YOU EARN as YOU LIVE as YOU VALUE

Consumption–work dialectic and its implications for sustainability

Patrick O'Sullivan
Grenoble Ecole de Management, Grenoble, France and
Thammasat University Business School, Bangkok, Thailand, and

Suthisak Kraisornsuthasinee
Thammasat University Business School, Bangkok, Thailand

Received 27 December 2018
Revised 1 May 2019
6 August 2019
Accepted 17 September 2019

Abstract

Purpose – In economic theory, the relationship between working/earning decisions and consumption/lifestyle decisions has been conceptualised in an almost entirely unidirectional manner: income from work taken as a given governs consumption and so lifestyle. This involves a narrowly inaccurate view of the consumption–work interaction. The purpose of this paper is to argue that this economist's way of thinking about consumption and work needs to be replaced by a conception in which not only does realised income determine one's consumption possibilities but also the desired level of consumption is itself a choice and a key determinant of how and how much one decides to work.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is designed as a conceptual contribution in which the above insight is linked to the extensive literature on sustainability.

Findings – When consumption is no longer thought of as determined by a given income constraint, it becomes possible to consider how people by modifying their consumption aspirations may be led not only to work less or differently but also to live and consume in a more sustainable manner. As a result of lesser pressure to work ever more, they may also be led to an ethical reappraisal of the way they work.

Research limitations/implications – The conceptualisation suggested is rich in implications for future research, for example, on links between consumerism and corruption; and on the impact of more ethical work choices on well-being. There is an implicit critique of much of HRM theory and practice which tends to instrumentalise work. The implications of artificial intelligence for future work are noted and, in this context, are surprisingly positive. The macro level implication of the need to move away from gross domestic product to more appropriate measures of socio-economic performance and well-being such as Social Progress Index (SPI) are noted.

Practical implications – The link between this widened conceptualisation of the consumption–work decision and the notion of voluntary simplicity is explored in detail and the latter is shown to apply also to the types of work/job chosen. This in turn is shown to have implications for management (especially HR) practice and for government policies both at micro and macro levels.

Social implications – This carries clear implications for work-life balance in people's daily lives; and by choosing more ethical ways of working or types of job, there may be a significant pro-social impact.

Originality/value – This paper points to a widening of the notion of voluntary simplicity beyond merely consumption choices to apply also to work choices. In the discussion of moral philosophical underpinning of voluntary simplicity, the link is made with Buddhist wisdom of the Middle Way and sufficiency economy and with the Golden Mean of Stoicism.

Keywords Consumerism, Work-life balance, Voluntary simplicity, Sustainable consumption, Meaningful work, Eastern (Buddhist) wisdom

Paper type Conceptual paper

Sustainability Accounting, Management and Policy Journal
Vol. 11 No. 2, 2020
pp. 429-450

2040-8021
DOI 10.1108/SAMPJ-12-2018-0362

Introduction

In our era, whilst sustainability concerns have risen up the public policy and business ethical agendas, insatiable self-centric consumption demands of individuals have simultaneously caused many negotiations for sustainability to end in stalemate. This has greatly limited the progress of sustainability in practice. One has only to think of the consumers' (as well as producer) resistance to the idea of a carbon tax which would make emitters of CO_2 in effect pay for the damage they create in the atmosphere by the enhancement of the greenhouse effect as evidenced by a variety of political stand-offs in recent years (stalemate in relation to climate change action at climate summits, Donald Trump on coal in the USA; *gilets jaunes* protests against fuel taxes or special levies on HGVs in France). Institutional or corporate behaviour can hardly be expected to change if individuals as consumers are not prepared to change (and indeed vice versa). These same consumers in their productive activities are employees, managers, corporate shareholders or other types of company stakeholders. At the very least, these considerations suggest the need for a re-examination in relation to sustainability challenges of the whole nexus of interconnection between consumption and sustainability challenges on the one hand and between consumption and work/earning decisions on the other.

In economic thinking, work and earnings are considered as givens that constrain the way people consume. But that is a very narrow way of conceptualising these decisions. How and how much people work/seek to earn will in part be driven by their consumption desires and by the consumption standard which they wish to attain. So as much as income governs consumption possibilities, consumption desires equally govern how and how much people will seek to earn. Those consumption desires are in turn a reflection of more deeply held (or manipulated) values. In response to the call to expand research in sustainable consumption (Prothero *et al.*, 2011) and well-being (Saren, 2015) and building on recent empirical findings (Kraisornsuthasinee and Swierczek, 2018), this conceptual paper proposes an alternative complementary way of thinking about sustainability challenges by taking into account the double-sided nature of the consumption–work interface driven by personal values and showing how this might be used as a lever to attain sustainability goals . The link with sustainability concerns comes through the concept of **voluntary simplicity** as a basis for the articulation of consumption goals and aspirations.

The paper is structured as follows. First, the traditional economic theory of the work–consumption decision and its limitations, especially for more advanced economies, are explained and the elements of a more sophisticated theoretical conceptualisation of the decision are outlined. With such a richer conceptualisation comes the possibility of linking it with sustainability challenges, in particular with the ideas of environmentally and socially sustainable consumption. This leads directly to a discussion of the notion of voluntary simplicity which is explained and then extended beyond its customary application to consumption decisions to embrace also decisions about how and how much to work. The potential macroeconomic consequences of voluntary simplicity in respect of work decisions if widely adopted are explored. Some indications of the potential fruitfulness of the conceptualisation for management practice and for future research will be given. As ultimately voluntary simplicity stems in part from essentially ethical motivations, some attention is also paid to its moral philosophical underpinning. Finally drawing together the diverse strands of the arguments, the essentially dialectical nature of the work–sustainable consumption–voluntary simplicity nexus is elaborated to give a more in-depth idea of the conceptualisation that is being attempted. The paper is essentially theoretical, aiming to introduce a more sophisticated framework for thinking about work decisions, consumption choices and voluntary simplicity.

The work and consumption decision

Work remains a dominant activity in human life. It may not be the only motivation but an overriding reason why people work is to earn income for their consumption (Kaun, 2005). In conventional economic analysis, work or more broadly earnings (income) determine consumption behaviour. As a glance at any basic economics textbook will quickly reveal, in the basic theory of consumer demand, a consumer is considered to be choosing among a range of consumption possibilities subject to a *given* income constraint (Sloman and Wride, 2009, pp. 101-104 as a typical example). The amount of one's income governs the amount one consumes and the link is generally conceptualised as unidirectional in effect. Not only that, it is almost invariably presumed that a rightward shift of the income constraint line reflecting an increase in income will lead to a higher level of consumption of all goods and so to a higher level of well-being (higher indifference curve; Figure 1). Hence, it has been taken almost as axiomatic that as higher income leads to more consumption of material goods and so to higher "utility" or material satisfaction, people will choose higher over lower income so as to consume ever more. Is not this ultimately the reason why growth in gross domestic product (GDP) per head is assumed without question to be good (at least if there is an equitable distribution of said growth)?

However, earning more income does not always lead to more happiness from higher spending power when it turns into overwork and low job satisfaction (Kaun, 2005); and it is this observation that is notoriously missing from the traditional economic theorising on the

