduct a rigorous analysis of consumer expenditure during the study period to support their claim that many of the kinds of material goods and much of
their consumption as it is currently practiced in consumer societies are pseudo-satisfiers, inhibiting satisfiers or destroyers of non-material needs. They advance an analysis of consumer expenditure which distinguishes different categories of consumption, determines the increase in expenditure and then assigns the increase to the attempted satisfaction of either material or non-material needs. Consumer expenditure has doubled in the forty year period of the study, but this increase was distributed unevenly across different categories of expenditure. There were small real terms increases in expenditure on food (29%), fuel (55%) and housing (78%), but clothing (224%), communication (341%), household appliances (385%) and recreation and entertainment (398%) saw very large increases. Within the category of recreation and entertainment, gambling (80%) saw a small increase compared to sports and recreational goods (580%) and durable entertainment goods such as television, radio, video and sound systems (3500%). The increase in real terms expenditure on travel (293%) was also substantial. But within that category it was car travel which accounted for most of the increase (950%), with expenditure on public transport falling. Mobility, as measured in how far we travel a year, has increased by 400%. The analysis reveals that although an increase in expenditure does not entail that there is an increase in consumption of material goods (i.e. the expenditure may have been on such things as education), as a matter of fact most of the increase has been on material goods (p. 439). The authors argue that while a proportion of the increase in expenditure is attributable to the changing structural cost of maintaining levels of needs satisfaction (such as for participation and affection (visiting more dispersed families) or for subsistence (shopping at out of town retail centres)), most is attributable to the attempt to satisfy non-material needs, with 160% increase for non-material needs and a 50% increase for material needs (p. 439).

Jackson and Marks argue that if material goods and their consumption were successful satisfiers of non-material needs then any increase in expenditure on material goods intended to satisfy them would be correlated with an increase in the satisfaction of those needs. They do not appeal to the empirical evidence I presented above, but to the arguments of critics of consumer society to support the claim that there is ‘little evidence for substantial increase in needs satisfaction in these other categories and considerable literature suggesting modern society is increasingly
suffering from varying degrees of poverty in relation to them’ (p. 436). They also appeal to critics of modern consumer society to cast doubt on whether this massive increase in consumer expenditure directed at satisfying non-material needs is correlated with any increase in their satisfaction. They cite Herber’s (1963) criticism of the ‘anonymity, social atomisation and spiritual isolation’ of modern society, implying that the non-material need of participation is not well met; Fromm’s (1976) criticism of modern forms of entertainment fostering passivity and alienation, implying that the consumption of durable entertainment goods is not apt to satisfy the non-material needs of idleness and creativity; Watchel’s (1989) criticism of the consumer way of life as psychologically ‘flawed’; and the literature on the psychopathology of consuming in the attempt to satisfy the need for identity, such as Elgin’s (1993) claim that ‘when we equate our identity with that which we consume.....we become consumed by our possessions.’

The thesis that the 160% increase in consumer expenditure targeted at realising welfare in the non-material dimensions has failed is Jackson and Marks’ central contention, and I will treat it in section 4.3. I will argue that objective theories of welfare can appeal to a conception of satisfiers according to which the consumption of material goods is insufficient to realise non-material dimensions of welfare without accompanying that consumption with certain appropriate modes of engagement. However, before doing so, I will argue that objective theories of welfare can also justify a sub-thesis that they offer: that the 50% increase in consumption targeted at the realisation of welfare in the material dimension constituted by the substantive good of life itself has failed to realise additional welfare. Together, these two theses are necessary to establish the failure thesis that additional consumption has failed to increase welfare in any dimension such that welfare has plateaued.

4.2 The Plateau in the Material Dimension of Welfare

Jackson and Marks’ analysis reveals that over the study period there was a 50% increase in consumer expenditure that is best understood as targeted at the satisfaction of material needs, such as real terms increases in expenditure on food (29%), fuel (55%) and housing (78%). However, they claim that ‘[w]here subsistence and protection needs are concerned, these were largely already met in the
UK in 1954’ (p. 436). While a proportion of this increase in expenditure will be attributable to the changing structural cost of maintaining levels of needs satisfaction, such as or for subsistence (shopping at out of town retail centres) (p. 439), much of it was plausibly an attempt to realise further welfare in relation to protection (e.g. heating dwellings to higher temperatures and for longer periods, purchasing larger houses) and subsistence (e.g. prepared meals). How can an objective theory of welfare justify the claim that this increase in consumption failed to promote further welfare gains with respect the dimension of life itself? The justification lies in claiming that the various substantive goods – life itself included – are subject to upper thresholds. The theory of welfare that equates welfare with needs satisfaction has a clear account of an upper threshold to welfare; no more welfare is available with regard to a particular need once that need is satisfied. This is what Jackson and Marks claim with regard to subsistence and protection, and this claim seems plausible; once we are adequately fed, sheltered and clothed, additional food, shelter and clothes make little contribution to this dimension of our welfare. But what about a theory for which welfare consists in the realisation of the substantive goods? On such a theory, needs plausibly constitute a lower threshold to the degree of realisation necessary to avoid harm; without a certain degree of the various substantive goods, an individual cannot live a minimally flourishing or decent life. As I argued in Chapter 2, however, while needs comprise a part of an adequate objective theory, they do not exhaust it. For any given substantive good, there is additional welfare available – further realisation of that good attainable – beyond the lower threshold of needs satisfaction. An elderly lady who lives alone and is house-bound may have her need for social contact satisfied by a twice-weekly visit from a volunteer helper, but if the helper establishes a charity who collects her and others like her in the local area and lays on a dinner in a residential housing centre where she can meet old friends and make new ones, then she will have improved her welfare in this dimension beyond the lower threshold of needs satisfaction. Clearly, unlike a needs-based theory of welfare, the upper threshold to welfare is not constituted by the satisfaction of needs for theories according to which welfare is constituted by the realisation of the substantive goods.

I will introduce two kinds of upper threshold that such theories may accommodate. Firstly, the *satiation threshold* is breached when further attempts to achieve welfare gains in the dimension in question either fail, or compromise the welfare in that dimension. Overeating is a paradigmatic (and common)\(^{34}\) case of crossing the satiation threshold; by overeating the state of healthiness is ‘exited’ into a state of being unhealthy. The sense in which this state of unhealthiness counts as obtaining beyond the *upper* threshold of welfare in the dimension of life itself is a function of its causal origin lying in a *surplus* of that which otherwise contributes to realising this substantive good. The state of unhealthiness that a malnourished person is in is a function of an *undersupply*, and therefore the state of unhealthiness counts as obtaining ‘below’ the lower threshold of needs satisfaction.

The second kind of upper threshold is a function of the limitations of time and personal energy available to humans. As Black (2000: 16) observes, ‘our experience reveals that the pursuit of fulfilling activities requires substantial amounts of time and personal energy, and that human life is limited in these regards’. Cooper (1986: 95, my emphasis) notes that ‘beyond identifying a set of ends, a rational plan [for life] must also assign priorities: how far to develop the various capacities, how much time to devote to their exercise, what to do when *the pursuit of one end will require slighting another*, and so on’. To engage in one activity will typically require forgoing the opportunity to engage in another. (This is not necessarily the case; for example, one may enjoy the aesthetic experience of listening to music while pursuing some practical activity.) While this is a fact imposed by the finitude of human existence in terms of the time and personal energy available, it need only be of concern once the time and personal energy spent realising one substantive good results in an appreciable or significant detriment to other goods. As Hardie (1965: 278) observes of any agent, ‘if he pursues one object too ardently, he may lose or imperil other objects also dear to him’. This point marks a second kind of threshold, which I will call the *transference threshold*; where the pursuit of one good imperils others to the extent that their lower thresholds of needs satisfaction is breached.

---

\(^{34}\) Americans consume on average 25% more calories and three out of five Americans are overweight and one out of five is obese (Gambrel and Cafaro 2010: 91).
The satiation threshold can be appealed to by an objective theory of welfare to justify the claim that, despite the 50% increase in consumption over the study period, there was no further welfare realised in the material dimension. While the lower threshold of needs satisfaction and the satiation threshold may not coincide with regard to this good, they are sufficiently close that very little additional welfare is available once needs are met. If needs were met by 1954 for many, then additional consumption targeted at this dimension will have either realised very little, or perhaps have failed to realise any additional welfare. Worse still, the rise in obesity and its related health problems appears to be a case of breaching the satiation threshold; that is, not only failing to realise additional welfare in this dimension, but compromising it.

The transference threshold can be appealed to by an objective theory of welfare to justify the claim that pursuit of further comfort, convenience and luxury related to the needs of subsistence and protection risks compromising welfare in other dimensions. Of course, much consumption of material goods which appear to be related to material needs – clothing, housing, automobiles – is in fact in pursuit of social status. However, the foregoing arguments suggest that that proportion of the rise in consumption which is attributable to the attempt to realise further material welfare – and the time and personal energy that consumption takes – would be better spent pursuing the non-material substantive goods. It is to these goods, and Jackson and Marks’ claim that the additional consumption that has had their realisation as its aim has failed, that I turn to next.

4.3 The Plateau in the Non-material Dimensions of Welfare
The argument of this section is that objective theories of welfare can provide the theoretical element to the explanation for the failure thesis proposed by Jackson and Marks. Their thesis is that there has been a 160% increase in the consumption of material goods targeted at the realisation of the non-material substantive goods but that this increase has failed to realise any additional welfare in these dimensions. I will argue that objective theories and their account of the nature of many of the substantive welfare goods may contribute to two possible explanations of the failure of additional consumption to realise welfare in the non-material dimensions. Whether either of these two potential explanations are cogent would require empirical evidence to determine.
Much of the increase in consumption has been of what Russell Keat (2000) refers to as equipment goods; goods which enable consumers to engage in ‘own sake’ activities. For example, expenditure on sports and recreational goods increased by 580% over the study period. These equipment goods enable engagement in activities that constitute forms of the non-material substantive goods. Books and computers enable forms of the good of knowledge; cameras and stereo equipment enable forms of aesthetic experience; mountain bikes and musical instruments enable forms of play; and anything given as a gift or employed in social forms of the other goods may enable forms of sociability. But despite the massive increase in expenditure on such equipment goods, Jackson and Marks claim (and this claim correlates with the life satisfaction data) that there has been no corresponding increase in welfare in these dimensions. The following two explanations – both of which receive justification from objective theories of welfare and the practical judgements they enable – seem to me to be plausible candidates.

Firstly, it may simply be the case that a significant proportion of the equipment goods that are purchased are rarely used and, in some cases, never used at all. Purchasing and possessing an equipment good – a surf board, a mountain bike, an amateur astronomy telescope – is clearly insufficient for realising the form of the substantive good it may contribute toward enabling, and using it only a few times before storing it fails to realise the potential it has. It seems likely that a not insignificant proportion of equipment goods that are purchased are used extremely infrequently; the massive growth in the self-storage industry, which has responded in part to the rise in the proportion of possessions that fail to be used, is an indication of this (De Graaf et al. 2001: 32). This explanation finds support in one of the practical judgements appealed to above and outlined in Chapter 2; that longer durations engaged in the realisation of the substantive goods can justify a judgement of welfare gains. If many of the equipment goods that are purchased are in fact rarely and infrequently used for engaging in activities that realise the substantive goods of, say, knowledge, play and aesthetic experience, then it is unsurprising that the rise in their consumption has not been attended by a rise in welfare.

The second explanation concerns the manner in which equipment goods are used. Consider the other kind of judgement appealed to above and outlined in Chapter 2,
where a substantive good can be realised in forms which realise the good’s potentialities to varying degrees. In Chapter 2 I provided examples where the potential of a good was not realised because of a lack of skill or attention on the part of the agent. I will now explain this further. Recall that substantive goods may be either exclusively objective (e.g. life itself), exclusively subjective (e.g. pleasure), or a composite of both objective and subjective components (e.g. friendship). The objective component is constituted by engagement in some activity. For example, the substantive good of play cannot be realised without engaging in some activity or another. This activity may be a physical activity such as paragliding or a mental activity such as solving a word puzzle. The subjective component is constituted by an appropriate mode of engagement. It is insufficient to realise a composite substantive good to merely ‘go through the motions’ of engaging in the activity. One must be intellectually, aesthetically or affectively engaged – as appropriate – in one’s activity. For example, it seems reasonable to judge that the geology student who is learning how to distinguish between different minerals by grain size but is not intellectually engaged in this endeavour realises the substantive good of knowledge to a lesser degree than his fellow student who is so intellectually engaged. The party-goer with social anxiety disorder who is making an effort to join in with the conversation but wishing he was not there is not affectively engaged and is thereby failing to realise the good of sociability to the degree that he might in this instance. The person who is loyally ploughing her way through her friend’s newly-published historical romance novel but who secretly abhors this genre is not aesthetically engaged with the work in a way which fully realises the good of aesthetic experience. The realisation of these goods is such that we can see ways in which its potentialities might be more fully exploited. We could in this way explain why, for all the additional consumption of equipment goods that has taken place in recent decades, there has been little additional welfare realised in the non-material dimensions. Consumer society has placed too great an emphasis on purchase, possession and perhaps display, and too little on cultivating the appropriate modes of engagement which are necessary constituents of realising the substantive goods.

4.4 The Recommendation for Consumption Reduction
Several recommendations may be derived from this expression of the overconsumption claim. Firstly, since it seems plausible that part of the failure of the
rise in expenditure on equipment goods to realise welfare gains in the non-material dimensions is attributable to a failure to use those goods, it seems sensible to say that consumers should make more careful decisions regarding what they purchase and refrain from purchasing equipment goods that they are unlikely to use frequently. The income that was spent on these goods may then be put to other uses (which may or may not be alternative equipment goods) which may realise additional welfare, as well as the time and personal energy that it takes to choose, purchase, put into storage, move between houses and finally dispose of goods that fail to be used to a significant extent. Secondly, this expression recommends cultivating the appropriate modes of engagement that are necessary to fully realise the potential of the substantive goods that equipment goods enable. That is, where a careful decision is made regarding the purchase of an equipment good – say, a camera, a food processor, or an amateur astronomy telescope – then there should be a commitment to not only properly learning how to use the good, but also to cultivating an understanding and appreciation of the value of the activities it enables. Although using equipment goods more frequently will typically mean they require replacement sooner, commitment to the forms of the goods it enables may also mean that fewer equipment goods will be purchased in pursuit of novel experiences or keeping up with the latest models and fashions. This is by no means to suggest that all purchase and use of equipment goods are engaged in for these reasons; they can and do genuinely enable to rich realisations of the substantive goods. But it is undeniable that a not insignificant proportion of such goods would not be purchased if it were not for the pressure of advertising which plays upon the justifiable desire for social acceptance (Lichtenberg 1998). There might also be a concern that rising consumption could promote welfare gains if the appropriate modes of engagement were cultivated and that therefore consumption reduction is not necessary to achieve welfare gains. This may be so, but it is arguable that a different set of cultural values from those embodied in consumerism – and that are partly responsible for the rise in consumption – would be required to establish a widespread emphasis on becoming more absorbed in the development of practices that require the skilled and experienced use of equipment goods. Such values would, I suspect, eschew the frequent replacement of equipment goods and thus occasion reduced consumption levels in at least this domain.
5. The Displacement Thesis

The third expression of the overconsumption claim that I will examine posits, in common with the erosion of sociability thesis, that the plateau in welfare over the past 40–60 years has occurred because of a decline in the social dimension of the welfare of inhabitants of rich countries. However, in contrast to that thesis, it does not implicate the growth in consumption indirectly in this erosion as an integral part of the widespread societal changes which characterise a market economy. Rather, it implicates the growth in consumption directly by alleging that activities falling under the rubric of consumption have displaced time spent with friends, families and engaged in civic activities. Lane (2000: 186), for example, argues that ‘instead of freeing individuals for companionship, market demands seem rather to encroach on the time that might otherwise have been spent with family and friends’.

5.1 The Role of the Rise in Consumption in the Welfare Plateau

I will divide the activities that are alleged to have displaced valuable social interaction into two classes. Firstly, the final use of material goods, such as the surfing of the internet on the computer, the riding of the mountain bike, the toasting of sandwiches in the sandwich toaster and the watching of films on the home cinema system. Secondly, there are the consumption activities which are instrumental to and necessitated by the acquisition and final use of any material good. These include researching the precise kind and model of good required or desired; shopping for and purchasing the good; installing and learning to use the good; cleaning, maintaining and repairing the good; organising its storage within the home and its place within routines; displaying the good; and disposing of the good. In addition to these activities concerning our interaction with material goods themselves, the time spent working to generate the disposable income to purchase consumer goods may also come under the rubric of consumption activities. While this expression of the overconsumption claim can be seen as suggesting that it is the rise in the frequency in which the final use of material goods is engaged in that has been responsible for displacing valuable social interaction, most of the criticism of the rise of consumption is reserved for what I am calling consumption activities. De Graaf et. al. (2001: 32), for example, claim that ‘chronic congestion has settled into our daily lives – chaotic clutter that demands constant maintenance, sorting, displaying, and
replacing’. Related arguments were also cited in support of the erosion of sociability thesis concerning private forms of consumption displacing informal social and civic activities.

Since the displacement thesis alleges that the rise in personal consumption has compromised welfare in the dimension of sociability, this thesis is committed to these losses having been accompanied by gains in other dimensions that justify the judgement of a welfare plateau in order to remain consistent with my commitment to respect the life satisfaction data. As with the erosion of sociability thesis, the literature to which I refer contains no speculation as to what these gains might have been. This is understandable since it commits neither to a pluralistic theory of welfare; to providing a full account of all welfare gains and losses; nor to remaining consistent with the welfare plateau which the life satisfaction data indicates. Further, as I argued in Chapter 2, no generalised claims can be made or rules advanced regarding trade-offs between different substantive goods. Rather, practical judgements – informed by reflection on a cogent theory of welfare and the nature of the substantive welfare goods – must be made which carefully consider the particularities of the context. While in my examination of the erosion of sociability thesis I concentrated on articulating the manner in which declines in the social dimension of welfare had occurred, in this case it is worth considering what welfare gains might have been promoted to justify a judgement consistent with the welfare plateau, for this consideration will reveal the aspects of the nature of modern consumption activities that those who advance the overconsumption claim object to.

Consider firstly that there is a scale on which we may place any given form (kinds of activities or pursuits such as particular sports or subjects of enquiry) of the various substantive goods. At one end of this scale are forms which require a considerable investment of time and personal energy spent on consumption activities necessitated by the final use of material goods which enable that form. At the other end of the scale are forms of the goods which require very little investment of time and personal energy spent on associated consumption activities. For example, if one’s favoured form of the good of aesthetic experience is landscape photography, then this will require a certain amount time and personal energy to be spent on researching and purchasing photography equipment; installing and learning to use
that equipment; cleaning, maintaining and repairing it; upgrading it; and disposing of equipment which has been superseded or has broken beyond repair. If, however, one is content to aesthetically appreciate landscapes without attempting to capture images of them, then this form of aesthetic experience necessitates little or no time on consumption activities to enable it. This scale on which we can place forms applies to any of the substantive goods.

Now, there is nothing necessarily to be preferred about forms which necessitate less investment of time and personal energy on the enumerated consumption activities to those which necessitate more. On the one hand, at least some of the consumption activities required by forms which necessitate a considerable investment in them can be seen as internal to the form itself. The landscape photographer is likely to find researching which new lens he needs to capture an image of a particular landscape an absorbing and exciting project, and the serious mountain biker is likely to see the cleaning and maintenance of his bike as an integral part of his pastime. On the other hand, even if in certain cases it would be a stretch to say that the necessitated consumption activities are internal to the form which they enable, they may nonetheless constitute rich forms of the substantive goods themselves. Learning to use a new material good, and maintaining and repairing it can develop skills that fall under the substantive good of knowledge. Similarly, researching the particular product that can best meet a set of criteria for a valued purpose and choosing from amongst an array of options can involve the exercise of critical appraisal and judgement. Arranging and displaying goods – clothes, interior design features, garden furniture – can involve exercising our aesthetic creativity. It is also true that shopping can be a very sociable activity if engaged in as a leisure activity with friends or family.

