

Voluntary Simplicity

Strongly Backed by All Three Main

Normative-Ethical Traditions

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Abstract. We examine the growing ‘Voluntary Simplicity’ (VS) movement from the perspectives of Utilitarianism, Kantian deontology, and Virtue Ethics. We argue that, from each of these three diverse perspectives, there is a compelling argument to the conclusion that citizens of the ‘developed’ world ought to embrace such simplicity in their own lives, and to facilitate its greater adoption societally and globally. We conclude by asking why it is that this compelling conclusion has not already been more widely found and acted upon. In reflecting on this question we outline some arguments for why a culture of voluntary simplicity may be needed to drive political and macroeconomic change.

Keywords. Kant, Peter Singer, neoliberalism, moderation, climate change, eudaimonia

I. Introduction

A vast body of scientific literature impresses upon us all that human economic activity is degrading planetary ecosystems in ways that will make any form of ‘business as usual’ impossible. We humans are over-consuming earth’s resources, destabilising the climate, and decimating biodiversity (Steffen *et al.* 2015; IPCC 2013; WWF 2016). At the same time, we know that it is a minority of us who are largely responsible for this; there are many millions of people around the world who, by any humane standard, are ‘under-consuming’. Alleviating global poverty will place even more pressure on an already over-burdened planet.¹ To make

matters worse, the global population, currently at 7.6 billion people, is expected to rise to around 9.7 billion by mid-century and 11 billion by the century's end (Gerland *et al.* 2014), compounding already severe sustainability and social justice crises. Continuous economic growth seems socially necessary but ecologically cataclysmic (Meadows *et al.* 2004).

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

Accordingly, in this article, we examine VS from the 'big three' ethical perspectives of utilitarianism, Kantian deontology, and virtue ethics in order to assess which, if any, can provide a coherent philosophical defence of VS. While we do not claim to present anything like an absolute philosophical foundation to VS, ultimately our analysis shows that VS can draw strong philosophical support from a surprisingly full range of ethical perspectives. Our conclusion is that this overlapping support makes VS a robust ethical position that should guide the direction of our lives and our societies much more than it does.

II. dEfnItIon of VoluntAry Simplicity And the neoclassIcal frAmIng of Consumption

Choosing to consume less while seeking a higher quality of life is a living strategy that today goes by the name 'voluntary simplicity' (Elgin 1998; Alexander 2009). The term was coined in 1936 by Richard Gregg (2009), a follower of Gandhi, who advocated a mindful approach to

consumption that involves seeking to meet basic material needs as directly and sustainably as possible and then directing time and energy away from limitless material pursuits in favour of exploring 'the good life' in non-materialistic sources of meaning and fulfilment. This way of life, also known as 'downshifting' or 'simple living', embraces values like moderation, sufficiency, and frugality, and eschews acquisitiveness and excess. By exchanging superfluous consumption for more freedom, VS holds out the tantalising prospect that over-consumers could live more on less (Cafaro 2009), with positive consequences for self, others, and planet.

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

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

However, throughout history there have always been criticisms of materialistic values, and praise given to ‘simpler’ ways of life (Alexander and McLeod 2014). All the great spiritual and wisdom traditions have warned against the dangers of extravagance, and acquisitiveness (see VandenBroeck 1991), and, indeed, until quite recently, political parties across the spectrum shared a view that moderation and humility were noble socio-political values (see Shi 2007). Nevertheless, despite this venerable tradition, VS has received surprisingly little attention from moral philosophers (see Barnett, Cafaro and Newholm 2005).²

III. Affluence, poVerty, And VoluntArySImplIcItY

We begin our substantive analysis with a review and application of one of the most prominent moral perspectives of recent decades: the provocative argument Peter Singer presented in his seminal “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” (1972). Although Singer did not frame his argument in terms of VS, the weight of his reasoning provides direct moral support for it, as we will explain.

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

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

We do not claim here that Singer's argument is unproblematic. There are indeed various problems that one can raise with it. One immediate question is how far to take this line of reasoning. Does the argument require us to give away everything other than what is required to meet our most basic biophysical needs? After all, if there are people who suffer greatly because they do not have those most basic needs met, perhaps all acts of consumption beyond basic needs are unjustifiable until everyone's basic needs are met.

That might seem to manifest a knock-down argument against Singer, because it would raise what many would feel to be an untenable demand for us to immediately cast off all our wealth and privilege to which we are accustomed and without which we would feel/be bereft; and (if 'universalised') it would seem to require us to eliminate much of our culture in one fell swoop. This objection is a venerable one, and widespread (see Murphy 1993). But is it actually a good argument against Singer? Obviously, Singer is placing a tremendously challenging moral demand on us,

but *that* does not necessarily constitute a good argument against the validity of the demand. Indeed, it could be said that a morality that was not challenging would be no morality worth having.