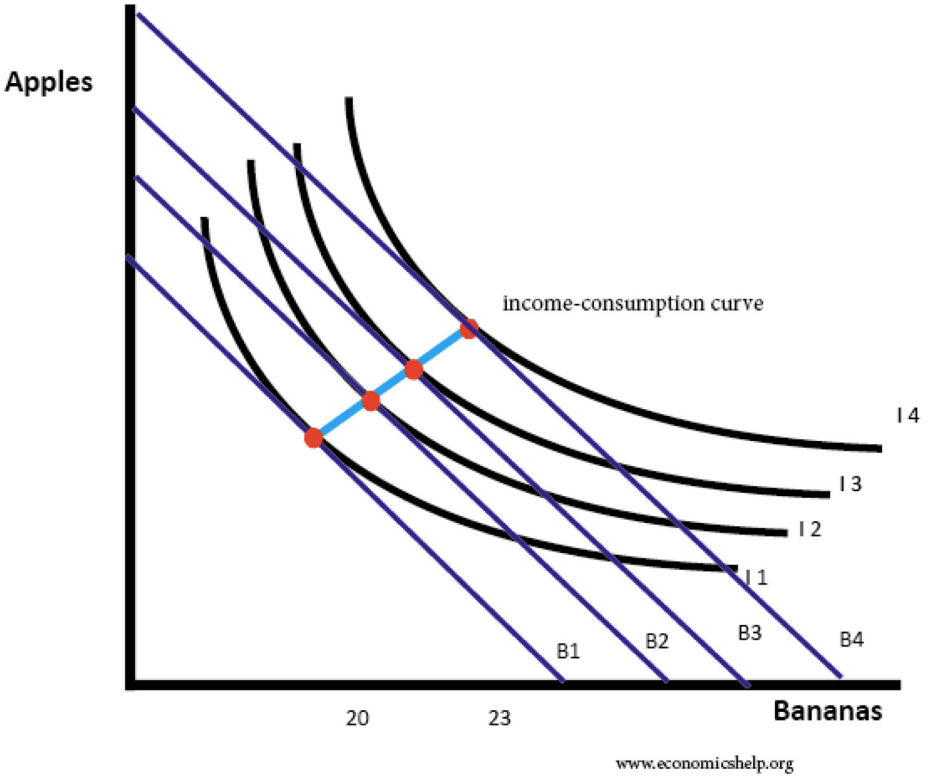


Figure 1.
Indifference curve map of a typical consumer

topic. Occasionally tucked away in remote corners of the economic literature are some hints that in the decision to work, to supply labour, people may sometimes be tempted to take more leisure rather than more material goods (more income). When recognising this possibility, economists intriguingly have seen this choice of more leisure over more work as something which comes into play only for those who are already materially affluent. It is this behavioural possibility that gives rise to the hypothesis of a backward bending supply curve of labour (Figure 2). But recognition of this possibility remains a relative rarity and is seen by most economists as a quaint theoretical curiosity rather than as a mainstream insight. For example, in the highly recognised and widely adopted economics textbook to which we referred earlier, Sloman and Wride (2009, p. 240) mention this possibility *en passant* in a side comment box on one page without taking the discussion of the implications any further; and similar treatment is replicated in many other textbooks (if they even mention the possibility). In more specialist textbooks on labour economics, the topic receives somewhat more attention but again more as a theoretical curiosity than as a central insight regarding work and consumption decisions. In Borjas (2019, pp. 42-46), for example, after a reasonably detailed discussion of the theoretical possibility that people might decide to reduce their hours worked as income increases at higher levels of affluence, it is concluded in the light of empirical evidence regarding at least male labour supply that:

> [. . .] hours of work for men do not seem to be very responsive to changes in the wage. In fact, one would not be stretching the truth too far if one were to claim that the male labour supply elasticity is essentially zero (Borjas, 2019, p. 46).

We would argue that this recognition that the work decision not only determines consumption possibilities but is in turn affected by decisions about how much one wants to consume (especially for those already affluent) deserves to be treated as more than just a curiosity or occasional feature of labour supply decisions. Instead, it should be central to our understanding of the work and consumption decisions which should be seen as mutually interactive in a bidirectional manner.

This bidirectional (and as we shall argue later dialectical) relationship is consistent with Gould's (1991) consumption sequence based on the analogy of desire from ancient Tibetan Buddhist's Wheel of Life stages, comprising *prana* (desire), death and rebirth. Desire, whether for higher material, wealth or status, drives people to earn resources to fulfil it. The circle repeats itself as new desires keep coming up even before the end of the old ones.

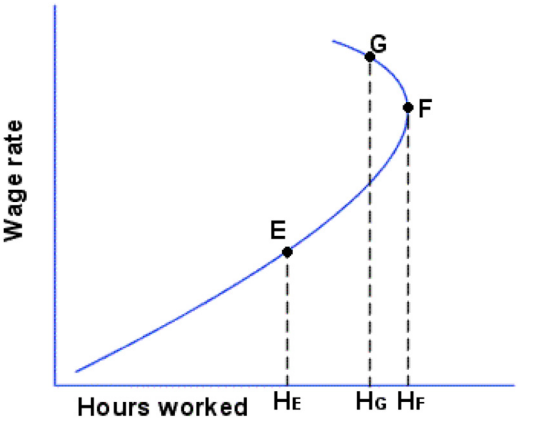


Figure 2.
Backward bending supply curve of labour

Driven by excessive desire, people then have to earn more and more restlessly, wretchedly and even recklessly. Once this is realised then curbing desires, particularly detrimental desires, leads logically to curbing other related reckless and even unethical behaviours and vice versa (Campbell, 1987; Belk *et al.*, 2003).

How much to work. . .and also HOW to work?

Once the interaction of work and consumption decisions is thus recognised for more affluent consumers, another possibility arises: that they may not only decide to take more leisure rather than work if remuneration rises but also that they may become more discerning about the type of work they will accept. They may demand more personally fulfilling or ethically acceptable types of work. This dimension of the work decision is largely absent in the economic literature apart perhaps from some ancient hints of a trade-off between quality of work and remuneration demanded in Adam Smith's discussion of wage differentials as governed by equalisation of net advantages (Smith, 1776: Book 1, ch 10) and occasional mentions of this theory in advanced micro-economics textbooks (Sapsford, 1981; ch 9 for example).

Sustainability and work/consumption decisions

These considerations have very interesting implications for sustainability concerns and policies in our own day. With macroeconomic austerity policies limiting the ability of governments to spend *inter alia* on the sustainability agenda, the focus has been shifting to what people can achieve by their own individual actions to promote sustainability. In particular, consumption behaviour of a person can define and be defined by their work in any stakeholder role (worker, manager, shareholder, landlord, etc.) and that can have significant sustainability implications (Kraisornsuthasinee, 2012).

It has been widely argued that people today consume to satisfy apparently insatiable but ultimately (in a consumerist society) artificial wants and desires for material pleasure and social status to an extent that is vastly in excess of what they could be said to need (De Graaf *et al.*, 2005). "Need" is a slippery concept insofar as there could be considerable debate as to what people strictly need, and those needs may be different in different societies because of climatic and cultural factors. Our point is that contemporary artificially stimulated consumption goes far beyond even the widest possible definitions of need in contemporary affluent societies. In practice, many people, however, are incapable of even making the distinction as wants and desires mutate into "needs" because of social pressures. High income/wealth has become a critical means to display achievement in a consumerist economy (Etzioni, 2004; Hill, 2012) or even the one and only goal itself when it becomes the leading indicator of social status (Randers, 2012). Although many contemporary ostentatious materialists may not be aware of it, this materialism can ultimately be linked to the puritanical Calvinist belief definitive of the American dream and brought to the USA by the early Pilgrim father settlers which holds that to be hardworking and materially prosperous is a sign of being among God's chosen elite who will merit Heaven after death (Weber, 2002; Rifkin, 2004, pp. 17-24).

But this materialism has a cost and indeed encapsulates some bizarre contradictions. Marketers may be assigned to play on people's emotions in a consumerist environment to create new but ultimately insatiable (and sometimes addictive) desires for consumption (excess) among potential consumers which apart from the impact on rampant consumerism and environmental impacts may even lead to a reduction of subjective happiness for many who cannot afford the new trinket (s). (Carrington *et al.*, 2015; Belk *et al.*, 2003; Kjellberg, 2008; Shankar *et al.*, 2006b).

Sustainable consumption, voluntary simplicity and work–consumption decisions

We now turn to examine the linkage between these reflections on the conceptualisation of the work–consumption decision to the questions of sustainability and sustainable development that are much debated in the contemporary era. Jorgen Randers (2012), one of the co-authors of *The Limits to Growth* (Club of Rome 1972), projects that in the next 40 years consumption, especially of those with higher incomes, will become a more critical factor than production in the challenges of sustainability. The impact on ecology from resources required for mass consumerism and the pollution generated per person has only expanded since 1972. Moreover, non-renewable resource withdrawal and pollution are having major negative effects on various other species through the reduction of bio-diversity. For example, the world's oceanic eco-systems are being damaged on a huge scale through the wholesale indiscriminate dumping of waste of all kinds, much of it consumer throwaway litter (especially plastics) from supposedly advanced societies, and by overfishing. More recently, there has been a dramatic impact of fertiliser run-off in coastal regions generating algae seriously poisonous to fish and even to human bathers in 2019 on the West coast of Florida and on the Breton coast in France (to give but two clear examples). There also appears to be a degree of climate-related acidification of the oceans (although the seriousness of the latter is debated: see Hendriks *et al.*, 2010).

Sustainability of consumption (as well as of production) has, thus, become today a key concept which broadly embraces the interaction of socio-economic and ecological issues, including natural resource usage, environmental protection, biodiversity, human needs, prosperity, quality of life, intra-generational and inter-generational equity (Balderjahn *et al.*, 2013; Jackson and Michaelis, 2003; Pepper *et al.*, 2009; Salimath and Chandna, 2018).

