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**Understanding Consumer Moral Consciousness**

**Abstract**

The issue driving this paper is “*Why don’t people, in their consumer role, have a well developed moral conscience?*” To address this compelling question, the paper explores the moral consciousness of consumption behaviour (or lack thereof). The first part of the paper provides brief overviews of: moral consciousness applied to consumption, the essence of morality and ethics, four facets of the field of ethics, two moral development models and the affective domain of learning. The intent is to prepare the reader for a discussion of an approach to understanding the moral consciousness of consumption that integrates particular concepts drawn from the theory of ethics and morality with the moral development models and the affective domain of learning.

**Keywords:** consumer, moral conscience, moral development, affective learning, ethics, morality, consumption

The issue driving this paper is “*Why don’t people, in their consumer role, have a well developed moral conscience?*” To answer the question, one must deal with moral character development, ethics and morality because they help us understand moral consciousness. Ethics refers to the quality of one’s inner character or to one’s moral philosophy of what is right and wrong behaviour. Conversely, unethical means lacking scruples or principles or to ruthlessly seek a personal advantage. Morality pertains to the rightness or wrongness of behaviour gauged against some agreed to standard of conduct.<sup>1</sup> Immoral means the behaviour is wrong, reprehensible (so objectionable as to elicit strong disapproval, even contempt) and bad, bad because the immoral action is below a standard of acceptable quality and causes harm or injury.

While evidence of unethical consumption has been with us for too long, the label of “ethical consumerism” has been with us for about 15 years (Harrison, 1997). The notion of certain forms of consumption being immoral is a more recent mental image. The labels unethical and immoral conjure up different pictures in people’s minds, with unethical referring to unprincipled consumption and immoral referring to contemptible consumption. It is the latter that is the focus of this paper. Some may be interested in a very new book on ethical consumption (Harrison, Newholm & Shaw, 2005).

**Moral Consciousness Applied to Consumption**

McGregor (2003a,b) emphatically states that much of “Northern” consumer behaviour is

unethical and immoral because it frequently impacts negatively on the next generation, those living elsewhere, those not yet born, and the environment. She claims this immorality happens because a sense of entitlement gives consumers the perceived moral high ground at the same time that they experience a declining sense of personal responsibility. The inflated ideas of entitlements are deeply embedded in our collective psyche. Grounded in a sense of privilege, self-importance and entitlement, people continue to realize their relative prosperity on the backs of prisoners, slaves, and women and child sweatshop labourers. This situation can be perpetuated because people are often ignorant of their real connections and interdependence.

McGregor (2003a,b) suggests that this immoral consumption is reflected in a collection of consumer actions: buying goods produced using slave, prison, sweatshop and child labour, without compunction; remorselessly buying products produced using non-renewable raw resources; and refusing to acknowledge that one's consumption behaviour is tantamount to exploiting, using, abusing and discarding people and elements of the ecosystem. These actions are immoral because they impinge on the safety, health, welfare and well-being of other humans and species. She strengthens this argument by suggesting that consumerism is a source of structural violence. Because the violence perpetuated on self, others and the environment, through consumption, is invisible, we are not conscious or aware of it. She concludes that consumers need to develop a moral conscience as they engage in the marketplace.

### **What is moral consciousness?**

What is moral consciousness? Tucker (1994) sheds very interesting light on this concept. He explains that "when we can see into the complexity of a situation, look with penetrating insight into all of the possibilities, understand the true impact of each possible action, then we are using moral consciousness" (p.1). He has just described a heightened awareness where people choose consciously, rather than instinctively or habitually. Hand-in-hand with moral consciousness is a sense of connectedness, an awareness that everyone and everything are linked together and that one has to continuously rise above a personal sense of self. Moral consciousness refers to the power of choice. People can choose to reject responding automatically to a situation and elect to be acutely aware of the mix of right and wrong, of good and bad in everything and of the many possible responses to a situation. Being conscious of the moral quality of one's choices is an important part of one's life that, once gained, can never be lost.

The moral nature of consumption decisions is clear. If we enter into each transaction being conscious of the impact of the choice we make, we will be less likely to make immoral decisions. If we see everything as connected, we can no longer dismiss the potential negative impact of buying or not buying something. If we approach each buying situation knowing both our side and the others' sides, then it is harder to ignore the insights we get from examining the consumer choice from a moral imperative. That is, we would be incapable of dispensing with the truth revealed when we bring our conscience to bear on the decisions and choices made as a consumer. We would have to engage the moral imperative as we decide what signifies quality, the common good or sustainability of a product or service.

### **The Essence of Morality and Ethics**

If we are examining consumer moral consciousness, we must explore the notions of morality and ethics. Morality deals with right or wrong, the good or bad of an action or motive. Arcus (1999) provides a useful discussion of the nature of morality, explaining that it is concerned with our character (what kind of people we are) and how we conduct ourselves with

others. Also, morality is focused on those acts likely to have helpful or harmful effects on the lives of humans in the long term. It poses the question, “how ought we to live and to treat others?” She explains that it is not enough to *care* about others or to *judge* a moral situation using objective criteria unless one is able and willing to take *action*. Caring, judging and acting are intricately linked processes.

Arcus (1999) notes that morality is a social enterprise meaning it serves the function of guiding the conduct of members of that society. She then provides a useful distinction between two kinds of social enterprises. Just because something is the custom, the law or set out by a religion (the first kind of social enterprise) does not make it morally right (the second social enterprise). In any society, morality can be used as a way to judge the entrenched customs, laws or religious practices on the ground of fairness, justice, and rightness. Wearing the moral hat, we ask how we ought to treat people, not how we actually treat people, so the treatment does not harm them or create injustices.