A more compelling issue to raise *vis-à-vis* this point might be that if one reduces one's standard of living down to basic needs alone – to subsistence – one will be in no position to carry on seeking actively to make the world a better place. This objection seems potentially more valid; but it carries a weighty corollary. One will only be justified in non-basic-needs consumption if one is actually in good faith about using one's privileged position to seek to eliminate privilege. In other words, one ought to practice VS only in order to free up time to be an activist for social and political change. This is a demanding injunction.³

A deeper problem concerns Singer's 'irrelevance of proximity principle'. The case involving the drowning child is valid because (by hypothesis) no-one else is there to save the child. If one is passing a pond where a child is drowning, but an Olympic swimmer is already preparing to dive in to save it, one need not get one's clothes wet and dirty. The situation involving people starving in distant countries is different from the situation of oneself and only oneself passing a pond in which a child is drowning. To deny the difference – to suggest, as Singer in effect tries to do, that those people are actually dependent only upon oneself, that all other factors must be considered as 'exogenous' – risks patronisingly and disempoweringly depriving those in those countries of agency, and, crucially, risks letting governments and responsible others (including the whole paraphernalia of capitalism⁴) off the hook.

This point can be developed further, into a *tension* between VS and the Singerian opposition to allowing considerations of proximity to matter: for the claim that we must give most of our money away to distant people cuts against ideas of Thoreauvian self-reliance and against the value of *localization*,⁵ features of the good life typically supported by advocates/practitioners of VS. There are at least two reasons why the programme of localization may undermine Singer's 'proximity is irrelevant' principle:

- i. Ignoring (non-)proximity ignores the simplicity of local, direct action – and the inherent complexity (and thus, often, inefficacy) of what is involved in aid-giving across distance. It thus projects unwarrantedly from a genuinely simple, local situation (the child-in-the-pond clear and present emergency) to a situation neither simple nor local (my – and others’ – inevitably mediated and plural relationships to children far away).
- ii. Acting locally, building self-reliance, achieving autonomy, is (we would argue) part of the good life, valuable in itself. A simple life independent of the interference of outsiders, however wealthy or well-intentioned, is put at risk by Singerian action-at-a-distance.

So we certainly do not naively assume that Singer’s argument is unobjectionable. All we aim to have done, by invoking Singer’s argument, is to have created a significant *prima facie* reason in favour of VS. There are partial critical responses to Singer available. And there are ways, clearly, in which we would suggest that his argument be refined or delimited. But what seems to stand firm is the following simple insight: there is something unethical about living lives of plenty while others live destitute lives to the point of misery, malnutrition, etc. Any attempt to argue *that* intuition away appears highly likely to be pure bad faith. But we contend that that intuition is enough to motivate quite powerfully a project of VS. Singer’s position may not be able to provide a clear cut line between justifiable and unjustifiable consumption, but his argument provides a compelling *prima facie* moral case that we could and should forgo many acts of consumption and give the money saved to (say) aid agencies: which is exactly what he says we should do. This could relieve great suffering without causing us any significant hardship. Indeed, according to William MacAskill, “[...] the same amount of money can do one hundred times as much benefit to the very poorest in the world as it can to benefit typical citizens of the United States” (2016, 22).

We have allowed that the principle of the ‘irrelevance of proximity’ can (and indeed should) be questioned. Yet it undoubtedly retains *some* force. Perhaps a key part of the reason people often fail to appreciate the force of the Singerian moral position *is* due to the lack of proximity

between acts of superfluous consumption and the individuals living in the greatest destitution, or at least to the lack of the *visibility* of the latter. Would we be so casual in our consumption practices if we had to make our purchases before the gaze (perhaps just via a video-link-up) of a grossly emaciated Ethiopian child, desperate for a simple bowl of rice? Isn't that new pair of shoes morally tarnished knowing that the money spent on them could have fed that child for a month, perhaps saved his or her life? This is not an easy thought-experiment to conduct – it can induce guilt, because so often we fail to live up to this standard. But by clarifying our moral obligations, we argue that this line of reasoning can challenge us to rethink our consumption practices in ways that could greatly reduce human suffering. In short, Singer's argument radically calls into question the legitimacy of consumer culture and provides a robust *prima facie* moral case for VS. As the Gandhian dictum goes: "Live simply so that others may simply live." If it is not straightforward how to put such a dictum *effectively* into action, then we are called upon at least to seek to *find* a way through which we could put it into action.

