

THE FOUR GOOD REASONS FOR LIMITING CONSUMPTION: A PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVE

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In keeping with the general direction of Mark Sagoff's essay, this paper will sketch the outlines of a pragmatist's way of thinking about his "four good reasons" for limiting consumption, reasons which involve, respectively, the issues of 1) fairness, 2) diversity, 3) happiness, and 4) the intrinsic glory of nature. This pragmatic perspective can offer a useful normative frame for some of the paths he wants to take, although it may at times lead in directions he would not want to follow. And, the best place to begin is with the issue of diversity.

The problem in the area of diversity arises from the fact that over-consumption is leading in two directions, neither of which is viable. Much of the world's cultural diversity is being destroyed through global assimilation. At the same time, and as a counter to this, ethnic, tribal, and other cultural groups are militantly defining themselves in opposition to this threat of assimilation. As Sagoff well encapsulates the dilemma, neither assimilation nor the militant opposition to market forces offers a plausible path to cultural survival

Any normative frame for avoiding the extremes of tribalism or globalism must definitively reject the long history of atomic individualism which offers the choice between the collective homogeneous whole at the expense of the individual or the individual at the expense of the collective whole. In this case the atomic unit is the individual "tribe" with its own unique traditions and meanings on the one hand, and the collective whole is the uniformity of the globalism of market forces on the other. What is needed is a global community, and the engulfment of diverse cultures by globalism, no more than isolationist tribalism, can produce a true global community. There is needed a new concept of community which undercuts these alternatives and offers a useful normative framework for understanding the nature of a global community toward which to strive.

The pragmatic understanding of community has its roots in its unique understanding of the relational nature of the self, an understanding which denies the atomistic view that gives rise to the extremes of both an individualism which ignores the whole and a collectivism which trivializes the individual. To have a self is to have a particular type of ability, the ability to be aware of one's behavior as part of the social process of adjustment, as an acting agent within the context of other acting agents. The origins and foundation of the self are

social or intersubjective. In incorporating the perspective of, taking the attitude of, or taking the role of the other, the developing self comes to take the perspective of others as a complex, interrelated whole, and in this way comes to incorporate the standards and authority of the group or “general other” as an organization or system of attitudes and responses. This is the passive dimension to the self, the dimension structured by role taking. Yet, in responding to the perspective of the other, the individual responds as a unique center of creative activity. Any self incorporates, by its very nature, both the conformity of the group perspective or group attitudes and the creativity of its unique individual perspective.

These bi-polar dynamics of creativity and conformity operative within the self are analogously operative in the dynamic structure of community. A community is constituted by the ongoing process of adjustment or accommodation between the individual, creative novel perspective and the conforming group perspective, and in the ongoing course of adjustment it develops its own organs for control of the process. The individual, then, is not an atomic building block of community but represents the creative pole within the ongoing dynamics of community. And thus, the individual can be contrasted with the general other, but not with community.

Because of the inseparable interaction of the two poles within community, individual goals cannot be adequately pursued apart from the vision of the functioning of the whole, but neither can goals for “the whole” be pursued by ignoring consequences for individuals affected. Moreover, the adjustment of perspectives through rational reconstruction requires not an imposition from “on high” but a deepening to a more fundamental level of human rapport. Indeed, while experience arises from specific, concrete contexts shaped by a particular tradition, this is not mere inculcation, for the deepening process offers the openness for breaking through and, evaluating one’s own stance. It allows us to grasp different contexts, to take the perspective of “the other,” to participate in dialogue with “the other.” Such a deepening does not negate the use of intelligent inquiry, but rather opens it up, frees it from the products of its past in terms of rigidities and abstractions, and focuses it on the dynamics of concrete human existence. The ability to incorporate the perspective of the other, not as something alien but as something sympathetically understood, constitutes growth of the self and growth of community.

The above dynamics are the same whether understood as dynamics within the individual person, between the individual person and the general other of a localized community, or between the unique individual indigenous culture and the other of a global market economy. These are the dynamics constitutive of community, be it a local community or a global community. It has been seen that “the whole” is not the common other as some collectivity which absorbs the individual, but rather the whole is community, and its growth depends upon a proper balance between the two poles of novelty and conformity and the ongoing adjustment between them. Thus, authentic community does not deny but rather requires pluralism.

This understanding of community provides a moral defense of the diversity of cultures, and of the need to at once aid a culture which is rooted in poverty while yet allowing for and learning from the meanings which inform its life. Thus, this view also provides a moral frame for the first issue Sagoff presents, the problem of the distribution of wealth. A global community not only allows for but requires the vitality and ongoing development of all of its creative poles. Moreover, because growth of self requires ever widening appropriation of the perspective of the other through deepening attunement, concern for the other through some sort of distribution of wealth gains moral footing not merely as an externally imposed necessary infringement on the self but as something sympathetically understood and expansive of oneself.