There are different but overlapping emphases in the wide-ranging literature on sustainable consumption. Characteristics of individuals practising sustainable consumption may be referred to in various terms, such as "green", "environmentally conscious", "socially conscious", "ethical", "mindful" or even "frugal", and segmented in various ways (Black and Cherrier, 2010; Heiskanen and Pantzar, 1997; McDonald *et al.*, 2006; McDonald *et al.*, 2012; Newholm and Shaw, 2007; Peattie, 2010; Pepper *et al.*, 2009; Shaw and Newholm, 2002; Szmigin *et al.*, 2009).

The segmentation of consumers that results from this research on sustainable consumption rather than being dichotomous suggests that these consumers may be thought of along a continuum into which individuals fit at various points depending on their exact values and preferences (Jackson and Michaelis, 2003; McDonald *et al.*, 2006). At one end are the pro-green or pro-social consumers who are willing to change some of the products or services they consume to greener or more ethical choices as long as they can keep intact their habitual, comfortable lifestyle. This strategy of consuming differently by simply choosing different products and services within the same overall budget/spending level is widely practised, and such consumers are variously labelled as environmentally conscious consumers, socially conscious consumers or selectors (Friedman, 1996; McDonald *et al.*, 2012; Pepper *et al.*, 2009; Shaw and Newholm, 2002). To judge by the continuing expansion of sales of all manner of biological and green products in supermarkets throughout Europe, it appears that the environmentally conscious consumers are a group growing in importance, especially in France and Italy. Moreover, a recent German study documents the significance of the phenomena of green and environmentally aware consumption among German consumers (Peyer *et al.*, 2017). However, the fact that such consumers are still fundamentally attached to material comfort has been criticised as "superficial" or "cosmetic" (Elgin, 2010). To a significant extent, such consumers are still ensnared in what we might

call the marketing pressure cooker to consume, and so from the perspective of the Critical School of Macro-marketing, marketing systems remain dominant (Kjellberg, 2008; O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2002). The gain in eco-efficiency from environmentally aware consumption may still be outweighed by increasing overall consumption (Holm and Englund, 2009; Mittelstaedt *et al.*, 2014).

Voluntary simplicity in respect of consumption

Toward the other end of the sustainable consumption continuum, we find what have come to be known as *voluntary simplifiers*. These are people whose values prioritise subjective well-being and spiritual growth over money and material possessions. Therefore, they are led to a greater or lesser degree of reduction (simplification) in their consumption patterns (Cherrier, 2002; Richins and Dawson, 1992). There is today a wide-ranging literature on voluntary simplicity and related topics (Etzioni, 1998; Bekin *et al.*, 2005; Shaw and Moraes, 2009; McGinnis *et al.*, 2013 to cite just a few examples), much of it drawing implicit or explicit inspiration from E F Schumacher's masterpiece *Small is Beautiful*, a collection of critical essays on growth-obsessed economics, the challenges of sustainability and the importance of developing economics to a human scale (Schumacher, 1973). One extensively cited recent definition of voluntary simplicity is that by Amitai Etzioni (1998, p. 620): the voluntary simplifiers "choose out of free will – rather than by being coerced by poverty, government austerity programmes, or being imprisoned - to limit expenditures on consumer goods and services and to cultivate non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning". Those who subscribe to such a voluntary simplicity are willing to put a major effort into changing their lifestyles even at the expense of some personal material comfort (Balderjahn *et al.*, 2013; Jackson, 2005). Further research into the underlying motivations of such people reveals basically ethically motivated concerns (Ballantine and Creery, 2010). If we were to express these various stances in one or two words, then they would be significant elements of a broader mindful consumption, that is, to say of consumption which considers and evaluates ethically its impact on others and on the environment.

Indeed, Etzioni's definition as cited above is also potentially much wider than that of voluntary simplicity in consumption. So it should be noted that there may be people or groups who arrive at the voluntary simplicity conclusion as a result of evaluative considerations that have little to do with sustainability or mindful consumption. They may just have a fundamental preference for a lifestyle uncluttered by material trivia and more concentrated on purely spiritual, artistic or even activity-focussed goals as a way to personal fulfilment. Buddhists who follow the Middle Way are enjoined to avoid the excesses of the materialist rat race which is ultimately a source of profound frustration (because of the evanescent nature of all material pleasures) and to live a lifestyle that is moderate and "sufficient" (O'Sullivan and Pisalyaput, 2015: Ch 15). Many great artists live for their art whilst remaining materially quite poor, whilst for many athletes and sports people,their overriding motivation is not material wealth but rather the sheer pleasure of great sporting achievement and endeavour. A well-known climber (whose overriding passion was mountaineering and who was not super affluent but led in general a modest lifestyle) once remarked:

> It is raining and many of us are sitting around Yosemite Lodge [mountain refuge]. Roper [a colleague] is reading Thorstein Veblein (Veblen, 1899), Theory of the Leisure Class [. . .] I happen to remark that there is a leisure class at both ends of the social spectrum. (Belk, 2006).

There has also been discussion of how a voluntary simplicity whose basic motivation may be ethical or at least ecological (and so sustainability-based) is distinct from *minimalism* at

least insofar as the main motivation of the latter is aesthetic and often purely individualistic (Denham, 2016).

Voluntary simplicity in relation to work decisions

In the earlier section, we noted how in general desired consumption levels impact on the decisions as to work effort by people (see Figure 2 and related discussion). We would now suggest that to the extent that voluntary simplicity implies a certain stance in relation to how much and how to consume, it will *a fortiori* have implications for the work/leisure decisions of voluntary simplifiers. Indeed, it is generally accepted that voluntary simplicity is "not a single phenomenon but a complex set of attitudes, inclinations and changes in goals and lifestyle" (Wachtel, 1996, p. 225; McDonald *et al.*, 2006). The voluntary simplifiers attempt to differentiate need and want in their lives. They are mindful that overconsumption can not only degrade their own well-being but generate externalities that can cause suffering to many others including to their own immediate families. They are aware of how in consumerist societies social comparison is prominent and of how materialism and social status become intertwined in this comparison. Inherent functional values of products tend to be overshadowed by the signalling capacity that serves social climbers to position themselves within the desired, higher class (Belk *et al.*, 1982).

Some recent studies even suggest that pressure for conspicuous-consumption expenditure can be linked with unethical behaviour and corruption (Gokcekus and Suzuki, 2014). To earn enough to indulge themselves, conspicuous consumers often choose to force themselves to work more, work tediously or even work unethically as well as contracting unnecessary and potentially very burdensome personal debt (Daoud, 2011; Golden and Wiens-Tuers, 2008; Richins, 2011; Tang *et al.*, 2008). Yet for many such people, the goals at which they aim slip ever further away and become increasingly elusive leading ultimately to a profound personal frustration. It is this ultimately frustrating character of the pursuit of ever more material pleasures that is a central theme in the Buddhist teachings regarding moderation and the Middle Way.

Lost in the materialist rat race are other satisfactions in life besides those of consumption of material goods and services. These can be afforded without the need for ever higher income to afford them and which may indeed be far more durable. Moreover, if one begins to reappraise one's consumption activity with a view to adopting a voluntary simplified lifestyle, then given that work is at least in part necessary to underpin one's level of consumption, such reappraisal will imply a reconsideration of work decisions: how much and even in what manner to work? Voluntary simplicity will at the very least mean less pressure to work long hours. But also given the ethical reappraisal of one's life and its impact on others that goes with voluntary simplicity (especially at the more advanced levels), we should expect that voluntary simplifiers would also appraise the nature of the work they carry out for a living. Indeed, Randers (2012) argues explicitly that one key way to bow out of the frustrations of materialist conspicuous consumption is through choosing the *way* we work.

Meaningful work that highly motivates people could even give a purpose to one's existence through a contribution to the well-being of others (Grant, 2007; Grant, 2008; Michaelson *et al.*, 2014; Kraisornsuthasinee and Swierczek, 2018). The idea that having a pro-social impact is a source of meaningful work and is found across many cultures as a deeply-held, widely shared core value in life (Schwartz and Bardi, 2001). Work for the benefit of others may be seen not merely as "a job" to meet economic needs and desire or "a career" to hope for promotion or prestige. Instead, it is meaningful because it is "a calling", a vocation to fulfill one's purpose in life (Beadle and Knight, 2012). Many professionals such

as medical doctors or teachers working in deprived areas of the world testify to the sense of meaning and well-being in their lives that they experience through the giving of themselves to promote the welfare of others (in ways that go far beyond what could be put down to the monetary compensation). Michaelson *et al.* (2014) explain that meaningful work in this altruistic sense helps to affirm one's role in the society in a manner far more effective than conspicuous consumption. Such people serve social purposes that go far beyond their narrow personal perimeter and become key contributors in a much wider community. This can result in such extrinsic rewards as recognition and esteem (Sayer, 2009), but the essential motivation is the intrinsic sense of accomplishment ("*eudaimonian*" well-being) rather than hedonic (pleasure-seeking) self-interest (Walsh, 1994).