This observation suggests the first possibility for one of the sources of the welfare gains that should be taken into consideration alongside the losses to sociability that this expression of the overconsumption claim alleges has occurred; it might be the case that engagement in those very consumption activities that it is alleged have displaced social interaction to the extent that the social dimension of welfare has declined have themselves promoted the welfare gains that we are assuming have occurred. However, a second possibility must be canvassed because this is not what
expressions of the displacement thesis suggest. Rather than suggesting that while it is unfortunate that valuable social interaction has been displaced, it is fortunate that it has been so by activities that themselves promote our welfare in different ways, it rather implies that these activities are inferior. General expressions of this claim compare consumption activities unfavourably to those social activities which they displace. Schmitz and Willott (2006: 354), for example, state the claim thus: ‘Sometimes, what leads us to regard an activity....as overconsumption turns on how that activity prevents us from spending the time in an arguably better way.’ Cafaro (2001: 472) also notes that overconsumption can mean consuming ‘in one area leading me to neglect other types of consumption or nonconsumptive activities that are more in my (enlightened) self-interest.’ De Graaf et. al. (2001: 39) characterise what they note some call ‘possession overload’, where ‘you have so many things you find your life is being taken up by maintaining and caring for things instead of people’. They also (p. 41) cite the predictions of the Swedish economist Staffan Linder, who in 1970 said ‘[a]s the volume of consumption goods increases, requirements for the care and maintenance of those goods also tends to increase, we get bigger houses to clean, a car to wash, a boat to put up for the winter, a television set to repair, and have to make more decisions on spending’ as well as the time-consuming activity of shopping itself. They note that the ‘chaotic clutter’ and ‘possession overload’ of those who are ‘just unable to stop buying’ such that their houses and double garages are full have fuelled a forty-fold expansion since the 1960s in the self-storage industry, now worth $12 billion annually (p. 32). They dismiss labour-saving devices as merely constituting yet more objects which require purchasing, maintaining, cleaning, upgrading and disposing: ‘We thought the opposite was supposed to be true: that advances in technology....were supposed to give us more leisure time and less work....We got the technology, but we didn’t get the time’ (pp. 40–1).

These are hardly observations that sociability on the one hand and consumption activities on the other may be equal in the contribution they make to welfare. If this were the case then there would arguably be no welfare (although still environmental) reasons to reduce personal consumption, since reducing engagement in consumption activities for the sake of increasing engagement in social activities would yield no welfare dividend overall. The second possibility seems therefore to better
characterise the intentions of those who advance this expression of the overconsumption claim: that the welfare gains that must be assumed to have occurred are unrelated to consumption and its associated activities. I argued that the previous expression of the overconsumption claim was best understood as being committed to claiming that while consumption of material goods constituted the objective element of many forms of the non-material substantive goods, the cultivation of the appropriate modes of engagement had been neglected such that the potentialities of the substantive goods were not being realised to the degree they might be. This expression, however, in suggesting that consumption activities fail to constitute realisations of the substantive goods sufficient to account for significant welfare gains, is best understood as being committed to there being a limitation on the degree of realisation of the goods these activities as they are currently pursued can achieve even with the appropriate modes of engagement.

Firstly, the activities of shopping, displaying and disposing are less than they might be. It is a commonplace that shopping has become a more impersonal experience; instead of small-scale shops in town centres where the staff knew their customers by name and members of the community frequently encountered one another, large shopping centres and supermarkets offer much less such social interaction unless one goes in company. The display of material goods is rarely motivated solely by one’s own aesthetic tastes, but is pursued within the restrictions of fashion and the tastes of one’s neighbours and friends. The disposal of material goods, which in the past was more frequently an exercise in skill and imagination to see how much one could reuse and recycle from their constituent parts, is now most often a trip to the municipal waste disposal site. Secondly, the nature of mass produced consumer goods is such that learning to use them has been de-skilled, and maintaining and repairing them often made impossible altogether.\textsuperscript{35} No matter the degree to which we may wish to fully realise what welfare we can from our consumption activities, a

\textsuperscript{35} This point regarding the impossibility of maintenance of many household goods may appear to conflict with my earlier point that maintenance is one of the consumption activities which is displacing sociability. However, maintenance can simply refer to cleaning the car, recharging batteries, de-bugging the computer and other routine and unskilled practices. This kind of necessary but unskilled maintenance is different from the skilled maintenance that is no longer possible on many cars, electronic goods and items of kitchen equipment that I am highlighting here. These points touch upon the concerns of Albert Borgmann regarding what he calls the ‘device paradigm’ and the decline of ‘focal things and practices’ in his (1984) \textit{Technology and Character of Contemporary: A Philosophical Enquiry}. 
consumer society and the kinds of material artefacts it produces limit the welfare that is available.

5.2 The Recommendation for Consumption Reduction

Six kinds of recommendation which would succeed in both realising welfare gains and reducing personal consumption emerge from this expression of the overconsumption claim. Firstly, consumption activities should be reduced and replaced with social interaction. This expression is committed to social relations having a greater potential to realise welfare gains than consumption activities as they are currently engaged in, and it stands to reason that a life in which there is less shopping and purchasing of material goods – and which therefore also contains less maintenance, upgrade, disposal and so on – is one which occasions less material throughput. Secondly, individuals should endeavour to choose material goods which require less frequent upgrade, disposal and replacement. Such goods, with a more durable construction, may have required more resources to manufacture, but will typically last longer and therefore occasion less resource use in the longer term. Thirdly, individuals should not only endeavour to purchase less frequently by choosing more durable goods but also by resisting the pressure from marketing to replace goods that have not yet reached the end of their useful life. Part of the pressure to replace goods also comes from comparing our possessions to others, which marketing encourages us to do. Paying less attention to what others have and are displaying may also allow a greater degree of expression of our own aesthetic preferences. Fourthly, where possible, equipment goods and other kinds of material goods should be imaginatively recycled instead of occasioning a trip to the municipal waste site. Fifthly, where maintenance and repair requires the development of skills these should be developed instead of storing or disposing of the good.

The sixth recommendation recognises that although this expression of the overconsumption claim diagnoses the problem as being the displacement of sociability by consumption activities, it is not necessarily the case that the additional time and energy saved by reducing personal consumption must be invested in forms of sociability. Rather, instead of attempting to replace only those goods which it is alleged have been neglected, consumption might be replaced by any other substantive good. A paradigmatic activity which environmental and social
campaigners suggest as a replacement for consumption is (low consumption forms of) direct contact with nature. Natural and semi-natural environments enable many rich forms of the various substantive goods. For example, it enables rich forms of knowledge concerning geological history, plant and animal biology, ecological relationships, meteorological phenomena and the history of association between all of these and human culture embodied in cultural landscapes; natural and semi-natural environments are paradigmatic objects of aesthetic appreciation; and the scope for adventure and exploration and the risk inherent in uncontrolled environments have given rise to an array of forms of play: walking, hiking, trekking, orienteering and camping; cycling and mountain biking; climbing and mountaineering; swimming, surfing, windsurfing, kite surfing, snorkelling and diving; kayaking and canoeing; caving and canyoning; downhill and cross-country skiing, and snowboarding; hunting and fishing. All of these forms are pursued in company, and the forms of sociability they enable are rich, including as they do intense experiences, dependency on others in risky situations, teamwork and long periods of time spent with one another. Insofar as reducing consumption frees up time and personal energy for investment elsewhere on activities that would otherwise have been engaged in low quality forms of consumption activities, direct contact with nature in one form or another is a significant candidate for realising the welfare dividend this expression of the overconsumption claim suggests is available.

7. Conclusion

This chapter has argued that three expressions of the overconsumption claim which are advanced in the popular and scholarly literature receive justification from objective theories of welfare. The first expression – the erosion of sociability thesis – claimed that welfare has plateaued within rich countries because of a decline in the social dimension of welfare. This decline was attributed to societal changes brought about at least in part by the market economy, of which rising personal consumption is an integral element. I argued that objective theories of welfare can provide justification to this thesis insofar as this thesis (i) alleges that a dimension of our welfare has declined which corresponds to a substantive good (i.e. sociability) that objective theories specify, and (ii) is consistent with and illuminated by practical judgements regarding welfare losses that such theories warrant. These judgements
concerned the failure to fully realise the potentialities of the good of sociability, the reduced duration for which this good is realised in high consumption lives, and the narrative of loss amongst those who have witnessed the erosion of communities.

The second expression – the insufficiency thesis – claimed that welfare has plateaued within rich countries because the additional consumption failed to realise additional welfare in any dimension. Rising consumption has therefore not played a direct role in the plateauing of welfare, but the expectation that it would promote further welfare gains has been confounded. I argued that objective theories of welfare can provide justification to this thesis insofar as this thesis (i) is consistent with and illuminated by practical judgements regarding the failure to realise welfare gains on any dimension; (ii) implicitly appeals to the substantive goods being subject to upper thresholds, which notion objective theories may accommodate; and (iii) is potentially explained (on condition of the availability of supporting empirical evidence) by reference to either the duration for which equipment goods are used or the nature of composite welfare goods enumerated by objective theories, whereby the pursuit of the activities that consumption of material goods enable is insufficient to realise the substantive goods in the absence of the appropriate modes of engagement that are partly constitutive of their realisation.

The third expression – the displacement thesis – claimed that welfare has plateaued within rich countries because the social dimension of welfare has declined. This decline was attributed to the rise in consumption in virtue of the additional time and personal energy that the consumption of material goods requires – and the further activities of shopping, maintaining and disposing that this consumption entails – displacing familial, social and civic activities. I argued that objective theories of welfare can provide justification to this thesis insofar as this thesis is consistent with practical judgements regarding welfare losses in the dimension of sociability. It was argued that this expression rejects the hypothesis that, on the assumption that welfare gains must have occurred elsewhere such that a judgement of a welfare plateau was justified, these gains are attributable to the additional consumption and its related activities. Again, objective theories of welfare provide the resources to make practical judgements that explain the failure of the displacing consumption activities to constitute welfare gains.
The thesis which has spanned chapters 2 and 3 is that objective theories of welfare – comprised of one of the class of determination theses which are defensible from the two criticisms advanced by Sumner; a content thesis which enumerates the appropriate substantive goods; and a defence of the possibility of practical judgements regarding intra- and interpersonal welfare comparisons – provide justification to three expressions of the overconsumption claim and therefore may comprise an element of cogent analyses of the manner in which ‘modern society is adrift in its pursuit of wellbeing’ (Jackson 2008: 704).
4 The Problem of Inconsequentialism

1. Introduction

This chapter and the next constitute an analysis of moral arguments for reducing personal consumption. This chapter will introduce the nature of the problem of justifying a moral obligation to reduce personal consumption, and the next chapter will advance a number of ways of justifying this obligation. This context of personal consumption and its aggregated environmental consequences is an instance of the well-recognised problem of justifying an obligation to refrain from performing actions which are members of large sets of actions, each with imperceptible consequences but which aggregate to cause considerable harm. In this chapter I will argue that attempts at justifying an obligation to refrain from performing such actions that have been offered by consequentialists, as well as further arguments that could be offered by deontologists and virtue ethicists, fail. In the next and final chapter I will offer an alternative approach, grounded in virtue ethics, which I will argue succeeds in justifying the obligation.

In section 2 of this chapter I will distinguish three classes of actions which individuals are urged to engage in by environmental campaigners; compliance with the requirements of existing collective measures to mitigate the harmful impacts of environmental problems, promotion of stronger and more adequate collective agreements, and unilateral reductions of personal consumption. I will explain what makes an action a unilateral reduction before noting that it is typically assumed that widespread engagement in all three kinds of actions are necessary for the success of efforts to mitigate environmental harm. However, as I will next observe, there is scepticism in the scholarly literature that individuals are under an obligation to engage in unilateral reductions in personal consumption. This scepticism is best expressed by Sandler’s (2010: 168) formulation of the problem of inconsequentialism: ‘given that a person’s contribution, although needed (albeit not necessary), is nearly inconsequential to addressing the problem and may require some cost from the standpoint of the person’s own life, why should the person make the effort, particularly when it is uncertain (or even unlikely) whether others will do
so?’ The expressions of the overconsumption claim examined in Chapter 3 can be seen as constituting a particular kind of response to this problem; they argued that unilateral reductions in personal consumption, if engaged in sensitively and informed by the recommendations that these expressions advance, need not involve a cost from the standpoint of the person’s own life. Individuals should therefore engage in unilateral reductions because of the welfare dividends available in doing so. The arguments that are the subject of this chapter and the next constitute a different kind of response to the problem of inconsequentialism: they argue that despite any costs to the individual and the likelihood of others joining one’s efforts, individuals are nonetheless under a moral obligation to engage in unilateral reductions in personal consumption. Sandler’s problem of inconsequentialism can be expressed in two ways with regard to this response: (i) given that, for any given individual, performing unilateral reductions will alleviate no harm, it is unjustifiable to claim that individuals are under an obligation to engage in them, and (ii) given that, for any given individual, continuing to consume at current levels (i.e. failing to engage in unilateral reductions) causes no harm, it is unjustifiable to claim that individuals are committing a moral wrongdoing. In section 3 I will argue that two classic responses – from Parfit (1984) and Glover (1975) – to the problem of justifying an obligation to refrain from inconsequentially contributing to collective harm fail. In section 4 I will briefly outline the inadequacy of standard Kantian ethics to justify this obligation, and in section 5 I will develop a virtue ethics approach to justifying the obligation but argue that this too fails.

2. The Problem of Inconsequentialism

A variety of strategies are advocated by environmental campaigners for individuals to contribute to mitigating the harmful impacts of environmental problems. These harmful impacts are the disease, displacement and starvation of humans and non-humans. The environmental problems that cause this harm are the reduction of forest cover; the reduction in fish stocks; an increase in the nonhuman extinction rate; a reduction in the availability of potable water; and the increase in storm frequency and intensity, drought frequency and the incidence of tropical disease that are the results of global climate change. I will distinguish three strategies that are advocated by environmental campaigners for individuals to contribute to their mitigation.
2.1 Compliance
Firstly, the *compliance* of individuals with the requirements of existing collective agreements that genuinely contribute to the mitigation of the harmful impacts of environmental problems is clearly important if those agreements are to be successful in their aims. In Rawlsian terms, we have duties ‘to support and comply with just institutions that exist and apply to us’ (Rawls 1999: 99). Collective agreements in this context mean not only international treaties such as the Kyoto Protocol and the Convention on Biological Diversity, but also the domestic legislative and institutional measures to implement these agreements as well as other regional, domestic and local measures. These include ‘green’ taxes; bans in the manufacture, import and sale of certain goods or components of goods; national and local subsides for building insulation, energy saving goods, compost bins and public transport; local bans on the use of hosepipes; and voluntary agreements of car manufacturers to increase fuel efficiency or of supermarkets to reduce food miles. Environmental campaigners rarely explicitly encourage individuals to comply with such arrangements unless they are widely flouted to the extent that the success of the arrangement in meeting its aim is in doubt. For example, if the ban on the sale of a certain product in order to remove a particular chemical from the environment was being undermined by a black market in goods that contained it, environmental organisations would likely encourage consumers to comply with the ban and not to purchase the product on the black market.

2.2 Promotion
Secondly, on the assumption that existing collective agreements are inadequate to address all environmental problems, campaigners urge that individuals engage in *promotion* activities to bring about stronger and more adequate collective agreements. Protesting against the inadequacy of existing arrangements, lobbying governments and corporations for stronger agreements, and voting and campaigning for political candidates who will attempt to bring about more comprehensive and effective collective measures all count as this kind of action. Again, to put this is in more familiar political philosophical terms, we have duties to ‘further just arrangements not yet established’ (Rawls 1999: 99). As Stern (2006: 395) argues, ‘[t]he actions and attitudes of individuals also matter when it comes to international
collective action by governments. The most important force that will generate and sustain this action is domestic political demand in the key countries or regions’.

2.3 Unilateral Reductions
Thirdly, almost all environmental agencies and organisations produce a list of things that individuals can do in their households and daily lives to reduce their personal contribution to global climate change and other environmental problems. Directgov, the UK Government information website, for example, say that ‘the biggest effects most people have on climate change [and other environmental problems] come from energy used at home, travel, [and] the food they eat.’ They suggest turning down your heating; insulating your home; buying energy saving products; driving less and buying fuel saving cars; flying less and offsetting CO₂ emissions; wasting less food; eating less meat and dairy, and buying more fresh and outdoor-grown foods; reusing and repairing goods, recycling and composting; and choosing ‘greener’ products such as responsibly caught fish. Other government agencies such as the US Environmental Protection Agency suggest very similar actions, as well as switching to a green energy tariff, using a push mower, using water efficiently, using public transport for your commute; and learning how to drive your car more efficiently. Non-governmental environmental organisations also advocate personal actions. Greenpeace, for example, suggest that individuals should switch off computers, TVs, hi-fis and mobile phone chargers when not in use; leave lids on cooking pots and only boil the required amount of water; regularly defrost fridges and freezers; take shorter showers; wash clothes at low temperatures, always wait until you can fill the washing machine drum and dry your clothes outside instead of using tumble dryers;

37 Ibid.
turn the thermostat down; video conference instead of fly to meetings; and take more local holidays.  

I will call this third category of actions to contribute to the mitigation of the harmful impacts of environmental problems *unilateral reductions*. The sense in which these actions are *reductions* is that they all involve a reduction on the part of the individual in the direct use of, or stimulation of demand for, natural resources. For example, turning down household heating and washing clothes at low temperatures will reduce the level of demand the individual stimulates for fossil fuels used for heating and electricity generation; taking shorter showers directly uses less water; and recycling aluminium cans reduces demand for the extraction of new bauxite. A second sense in which these actions are reductions is that they reduce the level of CO$_2$ emissions an individual is responsible for, both through direct use and through stimulation of demand. Reductions typically take the form of either (i) the consumer choosing A (some energy efficient product, say) instead of B (some energy inefficient product), thus stimulating demand for more energy efficient products as well as using less energy over the lifetime of its use, or (ii) refraining from consuming X (whether it is energy efficient or not).

A reduction is *unilateral* only if it is (i) voluntary and (ii) is not part of, or if it goes beyond what is required of the individual to comply with, germane collective agreements. With regard to (i), a reduction is voluntary in this context only if the opportunity not to reduce (e.g. to leave the thermostat up higher) was both available to and legal for them. If the individual turned the thermostat down because they could not afford to heat their home adequately, then the opportunity not to reduce was not available to them and this action does not count as a unilateral reduction. And if the individual replaced their incandescent lightbulbs with energy efficient ones because a ban on incandescent lightbulbs has taken effect, then the opportunity not to reduce was not legal for them and this action does not count as a unilateral reduction. Where opportunities not to reduce were available to and legal for the individual, a reduction undertaken for prudential reasons (rather than solely to reduce

---

one’s contribution to environmental problems) counts as a unilateral reduction. With regard to (ii), it is only possible for unilateral reductions to make a contribution to mitigation efforts in the context of either the non-existence of a collective agreement to address the environmental problem in question, or a collective agreement which only inadequately addresses it. Collective agreements (taxes, bans, subsidies, etc.) diminish the space for unilateral reductions to contribute, since by their nature unilateral reductions go beyond the measures instituted by collective agreements. A wholly adequate and comprehensive collective agreement would foreclose unilateral reductions making further contributions to mitigating the harmful impacts of environmental problems. For example, a personal carbon credit scheme which covered the entire population of a nation and was integrated into a legally binding international treaty to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to a level and by a time which stood a high chance of avoiding dangerous climate change would only require individuals to comply with the procedures of the scheme; further – unilateral – reductions on the part of individuals in addition to the reductions that would be built into the scheme would be unnecessary (at least with regard to this particular aspect of this particular environmental problem).

2.4 The Requirement of All Three Strategies to Meet Environmental Problems

We thus have three classes of actions that individuals are urged to engage in to contribute to the mitigation of the harmful impacts of environmental problems:

i. *compliance* with the requirements of existing collective agreements that genuinely contribute to the mitigation of the harmful impacts of environmental problems;

ii. *promotion* of collective agreements that fully mitigate the harmful impacts of environmental problems; and

iii. *unilateral reductions*.