Arcus (1999) adds another dimension to help us understand morality, that of values. She explains that moral values are different than social, religious, cultural, or prudential values. The latter values apply to *each person* who belongs to a particular social group or religious/spiritual group, as they are culturally or personally held values. Moral values pertain to the “good for all members of society” or the common good, regardless of other affiliations. When it comes to the crunch, personal or other values must give way to social morality. The good of everyone must come before the good of any one person. The “good for all” idea embraces five basic principles: justice as fairness, non-maleficence, beneficence, freedom and honesty. Respectively, we will not discriminate; not harm anyone; we will consider the interests of others as they meet their basic needs; we will not interfere with others unless it is morally justified; and, we will not deceive others. Each consumer decision is a principled decision with ethical implications. Ethical consumer conduct can be seen in terms of: (a) personal fulfillment, happiness, pleasure, and the pursuit of “the good life” or (b) obligations to, and respect for, others and established norms of what is right (Rohmann, 1999). The former conduct can lead to immoral consumption and the latter to moral consumption. This is the ethical quagmire.

To help us navigate this ethical quagmire, we can turn to the field of ethics, a branch of philosophy that studies moral principles and behaviour and the nature of “good.” Socrates explained that there is a difference between goods, which are morally neutral, and us using the goods properly to produce “the Good.” This action is the juncture where ethics are essential. In philosophical traditions, ethics stems from the Greek word *ethos*, a very broad term that speaks of a way-of-being. People in a given society have a particular way of living well with others. Ethos refers to the way that *all* creatures co-dwell in ethical, cosmic harmony and that has a particular name - *daimon*, well-spirited. *Daimon* also refers to something akin to one’s inner directions, one’s inner voice that is truer to us than we are to it (Snyder, 2003). So, if people do not act well-spirited as they use goods (income, wealth, skills, etc) to make “the Good,” they are acting unethically. Indeed, ethics is defined as the moral quality of our customs or character and our courses of action, conduct or behaviour. Morals refer to the social rules of a particular society and refer to the traditional notions of good and evil that are passed down (personal communication, Dr. Wendy Hamblet, April, 2004; Rohmann, 1999). This paper stretches this argument to suggest that the rules of a *consumer society* are immoral. And, if ethos means well-spirited and living well together with others, then those living in a consumer society are not well-

spirited.

When Aristotle said the goal of a good life was to *live well and be happy*, he had something else in mind instead of what subsequent generations have ascribed to this idea. In a consumer society, it is assumed consumers are *happy* when they are living the *good life*, taken to mean that material wealth, accumulation and status are high. Of relevance to this paper is Aristotle's notion that *happiness* is a holistic way of existing, a complete and healthy way of living in which one is in touch with the purpose of life itself and achieving a satisfying sense of purpose, day in and day out. This type of happiness is not an emotional state that comes and goes with the situation. It lasts and abides all situations, happy or sad, and helps us stay the course of our life. It is not fleeting and does not need continual fixes to maintain the high (Snyder, 2003). Imagine if consumers embraced this notion of happiness instead of the quick fixes sought through consuming material goods? Imagine if consumers focused less on using goods as a *means* to get another good (income to buy a car to attain status to have a feeling of belonging) and focused more on intrinsic goods, end states that are wanted because of what life is like when we have them, with the ultimate end state being Aristotle's notion of happiness. But, consumers tend not to have this focus. So, we have an ethical problem at the core of our consumer society. We have a moral issue to grapple with if we wish to live in a society that is *well-spirited*, in such a way that our inner voice is one of integrity - moral consciousness.

#### **Four Facets of the Field of Ethics**

To address this ethical and moral issue in our consumer society, we can turn to the field of ethics. To examine the relationship between morals and ethics, the discipline of ethics has evolved along four different strands: metaethics, normative ethics, descriptive ethics, and applied ethics. Respectively, they each deal with the following overarching questions: (a) where do a society's ethical principles and belief systems *come from* and what *motivates* people to be moral; (b) how do we arrive at the standards to use to determine how we *should act*; (c) what do people *actually believe* is morally correct as reflected in codes of practice, et cetera; and, (d) how do we *solve* moral problems? Each of these four strands of this branch of philosophy will be discussed briefly, prior to examining two models of the stages of moral development and the affective domain of learning (entrenchment of a new value system).

#### **Metaethics**

Metaethics deals with the query, "where did our fundamental, ethical principles come from"? Those interested in metaethics are eager to find out the history of the usage and foundations of a society's concepts such as right and wrong, good and bad. They are intrigued with the role of ethics in people's daily life, with how particular ethical systems came into existence and how valid these systems are (Rohmann, 1999). Whenever a moral system is created, it is based upon certain premises about reality, human nature, values, etc. Metaethics is all about questioning the validity of premises. This particular strand of ethics has been dominated by five kinds of theories, making it difficult to provide a clear explanation of this branch of ethics. For instance, (a) while some theorists believe that people intuitively know what is right or wrong, that we have some innate sense, (b) others believe that we gain moral knowledge through scientific experiments. (c) Some believe that what is morally right is what is approved by a society, (d) and others claim that what is morally right is an expression of people's emotions. Finally, (e) some theorists are skeptical, believing that all statements of what is right or wrong are false because there is no such thing as a statement free from bias (objective)

(Wikipedia, 2004).

Also, Fieser (2003) tells us that metaethics can be concerned with whether morality exists independent of being human and from that which motivates us to be moral. Put simply, do morals come from the universe and apply to everyone or are they relative? If relative, do individuals create their own morals or do they adhere to those created by society? If universal in nature, they are constant and do not change. If relative, morals change from society to society, over time, across generations and around the world. How one answers this question greatly affects how one answers the fundamental question of metaethics - where did our morals come from? Second is the question of "what motivates us to be moral?" Answers to this question come from three camps. Either we (a) act in self interest or to help others; (b) reach moral assessments using either emotions or reason; or, (c) perceive morality differently depending on our gender, with women embracing a morality of care and relationships and men embracing a morality of rights and justice. Again, answers to this metaethical question truly affect how we answer what motivates us to be moral in the first place?