Towards a more ethical way of working

In addition to working in a more meaningful manner, voluntary simplifiers will often be led also to work more *ethically*. When we speak here of more ethical work, we mean the term in a sense much wider than that of (not) working in occupations where the nature of the work itself raises moral questions as, for example, with mercenary soldiers, working in the armaments industry, etc. What we are referring to is rather the impact of one's work or of the way one works on the rest of one's life and the moral obligations that may go with that (e.g. towards colleagues, friends, family and the natural environment). The drive to unethical work does not come just from money earned as an instrument to meet consumption needs and/or artificial wants but from what might be called "love of money". "Love of money" here refers to an obsessive attitude towards money and material wealth, which sees money as the ultimate motivator, an end-in-itself for the materialist dream and as a status symbol of success (Tang and Chiu, 2003). Empirical findings suggest that love of money significantly correlates with unethical intentions, more specifically Machiavellianism and risk tolerance (Tang *et al.*, 2008). A strong desire to get rich may lead people to shortcuts and unethical practices in their work, such as abuse of position, abuse of power, abuse of resources, corruption of various kinds and negligence/blind eye in relation to unethical behaviour (Daoud, 2011; Robinson and Bennett, 1995). Voluntary simplifiers especially of the more advanced type, because they are less motivated by money and wealth and more attuned to considering the wider impact of their individual lifestyle decisions on the wider society, may be expected to behave more ethically when at work.

Hence, the reappraisal of the work–consumption interface beyond just simple work-leisure or work-life balance that will accompany the adoption of the more advanced reflective forms of voluntary simplicity in consumption will involve not only decisions about how much to work but also more deeply reflective decisions about the nature of the work that a voluntary simplifier is prepared to undertake. This in turn will usually reflect deeply held moral convictions about the meaning of life and moral values. In the next section, we will explore in more detail what some of these moral values underpinning voluntary simplicity lifestyle might be.

The moral underpinning of voluntary simplicity: live your convictions

It is well established in modal logic that normative conclusions in an argument can only be reached if there are at least one or more normative premises present among the assumptions (Hume, 1985: Book 3 passim; Moore, 1903). To the extent that any set of normative guidelines for action and lifestyle derive from explicit or implicit normative premises, it will be interesting in this section to explore in more depth some of the underlying moral convictions and values which may underpin voluntary simplicity. In that way, we will also

achieve an understanding of the rationale for a phenomenon which to neoclassical economists or to dedicated materialists at first seems quite bizarre to say the least.

Small is beautiful (Schumacher, 1973)

Although we will suggest some much more ancient moral underpinnings for voluntary simplicity and sustainability concerns below, the seminal work on this topic is assuredly E F Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* (1973). In this collection of semi-philosophical essays that he dubs as "meta-economics", Schumacher invites us already in 1973 to consider the very basic question of (1) whether or not the headlong quest for economic growth and, thus, of never-ending advancement of *material* standard of living is logically admissible as a long-term policy goal on a planet which is finite; and (2) whether or not the excesses which occur as a corollary of this uncritical quest for economic growth at all costs are compatible with advancement of human well-being. Interestingly, Schumacher sees both the capitalist and the communist economies of his day as sharing this obsession with materialism and economic growth. So he is inviting us to consider a wholly different sort of economic order that serves the needs of humanity in a sustainable manner. As he said with remarkable foresight in 1973:

> Economists have felt [in the past] entitled to treat the entire framework [environment] within which economic activity takes place as given. . ..but since there is now increasing evidence of environmental deterioration, particularly in living nature, the entire outlook and methodology of Economics is being called into question. The study of economics is too narrow and too fragmentary to lead to valid insights unless complemented and completed by a study of meta-economics.

On the question of serving human needs as opposed to the dictates of an ultimately unsustainable headlong increase of production by firms (GDP growth above all else) which only provide at best some of the material means to fulfilment, he remarks that:

> The trouble about valuing means over ends [. . .] is that it destroys man's freedom and power to choose the ends he really favours; the development of means as it were dictates the choice of ends. (Schumacher, 1973, p. 33. Parentheses ours).

Later, Elgin and Mitchell (1977a, 1977b) contend that voluntary simplifiers generally adhere to one or more of five interdependent core values: material simplicity (green/ethical consumption and less excessive consumption), human scale (less complex work and living environment), self-determination (as opposed to reliance on large corporations and self-sufficiency, such as home food production), ecological awareness (from low-impact lifestyle to caring for others) and personal growth (self-realisation development). In Etzioni's work, the consumption of the more committed voluntary simplifiers is found to reflect social, ethical and environmental values (Etzioni, 1998). Despite these differences in detail among authors, an extensive study on the values of voluntary simplifiers concludes that their non-materialistic orientation in consumption is based on a common set of values which includes respect of nature, relationship with people and a more spiritual conception of self-development over and above material possession, very much in line with, if not inspired by, Schumacher's earlier critical insights (McDonald *et al.*, 2006).

Expanding on the reasons for adoption of such values by simplifiers and their link to the sustainability agenda, we have to recognise that in contemporary free market societies, people are widely driven by the materialistic values of consumerism and judged and evaluated by their expanding capability to produce and consume. Indeed, the idea that the "value" of a human life is essentially the value of the production that will be lost in the event of death is still remarkably prevalent despite serious attempts to side-line it in the

"willingness to pay" approach to such valuation (Rice, 1967; Landefeld and Seskin, 1982). For the vast majority of people in advanced economies and for a significant majority in many emerging economies, people are no longer "consuming to exist" but rather "existing to consume". Products and services are consumed not only for utility values but also for purposes of what Veblen called conspicuous consumption, that is to say for a symbolic purpose designed to locate the self-identity and social status of a person in a consumerist culture (Veblen, 1899; Trigg, 2001; Wattanasuwan, 2005). But with this transformation to "existing to consume" in materialist societies, there also come some treacherous psychological/sociological dangers. Fromm (1976) questions if a sense of "being" would be threatened by the loss of "having". Immediate pleasure from consumption and possessions can satisfy needs merely temporarily but may eventually ensnare a person into the realm of addictive consumption (Elliot, 1994). This vicious cycle of self-enslavement in materialism begins with an insatiable desire for consumption followed by the endless striving not only to keep and to replace but also to accumulate more and more, in short insatiable greed. From a psychoanalytical perspective, the untrammelled desire for consumption and (bizarrely) the plethora of choice among material goods eventually leads to misery, not contentment (Zavestoski, 2002; Shankar *et al.*, 2006a, 2006b). Without wishing to go into the psychoanalytic depths of the Lacanian analysis of "lack", at a more concrete practical level, we can say that attempts to satisfy this greed come ultimately at a cost not only to oneself but also to many others in this generation or the next and, thus, generate inevitably moral questions (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2002). On the one hand, the unfettered greed that has characterised market economies since the late 1980s under the influence of deregulation has been associated with a rising inequality that is most pronounced in the economies most inspired by market fundamentalist ideologies (Piketty, 2014) with resultant degradation of the social fabric and so social sustainability of those economies in our own day. On the other hand, it has also been accompanied by an increasingly worrying environmental impact through, for example, anthropogenic global warming and a variety of forms of environmental pollution related to waste disposal (e.g. plastics). Hence, voluntary reduction of excessive greed in consumption is indispensable to attainment of at least two of the pillars of sustainability: environmental and social.

More ancient antecedents: Natural law and Buddhism

If we press deeper into the moral philosophical as opposed to psychoanalytic roots of such sustainability concerns, then we can ultimately find a basis in ancient Greek Natural Law and in Buddhist wisdom of the Middle Way (which actually predates the Greek articulation of Natural Law in Plato and Aristotle by some 200 years). To the Greeks, it was axiomatic that the universe was a highly ordered system in which there were present immutable harmonies as epitomised, for example, by musical harmony. Hence, the roots of the good life are to be sought by living in line with and in accordance with the natural harmony of the universe, in short respecting the imperatives of environmental and social sustainability.

