



Self-Constraint: Ethical Challenges for Contemporaneity

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Abstract

The paper deals with issues related to self-constraint examined in the context of the social, environmental or economic threats and challenges generated by the contemporary civilization. The ability to limit one's own needs, and hence the issue of the reasonable use of goods is nothing new for ethics. However, after having realized the finite nature of natural resources, growing economic disproportions, and especially the exceeding consumption, that problem gains importance and calls for the recapitulation. The article, based on references to alternative models of consumers' behavior (sustainable consumption, voluntary simplicity) and sustainable strategies of development (degrowth), provides an argument why reflection on self-constraint is one of the critical areas of ethical reflection today. Self-constraint was presented as a voluntary, and individual approach of the moral agent towards other people and the natural environment.

Key words: consumer choice, degrowth, “freedom to” consumption, “freedom from” consumption, self-constraint, sustainable consumption, voluntary simplicity

*While (...) all pleasure because it is naturally akin to us is good,
not all pleasure is worthy of choice.*
Epicurus

INTRODUCTION

The deepening ecological crisis, as well as the constantly changing social, institutional-political, and economic background encourage the redefinition of essential concepts and categories, such as the need, prosperity, justice, wealth, poverty, community (Latouche 2009, 35; Jackson 2009, 16). They also call for reviewing the recognition of the breadth of the meaning and ways of usage of terms like moderation, restraint, or self-constraint. In the light of continually growing local and global problems like depletion of natural resources, climate change, threats to biodiversity, rising social inequality, the weariness of aggressive capitalism and prevailing economization of life the capacity of limiting one's own needs and therefore the issue of reasonable and responsible using of goods gains a significant role. The culture of limitation, namely living according to the ideas of voluntary simplicity and minimalism is called for more and more often. These ideals are treated, e.g., by Tim Jackson and Serge Latouche not merely as a real possibility but rather as a political necessity, especially for citizens of well-developed and economically robust countries.

However, in the congestion of the signaled threads, the philosophical context of reading self-constraint and recognizing in it not only a political or economic challenge but also an ethical one, which requires involvement at the individual, community or international level gets lost.

The paper attempts to justify why the reflection on self-constraint should be considered as a still-current, yet the currently crucial area of ethical reflection. In order to do so, I will refer to alternative models of consumer behavior, as well as to the problems of needs and choices. However, firstly, I will elucidate the proper understanding of self-constraint, what are its ethical connotations, and what place it occupies in contemporary considerations on sustainable life, consumption, and development.

1. WHAT SELF-CONSTRAINT? DEFINITION AND METHODOLOGICAL TRAILS

The preliminary reflections on the idea of self-constraint follow the well-defined by millennia path of reflection on good, happy life, and the ability to make the right choice. In European thought, we will find them in virtue of moderation, the concept of constraint, continence, the order of renunciation, the stoic autarky and apathy, or in the principle of “the golden middle.” The praise of the self-limitation is also firmly rooted in the Eastern tradition, i.a., in Taoism or Buddhism. Nowadays, these topics return in cases of promoting alternative consumer strategies, such as voluntary simplicity, downshifting, alternative hedonism, degrowth and sustainable consumption projects, or more broadly in the context of the idea of sustainable development.

In the face of this rich philosophical-ethical tradition few questions occur. First, is it legitimate to introduce into the language of morality the category of constraint since there are already other notions like moderation, restraint, temperance, renunciation? Secondly, the clarification of whether self-constraint, referred to in the contemporary narratives, is, in fact, convergent in its meaning with the aforementioned tradition-laden notions? And if so, with which ones? Can they be treated as synonyms? And finally, why should self-constraint be an ethical challenge for contemporaneity?

