Ethical consumption: Moral meaning in everyday purchases

If we are what we eat, how should we decide what to consume? IESE's Carlos Rodriguez-Lluesma's "virtue ethics" offer food for thought beyond product labels.

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Overconsumption. In developed nations and beyond, many are guilty of it. Imelda Marcos and her alleged 3,000 pairs of shoes might spring to mind.

Overconsumption as an ethical problem gets a lot of attention. It's easy to tie it to the world's growing landfills, teeming with obsolete electronics, plastic products, outdated fashion footwear, etc.

While greed and materialism are not good for our society, depleting our planet's resources, it's important to remember the prefix: "over-." Consumption itself is both natural and inevitable as we live and hopefully flourish. The question on many conscientious consumers' minds is: How can consumer behavior promote altogether what is good for me, for my family and for society?

Pablo Garcia-Ruiz of the University of Zaragoza and **Carlos Rodríguez-Lluesma** of IESE explore the realm of ethical consumption in their chapter for the *Handbook of Virtue Ethics in Business Management* (Springer Netherlands, 2016). They argue that ethical consumption forms part of an individual's character development and the pursuit of a morally good life. So, you are what you eat — in a moral sense, too.

The ethical consumer

How do you consume ethically? There are some high profile organizations to help. Choosing

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fair-trade products can help support the payment of living wages in developing countries. The Slow Food movement is prominent, too, with its push for locally sourced and traditional cuisine over fast food. To take an ethical stand as a consumer, one can boycott products associated with sweatshops, environmental damage and/or testing on animals. This may be spurred by political, religious, social or environmental reasons.

Yet here Rodríguez-Lluesma and his co-author have a "virtue ethics" approach to consumption in mind. They write: "Virtue ethics understands that simple, slow, sustainable or fair-trade practices are worthy and must be carried out not only for their own sake but also as a means for consumers to develop virtues and flourish as human beings."

The philosophical tradition of virtue ethics emphasizes the development of character and virtues in a person. In contrast, other branches of ethics may emphasize doing one's duty or acting in a certain way to bring about good consequences.

So, what does a virtue-ethics approach to consuming look like?

Start with a question: "What kind of person do I want to become?" Frame purchasing decisions with an answer in mind.

In praise of excellence

Consumption enables practices that help realize human potential. For example, a good musical instrument is key for a competent musician and access to rigorous books and papers is key for an academic. Practical wisdom, humility and constancy are among the virtues that can be developed with careful consumption tied to meaningful practices.

The authors say "moderation" is a central virtue tied to consumption. While overconsumption has its moral pitfalls, so does underconsumption, they write. Consumption is necessary for a good life: Besides feeding our basic needs, it allows us to play music or furnish a home, for example. And what is good for the individual can also be good for society. While overconsumption can lead to materialism and superficiality, on the other extreme, underconsumption can mean that a person never hosts friends and thereby estranges or alienates others. Somewhere between stingy and greedy, moderate consumption can be a means to express affection for others and live well.

What is moderation for one group might be overconsumption or underconsumption for another, the authors note. Context is required. While a yearly concert pass might be an extravagance for casual music fans, it can also be considered a moderate use of resources

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for musicians developing their talents.

In other words, when we make conscious choices about how and what to consume, we are also choosing which moral values to prioritize. Advertising and marketing messages can get in the way or, occasionally, help this process.

Whether choosing fair-trade labels or deciding how much to spend on your child's birthday party, what you consume can play a wider role in your moral development and as part of a larger community. That's food for thought.

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