All three classes of mitigation action are generally seen as necessary for the success of mitigation efforts. Recall that with regard to the *promotion* of stronger collective

---

42 I will later argue that it is doubtful that any collective agreement or mosaic of collective agreements acceptable in liberal societies is capable of fully mitigating the harmful impacts of environmental problems. For now, and in my account of promotion actions provided below, I will assume that collective agreements may at least in principle fully mitigate environmental harm.
agreements, Stern (2006: 395) argues that ‘[t]he actions and attitudes of individuals also matter when it comes to international collective action by governments. The most important force that will generate and sustain this action is domestic political demand in the key countries or regions’. With regard to unilateral reductions he argues, ‘[i]n the case of climate change, individual preferences play a particularly important role. Dangerous climate change cannot be avoided solely through high level international agreements; it will take behavioural change by individuals and communities, particularly in relation to their housing, transport and food consumption decisions’ (ibid.). A Friends of the Earth leaflet argues in the reverse order from Stern, from the insufficiency of unilateral reductions to the need for the promotion of stronger collective agreements in the form of political campaigning:

You recycle. You re-use. You reduce. You choose free range. You walk instead of drive. You buy local, organic produce. You use energy saving light bulbs. You ride a bike. You use energy wisely. You turn off the tap while brushing your teeth. You do your bit....Will it be enough?...[N]o matter what steps you take in your own life...it will never be enough. Why? Because, on your own, you only have the power to influence one third of your CO$_2$ emissions. The remaining two thirds are controlled by the Government, through transport, infrastructure, energy and economic policies. What more can you possibly do? You can join Friends of the Earth...the most effective environmental campaigning organisation in the world.\footnote{Friends of the Earth leaflet, no reference details.}

2.5 Two Problems of Inconsequentialism

If it is accepted that the harms that are being and will be caused by environmental problems are grave, and that all three kinds of mitigation actions are required to avoid these harms, we might expect there to be agreement that we are under an obligation to engage in all three of them. It is indeed widely accepted that we have an obligation to comply with the requirements of existing effective collective agreements. Many also argue that we have an obligation to engage in promotion activities for stronger collective agreements. But it is highly contentious whether individuals are under any obligation to engage in unilateral reductions.

To begin to appreciate the grounds for believing that no such obligation obtains consider the nature of many environmental problems. Sandler (2010) has called a significant subset of environmental problems, and the ones that we will be concerned with here, longitudinal collective action environmental problems (henceforth, environmental problems). These problems are collective action problems because of
their root in the consumption of resources. The level of resource consumption that has caused, say, global climate change has been achieved not through the actions of any given individual but through the cumulative impact of a large collective, namely the millions of individuals each of whom has consumed a fraction of fuel and fibres and food and therefore produced or been responsible for the production of a fraction of the greenhouse gases which now warm the global atmosphere (Schmidtz and Willott (2006: 352). Further, the members of this collective neither intend to cause the problem nor are acting as a collective. This class of environmental problems are longitudinal because ‘alterations of climactic[sic] and ecological systems can take considerable time to mature and spread, but often are persistent once they do’ (ibid.: 168). Other environmental problems of this kind as well as global climate change are ozone depletion, the depletion of natural resources, and chemical pollution (Andreou 2006: 98).

Sandler (ibid.) has identified a number of features of this pervasive class of environmental problem that creates problems for the strategy of advocating individuals engage in unilateral reductions to contribute to their mitigation:

i. Environmental problems are caused cumulatively by a very large number of consumption actions performed by very large numbers of agents.

ii. It is not the intention of the agents who perform these actions to bring these problems about, i.e. they do not form part of the goal of the actions they perform.

iii. The agents whose actions cumulatively cause these problems are not acting collectively.

iv. Each individual action, and indeed the collected actions of any given individual over their lifetime, makes an inconsequential contribution to causing these problems.

v. Any given individual action, and indeed the collected actions of any given individual over their lifetime, aimed at contributing to the mitigation of the harmful impacts of these problems is inconsequential.

The problem is to provide justification for the claim that individuals should engage in unilateral reductions in the face of the following circumstances:
1. Engaging in unilateral reductions will be inconsequential in their contribution to mitigating the harmful impacts of environmental problems.
2. Engaging in unilateral reductions will involve bearing a cost or foregoing a benefit.
3. Most other people do not engage in unilateral reductions.

This is what Sandler (ibid.) calls the problem of inconsequentialism: ‘given that a person’s contribution, although needed (albeit not necessary), is nearly inconsequential to addressing the problem and may require some cost from the standpoint of the person’s own life, why should the person make the effort, particularly when it is uncertain (or even unlikely) whether others will do so?’ By ‘inconsequential’ it is meant not just insignificant or trivial, but imperceptible to any given individual. That is, no individual could notice the difference between me contributing to mitigation efforts – in the form of unilateral reductions or, indeed, promotion or compliance activities – or failing to contribute, in terms of its contribution to environmental problems.

But there is a second problem of inconsequentialism, which arises when attempting a particular kind of answer to the first. Sandler (ibid.: 169) distinguishes several kinds of common response to the (first) problem of inconsequentialism. Sometimes an appeal to agent benefit is made, where it is argued that ‘making an effort to address the problem is itself beneficial to the person’ (ibid.). This kind of response was considered in Chapter 3. Another common response moves from a prudential appeal to a moral appeal, such as an appeal to duty. Here it is variously argued that ‘a person is required to do their duty with respect to the problem, regardless of whether others do theirs; that a person is required to act in ways that would resolve the problem if others were to act likewise; or that a person is required to do their fair share to address the problem, no matter how small the share’ (ibid.). Another, stronger kind of moral appeal is to claim that failing to engage in unilateral reductions, e.g. leaving the thermostat up high or driving short distances, constitutes a moral wrongdoing, and that there are thus moral reasons for contributing to environmental problem mitigation efforts grounded in the moral impermissibility of actions of this kind. I will call the actions that we perform when we fail to engage in unilateral reductions paradigmatic consumption actions. I will further define and
explain this class of actions before returning to characterise the expression of the
problem of inconsequentialism they enable.

Each unilateral reduction on the lists drawn up by environmental campaigners is
intended to be an achievable alternative to a particular widespread action or practice.
For example, the unilateral reduction of unplugging appliances is the alternative to
the widespread practice of leaving appliances plugged in or on standby when not in
use; the unilateral reduction of boiling the required amount of water is the alternative
to the widespread practice of filling the kettle or pot when less is required; the
unilateral reduction of eating less meat and dairy is the alternative to the widespread
adoption of a diet high in meat and dairy. I will call the actions to which unilateral
reductions are intended to be the alternative paradigmatic consumption actions. I call
them ‘paradigmatic’ in recognition of the way in which they are foregrounded in
public debates about personal contributions to environmental problems, as evidenced
by the lists of unilateral reductions from governments and environmental
organisations above. They are consumption actions in both of two senses
distinguished in Chapter 1: use actions and purchase actions. The grounds of the
distinction between unilateral reductions and paradigmatic consumption actions are
heterogeneous. Some unilateral reductions involve, in a sense, more consumption
than their counterpart paradigmatic consumption actions. For example, to reduce the
amount of food we waste involves consuming more of it, and to waste it involves
failing to consume it. Some paradigmatic consumption actions are best characterised
as omissions rather than acts of consumption, such as failing to defrost the freezer
regularly. I trust, however, that in each case it will be clear which action involves a
reduction in the use of resources and which involves maintaining or increasing levels
of consumption.

The claim that performing paradigmatic consumption actions (i.e. failing to perform
unilateral reductions) constitutes a moral wrongdoing generates a second, slightly
different kind of problem of inconsequentialism: the problem of providing
justification for the claim that individuals engage in moral wrongdoing when they
fail to engage in unilateral reductions in the face of the following circumstances:
1. The performance of paradigmatic consumption actions (i.e. failure to engage in unilateral reductions) makes an inconsequential contribution to the harmful impacts of environmental problems.

2. The performance of paradigmatic consumption actions (i.e. failure to engage in unilateral reductions) yields benefits for the individual who performs them.

3. Most other people perform paradigmatic consumption actions.

This chapter and the next make the case that the problem of inconsequentialism can be overcome and an obligation on individuals to engage in unilateral reductions of their personal consumption can be justified. The remainder of this chapter argues that standard approaches from consequentialist, deontological and virtue ethics fail to justify the claim that paradigmatic consumption actions constitute moral wrongdoings.

3. Consequentialism

Consequentialist theories are subject to the second problem of inconsequentialism for a large subset of paradigmatic consumption actions. Sinnott-Armstrong (2005) examines a number of candidate principles which might justify the claim that performing paradigmatic consumption actions is morally wrong and finds none of them satisfactory. He begins with one closely connected to consequentialist theories, the harm principle – we have a moral obligation not to perform an act that causes harm to others44 – and provides what constitutes perhaps the most common and most prima facie persuasive reason for why the performance of paradigmatic consumption actions is not morally wrong in the context of their contribution to environmental problems: it is not a consequence of those actions that anyone is harmed (ibid.: 289). That is to say, the contribution of any given paradigmatic consumption action – say, putting on a wash when one can only half fill the washing machine drum – to environmental problems is not merely trivial or negligible or insignificant, but inconsequential in the following sense: no individual could perceive the difference

44 This is not the classic formulation of the harm principle as found in Mill (1991 [1859]: 14) and widely referred to in political philosophy. Neither is it the case that this formulation of the harm principle is necessarily consequentialist; for example, if the account of ‘harm’ is in terms of, say, damage to an individual’s integrity. For the purposes of this section, however, I will understand the harm principle in broadly consequentialist terms.
between one performing or refraining from performing this action in terms of its environmental consequences. In the terms of utilitarianism – the most prominent consequentialist theory – the performance of paradigmatic consumption actions has low global disutility in terms of their contribution to the harmful impacts of environmental problems. However, many paradigmatic consumption actions have high local utility, that is, utility that accrues to the agent and those proximate to her. For example, having the temperature of one’s house at 19 degrees Celsius rather than 16, or driving to the shops in the rain rather than cycling, involve small but perceptible differences in comfort that, on consequentialist calculations, outweigh the imperceptible difference that the relevant unilateral reductions would make to the level of harm to any given victim of environmental problems. For at least some unilateral reductions it may be the case that they have high local utility (for example taking up a government grant to insulate one’s house), such that they become obligatory on consequentialist grounds and the counterpart paradigmatic consumption action becomes impermissible. But it is prima facie problematic to justify a negative moral status for many paradigmatic consumption actions on consequentialist grounds.

The three following subsections assess arguments that attempt to establish, from within a consequentialist framework, that actions that are members of sets of actions that violate the harm principle constitute a moral wrongdoing. The first argument grounds the attempted justification in the claim that the individual actions that are members of these sets violate the harm principle. The second argument grounds the attempted justification in the claim that the individual actions should be treated as if they violate the harm principle. The third and fourth arguments ground the attempted justification in the membership of the individual actions in the set of actions that together violate the harm principle. I will argue that all four arguments fail.

3.1 Paradigmatic Consumption Actions Constitute a Moral Wrongdoing Because They Violate the Harm Principle
Parfit articulates a number of what he calls ‘mistakes in moral mathematics’. I will examine the two that are most germane to the problem of inconsequentialism: the

---

45 This distinction is from Sandler (2010: 171).
mistake of ignoring imperceptible effects and the mistake of ignoring sets of actions. The following quote (1984: 67) illustrates that, although not always explicitly discussing environmental problems, Parfit’s arguments are nonetheless in the same moral territory as the discussion thus far:

It is often claimed that, in cases that involve very many people, any single altruistic choice would make no difference...These people argue that, in such cases, because we cannot appeal to the consequences of our acts, we must appeal instead either to the Kantian Test, 'What if everyone did that?', or to the reluctance to free-ride. But if my contribution involves real cost to me, and would certainly make no difference – would give no benefit to others – I may not be moved by my reluctance to free-ride.

The first of Parfit’s ‘mistakes in moral mathematics’ I will examine – the mistake of ignoring imperceptible effects – consists in making the following assumption (ibid.: 75):

If some act has effects on other people that are imperceptible, this act cannot be morally wrong because it has these effects. An act cannot be wrong because of its effects on other people, if none of these people could ever notice any difference. Similarly, if some act would have imperceptible effects on other people, these effects cannot make this act what someone ought to do.

Parfit rejects this assumption, thus apparently paving the way for a moral assessment of paradigmatic consumption actions. He motivates this rejection with the following example (ibid.: 76):

A large number of wounded men lie out in the desert, suffering from intense thirst. We are an equally large number of altruists, each of whom has a pint of water. We could pour these pints into a water-cart. This would be driven into the desert, and our water would be shared equally between all these many wounded men. By adding his pint, each of us would enable each wounded man to drink slightly more water – perhaps only an extra drop. Even to a very thirsty man, each of these extra drops would be a very small benefit. The effect on each man might even be imperceptible.

Assume, Parfit says, that 100 pints have already been donated, such that each wounded man will receive 1/10\(^{th}\) of a pint. The remaining 900 altruists would then be in a position to make the mistake by believing that since their donation of a pint (shared equally between the wounded men), being to each wounded man worth only 1/1000\(^{th}\) of a pint, will have imperceptible effects and therefore not be something that they ought to do. In this example, donating one’s pint is equivalent to performing a unilateral reduction, and withholding one’s pint is equivalent to a paradigmatic consumption action. In believing that donating one’s pint will have
imperceptible effects we can believe that donating our pint is not something we are morally obligated to do. Similarly, in believing that withholding our pint will also have imperceptible effects (or a lack of perceptible effects) we can believe that this action is not a moral wrongdoing. But, Parfit asserts (ibid.: 77), ‘each of us should pour his pint into the water-cart...even though the effects are imperceptible.’ He offers the following concluding claim (ibid.):

When (1) the best outcome would be the one in which people are benefited the most, and (2) each of the members of some group could act in a certain way, and (3) they would benefit these other people if enough of them act in this way, and (4) they would benefit these people the most if they all act in this way, and (5) each of them both knows these facts and believes that enough of them will act in this way, then (6) each of them ought to act in this way.

Parfit (ibid.: 79) distinguishes two strategies for rejecting the assumption which constitutes the mistake, each attacking a further assumption. I will present the first strategy here and the second strategy in the following section. The first strategy is to claim that the harm principle has been violated by each individual member of the harming group by rejecting the assumption that there cannot be imperceptible harms and benefits.

I believe that someone’s pain can become less painful, or less bad, by an amount too small to be noticed. Someone’s pain is worse, in the sense that has moral relevance, if this person minds the pain more, or has a stronger desire that it cease. I believe that someone can mind his pain slightly less, or have a slightly weaker desire that his pain cease, even though he cannot notice any difference. More generally, there can be imperceptible harms and benefits. In many other kinds of case, people have been shown to make very small mistakes when they report the nature of their experiences. Why should we assume that they cannot make such mistakes about the badness of their pain, and the strength of their desire that some pain cease?

Parfit (ibid.: 80) offers the following example to illustrate this claim:

*The Harmless Torturers.* There are a thousand torturers and a thousand victims. Each victim is feeling mild pain such that the addition of a small amount of pain is imperceptible. Each of the thousand torturers presses a button, which turns a switch on each of the thousand torture instruments attached to the victims. Each turning of a switch affects each victim’s pain in a way that is imperceptible. But after each torturer has pressed his button a thousand times, severe pain has been inflicted on the victims.

If it is accepted that there cannot be imperceptible harms then we must admit that each of the Harmless Torturers causes no one to suffer more, such that there is no increase in suffering as a consequence of pressing the button. But surely we want to
claim that each torturer acted wrongly. Therefore, Parfit argues, we should reject the claim that there cannot be imperceptible harms and instead claim that each press of the button inflicts harm on each victim and that therefore the total effect of pressing the button is to inflict a great total sum of suffering (as much suffering as if each torturer pressed a button a thousand times for one victim).

Parfit concedes (ibid.: 81–2) that this argument is contentious on the grounds of a consideration of whether a single torturer is acting wrongly if he turns his switch knowing that no other torturer has turned up for work and that therefore no victim’s pain will become perceptibly worse as a result of his act. It is arguable that, in this circumstance, the single torturer is not acting wrongly since he knows that the effects of his act will be imperceptible and that his act will not be part of a set of acts that, together, cause perceptible harm. If the single torturer is not acting wrongly in virtue of the fact that his act causes imperceptible effects, then we cannot appeal to the imperceptible effects of his actions when his colleagues return to work. Glover (1975: 175), whose arguments I shall turn to next, expresses the same thoughts: ‘Why should we not say that acts which do not contribute to the discrimination threshold being reached have zero disutility, but that they do have disutility where they do so contribute? This should only seem paradoxical to someone who thinks that the utility of an act must be independent of the behaviour of others.’

Even if we set aside these reservations, it is not clear that Parfit’s argument does more than establish that it is not necessarily the case that harms and benefits are always perceptible. Whether it applies to the case of paradigmatic consumption actions and their contribution to environmental problems would require further argument. It is doubtful that this argument could be made. This doubt has two sources. Firstly, unlike in the case of the Harmless Torturers, there is no principled way of identifying the victims of the imperceptible harms inflicted by paradigmatic consumption actions through their contribution to global environmental problems. It is simply indeterminate whether the greenhouse gas emissions from my drive to the shops imperceptibly harms the members of a certain community in sub-Saharan Africa in its contribution to changing patterns of rainfall and its effect on the harvest; members of a certain Inuit community in Nunavet in its contribution to the retreat of sea ice; or the puffins of a seabird colony in the North Sea in its contribution to the
collapse of sandeel populations. In the absence of a principled way of identifying the victims of the imperceptible worsening of harm, we can only divide the harm equally between its potential victims. Since environmental problems are global problems, this would mean all those beings capable of being harmed. In the case of the Harmless Torturers, while the claim that the victims’ pain became imperceptibly worse requires argument, it is at least arguable; when a torturer pressed his button there occurred, presumably, a physical change in the bodies of the victims, albeit too small for each victim to notice. But a thousand of those physical changes accumulated to cause great pain. In the case of the victims of environmental problems, where the effects of the performance of a paradigmatic consumption action are divided amongst the billions of beings capable of being harmed, it stretches plausibility to say that these infinitesimal effects harm the victims at all.

Secondly, even if we could accept that such infinitesimal effects constitute harm, it is questionable whether the infinitesimal difference that paradigmatic consumption actions make to the trajectory of the physical changes in ecological and meteorological systems can be correlated with (imperceptible) changes to the level of harm suffered by the victims of those changes. Take, for example, a young child who contracts malaria in a sub-Saharan nation. My paradigmatic consumption action may contribute to an increase in the incidence of such tropical diseases in a given region, but it does not make this child’s malaria imperceptibly worse. The child either contracts malaria or she does not, and if she does, the harm she suffers is not made worse for the extra greenhouse gas in the atmosphere that resulted from my paradigmatic consumption action. Parfit’s argument for the claim that there may be imperceptible harms does not, therefore, justify the claim that paradigmatic consumption actions constitute moral wrongdoings.

Parfit’s argument could be recast in the following terms: it is a moral wrongdoing to increase the risk of harm to individuals, and there is a correlative obligation to reduce the risk of harm one causes to others. For example, we might consider a child harmed insofar as her risk of contracting malaria is increased, and we might argue that the performance of paradigmatic consumption actions increases that risk insofar
as it increases her probability of contracting it.\footnote{See Martens et al. (1995) for research on the effect of anthropogenic climate change on the health impact of malaria in terms of disability-adjusted life years} However, I will not pursue this alternative account of the grounds for a moral evaluation of paradigmatic consumption actions here.\footnote{Sinnott-Armstrong (2005: 293) also considers, and rejects, these grounds.} Even if able to overcome the problem regarding the victims of paradigmatic consumption actions being statistical rather than identifiable victims, and even if able to mount a plausible argument to the effect that an individual is harmed or wronged insofar as her risk of harm is increased, this account would still face the original problem of inconsequentialism. That is, any given paradigmatic consumption action will increase the risk of harm to any potential victim by such an infinitesimal degree that it stretches plausibility to claim that they are harmed by this increase.

3.2 Paradigmatic Consumption Actions Constitute a Moral Wrongdoing Insofar as They Should Be Treated As If They Violate the Harm Principle

Glover (1975) also, in effect, argues that the harm principle is violated by individual actions inconsequentially contributing to collective harms, but instead of grounding this argument in the claim that there can be imperceptible harms he argues that we should treat such individual actions \textit{as if} they caused harm by assigning a share of the total disutility caused by the set of actions that together cause the perceptible harm to which they contribute. Glover thus argues that the fact that an action has imperceptible consequences does not entail that that act should not be assigned disutility and, thereby, by the lights of consequentialism, be morally evaluable.