Answering to some of the questions and defending the undertaken research efforts let us call for two arguments. The first of them refers to one thesis posed by Elisabeth Anscombe in her text entitled *Modern Moral Philosophy* (Anscombe 1970, 211-234). The British philosopher claims that the moral vocabulary used by the contemporary researchers is anachronic and out-of-date. In consequence, it is not adequate for the current socio-cultural background. Moderation, restraint, although convergent in their essence with self-constraint, are today terms that have enshrouded with additional meaning that goes beyond their original understanding. In that sense, the category of self-constraint, associated with minimalism, sustainability, or the slow movements seems to be a clear notion, and hence much easier to adopt by the contemporary theory of morality. The second argument is related to the first one and points at the necessity to adjust the

postulate of self-constraint to the contemporary requirements and moral challenges. Such intuitions can be found in the thought of Roger Scruton, and earlier in Hans Jonas' works. The British philosopher believes that traditional ethics is unable to provide a satisfactory response to the contemporary crises (Scruton 2012, 409). The thesis uttered by Jonas in his *Imperative of Responsibility* is even stronger for it states that "the changed nature of human action calls for a change in ethics" (Jonas 1985, 1). In their own way, each of the mentioned researchers points out that the altered circumstances condition the change of interpretational perspective. Therefore, there is a need for creating new ethics or to reformulate and re-read the theses of, e.g., Kantians or Aristotelians, which, in their traditional form, may not be clear and easily adopted principles for the contemporary generation. That is why the efforts undertaken to explain, elucidate, and update the denotation of the term "self-constraint" can, in lines of Charles Taylor's argument, become a good available to people; something the moral agent can relate to, and what they can consciously choose, and in consequence, bring into practice (Taylor 2001, 179).

For the purpose of these considerations, we shall use a tentative definition. Following the path set by Henryk Elzenberg and on the basis of his analyses of renunciation, self-constraint can be understood as a voluntary, reflected upon, and intentional act of abandonment of the goods we possess and desire, or we strive for (Elzenberg 2012 [1925], 149). According to the distinction made by the Polish philosopher, it may take the form of a change in the external world (e.g. reduction of the amount of goods held or purchased), or a change in attitude of the acting agent (e.g. readiness to limit one's will to possess material goods) (Elzenberg 2012, 151-152). In practice, the external dimension usually entails the internal one, and the quantitative change is accompanied by the qualitative one. However, it is worth remembering, as Elzenberg shows, that we are not always faced with their concomitance (Elzenberg 2012, 152-153).

Apart from the distinction between external and internal self-constraint, we can adopt from Elzenberg the division between constraint due to the necessity of choice, and constraint for positive reasons, as well. The former refers to every-day situations, whereby making a decision we at the same time resign from alternative solutions (Elzenberg 2012, 163). The latter, on the other hand, affirms the very act of self-constraint and recommends it because of good outcomes it leads to.

The last understanding and quality context lead us undoubtedly towards an ethical, and therefore normative reflection. Hence, the next step will be a clarification of the purpose and reason for undertaking the effort of self-constraint.

2. THE CONTEMPORARY DIMENSION OF SELF-CONSTRAINT

Looking at the current research on the issue of constraint, we discover that the focus is put on two problem areas: the production system and the consumption system; both are inextricably linked to the growth dilemma and the environmental crisis, which is its after-effect. In a nutshell, the economic problem refers to the allocation of scarce resources in the face of infinite needs; the political problem touches upon a fair distribution of commodities and minimizing social inequalities; the socio-cultural problem focuses on the issue of changing ways of thinking and the patterns of meeting consumer needs; and the ethical problem relates to the questions how we should live and how to make responsible choices.

All those areas condition one another. However, from the perspective of the adopted definition of self-constraint it is the analyses of needs, behavior models, and consumers' attitudes that are the most significant, or to put it more precisely, they are the issues that lie at the basis of preferences and ways of justification. This is why, if the project of self-constraint, and in consequence, sustainable consumption and degrowth, is to succeed, we must, according to Jackson, answer a number of questions: "Why do we consume? What do we expect to gain from material goods? How successful are we in meeting those expectations? What constrains our choices? And what drives our expectations in the first place?" (Jackson 2005, 20).