Probably even more clear-cut as hinted earlier is the linkage between voluntary simplicity and the ancient Buddhist wisdom of the Middle Way in the Noble Truth and the Noble Eightfold path. In this wisdom, the evanescence of all material pleasure, the dangers of excessive attachment to material pleasures (which in the long term can only lead to frustration) and, hence, the emptiness of material pleasure and the pointlessness of greed point towards self-discipline and sufficiency. We are urged to be content with that which is sufficient (Kraisornsuthasinee, 2012; O'Sullivan and Pisalyaput, 2015: Chapter 15). Also emphasised in the Eightfold Path are the importance of co-existence with all living beings,

hence respect for other human beings and indeed for all living things and a selfless drive to eliminate as far as possible suffering wherever we encounter it.

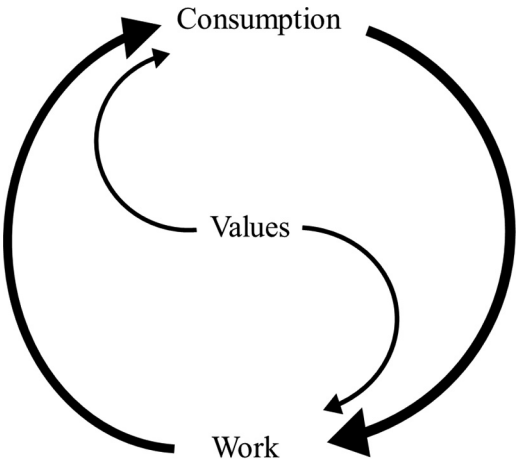
The ultimate moral underpinning of voluntary simplicity is, therefore, not only deeply rooted in the contemporary morality of sustainability and sustainable development. It also taps into some very ancient conceptions of the morally good life such as can be found in Buddhist wisdom, in Greek notions of Natural Law and in Aristotelian/Stoic conceptions of the virtuous life as living according to the Golden Mean: moderation in all things.

Elaboration of the conceptualisation: consumption–work dialectic

As this is a theoretical paper, it may be useful to explore in more depth some of the further conceptual implications and intricacies of the bidirectional approach to the work/consumption decision and to voluntary simplicity that we have proposed. For a reflective person at least, this will imply a reappraisal of the whole array of one's life goals in accordance with basic values. Voluntary simplicity should, thus, be conceptualised as a whole lifestyle (McDonald *et al.*, 2006), and by considering not just how one consumes but also how one works, it will have significant implications beyond just one's "work-life balance". There is of course now an extensive literature on work-life balance which we duly acknowledge but that literature has for its main focus the questions of how such a balance can most effectively be attained in practice in twenty-first-century society and economy. Our concern has rather been with the conceptual framework and with the philosophical presuppositions and, as we shall now see, even contradictions that underpin the quest for work-life balance. In effect, we seek to deepen our conceptualisation by considering consumption and work as being in a dialectical relationship to each other. The relationship we see can be illustrated as in Figure 3 (Kraisornsuthasinee and Swierczek, 2018).

Dialectical interactions in social theory: Hegel and Marx

To the extent that in this broader conceptualisation of voluntary simplicity, there is a bidirectional interaction between the consumption decision and the work decision and that



Source: Kraisornsuthasinee and Swierczek, 2018

Figure 3.
Values and consumption–work dialectical interaction model

this interaction is partly based on contradictory implications for human fulfilment of these decisions; we can usefully consider the interaction in a dialectical perspective. The original notion of dialectic refers to the form of argument through critical discussion and confrontation of opposing perspectives which is exemplified by Plato's dialogues. The great German philosopher of history, Hegel, took over the notion of the dialectic to develop the first all-embracing philosophy of history, that is, to say a comprehensive philosophical explanation of why history unfolds or has unfolded in the way it does and has. For Hegel, the motive force of human history was the progress of Reason, a dialectical process of the confrontation of systems of ideas and of thinking as in the Platonic dialogues but now carried by world historical figures and by states and empires. Karl Marx whilst taking over this dialectical perspective to explain human history sees the dialectic in materialist terms: for Marx, the dialectic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis plays itself out in the contradictions between the material forces of production and technology on the one hand and the system of social relations of production and politico-ideological superstructures built upon these on the other hand. With Marx, the dialectical conception is, thus, introduced into sociological and economic thinking. It can be applied to understand a wide variety of human behaviour and interaction where the following characteristics can be found (Marsden and Littler, 1999, p. 341): behavioural patterns that are "(a) shaped by the 'material' environment; (b) in a process of perpetual motion and 'change'; (c) 'interconnected' with other forms of human behaviour; and (d) transformed according to internal 'contradictions'". To understand the position of voluntary simplifiers in respect of the consumption–work relationship, we can usefully draw on these four principles.

Application of the dialectical framework to voluntary simplicity and work

In a dialectical materialist perspective, the physical-natural and socio-historical environment construct and condition human behaviour (Hetrick and Lozada, 1994; Marsden and Littler, 1999). Both consumption and work, thus, come from subjective interpretation and reinterpretation of the existing material environment and are conditioned (and in economics constrained) by this environment. Conflicts among stakeholders occur as scarce material resources are appropriated to become objects of possession and consumption, a process which inevitably impacts the common wellbeing and our common future. The voluntary simplifiers in effect recognise the latent contradictions in such appropriation (most basically that the earth cannot possibly sustain high material standards of living comparable to those of the affluent West for all of humanity: Global Footprint Network, 2016). Hence, they begin to consider alternative dematerialised approaches to consumption. To them, modern living is overwhelmed by a materialist rat race which ultimately frustrates and disappoints (as we argued already above) and generates sufferings for others, both those close to one and in the society at large in terms of environmental damage and social deprivation.

It is a trusim that the social world is in a constant process of change both because of natural evolution and technological progress. But this process being dialectical, consumers not only passively react to the changing environment but also proactively recreate the environment they value (Hetrick and Lozada, 1994). For the voluntary simplifiers, the aim of their actions is to reshape the damaged and contradictory world into a better environment, at least around them. In a remarkable transition through their own free-will, they effect a transcendence from materialist consumerist accumulation to consumption reduction and to work choices consistent with de-consumption, even as they (the voluntary simplifiers) are for the most part to be found among the more affluent and certainly more intelligent members of society and so, at least for the moment, a privileged class.

The third distinguishing principle of any dialectic emphasises connectivity and interaction of seemingly unrelated elements (Marsden and Littler, 1999). In our specific case here, what this points towards is the need for a transversal understanding of human motivation as opposed to the narrow economic or objectivist-behaviourist (stimulus-response) psychological conceptualisations which to date have been dominant in the Anglo-American approaches to the human sciences, for example, *homo economicus* (O'Sullivan, 1987: Ch5). Rather a person is one but at the same time an amalgam of economic, political and affective drives and motivations. In such a perspective, it becomes vital to understand the whole person and so the interconnections between the different motivations and areas of endeavour in people's overall life choices and projects (Schumacher's meta-economic considerations). We have argued here that in particular, work and consumption choices are interconnected: first in the sense familiar from economics whereby consumption is constrained by income from work (for all but the super-rich); and, second, in the sense that at least for those who have attained a level of affluence well beyond subsistence and so have some choice in the matter, their decisions about how and how much to work may be affected by their decisions of how and how much they wish to consume. For voluntary simplifiers, when the desire for material excess is contained or decreases, there is not much need to work restlessly, pointlessly or unethically for wealth accumulation. Sufficient, meaningful and ethical work geared to voluntarily simplified consumption allows them in effect (even if this may not be the explicit motivation of all simplifiers) to contribute to sustainability by reducing the need for ever more material production as well as by reducing waste and other negative impacts of consumerist excesses.

It is true, as we have repeatedly stressed that such de-consumption choices are most easily made by those who already enjoy a certain degree of affluence and that this raises a question about the general applicability of sufficiency principles. But the point is that the more widespread sufficiency behaviour becomes in the more affluent societies, the easier it will be to attain a moderate and "sufficient" level of affluence for all in the world economy. In short, voluntary simplification contributes not only to environmentally sustainable but also to socially sustainable development.

A final but central dialectical principle posits that internal contradictions within any system drive change in the system (Marsden and Littler, 1999; Gabriel and Lang, 1995). The specific contradictions which lead to the modification of behaviour to voluntary simplification in work and consumption are those we have briefly mentioned above: the recognition at a personal level of the pointlessness of consumerism and the materialist dream and at a social level of the impossibility of bringing the whole of humanity up to the levels of affluence in advanced economies.

We believe that more holistic conceptualisation of the whole consumption/work interface drawing on a dialectical method in the manner we have just outlined offers a much richer and more accurate understanding of work and consumption decisions than has been offered in the traditional economic models on this question. We also believe that it can enrich the wider work-life balance literature through the appreciation of its philosophical presuppositions and implications.