IV. UTILITARIANISM AND VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

We began with Singer's argument because it is so simple, powerful, and yet challenging. We now wish to step back and consider the underlying theory of utilitarianism that subtly informs Singer's argument and that may offer further insight into possible moral foundations for VS.

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

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

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

Interestingly, in recent decades a vast body of sociological and psychological literature has provided some empirical support for this ancient line of reasoning (e.g. Lane 2000; Diener and Seligman 2004; Diener, Helliwell and Kahneman 2010). For instance, Tim Kasser (2002) has shown that people with materialistic value-orientations (that is, people who highly value possessions and the status they bring) tend to have lower psychological wellbeing than those who are less materialistic. Richard Easterlin (1995; 2013) and others (including utilitarians such as Layard 2005; Layard *et al.* 2010) have provided evidence from subjective

wellbeing surveys, which indicate that economic growth is not increasing life satisfaction or ‘evaluative happiness’, particularly in the developed world, and may in fact be decreasing it. Without going into the intricacies of this diverse literature, suffice to say that there is now a compelling body of social research suggesting that many people in the most developed regions in the world are not only over-consuming from an environmental perspective, but also probably mal-consuming even from a personal wellbeing perspective.

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

While we suggest that this ‘self-interested’ defence of VS should be taken more seriously by utilitarians, VS arguably has even greater moral importance to the extent it could reduce the suffering of others, both immediately and in the future. This links back to Singer’s arguments. If it is the case that the pursuit of increased consumption, especially in affluent societies, is no longer increasing happiness (or at the very least no longer significantly increasing it, such that the benefit at the margin is much less than could be realised by devoting those resources to deprived persons), then the case for reducing consumption and redistributing that superfluous wealth to those in poverty becomes even stronger. Indeed, there is something morally perverse about consuming in ways

that do not advance personal happiness while others suffer in material destitution.

We can go further. Once one takes the future seriously, then it is not enough to transfer consumption from the rich to the poor. Overconsumption of the world's resources is putting in jeopardy the very viability of the planet for future generations. This provides very strong utilitarian support for widespread VS now: i.e. for much of what the relatively rich possess to be not consumed at all (rather than distributed to the poor), at least in the present. After all, if we take the happiness of *future* generations into account and recognise the vast suffering that would flow from ecosystemic collapse, then it would seem the moral scales fall heavily in favour of VS. By consuming much more modestly and thereby helping avoid ecosystemic collapse, we help maintain a healthy biosphere for many millions of years within which human beings can flourish; the well-being of millions of future generations utterly outweighs the importance (if any) of the extravagances of one present-day generation. Continuing to consume recklessly, on the other hand, is likely to lead to unfathomable suffering, with dangerous or (worse) runaway climate change being one of the greatest humanitarian threats (Gardiner 2011). From a utilitarian point of view, what this suggests is the need rapidly to spread and to scale up VS principles.

In closing this section it is worth noting that the moral scope of utilitarianism extends beyond humanity and should include, as Mill argued, “the whole of sentient creation” (2012 [1863], 13).⁶ That is, the entire animal kingdom, not just humans, should be included in the hedonic calculus; for as Bentham asked rhetorically: “The question is not, Can they [animals] *reason?* nor, Can they *talk?* but Can they *suffer?*” (2007 [1789], 311; italics ours). Morality demands serious consideration of animals (Singer, 2009).

Including the concerns of non-human animals can then be made to rest on plausible utilitarian foundations, and doing so further calls into question the legitimacy of Western-style consumption practices and the

economies of growth those consumption practices both drive and depend on. For instance, a recent study (WWF 2016) reports that over the last forty years alone, human economic activity has reduced the populations of invertebrate species by, on average, an alarming 58%, with trends indicating that this impact will rise to 67% by 2020 if business as usual persists.

All this suggests that humanity, as a whole, is disregarding the moral worth of animals. Factory farming is but the most egregious example of a more general lack of concern. While we will not here begin to attempt to set out a complete ‘solution’ to this complex problem, it can be argued that a necessary *part* of any coherent and effective response will involve human beings making fewer demands on the natural habitats of earth’s declining biodiversity and taking more seriously the moral arguments for vegetarianism (Singer 2009) or veganism (Francione 2008), or at the very least for reducing drastically our exploitation of animals: strategies which are highly consistent with a cultural embrace of VS. As there is clearly no *need* to exploit animals in the overwhelming majority of cases, morally we ought not to do so.

