



Frugal tastes and frugal conduct

Five or six ways in which they may make sense

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author formulates six hypotheses as to why frugality makes sense: frugal tastes (1) facilitate happiness; (2) create the conditions for justice concerns. Frugal habits (3) constitute a personal asset; allow a Pareto improvement; (5) are required by a fair distribution of resources; and perhaps (6) are intrinsically better.

KEYWORDS

Frugality; Justice; Economic Ethics

Does frugality make sense to me? It depends on what we take ‘frugality’ to mean. I shall here call frugal a conception of the good life, an ideal, that involves a low level of material consumption, but also a way of life, a conduct, that conforms to such a conception. A frugal ideal might be valued simply because of the frugal conduct it inspires, but also irrespective of whether it does so. And a frugal conduct may be valued as the pursuit of a frugal ideal, but also irrespective of the motives that drive it. Let us consider each interpretation of frugality in turn.

1. Frugal tastes and the quest for happiness

A frugal ideal may first make sense, under conditions of material scarcity, as a way of facilitating happiness. As such, it constitutes a particular facet of the age-old Stoic wisdom that the achievement of happiness requires people to adjust their desires to their situation. “*Tâcher à changer mes désirs plutôt que l’ordre du monde*”, was one of Descartes’s maxims in the *Discours de la méthode*. Clearly, this recipe for happiness applies far more broadly than just to the realm of

material consumption: moderating our ambitions in matters of world (or even neighbourhood) improvement or keeping our libidinal aspirations under tight control are certainly no less relevant to the achievement of happiness than is the taming of our material greed. The extent to which this ideal is given prominence varies significantly from one civilization or tradition to another. Serge-Christophe Kolm, for example, presents the taming of material greed as the distinguishing feature of the Eastern, or Buddhist, quest of happiness, in contrast to the Western, growth-oriented one.¹

However, in moderate and fluctuating doses, this sort of desire management, of character planning, is of course not the exclusive preserve of a handful of Tibetan monks. To save our lives from being reduced to never-ending stories of painful frustration, we resort to it all the time. But we do not do it, and do not wish to do it, without limit. For happiness understood as contentment or preference satisfaction is not all that matters. We do not want to kill all our passions, to deflate all our hopes, for fear of their being disappointed. Our daily stamina, indeed our mental health

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itself, depends on a subtle management of ambition that drives flourishing and pride, and of modesty that reduces both achievement and frustration.

2. *Frugal tastes and the circumstances of justice*

Thus, both individually and collectively, a frugal conception of life may make sense as a way of helping us achieve, admittedly not at the cost of everything else we may value, a decent level of happiness. There is, however, a second, less straightforward way, in which one may want to make sense of sticking to a frugal ideal of life as such — rather than because of the frugal life it tends to induce: not as a way of achieving happiness, but as a condition for making justice possible.

This argument assumes that the ‘circumstances of justice’, the factual conditions under which it is meaningful to talk about the fair distribution of resources, include — as they do, for example, for David Hume² and John Rawls³ — ‘moderate scarcity’, i.e. some gap between what, in the aggregate, is wanted and what is available, but not so wide that people are unreceptive to reasonable arguments. Under some demographic and economic conditions which may well obtain today on a world scale, moderate scarcity may quickly degenerate into acute scarcity, and hence generate a level of strife which fairness talk would be totally unable to defuse, at least *if* the level of material aspiration of the rich countries were to spread worldwide. Assuming that globalized communication can no longer impose geographical borders to expensive tastes, a global shift to a frugal ideal of life may be needed to keep scarcity moderate, and hence give global justice a chance. The argument here is not that frugal conduct will make it possible to distribute justly, but that frugal ambitions will make it possible to talk and reason about what a just distribution would be.

3. *Frugal conduct as a personal asset*

There are also various ways of making sense of a frugal conception of life by emphasizing the con-

sequences of the way of life it induces. One of them jumps immediately to my mind when I ask myself what would be the most precious asset I could bequeath to my children in order to secure their future material welfare. There is something more important than leaving them some property, indeed more important even than making sure they get a good degree or teaching them to derive some pleasure from hard work. It consists precisely in instilling frugal tastes, and hence a propensity to consume less than their income (and access to credit) would allow. In terms of the lifelong level of comfort one will be able to achieve, there is a world of difference between consuming 90% and 110% of one’s income at an early age.