The American researcher is of the opinion that in the Western culture there are two contradictory patterns of behaviors. The first one encourage consumption according to the rule: "the more we consume, the better off we are;" the second, which is a response to overproduction and hyper-consumption is expressed by the maxim: "live better by consuming less" (Jackson 2005, 21). The first model is founded upon radical hedonism and feeds on the belief that the people's will of ownership is outstanding (Jackson 2005, 21), and even if it gets satisfied, it is still characterized by an inclination for excess (Latouche 2009, 54). The second pattern, by revealing the individual, social, and environmental costs stemming from an irrational logic of consumerism calls for conscious constraint and sustainable response to the needs (Jackson 2005).

The growth society upholds the consumers' insatiability of material goods by convincing them that quantity goes hand in hand with quality. It is facilitated by the symbolic role that is assigned to material goods – the role they play on shaping the individual, social and cultural meanings, in creation and consolidation of identities, belonging, as well as the position within the group (Jackson 2005; Jackson 2009). However, as it stems from the analyses carried out by social psychologists and some economists that postulate degrowth, the increase of GDP is not

necessarily followed by the personally perceived increase of quality of life and life satisfaction. Moreover, as Jackson argues: “the relentless pursuit of novelty may undermine well-being” (Jackson 2009, 102). The need of changing the amount and standards of consumption begins with the recognition of disproportions between the material status and life satisfaction. It is not a new claim. Already Aristotle noted, in his description of the virtue of fairness, that pleonexia or relentless pursuit of possession is an obstacle for having a good life; and the one who excessively strives for owning things cannot be happy (Aristotle 1999, 118-119). It is worthy to remember, however, that the author of *Nicomachean Ethics* lived in times when the scale of using resources, consumption, and thriftlessness was much different than today.

Moreover, the proponents of degrowth turn attention to social and environmental benefits of self-constraint. Duane Elgin, the eulogist of voluntary simplicity, argues that behind the slogan "live better by consuming less" there are benefits such as harmonious relations with nature, promotion of justice and equality, or an increase of resources available for future generations (Elgin 2010, 4). Jackson shares that opinion and believes that sustainable consumption gives a chance to realize two benefits: to increase of quality of life and to reduce a negative impact on the environment (Jackson 2005, 25). The American researcher also states that although referring to the well-being of the humankind and nature are ones of the most common strategies of justification of the necessity for reducing consumption, the reasons of psychological nature that are an expression of care for oneself and their closest surrounding have the strongest impact on consumers. Jackson realizes that it is difficult to leave behind the anthropocentric optics of looking at the environmental issues: “It is the question of whether and to what extent current levels and patterns of consumption are or not “good for us” – not just in terms of environmental impact but in terms of individual and collective well-being” (Jackson 2005, 21). This is why the most efficient arguments for self-constraint in regard to the need of possession are the ones that show that the strategy of maximizing goods is linked to individual costs like a sense of regret and discontent caused by both, the excess of commodities, and the fear of shortage, as well as a constantly fuelled concern whether the choice we have made is good enough because it could have always been better (Kasser 2003; Schwartz 2004). On the other hand, there are social costs, i.a., the disintegration of interpersonal relationships and communities, growing social inequalities, the decrease of a sense of trust and safety (Willkinson, Pickett 2011; Jackson 2009). Therefore, one may get the impression that care for the individual, as well as current and future global well-being, predates or condition care for the natural environment. However, it should be remembered that due to the ecological crisis the discussions on self-constraint and restraint flared up anew.

The proponents of degrowth, sustainable consumption, and voluntary simplicity agree on the reasons for constraining the need of possession and point at three ways justifying why that effort should be undertaken (care for oneself, care for the current and future well-being of humankind, care for the natural environment). They are however not undivided regarding the scope of self-constraint. Latouche (degrowth) argues for the reduction of consumption (Latouche 2009, 37); Elgin (voluntary simplicity) is in favor of more restrictive, close to renunciation, form of self-constraint (Elgin 2010), while for Jackson (sustainable consumption) not growing consumption is a success (Jackson 2011). The turn towards small scale that presupposes reduction of consumption and at the same time allows to maintain comfort is also proposed by Scruton: “The solution, it seems to me, is to care for one’s home, meanwhile living not frugally but temperately, not stingily but with a prudent generosity, so as to embellish and renew the plot of earth, and the community, to which one is attached” (Scruton 2012, 412). As we can see, the horizon of the self-constraint scale extends from a rigorous version to a more moderate version, and the decision how and to what extent one should satisfy their needs by natural or artificial goods stays open. Similarly to the Aristotelian moderation, which is not an arithmetic average but a measure proper for a particular moral agent (Aristotle 1999, 26-27), the decision belongs to a free and autonomous individual. They should voluntarily and consciously decide how they should constrain their own needs, while taking into account well-being of other people and natural environment, today and in the future.

