The Consequences of Convenience: Ecological and Philosophical
Meredith Wilson

<u>Introduction</u>

Throughout history, especially post-industrialization, Western culture has become busier. Consumers worship convenience, and time is monetized; any time saved is money and effort saved, and that time can be put towards increasing personal wealth. The old expression, "no pain, no gain" has evolved into "no pain, gain." Ecologically, there are clear consequences of convenience that inhibit sustainability: higher costs, wasteful production and consumption, and unhealthy habits. Achieving sustainability for the sake of humanity certainly requires significant change in the current consumer society, such as a shift in consumer behaviour that discourages wasteful habits. These types of changes are categorized as a 'shallow' ecological approach, and do not address the flaws in the fundamental structure of consumerism (Drengson 2012). A long range, 'deep' ecological approach calls for a redesign of our entire system, instead of changes within (Drengson 2012).

The deep ecology movement, pioneered by Arne Naess, declares that the values held in highest esteem by society require a complete philosophical reform if there is any hope of solving our environmental crisis. It calls for a deep questioning of the underlying assumptions of our culture, and is in contrast with the mainstream shallow approach (Harding 2015). To Naess, deep ecology is only possible under the concept of Self-realization, which he defines as the philosophical and spiritual understanding that everything is interrelated (Naess 1986). Naess distinguishes between the universal 'Self' (capitalized), which is attributed to Self-realization, and the individual 'self' (lower case), which is attributed to the individual (Tulakder 2016). To achieve Self-realization, it requires the diminishing of one's narrow-minded ego, and to embrace the integrity between human and nonhuman worlds (Tulakder 2016). Once this is achieved, one's behaviour "naturally" and "joyfully" aligns with environmental ethics (Naess 1986).

Today, consumer society is largely motivated by the individual self to adhere to social norms and to strive towards quantifiable satisfaction, which results in the human isolation from nature. The desire for convenience fuels the egocentric motivations of the individual self, and removes one from

the interconnectedness of the human and nonhuman world. In this essay, I will argue that the human desire for convenience prevents us from achieving Self-realization, and is a fundamental barrier to achieving sustainability.

Social Conformity and Overconsumption

It is important to understand how our personal values influence our everyday behaviour. For instance, if someone strongly values academic achievement, they will likely spend a lot of effort to attain the highest grades in school. On the other hand, if someone strongly values social equality, they might spend more time fundraising for a social cause than they would study for school. The psychologist Shalom Schwartz describes this balance of values.

Schwartz's theory of values categorizes value-types in relation to their complementarity and conflict. There are ten values spanning four categories according to this theory: self-enhancement (achievement, power, and hedonism) is in conflict with self-transcendence (universalism and benevolence), and openness to change (stimulation, self-direction) is in conflict with conservation (security, conformity, tradition). In the case of sustainability, the balance between self-enhancement and self-transcendence are more relevant. Self-enhancement values can be attained through achievement (personal success that aligns with current social standards), power (social status and prestige, superiority over others), and hedonism (pleasure for oneself) (Schwartz 1992). On the other side of the spectrum, self-transcendence values can be attained through universalism (understanding, appreciation, and protection for all life on earth) and benevolence (preservation and enhancement of people with whom one is in frequent contact) (Schwartz 1992). Self-enhancement could be compared to the concept of self-actualization, an idea initially proposed by Maslow in his pyramidal hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1943). Self-actualization is focused on the development of the individual self through the fulfillment of one's full potential (Maslow 1943). Once one has fulfilled physiological needs, safety needs, the need for belonging and self-esteem needs, only then could one obtain self-actualization

needs (Maslow 1943). In congruence with Schwartz's theory of values, self-enhancement, or self-actualization, arguably strives to expand one's narrow ego through social achievement and comparison. Self-transcendence, on the other hand, is synonymous with Self-realization, as proposed by Arne Naess. Self-transcendence and Self-realization emphasize holism and interconnectedness of one's self with other beings, whereas self-enhancement and self-actualization emphasize individual achievement based on one's personal potential, which is defined by social norms. Interestingly, in his later work, Maslow revised his hierarchal model of needs to incorporate the idea of self-transcendence: once one has achieved self-actualization, only then can they achieve self-transcendence (Maslow 1969, Koltko-Rivera 2006).