To counter peer pressure that favours all sorts of conspicuous consumption, one needs to foster a range of “*stratégies de contrepied*”, to use an expression aptly coined by Pierre Bourdieu⁴: it must look ‘cool’ to be a ‘loser’, with a lousy watch and pathetic shoes. Easier said than done. And not the slightest chance of success if one does not preach by example. I therefore regard at least a modicum of conspicuous frugality as an intrinsic component of my parental responsibilities. Hence my resolute policy of wearing a watch which my children would not dream of wearing, and clothes which my sons have grown out of – admittedly not those my daughters have decided to give up: there are, after all, some limits to what parents can be reasonably expected to do for the good of their children.

4. *Frugal conduct as a Pareto improvement*

There is a second way in which the beneficial consequences of frugal conduct enable us to make sense of frugality. The argument is now no longer that the adoption of frugal conduct is a wise investment, but that it produces a public good (or gets rid of negative externalities), thereby enabling some to become better off without anyone being made worse off, not thanks to a change in preferences (as in the ‘Buddhist’ quest for happiness mentioned above) but with given preferences.



This argument lies at the core of Robert Frank's insightful analysis⁵ and is also substantiated in two incisive books by Juliet Schor.⁶ It can be viewed as parallel to one that justifies the obligation of remaining seated in a stadium. True, anyone could see better by standing if all others remain seated. But if all stand up, people will not, or hardly, see better on average, and some will get a backache which they would have avoided had they remained seated. Here is the analogy. Let us accept that, relative to a relaxed, low-consumption life, anyone would become better off if she chose to both work and consume more. But most, if not all of the benefit thus gained arguably consists in the pleasure or pride derived from having and displaying a higher standard of living than others in one's reference group, or in the avoidance of the discomfort or shame of falling behind, of looking a failure. Therefore, if all speed up their lives and boost their consumption, little, if anything will be gained in terms of pride achieved and shame avoided. At the same time, just as standing in the stadium causes backache, catching people in a ruthless rat race generates a number of unpleasant effects. For example, it creates a mid-life congestion of professional and family commitments which burns out workers/parents, pulls them apart, prevents them from stepping back and retraining, and drives them into early retirement, while depriving the young generation of a relaxed home environment in which to grow up. What a mess!

Surely, one must be able to do better than this by inducing a more frugal way of life, whether job-wise or consumption-wise, possibly in part through a progressive consumption tax of the sort advocated by Robert Frank at the end of his book, or through a Value Added Tax commodity-differentiated so as to make it somewhat progressive, as explored by André Decoster, Erik Schokkaert and Guy Van Camp.⁷ By taming the production of negative positional externalities and reducing the unpleasant side effects of the rat race, room might thus be made for a Pareto improvement, for a situation in which current preferences for life course patterns of consumption, leisure and status will be

better satisfied for some, without being less well satisfied for anyone.

5. Frugal conduct as a requirement of distributive justice

There is at least one further way of making sense of frugal conduct — whether or not it is motivated by an ideal of frugality. In addition to personal prudence (as in the first argument) and collective efficiency (as in the second), the recognition of the requirements of a fair distribution of scarce resources can lead some to take less of these resources than they could in order to leave enough and as good for others.

One massive illustration concerns the affluent world's need to adopt a more frugal way of life in order for both intra- and inter-generational justice to be achievable on a global scale. To help realize global justice it is essential for the richer countries to identify and adopt a standard of living and a way (or range of ways) of life that are sustainably generalizable worldwide. In the context of scarce natural resources, the rich must scale down their consumption of the goods which use up these resources to avoid unjustly appropriating the share which fairness requires them to leave for poorer countries and future generations. Frugally forgoing the use of a car when a bicycle would do can easily be made sense of in this perspective.

