Self-interest, Altruism and the Consumer
framing the consumer in consumption ethics

Greed and care

Business Strategist, Tim Devinney (2010, p. 4):

“the ethical consumer is little more than a myth that belies the reality of individual behaviour”

Geographers, Clive Barnett et al. (2011, p. 201):

see people (as consumers) as exhibiting “existing dispositions of care, concern and solidarity” that can be mobilised through ‘new’ social movements.

“Self-interest is assumed to dominate all other motives.”

Anthropologist, Daniel Miller (2009, p. 300):

with few exceptions, sees his participants exhibiting “love and care in families” and occasionally caring for people beyond.
Psychologist, John Thøgersen (1999):
We must engage peoples' altruism to ensure they continue their good (consumer) practices.

Philosopher, Kate Soper (2008):
We must engage peoples' self-interest in an utopian environment otherwise they will not respond.
Within what context should we understand these seemingly considerable differences?

Socio-political: the differing views of human nature are the result of competing political ideas?

Methodological: theoretical and survey studies presuppose self-interested representations, ethnographic studies tend towards representations of care?

Disciplines: are they merely disciplinary differences?

Evolutionary psychology: human nature is so complex that it allows different accounts in different contexts?
Carol Scott’s (1977), ‘Modifying socially-conscious behavior: the foot-in-the-door technique’.

Carolyn Strong’s (1997), ‘The problems of translating fair trade principles into consumer purchase behaviour’.

Marylyn Carrigan et al.’s (2004), ‘An interpretive study for the potential for the ethical consumption within the older market’.

Terrence Witkowski’s (2005), ‘Fair trade marketing: an alternative system for globalization and development’.
What potential is there in human nature for changed behaviour (via social marketing)?

Economist, Gary Becker (date, p. 5):

“preferences are assumed not to change substantially over time.”
Marketing theorist, Andreas Chatzidakis (2012 p. 509): “[S]pace/place acts as a destination and as a form of supportive environment or ‘social capital’ that allows similar initiatives and movements to emerge.”

Marketing theorist, Caroline Bekin et al. (2005 p. 242): “The findings suggest that for some the choice to simplify and join communities seems to have reinstated the enjoyment of life. This, however, has not come without trade-offs, with mobility remaining one of the biggest challenges to the attainment of environmental goals.”
Historian, Edward Thompson (1971): traditional 'moral economy' in the UK was changed to a market economy based on self-interest; 1780 to 1832.

Buddhist Theologen, Richard Payne (2010, p. 50-51): reports that in Thailand, Buddhist teachings on contentment were suppressed in the 1960s during the country’s transition to a global consumer economy.

Sociologist, Don Slater (1997, p. 10): during the 1980s the Thatcher administration in the UK, legitimised “unabashedly self-interest” consumption.
Historian, Nayanjot Lahiri (2015): Aśoka in ancient India issued 33 edicts towards a more compassionate life.

Tells us that a number of locations are adopting 'new criteria of prosperity' that include measures of cooperation, voluntary work that might surrogate for altruism: Bhutan, Costa Rica, Brazil, Japan and Alberta.
Is altruism fixed and in short supply (as some economists believe) or variable when fostered or discouraged?

How should we understand human nature and behaviour during these times of 'social engineering'?

To what extent does consumption change during periods of social engineering?
Philosopher, Mary Midgley (1996, see argument pp. 97-99) The Ethical Primate:

In her critique of behaviourism she asks how “would environmental pressure so affect Skinner, or his opponents, as to produce passages of prose like this without any mediating processes in their minds?”

The Midgley Test¹

Can the proposed theory of human behaviour account for the author's behaviour?
Philosopher, Mary Midgley (1996, p. 3):

“Our moral freedom is not something biologically bizarre. No denial of the reality of ethics, nothing offensive to its dignity, follows from accepting our evolutionary origin. To the contrary, human moral capacities are just what could be expected to evolve when a highly social creature becomes intelligent enough to become aware of profound conflicts among its motives.”

**The Midgley Test**

Is the proposed theory of human behaviour consistent with an evolved primate?

“How selfish so ever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interests him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him.”

“[H]ow disagreeable does he appear to be, whose hard and obdurate heart feels for himself only, but is altogether insensible to the happiness or misery of others!”
Philosopher, Adam Smith (2006[1759], p. 60 and p. 20):

“[W]e may generally expect a considerable degree of virtue: and, fortunately for the good morals of society, these are the situations of by far the greater part of [hu]mankind.”

“[T]o restrain our selfish, and to indulge our benevolent, affections, constitutes the perfection of human nature.”
The consumption ethics research has developed sufficiently to be more reflexive.

We should be more explicit about our understanding of human nature.

We should not subscribe to theories that fail the Midgley tests.

This area is necessarily interdisciplinary and we should collaborate to research and publish.


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