Glover distinguishes between absolute and discrimination thresholds for the consequences of actions. \textit{Absolute thresholds} are located at the point between two radically different outcomes. These thresholds are such that a single action is sufficient to shift the situation over the threshold between outcomes. However, many situations are not such that there is a sharp boundary between two different outcomes. Rather, the outcomes lie on a continuum or slope. Therefore, unlike in absolute threshold situations, there is no potential for any individual action to alter the situation radically; each individual action will merely propel the situation in a certain direction along the continuum. Nevertheless, we may still define a different
kind of threshold for such situations, namely, a *discrimination threshold*. In non-
absolute threshold situations, though each action may alter the situation
progressively in a certain direction, the consequences of each action may be ‘spread
through the community’ such that they are imperceptible (ibid.: 173). The
discrimination threshold is then ‘defined by the distance apart on the slope two
points have to be in order to be seen as separate by us’ (ibid.: 175). Environmental
problems, in Glover’s terms, do not admit of absolute thresholds. Therefore, any
given paradigmatic consumption action or unilateral reduction will not be in a
position to radically alter the state of the climate, the mass of glaciers, the stability of
ice caps or the longevity of fossil fuel reserves. Rather, each action or refraining will
only propel the situation in a certain direction. Moreover, the contribution of any
given paradigmatic consumption action to environmental problems will almost
certainly be beneath the discrimination threshold once its consequences are globally
diffused.

Given that environmental problems do not admit of absolute thresholds and that the
consequences of any given individual action will fall below the discrimination
threshold, individuals are in a position to advance what Glover (ibid.: 172) calls the*
argument from insignificant difference*:

> [G]iven the size of a problem, the best I can do in the way of acting or refraining will
only make an insignificant difference, and so it does not matter what I do.

Since paradigmatic consumption actions contribute to environmental problems in
such a way that their consequences fall below the discrimination threshold, those
actions have no moral significance in terms of this contribution. Moreover, since the
consequences of unilateral reductions will not be above the discrimination threshold
in terms of alleviating the harm caused by environmental problems to contemporary
or future humans or nonhumans they are not obliged to engage in such actions or
refrainings. Glover’s argument from insignificant difference appears to me a good
characterisation of the attitude implicit in those unprepared to moderate their
consumption habits and engage in unilateral reductions because of a belief both in
the insignificance of paradigmatic consumption actions in contributing to
environmental problems, and of the insignificance of the unilateral reductions they
are capable of with regard to the mitigation of the harm those problems cause.
Glover (ibid.: 175) argues that the advancement of the argument from insignificant difference is unacceptable in two circumstances. Firstly, it is unacceptable ‘where the supposed insignificance is a size illusion created by a special context.’ Glover claims that large problems, the resolution of which an individual can only make a small contribution to, can lead to despair and paralysis. However, the argument from insignificant difference is an unacceptable defence of inaction in certain kinds of circumstances. For example, if one arrives at a disaster zone to hear the screams of a thousand people trapped under rubble, despair at the insignificance of being able to rescue only a few of the trapped victims might take hold, but this does not justify inaction. The insignificance, in such cases, is what Glover calls a ‘size illusion’ created by the context. In a different context, where one came upon a small number of trapped victims, all of which one believed one could rescue, one’s action would not seem insignificant.

The second kind of circumstance where the argument from insignificance is unacceptable is ‘where its plausibility depends on a tacit denial of the principle of divisibility’ (ibid.). The principle of divisibility says that ‘where harm is a matter of degree, sub-threshold actions are wrong to the extent that they cause harm, and where a hundred acts like mine are necessary to cause a detectable difference I have caused \( \frac{1}{100} \)th of that detectable harm’ (ibid.: 174). By ‘sub-threshold actions’ Glover is referring to actions the consequences of which are beneath the discrimination threshold. Glover claims that the argument from insignificant difference depends on a tacit denial of the principle of divisibility. This seems to be the case. The principle has it that I am causally responsible for harm even if it is below the discrimination threshold. If we accept this principle then we are justified in treating actions which individually have consequences that fall short of the discrimination threshold but collectively have consequences that exceed it as if they violate the harm principle and, thus, constitute a moral wrongdoing. But why should we accept the principle of divisibility? Glover (ibid.: 174–5) motivates the assigning of moral significance to sub-discrimination threshold actions in non-absolute threshold situations, and thereby acceptance of the principle of divisibility, with the following example:
Suppose a village contains 100 unarmed tribesmen eating their lunch. 100 hungry armed bandits descend on the village and each bandit at gunpoint takes one tribesman’s lunch and eats it. The bandits then go off, each one having done a discriminable amount of harm to a single tribesman. Next week, the bandits are tempted to do the same thing again, but are troubled by new-found doubts about the morality of such a raid. Their doubts are put to rest by one of their number who does not believe in the principle of divisibility. They then raid the village, tie up the tribesmen, and look at their lunch. As expected, each bowl of food contains 100 baked beans. The pleasure derived from one baked bean is below the discrimination threshold. Instead of each bandit eating a single plateful as last week, each takes one bean from each plate. They leave after eating all the beans, pleased to have done no harm, as each has done no more than sub-threshold harm to each person. Those who reject the principle of divisibility have to agree.

The bandit and tribesman thought experiment does not serve to motivate the case of paradigmatic consumption actions since the bandits, as a collective, intend to cause harm, whereas individuals who perform paradigmatic consumption actions do not. This need not, however, constitute a significant objection, since there is nothing in Glover’s characterisation of the principle of divisibility that says the collective must intend to cause the harm that they do in order for its constituent actions to be assigned a share of disutility, or that any member of the collective must intend to contribute to a set of actions which is collectively harmful for disutility to be assigned to it. However, as with Parfit’s arguments concerning imperceptible harms, this argument, if it works at all, only establishes the principle of divisibility as a general principle. Again, it requires further argument to establish that this principle applies to the case of paradigmatic consumption actions and environmental harm. Again, it is not clear that such an argument can be made.

Glover is essentially arguing for a model of shared responsibility to be applied to cases of a set of actions that causes harm but where each constituent action in itself causes no harm; the responsibility for the harmful result is shared out amongst the members of the set – as Cripps (2011) characterises May’s (1992) model of shared responsibility – either ‘by a straight division of the harm, or (preferably) according to different roles, which could be used to assign responsibility for proportionally extensive or limited ‘parts’ of the harm’ (Cripps 2011: 176). However, Cripps argues that models of shared responsibility are not appropriate for cases like the environmental problems I am here concerned with. Firstly, models of shared responsibility are only appropriate for cases of joint undertaking, where ‘the causal contribution of each person often cannot be ascertained, except to say that all parties
played a necessary role in the harm, and that no one party played a sufficient role’ (May 1992: 39, quoted in Cripps 2011: 176). The harm that results from environmental problems is overdetermined; no given paradigmatic consumption action was necessary for the harm to occur, and therefore the set of paradigmatic consumption actions is not a case of joint undertaking on this account. Secondly, models of shared responsibility are most appropriate to cases of ‘concerted joint action, [where] each individual knowingly contributes to an overall end which is either foreseeably or deliberately harmful’ (Cripps 2011: 177). But individuals who perform paradigmatic consumption actions are not contributing to any shared or coherent end or endeavour. Thirdly, such individuals occupy no specific roles in a collective endeavour which was foreseeably harmful. We cannot therefore differentiate levels of responsibility for the harm among them on this basis. Of course, levels of responsibility could be differentiated in this case on bases such as carbon footprint, or the broader measure of an ecological footprint, but since no footprint – not even that of the richest and most decadent billionaire – will contribute beyond the discrimination threshold, the worth of any kind of differentiation is questionable.

Lastly, and relatedly, direct personal responsibility for a share of the harm is not possible since, on Glover’s own account, no individual has harmed, i.e. no individual has contributed at a level above the discrimination threshold. Rather, individuals are to be assigned shares of responsibility for consequences that fall below the discrimination threshold. This brings us back to the central point of Glover’s principle of divisibility; it is intended to enable a consequentialist assessment of actions which have no consequences. It does this by sharing out responsibility for the collective harm and treating individual actions as if they violate the harm principle. In a case like that of the bandits and tribesmen, this share is above the discrimination threshold; it is equal to one bandit stealing one tribesman’s lunch. It is therefore plausible to evaluate the action of the bandit as if they have violated the harm principle. But in the case of environmental harm, not only are the consequences of paradigmatic consumption actions beneath the discrimination threshold, but so is the share of the collective harm. We cannot therefore evaluate paradigmatic consumption actions as if they have breached the discrimination threshold and thereby violated the harm principle. Therefore, if no individual can be assigned a
share of the consequences of the set of actions at a level that constitutes harm, then
*moral* responsibility should not be assigned at all, for it is not all clear that the notion
of harm – or the concomitant notions of responsibility and punishment – can
function as moral notions when divided to the level in the way the principle of
divisibility requires in environmental problem cases. Rejecting the model of shared
responsibility that Glover’s principle resembles reveals that this crude extension of
consequentialist calculations beneath the discrimination threshold renders it of
questionable value in assessing the moral issues at play in the cases in question.

### 3.3 Paradigmatic Consumption Actions Constitute a Moral Wrongdoing

*Because They Constitute Membership of a Collective that Violates the Harm Principle*

I turn now to arguments that ground the attempted justification of the claim that
actions that are members of the harming set constitute moral wrongdoings in virtue
of their membership of this set. I begin with the second of Parfit’s strategies for
rejecting the assumption that constitutes the mistake of ignoring imperceptible
effects. The first strategy was to reject the assumption that imperceptible effects
cannot be harmful. The second strategy appeals to the set of acts of which the act in
question is a member. Consider a second assumption of the mistake; that *at least as
bad as*, applied to pains, is a *transitive* relation. That is, ‘if someone’s pain in
Outcome (2) is at least as bad as it was in Outcome (1), and his pain in Outcome (3)
is at least as bad as it was in Outcome (2), his pain in Outcome (3) must be at least as
bad as it was in Outcome (1)’ (Parfit 1984: 78). Recall the wounded men example;
each wounded man’s pain is at least as bad if 101 altruists contribute their pints of
water than if only 100 contribute, and it is at least as bad if 102 altruists contribute
than if only 101 contribute. Therefore, each wounded man’s pain is at least as bad if
102 altruists contribute as it is if only 100 contribute. If we assume both that pain
cannot become imperceptibly better or worse and the transitivity of *at least as bad as*
applied to pains, this implies that the situation in which each man drinks a pint is at
least as painful as that in which they drink only 1/10th of a pint. Since this conclusion
is absurd, one or either of these assumptions must be rejected. The usefulness of the
strategy of rejecting the former for the case of morally evaluating paradigmatic
consumption actions in terms of their contribution to the harmful impacts of
environmental problems was argued against in the preceding section. Rejecting the
latter has the implication that one must accept that one’s acts may be wrong, because
of their effects on someone else’s pain, even though none of one’s acts makes this
person’s pain worse. This is so, Parfit claims, because, ‘though none of your acts
makes this person’s pain worse, they may together have this effect. Each act may be
wrong, though its effects are imperceptible, because it is one of a set of acts that
together make this person’s pain very much worse’ (ibid.: 79). We are appealing,
then, not to what each Harmless Torturer does (accepting that no individual torturer
causes any one victim to suffer more), but to what they together do; even if each
harms no one, together they impose great suffering on a thousand victims (ibid.: 80–
1). What grounds the claim that each is acting wrongly is that his act makes him a
member of a group who together inflict great suffering on their victims’ (ibid.: 82).
Pursuing this strategy, Parfit asserts (ibid.: 81), allows us to claim the following:

When (1) the outcome would be worse if people suffer more, and (2) each of the
members of some group could act in a certain way, and (3) they would cause other
people to suffer if enough of them act in this way, and (4) they would cause these
people to suffer most if they all act in this way, and (5) each of them both knows these
facts and believes that enough of them will act in this way, then (6) each would be
acting wrongly if he acts in this way.

Another of Parfit’s ‘mistakes in moral mathematics’ (ibid.: 70) can also be used to
articulate a claim that actions which inconsequentially contribute to a collective
harm constitute moral wrongdoings. It consists in making the following assumption:
If some act is right or wrong because of its effects, the only relevant effects are the
effects of this particular act. This assumption is wrong, Parfit argues, in cases of
overdetermination. For example, where X and Y each shoot me, and either shot
would have killed me, neither has acted in a way whose consequence is that I am
harmed. We are therefore forced to conclude that neither X nor Y acted wrongly.
Parfit claims (ibid.: 70), however, that on ‘any plausible moral theory, even if each
of us harms no one, we can be acting wrongly if we together harm other people.’ He
draws the following principle from this argument (ibid.):

Even if an act harms no one, this act may be wrong because it is one of a set of acts
that together harm other people. Similarly, even if some act benefits no one, it can be
what someone ought to do, because it is one of a set of acts that together benefit other
people.
Both of Parfit’s strategies for claiming that an act may be wrong, even if its effects are imperceptible, in virtue of being a member of a set of acts which together cause perceptible harm are clearly relevant to the case of paradigmatic consumption actions and their relation to environmental problems. The harmful effects of environmental problems are clearly overdetermined; no single act of consumption, nor even the collected acts of consumption of a single individual, is necessary for the level of harmful effects to occur. Further, individual paradigmatic consumption actions are clearly members of a set of actions that together cause great harm. Both of Parfit’s strategies result in the claim that it may be wrong to perform those acts of consumption that are members of the set of consumption actions which together harm other people. However, Parfit’s arguments do not explain why actions which inconsequentially contribute to a collective harm are wrong, and therefore do not apply to the case of environmental problems without further argument. As with Parfit’s other argument concerning the mistake of ignoring imperceptible harm, at most the claims that at least as bad as, applied to pains, is an intransitive relation and that an act may be wrong because it is one of a set of actions which together cause harm, succeed in undermining the assumptions that he believes constitutes a mistake – ignoring imperceptible effects and ignoring sets of actions respectively – but neither advances rich and satisfying positive explanations of why such actions are wrong. Both go some way towards making the claim that an act may be wrong in virtue of its membership of a larger set plausible, but no explanation is offered for why. Section 3 of Chapter 5 will offer this explanation, and an argument that paradigmatic consumption actions constitute moral wrongdoings on these grounds.

4. Deontological Ethics

For deontologists, an act is morally wrong if it is contrary to the moral law. Kantian ethics, for example, holds that an action is wrong if the maxim from which it is performed does not conform to the moral law. If, for example, the maxim cannot be willed to be a universal law, or if it involves treating a human or other being with intrinsic value as a means to an end rather than an end in itself, then actions performed from that maxim are impermissible. Johnson (2003) states that the widely believed answer to the problem of inconsequentialism – and what he calls the commons problem – is that there are ethical reasons for why individuals should
contribute to a solution to environmental problems. In particular, individuals are under a moral obligation to engage in unilateral reductions. The nature of this obligation, he says, is often thought to be Kantian: ‘every commons user ought, morally, to restrict his or her use [of the commons] to a level that would be sustainable if all other users reduced their use in a similar way, and to do this regardless of what others do’ (Johnson 2003: 272). Johnson argues against the claim that there is such a Kantian obligation to engage in unilateral reductions on the grounds that they are highly unlikely to succeed in protecting the commons. But the strategy I am now pursuing in order to determine if there are grounds for a moral obligation to engage in unilateral reductions is to seek a solution to the second problem of inconsequentialism. The question, therefore, is whether the maxims from which paradigmatic consumption actions are typically performed are contrary to the moral law and thus constitute a moral wrongdoing.

It is not clear that paradigmatic consumption actions are contrary to the moral law on either of the main formulations of the categorical imperative. Firstly, if the harm caused by an action is not part of the end or purpose of that action but only an unintended by-product, then the recipients of the harm are not being treated as a means to the end sought. Contribution to environmental problems does not constitute part of the end sought in the performance of paradigmatic consumption actions, so treating the recipients of the harm caused by these problems – poor people in developing countries, nonhumans, future generations – as a means to an end rather than as ends in themselves forms no part of the maxims from which they are performed (Sandler 2010: 173). Secondly, it is not clear that the maxims from which paradigmatic consumption actions are typically performed – such as ‘purchase the good which maximises one’s utility’ or ‘perform that action which maximises one’s comfort and convenience’ – are not universalizable (Sandler 2010: 174). While the environmental consequences of this maxim being willed to be universal law would be severe, it is not contradictory to so will it. The circumstances in which it would be contradictory are where the natural environment responded within the average lifetime to increases in greenhouse gas emissions and other chemical pollutants such that if these maxims were universally acted upon the very material conditions of life could not be sustained. However, as is contained within the name of these environmental problems, they are longitudinal; the natural environment is only
slowly responding to current and recent consumption levels, and it appears that it will be some time yet before the most severe consequences of these levels will be felt to the extent that it would be arguable that it is contradictory to will the universalisation of the maxims from which paradigmatic consumption actions are performed. While there are other deontological theories besides Kantian ethics, insofar as it is the most prominent theory of this kind, it demonstrates that deontological theories have difficulty providing justification for the claim that paradigmatic consumption actions constitute a moral wrongdoing.

5. Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethical theories are typically oriented around and articulated using the central notion of virtue. However, since I will require an account of wrong action I will therefore be principally interested in the notion of vice. I will firstly introduce what I take to be the most plausible virtue ethical account of right action before deriving from it a more explicit account of wrong action than is ordinarily provided. Before I introduce this account it is worth distinguishing two helpful notions: the bases of responsiveness and the forms of responsiveness. Sandler (2007: 40–1) articulates an account of what distinguishes the virtues from one another: their bases of responsiveness, that is, ‘the types of objects, events, and properties to which they are responsive’, and their forms of responsiveness, that is, ‘the types of reactions and activities that they involve’. For example, ‘the basis of responsiveness for compassion is the suffering of others, and the forms of responsiveness are concern for others, desiring to assist others, and acting to diminish the suffering of others. The basis of responsiveness for gratitude is being benefited by another, and the forms of responsiveness are recognition of the benefit, a desire to acknowledge it, and actions that acknowledge it’ (ibid.: 41). We are now in a position to better understand Sandler’s (ibid.: 94) agent-relative target principle of right action:

An action is right to the extent that it better hits the targets of the operative virtues taken together (i.e., it is more virtuous) than the other courses of action available to a particular agent under the circumstances; and an action is wrong to the extent that it misses the targets of the operative virtues taken together (i.e., it is less virtuous) than the other courses of action available to a particular agent under the circumstances.
This account is a target principle, which Sandler distinguishes from qualified agent and ideal observer principles of right action. Instead of right action being defined in terms of what a qualified agent or ideal observer (i.e. a virtuous agent or observer) would do or endorse in the circumstances, right action is defined in terms of the substantive content of the virtues. Sandler’s target account is an expanded and modified version of Swanton’s (2003) account of right action. For Swanton, hitting the target of a virtue is ‘a form (or forms) of success in the moral acknowledgement of or responsiveness to items in its field or fields, appropriate to the aim of the virtue in a given context’ (ibid.: 233). Consider the simple case where ‘the aim of a virtue is simply to promote the good of individuals and hitting the target is successfully promoting that good (ibid.: 39). In Sandler’s (2007: 92) terms, it is ‘a matter of whether the considerations in the world to which the operative virtue is responsive are adequately addressed by the agent’s action.’ With respect to compassion, it is a matter of whether the suffering is relieved…. With respect to tolerance, it is whether one is able to refrain from interfering with what one finds objectionable.’ Right action in virtue ethics, then, is a matter of hitting the target of the virtue, that is, of one’s forms of responsiveness being appropriate to and adequately addressing the bases of responsiveness.

An account of wrong action – which is not explicitly offered by either Swanton or Sandler – can be derived from this account of right action. Firstly, actions which merely fail to hit the target of the virtues that are operative in a context count as wrong action. But also, missing the target of a virtue will often, although not always, involve hitting the target of a vice. Just as certain virtues will be operative in particular contexts, so will certain vices. For example, in a situation that calls on people to desire the alleviation of the suffering of others and act to bring about that

---

48 It is also to be distinguished from Slote’s (1995) motive-based account of right action, according to which ‘an action is right if and only if it exhibits or expresses a virtuous (admirable) motive, or at least does not exhibit or express a vicious (deplorable) motive’ (Swanton 2001: 33–4).