If one values social status and conforming to social norms more than the ideas that come with self-transcendence, one would favour self-enhancement values. In today's materialistic society, social norms are extremely important, and lead to a great amount of overconsumption and waste. There are societal pressures to conform to current consumptive trends, such as purchasing state-of-the-art technologies that are designed to make life easier. Additionally, there is a certain level of comfort and convenience expected as one increases their socioeconomic status (Woersdorfer 2009). An example of a social norm that is associated with convenience is the limited use of sustainable menstrual products in developed nations. Some economists say that, "Reusable sanitary waste items are not considered viable within developed countries, as contemporary women have become accustomed to efficient, non-intrusive and discrete sanitary protection" (Ashley et al. 2005). In other words, society has become accustomed to a certain level of convenience that is unsustainable since we highly value the expectations of social norms (Davidson 2012). The desire for convenience goods is perpetuated and encouraged by the media and advertising to increase consumption, leading to consumer dependence on convenience purchasing. Consumers are convinced that striving for convenience is a 'need', and are urged to use unsustainable products to make their lives easier. A study conducted by Botonaki and Mattas (2010) revealed that there are significant differences of values in consumers who favour

convenience food consumption over others who favour cooking. Consumers who value convenience are in direct conflict with the values associated with self-transcendence as described by Schwartz.

By definition, convenience consumerism would align with achievement valuation: living conveniently requires a certain level of income, and would signify success in accordance with current social standards. As mentioned above, self-enhancement includes achievement, and is in direct conflict with self-transcendence. Therefore, our desire for convenience pushes us towards the values of self-enhancement and away from Self-realization. Thus, to curb overconsumption and embrace sustainability, society needs to re-evaluate its motivations and reform its values.

Extrinsic Motivation and Short-Term Thinking

To be motivated by the deep ecology movement would mean to be motivated by the inherent value of all life on earth. With that, to be Self-realized would mean to appreciate the interconnectedness of one's Self with all life on earth and leave behind one's narrow ego. Self-realization is intended to provide one with everlasting joy and satisfaction with one's place in the world. As Arne Naess puts it, "Self-realization involves experiences of the infinitely rich joyful aspect of reality" (Naess 1986). However, humanity's desire for convenience is preventing itself from achieving Self-realization because of potent extrinsic motivations.

Psychologists define extrinsic motivations as actions that are contingent on reward or punishment (Bénabou and Tirole 2003). For instance, extrinsic motivation would influence a commuter to drive their own vehicle to work for the immediate reward of comfort and convenience. Substantial evidence shows that extrinsic motivation conflicts and undermines intrinsic motivation, which is generally defined as the desire to complete a task for its own sake (Bénabou and Tirole 2003). A commuter that takes public transit or rides a bicycle into work because they want to take a stand on emissions would be motivated intrinsically. There are well-known ecological consequences associated with short-term extrinsic motivation that prevent sustainability of future generations. In politics, for

example, leaders may push for lower fuel prices to satisfy the convenience desire of voters since they are only in power for a short period of time. Evidently extrinsic desires for convenience are not sustainable. The deeper, philosophical consequence of convenience is the undermining of intrinsic motivation, thus preventing Self-realization.

Many environmentalists see the consumer's desire for convenience as an opportunity to motivate individuals into environmentally positive behaviours, because they respond well to extrinsic motivation. If environmentally positive acts were to provide short term-reward, we would start to see environmental management (Padoch and Redford 1999). However, this idea still adheres to humanity's desire for convenience from extrinsic motivation. I am arguing that we need to rid ourselves of this desire for convenience. If we are Self-realized, convenience is no longer relevant; we would not need short-term reward systems to see environmental management. Only without this desire for convenience can we experience a long-term satisfaction through Self-realization, and with that achieve true ecological sustainability.