### **Normative ethics**

Normative ethics is concerned with theorizing about what the people *should* believe to be right or wrong, rather than understanding how these beliefs came to be (metaethics). Normative ethics is focused on the fact that something is wrong. *Why* it is wrong is someone else's concern. It involves determining how we arrive at moral standards that regulate right and wrong behaviour in society (Wikipedia, 2004). These standards could be a set of: (a) good habits, (b) duties one should follow, or (c) consequences for bad behaviour. This type of ethics is interested in determining the content of our moral behaviour and seeks to provide guidelines to "what *ought* we to do?" There are three interesting normative theories of how to determine specific courses of moral action. First, people will develop good habits of character and then make sure that all actions live up to this set of rules - they will acquire virtues that regulate their emotions, ensuring they do not fall prey to their vices or bad character traits. These virtues are grounded in, and emerge from within, social traditions and are taught through moral or character education. There is a huge resurgence of this type of normative ethics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Fieser, 2003).

Second, is the sense of moral duty - that we all have clear responsibilities and obligations as human beings, obligations to fulfil regardless of the consequences that might follow our actions. There are four interesting theories that try to explain what duties we are obligated to fulfil. First, the notion of duties to God, self and others embraces, among other things, the duty to do no wrong to others, to treat people as equals, to keep one's promise, and not to harm oneself (including one's soul) or others. A second theory is the familiar rights and responsibility corollary. The third theory is called the categorical imperative. It is imperative (obligation imposed by someone) that one act in a certain way, irrespective of one's personal wants or needs. Categorical means that the duty is clearly, fully and emphatically expressed, so there is no doubt. One major duty is to not use people, or oneself, to get what one wants. Instead, one has a duty to recognize the inherent value in every person - this is the single principle or "prime directive." Finally, one can employ the principle that, in any particular situation, one will intuitively know which of two duties is one's *actual* (undeniable) ethical option (one's duty) and which has to take second place in those circumstances (Fieser, 2003).

The final type of normative ethics is consequentialist. We reach our decision to determine moral responsibility by weighing the consequences of our actions. An action is morally right if

the consequences of that action are more favorable than unfavorable. This approach to judging ethical behaviour appeals to experience with the impact of consequences on people rather than intuition or a long list of duties and virtues. When applying this approach, one can assess the favorableness of the consequences on either of: (a) the agent performing the ethical assessment (ethical ego), (b) everyone but the agent (altruistic), or (c) everyone (Fieser, 2003).

Vance (1995) adds another interesting dimension to the notion of normative ethics. He suggests that normative ethics can be further sub-divided into two subgroups: moral common sense and critical thinking. The moral common sense is a system of ethical values or rules of thumbs which guide decision making. Critical thinking is a process used to search for criteria that justify the inclusion or exclusion of more rules of thumbs in a person's *ethical value system*. Indeed, Josephson (2002) clarifies that one's ethical value system relates directly to what is right and wrong, to one's sense of moral duty, while non-ethical values refer to things one likes, desires, or finds personally important. These values are ethically neutral. Most people have personal convictions about what is right and wrong (based on religion, culture, family, etc) but these values are not ethical values because they can vary over time, among cultures and even within the same society; that is, they are not universal values as are trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship. He makes a very important point when he says that "the pursuit of nonethical objectives is normal and appropriate so long as ethical values are not sacrificed in the process" (p.3). This sacrifice is common in a consumer society, leading to many moral problems requiring applied ethics.

### **Descriptive Ethics**

Descriptive ethics, the type of ethics we are likely most familiar with in our home economics practice, involves determining what the population or society *actually believes* to be right and wrong, rather than what it should believe (normative ethics). It entails: (a) studying the codes of conduct developed by professional associations to regulate the conduct of its members, (b) describing how people behave and/or what sorts of moral standards they *claim* to follow, and (c) describing how a person's conscience develops ("Descriptive ethics," 2002). Descriptive ethics is not designed to provide guidance for people when making moral decisions, nor to evaluate the reasonableness of moral norms. Instead, it serves to describe how people behave and/or what sorts of moral standards they claim to follow.

### **Applied Ethics**

Finally, applied ethics comes into play in our daily practice and is concerned with examining specific controversial issues or circumstances with the intent of trying to resolve the issue. It attempts to deal with specific realms of human action and to craft ideas for how to deal with issues that may arise within these realms, issues including human rights, animal rights, and environmental concerns (Cavalier, 2002; Fieser, 2003; Whitbeck, 1998), all dimensions of consumer decisions. There are three different players who are active in the field of applied ethics: the moral critic (critical spectator), the moral judge and lawmaker, and the moral agent. They differ on how engaged they are with the process and outcome and with the type of reasoning each employ to reach their moral stance (Whitbeck).

The moral critic is a spectator who is concerned with developing and employing moral and ethical principles to evaluate what someone has done, but is removed from any moral responsibility. This spectator is engaged in an intellectual game without practical consequences. The judgements they make, after weighing alternatives, have no effect on those they judged.

Their role has evolved into one of observation rather than moral engagement with the people or the situation. They are the ideal moral observer, working in the world outside of the “real world situation,” looking for the qualities and relations which correspond with moral statements of right and wrong and good and bad. They consider matters in the abstract (removed from reality) and carry no responsibility or accountability (Whitbeck, 1998).