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

V. deontology And Voluntary Simplicity

It is not only in the pursuit of maximal happiness and minimal suffering that strong ethical warrant for VS can be found. We now begin our analysis of various non-utilitarian approaches by turning our attention to Immanuel Kant, the exemplary philosopher of deontological ethics. On

his account, our moral duties can never be accurately derived from our fallible predictions of consequences or from how we imagine happiness might be obtained. Instead, Kant insisted that the only legitimate foundation for a system of morals is upon universal principles of reason and their inescapable requirements of us as rational agents. Along these lines he argues that the only thing good in itself is a good will, for it alone among all other things often considered good – such as good circumstances, good temperaments, or good talents – is good apart from the ends it aims at or achieves. According to Kant, all other goods can be produced by accident without the good will of a rational agent, whereas the highest and unconditional good is sought out and produced only by good will *because it is good*, and for no other reason.

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

In this way Kant maintains that the precepts of the rational and moral law are binding on us all in ways we cannot choose to ignore. We ought to act according to the laws of reason to the extent that we are rational; to act against these laws is to shirk our inherent duty as rational beings. It is within this framework that Kant advances his famous categorical imperative, the first and most common formulation of which is, “I ought never to act in such a way that I couldn’t also will that the maxim on which I act should become a universal law” (Kant 1785, 11). Kant takes this to be the principle of action to which all rational beings must conform and he holds that it cannot be rationally rejected.

Famously, he illustrates the force of the imperative with the example of telling a lie. Since lies rely on a background expectation that people

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

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

On this basis we contend that – it is clear that – there are compelling reasons on the Kantian view to reject patterns of (selfish) consumption common in the Western world (and increasingly elsewhere) in favour of a lifestyle of far greater material simplicity. Right now an expanding consumer class of more than one billion people is consuming earth’s resources in a manner that is unprecedented and that will not be able to continue. With the ecological future of the planet already direly jeopardised by current rates of consumption, it would be utterly and rapidly catastrophic from an environmental perspective if such practices were universalised to all 7.4 billion human beings, to say nothing of the ten or eleven billion expected by 2100 (Gerland *et al.* 2014). From a Kantian perspective, then, it seems consumer lifestyles as they exist today in wealthy, technologically ‘developed’ nations are being pursued in a moral and rational vacuum, consisting as they do of numerous daily decisions that treat those making them as exceptions to *the rules of reason and equality under the moral law*.

Kant understood that – despite being capable of rational deliberation and choice – our wills regularly come under the influence of motivations that do not always find accord with our reason: we do not always do the right thing simply because it is the right thing. The fact is, Kant says, human beings cultivate and fall prey to their own personal preferences, which impede the free action of their rational wills; if it were not so, he claims, a perfectly rational will would never feel constrained by its moral duty. Unfortunately for the Kantian, humans are far from being perfect moral agents, but this in no way provides us with an excuse for ignoring our duty. Even with the perhaps enticing prospect of that privately-owned car, phone-upgrade or cup of coffee, from the Kantian perspective we are all still bound by the categorical responsibility to live in a way that is universalisable, and what that means, above all, *now* is: *sustainable*, at a level compatible with one-planet living for all. One must consider the whole of humanity (and beyond) both now and in the future. For Kant, blindly following the standard practice of our friends, neighbours, or society at large is no justification or excuse at all. Given that the practices of the affluent cannot be universalized, those practices simply must, following Kant, be wrong.

VI. VIRTUE ETHICS AND VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

So far we have mostly discussed how the two leading relatively modern ethical positions may warrant decreased material consumption, yet some of the oldest and most influential advocates of the relationship between the good life and material simplicity come from the ancient Greek philosophers who, despite deep disagreement on various matters, found considerable accord in their praise and practice of simple living. Perhaps this should be no surprise, given the natural overlap of simplicity with the traditional virtues of moderation, temperance, frugality, prudence, and self-control. However, the case for material simplicity as a virtue in its own right has not often been stated by philosophers. In this section,

following the work of Cafaro and Gambrel (2009), we will briefly outline and discuss the possible place of VS within a virtue ethics framework that dates back to the ancient Greeks. VS should become a more prominent corollary, we suggest, of the resurgence in virtue ethics that has occurred in the last generation or so.

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

Furthermore, the virtuous person acts out of motivation from the virtues, rather than only as a means to some other end. As a result, even many honest actions do not make a person honest, for he or she may be acting honestly only in order to garner a good reputation or to avoid the consequences of being caught in lies. Additionally, the truly virtuous person knows how and when to act, and knows what kind of action is called for by the virtues in a given situation. Such a person has *phronesis*, practical wisdom.