A conceptualisation rich in possibilities for future research

There is great scope for further interesting empirical research on the tensions we have uncovered in our dialectical analysis, an analysis which for the moment seems to corroborate well with our own casual introspection and observation of contemporary consumers and events. There is also a fertile field for empirical research into the types of work for which voluntary simplifiers of various levels may have a preference and into the

conjectures we have ventured regarding the ultimate moral underpinning of voluntary simplicity. This latter is something that has in part been addressed in Kraisornsuthasinee and Swierczek (2018).

Another potentially very fruitful area for future research based around this application of voluntary simplicity (or more widely of minimalist) notions to the work and consumption decisions of people is in respect of the macroeconomic implications and indeed resultant policy implications thereof. If large swathes of people in advanced economies or the more affluent in emergent economies were to adopt a voluntary simplicity in consumption, then this would in principle lead to economic slow-down because of weakening aggregate demand. But as we now know from the clear-cut results produced through the Social Progress Index (SPI), a slow-down of growth in advanced economies does not necessarily mean a slow-down of *social progress*. The SPI is a wide-ranging index of socio-economic performance based on 12 fundamental components of human well-being which in turn are measured through 50 indicators to give a composite picture of social progress through time and a comparison of social progress levels across countries (Social Progress Imperative, 2018). GDP per capita is not included in the index, as SPI rejects the equation of material wealth with well-being (material goods being at best an input which may contribute to well-being but then again may not because of frustration as noted above). This then allows a meaningful investigation of the degree to which social progress and GDP growth are correlated and the evidence after 5 years of measuring SPI across over 130 countries is that whilst there is a correlation, that correlation becomes weaker as GDP per capita rises and is almost non-existent for the most advanced countries (Social Progress Imperative, 2018, p. 9). What all of this suggests is that whilst a turn towards voluntary simplicity in respect of decisions of how much and how to work might imply lower rates of economic growth the implications for social progress might be rather different and even the very opposite. Hence, this is another fertile field for study of the implications of the voluntary simplicity conceptualisation in respect of work/leisure and work/life balance decisions. It also points more pragmatically to a concrete and already existing macro-level metric which could be used in practice to monitor the impact of concerted policy drives in the direction of encouraging voluntary simplicity were such to be undertaken.

Whilst we in this article have focussed on voluntary simplicity in sustainable consumption and earning at an individual (consumer) level, a similar analysis could probably also be applied at corporate, organisational and institutional levels; what may be the consequences of excessive greed at organisational level and to what extent can sufficiency principles of restraint of excessive greed be fruitful or even imperative at corporate level? To deal with sufficiency principles in the corporate institutional setting by, for example, linking it to sustainable personal consumption particularly of top executives and major individual shareholders could be a further area for research.

Less obvious but more intriguing would be the implications of the conceptualisation in relation to the much debated question of the implications for work and well-being of the progressive introduction of artificial intelligence (AI) in production and even in consumption interactions in the service sector. AI is rapidly replacing human beings in ranges of the most repetitive jobs that require little or no human creativity but a moderate or even high degree of calculation ability (Neufeind *et al.*, 2018). This means that the sorts of jobs left for us mortals to perform will be those requiring a high degree of creative ability and/or human discretion and emotional intelligence. But these are precisely the types of fulfilling and meaningful jobs which the voluntary simplifiers and minimalists are typically seeking. To that extent, there may be a happy convergence between the large-scale disappearance of mechanistic repetitive stultifying jobs on the one hand and the reduction of the desire to

work and quest for more meaningful work when at work that are implicit in voluntary simplicity. One would almost be in a bizarre reversal of Say's Law (of Markets), whereby (in this case) demand would be destroying its own supply. Be that as it may, we believe that this is a further fruitful area for future research deriving from our conceptualisation.

It will be obvious that the results of such detailed research as just described would be pregnant with manifold implications for the promotion of the agenda of sustainable development. Not only would there be the obvious linkage between reduced consumption and reduced pressure in the world's non-renewable resources, the whole orientation of public policy could be shifted away (at least for the more affluent economies) from the obsession with economic growth and unemployment to more pressing concerns focussing on social progress, quality of life as opposed to quantity of material trinkets, to a sustainable path of development and progress for current and future generations (and we might say for all living beings), in short on [. . .] well-being for all.

At a more micro level, there will be not only the direct need for economists to recalibrate their traditional theorising regarding work and consumption decisions but also perhaps awkward implications for human resource management both in theory and in practice. Traditional HRM has essentially conceived of people at work as resources of the firm and so as an element to be somehow optimised by making the most effective contribution to a firm's goals, which in turn have been widely conceived primarily as maximisation of shareholder wealth (i.e. maximisation of profits). But this involves a complete instrumentalisation of human labour. If the well-being and sense of fulfilment of workers in their work, such as is sought by voluntary simplifiers who care about how they work is occasionally recognised in HR theory and practice, then this remains purely instrumental and is tolerated only insofar as it contributes to the bottom line. Our conceptualisation implies a transformation which would actually make creativity and the sense of fulfilment at the work place the unambiguous goal of effective HR management, whilst any resulting impact on profits would simply be a useful side effect. As Schumacher so astutely remarked when discussing Buddhist Economics contrasting approach to human labour and work by comparison with the neoclassical mainstream, contemporary, HR practice, because of the instrumentalisation necessarily implicit in the requirement of contributing to firm profitability as the overriding goal of the firm:

> [. . .] is standing the truth on its head by considering goods as more important than people and consumption as more important than creative activity. This means shifting the emphasis from the worker to the product of work, that is from the human to the sub-human. (Schumacher, 1973, p. 38).

Indeed, the problem of instrumentalisation is wider than just the HR area. When many contemporary companies consider their ethical stances or commitments to sustainability, this is not because of any real wish or moral impulse to improve the world or adopt a more responsible stewardship of the environment but rather because of the potential risk to future profit streams if seriously unethical or environmentally damaging behaviour is discovered and reported. All too often for them, it is not about contribution to the well-being of humanity but simply a matter of "reputational risk", that is, risk of reduction of future profit streams. In commenting on a recent report on the state of sustainable business 2018 (BSR, 2018), Manoukian (2018) notes that:

> [. . .] the top priorities of corporate sustainability agendas are still issues that we would expect to see, such as climate change, human rights, ethics/integrity, inclusiveness, etc. But

risk management is the underlying driver propelling these issues to the top of the list of priorities.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have sought to move beyond the narrow conceptualisation of work and consumption choices such as are found in traditional economic theory towards a more complex view in which not only does the income from work determine one's consumption level but also the level of work undertaken at least for those who can afford the choice is itself determined by decisions about how much one wants to or should consume. The latter type of question, insofar as it raises issues about morally responsible consumption, leads directly to notions of voluntary simplicity, the renunciation of material greed and related consumerism for a more balanced lifestyle based on being content with that which is sufficient to live well whilst leaving more of the earth's resources available to meet the needs of the less fortunate. The parallel between such sufficiency economy principles and ancient moral convictions such as those found especially in Buddhist wisdom regarding moderation in all things and the Middle Way we have emphasised.

In traditional economics, the interconnection of work and consumption has been conceived almost exclusively as unidirectional: income from work taken as a given determines how much people will consume. As economies grow, incomes rise and consumption is presumed to be infinitely extensible and to be indeed the essence of human well-being in materialistically driven consumerist societies. Whether for voluntary simplifiers or more generally for others, we have argued this economic approach is indefensibly narrow. It completely ignores the consequences of how one works for:

- how much time one has for the rest of one's desired lifestyle;
- perhaps even more importantly, its impact on personal sense of fulfilment; and
- for how one may wish to balance work with other values in life, such as health, wellness, family and relationship, or to wider ethical and social concerns, such as environmental stewardship, social sustainability and elimination of unnecessary suffering.

We have noted that there are people who are willing to dedicate their lives for the greater good of others, and this vocation for them is a huge source of personal fulfilment. The alternative insights we suggested can not only explain the choices of voluntary simplifiers: they point to a much wider conceptualisation of work-life balance questions and issues. There is a significant literature looking at these work-life balance questions from a positive practical standpoint in contemporary society. But our philosophically inspired more holistic and dialectical conceptualisation of the work and consumption decision can both enrich that literature, bring to it a much deeper level of reflection and awareness and point to new and potentially more radical approaches to sustainability policies.