3. SELF-CONSTRAINT IN THE LIGHT OF CONSUMERS’ CHOICES – “FREEDOM TO” AND “FREEDOM FROM” CONSUMPTION

Keeping in mind the definition of self-constraint, according to which its essence is a voluntary, conscious, and intentional act of resigning from goods we possess, or we strive for, and placing the reflection on it in the context of a change of thinking about the ways of satisfying needs, it is worthy to take a closer look at the problem of free choice, or to put it more precisely, to consider it in reference to the “freedom to” and the “freedom from” consumption.

By colliding the perspective of positive freedom (freedom to) that gives the individual the right to decide for themselves, which quintessence is the right to unlimited consumer freedom, with the perspective of negative freedom (freedom from) that is measured by the lack of obstacles in realizing possible choices and actions, and thereby protecting consumers from external, institutionalized forms of coercion, we unveil a number of critical problems related to the implementation of the idea of self-constraint.

There are no doubts that self-constraint implies a change of one form of restriction to another. Although it liberates the individual from the coercion of unsustainable consumption, from manipulating their needs and desires, it is always at the expense of the freedom of decision-making concerning the way and scope of satisfying material needs because the freedom to consume has been somehow limited.

However, a question of the scope of intervention of the state or other collective life institutions into the freedom of consumers' decisions comes to the fore. Adopting the self-constraint attitude is a voluntary and individual choice of the moral agent, and as it seems, it is impossible to impose conscious and long-term self-constraint from enjoying goods and satisfying one's needs by an external institutional ruling, e.g., by legislation. On the other hand, however, can we even think about changing consumers' habits without employing a form of top-down forms of coercion? Jackson explicitly points out that individual efforts are not enough to implement the sustainable consumption plan: "It's clear that changing the social logic of consumption cannot simply be relegated to the realm of individual choice. In spite of a growing desire for change, it's almost impossible for people to simply choose sustainable lifestyles, however much they'd like to. (...) The chances of extending this behavior across society are negligible without changes in the social structure" (Jackson 2009, 153). Elsewhere, he adds that creation of a society, where one lives better by consuming less and in a more humane and environmentally friendly way is a supra-individual project: "This is not, in any sense, a simple task, nor one that can easily be pursued by any given individual or set of individuals. On the contrary, it is a fundamentally social and cultural project, which will require sophisticated policy interventions at many different levels" (Jackson 2005, 32).

On the other hand, if a free and autonomous individual, in line with the positive freedom, wants to satisfy their consumptive appetites in an unsustainable way, can the state or other bodies prevent that? Isaiah Berlin pointed out that a free human being from the point of view of the "freedom to" wants to be masters of their fate: "I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from outside" (Berlin 2018, 14). For positive freedom presupposes full unconstraint of the way and scope of satisfying material needs. Therefore, it seems that all external regulations limiting the individual in that regard unjustifiably compromise their autonomy. However, the situation is not as simple as it may seem at first glance.

First, today's consumers are not entirely the masters of their destiny. They are subjects to a range of socio-technical tricks. They are influenced by advertisements and other media

discourses that drive the need to possess and guide the mass imagination toward material goods, and in consequence pose a threat to a stable future of the planet (Jackson 2009, 149).