Within this approach, we hold that simplicity may rightly be considered one of the virtues – even if this is primarily about putting the new wine of ‘voluntary simplicity’ into the old bottle of Aristotelian

‘moderation’. Simplicity (and moderation) help us see clearly what (little) we actually need to flourish⁷ when it comes for instance to things we acquire, and can also identify which things are ultimately irrelevant to *eudaimonia* or how those things, if pursued, may diminish or hinder it in our lives. Additionally, simplicity would include the wisdom to understand where and how our personal decisions will impact the flourishing of others, making us more able to perceive the kind of society and world to which various decisions would lead.

Accordingly, the virtue of simplicity implies regular, thoughtful introspection and reflection, leading to more conscious consumption in line with a deeper understanding of what is truly valuable and important in life: thus, *more conscious living*.⁸ This is precisely what VS is. That is, we suggest that the earnest practice of simplicity will typically result in significantly decreased and alternative forms of consumption when compared to the average in ‘developed’ countries. It is also worth noting that while over-consumers, mostly located in these nations, are the clear focus for the present discussion, simplicity likely remains a virtue even for those with very little opportunity to acquire material objects, many of whom are quite justified in trying to increase their level of material consumption. While we acknowledge that the moral burden of simplicity falls squarely at the feet of those who have much, we cautiously suggest that those with little (but sufficient) will still benefit from conscious consideration regarding the right material goods to consume, as well as the cultivation of discipline to avoid making unwise decisions in this sphere.

But can simplicity rightly be called a virtue? That is, *does* the ability to make wise and appropriate ungreedy personal decisions promote and help maintain individual, societal, and planetary flourishing? First of all, we suggest that the wise and virtuous person will see that the planet’s ecological systems are already strained, especially by the production/consumption practices of the richest 1.5 billion of its inhabitants, and that the continuation and extension of such practices risks ecosystemic collapse, thereby endangering the lives and wellbeing especially of the

billions most vulnerable to environmental change (Gardiner 2011). In the face of this reality, it is relatively *simple* to see how truly careful moderation of consumption and the ability to make a panoply of informed and appropriate – truly ethical – decisions can directly impact human (and non-human) flourishing on a global scale.

Yet despite the pressing environmental need to significantly moderate consumption and to live differently – more simply – many would see this limitation as antithetical to personal happiness and good living. Does virtue simply demand that we sacrifice our own pleasure for the good of the planet and the human race as a whole? Fortunately, it does not seem that this is so. As noted earlier, a growing body of work is emerging which suggests that by de-emphasising material things, and intelligently giving away (or putting away, or even simply eliminating) much of one's wealth and/or income, we stand to gain in diverse and often profound ways in the non-material aspects of our lives. By resisting the consumerist impulses to needlessly upgrade and acquire, many of us can save ourselves from financial stress due to over-commitment and debt, while simultaneously freeing ourselves to devote more attention to non-material pleasures such as time with friends and family, meditation, or slow/local travel. In a wider social context, this freed-up time (and money) can also be directed into volunteer and community groups, making it easier and more enjoyable for us to develop and express other virtues including generosity, compassion, and kindness. Furthermore, even affluent societies of course depend utterly upon basic so-called 'ecosystem services' that are being eroded by overconsumption; simplicity helps, vitally, to maintain and protect these and in so doing allows for flourishing societies into the future.

In many ways then, even irrespective of the (non-negotiable) existential modern environmental crises facing us, simplicity remains a great virtue (Cafaro and Gambrel 2009), as it serves to maintain and promote a balanced positive personal and social outlook while fostering other,

overlapping virtues and cultivating fertile ground for the growth of other people/beings. In making this argument, we have the strong support of the Aristotelian tradition in its defence of moderation as the central virtue, the virtue enabling one to ‘calibrate’ all the other virtues, by casting them as the mean between two extremes. Thus we would argue, for example, that simplicity is the golden mean between excess and insufficiency.

Finally, even with these strengths, it may again be objected that, since a healthy economy is essential for a flourishing society, simplicity should be opposed on the grounds that it threatens ‘economic growth’. On this point, we simply turn the reader’s attention back to the points we made in this connection in sections I and II, and echo Cafaro and Gambrel in their conviction that “[...] the endless growth economy is an ecological impossibility and a blind alley in the human career” (2009, 105).⁹ Perhaps the first step to a better world involves learning to appreciate the virtue of voluntarily moderating our impact as we choose to live out the fact that true happiness will never come from things we can buy. Genuine flourishing lies beyond consumer culture. An environmental virtue ethics offers more by way of such flourishing than is dreamt of in ‘growthist’ philosophy.