Our approach makes an important contribution to the discussions of sustainability allowing us to pass beyond the apparent stalemate and stagnation in sustainability dialogues and policies at the macro level to initiating change at the micro level of the individual person through encouragement of voluntary simplicity both in consumption and in work decisions. This could be achieved through a variety of policy initiatives, such as suitable consumption taxes (especially carbon taxes) through a transformation of the HR function in many companies but probably most of all through a degree of spiritual renewal and encouragement of a deeper level of self-reflection on the part of affluent consumers (mindful consumption). In line with that policy transformation at the micro level, we have

suggested that at macro level, a move away from the obsession with economic growth seen as an indicator of social performance of countries, regions and municipalities towards the adoption of alternative indices and in particular the SPI as a basis for gauging socio-economic performance and so the effectiveness of policies in respect (*inter alia*) of sustainable development.

To the extent that the transformation we are advocating involves a critique of the inherent contradictions of mass consumerism, we have suggested that the whole nexus of work–income–consumption can usefully be considered in a dialectical framework, thereby inviting the most reflective individuals at least if not ultimately most of humanity to overcome these contradictions through an effort to live in a degree of voluntary simplicity consistent with environmental and social sustainability in our finite world. In line with the invitation to self-reflection, we have throughout made reference to the deeper moral philosophical presuppositions which may underpin the normative views of typical voluntary simplifiers (such as Natural Law, Aristotelian/Stoic Virtue ethics of the Golden Mean and the Eastern Buddhist wisdom of the Middle Path).

References

Balderjahn, I., Buerke, A., Kirchgeorg, M., Pyer, M., Seegebarth, B. and Wiedmann, K. (2013), "Consciousness for sustainable consumption: scale development and new insights in the economic dimension of sustainability", *Ams Review*, Vol. 3 No. 4, pp. 181-192.

Ballantine, P.W. and Creery, S. (2010), "The consumption and disposition behaviour of voluntary simplifiers", *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, Vol. 9 No. 1, pp. 45-56.

Beadle, R. and Knight, K. (2012), "Virtue and meaningful work", *Business Ethics Quarterly*, Vol. 22 No. 2, pp. 433-450.

Bekin, C., Carrigan, M. and Szmigin, I. (2005), "Defying marketing sovereignty: voluntary simplicity at new consumption communities", *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, Vol. 8 No. 4, pp. 413-429.

Belk, E.J. (2006), "Quote", available at: www.supertopo.com/climbing/thread.php?topic_id=187908&tn=20 (accessed 22 April 2019).

Belk, R.W., Bahn, K.D. and Mayer, R.N. (1982), "Developmental recognition of consumption symbolism", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 9 No. 1, pp. 4-17.

Belk, R.W., Ger, G. and Askergaard, S. (2003), "The fire of desire: a multisited inquiry into consumer passion", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 30 No. 3, pp. 326-351.

Black, I.R. and Cherrier, H. (2010), "Anti-consumption as part of living a sustainable lifestyle: daily practices, contextual motivations and subjective values", *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, Vol. 9 No. 6, pp. 437-453.

Borjas, G. (2019), *Labor Economics*, 8th ed., McGraw Hill, New York, NY.

BSR (2018), "The state of sustainable business in 2018", Globescan and Business for a Better World, BSR, Hong Kong, available at: www.bsr.org/reports/BSR_Globescan_State_of_Sustainable_Business_2018.pdf (accessed 6 August 2019).

Campbell, C. (1987), *The Romantic Ethic and Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, Blackwell, Oxford.

Carrington, M.J., Zwick, D. and Neville, B. (2015), "The ideology of the ethical consumption gap", *Marketing Theory*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 21-38.

Cherrier, H. (2002), "Drifting away from the consumption spiral: trait aspects of voluntary simplicity", *Asia Pacific Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 5, pp. 280-281.

Daoud, A. (2011), "The modus vivendi of material simplicity: counteracting scarcity via deflation of wants", *Review of Social Economy*, Vol. 69 No. 3, pp. 275-305.

De Graaf, J., Wann, D. and Naylor, T.H. (2005), *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*, 2nd ed., Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco.

Denham, J. (2016), "Minimalism v. Voluntary simplicity", 23 August 2016 blog, available at: www.jessicadenham.com/dealing-with-stuff/minimalism-vs-voluntary-simplicity (accessed 20 April 2019).

Elgin, D. (2010), *Voluntary Simplicity*, Harper Collins, New York, NY.

Elgin, D. and Mitchell, A. (1977a), "Voluntary simplicity: lifestyle of the future?", *The Futurist*, Vol. 11 No. 4, pp. 200-261.

Elgin, D. and Mitchell, A. (1977b), "Voluntary simplicity", *The Co-Evolution Quarterly*, Vol. 3, pp. 4-19.

Elliot, R. (1994), "Addictive consumption: function and fragmentation in postmodernity", *Journal of Consumer Policy*, Vol. 17 No. 2, pp. 159-179.

Etzioni, A. (1998), "Voluntary simplicity: characterization, select psychological implications, and societal consequences", *Journal of Economic Psychology*, Vol. 19, pp. 619-643.

Etzioni, A. (2004), "The post affluent society", *Review of Social Economy*, Vol. 62 No. 3, pp. 407-420.

Friedman, M. (1996), "A positive approach to organize consumer action: the 'buycott' as an alternative to the boycott", *Journal of Consumer Policy*, Vol. 19 No. 4, pp. 439-451.

Fromm, E. (1976), *To Have or to Be*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.

Gabriel, Y. and Lang, T. (1995), *The Unmanageable Consumer: Contemporary Consumption and Its Fragmentation*, Sage Books, London.

Global Footprint Network (2016), "Accounts", available at: www.footprintnetwork.org/ (accessed 29 October 2018).

Gokcekus, O. and Suzuki, Y. (2014), "Is there a corruption-effect on conspicuous consumption?", *Margin: The Journal of Applied Economic Research*, Vol. 8 No. 3, pp. 215-235.

Golden, L. and Wiens-Tuers, B. (2008), "Overtime work and wellbeing at home", *Review of Social Economy*, Vol. 66 No. 1, pp. 25-49.

Gould, S.J. (1991), "An Asian approach to the understanding of consumer energy, drives, and states", in Hirschman, E.C. (Ed.), *Research in Consumer Behavior*, Greenwich, CT, Vol. 5.

Grant, A.M. (2007), "Relational job design and the motivation to make a prosocial difference", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 32 No. 2, pp. 393-417.

Grant, A.M. (2008), "The significance of task significance: job performance effects, relational mechanisms, and boundary conditions", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 93 No. 1, pp. 108-124.

Heiskanen, E. and Pantzar, M. (1997), "Toward sustainable consumption: two new perspectives", *Journal of Consumer Policy*, Vol. 20 No. 4, pp. 409-442.

Hendriks, I., Duarte, C. and Alvarez, M. (2010), "Vulnerability of marine biodiversity to ocean acidification", *Estuarine Coastal and Shelf Science*, Vol. 86 No. 2, pp. 157-164.

Hetrick, W.P. and Lozada, H.R. (1994), "Constructing the critical imagination: comments and necessary diversions", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 21 No. 3, pp. 548-565.

Hill, L. (2012), "Adam smith on thumos and irrational economic 'man'", *The European Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, Vol. 19 No. 1, pp. 1-22.

Holm, S.O. and Englund, G. (2009), "Increased eco-efficiency and gross rebound effect: evidence from USA and six european countries 1960-2002", *Ecological Economics*, Vol. 86, pp. 879-887.

Hume, D. (1985), *A Treatise on Human Nature*, Penguin Classic, London.

Jackson, T.C. (2005), "Live better by consuming less? Is there a 'double dividend' in sustainable consumption?", *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, Vol. 9 Nos 1/2, pp. 19-36.

Jackson, T.C. and Michaelis, L. (2003), *Policies for Sustainable Consumption*, Sustainable Development Commission, London.

Kaun, D. (2005), "Income and happiness: earning and spending as sources of discontent", *The Journal of Socio-Economics*, Vol. 34 No. 2, pp. 161-177.

Kjellberg, H. (2008), "Market practices and over-consumption", *Consumption Markets and Culture*, Vol. 11 No. 2, pp. 151-167.

Kraisornsuthasinee, S. (2012), "CSR through the heart of the Bodhi tree", *Social Responsibility Journal*, Vol. 8 No. 2, pp. 186-198.

Kraisornsuthasinee, S. and Swierczek, F.W. (2018), "Beyond consumption: the promising contribution of voluntary simplicity", *Social Responsibility Journal*, Vol. 14 No. 1, pp. 80-95.

Landefeld, J. and Seskin, E. (1982), "The economic value of life; linking theory to practice", *American Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 72 No. 6, pp. 555-566.