Second, are moral judges and lawmakers are engaged in the process of evaluating what someone has done and making an oral or written judgement to the courts. Just like the critical spectator, they weigh alternatives and evaluate courses of action and motives. In addition, they must come to a judgement suited to a particular situation. But, they do not come up with a plan of action to resolve the controversial issue. They have responsibilities to fulfil, but not to the people affected by their judgement. Instead, they have to *be just* in their judgements - *that* is their responsibility. They bear the moral responsibility to try to be free from bias, be impartial, equitable, fair, consistent, appropriate and far-sighted as they create laws and pass judgements in courts of law. As well, the written and oral arguments from an actual judge are useful because they can help clarify moral standards in a society (Whitbeck, 1998).

Finally, there are moral agents - with an example being family and consumer scientists and home economists. They are active in their field of practice, encountering situations with moral overtones. As moral agents, they have the onerous responsibilities of evaluating people’s motives for what they did, evaluating alternatives, and foremostly, devising a response to the moral situation or problem, implementing it and being accountable for their actions. It is called a moral problem because the well-being of human beings is at stake (Arcus, 1999).

Problems arise in life and work all the time. But, until the welfare and well-being of humans comes into play, they do assume a moral dimension (Arcus, 1999; Whitbeck, 1998). A problem is any situation that presents difficulty, uncertainty or perplexity. A *moral* problem exists when what is presented to a person contradicts what they have learned as right or wrong. “Sometimes, when all of the factual and conceptual issues are settled, there is still uncertainty about what ought to be done or decided. In this case, there is a moral problem in the fullest sense of the term; that is, there is disagreement or uncertainty about the moral evaluation of the person or action” (Harris, Pritchard, & Rabins, 2000, p. 57). When there is a clash of values, there is an ethical dimension to the problem.

When responding to a moral problem, the agent (e.g., a home economics practitioner) can take two different approaches. First, they can employ analytical reasoning and assume that the problem can be treated as a multiple choice problem and make a choice from among alternate pre-determined options or, second, they can employ synthetic reasoning, rejecting the notion of an ethical dilemma, and devise a course of action for the *multilemma* (a situation in which it is difficult to determine what to do)<sup>1</sup>. People tend to opt for the first approach when they want to be

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<sup>1</sup>The term “multilemma” was inspired from Whitbeck’s (1998) challenge of the use of ethical dilemma. She suggested the term *trilemma* to convey the idea that a moral agent can approach an ethical situation and not assume that there are only two courses of action, both unfavorable - like the term “between a rock and a hard place.” Dealing with this dilemma is often referred to as “taking the bull by the horns” in reference to the battle inherent in the choice between one of two choices. Yet, assuming that there are only two or three possible responses

certain. Their decisions are then technical in nature, replying on a list of principles, values and virtues. They may even take sides with someone, assuming that the problem is a conflict situation. This approach (a) ignores the reality that complex moral problems are often matters of moral responsibility, and (b) reinforces the tendency to represent moral problems as dilemmas involving a forced choice instead of problem with many possible solutions.

When opting for the second approach, people will employ synthesis reasoning to deal with multilemmas. This reasoning finds synergy among morally relevant factors (facts, opinions, values and perspectives). People take this approach so they can devise a response that understands the moral implications of *many* choices, rather than a dilemma. Their moral reasoning is anything but technical in nature. These agents (practitioners) have a moral responsibility to appreciate that the situation can be interpreted from many perspectives and that there is no certainty. From this understanding, they employ a deliberative process, rather than choosing from a predetermined menu of options. They devise a good response, not by taking sides but, by considering as many relevant factors as possible. Then, they formulate a reasoned response that suits as many people, as well as possible, knowing that no one is totally satisfied. They use their technical criteria, as well as skills, understandings and practical wisdom, to devise a solution to the moral problem. The process of *devising* a solution is employed instead of *determining* a solution because it implies a strategic process when formulating a reply instead of just making a forced choice from a list of options. When faced with a moral problem, the agent's responsibilities are to take into account all the relevant factors and the mental processes involved in deciding which alternatives to consider and what are morally relevant (Whitbeck, 1998). Arcus (1999) notes that this consideration also involves learning how to judge, learning how to care and appreciating that thinking and caring are interlocking skills rather than opposing skills. As well, these moral agents will learn that there is a moral point of view that goes beyond their personal preferences, challenging them to not take sides but to remain open to many moral interpretations.

### **Moral Development Models**

There are three kinds of moral consciousness, namely, good, bad or neutral. A good moral conscience has its roots in goodwill, love and wisdom. A bad moral conscience has its roots in greed, anger, hatred and delusion (an erroneous perception of ones reality). The changing of an immoral to moral consciousness comes when the mind, after mental development, uses wisdom to change the moral direction of consciousness. This change in direction forms the pattern of all development, bringing into play mindfulness diligence and wisdom (Min,1993).

Whereas the previous section set out the four main strands of thinking within the branch of philosophy called ethics, it did not deal with how people develop a moral conscience. In this section, we will explore how a person's conscience develops, and how rigorous one's ethical beliefs are, according to different models of moral development. Interestingly, conscience is always defined in terms of decency and grace, dignity and honor and as conformity to recognized standards. This discussion assumes that a consumer's place (stage) in the process of

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(chose one) discourages the attempt to devise better alternatives; hence, the term multilemma, multi, Greek for "*many*" and lemma, Greek for "*to take*."

developing a moral conscience affects their propensity to take moral decisions in the marketplace. Bringing this notion to understand consumer behaviour is a very intriguing exercise. To that end, Kohlberg (1981) and Gilligan's (1982) models of moral development will be discussed, followed by a brief discussion of the affective domain of learning (Bloom, Mesia & Krathwhol, 1964). All three approaches are well recognized, used widely and can inform this discussion of moral consciousness in consumption behaviour.