49 In Swanton (2001: 34) she explains that hitting the target of a virtue involves realising the end of the virtue.

50 Sandler does not provide an account of what it is for a virtue to be ‘operative’ in a context. However, I take it that, for example, a context in which one person benefits another will be one in which the virtue of gratitude (and the vice of ingratitude) will be operative, and if in that context there is no danger for either the giver to give or the receiver to receive, the virtue of courage (and the vice of cowardice) will not be operative.

51 An alternative characterisation which Sandler uses is that actions which do more than merely miss the target of a virtue are ‘contrary’ to or ‘violate’ a virtue. I am providing a more positive characterisation of wrong action in terms of the vices.
end, missing those targets of the virtue of compassion may hit the target of the vices of insensitivity, apathy or arrogance. Hitting the target of a vice is perhaps a more awkward notion than hitting the target of a virtue. The target of the vice may be hit unintentionally through ignorance or carelessness rather than intentionally, or one indeed may intend to be intolerant, cruel or disloyal. Actions which hit the target of a virtue or vice will not necessarily (although they often will) be performed by agents that are expressing, or even possess, the relevant virtue or vice. An action from virtue is one which ‘displays, expresses, or exhibits all (or a sufficient number of) the excellences comprising virtue...to a sufficient degree’, and a virtuous act is one which hits the target of a virtue (Swanton 2003: 233). Whether an act is from virtue depends on the motives of the agent and the state from which she acts, whereas whether an act is virtuous is typically independent of these features of the agent (Sandler 2007: 92).

To justify the claim that paradigmatic consumption actions constitute moral wrongdoings from within a virtue ethics framework therefore requires arguing that they either miss the target of the operative virtues or that they hit the target of certain vices. I will concentrate here on the operative vices the targets of which paradigmatic consumption actions might plausibly be said to hit. Consider the following assertions:

- Driving down the road to the local shop instead of walking is lazy.
- Leaving the lights on in unoccupied rooms, throwing away usable food and leaving taps running when not in use is wasteful.
- Overheating your house to the extent that you have to remove clothes is profligate.
- Not participating in a recycling scheme is apathetic, and not doing so because you believe it is not recycled and goes to landfill is cynical.
- Eating large quantities of meat and dairy is gluttonous.
- Being desirous of and accumulating more possessions than you need is greedy, acquisitive and avaricious.
- Disposing of a good before the end of its useful life so that it can be replaced with a more fashionable model is intemperate and vain.
• Participating in a consumerist lifestyle one knows to be fuelled by environmental destruction is arrogant in its attitude to the natural environment and cruel towards and contemptuous of those it harms.

Have I identified the operative vices which are germane to the contribution of these consumption actions to the harmful impacts of environmental problems? To answer this, I will firstly make a distinction between three categories of virtue; personal, or self-regarding; interpersonal, or other-regarding; and environmental. These categories are not mutually exclusive. Any virtue which is productive of or maintains environmental goods or values, such as ecological integrity; is justified by environmental considerations; or is responsive to environmental entities, such as nonhuman individuals, species or ecosystems is an environmental virtue (Sandler 2007: 42–3). Frugality and temperance, for example, are both personal and environmental virtues. Compassion and care, likewise, are both interpersonal and environmental virtues. Any character trait which is unresponsive to environmental entities in contexts which call for it or which is destructive of environmental goods or values is an environmental vice.

While we can be justified in claiming a given personal or interpersonal virtue or vice is an environmental virtue on the grounds of its responsive, justificatory or productive relations to the natural environment, and a given vice is an environmental vice on the grounds of its unresponsive or destructive relations to the natural environment, we may still ask if it indeed is those relations that justifies the virtue or vice attribution in that context. While the vices I have identified are justified as environmental vices on the grounds of their destructive and unresponsive relations to the natural environment, the particular vice attributions do not satisfy what is required to adequately address the second problem of inconsequentialism. Firstly, some of the vices are attributed on entirely non-environmental grounds. Take, for example, the laziness I attributed to the car driver. While we may be justified in characterizing it as an environmental vice on the basis of the pollution the action results in, it is not on those environmental grounds that we are justified in specifying the vice as laziness. Those grounds are related to the harm, perhaps, that this trait does to the agent. Similar arguments could be made for apathy, cynicism, acquisitiveness, avariciousness, intemperance, vanity, gluttony and greed. For
example, because intemperance regarding the replacement of new models of mobile phones when one’s current device is still functioning contributes to environmental problems is not the reason we say that individual is intemperate. Rather, it is the lack of restraint and patience, and the indulgence of a desire to be well thought of in terms of fashion or financial considerations that justifies the attribution. Environmental vices they may be, but they are not the vices they are on environmental grounds.

Secondly, the other vices (wastefulness, profligacy, arrogance towards the natural world, cruelty), while attributed on environmental grounds, are not grounds related to their contribution to a collective environmental harm. For the problem at hand, namely, the second problem of inconsequentialism, it is not merely that we need a claim of paradigmatic consumption actions constituting moral wrongdoings to be based on any grounds, and not even on any environmental grounds. We need the wrongdoing to apply to consumption actions under a certain description: an action which inconsequentially contributes to a collective environmental harm. With this in mind, while the case for the above vice-attributions being based on environmental considerations is stronger than the previous set, none of them relates in particular to the feature in question. While, for example, I characterized the arrogance as towards the natural world, this arrogance is not in virtue of the contribution made by consumption actions towards collective environmental harm. Profligacy and wastefulness with energy resources appears to be the closest in this regard, but this raises once again the central problem.

Even if an individual’s energy usage is profligate and wasteful within the context of either their own life, their own household, or in relation to others in their situation (say, those with a similar sized house), it is difficult to characterize it as such in relation to the scale of energy usage that causes global environmental harm. We have exactly the same problem again; why should the profligate use of energy, or the greed that leads to the accumulation of material goods, or the apathy that allows recycling to go to landfill, or the gluttony that leads us to consume a high meat content diet, or the wastefulness of throwing away a substantial proportion of the food we grow and purchase, be considered environmental vices at all, given that their contribution to environmental problems is inconsequential? Why should we say
that consumption actions are environmentally vicious if their performance has no perceptible effects on the natural environment? If we should not, then even though we might be able to point to personal and interpersonal vices that the action hits the target of such that it is impermissible, we have not addressed the problem of inconsequentialism. For we did not want any justification for why paradigmatic consumption actions constitute moral wrongdoings, but a justification grounded in such actions’ contribution to the harmful impacts of environmental problems. In section 3 of the following chapter I will address this problem: I will specify and justify certain vices and virtues relevant to paradigmatic consumption actions which ground a moral evaluation of individuals who perform them and avoids the objection that such actions have no perceptible effects in terms of their contribution to environmental problems.

6. Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the problem of advancing a moral argument for reducing personal consumption. It distinguished unilateral reductions in personal consumption from two other classes of actions – compliance and promotion – that campaigners and governments urge individuals to engage in to contribute to mitigating the environmental harm caused by the aggregated consequences of individual consumption actions. It then modified Sandler’s characterisation of the problem of inconsequentialism to reflect the difficulty in justifying a particular kind of response to it. This response understood the obligation to engage in unilateral reductions as grounded in the moral impermissibility of performing paradigmatic consumption actions. Parfit’s and Glover’s consequentialist arguments concerning individual obligations in cases of collective harm were then outlined, applied to this special case, and rejected as constituting a solution. The inadequacy of standard Kantian ethics in these contexts was briefly argued for, before a virtue ethics account of moral wrongdoing was developed and again applied to the case of paradigmatic consumption actions. This approach was also rebutted on the grounds that the particular vice attributions enumerated did not adequately address the problem of inconsequentialism in this context. The standard approaches therefore fail, and it seems at this juncture that there may be no justifiable moral argument for reducing
personal consumption. The following chapter, however, develops two different strategies for advancing such an argument.
5 Moral Arguments for Reducing Personal Consumption

1. Introduction

This chapter presents two strategies for justifying the claim that unilateral reductions in personal consumptions are morally obligatory. The first strategy, which is pursued in section 2, takes as its starting point Johnson’s (2003) argument that individuals are under an obligation to engage in activities that promote stronger collective agreements to mitigate environmental harm. It then argues that if this is the case then obligations to engage in unilateral reductions also obtain. Johnson’s argument is firstly explained, before a distinction between public and private unilateral reductions is drawn. The existence of an obligation to unilaterally reduce personal consumption is then justified on three grounds: (i) public unilateral reductions may function as promotion actions; (ii) public unilateral reductions may strengthen the effectiveness of promotion actions; and (iii) public and private unilateral reductions are required on grounds of integrity by those who accept or discharge the moral obligation to engage in promotion actions. A further, independent, argument is then presented, which proceeds from a rejection of an implicit assumption in Johnson’s argument: that there is a possible set of collective agreements for individuals to promote which stands a reasonable chance of success in fully mitigating environmental harm. Insofar as this claim is doubtful, and insofar as Johnson’s argument against unilateral reductions is grounded in the claim that individuals are under an obligation to do whatever stands a reasonable likelihood of success, then individuals are under an obligation to engage in unilateral reductions sufficient to make up the shortfall from the strongest likely collective agreement.

This first strategy does not invoke the moral status of paradigmatic consumption actions to which unilateral reductions are the widely accepted alternatives. The second strategy, which I pursue in section 3, resumes Chapters 4’s search for a justification for the claim that paradigmatic consumption actions constitute a moral wrongdoing. The argument will employ the virtue ethics account of moral wrongdoing proposed in Chapter 4, and advance a new understanding of paradigmatic consumption actions as constituting membership of a harming group.
An argument by analogy is developed, both to clearly explain the structure of the case and to examine and respond to a number of objections. I will conclude that this account justifies the status of a limited but significant class of paradigmatic consumption actions as moral wrongdoings, and therefore justifies the claim that the corresponding unilateral reductions in personal consumption are morally obligatory.

2. Unilateral Reductions are Morally Obligatory

This section will firstly present Johnson’s argument that unilateral reductions are not morally obligatory. Next, it will draw a distinction between public and private unilateral reductions before embarking on four arguments that individuals are under an obligation to engage in unilateral reductions.

2.1 Johnson’s Argument that Individuals are not Morally Obligated to Engage in Unilateral Reductions

Johnson (2003: 272) argues that individuals are not under any moral obligation to engage in unilateral reductions because the claim that we are fails to distinguish acting unilaterally from acting as one of many in a cooperative scheme to address a problem...[I]n addressing a commons problem, unilateral, voluntary actions typically have no reasonable chance of achieving their object....Since collective, coordinated action faces no similar, systematic obstacle and so has a greater chance of protecting the commons, one’s moral obligation is to work for and adhere to a collective scheme to protect the commons.

The systematic obstacle to the success of unilateral reductions in protecting the commons (i.e. mitigating the harmful impacts of environmental problems to acceptable levels) obtains because of the features of environmental problems. That is, they bear the features of a tragedy of the commons, which occurs when ‘many independent agents derive benefits from a subtractable resource that is threatened by their aggregate use’ (ibid.: 273). I have adapted Johnson’s presentation (ibid.: 275) of the assumptions and rules of the tragedy of the commons below:

1. The only incentive individuals have is to maximise benefits from their consumption of environmental resources.
2. The only way individuals can communicate regarding their consumption of environmental resources is by increasing or reducing their levels of consumption.

3. Costs to environmental resources of increased consumption are shared but benefits from increased consumption accrue to the individual.

4. Benefits to environmental resources of decreased consumption are shared but costs of reduced consumption are borne by the individual.

5. Environmental resources saved by one individual are available for use by any other individual.

The ‘tragedy’ of a tragedy of the commons is the destruction of the commons. For our purposes, the commons can be conceived either as some particular environmental resource, such as fresh water or rainforests, or as the biosphere itself. The sense of tragedy can be amplified by the fact that it may well be the case that the users of the commons recognise that overuse is occurring. However, the incentives at play and the awareness of each user of the pattern of costs and benefits of increasing or reducing use mean that it will always be rational for a user to increase use and never be rational for her to reduce use.\(^{52}\) Johnson argues (ibid.: 273–7) that there is no reasonable expectation that unilateral reductions in use will succeed as a strategy for protecting the commons for the following reason: there is a lack of assurance to any and all would-be reducers that the resources saved by their restraint will be preserved and not reward the less restrained. This lack of assurance obtains and is embedded because of the manner in which unilateral reductions restrict communication between users, which is the second feature of a tragedy of the commons situation. Even if a majority unilaterally reduce their use in the face of this lack of assurance, the commons may be such that the remaining minority may appropriate all the resources saved by the majority of unilateral reducers and the level of overuse is not changed by the sacrifice endured. This restriction is overcome by a collective agreement which alters features 1, 3, 4 and 5; that is, it provides incentives for users to reduce their use and changes the pattern of costs resulting

\(^{52}\) There is much debate over the extent to which the tragedy of the commons as articulated originally by Hardin (1968) is best described as a tragedy of the *commons*, for there are many examples of well-functioning commons. It has been suggested, prominently in the work of Elinor Ostrom (e.g. 1990), that the tragedy of destruction occurs where there is no ownership and thus an absence of regulations, rules and agreements, rather than collective ownership as in a commons.
from increased use by the imposition of sanctions on individuals for overuse. The monitoring of use and the reliable enforcement of sanctions provides the assurance for individuals to engage in reductions (no longer unilateral) the benefit of which will not be appropriated by others. Since, Johnson argues, unilateral reductions are highly unlikely to succeed in securing protection of the commons there is no reason, and hence no moral reason, to engage in them. Rather, since collective agreements are likely to succeed by providing sufficient assurance that reductions will not be wasted, we are under a moral obligation to act to bring them about (promote) and to adhere to them once they are established (comply).

For the purposes of argument, I will accept Johnson’s conclusion that individuals are under a moral obligation to engage in promotion activities on the grounds that collective agreements are likely to succeed in protecting the commons. However, I present four arguments below that if this conclusion is true then at least a significant subset of unilateral reductions is also morally obligatory.

2.2 Public and Private Unilateral Reductions
I will firstly draw a distinction between public and private unilateral reductions. A unilateral reduction may be public to three groups: other individuals (friends, family, neighbours, work colleagues), businesses and governments. There are three senses in which reductions may be public or private. Firstly, unilateral reductions may be literally visible or invisible to other individuals. For example, the installation of solar hot water panels on a domestic roof is public in the sense that it is visible to the household’s neighbours, but taking shorter showers, reusing and repairing goods and turning down the household thermostat are private in the sense of being invisible to other individuals. Secondly, unilateral reductions may be ‘visible’ or ‘invisible’ to businesses and governments insofar as they stimulate or reduce demand for certain goods and services. For example, the take up of a government grant by a household for the installation of solar hot water panels will be ‘visible’ to the government agency administering the grant, and the purchase of an energy efficient appliance will be ‘visible’ to the retailers of the good. However, it is a condition of this kind of visibility that the unit at which individuals purchase must be recorded and in principle assessable by the business or government agency in question; if it is not then that unilateral reduction will be ‘invisible’ to them. The third sense in which a
unilateral reduction may be visible or invisible to other individuals, businesses and governments concerns the clarity and comprehensibility, or the obscurity and ambiguity, of the social meaning of the action or refraining. For example, it will be unclear whether an individual who is driving less and cycling more is doing so for the purpose of reducing their personal contribution to global climate change or for the purpose of improving their health. Similarly, it will be unclear or ambiguous to an airline company – unless part of a specific boycott or other wider movement which articulates its aims – whether a reduction in demand in a given month has occurred for prudential reasons on the part of its potential passengers or is for the purpose of reducing personal contributions to global climate change. Where a unilateral reduction’s social meaning is clear and unambiguous it is ‘visible’ as a unilateral reduction taken for the purposes of contributing to the mitigation of the harmful impacts of environmental problems, and where its social meaning is obscure or ambiguous then it is ‘invisible’ as a unilateral reduction taken for this purpose. The distinction between public and private unilateral reductions therefore has heterogeneous grounds and falls along a continuum, with most containing both private and public elements.

2.3 Unilateral Reductions May Function As Promotion Actions
If individuals are morally obligated to promote collective agreements then they are also under a moral obligation to at least consider engaging in unilateral reductions with a strong public element, that is, those that are visible to other individuals, businesses and governments and have a reasonably clear and unambiguous social meaning. This obligation follows from the obligation to engage in promotion actions because public unilateral reductions may function as promotion actions. Collective agreements are predominantly, if not necessarily, instituted by governments. Promotion activities must therefore be directed towards persuading governments to, for instance, ban, tax or subsidise the relevant goods or activities. This persuasion may either take the form of (i) lobbying governments with petitions and demonstrations; (ii) demonstrating to governments what is desired with activities such as boycotts, joining certain campaigning organisations (who in turn lobby directly) or voting for alternative political parties; or (iii) recruiting other individuals and groups to a cause in order to increase the numbers who participate in the more direct forms of promotion. Public unilateral reductions – those that are visible to
other individuals – may function as instances of both (ii) and (iii). In terms borrowed from Neuteleers (2010: 514), at the citizen-government level public unilateral reductions that are visible to governments may constitute an element of lifestyle as indication, serving to guide and motivate governments in the redesign of institutional arrangements, and at the citizen-citizen level public unilateral reductions that are visible and clear to other individuals may constitute an element of the diffusion of lifestyles, either serving directly as an example for other individuals to imitate (thus clarifying and increasing the indication to governments) or as an indirect means by which social norms can be changed (thus either bypassing, supplementing or augmenting government efforts).

The reason that I do not argue for the stronger claim that insofar as it is morally obligatory to engage in promotion actions it is also obligatory to engage in public unilateral reductions is because these reductions comprise only a subset of promotion actions. To discharge the obligation we must only engage in at least some promotion activities, and it is unspecified which kind they must be. Of course, to the extent that no kind or subset of promotion activities are specified by the obligation, public unilateral reductions are on an equal footing to the more classical political actions such as voting and demonstrating. It might also be objected that the foregoing argument does not count as an argument for it being morally obligatory to at least consider engaging in public unilateral reductions, since if such reductions are functioning as promotion actions then we are justified in treating them as such and not as unilateral reductions. However, this is just a matter of description; these actions still fall under the description of a unilateral reduction in addition to under the description of a promotion action. We might similarly say that being morally obligated to engage in promotion actions does not entail being obligated to vote for the appropriate political candidates, since voting is merely functioning as a promotion action. This seems absurd because voting is a paradigmatic promotion action. I have been seeking to dissolve the distinction set up by Johnson between promotion actions and unilateral reductions by arguing that being obligated to engage in promotion actions extends to include public unilateral reductions precisely because they may function as, or service as instances of, promotion actions in exactly the same way that voting, demonstrating and other classical political actions may.
This argument only applies to the more public unilateral reductions. It does not establish the general claim that insofar as we are under an obligation to engage in promotion activities we are also under an obligation to consider engaging in public and private unilateral reductions. Since not all unilateral reductions may function as promotion actions (i.e. private unilateral reductions), arguments that are independent of this relation of identity between promotion and (public) unilateral reductions must be provided for the claim that it is obligatory to consider engaging in both kinds of unilateral reductions. I will provide further arguments in the following three subsections. The first two of these arguments will still be grounded in and be developed from the assumption that promotion actions are morally obligatory. They will present a stronger argument than that we are obligated to consider engaging in unilateral reductions, and will be for the claim that insofar as we are under an obligation to engage in promotion actions we are also under an obligation to engage in public (2.4) and private (2.5) unilateral reductions. The third (2.6) will be grounded in the claim that we are under a moral obligation to do whatever stands a likelihood of success in mitigating environmental harm.

2.4 Unilateral Reductions May Strengthen the Effectiveness of Promotion Activities

Engaging in public unilateral reductions can strengthen the effectiveness of the promotion activities that one is under a moral obligation to engage in. As Johnson (2003: 285) accepts:

Making individual reductions...may be necessary to convince others of one’s sincerity and of the viability of what one proposes. Beyond this it may set an example for others and impress them with one’s commitment and understanding. So as an aid to one’s organising efforts, there may be a place for exemplifying the kinds of changes that one urges on others as part of a collective agreement.