VII. Objection: Is Voluntary Simplicity Ineffective And Politically Naive?

So far we have considered the degree to which there is a basis in each of ‘the main three’ philosophical approaches to ethics for VS. The verdict thus far is remarkably positive: in each case, the usual disagreements between these approaches appear to fall away, and VS receives forceful backing. It seems hard to argue against it; what could be said *against* living more simply so that others may simply live, reducing our ecological footprint so that countless future people and present animals can live and flourish, and so forth?

We turn in this section to what we think is the best potential *objection* to VS: that it is ineffective, that, while individualistically commendable, and (as we have seen) hard to fault from a narrowly ethical standpoint, it is politically naive (so the objection goes) and unable to midwife an actual transition to the better world that it hopes to pre-figure.

We believe this objection would be valid, were it to be the case that VS operated *only* at an individual or small-group level, and were altogether hostile to politics and to any and all ‘top-down’ processes.¹⁰ And there are advocates and practitioners of VS who lean strongly in that direction. Indeed, in her empirical study of the VS movement Mary Grigsby concluded that participants “[...] don’t generally talk about policy initiatives, instead focusing on the individual as the primary mechanism for change” (2004, 12). This characterises the movement as seeking to ‘escape’ the system at a personal level, rather than ‘transform’ it at a collective level.

To what extent then is this a valid critique? We would accept that if VS is or remains *solely* a depoliticised cultural movement, if it is ethical and apolitical or even *anti*-political, then it is hard to see how it could actually succeed in changing the world. It is not clear that living more simply within carbon capitalism will do much to disrupt carbon capitalism; and VS might then be a kind of distraction, a middle-class self-indulgence. In fact, it could often be the case that those privileged enough to choose their material standard of living might find, on reflection, that their practices of simple living in many ways depend on the very economic and political structures (e.g. exclusionary property rights) that essentially prohibit most of the population from living similarly. So far as that is so, VS depends on the system it hopes to transcend.

In order to challenge that system adequately, a clear vision of the latter is essential. In section II, we spoke of the way the system we live in leads to dangerous ‘externalities’. But that concept actually still depends on the hegemonic neoclassical framework: a framework that is inadequate. Its central concepts of ‘market failure’ and of ‘externalities’ conceal that *successful* market-actors will succeed precisely *by* externalising their

costs onto those absolutely or relatively incapable of effective resistance (i.e. nature, future generations, the poor and vulnerable). Major market-actors will also succeed better (at least in the short term, which is what mainly matters to them), the more they strip out the capacity of government or civil society to fight back against such ‘externalisation’ of costs. ‘Market failure’ is typically, from the point of view of firms, market *success*.

Furthermore, successful ‘internalisation of costs’ as such typically comes at a high cost. Consider, for example, the concept of ‘ecosystem services’, apparently designed to stop economics from ignoring the destruction of ecosystems that it has helped engender in a grievous ‘market failure’, but actually facilitating an entrenchment of anthropocentrism and a vast new frontier for the commodification of ecosystems (Read and Scott Cato 2014), by giving the dubious impression that we can just purchase sustainability through marketization of our ‘revealed preferences’ – and thus furthermore depoliticising issues which are inevitably political.¹¹

Neoclassicism also fails to take seriously the issue of *scale* (see Daly 1996), and thus in the eyes of many critical/philosophical economists it cannot hope to yield outcomes that can be long-term sustained on a finite planet. It fails to take seriously the extent to which production is undertaken in order to satisfy consumer ‘wants’ and ‘needs’ *that are actually generated by advertisers and marketers* (Bauer *et al.* 2012), who need to keep us in a state of permanent anxiety or unhappiness in order to be able to continue to sell to us (because someone who is already satisfied does not feel compelled to buy anything). It is producers then who are, ultimately, largely responsible for such wilful and counter-productive ideological genesis of human ‘needs’ (Jackson 2009, chapter 6).

One might go further still: we would argue that the ultimate consumer-product *is the consumer* and the ideology of consumerism. These lived identities are the result of a process of *production of consumer-subjectivity*, and thereby of construction of ‘needs’ (Bauer *et al.* 2012). We need a way

of rethinking consumption not subject to the vast distortions that follow inevitably from the dominant ‘producerist’ perspective just criticized.¹² We have demonstrated in the present contribution that such a way is available, under the heading of VS.

The point, then, is to situate VS *within a critique of neoliberalism and neoclassicism*. When this vital context of political economy is present, then the objection under consideration in this section is overcome.

Voluntary simplifiers seek to reduce their own footprint. Within an unchanged macro context, however, this would send a ‘price-signal’ to the rest of the economy that potentially *hastens* the growth in others’ consumption. Thus, considered economically, VS would – without a change in that context – not slow down net resource-depletion at all, due to what Blake Alcott (2008) calls the ‘sufficiency rebound effect’.¹³ That is, by taking less, the movement may make it easier and more affordable for others to take more. Thus, in order to have an impact at the level of society, VS will surely require regulations or other governance mechanisms capping overall production/consumption.