### **Kohlberg's Model of Moral Development**

Kohlberg's (1981) levels of moral development range from shallow and concerned with what others think to deep levels concerned with how one's actions affect others. He suggests that people reach a certain level at which they consistently reason, and that they move through the levels, two stages at a time as they age: pre-conventional (ages 1-9), conventional (9-20) and post-conventional (20+). They have a different social orientation at each level. The following text sets out each of the three levels and respective two stages:

- **Level one Pre-conventional** (sense of moral rightness that exists before someone accepts society's norms and *conventions* of right and wrong - individual avoids pain and seeks pleasure)

*Stage one* - People do things because they are told to and because they do not want the consequences or punishment if they do not obey. They try to stay out of trouble and their motivation to act is anticipation of pleasure or pain.

*Stage two* - The individual does something because it is in their best interest. People are concerned with fair exchanges and will give if they know they are getting something in return. They know they risk punishment but they make concessions only as necessary to satisfy their own needs. They will do what is necessary and value people in terms of how much they can help get what they want.

- **Level two - Conventional** (sense of moral rightness is found in acceptance of rules and standards of the group)

*Stage three* - Orientation shifts from pleasing self to pleasing and helping others but the *intent* is to gain the approval of others (not altruistic). "Everyone else is doing it" is the new motto. Individual vengeance is not allowed but collective retribution for a wrong against the group is alright. Punishment is accepted if someone has strayed from the group norms. What is *morally right* is anything that conforms to what is expected by one's peers or society. Good and right behaviour is that which maintains good interpersonal relationships (remember those at this stage are usually teenagers) and positive inner feelings such as love, empathy, trust and friendship. This stage of moral development is intensely focused on two-person relationships as with friends or family members.

*Stage four* - What is morally right shifts from what peer's expect to a new respect for formal rules, laws and authority - what is necessary to keep order in society. Concern is now for society as a whole. This concern is evidenced by obeying the laws, demanding punishment for those who do not, justice for those who are harmed. These conventions keep society running and functioning smoothly. Authority figures are seldom questioned because they ensure consistency and set precedents that provide order.

- **Level three - Post-conventional**

*Stage five* - Instead of blindly adhering to rules and laws specific to an orderly society, at this stage, people begin to question “what is a good society” and what society *should* look like so that the welfare of everyone is met. An individual is born with rights and the society they live in should not be able to infringe on those rights. In fact, society should protect these rights. Each person benefits from a *social contract* - society will agree (contract) to protect the welfare of individual citizens. Also, each individual can exercise these rights unless they infringe on other people’s same rights. Any punishment for infringement of these rights must protect future victims, provide deterrents, and rehabilitate offenders.

*Stage six* - At this stage, people have developed a principled conscience. They have forged respect for all human beings, justice for all, freedom for all, basic dignity for all, empathy for all. They will follow their conscience, their internalized ideals, no matter what others may think. If they do not follow their conscience, live by their principles, they experience guilt and condemn themselves for not being true to their moral compass. Civil disobedience is an option because acceptable to disobey an unjust law. All persons are due full consideration of their interests in every situation, and those interests are as important as anyone else’s interests. Their mantra is “come and let us morally reason and work for justice together.”

Kohlberg (1981) acknowledges several insights about his model that are useful. People cannot skip stages - there are no *moral* leaps. People are incapable of understanding moral reasoning more than one stage beyond that which they have attained. As they reason at one particular stage, they will run into problems that their current level of reasoning cannot deal with and will look with anticipation to the higher level of reasoning for answers. People will not grow morally unless they encounter a dilemma, or as Whitbeck (1998) would have it, a problem with multiple constraints and perspectives that may or may not turn out good for everyone - a multilemma. Age and morality are not necessarily related. A person can, indeed, mature physically but not morally, if raised in an environment where they never have to question things, where level one suffices. Finally, and most telling, 75% of the world’s people will never develop a principled conscience or even the concept of a social contract. Instead, they will be stalled at Stage four. They will obey the laws, demand punishment for those who do not, justice for those who are harmed and never question authority because it brings social order. Those with a principled conscience are often misunderstood by this majority and persecuted as being too principled, too ivory tower, too Polly Anna, too unrealistic, too idealistic (Kuehl, 2003).

### **Gilligan’s Model of Moral Development**

Gilligan (1982), a former student of Lawrence Kohlberg, took issue with several aspects of the work that formed his three levels, one of them being the gender differences. Claiming that Kohlberg’s work was conducted using boys, she did her own research and developed her model for moral development based on care and relationships, instead of duty and rights (see Table one for a comparison of their two different approaches). Although she uses the same labels for the three levels, she totally reconceptualizes moral development from a gender perspective.

Insert Table 1 about here

- **Stage one Pre-conventional** (with *convention* meaning the second stage) - This is the *selfish* stage focussed on personal survival, learning to care for oneself, self interest. Individual survival is paramount.
- **Stage two - Conventional** - internalizing societal norms of caring for others and NOT caring for oneself while doing this, neglect of self, self-sacrifice, being “good” for the good of others - belief in conventional morality (conforming to societal expectations and standards of moral, right and good conduct). Caring for others is good/right and being selfish is wrong, even if it does one harm. One thinks it is wrong to act in one’s own self interest. One should value, instead, the interest of others. Concern for oneself is the same as being selfish. Moving from this stage to the next is very hard because it feels like moral regression rather than progression. One finds it hard to give oneself permission to take care of oneself. For some this becomes a martyr state.
- **Stage three - Post-conventional** - One learns that it is just as wrong to IGNORE one’s own care as it is to ignore the care and interests of someone else or others. One realizes that one DOES deserve to be taken care of! People in this stage transform so they see themselves in relationships with others and appreciate that, if one person is not taken care of (whether self or others), or is slighted, in the connection, then the relationship is harmed. This moral growth leads to a respect for non-violence! and the principle, “do not harm others **or** yourself.” One becomes very critical of the conventions adopted at the other two stages and learns to balance caring for self with caring for others! The value of inclusiveness becomes very important and one condemns exploitation and hurting of oneself and others.