Secondly, with today's surplus of offers, we should rather talk about the illusion of free choice. As the research carried out by Schwartz demonstrates, the excess of possibilities is not a sign of freedom at all. On the contrary, for consumers who have found themselves in the thicket of the proposed to them solutions, it becomes distress (Schwartz 2004). Ultimately, the average consumer does not choose in a reflected and rational way but merely goes through the choices that others have made earlier and thus is even more susceptible to manipulation.

Thirdly, according to the theory of symbolic interactionism, if we express ourselves through shopping to the point that in order to maintain our position and prosperity we are ready to exploit others (growing social inequalities both locally and globally), and the vision of dematerialization of social and cultural needs is moving away, should there occur, after all, institutionalized forms of coercion to support the elimination of unfavorable habits?

The question remains whether top-down attempts of introducing sustainability will actually make individuals more resistant to consumptive temptations. But even in the face of small chances of success, it is worthwhile to consider how to promote the attitude of self-constraint and strengthen the possibility of implementing it.

Interestingly, Jackson sees the hope in, i.a., the aforementioned symbolic interactionism, which, by changing the way of marking, and hence the vector of social motivation and behavior, may, according to the American thinker, contribute to the change to the existing consumption model: "(...) it seems to me that the symbolic interactionist approach does offer some particularly promising insights for sustainable consumption. At the very least, the social anthropology and philosophy of consumer behavior does not preclude the possibility of negotiating or renegotiating the conditions and the means under which "marking services," for example, are exchanged. Moreover, the insight that a certain amount of consumer behavior is dedicated to a pursuit of meaning opens up the tantalizing possibility of devising some other, more successful and less ecological damaging strategy for pursuing personal and cultural meaning" (Jackson 2005, 32).

In the first place, a key for protecting individuals against the disastrous influence of consumerism and the economic model that perpetuates it would be reliable environmental and economic education carried out by the state apparatus and other non-state bodies; education that would create conscious and mature participants of socio-economic and ecological life. According to Jackson, one of the primary policy objectives should be to keep consumers informed about the environmental impact of their daily choices, and also where, by whom, in what conditions, and

how the goods are manufactured and what is their environmental impact (Jackson 2005, 23). Only then we can expect consumers will take them when making, and in consequence, they will become more open to practicing self-constraint.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, let us ask once again why the self-constraint may become an ethical challenge for contemporaneity?

It should be remembered that the considerations related to how we should live, what choices to make, what to do in order to want less, and how to convince others, so they wished to have less have been present in the philosophical-ethical reflection since the dawn of history and are still significant. The problem remains, and as it seems, ethical claims on that issue will stay relevant. What has changed about that problem is the way it is interpreted and justified because it depends on the socio-cultural background that determines the ways we deal with it.

The question on an ethical relevance of self-constraint, as indicated in the article, springs from ecological reflection and the concept of limited growth, and in a unique way it affects issues related to the dominant paradigm of consumption. The main ethical problem is broken down by translating theoretical claims associated with limiting our needs and the will to possess into practice. As shown by the experiences so far, it is not an easy task. Even the proponents are skeptical about the chances of success and, despite the necessity of implementing it, they recognize the difficulties it poses. Although they do not formulate such far-reaching conclusions as Jean Baudrillard, who states that “the desire to moderate consumption or to establish a normalizing network of needs, is naive and absurd moralism” (Baudrillard 1968, 24), but they are aware of the tremendous top-down and bottom-up efforts that have to be undertaken, individual and collective work that has to be done in order to create conditions conducive to the practice of self-constraint or sustainability (Jackson 2005).

Self-constraint by closely bidding the act with the acting agent directs the attention towards a particular moral agent and thus does not allow to forget that top-down attempts to build a specific social, economic or moral order must be approved by specific individuals if they are to be successful. Therefore, in the end, hoping that the self-constraint project will not remain merely in the realm of the declaration, we give the voice Scruton who has perfectly recognized these nuances and interdependences: "No large-scale project will succeed if it is not rooted in our small-scale practical reasoning. For it is we in the end who have to act, who have to accept and

co-operate with the decisions made in our name, and who have to make whatever sacrifices will be required for the sake of future generations" (Scruton 2012, 2).

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