This does not on its own constitute an argument for a moral obligation to engage in unilateral reductions. For this, an extra assumption is required: that the moral obligation requires engaging in effective promotion activities. If the mismatch between one’s individual behaviour and what one is promoting undermines the effectiveness of the promotion by, for instance, drawing accusations of hypocrisy, then we are obligated to engage at least in public unilateral reductions to safeguard this effectiveness.
2.5 Unilateral Reductions are Morally Obligatory, On Grounds of Integrity, For Those Who Accept Or Discharge the Moral Obligation to Promote

An appeal to the requirements of integrity can ground either strong or weak claims regarding the obligation to unilaterally reduce that follows from the obligation to promote. The strong claim – that insofar as an individual is morally obligated to engage in promotion actions she is also, on grounds of integrity, obligated to engage in unilateral reductions – has the following form:

- If an individual, $S$, is subject to a moral obligation $O_1$, and if the requirements of integrity entail that those who accept or discharge $O_1$ are also subject to obligation $O_2$, then $S$ is also subject to $O_2$.

This principle is questionable. It has the merit of disallowing an individual from avoiding being bound by obligation ($O_2$, or the obligation to unilaterally reduce) merely by avoiding the acceptance or discharging of another obligation ($O_1$, or the obligation to promote). However, unless there are independent grounds for why $O_2$ applies to $S$, it is not clear that unless they accept or discharge $O_1$ they should be bound by $O_2$. That is, an individual is not open to a charge of inconsistency, hypocrisy or lack of integrity if she does not accept the obligation to promote; profess the need for or desirability of widespread promoting; or actually engage in promotion activities. The following, weaker formulation involving the appeal to integrity would then be the most that could be claimed:

- If individuals are morally obligated to perform promotion activities, and $S$ either (i) accepts that the obligation to promote applies to her, or (ii) professes the need for or desirability of widespread promotion, or (iii) engages in promotion activities, then $S$ is, on grounds of integrity, obligated to perform unilateral reductions.

An objection to this formulation is that an individual whose understanding of the promotion activities that she and others were under an obligation to engage in, and the promotion activities that she actually engaged in, consisted entirely of classical political actions such as campaigning for political candidates and persuading others to engage in such actions, and made no reference to unilateral reductions, then she
would not need to engage in unilateral reductions herself to exhibit integrity. A weaker formulation still, then, would acknowledge this objection:

- If individuals are morally obligated to perform promotion activities, and $S$ (i) has an understanding of the promotion activities she and others are obliged to engage in as including advocacy of unilateral reduction, or (ii) performs promotion activities, among which is the advocacy of unilateral reductions, then $S$ is, on grounds of integrity, obligated to perform unilateral reductions.\(^{53}\)

This is a considerably weaker argument than that first considered, insofar as it excludes from the obligation all who do not engage in promotion activities, and all who do but do not include advocacy of unilateral reductions among them. Nonetheless, given that it still applies to all who accept the obligation to engage in promotion (let alone all those who accept, but do not act upon, the requirement for individuals to engage in unilateral reductions), it is still a significant argument. Hourdequin advances this species of argument as a ground for a personal obligation to reduce one’s greenhouse gas emissions. This argument is connected to the foregoing argument regarding the necessity of avoiding the perception of hypocrisy in order not to undermine the effectiveness of one’s promotion activities. She argues (2010: 448–9):

A person who is truly concerned about climate change and is committed to alleviating it to the best of her ability must make some effort to effect social change... However, a person of integrity who has this commitment will act also on a personal level to reduce her own emissions and will, in general, avoid frivolous emissions of greenhouse gases: her actions at the political level will be integrated with those at the personal level...The kind of unity that integrity recommends requires that an individual work to harmonise her commitments at various levels and achieve a life in which her commitments are embodied not only in a single sphere, but in the various spheres she inhabits.

Hourdequin makes clear that arguments concerning integrity are intended to be sensitive to the facts of human psychology. This is most clear in the link between this argument and that of 2.4, as when Hourdequin (ibid.: 451) says ‘[w]here we see in others a lack of coherence between their political commitments and personal

\(^{53}\) Hourdequin cites Al Gore as an instance of this kind of case (2010: 450).
choices, we often wonder how to make sense of this apparent mismatch, and we may question the sincerity with which certain commitments are held. A politician’s environmental commitments, as embodied in public pronouncements and legislative support, for example, may be called into question if he or she lives a lavish and environmentally damaging lifestyle.’ It need not be the case that the public pronouncements and legislative support make any reference to the need for unilateral reductions for this questioning and doubt to take place, or even to be justified. We would expect such a person to be ‘thoughtful about her greenhouse gas emissions and [make] an effort to reduce them’ (ibid.). It may not be logically required given the content of what is publically said, but it seems justifiable to doubt the strength of the commitment to mitigating environmental harm in cases such as these. The argument from integrity thus comprises another non-comprehensive but significant element amongst a suite of arguments for the claim that unilateral reductions are morally obligatory.

2.6 Unilateral Reductions are Necessary for Success
If individuals are under a moral obligation to engage in those actions which stand a high likelihood of success, and it is the case that promotion and compliance actions are insufficient to achieve this success in the absence of unilateral reductions, then they are also under a moral obligation to engage in unilateral reductions. Johnson argues that unilateral reductions stand no reasonable chance of success in protecting the commons, which I interpret as ‘mitigating the harmful impacts of environmental problems’. In this context, then, a successful collective agreement or set of agreements is one which adequately mitigates the harmful impacts of environmental problems. Conversely, we do not have an obligation to unilaterally reduce because, as a strategy, it does not stand a reasonable chance of being successful in mitigating the harm. The plausible assumption behind these claims is that we only have a moral obligation to do that which stands a reasonable chance of achieving success in the relevant spheres of moral concern. A further, implicit and crucial assumption is that there is a possible collective agreement or set of agreements for individuals to promote which stand a reasonable chance of achieving success in mitigating the harm. I believe that it is at least arguable that this assumption is unjustified. Such is the scale of environmental problems such as global climate change, biodiversity loss and chemical pollution that it may be the case that any collective agreement which
contained measures to adequately address them would involve a level of control of and intrusion into the private lives of individuals that would be politically unacceptable in many liberal democracies. If this is the case, and if the content of the moral obligation is to do whatever stands a reasonable chance of adequately mitigating the harm caused by environmental problems, and if what would do this is in fact a mix of collective agreements and unilateral reductions, then we are morally obligated to both promote those agreements \emph{and} unilaterally reduce. In framing his argument in this way, Johnson has made it contingent on the questionable assumption that there \emph{is} a possible set of collective agreements that stands a reasonable chance of success in the relevant regard. If this assumption is unjustified, then his argument functions as an argument for moral obligations to unilaterally reduce.

This section has presented four arguments that provide multiple justifications for the claim that unilateral reductions are morally obligatory. The first argument was that individuals subject to the obligation to engage in the promotion of stronger and more adequate collective measures to mitigate the harmful impacts of environmental problems are under an obligation to at least consider engaging in public unilateral reductions, since such actions are among those which may function as promotion actions. The second argument was that if individuals are under an obligation to engage in promotion effectively, then they are also under an obligation to engage in public (and possibly private) unilateral reductions since the failure to do so may undermine the effectiveness of promotion activities. The third argument was that those who accept and discharge the obligation to promote are, on grounds of integrity, obligated to engage in both public and private unilateral reductions. The fourth argument was that if it is the case that there is no politically feasible collective agreement the compliance with which stands a high likelihood of mitigating environment harm to acceptable levels, and if widespread engagement in unilateral reductions could make up the shortfall from the strongest possible collective agreement, then we are obligated to engage in unilateral reductions in addition to promoting this agreement. None of these arguments invoked the moral status of the paradigmatic consumption actions that unilateral reductions are the alternative to.

The following section assesses once again arguments for the claim that paradigmatic consumption actions constitute moral wrongdoings.
3. Paradigmatic Consumption Actions Constitute a Moral Wrongdoing Because they Continue Membership of a Harming Putative Group

The argument of this section is as follows:

A. To remain a member of a harming group is a moral wrongdoing.
B. The performance of paradigmatic consumption actions constitutes remaining a member of a harming group.
C. Therefore, the performance of paradigmatic consumption actions is a moral wrongdoing.

I will firstly present an analogy to the case of environmental problems of an individual remaining a member of a harming group, followed by a first set of defences against a claim of wrongdoing in this context. I will then present an account of the nature of the wrongdoing in this context grounded in the virtue ethics formulation of wrong action in section 5 of Chapter 4. I will then transfer the claim to the case of the harming group responsible for environmental problems, and consider some additional defences to the wrongdoing claim that its members might advance. I will deliberately not frame this discussion in terms of paradigmatic consumption actions or unilateral reductions until the concluding arguments.

3.1 The Golf Club Member

Consider the following scenario. Nigel is a member of a golf club that has a driving range. He goes every week to the driving range, pays for his tub of golf balls, and spends an enjoyable hour driving golf balls as far as he can. Sometimes, when he is there last thing in the evening just before the club closes, he notices the cart that sweeps the golf balls up getting ready to go out on to the course to collect them. But one evening, just as he is leaving, he notices the cart has swept up all the golf balls, then it goes over to the very back of the course where the ground falls away down a steep embankment. The driver then discharges the golf balls down the embankment. Nigel is puzzled, but it is late. Next week, he takes a detour on his way to the club to have a look at the area to the rear of the range at the bottom of the embankment. He finds a car park with a sign that reads ‘Wistow Hollow Community Nature Reserve’. He walks down a path through woodland and comes upon a lake filled with
thousands of golf balls. The woodlands on the embankment above it and all around it are similarly choked with golf balls. He can see that the reserve was once well looked after; there are trees that were obviously planted and protected with tree guards, benches and well made paths, interpretation boards about the history of the site and how it was acquired by the surrounding community, the lake cleared of rubbish and old vegetation and trees planted. As he is leaving, a local resident enters the car park. Nigel goes over to him and asks what has happened. They say that a year ago the golf club started dumping golf balls down the embankment. The community complained, but the club said that they could produce deeds to show they owned the land so there was nothing they could do. The local council do not want to get involved; the club is wealthy and can afford good lawyers. Nobody visits the reserve anymore and the lake is now largely devoid of wildlife.

When Nigel arrives at the club he asks to see the manager, who explains that they get a good price on the particular brand of golf balls for the driving range, but that many of them are only good for one strike. It is cheaper to buy new ones than to employ someone to sort through the hundreds that are struck each week. Nigel tells him about the nature reserve and the harm it has done to the wildlife and the local community down there. The manager is evasive on whether the club really does own the land, and says that business is business.

What should Nigel do? He has found himself a member of a group – in this case, a golf club – that harms. It harms the wildlife in the lake, and the local community by depriving them of a green space that they once enjoyed (and also the harm of knowing that they are the subject of an injustice). He knows that a good number of the golf balls in the lake are his, but that this amount is negligible compared to the thousands down there. Resigning his membership of the club will make no difference, either in terms of the number of golf balls that end up in the reserve, or its effects on other members or the actions of the club. In the end, he decides not to resign. He continues going to the club and using the driving range. Occasionally he sees the cart dumping the golf balls down the embankment. He still feels bad about it, so whenever he sees the manager he asks him if he has done anything about it, he suggests different brands of golf balls that will last longer, and he tells other
members of the club what he saw and encourages them to raise it with the manager. But after a while nothing has changed.

Nigel tells his friend Olivia, who is not a member of the club, and she says he is wrong to stay a member. She says he ought to have resigned his membership of the club by now. Nigel is taken aback, and decides to defend himself.

3.2 The First Set of Defences

I will examine two set of defences to which those accused of committing a moral wrongdoing in remaining a member of a harming group might appeal. This first set will apply only to those who, like Nigel, are members of a formal group. The second set, examined in 3.4, will be more specific to members of the harming group relevant to environmental problems.

3.2.1 The Ignorance Defence

Nigel defends himself from Olivia’s disapproval of his not having resigned his membership of the club by pointing out that when he joined the club he had no idea that it was destroying a nature reserve. Olivia replies that this is a separate issue from what Nigel should do now. She says that it would have been much worse if he had joined the club knowing that it was destroying a nature reserve, but that since he had no reason to expect that it was, he did nothing wrong in joining. But now he does know what it is doing he should resign.

3.2.2 The Group Intention Defence

Nigel says that the club does not intend to do anyone harm and so Olivia should not disapprove of him for being a member. The manager and his staff are just trying to run a golf club well, which includes keeping the prices down for its members. They did not set out to destroy a nature reserve; that is just the unintended by-product of the running of this golf club. Olivia replies that it would indeed be worse if Nigel were a member of a club which actually intended to harm others, but concedes that this is not such a group. Nonetheless, as a matter of fact, this club does cause harm, whether it is its intention or not, and the fact that it does so is morally relevant to Nigel’s decision regarding whether or not to remain a member.
3.2.3 The Personal Intention Defence
Nigel tries another tack to argue that he is doing nothing wrong. He concedes that the golf club is causing harm, but says that he has no intention to belong to a club that causes harm. He just wants to be a member of a golf club and play golf. He enjoys playing golf, this is the nearest club and it is on his way home from work. He does not want to harm wildlife or the local community. He just wants to enjoy himself playing this sport. Olivia replies in a similar way as before; it is good that Nigel does not want to be a member of a group that causes harm – that would be even worse if he did – but as a matter of fact he is. Having found out that the club of which he is a member causes harm, he should no longer be a member.

3.2.4 The Harmlessness of Membership Defence
Nigel points out that his being a member does not cause any real harm. He tells Olivia that the lake and woods have so many golf balls in them that it would be difficult to tell the difference if he had never played golf at the club at all. Olivia replies that Nigel’s individual contribution to the number of golf balls in the lake is not what is wrong with remaining a member of the group after he has found out what they were doing. Nigel says he does not see what he is doing wrong if the level of harm he is causing is so negligible compared to the overall level of harm, and presses Olivia for an explanation.

3.3 The Virtue Ethics Account of Why Remaining a Member of a Harming Group Constitutes a Moral Wrongdoing
In her reply to the ignorance defence Olivia demonstrated that what she is evaluating is not necessarily the joining of the group in the first place, and in her reply to the harmlessness of membership defence she reveals that she is not necessarily evaluating membership as such. Rather, what she is evaluating is remaining a member. To remain a member of a harming group is to continue one’s membership (i.e. fail to resign one’s membership and withdraw from the group) after one comes to know (or after the point where one could reasonably be expected to know) that the group causes harm (intentionally or unintentionally). What is wrong with remaining a member, Olivia explains, is Nigel’s attitude to the overall level of harm that the club is causing to the wildlife and the local community. Firstly, in remaining a member of the club Nigel is acquiescing in the harm that it is causing. He may not be
explicitly assenting to the harm continuing, but he is tacitly doing so by his actions (or, rather, his lack of action in resigning). Secondly, Olivia continues, in remaining a member of the club Nigel is *complicit* in the harm it is causing and the wrongdoing that harm constitutes. He may not be the manager who instigated the practice, or on the committee who let it pass, or the treasurer of the club who signs the cheques for the cheap golf balls, or the driver of the cart who pulls the lever and dumps the golf balls, but he is nonetheless a member of the club and as such – even without a specific role in the harm – is complicit in the harm it causes.

Thirdly, in remaining a member he is tacitly *approving of or endorsing* the practice of dumping golf balls in the reserve. Nigel may protest that he does not approve of it; he professes his disapproval to his fellow members and to the manager, as well as to his non-member friends like Olivia. Moreover, if he were manager he would stop the practice. But Olivia replies that his actions tell a different story. Imagine, Olivia asks him, if he were to meet the local resident again. What would he say if they asked if he had resigned? If Nigel said that he had not because he did not think his membership made any significant difference, the local resident might agree with Nigel that it did not make a difference in terms of the number of golf balls that were dumped in the reserve, but he would nonetheless be disgusted that he had remained a member because it showed that he approved of the practice. Nigel could protest all he liked that he did not approve of the practice or the harm that it caused, but the local resident could say that if he really disapproved then he would resign his membership, because not resigning is a form of approval and endorsement of the practice continuing.

We can augment Olivia’s argument that remaining a member of the club is to tacitly approve of or endorse the practice which causes harm with an account of what it is for an action to express an attitude. As O’Neill, Holland and Light (2008: 84) observe, ‘actions are not just instrumental means to an end, but a way of expressing attitudes to people and things.’ An action is instrumental if it is intended by the agent to function as a means to achieving some end. For example, the action of walking is typically instrumental to achieving the end of arriving at one’s destination. An action is expressive if it manifests a state of mind, such as a belief, mood, emotion, attitude,
desire, intention, or personality trait (Anderson and Pildes 2000: 1506). The same action of walking might not be instrumental at all, but expressive of impatience for the return of a friend. The clearest cases of expressive actions are political, such as tearing up draft papers or refusing to renounce religious belief. Typically, most actions will possess both instrumental and expressive components. For example, walking might be both instrumental and expressive of a desire to improve one’s fitness, and tearing up draft papers both expressive and intended to inspire and motivate others such that one’s country disengages from the war for which one is being drafted. To determine the expressive content of an action we need to weigh the agent’s intention in performing the action against the social meaning of their action. As Anderson and Pildes (ibid.: 1513) argue, ‘[e]xpressive theories of action hold people accountable for the public meanings of their actions.’ If I raise my hand at an auction, I have made a bid, even if I claim that my intention was only to stretch. Nigel, in being aware of the club’s practices and the harm they cause, and being free to resign his membership of the club but failing to do so, is accountable for the attitude towards the practice and its consequences it expresses, namely, approval and endorsement.

In acquiescing in, being complicit in, and approving of or endorsing the practices of the club and their associated harm, Nigel is hitting the target of certain vices and failing to hit the target of certain virtues. Firstly, insofar as he is unprepared to withdraw from the group and disassociate himself from its actions and is thereby tacitly acquiescing in and approving of or endorsing the harm it causes, he is hitting the target of the vices of indifference and disrespectfulness towards the victims of the harm. Even if his membership has caused and is causing little harm in relation to

---

54 Anderson and Pildes reference both Robert Nozik (1993: 28) (‘the symbolic connection of an action to a situation enables the action to be expressive of some attitude, belief, value, emotion, or whatever.’) and Charles Taylor (1979) as contributing to their view. 55 Our actions are also evaluable in terms of whether they are expressively rational, that is, whether they authentically express our identity (see, for example, Hargreaves Heap 1989). This standard of rationality, which is often portrayed as standing in contrast to instrumental rationality, is used by some to explain why people vote when there is little chance that their vote will influence the outcome of an election (see, for example, Brennan and Hamlin 1998 and Engelen 2006). While this debate is strongly related to the issue of individual environmental behaviour, I will not develop my arguments in terms of an assessment of rationality, since my primary concern is actions’ ethical status. 56 In what follows I will characterise Nigel (and, later, Olivia) as ‘hitting the target’ or ‘failing to hit the target’ of the operative vices and virtues. The virtue ethics account of wrong action must be expressed in these terms, since right and wrong action is a matter of realising, or failing to realise, the ends of the operative virtues. However, it is also the case that, typically, right actions will express or
the level of harm caused by the group, the fact that the group of which he is a member is causing considerable harm should be a matter of concern to him that moves him to acknowledge the harm in some way, even if he is incapable of stopping or even mitigating it. In failing to acknowledge it in the ways open to him he is being indifferent to and disrespectful of its victims by remaining a member and continuing the actions which aggregate to cause the harm. Secondly, insofar as he appreciates both the harm that the group of which he is a member causes and that his membership associates him with this harm in a morally problematic way, but is nonetheless unmoved to withdraw from the group, he is hitting the target of the vice of apathy. Thirdly, insofar as the benefits he accrues from membership of the group lead him to ignore or downplay the harm caused by its practices he hits the target of the vice of selfishness or self-centredness, and insofar as he unjustifiably weighs the benefits he accrues from membership above the harm suffered by the victims of his group’s actions he hits the target of the vices of arrogance and egoism. Fourthly, insofar as he professes disapproval of the practice which causes the harm yet continues by choice to reap the benefits his membership and his contribution to the harm affords he is hitting the target of the vice of hypocrisy. Fifthly, insofar as fear of the costs – either material, psychological or social – resulting from withdrawal from the group lead him to remain a member despite recognition of the harm with which he is associated he hits the target of the vice of cowardice.