While there is no general agreement that women reason from an ethic of care while men reason from an ethic of justice, her work did increase awareness that care is an integral component of moral reasoning, as Arcus (1999) suggests.

#### **Affective (Emotional) Domain of Learning**

If we are to adequately deal with the notion of consumer moral consciousness, we need a tool to help conceptualize the process of transforming one’s internal value system. Remember that moral consciousness is about acting from new levels of awareness (Tucker, 1994). These new levels of awareness do not appear overnight. For one’s value system to be transformed, a particular approach to learning and teaching has to be employed. The affective domain of learning provides a good overview of how someone gains a deeper awareness of something, to the point that their entire world view and life style change (Bloom et al., 1964). It helps us focus on the manner in which people deal with things emotionally, such as their feelings, values, appreciation, enthusiasms, motivations, and attitudes.

There are five stages that people move through as they move toward the entrenchment of a new value system (Continuing Education Resource Center, 2002; National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 2002):

- **Receiving/awareness of new idea** - People gain awareness of a situation, idea or process and are willing to pay attention to it. They passively attend by listening or observing because they have a growing awareness of the value or importance of learning this new

information.

- **Responding/engage with the new idea** - they do something with, or about, their awareness at a low level of commitment in the learning process. They are motivated to respond and become more involved with the new ideas, become interested and derive satisfaction from doing so.
- **Valuing/show preference for new idea** - They perceive that the new idea will have worth for them. They begin to see it as *valuable* and develop a preference for it. They accept and show a preference for an object, idea, belief or behaviour by developing an underlying commitment and by expressing their opinions, consistently, with conviction. They do this in situations where they are not expected to comply or obey.
- **Organization/place new values into existing system** - At this stage, they make a concerted effort to place the new values they are aware of and have a preference for into their existing value system. They contrast different value systems, resolve conflicts between these systems and their own and form a unique, revamped value system of their own. They then become committed to their new value system and begin to adapt their behaviour to these values. This includes analysis and formation of judgements about their social responsibilities.
- **Characterization/total change in character and life style** - Finally, they integrate and internalize this value system into a total world view or personal philosophy. They develop a completely new personal value system that will govern their future behaviour. Their total behaviours (character) and life style are consistent with the values they have internalized.

The affective domain of learning approach does not specify whether the value system is morally sound or not. It does, however, allow us to perceive that a person can pass through stages as they develop their moral compasses. We find this approach useful if we want to consider how people learn to be consumers. This domain of learning deals with attitudes, values, beliefs, behaviours, emotions and the value a person places on things, ideas and such. When a person is operating within the affective domain, they can be expected to emulate and model tolerance, respect, kindness, honesty, conservation, supportiveness, and integrity. They tend to challenge things, make judgements, question things, volunteer, join and seek solidarity (Continuing Education Resource Center, 2002; National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 2002). Someone who has moved through all five stages should act in such a way that others will be able to identify, or characterize, them as a morally conscious consumer.

### **Discussion**

To reiterate, the issue driving this paper is “*Why don’t people, in their consumer role, have a well developed moral conscience?*” If we agree that responsible consumption is a moral imperative for society, then members of the profession have an ethical responsibility to explore this aspect of family and individual behaviour. As prescriptive as this sounds, consumers need help so they can come to their senses and learn to achieve self-mastery by way of learning how to perceive their own consumer behaviour in relation to others, the environment and other species. Most will need help if they are to liberate themselves from a narrow conscience, a narrow vision of themselves. With this help, they can be free to see themselves connected to others, and the planet. This help is necessary because, when left to their own devices, individuals

in a consumer society will sacrifice everything else to maximize their self-gratification. We have a role to play in sensitizing the population to the knowledge that there are limits beyond which certain attitudes and acts are excessive and unethical. To deliberately, even uncritically, choose bad principles, and surrender to the weakest desire to please oneself, is to be a shameless and incorrigible individual (inspired by Pendergast & McWilliam (1999) who drew on ideas from Michael Foucault). These words create harsh images of today's consumers but they are necessary given the long term consequences of immoral, worse yet amoral, consumption.

### **Consumer Immaturity**

We now live in a society that is changing so rapidly, especially technologically, that we are presented with consumption decisions that have no correlates in the experience of previous generations. Therefore, constructing good responses to moral problems takes great effort and attention. Consumers have to learn how to avoid pitfalls that leave them open to corruption or neglect of their responsibilities (this idea is adapted from Whitbeck, 1998). She suggests that people participate in multiple moral communities, and this paper submits that one such community is the consumer collective. Codes of conduct for moral consumption behaviour must represent the mature, ethical reflection of members of the consumer community. Using the two models of moral development, it is easy to deduce that many are operating at a very immature level of moral development, relative to their role as consumers. Their sense of moral rightness comes from accepting the rules and standards of the collective consumer group. And, this group is not in good moral standing. They crave the approval of others, are focused on two-person relationships (no room for the global collective), and tend not to question authority figures because they do not want to upset the balance in society. Unfortunately, who they perceive as authority figures is problematic as they are advertisers, marketers, transnational corporations and media characters and these tend to be morally immature and misguided.

### **Global Citizenship**

This immaturity is further exacerbated when one considers Whitbeck's (1998) suggestion that people experience moral problems, moral deliberation and the development of moral character in the form of narratives, conversations and stories within relationships. In today's consumer society, people feel very isolated, disconnected and alone and are not as engaged in social relationships as were earlier generations. Without these conversations and reflections, consumers are truly challenged to develop morally in their consumer role. One approach is to begin to see oneself as a citizen first and consumer second. People in their citizen role tend to lean toward dialogue more so than when they are consumers. This is where the concept of global consumer citizen becomes relevant. Andrzejewski and Alessio (1999) suggest that global citizenship refers to understanding one's responsibilities to others, to society and to the environment by: (a) examining the meaning of democracy and citizenship from differing points of view, including non-dominant, non-western perspectives; (b) exploring the various rights and obligations that citizens may be said to have in their communities, nations and in the world; (c) understanding and reflecting on one's own life, career, and interests in relation to participatory democracy and the general welfare of the global society; and, (d) exploring the relationship of global citizenship and responsibility to the environment.