Furthermore, it is very challenging for the practice of VS to actually take off in the first place, in an unchanged macro or systemic context. To a large extent this is what some call ‘consumer lock in’ (Sanne 2002). There are numerous regulatory, economic and practical obstacles in its way: everything from planning rules that discriminate against smallholders, and prohibitive rents, to a default assumption on the state’s part that citizens work a ‘normal’ working week. In the absence of bike lanes or public transport systems, it is hard to escape car-culture. In short, the structures within which we live deeply shape consumption practices (Alexander 2015a, chapter 4).

The response to this line of objection then is not to dismiss VS but to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between culture and politics, or ‘structure’ and ‘agency’. Granted, overconsumption is a systemic problem, not merely a lifestyle problem; but what this implies is that VS should proceed hand in hand with structural change.

Furthermore, we maintain that the structural change needed to enable far more of us to flourish while remaining within ecological limits will not be achieved *without* a flourishing simplicity movement. That is, a macro-economics of ‘growth’, of ‘more’, will not be bucked unless there is a microeconomics or culture that embraces ‘less’ (Alexander 2013). This is because the major political-economic/structural changes now so badly needed will have no democratic mandate without the cultural change that VS embodies. Just as significantly, practicing VS and thereby escaping the ‘work-and-spend’ cycle may be what is necessary to provide the ‘free time’ needed for an active and politicised social movement to emerge.

Moreover, the needful changes will not even be thinkable for people, without the example of a flourishing movement that exemplifies how *desirable* a simpler life can be. Nor will the structural changes be able to be *realised* without such a movement: for VS provides a low-impact way of life – a goal – that our institutions and infrastructure should be trying to support. This is the real importance of the ‘demonstration projects’ undertaken in the Transition or Permaculture Movements, for instance, both of which reflect a VS ethic. Their significance lies not so much in their actual impacts on our footprint right now, but in their demonstration of a way in which we could actualise VS on a larger scale, if there was sufficient social support and political will.

Finally, VS is vital in showing leadership: we in the ‘developed’ world especially need to show that we are serious in moving away from the ecologically disastrous development model that other societies are now trying (or being pressured) to emulate. One will not be taken seriously in calling for a worldwide movement for one-planet simpler living, until one starts at least trying to live in that way oneself.

To call for VS without simultaneously seeking for systemic change that will facilitate that way of life and scale up its benefits is *empty*. To call for systemic political and macroeconomic change for socio-environmental justice without simultaneously starting to pursue voluntary simplicity is *blind*: citizens will struggle to see how to orient their actions until they

can see a social movement already starting to be put into action that re-imagines the good life, beyond consumer culture. We envisage then a virtuous circle: of actual bottom-up moves toward VS working hand-in-hand with societal political changes that increasingly enable such moves, and enable them to be scaled up.

This constitutes our response then to the objection of ineffectiveness and political naivety, the best objection we think possible against VS. We argue that such a living strategy can be effective, provided it aims to be a driving force of (and driven by), rather than alienated from or antagonistic to, broader macro change. And when one sees this, one sees how, properly understood and responded to, this objection turns into an asset for the VS movement. A culture that embraced simpler living could be astonishingly effective, if pursued complementarily with the objective of a societal and global ‘green’ political transition. Such a movement could provide the cultural conditions in which a steady-state or post-growth economy could take root.

So what is needed is an ethic that thinks as a community, as a society, and as an ecosystem, that is politically aware and certainly not in horror of political collective action, and that seeks to actualise a virtuous circle between cultural and political change. There is no reason to believe that the approaches considered in sections III-VI above need be incompatible with such an ethic. On the contrary. Without an ethics of VS embraced at the philosophical and cultural level it is hard to imagine a politics of simplicity ever taking root, and hard to imagine a politics of ecology flourishing.

VIII. CONCLUSION

We have seen that it is hard to argue against voluntary simplicity. The main intelligent objection to it, indeed, is that it should in a sense be less voluntary, and more strongly encouraged and even (ultimately) required by public authorities. We hope in the previous section to have shown

how that objection can in the end strengthen the case for VS, rather than weaken it. In a democracy, the scale and speed of change required of us, if we are not to devastate our posterity, will be impossible without a grassroots movement showing how it is possible and desirable, pre-figuring it and starting to build it; and that grassroots movement needs macro change too, to facilitate it and to scale it up and make it not only thinkable but actual globally.