McDonald, S., Oates, C.J., Alevizou, P.J., Young, C.W. and Hwang, K. (2012), "Individual strategies for sustainable consumption", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 28 Nos 3/4, pp. 445-468.

McDonald, S., Oates, C.J., Young, C.W. and Hwang, K. (2006), "Toward sustainable consumption: researching voluntary simplifiers", *Psychology and Marketing*, Vol. 23 No. 6, pp. 515-534.

McGinnis, L.P., Frendle, A.M. and Gentry, J.W. (2013), "The simple man: the consumption behaviour of the principled life", *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, Vol. 12 No. 1, pp. 70-80.

Manoukian, G. (2018), "How a sustainability agenda is driven by risk management", Blog, available at: https://enablon.com/blog/2018/10/11/how-a-sustainability-agenda-is-driven-by-risk-management (accessed 6 August 2019).

Marsden, D. and Littler, D. (1999), "A dialectical approach to consumer research: beyond positivism and postmodernism", *European Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 4, pp. 341-346.

Michaelson, C., Pratt, M.G., Grant, A.M. and Dunn, C.P. (2014), "Meaningful work: connecting business ethics and organization studies", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 121 No. 1, pp. 77-90.

Mittelstaedt, J.D., Shultz, C.J., Kilbourne, W. and Peterson, M. (2014), "Sustainability as megatrend: two schools of macromarketing thought", *Journal of Macromarketing*, Vol. 34 No. 3, pp. 253-264.

Moore, G.E. (1903), *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Neufeind, M., O'Reilly, J. and Ranft, F. (Eds), (2018), *Work in the Digital Age*, Rowman and Littlefield, London.

Newholm, T. and Shaw, D. (2007), "Studying the ethical consumer: a review research", *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, Vol. 6 No. 5, pp. 253-270.

O'Shaughnessy, J. and O'Shaughnessy, N.J. (2002), "Marketing, the consumer society and hedonism", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 36 Nos 5/6, pp. 524-547.

O'Sullivan, P. (1987), *Economic Methodology and Freedom to Choose*, Allen and Unwin, London, Reprinted 2012 by Routledge London as a Routledge Revival.

O'Sullivan, P. and Pisalyaput, N. (2015), "The sufficiency economy: a thai response to the Asian financial crisis", in O'Sullivan, P., Allington, N. and Esposito, M. (Eds), *The Philosophy Politics and Economics of Finance in the 21st Century, Chapter 15*, Routledge, London.

Peattie, K. (2010), "Green consumption: behaviour and norms", *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp. 195-228.

Pepper, M., Jackson, T. and Uzzell, D. (2009), "An examination of the values that motivate socially conscious and frugal consumer behaviour", *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, Vol. 33 No. 2, pp. 126-136.

Peyer, M., Bahlderjahn, I., Seegebarth, B. and Klemm, A. (2017), "The role of sustainability in profiling voluntary simplifiers", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 70, pp. 37-43.

Piketty, T. (2014), *Capitalism in the 21st Century*, Harvard University Press, Boston.

Prothero, A., Dobscha, S., Freund, J., Kilbourne, W.E., Luchs, M.G., Ozanne, L.K. and Thøgerson, J. (2011), "Sustainable consumption: opportunities for consumer research and public policy", *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, Vol. 30 No. 1, pp. 31-38.

Randers, J. (2012), *2052: A Global Forecast for the Next Forty Years*, Chelsea Green Publishing, White River Junction, VT.

Rice, D. (1967), "Estimating the costs of illness", *American Journal of Public Health and the Nations Health*, Vol. 57 No. 3, pp. 424-440.

Richins, M.L. (2011), "Materialism, transformation expectations, and spending: implications for credit use", *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, Vol. 30 No. 2, pp. 141-156.

Richins, M.L. and Dawson, S. (1992), "A consumer values orientation for materialism and its measurement: scale development and validation", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 19 No. 3, pp. 303-316.

Rifkin, J. (2004), *The European Dream*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Robinson, S. and Bennett, R.J. (1995), "A typology of deviant workplace behaviors: a multi-dimensional scaling study", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 38 No. 2, pp. 55-572.

Salimath, M. and Chandna, V. (2018), "Sustainable consumption and growth: complementary perspectives", *Management Decision*, available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/MD-12-2016-0934 (accessed 12 October 2019).

Sapsford, D. (1981), *Labour Market Economics*, Allen and Unwin, London, Reprinted 2013 by Routledge London as a Routledge Revival.

Saren, M. (2015), "Buy buy miss american pie': the day the consumer died", *Marketing Theory*, Vol. 15 No. 4, pp. 565-569.

Sayer, A. (2009), "Contributive justice and meaningful work", *Res Publica*, Vol. 15 No. 1, pp. 1-16.

Schumacher, E. (1973), *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as If People Mattered*, Blond and Briggs, London.

Schwartz, S.H. and Bardi, A. (2001), "Value hierarchies across cultures: taking a similarities perspective", *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, Vol. 32 No. 3, pp. 268-290.

Shankar, A., Cherrier, H. and Canniford, R. (2006a), "Consumer empowerment, a foucaultian interpretation", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 40 Nos 9/10, pp. 1013-1030.

Shankar, A., Whittaker, J. and Fitchett, J.A. (2006b), "Heaven knows I'm miserable now", *Marketing Theory*, Vol. 6 No. 4, pp. 485-505.

Shaw, D. and Moraes, C. (2009), "Voluntary simplicity: an exploration of market interactions", *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, Vol. 33 No. 2, pp. 215-223.

Shaw, D. and Newholm, T. (2002), "Voluntary simplicity and the ethics of consumption", *Psychology and Marketing*, Vol. 19 No. 2, pp. 165-185.

Sloman, J. and Wride, A. (2009), *Economics*, 7th ed., Pearson Prentice Hall, Harlow.

Smith, A. (1776), *An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Penguin, London.

Social Progress Imperative (2018), "Social progress index executive summary 2018", Social Progress Imperative, Washington, DC, available at: www.socialprogress.org/assets/downloads/resources/2018/2018-Social-Progress-Index-Exec-Summary.pdf

Szmigin, I., Carrigan, M. and McEachern, M. (2009), "The conscious consumer: taking a flexible approach to ethical behavior", *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, Vol. 33 No. 2, pp. 224-231.

Tang, T.L.P. and Chiu, R.K. (2003), "Income, money ethic, pay satisfaction, commitment, and unethical behavior: is the love of money the root of evil for Hong Kong employees?", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 46 No. 1, pp. 13-30.

Tang, T.L.P., Chen, Y.J. and Sutarso, T. (2008), "Bad apples in bad (business) barrels: the love of money, machiavellianism, risk tolerance, and unethical behaviour", *Management Decision*, Vol. 46 No. 2, pp. 243-263.

Trigg, A. (2001), "Veblen, bourdieu and conspicuous consumption", *Journal of Economic Issues*, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp. 99-115.

Veblen, T. (1899), *The Theory of the Leisure Class, the Collected Works of Thorstein Veblen*, Vol. 1, Routledge, London.

Wachtel, P.L. (1996), "Simplifying voluntary simplicity", in Belk, R., Dholakia, N. and Venkatesh, A. (Eds), *Consumption and Marketing: Macro Dimensions*, South-Western College Publishing, Cincinnati, pp. 225-231.

Walsh, A. (1994), "Meaningful work as a distributive good", *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 32 No. 2, pp. 233-250.

Wattanasuwan, K. (2005), "The self and symbolic consumption", *Journal of American Academy of Business*, Vol. 6 No. 1, pp. 179-184.

Weber, M. (2002), *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Penguin, London, First published in German in 1905.

Zavestoski, S. (2002), "The social –psychological bases of anti-consumption attitudes", *Psychology and Marketing*, Vol. 19 No. 2, pp. 149-165.

Further reading

Ewing, B., Goldfinger, S., Oursler, A., Reed, A., Moore, D. and Wackernagel, M. (2009), *The Ecological Footprint Atlas*, Global Footprint Network, Oakland.

Grant, A.M. and Campbell, E.M. (2007), "Doing good, doing harm, being well, and burning out: the interactions of perceived pro-social impact and anti-social impact in service work", *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, Vol. 80 No. 4, pp. 665-691.

Johnston, T.C. and Burton, J.B. (2003), "Voluntary simplicity: definitions and dimensions", *Academy of Marketing Studies Journal*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 19-36.

Porter, M.E. and Kramer, M.R. (2011), "Creating shared value: how to reinvent capitalism and unleash a wave of innovation and growth", *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 85 No. 1, pp. 62-77.

Corresponding author

Patrick O'Sullivan can be contacted at: patrick.osullivan@grenoble-em.com