

The Environmentalist v the Greedy Consumer

This document will examine the differences in the approach to the natural environment of the Environmentalist and the Greedy Consumer. In the context of this document ‘the Environmentalist’ is a Christian who believes that greedy behaviour harms others within the community and threatens the natural environment, with the role of human beings as good stewards of God’s creation, caring and protecting the earth’s natural resources as well as their fellow human beings. On the other hand ‘the greedy consumer’ is someone who happily engages in excessive consumerism, while at the same time justifying that consumerism on the basis of egoistic motives (it brings them satisfaction of their desires) as well as economic arguments (if people stopped consuming the economy would fail) etc.

The different perspectives of environmentalist and the greedy consumers cannot be simply regarded as a battle between the good guys and the bad, so any evaluation needs to consider both perspectives on the issues. Not everyone would agree with the environmentalist view, because greed can help economies when people purchase more and more products to satisfy their consumer desires. The result of this is that in the twenty-first century greed and selfishness are for some acceptable practice, even when it can be shown it is destroying the environment and threatens the survival of the human race, through over consumption which has led to a loss of natural resources and contributed to global warming.

The Greedy Consumer

When people buy more material possessions than they need, have large accumulations of wealth, spend money on none essential items such as luxury goods, this is good for business and creates employment. The greedy person’s desire for material possessions is now being manipulated by advertising to encourage selfish behaviour, which leads to an increase in sales. The simplest example is the Christmas wish list sent to Santa Claus, who was originally developed by the marketing department of Coca Cola based on the mythological Dutchman Sinter Klaas and the Germanic or Norse God Odin who appears during the winter solstice. (Based on material from Coca Cola’s website.) The Christmas wish list has now become a list of I wants including the trips to Lapland to see Santa Claus. There are a large number of presents bought to answer people’s selfish desires; many of these are discarded within a few days of Christmas.

People can find it hard when encouraged to spending of large sums of money on presents at Christmas time, because a great deal of the secularly celebrations have merged with the Christian

celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. The Santa Claus figure has also become part of Christmas and people are encouraged to buy loads of gifts as this is good for the retailer. It has to be noted that some people misguidedly associated Santa Claus with St Nicholas bishop of Myra, in south-western Turkey, whose patronage of children with its attendant custom of giving them presents on his feast. Retailers do nothing to correct it mistake, which makes it difficult for Christians to criticise greed and over consumption at Christmas time, because Christians are also actively participating, in what for them, is an important festival. This example illustrates that it is not a simple question of the good guys verses the bad, because all human beings can succumb to desires that lead them to sin, even when they know it is wrong, this is part of human nature.

Greed can be seen in most aspects of life from the high profile banker earning large bonuses to a person taking more food than they need from the buffet at a church social. (Personal observation of writer) Greed can range from the highly paid sports star spending huge sums on luxury goods to support their lavish lifestyles, to the shopper buying more than they need when there is a shortage of a product such as bread. Greed often brings out the undesirable behaviour in humans beings.

The greedy consumer appears to believe that it's alright to be greedy and selfish, wanting the latest consumer goods as it creates instant happiness when they get what they want; but then they want more, which is the nature of greed. The majority within society cannot have what they want, many poor and oppressed groups struggle to survive and can only look on enviously at the rich. Even those who are greedy for wealth and material possession are beginning to realise that these do not always bring happiness. Sadly in the modern western consumer society, this philosophy has not produced the greatest happiness because people are starting to realise that wealth and possessions do not produce inner peace and happiness, so people are starting to look for some form of spiritual fulfilment or turning to drug and alcohol.

The greedy consumer is regarded by some as being beneficial for the economy, but by the environmentalist, a harmful threat to the natural environment and in the longer term bad for the economy as they reduce natural resources on which people depend. The greedy consumer is motivated by a desire to have more than they need, leading them to engage in selfishness, covetousness, self indulgence and a desire for wealth, material possessions and consuming food and goods at levels which are much more than they need. However defining what is adequate for a person's need in itself presents a multitude of problems.

Environmentalist approach to greed and environment

The Christians do have teaching on why greed is wrong. The Tenth Commandment; ‘You should not covet things belonging to another person’ which is one of the great commandments, because it highlights how a person’s thoughts and attitude can be driven by desire leading them to engage in behaviour that is morally unacceptable. Greed is also driven by selfish desire and is therefore contrary to any acceptable Christian behaviour going against the very laws of God. Amos, Jeremiah, and Thomas Aquinas were all concerned that greedy behaviour of one person caused harm to their neighbour or other members of the community.

People may watch the programmes on nature on their TV and help with charity events but choose to ignore how their lifestyle treats the natural world. The TV, mobile devices, and computers all contain large quantities of parts made from non-biodegradable materials which cannot be recycled. These create waste that is difficult to dispose of and there is only a small percentage of sustainable energy used to operate the equipment, most of the electricity and the batteries come from non sustainable energy sources. At present the majority of electricity we use is not from sustainable sources, so the more electricity we use, the more CO₂ is produced increasing the damage to the natural environment. The large vehicles used for transporting consumer goods create air pollution and use large amounts of natural resources. If people are to take care of the world we live in there has to be a change to society’s consumption. (This is a very brief résumé of the problem more detailed information can be found on the Friends of the Earth and Global Issues websites.)

The Christian approach to caring for the environment can be seen through the idea of environmental stewardship. This is the idea that people should care for the natural environment in a practical way and is a key element in developing approaches that seek to protect the natural world, which has started to emerge.

The change of attitude required in how society approaches environmental stewardship can already be seen within Consumerism. Current consumerism does harm the environment, but if consumers changed their buying habit to purchasing products and food from sustainable and non-polluting sources then the negative impact on the natural environment could be reduced. (See other articles on website) When consumerism takes into account the damage to the environment, by avoiding the use of environmentally damaging products it can be a powerful force in reducing the damage caused by the greedy consumer.

Conclusion

The greedy consumer may provide economic benefits but these are far outweighed by the harm caused to other people and the environment. When considering the issue we need to take into consideration the benefit of consumerism, against the action of the greedy consumer that does harm. The concept of stewardship seeks to bring balance to the problems, by encouraging a desire to protect the environment and a greed for sustainable products that do not damage the natural environment. While the greedy consumer can have a very negative impact on the environment, not all consumerism and consumption can be regarded as a threat to the environment. In fact consumerism could, given the right stimulation, help protect the natural environment. Environmental Ethics face the challenge of how to highlight and discourage the greedy consumer from wanting products that damage the environment to encouraging ethical consumer practice.

End

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