

Environmental Ethics and Consumerism

Consumerism is a relatively new phenomenon which has developed into an all embracing term referring to people who purchase goods, primarily for their own consumption. We all need to consume food, electricity for modern equipment, purchase clothes and other necessities to live in the contemporary world. Everybody is a consumer in one way or another, without people purchasing food, clothes, furnishing and maintaining their homes, using transport and the occasional luxury item the economies of the world would collapse. Although we are all consumers, greed can be seen in the selfish behaviour of consumers who desire much more than they need. If we are to address the problems created by greed and propose an alternative approach which curbs the damaging effects it has on the natural environment we need to understand the economic and ethical issues related to consumerism. Consumerism provides a good illustration of how greed subtly impacts on the environment, because people are frequently unaware of how their actions affect the environment in which they live.

What is consumerism?

In the context of this document the words consumer and consumerism are being used to describe those who purchase goods for their own or for other peoples use. It also refers to businesses and individuals who sell products, because they are also consumers of for example; electricity, gas; and raw materials. Consumers range from the individual buying their weekly groceries to multi-national companies. With such a wide range of people involved consumerism has become a social movement in itself with laws to protect consumer's rights and protect them from unscrupulous traders.

The downside of consumerism is that it has come to represent the throwaway society, where people do not repair products if they go wrong, they simply throw them a way and buy new. When an item like a mobile phone or other items of electrical equipment, is out of date it is replaced even though it is still useable. The same applies to fashion accessories which soon go out of fashion and are then discarded. This results in an increase in waste being disposed of in landfill sites and excessive use of raw material. The only real beneficiaries are the companies selling the products.

It is clearly important to sales and marketing departments of business to coerce the consumer into purchasing their products. The profit figures of the large retailers demonstrate their success in encouraging people to buy their products. The Banks and Credit Card companies are also making

large profits from providing the finance to enable the consumer to buy the things they desire. Consumer debt has grown considerably over the first decade of the twenty-first century. The debt crisis in 2008 and 2009 demonstrates that the current level of consumption cannot be sustained.

The economic advantages

Consumption of goods is important for trade; it creates jobs and provides people with an income. The trading of goods and services has gone on ever since human beings started to form communities. The development of money made it easier for people to buy and sell, with the advent of the credit card consumption has become even easier. Contemporary society has some very sophisticated methods of transferring money for the buyer and seller, with no cash being used. The modern consumer can now order goods and services over the internet, with the result that the buyer and seller do not have any direct contact.

Consumerism is now seen by some people as an expression of individual freedom, the consumer is seen as having power and the ability to purchase their own happiness. The economic success or failure of any business depends on their ability to attract people to buy the products they sell. The consumer has therefore become an important person whose purchasing habits can mean the success or failure of a business. Buying and selling are also important for Governments, as it provides them with important income enabling them to buy goods and services which are vital in responding to the needs of people. Without income Governments cannot provide health, education or maintain law and order. The consumer therefore has an important role in ensuring the success of commerce. This has created a situation where politicians are keen to portray themselves as champions of the consumer or their party as the party of choice.

Consumerism with its apparent desire to purchase goods has meant that for some shopping has become a religion with the place of worship being the local shopping mall although it has to be said that people see this as something different to worship and do not regard it as a form of idolatry.

At the start of the twenty-first century the consumerist society is often more concerned with image, sadly people do not realise that the media image they seek could well result in their own downfall. The challenge is how do we tame the beast and redirect attitudes of consumers towards one that protects the natural environment not destroys it. The Christian faith seeks to encourage people to care for God's creation and live their lives by trying to apply the cardinal and theological virtues to the own lives, perhaps these virtues can provide a basis for an alternative approach for the consumerist

society of the twenty-first century. These virtues are prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance, faith, hope and love. However not all consumerism is bad and contradictory to Christian ethical teaching and everyone is a consumer in one way or another.

Current consumer practices do not always take into account protection of the natural environment, the result is that consumerism can be seen as damaging rather than protecting the environment, although there is a growing awareness of the impact consumerism has on the environment.

There is still a great deal of unbridled consumption as has previously been explained, although it would be correct to say that the situation is starting to change.