The ongoing adjustment between the dynamic poles of uniqueness and conformity within community allows for both growth of the individual and growth of community. From the pragmatic perspective, growth cannot be understood in terms of mere accumulation or mere increase. Rather growth involves the ongoing reconstruction of experience to bring about the integration and expansion of contexts with which selfhood is intertwined. Concrete growth is a process *by* which humans achieve fuller, richer, more inclusive, and more complex interactions with the multiple environments in which they are relationally embedded. This requires a deepening attunement to the fullness of existence in its concreteness, to its qualitative richness and value-laden contexts. In this way, growth is best understood as an increase in the moral-esthetic richness of experience.

This leads to Sagoff's third point, that we do not experience greater happiness when rising incomes enable us to buy more things once basic needs are met. Here he brings in the distinction between the physical limits of economic growth versus its moral purpose. This moral purpose is of course crucial. However, economic growth seems to be presented as something too external to its moral purpose—two separate factors that must be brought together. This perhaps stands the relation on its head.

From the pragmatic perspective, economic growth is, an abstraction from a concrete situation, and when it stifles rather than furthers concrete growth, this indicates it is an abstraction which has been severed from the concrete reality in which it has its being and to which it is answerable. This is a fallacy similar to that operative in the modern world view understanding of a quantified nature as having an ontological independence from the qualitatively rich, value laden concrete reality it is intended to explain. Indeed, the separation of economic growth from its moral soil is a remnant of the fact-value distinction rooted in the dichotomies of that era. The moral purpose of the economic system is embedded in its nature as a dimension of ongoing concrete growth.

Sagoff asks, "how good are goods?". That is a question that can only be answered in concrete contexts for goods—economic goods—are only as good as their contribution to the enrichment of concrete human existence, and this always occurs in specific concrete situations. Wealth can enslave or offer further opportunities for ongoing growth. Sagoff provides telling instances of the former

case, but there are also many instances of the latter. Too often increased consumption serves as a desperate substitute for the loss of the felt value dimension of existence, but it can also offer possibilities for enhanced attunement to the esthetic-moral richness of concrete existence.

This focus on ongoing concrete growth leads to Sagoff's final point, the loss of the intrinsic glory of nature. This is framed in terms of what he sees the fundamental choice of environmental policy: whether our relation to nature is ethical or economic, whether we will see nature as having instrumental value or intrinsic value. The pragmatic answer is that our relation to nature is at once moral and economic. The protection of the environment and the enhancement of quality of life are inextricably joined through the esthetic-moral nature of concrete growth as involving the ongoing integration and expansion of concrete contexts in their qualitative richness. Human development is ecologically connected with its biological as well as its cultural world. The deepening and expansion of perspective to include ever widening horizons must extend beyond the cultural to the natural world with which we are inseparably intertwined. And, this concrete intertwining involves economic dimensions as part and parcel of its moral nature.

Further, from the pragmatic perspective, the entire debate concerning instrumental vs. intrinsic value is wrong-headed from the start. Everything that can conceivably enter into experience has the potential for being a relational aspect of the context within which value emerges, and any value, as well as any aspect of the context within which it emerges, involves consequences and is therefore instrumental in bringing about something further. There is an ongoing continuity in which the character of the means enters into the quality of the end, which in turn becomes a means to something further. Moreover, interaction is an indivisible whole, and it is only within such an interactional context that experience and its qualities function. The intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy is again a remnant of the fact-value distinction rooted in the illicit reification of abstractions which dominated the modern world view.

An answer to environmental problems is not going to be found in a forced choice between traditional alternatives but in a recognition of the way in which these traditional alternatives distort the very nature of the concrete reality they must ultimately serve. This recognition requires a clear rejection of the modern world view with its separation of facts and values, instrumental goods and intrinsic goods, its atomic individualism and fascination with the products of quantification, its resulting understanding of growth as the quantifiable accumulation of individual things and, what underlies it all, its persistence in giving independent status to discriminable dimensions of concrete human existence, resulting in the need for us to ceaselessly engage in destructive choices among false alternatives or in the futile endeavor of trying to put together that which a long philosophical tradition has illicitly pulled asunder in the first place. The above discussion has attempted to provide a sketch of the way in the which the normative frame offered by pragmatic philosophy provides a viable pathway out of this quagmire.

Notes

1. By pragmatism in this essay is intended classical American pragmatism, that movement incorporating the writings of its five major contributors, Charles Peirce, William James, John Dewey, G. H. Mead, and C. I. Lewis. That these philosophers provide a unified perspective is assumed in this essay, but this claim is defended at some length in my book, *Speculative Pragmatism* (Amherst, Mass.: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1986). Paperback edition, (Peru, Ill.: Open Court Publishing Co., 1990.)

2. Within pragmatism, the self is not only relational in that it is inherently related to the cultural/human community, but also in that it is inherently related to the body; not the body that I “have, but the body that I “am.” Distinctively human traits such as mind, thinking, and selfhood are emergent characteristics of nature and part and parcel of its richness. They refer to ways in which the lived body behaves. Just as the self is essentially intertwined with other selves, so it is essentially intertwined with the body; it is a body-self which is “located,” if one speaks of location, throughout the biological organism with its reflexive ability as this emerges from and opens onto the relational contexts in which it functions.