### **Necessity of Moral Context**

To further develop their moral conscience, consumers need guidance creating the *moral context* within which they exercise their moral responsibilities (adapted from Whitbeck, 1998).

This context would include the notions of democracy, rights, respect, freedom, responsibilities, justice, equity, fairness, peace and non-violence (features of a culture of peace (McGregor, 2004)). Right now, the context of the marketplace is anything but moral. Dominate values include scarcity instead of abundance, competition instead of cooperation, profit instead of altruism, money instead of life, ownership instead of stewardship, greed instead of sharing, fear instead of courage, and despair instead of hope (a connection with the future). The profession needs to become familiar with the sister fields of peace education, citizenship education and human rights and development education.

### **Recommendations**

The following suggestions are tendered as possible strategies to begin our work on understanding and developing consumer moral consciousness.

#### **Affective Learning**

We have to work towards creating a good moral conscience in consumers. We can do this by helping them become aware of their current morally objectionable value system: greed, anger, fear, hatred and delusion. By adding the affective domain of learning into one's pedagogy, one can work to: (a) make them aware of their immoral stance, (b) bring to their attention the nuances of a moral stance in their consumer behaviour, (c) create learning spaces where they can derive satisfaction from engaging with the new value system, (d) facilitate a critical analysis of their current values and those preferred for a morally conscious consumer, and (e) anticipate that their moral character will change and that this change will be reflected in their pre-during- post market place behaviour.

#### **Moral Development Models**

As one brings the affective domain of learning into their pedagogy and philosophy, it is imperative that one remember that each of the models of moral development brings useful insights. People move through predictable stages of moral development and boys and girls develop along a different moral axis. We cannot ignore the fact that 75% of the world's population are stalled at Stage four of Kohlberg's (1981) model. This means they have yet to develop a principled conscience. Instead, they obey the laws, demand punishment for those who do not, justice for those who are harmed and never question authority because they fear lack of social order. It seems logical that family and consumer sciences professionals need to strive for Gilligan's (1982) ethic of care to move people into Kohlberg's (1981) final two stages that see people questioning their notion of what constitutes the good life and what society should look like so that the welfare of everyone is met. Then, they would progress to the highest stage of moral development with a principled conscience which respects all life. We can help them reach this level if we bring the affective domain of learning into our practice. Furthermore, if we can move people to the highest level of moral development advocated for by Gilligan, we would ensure that our practice enabled people to see themselves in relationship with others and that moral growth means respecting non-violence and inclusiveness with an ongoing critique of society.

#### **Care and Justice Concepts of Morality**

As we engage on this professional track, we need to give more credence to Gilligan's (1982) gendered model of moral development. If we do embrace her theory, then practice would shift to understand that women (girls) and men (boys) develop differently as regards moral behaviour. Table 1 clearly profiles the differences she thinks exist between the sexes, as regards attitudes, perceptions and beliefs about what is morally right. Since we know that nearly all

business and government positions are held by men, and that most care giving and helping professional positions are held by women, we can use her insights as we practice. We can teach people to be aware of the nuances of an ethics of care and relationships versus an ethics of duties and rights. With our facilitation, people can begin to appreciate that the marketplace (shaped mainly by men) is, by association, shaped by an ethical standard couched in dilemmas about justice, rights, non-interference with these rights, duties, self-fulfilment, logical choices, the notion that problems are moral when rights are in danger, rule-following, impartiality, responsibility by being answerable for actions, and treating “everyone” justly. From Gilligan’s perspective, we would begin to teach people what the marketplace *could look like*, if it was shaped by an ethic of care. Dilemmas would be about care issues. There would be a balance of responsibilities and rights, and we would find and alleviate real troubles of the world. We would respect the: logic of relationships, notion that moral problems reflect people suffering, concept of emotional connectedness, idea of caring for people and their feelings, and focus on caring for a particular person rather than just “anyone.” Imagine what consumption would look like then.

### **Assumptions Behind Ethical Strands**

Once we start teaching people about ethics in the marketplace, we have to be very specific about which aspect of each strand of ethics we are bringing into play because they each offer a different perspective. The next set of examples illustrates how mindful we have to be when picking and choosing from the theoretical base of the field of ethics. What we package reflects deep assumptions. For instance, from a metaethics perspective, when answering the question, “Where do fundamental ethical principles come from and what motivates us to be moral?,” we can assume various theoretical stances. First, we could assume that what is morally right is that which is approved by society, that moral values are relative in that individuals adhere to those created by society, and that people in a consumer society are motivated to be moral for their self-interest. Conversely, we could assume that people know intuitively what is right and wrong, that they create their own moral systems and that their moral assessments are shaped by their emotions, not reason. Third, we could assume that what is morally right is shaped by society, that morals come from the universe, are constant and do not change, and that the moral stance we take is based on our gender, with women embracing an ethic of care and men adopting an ethic of justice.