Campaign groups, like Friends of the Earth, have raised consumer awareness and encouraged the ordinary consumer to take action to help protect the environment. Consumers are becoming aware of global issues, through the debate on global warming which has made many aware that the human race cannot continue consuming the earth's resources at the present rate and that there needs to be greater emphasis on sustainable development. Consumers are in a position to make informed choices about what they buy. This has been reflected in the growth in sales of organic products. People are having solar panels fitted to their houses, and there is a growth in electric car sales, because people realise that we have to have an alternative to the current petroleum dependant cars the majority of people drive.

Consumers have the ability and power to rebel against the exploitation of our natural resources. Most people in the west have stopped buying products made of animal fur, although tigers have been almost hunted to extinction because of demands for tiger products in the Far East. The consumer can have a great deal of influence in changing attitudes on important ethical issues. For example consumers who are concerned about human rights try to avoid buying goods made by slave labour or by people forced to work in poor conditions. The discerning consumer tries to buy products and services that do not harm the natural environment. The consumer can, if armed with the right information, make a positive contribution to protecting the natural environment.

It is worth noting at this point that not all things called green are motivated by environmentally friendly companies. People are encouraged to have paperless billing to protect the environment, but the reason most companies encourage this is economic not environmental. If people move to paperless billing the company saves print and postal costs, which in some cases amounts to thousands of pounds being saved each year by the companies. The majority of paper is made from

sustainably managed forests which help to absorb CO² and reduce emissions. The bills could be produced on recycled paper thus reducing the mountain of paper that is not recycled. People also use electricity to run their computers and therefore create more CO² from power stations, which wipes out the reduction in damage to the environment, only when electricity is produced without creating pollution will paperless billing help the environment. (The writer is a company accountant and makes this observation from personal knowledge.) There is another issue that is the less post we send the more postmen are at risk of losing their jobs.

Another product which is promoted as environmentally friendly is the Electric Car, which will in the future provide an alternative to vehicles which use petroleum products. The electric car uses large quantities of electricity from non-sustainable sources to charge the batteries. The material in the batteries for example contains lithium, which is currently mined in South America and China, creating a loss of habitats, and producing high levels of polluting emissions. (Source WWF) The advantage of Electric Cars is they reduce air pollution in our towns and cities, plus reduce our dependence on the oil industry. These two examples illustrate how difficult it can be for consumers to identify environmentally friendly products.

Consumerism clearly provides examples of how the demand for more and more consumer goods, driven by greed rather than necessity impact on the environment. But not all consumerism is bad, in fact economies are dependent on consumers purchasing goods, so without consumerism there would be a real financial crisis in the world. It should be noted that all people are consumers, but it is the levels of consumption and what is being consumed which is a cause for concern. The fact is people cannot continue to consume resources at the present rate, there has to be a change to a sustainable form of consumption, but people will have to be willing to change their lifestyles.

People's reluctance to examine their own lifestyles and even deeper reluctance to change their consumption habits raises a number of ethical issues which have to be addressed. Can it be morally acceptable for people in the west to over indulge and waste large amounts of food while others starve? The majority of consumers seem happy to ignore their own impact on the natural environment, because in far too many instances they are driven by greed

The environment cannot support the current levels of materialism, consumerism, and over exploitation of resources, plus unequal distribution of wealth. Globalisation has created a greater understanding between people, but it has also enabled the greedy to exploit the situation to satisfy

their desires. In western countries consumer demand for food products, cheap clothing and luxury goods, mean the products are being freighted around the world. This creates air pollution, over extraction of minerals and fossil fuels with people often working in low paid poor conditions, which mean they struggle to feed their families. Countries in the developing world are often in debt to the rich countries and are forced to produce cash crops to feed western appetites, while not being able to adequately feed their own people. (Groups like Oxfam, Friends of the Earth, Christian Aid and WWF (World Wildlife Fund) have a great deal of information on these subjects.) In the United Kingdom when something goes wrong people do not have it repaired they buy a new one, which puts a further strain on natural resources.

The western consumer now expects a wide variety of fresh food and vegetables, these demands mean that developing countries have cut down forests and used the grassland used by wild animals to feed western appetites. The newly cultivated land could produce food for the starving.

The above has sought to highlight the differences of opinion between the environmentalist and those who believe consumption should continue at the present rate. If the damage to the nature environment is to be halted these differences will have to be resolved.

End

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