Olivia says that remaining a member of the golf club is a moral wrongdoing because it hits the target of these vices. To provide substance to this claim, recall my account of wrong action in section 5 of Chapter 4. Actions which ‘hit the target’ of a vice or vices operative in the context are wrong actions. This context contains exhibit certain virtues, and wrong actions will express or exhibit certain vices. That is, virtuous acts will typically be actions from virtue, and vicious acts will typically be actions from vice (see the distinction in section 5 of Chapter 4). That an action is performed from virtue or vice warrants an appropriate moral evaluation of the agent. However, this chapter is concerned with the moral evaluation of actions rather than agents. I will therefore continue with the notion of hitting and failing to hit the targets of the operative vices and virtues.

To appreciate how remaining a member of the harming group hits the target of these, and many of the other vices (and how it fails to hit the target of many of the operative virtues), it should be made clear that the target of many vices and virtues involve not just valuable outcomes but also the acting agent’s desires and emotions (Sandler 2007: 93).

I have deliberately left Nigel’s reasons for remaining a member of the club unspecified because his motivations are not strictly relevant to whether his actions (and omissions) hit the target of the operative vices and fail to hit the target of the operative virtues. It is possible, for example, that he is remaining a member through apathy but not arrogance. Nonetheless, remaining a member hits the target of both.
possibilities for the members of the club to be indifferent, disrespectful, apathetic, self-centred, arrogant, egoistic, hypocritical and cowardly. Insofar as their actions or omissions express these traits,\textsuperscript{59} they have committed a moral wrongdoing on this virtue ethics account. Moreover, actions which fail to hit the target of virtues that are operative in a given context also count as wrong actions.

In addition to, and mirroring, the vices the target of which are hit by remaining a member of the harming group, there are certain operative virtues in this context. Firstly, insofar as he refuses to acquiesce in and approve of or endorse the practices of the group and the harm it causes through remaining a member, he hits the target of the virtues of compassion, concern, care, empathy, sympathy and respect. Secondly, insofar as he overcomes barriers to his withdrawal from the group, including material, psychological or social costs, he hits the target of the virtue of determination. Thirdly, insofar as he properly weighs the benefits that accrue to him from his membership against the harm that the victims of the group’s practices suffer he hits the targets of the virtues of honesty and humility. Fourthly, insofar as his action of withdrawing from the group is consistent with his professed disapproval of the practice which causes harm he hits the target of the virtue of integrity. Fifthly, insofar as he withdraws from the group despite harbouring fears of the material, psychological or social costs that it may result in, he hits the target of the virtue of courage. In failing to hit the target of these virtues, Nigel commits a moral wrongdoing in remaining a member of the harming group. The claim that remaining a member is a moral wrongdoing is thus justified from two directions; from hitting the target of operative vices and failing to hit the target of operative virtues.

3.4 The Second Set of Defences

Nigel goes away and thinks about all this. The next time he meets Olivia he tells her that she is no different; she too is a member of a group that harms. Olivia, puzzled, asks which group. He says she is a member of the group of individuals who act in such a way that, in aggregate, the consequences of their actions are global climate change, biodiversity loss, marine pollution and all the other huge environmental problems that cause so much harm around the world (drought, disease, starvation,

\textsuperscript{59}Considered in the foregoing sense of the public meaning of their actions, rather than as being actions which express their inner states and motivations.
extinction). That is, she drives her car, heats her house, flies on holiday, buys and throws away material goods, eats meat and does all the other things that directly use fossil fuels and other non-renewable resources, and stimulates demand for such resources. Global climate change and other environmental problems – and the harm they cause to the current poor, future generations of humans, and current and future nonhumans – have been caused by individuals like Olivia doing all these things. These individuals comprise a group of which Olivia is a member, and she is wrong to remain a member of this group.\(^\text{60}\)

3.4.1 The Wrong Kind of Group Defence

The first thing Olivia replies with is that this is not at all like the group of which Nigel is a member. His group is a formal group: a club, with rules for who counts as a member. It is not even an informal group, like a university reading group or a criminal gang or a pub quiz team, where membership is governed not by payment of a fee or the signing of a contract as with formal groups, but by social conventions. The group he alleges she is a member of is just an abstract set of individuals; she is a member of this set along with accountants in Texas, lawyers in India, pharmacists in Australia and engineers in Nigeria, and all the millions of other kinds of individuals who perform actions with consequences that, in aggregate, cause environmental problems. This is not a group at all, but just an abstract set, so she is not a member of anything on a par with Nigel’s golf club regarding which she can be morally evaluated like he can. To take Olivia’s defence further, consider Sinnott-Armstrong’s (2005: 298) claim that ‘membership in a set is too arbitrary to create moral responsibility. I am also in a set of all terrorists plus me, but my membership in that abstract set does not make me responsible for the harms that terrorists cause.’

Nigel concedes that, while there are many formal groups which cause particular instances of environmental harm (e.g. a mining corporation felling an area of rainforest), there is no formal group of which Olivia could be a member that causes the harm in question, namely, global climate change and the other global environmental problems. The environmental harm in question is the aggregate of all

\(^{60}\) In the following sections I will deliberately not apply the terms ‘paradigmatic consumption actions’ and ‘unilateral reductions’ to the actions which constitute membership of the group and withdrawing from the group respectively until the final arguments.
such harm, a (probably significant) subset of which is attributable to formal groups such as corporations, governments and armies. But Olivia *qua* typical consumer is not a member of any such group, and therefore is not culpable with regard to her membership of them.

With regard to abstract sets, Olivia is clearly a member of indefinitely many abstract sets, such as the set of individuals born on (let us say) a Tuesday, or the set of individuals who can read. Olivia is also a member of the set of individuals who are causally responsible for global environmental problems and their harmful impacts. Olivia’s objection is that this set is arbitrary. If she is going to be morally evaluated on the basis of her membership of a set then it seems justifiable for her to demand that this set is not gerrymandered (like Sinnott-Armstrong’s terrorist set which contains one non-terrorist) so as to secure a certain moral evaluation of its members. Since, therefore, Olivia is a member of an indefinite number of such sets, some criterion is required to distinguish the sets of which Olivia is a member that are arbitrary and those which are non-arbitrary. Let us say that non-arbitrary sets are those which reflect considerations in the world, such as common physical, biological, social, cultural, psychological, historical or causal properties or relations, and arbitrary sets are those which fail to reflect such features. The set of all terrorists plus Olivia is clearly a gerrymandered set according to which a moral evaluation of Olivia on the grounds of her membership of this set is unjustified, since, for example, she does not share the relevant psychological properties of desiring to commit acts of violence to further some political or religious cause. The set of individuals causally responsible for global environmental problems is not a gerrymandered set since the members of this set share a certain causal relation to a particular set of phenomena. I will return to further examine the criteria for membership of this set below.

Even if Olivia accepts that this set that Nigel claims she is a member of is not arbitrary, she may still not be satisfied that her membership of it justifies a moral evaluation with the same structure as the evaluation of Nigel’s remaining a member of the golf club. She may object that moral judgements cannot be grounded in membership of a *set* of any kind, even one which reflects considerations in the world which make it non-arbitrary. For example, it would be peculiar to morally condemn
a particular terrorist not on the grounds of the acts of violence he commits or desires to commit, but on the grounds of his membership of the set of terrorists. In a case like Nigel’s, where he has neither bad motives nor has performed actions with harmful consequences, a moral evaluation is nonetheless possible because of his membership of a real group, not an abstract entity like a set. Membership of the (non-arbitrary) set of individuals who are causally responsible for global environmental problems and their harmful impacts is therefore insufficient to ground a moral evaluation of Olivia or any of its other members. The question for Nigel if he wishes to continue with his transfer of Olivia’s arguments to her contribution to environmental problems is whether the non-arbitrary set of individuals who are causally responsible for environmental problems can be shown to be anything more than merely a set.

I will use Cripps’s (2011) notion of a harming putative group to suggest that the set of individuals causally responsible for environmental problems can be shown to be a group according to which it is appropriate to morally evaluate its members on the same grounds as the account provided for Nigel’s continuing membership of the golf club. A harming putative group is ‘a set of individuals who do not yet constitute a group in the strong sense, but are nonetheless ‘grouped’ by the predictable harmful impact of their combined actions and could plausibly form a group to tackle the harm’ (Cripps 2011: 176). Such a group is neither a formal group (which is what I take Cripps to mean by a group ‘in the strong sense’) like a political party or a golf club, nor an informal group like a criminal gang or a pub quiz team. But it is plausibly more than merely an abstract set. Firstly, it reflects a consideration in the world, namely, the causal relation between the actions of its members and the harmful impact of their combined actions. Secondly, unlike the members of arbitrary sets, it could plausibly form a formal group to tackle the harm it causes. Indeed, many subsets of its members have already formed groups to tackle the harm, and a global treaty such as the Kyoto Protocol is evidence of the plausibility that a stronger formal group could be formed. It is a set that is, as it were, a formal group in waiting. Thirdly, since this particular set is non-arbitrary insofar as it is grouped by consequences that are harmful, membership is clearly relevant to moral evaluation. Each of these considerations makes this particular set more than an abstract set, even if it is less than a formal group like Nigel’s golf club.
Having provided an account of the kind of group of which he is claiming Olivia (and, of course, he himself) is a member, Nigel goes on to apply her account of his wrongdoing to how she is committing a moral wrongdoing by remaining a member of this group. If she remains a member of this group now she knows she is one and that the group causes harm, she will be acquiescing in the harm it causes; she will be complicit in the harm; and she will be expressing approval or endorsement of the harm. Insofar as she is acquiescing in, complicit in and approving of or endorsing the practices that lead to the harm, she will be hitting the target of the vices of indifference, disrespectfulness, apathy, self-centredness, arrogance, egoism, hypocrisy and cowardice, and failing to hit the target of the operative virtues of compassion, concern, care, empathy, sympathy, respect, determination, honesty, humility, integrity and courage. Insofar as wrong actions are those which hit the target of operative vices and fail to hit the target of operative virtues, performing those actions which continue membership of a harming group constitute a moral wrongdoing (whether it is a formal, informal or putative group, and whether the consequences of the actions which constitute membership cause perceptible harm or not).

3.4.2 The Harmlessness of Membership, Ignorance, Group Intention and Personal Intention Defences

Olivia appeals to each of the defences that Nigel deployed. Firstly, she tries the harmlessness of membership defence. She says that it is even less plausible than in Nigel’s case that she is causing any harm. Whereas he was adding a relatively small number of golf balls to the thousands that were already in the reserve, her actions contribute such an imperceptible amount of CO\textsubscript{2} emissions and stimulate a truly negligible level of demand for natural resources that it is implausible to suggest that remaining a member of this group causes any harm. But Nigel reminds her that she did not accept this defence in his case because her evaluation of him was on grounds unconnected to his level of contribution to the harm the group caused. Rather, it was grounded in the fact that remaining a member hit the target of certain vices and that failing to withdraw constituted a failure to hit the target of the operative virtues.

Nigel pre-empts Olivia’s invocation of the ignorance defence. He says that as in his case, it is no defence on her part that she did not know that the group was causing
harm, nor even (unlike in his case) that she did not know she was part of this group, for what is being evaluated are her actions once she knows she is a member of a group that harms. Nor will the *group intention* defence work. In the case of putative groups there are no shared intentions or aims at all, but even if we determine the group intention to be reducible to the intentions of its members to get on with the business of living their own lives such that the harm they cause is an unintended by-product of their actions, this will be no defence for remaining a member. This is because the relevant moral feature here is not the intentions of the group (understood either as explicitly agreed aims or as derived from the intentions of its members) but that, as a matter of fact, the group does cause harm. Lastly, the *personal intention* defence that Olivia might appeal to – claiming that she has no intention to harm, or any other intention that may be subject to negative moral evaluation – also provides no defence against the evaluation of her as hitting the target of certain vices and failing to hit the target of operative virtues. It is certainly the case that in not having the intention to join and remain a member of a group that *does* intend to harm, and in not remaining a member of a group that harms *for the purpose of* contributing to that harm, she avoids acting from and expressing certain other vices, such as cruelty or maliciousness (and thereby probably avoids hitting the target of those vices). But not having these intentions does not mean that she escapes all moral evaluation.

### 3.4.3 The Involuntary Membership Defence

Olivia realises that the different kind of group which Nigel claims she is a member affords her an additional defence that was not open to him. She says that, unlike his membership of the golf club, her membership of this group was involuntary. According to him, one just becomes a member of this group by performing certain kinds of actions which, in aggregate, cause environmental problems. Presumably – and this is something to which we will have to return – one becomes a member merely in virtue of being born into a certain kind of society or situation where one uses or stimulates demand for natural resources. This is not a matter of personal choice, and so is not something for which one should be morally evaluated. Nigel replies that he is not morally evaluating her on the basis of how she *became* a member of the group, but what she does now she knows the group of which she is a member causes harm. It is what she does *now* that matters. If she remains a member, just as he did, she is committing a moral wrongdoing.
3.4.4 The No Good from Withdrawal Defence

Olivia accepts that there is something morally problematic with remaining a member, but questions what Nigel is suggesting she do about it. He is suggesting she must withdraw from the group and cease to be a member. If she does so she will be performing the right action insofar as she will avoid hitting the target of the operative vices and will hit the target of the operative virtues. She asks Nigel how she can withdraw from the group. Nigel replies that membership of this harming putative group is unlike membership of his formal group or of an informal group. In theory, he could remain a member of the golf club but cease to perform the action – hitting golf balls onto the driving range – which aggregated to cause the harm to the nature reserve; the question of membership and the question of which actions of the members of the group aggregate to cause harm are distinct. Similarly, membership and the performance of actions which harm (or aggregate to cause harm) may come apart within informal groups like criminal gangs; gangs may retain members who do not participate in or contribute towards any criminal activities. But since the harming putative group in question is ‘grouped’ by the harm caused by the aggregated consequences of the actions of its members, the question of which actions aggregate to cause global environmental harm and in virtue of what one is a member of the group are intimately related. This is so because whichever actions are the ones that aggregate to cause environmental problems are the very ones the performance of which constitutes membership of the group. To become a member of the group that harms merely involves performing those actions which aggregate to cause the harm, and therefore to withdraw from the group involves ceasing to perform those actions which aggregate to cause the harm.\(^{61}\)

Olivia has three questions about this account of what grounds membership and how she may withdraw that constitute her three remaining defences. The first is that withdrawing from the group (i.e. ceasing to perform those actions which, in aggregate, cause environmental problems) will do no good. That is, it will not reduce the level of harm to any victim. If withdrawing will do no good, then how can it be something she ought to do? Nigel replies that we are under a general obligation not

\(^{61}\)It is not necessarily the case that membership of a harming putative group is constituted by the performance of actions which have consequences that are not in themselves harmful.
to commit moral wrongdoings. If we are performing actions that constitute a moral wrongdoing then we have a prima facie obligation to cease performing those actions. Olivia did a very good job of explaining how remaining a member of a harming group constituted a moral wrongdoing insofar as it hits the target of certain vices and constituted a failure to hit the target of any of the operative virtues. Nigel believes he has successfully argued that Olivia’s performance of those actions which, in aggregate, cause environmental harm is an instance of her account of this kind of wrongdoing. Moreover, such is the nature of the group of which she is a member that her membership is constituted by her performance of certain actions. Therefore, insofar as her remaining a member is a moral wrongdoing, her performance of those actions is a wrongdoing. Nigel concedes that withdrawing from this harming group, given the scale of the harm it causes and the inconsequential contribution that each member’s actions makes to it, will not alleviate the suffering of any of the victims of the harm. But given that remaining a member is a moral wrongdoing, she is nonetheless under an obligation to withdraw.

3.4.5 The Obligation to Promote Defence

Olivia’s second question is that, even if withdrawing avoids hitting the targets of these vices and hits the target of these virtues, if it does not alleviate the suffering of any of the victims of the harm, perhaps instead the obligation should be to campaign to bring about collective measures that will reduce the harm that the group causes overall in such a way that the suffering of its victims (or potential future victims) is alleviated. Nigel replies that Olivia is right that members of this harming putative group are under this obligation. He points out that this campaigning can not only take the form of classical political actions like writing letters to MPs and demonstrating on the streets, but also of ceasing to perform those actions which make you a member of the group and thereby withdrawing from the group. This may influence other people to withdraw from the group and also to engage in promotion activities. It will also demonstrate the sincerity of your commitment to the effect that it amplifies the strength of other campaigning actions you engage in. Nigel admits that what little ‘promotion activities’ that he engaged in at the golf club – talking to the manager and other members – was undermined for as long as he remained a member and still played golf. They were right not to take him too seriously. If he had resigned and then joined the community group campaigning against the actions of
the club, his resignation would increase his standing and demonstrate that, in sacrificing the benefits he obtained from membership, he was sincere in his campaigning. Similarly, if Olivia engages in campaigning for, say, stronger environmental laws and reparations to the victims of environmental harm, her case will be undermined by her inaction regarding her own membership of this group. And just as Nigel’s second meeting with the local resident would have been awkward, so Olivia may be open to a charge of, say, disrespectfulness from a member of the global poor for being sufficiently unmoved to withdraw from the harming group, no matter how much political campaigning she engaged in.

3.4.6 The Demandingness Defence

Olivia’s third question about Nigel’s account of what grounds membership of this group and how she may withdraw is that if withdrawing from the harming putative group is achieved by ceasing to perform those actions which, in aggregate, cause the harm, then it looks like she is going to have to stop doing almost everything. For surely environmental problems are caused by the aggregated consequences of everything that we all do; all our heating, eating, washing, travelling, and everything we manufacture, buy, use and throw away. She says that Nigel is claiming, on the basis of her arguments regarding his membership of the golf club, that to the extent that remaining a member of a harming group is a moral wrongdoing its members are under an obligation to withdraw from it. For Nigel, withdrawal is a straightforward matter of cancelling his membership dues. There may be some costs associated with his resignation; he may have to travel further to an alternative club; alternative clubs may be more expensive; he may lose touch with friends he had made there; or he may face censure for causing a fuss over a practice which keeps the club membership cheap. These costs are relatively modest. But if Olivia is right and to withdraw from the harming putative group responsible for causing global environmental problems is either impossible or very demanding and associated with an undue level of self-sacrifice, it may be difficult to justify the claim that withdrawal from this harming group is an obligation at all.62 That is, if withdrawal is

62 I will leave the notion of an ‘undue’ or ‘unreasonable’ level of demandingness unanalysed in this section. I do so because, on the one hand, it seems to me that the actions and refrainings which I specify would be required for full and immediate withdrawal from the harming group in question are uncontroversially ‘unreasonably’ demanding, and on the other hand, the unilateral reductions which are the subject of these chapters are, for the most part, uncontroversially undemanding. In cases where
not a reasonable option then remaining a member may not hit the target of the vices of indifference, arrogance, hypocrisy or cowardice after all.

Olivia’s final defence requires an assessment of how demanding it would be to withdraw from this harming putative group. We need, therefore, to know precisely what it would take to withdraw from the group. In Nigel’s case, being a member of a formal group, it is clear what it would have taken for him to withdraw. In the case of this harming putative group it is less clear. To determine (i) what it would take to withdraw requires an account of (ii) which actions constitute membership of the group, since withdrawal from this group consists in ceasing to perform those actions which constitute membership. This account itself requires an account of (iii) which actions have consequences which aggregate to cause the harm in question, which in turn requires an account of (iv) the harm in question. We must begin, then, with an account of which harm, or what level of harm, we will use to determine what its causes are, the extent and make-up of the membership of the group which causes it and, in turn, what it will take for a member of this group to cease being a member.