Normative ethics is concerned with what people *should* believe versus what they actually do believe. If we want consumers to have a moral conscience, we would cull the following ideas from the collection of theories around normative ethics. This type of ethics provides guidelines so people *know what to do* so their actions are morally sound. We can advocate and support the character education movement which assumes that, if people develop good habits of moral character, then they know what to do when they encounter a market decision with moral overtones. They would embrace the virtues of: temperance (instead of gluttony), courage to stand by their principles, magnanimousness (instead of self-centeredness), gentleness (instead of irascible), truthfulness, trustworthiness, respectfulness, fairness, honesty, hope for the future, charity, wisdom and justice. From the stance of moral duty, the second normative theory, we can balance our focus on consumer rights with a focus on duties and responsibilities as citizens, we can embrace the notion that our major duty is to not harm anyone, that we value every single person and that we have a duty to act in a certain way sometimes, irrespective of what *we* want or need (“the good” takes precedence). Finally, I think home economists can easily apply the normative theory that some people determine how to act when faced with a moral situation by

weighing the consequences of their actions on themselves, others or both. Which ever action positively affects whomever is being considered, is the moral action. The flaw of this approach in a consumer society is that people put themselves first. So, home economists would advocate that consumers gauge the impact of their decisions on others and then on themselves, or both and then take the moral action.

### **Many Voices in Multilemmas**

Within the rubric of applied ethics, we must raise to the challenge of assuming that moral problems are multilemmas and not dilemmas. The former means we remain open to many voices and many interpretations of situations that have moral overtones, instead of ascribing to a pick-and-choose approach from a menu of acceptable actions. Remember that a problem is moral when the well-being of people is in jeopardy. Since the focus of our entire profession is the well-being of individuals and families, many of the problems we encounter in our day-to-day practice will be moral problems. Someone could be hurt if we do not make the right decision. People, other species and nature are hurt when consumers do not make morally correct decisions.

### **Problemizing Morality of Consumer Choices**

All individuals are morally autonomous beings with the power and the rights to choose their own values. But, it does not follow that what they ultimately chose can be claimed to be an ethical value system. When working with consumers, we have an obligation to teach them how to engage in moral reasoning so they can distinguish between a clash of values and a clash of ethical values. The ethical, moral reasoning process needs to become part of the consumer's overall moral consciousness from which he or she deals with difficult conflict in every day life purchase decisions (Xu & Ziengenfuss, 2003). When Western consumers encounter a purchase decision involving the issue of child labor, they have encountered a moral problem. What do they believe is right? Should they still buy the product because they need it for their notion of the good life or not buy the product because they believe that it perpetuates oppression, exploitation and enslavement of children? Just posing this question brings the person further along on their journey toward being morally conscious in the marketplace. We need to help consumers pose and solve these types of moral problems. We need to problemize purchase conditions and criteria that they have never, ever thought of before when they shop.

### **Conclusion**

The issue driving this paper was "*Why don't people, in their consumer role, have a well developed moral conscience?*" The answer is complex because the issue is complex. People do not always have full information. They are not always able to make rational decisions, carefully critique the information nor do they readily have a wide range of alternatives to select from when considering a purchase. There are many external barriers to making moral consumption decisions. Lifestyles result in time poverty. There are poor premiums for many products and services reflective of ethical considerations. Consumer society exerts a tremendous amount of pressure on people. Decisions are not made in a vacuum. Significant others play a pivotal role in which goods and services are bought (friends, family, peers, church). All of these factors, and more, make this a difficult area to understand and form guidance.

As well, cultural aspects are also relevant here as most products are produced in Majority World countries (developing and underdeveloped). A key example is child labour. In Western societies, child labour is considered immoral. Yet, in other societies, it is culturally acceptable or necessary for familial well-being. The relationship between Western consumers imposing what they consider acceptable through their consumption, ironically, brings the issue of ethics into

play in terms of their right to “tell” another society how they should behave. Across different contexts, notions of right and wrong are not always clear. This reality adds to the complexity of the issue of moral consumption (Personal Communication, blind peer reviewer, April, 2005).

Progress is being made relative to opening the public’s eyes to issues related to corporate social responsibility and the unsustainability of most consumption and production. Movies (*The Corporation, Super Size Me*), books (*No Logo, Fast Food Nation, When Corporations Rule*) and the internet are all contributing to this growing awareness. However, a person’s character, their ethical and moral underpinnings, is also a key factor that cannot be ignored. Guidance towards perceiving oneself as a member of a global collective of citizens starts with a focus on the moral character of the person in their consumer role. This paper strived to provide an orientation to the concepts of ethics and morality as they relate to consumption. With these insights, we are better able to help consumers start to move away from ruthlessly serving their own self interest toward engaging in morally conscious consumer behaviour on a global scale.

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Table 1  
Gilligan's (1982) understanding of moral development of women and men

	Women	Men
Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- morality in terms of care</li> <li>- care dilemmas</li> <li>- responsibilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- morality in terms of justice</li> <li>- justice dilemmas</li> <li>- rights</li> </ul>
Moral Imperative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- to care and to discern and alleviate the real troubles of the world</li> <li>- caring about everyone and about oneself</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- to respect the rights of others and to protect, from interference, the rights to life and self-fulfilment</li> <li>- to treat everyone fairly, following the rules</li> </ul>
Logic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- of relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- of consequences of choices</li> </ul>
Nature of problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- problems are moral when they involve people suffering</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- problems are moral when they involve competing claims of rights</li> </ul>
Making Decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- make moral decisions by preserving emotional connectedness of everyone</li> <li>- moral decision was correct if relationships have been preserved and whether people have been hurt</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- make moral decisions by applying rules fairly and impartially</li> <li>- moral decision was correct if all the rules were applied properly</li> </ul>
Responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- taking care of the other person and their feelings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- being answerable for actions (accountable)</li> </ul>
Overarching concern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- whether a "particular" person suffered rather than "anyone"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- abstract codes of conduct: did "anyone" get treated unjustly</li> </ul>

1. **ENDNOTE** - Morality, in this sense, refers to the normative definition of morality - a code of conduct that, given specific conditions, all rational persons would put forward for governing behaviour of all moral agents. This is different from the descriptive definition of morality which holds that there is a specific code of conduct agreed to by a society and that it is used to guide behaviour by the members of that society (Gert, 2005).