But the saving of scarce natural resources is not the only form this type of meaningful frugality can take. In a context of academic unemployment, for example, some may be moved, through an analogous reasoning, to take early retirement or work part-time so that unemployed academics can have their fair share of the job cake to be shared. Similarly, knowing how overstretched emergency services are, or indeed, more generally, how costly health care is becoming, one could sensibly be moved to call frugally on them — significantly less often than would be the case if only the private price of the service or the length of the waiting were holding us back — so that again enough can be left for others with more pressing needs.



As suggested by Erik Schokkaert, such a frugal attitude, in a context of asymmetric information, is essential for the sustainability of generous solidarity in matters of health care.⁸

In all these examples, reliance can be made, and must to some extent unavoidably made, on individual self-restraint out of a sense of justice. But the spreading of appropriately frugal conduct will obviously be helped if legal or social rules are introduced, with formal and informal sanctions closing the gap between what justice demands and what self-interest dictates.

Epilogue

My conclusion leaves no doubt: whether as a type of preference or as a type of conduct, frugality can make plenty of sense. There are, therefore, plenty of sensible arguments which can help me rationalize my spontaneous attraction to what 'frugality' connotes in my mind. But I cannot help suspecting that there is still something in that attraction that I have not quite managed to capture under the five headings above.

To capture the residue, one possible point of departure is the contrast that occasionally comes to mind between what being expensively dressed conveys about an economist and what it conveys about a philosopher. If an economist is expensively dressed, the very fact that (s)he can afford the clothes (s)he wears suggests that (s)he is not too bad at making money and it thereby increases the likelihood one can securely attach to her or his being a competent specialist of the wealth of nations. By contrast, if a philosopher is expensively dressed, the very fact that (s)he bothers to buy such clothes suggests that (s)he is spending

time on futilities and it thereby depresses the likelihood one can reasonably attach to her or his being a competent expert on the meaning of life. If I really believe this to be true — and do not just say this to gently tease some colleagues and cheaply legitimate my own sloppiness — then I must believe that frugality matters for its own sake, irrespective of the good consequences that arguably ensue, along the five paths sketched above, from the adoption of frugal tastes and/or of a frugal conduct.

That I do believe something like that is given further support by the fact that one of the things I find most attractive in the Christian tradition is the dual and paradoxical role it ascribes to poverty. Poverty is presented as a target in two opposed senses: it is an ill one should fight and get rid of as soon as one can, and it is an ideal one should aim at and achieve as fully as possible. The first aspect can smoothly be absorbed into a conception of social justice that gives priority to the fate of the worst off. The second aspect, instead, describes a conception of the good life and can be interpreted as meaning that frugal tastes, apart from any positive impact they may have on other things, are also good in themselves. Do I believe that? Yes, in reflective equilibrium, I think I do. Why? I am not sure I must answer that question, and even less sure I can. But I suspect, if only in light of the choice of the theme of this conference, that Luk Bouckaert shares the belief I just ventured to express. I therefore also suspect that he has given some thought to the question I just asked. And he may have found the answer. Or, if not, he may want to devote part of his active retirement to formulating one. I am looking forward to hearing it.

Notes

¹ Serge-Christophe Kolm, *Le Bonheur-liberté. Bouddhisme profond et modernité* (Paris : P.U.F., 1982).

² David Hume, "An enquiry concerning the principles of morals," in *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 167-323, section III.



³ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), section 22.

⁴ Philippe Van Parijs, "Triadic Distributions and Contrepied Strategies. A Contribution to a Pure Theory of Expressive Behaviour," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 7/2 (1977): 129-160.

⁵ Robert Frank, *Luxury Fever. Money and Happiness in an Era of Success* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁶ Juliet B. Schor, *The Overworked American* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Juliet B. Schor, *The Overspent American* (New York: Basic Books, 1998).

⁷ André Decoster, Erik Schokkaert and Guy Van Camp, "Horizontal Neutrality and Vertical Redistribution with Indirect Taxes," in *Equality and Taxation*, ed. S. Zandvakili (Greenwich CT: JAI Press, 1997).

⁸ Erik Schokkaert, "Does Frugality Make Sense?" (oral presentation at the conference 'Does Frugality Make Sense?', Leuven, Belgium, 14-15 May 2002).