We maintain then that a very plausible ethical case can be and has here been made for VS, from the relatively comprehensive range of perspectives reviewed. This suggests that there is something of deep moral significance to this way of life that is not sufficiently recognised. That VS is in many ways a no-brainer – something that anybody with any acceptable ethical worldview should support.

To the extent that we are correct, the main immediate practical implication is that VS should take a more central place in our education (including the philosophy curriculum) and that the casual acceptance of consumer cultures should be more explicitly and regularly challenged. This may be particularly confronting for those of us in affluent societies, whose lifestyles are being called into question. Nevertheless, we hope that this paper provokes a broader discussion and deeper personal reflection about the ethical weight of VS and its political significance, especially in an age of consumer malaise, gross inequality, and ever-deepening ecological crises.

Indeed, we think that the real issue raised by the compellingness of our conclusion in favour of VS, even across very different ethical traditions, is: *Why hasn't everyone already recognised this? And started to act on it?* We suspect that the answer is: *because* it is uncomfortable; *because* it will require us to change our lives, and we resist giving up our many petty luxuries. As Wittgenstein notes (1993), the real problem in philosophy is typically one of the *will*, not of the intellect. At some level, we all *know* that how we are living is wrong. The issue is: having the willpower to face this and change it. Attention needs to shift now to the barriers – political, but also

personal – standing in the way of a major shift toward VS. We need to *will* a simpler life – *and* we need to will whatever it takes to overcome our unethical or simply lazy resistance to that will.

We contend that this article has shown how voluntary simplicity provides an essential part of the essential response to the epochal overlapping challenges facing humanity. And that we now need, of our own free will, to step up to those challenges: through changing our lives, both individually and together.¹⁴

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Notes

1. Though this problem will be considerably mitigated if, as we recommend, a new path of voluntary simplicity is chosen, rather than the global South being encouraged to follow a North-style ‘development’ model. See http://www.greenhousethinktank.org/uploads/4/8/3/2/48324387/post-growth-localisation_pamphlet.pdf for explication.
2. Ingrid Robeyns’ ‘limitarianism’ is a promising incipient exception to this generalisation: see, for example, <https://ethicsinsociety.stanford.edu/research-outreach/buzz-blog/having-too-much-ingrid-robeyns-defends-limitarian-doctrine>.
3. This point connects directly with the argument we explore affirmatively in section VII to the effect that VS is justly complemented by collective political action to reduce, ultimately, the need for *voluntary* simplicity.
4. On the direct salience of which, see <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/peter-singer-charity-effective-altruism/>.
5. As laid out for instance in the work of Norberg-Hodge *et al.*: cf., for example, http://www.greenhousethinktank.org/uploads/4/8/3/2/48324387/post-growth-localisation_pamphlet.pdf.
6. In fact, deontological approaches (and virtue ethics too) provide striking – overwhelming, and less compromised – cases for taking animals seriously in the kinds of ways we shall now outline. See, for example, Francione (2008).
7. This is particularly strikingly in some of the Hellenistic philosophies, such as Cynicism.
8. As recommended in most detail by the Stoics.
9. See also the texts by Alexander cited in our bibliography.
10. We do *not* assume that ‘politics’ should be limited to conventional representative electoral democracy. Far from it. We would include, as vital dimensions of it, the radicalisation of electoral democracy through greater presence of radical representatives as well as through electoral reform, the emergence of more deliberative and participatory forms of democracy, the inclusion of radically unrepresented constituencies (such as non-human animals and future people) in democracy, all kinds of civic actions and labour actions (strikes, etc.), and Direct Action.
11. This last point, we in effect expand on at length in section VII.
12. See <http://oneworldcolumn.blogspot.co.uk/2011/09/by-rupert-read-we-are-thoroughly-used.html> for detail.

13. The point here is very similar to the crucial reason why ‘green growth’ is oxymoronic: for any ‘green growth’ that does not *displace* ungreen economic activity will be net-harmful (see http://www.greenhousethinktank.org/uploads/4/8/3/2/48324387/post_growth_common-sense_inside.pdf[16ff]). And green growth that makes ungreen economic activity cheaper (by, for example, reducing the price of oil through the provision of alternatives) will *not* on balance displace such activity, but will add to it. In technical terms, this is the ‘rebound’ effect (or the Jevons paradox): it fatally undermines the case for ‘green growth’, and explains why a coordinated political decision to reduce production (and consumption) is essential. In the context of such a potential decision, voluntary simplicity is viable and indeed vital: as proof of concept, and as ideological support.

14. Thanks to the reviewers for comments that have helped us significantly to improve this paper.