The harm in question that has been the focus of this chapter has been the starvation, disease, individual death and species extinction which results from longitudinal collective action environmental problems; global climate change, atmospheric and marine pollution, ozone depletion, deforestation and so on. These problems are caused by the aggregated consequences of the actions of almost all 7 billion human beings, from poor sub-Saharan farmers felling trees to make a cooking fire to rich Northern consumers purchasing furniture made from non-sustainably sourced timber. While the difference between their individual consumption levels is stark when assessed on the basis of their relative levels of material wealth, an assessment on the basis of their contribution to environmental problems, as we have seen, reveals no difference; both their contributions are inconsequential, so there is no way to say that the rich Northern consumer is part of the group causally responsible for environmental problems and the poor sub-Saharan farmer is not. On this there is uncertainty regarding whether an advocated unilateral reduction was unduly demanding for those urged to engage in it, my account of the substantive welfare goods and of the nature of welfare comparisons provide the resources to reflect and deliberate on whether the demandingness defence applies. For example, the particular welfare goods which the proposed action or refraining effects should be identified and a practical judgement invoking the lower threshold of needs-satisfaction made regarding whether the welfare losses these effects constitute is excessive or unreasonable.
understanding of the harm in question, and the actions the consequences of which aggregate to cause it, withdrawal from the group is extremely demanding. The sub-Saharan farmer would have to cease gathering firewood, without which he cannot cook and feed his family. That is, gathering and burning firewood is among the actions the consequences of which aggregate to cause global climate change and deforestation. These actions therefore constitute the farmer’s membership of the harming putative group, and withdrawal from the group requires the farmer to stop performing them. But how demanding would it be for the rich Northern consumer? His consumption levels are much higher, but he also enjoys a greater level of comfort, convenience, security and luxury. Perhaps withdrawal from the harming putative group is less demanding for him.

We can see that the demands of withdrawal are significant for the rich Northern consumer by considering the work of The Global Footprint Network, who have developed a measure known as ecological footprint, a measure of ‘how much land and water area a human population requires to produce the resources it consumes and to absorb its carbon dioxide emissions, using prevailing technology’. It has calculated that the global average footprint required to live within the means of one planet is 1.8 global hectares (gha). This is not necessarily the footprint which corresponds to withdrawal from the harming putative group, only the footprint at which it is calculated the Earth could sustain the level of ecological impact it represents for its current population. The footprint which corresponds to a withdrawal from the harming putative group – that is, the footprint which corresponds to no longer performing actions whose consequences aggregate to cause environmental problems which harm the global poor, future generations or nonhumans – may be much lower. Almost all rich, industrialised nations have an average ecological footprint per inhabitant greater than 1.8gha. Many, such as the USA at 8, Australia at 6.84 and the UK at 4.89, are several times this. As the Network observe, however, for the inhabitants of many countries it is just not

64 Where 1gha represents the productive capacity of 1ha of land at world average productivity (WWF 2010: 32).
possible to reduce the ecological footprint below the level of ‘one planet living’, let alone (we may add) to below the level of membership of the harming putative group:

A person’s Ecological Footprint includes both personal and societal impacts. The Footprint associated with food, mobility, and goods is easier for you to directly influence through lifestyle choices (eating less meat, driving less, etc). However a person’s Footprint also includes societal impacts or “services”, such as government assistance, roads and infrastructure, public services, and the military of the country that they live in. All citizens of the country are allocated their share of these societal impacts. The Footprint of these societal impacts... does not vary, and therefore in some nations it is not possible to reduce your Footprint to below one planet... Even with significant changes in individual behavior, a large portion of a personal Footprint comes from the way national infrastructure is designed, goods are produced, and government and public services operate.

I took the Footprint Calculator quiz as a US resident, and answered all of the questions with the ‘greenest’ answer, i.e. as a vegan who only ever bought locally-grown, unprocessed, unpackaged food; who generated ‘much less’ trash than the average American; who lives in a small, wood-constructed ‘green design’ residence that uses only energy from renewable sources; who uses $3’s worth of electricity and $8’s worth of gas per year (as low as I could get them on their scale); who never rides in a motor vehicle of any kind (including public transport); and who never flies. The result was that we would need 3.2 planet Earths to support my lifestyle (5.8gha).

This limit to the amount one can reduce one’s ecological footprint is imposed by the fact that the calculator allocates each citizen a share of the state’s footprint: 62% of each individual’s ecological footprint is accounted for by ‘services’, that is, the infrastructure over which individuals have no personal control. This phenomenon is called ‘lock in’ (Sanne 2002; Jackson and Papathanasopoulos 2008; Schinkel 2011). The level of unilateral reductions required to get the footprint as low as I have are already extremely demanding, certainly beyond the reach of most. To unilaterally reduce one’s ecological footprint further than this limit would require not being allocated a share of the state’s footprint. It is not clear what it would take for an individual to justify not being allocated this share, but intuitively it would be very demanding, involving perhaps complete withdrawal from society.

It seems, therefore, that the demandingness defence deals a fatal blow to the claim that it is an obligation – grounded in a virtue ethics account of wrong action – to withdraw from the harming putative group that is causally responsible for global
environmental problems. Withdrawal is too demanding; the poorer members of the group would be required to sacrifice what little material security they have, and the richer members of the group would be required, beyond excessively difficult unilateral reductions to the elements of their ecological footprint over which they have direct control, to withdraw from society to the extent that it would be justifiable not to allocate to them a share of the ecological footprint of the state.

I will present two arguments to show that this defence is not fatal to the purpose of this section, which is to show that we are under a moral obligation to engage in a certain subset of unilateral reductions on the grounds that paradigmatic consumption actions constitute moral wrongdoings. Firstly, even if it is the case that full withdrawal from the harming putative group responsible for the harmful impacts of environmental problems is unreasonably demanding, this does not entail that making no effort whatsoever towards withdrawal is morally acceptable. On the one hand, if we find ourselves a member of a harming group withdrawal from which places unreasonable demands on us, we are under an obligation to bring about the conditions in which withdrawal is made possible. To draw an analogy with membership of the golf club, if Nigel found in the small print that to resign his membership before its term was complete would incur a considerable financial penalty, this does not entail that he can remain a member for his full term with no moral qualms. Rather, given the vices remaining a member hits the target of and the operative virtues it fails to hit the target of, he is under an obligation to attempt to remove this barrier of demandingness from his resignation. He should lobby the committee members to call an extraordinary meeting to change the constitution and the rules governing membership. He should look into consumer protection laws to determine whether the imposition of this financial penalty is legal. In other words, he should engage in promotion activities to bring about the possibility of his withdrawal from the harming group in a way that does not impose unreasonable demands on him and other members who wish to resign. In the case of members of the harming group responsible for environmental problems, they should engage in promotion activities for collective measures that reduce the demandingness of withdrawal; lobbying for the banning, subsidy and taxing of the appropriate products and activities such that the financial and social penalties currently imposed on those who wish to withdraw
from the group – that is, on those who engage in unilateral reductions – are not unduly demanding.

On the other hand, that full withdrawal is unduly demanding does not entail that we are under no obligation to engage in those non-demanding actions or refrainings which would contribute towards securing our withdrawal if full withdrawal was possible. Again, to draw an analogy with the golf club membership, that Nigel is unable at present to resign his official membership of the golf club due to the considerable financial penalty for doing so does not entail that he must continue to play golf there. He may not be able to fully withdraw from the harming group because of the demandingness of doing so, but he should do what he can towards withdrawing. Ceasing to patronise the golf club by playing golf there is, at present, all he can do. Doing this still hits the target of many of the virtues – respect, sympathy, empathy, integrity and so on – and avoids hitting the target of many of the vices – indifference, disrespectfulness, self-centredness, hypocrisy – which are operative in cases where full withdrawal is possible. In the case of the harming group responsible for global environmental problems, while it is not currently possible for members to reduce their ecological footprint to the extent that constitutes withdrawal from the group, in addition to promoting collective measures to make this possible, members should unilaterally reduce in ways that are not overly demanding. These reductions would be required if full withdrawal were possible, and so should be engaged in even though it is not possible. Failing to engage in these non-demanding unilateral reductions hits the target of the vices of disrespect, apathy, self-centredness and so on. Since failing to engage in these unilateral reductions just is performing paradigmatic consumption actions, paradigmatic consumption actions are moral wrongdoings insofar as their performance hits the target of these vices and is a failure to hit the target of the relevant virtues. For the rich Northern consumer, failure to further unilaterally reduce does not hit the target of these vices since to do so is overly demanding, in which case they are under an obligation to engage in promotion activities that make further reductions (both unilateral and as part of collective schemes) non-demanding. For the sub-Saharan farmer, any unilateral reduction is demanding, and if he performs any paradigmatic consumption actions at all, these do not constitute moral wrongdoings.
To begin introducing the second response to the demandingness defence consider the following concern from Cripps (2011: 182):

If there is no appropriate cut off point for inclusion as one of those collectively responsible, people whose contributions are comparatively tiny could become members of putative groups collectively responsible for hugely significant harms. At the extreme, they could become responsible for such harms merely by existing. This is counterintuitive. For example, almost everyone has some carbon footprint, but that does not necessarily render everyone including (say) a South American rainforest tribe collectively responsible for environmental harm.

Cripps’s response to this concern is to introduce a ‘cut off point for inclusion’ with the following criterion: ‘those with a carbon footprint above the level at which there would be no harm were everyone polluting only to that level’ (ibid.: 182). Now, as the work of The Global Footprint Network has shown, this criterion would include, if not a South American rainforest tribesman, then many more than who Cripps argues that it would include, namely, ‘the global elite’, that is, ‘Westerners and the rich minorities in poor countries’ (ibid.: 172), for even if everyone lived like the sub-Saharan farmer, at least some deforestation and atmospheric pollution would occur.

For it to be the case that it is only the global elite which constitute the harming putative group, Cripps’s criterion for inclusion in the group must be relaxed from a ‘no harm’ criterion to an ‘acceptable level of harm’ criterion. That is, if we agree that a certain level of anthropogenic climate change, deforestation and marine pollution is acceptable in return for the benefits yielded by the activities that cause them, and any harm above that level is unacceptable, then it will only be the global elite (and not the global poor) that meet this criterion. However, this may not fully meet the demandingness defence, for withdrawal from the global elite may still be overly demanding.

What consideration of the implications of Cripps’s stipulation of the global elite as the harming putative group opens the way to, however, is identifying a subset of the larger harming putative group and justifying its status as a harming putative group in its own right. As I stated above, we require a prior account of the harm that is in question in order to determine the membership of, and conditions for withdrawal from, the harming putative group. There now seems little reason not to identify the harm in question as that harm which is caused by the aggregated consequences of
consumption actions which it would not be demanding to refrain from performing, i.e. paradigmatic consumption actions. The harm caused by the aggregated consequences of this class of actions is only a subset of the total global environmental harm caused by all consumption, but it is almost certainly significant. In a similar fashion to the first response to the demandingness defence, that we cannot provide an argument that covers all global environmental harm does not entail that we should not consider arguments that cover a portion of it. The harm in question has not been identified on grounds independent of consideration of the actions that cause it, but again, there seems no good reason why it should be. The new harming putative group thus identified (a subset of the larger harming group from which it is too demanding to fully withdraw at present) plausibly meets the two criteria for such groups: it is ‘grouped’ by the predictable harm caused by the aggregated consequences of its actions (i.e. harm that is additional to that caused by consumption actions that it is too demanding to refrain from performing), and it could plausibly constitute a formal group to tackle the harm.

The demandingness defence against the accusation of wrongdoing in remaining a member of the harming putative group responsible for global environmental harm can thus be overcome in two ways. Firstly, it may be argued that even if full withdrawal is too demanding, members are still under an obligation to promote the conditions that would make withdrawal possible and non-demanding, and in the meantime to engage in those actions and refrainings which would contribute to securing withdrawal if full withdrawal were possible. Secondly, a subset of the total harm in question can be identified by reference to the same set of actions, i.e. those which are not demanding to refrain from performing. In turn, a new harming group may be identified and an argument of the same structure that to remain a member of this group – constituted in this case by the performance of paradigmatic consumption actions – constitutes a moral wrongdoing.

4. Conclusion

This chapter has argued that, contrary to the arguments of Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong, engaging in unilateral reductions is morally obligatory. I have presented five arguments for this claim. Firstly, I argued that if we accept that promotion
actions are obligatory, then we must also accept that it is obligatory to at least consider engaging in public unilateral reductions on the grounds that they may function as promotion actions. Secondly, I argued that public unilateral reductions are obligatory insofar as they may strengthen the effectiveness of promotion actions. Thirdly, I argued that, on grounds of integrity, those who engage in promotion activities are obligated to engage in unilateral reductions. Fourthly, I argued that insofar as we are obligated to engage in whichever actions stand a high likelihood of mitigating the harmful impacts of environmental problems, we are obligated to engage in unilateral reductions since collective measures alone are unlikely to be adequate. Fifthly, I argued that engagement in unilateral reductions is morally obligatory on the grounds that the paradigmatic consumption actions to which they are alternatives constitute moral wrongdoings. I not only rejected deontological and consequentialist justifications for this claim in the previous chapter, but also a certain virtue ethics approach. However, in this chapter I advanced a virtue ethics account grounded in the status of paradigmatic consumption actions as constituting membership of a harming group. I considered and responded to a number of objections to this account. These five arguments collectively provide an answer to the first problem of inconsequentialism, the problem of justifying the claim that individuals should engage in unilateral reductions. The answer is that to do so is morally obligatory. The first four arguments directly justified the obligation to engage in unilateral reductions, and the fifth argument indirectly justified the obligation via an argument that failing to engage in them (i.e. performing paradigmatic consumption actions) constituted a moral wrongdoing. This latter argument thus provided an answer to the second problem of inconsequentialism, namely, the problem of justifying the claim that individuals should refrain from performing paradigmatic consumption actions.
Summary and Conclusion

The thesis I have defended has been that two arguments advanced by environmental and social campaigners for why individuals should reduce their personal consumption of material goods and resources receive justification from cogent philosophical theories of welfare and ethics. Firstly, it has been argued that the welfare argument for reducing personal consumption – the argument that current levels of consumption within rich countries are excessive and that aggregate welfare could be maintained or even improved while reducing consumption levels – receives justification from the class of theories of welfare that are objective in determination. Secondly, it has argued that the moral argument for reducing personal consumption – the argument that inhabitants of rich countries are under a moral obligation to reduce their consumption – receives justification from a virtue ethics account of the wrongdoing of remaining a member of a harming group. Before advancing these arguments it proposed an analysis of the concept of consumption. Together, these arguments form a central part of a broad conception of what Crocker and Linden (1998: 11) call an ‘ethics of consumption’.

In the course of advancing these main theses, a number of supporting arguments and positions were advanced and defended. In Chapter 1, I argued that my analysis of consumption displayed an advantage for understanding the environmental consequences of acts of use, insofar as it classified most acts of use as acts of consumption in virtue of the typical reduction in the possible future episodes of use of objects and resources that is the consequence of any typical act of use. I defended my analysis from a number of possible counterexamples that sought to demonstrate that it is too liberal. This defence demonstrated that my analysis successfully distinguished between natural processes and involuntary ‘actions’ on the one hand, and intentional actions on the other. I further argued that my analysis maintains the distinction between the consequences of one’s own actions and those of others. While this excludes acts of purchase from being classified as acts of consumption, I developed an understanding of such acts which justifies the increasingly prevalent practice of informing consumers of the resources that the products they purchase occasion the consumption of. Next I argued that my analysis is consistent with
evidence from behavioural economics regarding the conceptual relation between welfare and acts of consumption implicit in standard economic understandings of consumption. Lastly, I engaged with the literature from the sociology of consumption and argued that the exclusion it imposes on certain objects that are claimed to be consumed (e.g. information, music and ideas) and certain modes of engagement that are claimed to constitute consumption (e.g. gazing, listening and reading) is justified. However, I also demonstrated the versatility of my analysis by showing how it still allowed us to talk of consumption in the kinds of cultural and social arenas that are the concern of sociologists.

In Chapter 2 I defended the class of theories of welfare that are objective in determination from two criticisms advanced by Sumner. I responded to Sumner’s criticism that objective theories failed to offer a determination thesis and thereby meet the formality criterion of descriptive adequacy by arguing that his objections to the status of perfectionist theories – which do offer a determination thesis – as legitimate theories of welfare are question-begging and that his stipulation of monism regarding determination which appears to undermine the status of objective list theories as genuine theories of welfare is unjustified. I also proposed an alternative understanding of what makes a determination thesis objective by proposing a procedural approach to specifying the content of welfare that is governed by the norms of practical reasoning. I next turned to Sumner’s criticism of objective theories that they cannot account for the subject-relativity of prudential value. I distinguished three understandings of Sumner’s criticism and proposed a strategy that objective theories may employ to meet each interpretation of this challenge: (i) by incorporating reference to subjective states into their determination thesis and thus becoming a hybrid theory; (ii) by committing to a locative analysis of good-for which rules out states of affairs and instances of goods which are not plausibly connected to the welfare subject; and (iii) by advancing a perfectionist-based determination thesis which provides an evaluative perspective from which to assess welfare gains and losses. After specifying certain substantive goods as constituting the content of welfare for use in the following chapter, I rebutted the scepticism of economists and philosophers of economics concerning the possibility of welfare comparisons and rejected the maximisation approach to such comparisons, before proposing a practical judgement-based approach.
In Chapter 3 I proposed an assessment framework with which any expression of the overconsumption claim could be evaluated. I distinguished three such expressions of this claim and employed my framework in their assessment. I argued that each expression received theoretical justification from objective theories of welfare of the kind defended in the previous chapter. This justification was grounded in the particular substantive goods that such theories specify and a deliberative, practical judgement-based reflection on the nature of those goods and the welfare comparisons they inform. The first and third expression proved to be an instance of welfare losses suffered in relation to the substantive good of sociability. I argued that the first expression was an instance of welfare losses insofar as interpersonal trust has declined and therefore the potentialities of this good were failing to be realised, and in virtue of a decline in the duration for which sociability is typically realised in high consumption lives. The second expression proved to be an instance of welfare plateauing in virtue of the upper thresholds that dimensions of welfare are subject to and the neglect of the cultivation of appropriate modes of engagement in favour of material consumption. The account of upper thresholds and the nature of composite goods were developed to articulate this expression. The third expression proved to be best explained by the limitations of current forms of consumption activities necessitated by rising consumption levels in realising the potentialities of the various substantive welfare goods.

In Chapter 4, after characterising unilateral reductions in consumption and distinguishing them from the promotion activities which environmental campaigners also urge individuals to engage in, I assessed and ultimately rejected both Parfit’s and Glover’s attempts from within a consequentialist framework to justify an obligation to refrain from inconsequentially contributing to collective harms. In order to assess the resources that virtue ethicists have at their disposal to justify such an obligation I developed an account of wrongdoing from within this ethical theory and considered the vices that paradigmatic consumption actions exhibit. I rejected these vice-attributions as contributing to a solution to the problem of inconsequentialism on the grounds that their attribution did not relate in the appropriate way to the actions’ contribution to collective environmental harm.
In Chapter 5 I proposed two kinds of arguments for justifying the moral obligation of rich consumers to reduce their personal consumption. The first kind of argument built the justification on an acceptance of a moral obligation to engage in activities that promote stronger and more adequate collective measures to mitigate environmental harm. After distinguishing between public and private unilateral reductions of personal consumption, it was argued that their relations to promotion actions justified the obligation for individuals to unilaterally reduce their consumption alongside promoting stronger collective mitigation measures. For the second kind of argument, I developed a new understanding of paradigmatic consumption actions as constituting membership of a harming group and a new virtue-based account of the moral wrongdoing of remaining a member of such a group. This account was tested against a raft of possible objections. Two responses to the most persuasive objection – that withdrawal from the harming group constituted by those who perform actions the consequences of which aggregate to cause environmental harm is overly demanding – were offered. Firstly, the set of consumption actions which constitute moral wrongdoings was moderated to those which it would not be unduly demanding to refrain from performing. Secondly, it was argued that the harming group from which there is an obligation to withdraw could be identified by reference to the harm caused by those consumption actions which it was not overly demanding to refrain from performing. It was claimed that despite that apparent moderation, the resulting moral obligation nonetheless accounted for a significant degree of consumption and its associated environmental harm.

It has not been a task of this thesis to suggest ways in which the moral and welfare arguments could be presented to individuals such that they could be efficacious in persuading consumers to moderate their consumption behaviour such that a significant contribution could be made to mitigating the harm caused by environmental problems. But I have sought to argue that however this task is undertaken by campaigners and governments, there is a sound philosophical basis to the claims that we have both moral and prudential reasons to reduce personal consumption.
References