Isolation from Nature and Emotional Disconnection

Environmentalists all share a love for nature; how this emotional connection came about in the lives of environmentalists can be greatly varied. For instance, an individual who spends their whole life amidst a forest would likely feel an intrinsic appreciation for nature. On the other hand, individuals can often develop this love for nature unexpectedly through spontaneous experience (Katz et al. 2000). This was the case for Aldo Leopold, an American philosopher and activist. Leopold unexpectedly developed his deep connection with nature when he looked into the eyes of a wolf he had just killed and was immediately humbled by their intensity (Harding 2015). In Leopold's case, this deep experience triggered his deep ecological path (Harding 2015). Although experiences vary, true environmentalists develop their love and deep commitment for nature through deep experience. As Naess describes, to embrace the ecological Self means to understand and embrace the interconnectedness of one's Self

with nature through deep experience. After the ecological Self is accepted, Self-realization will naturally follow (Naess 1986).

Disappointingly to an environmentalist, the frequency and significance of these critical deep experiences is reduced by our desire for convenience. Our current economic system thrives off efficiency, which by definition depends upon convenience. The world survives with mass production and specialization, so that no one person is self-sufficient. For instance, a department of the forestry industry would be specialized in the distribution of logging products, as it is the most economically efficient structure. These distributers are not personally immersed in the clear-cutting themselves, and do not experience the ecological impact of the industry first-hand. Although the loggers and fallers themselves are arguably seeing the impacts, there is a feedback loop within the system that prevents them from experiencing a deep emotional connection with nature. The consumers of logging products demand more from the forests, and this motivates the need for efficiency within the logging companies; individuals are restricted from feeling emotional connection with the forest. However, if stakeholders of this industry could experience a deep, emotional connection with the forests similar to Aldo Leopold, they would be able to see interconnectedness between humanity and nature.

Alongside specialization, today's consumer expects and desires a certain level of convenience in their lifestyle. It is most convenient for goods and services to be widely accessible, so one does not have to acquire such goods and services by one's self. Growing your own vegetables is arguably very inconvenient, and sometimes it is economically unfavourable to develop a successful garden. Isolation from the earth is most convenient, which is why mass-produced food items are so accessible. In 2013, the British Nutrition Fund surveyed over 5000 school children. The survey revealed that thirteen percent of 8-11 year olds answered that pasta comes from an animal, and eighteen percent of 5-7 year olds say that fish fingers are made of chicken (BNF 2013). Most children only see food as coming from a grocery store, and clearly the education of food production is not prioritized at this age. Since most families in developed nations are not involved in the actual production of food, there is no connection

with consumption and nature. Without being immersed in the production itself, consumers are unlikely to experience a deep, emotional connection with nature and feel interconnectedness. With a lack of interconnectedness, consumers are unable to feel empathy for nature and are not inclined to act sustainably.

There are obvious ecological consequences of specialization, mass production, and highly accessible products. The deeper consequence I describe is the emotional disconnection today's consumers maintain with nature as they strive towards convenience. With this isolation there is no deep experience to be had; thus, emotional disconnection prevents the development of the ecological Self, and consequently the development of Self-realization.

Conclusion

Ecological sustainability is only possible with a change in societal values and beliefs. Instead of encouraging development of the individual self, society needs to encourage the development of the ecologically realized Self. Self-realization will disrupt the current social norms of overconsumption, short-term decision-making and isolation from nature. Self-realization can only occur if the desire for convenience is addressed and reformed.

Despite the frequency of this response, it will not be effective to point fingers towards others who are perceivably responsible for our dependence on convenience. We are all part of society; thus, we are all responsible for ecological sustainability. Each of us needs to be introspective and question our own values as consumers. We should ask ourselves, how does convenience influence our own evolution towards Self-realization? The things in life that are most gratifying require the most effort. There is value in difficulty; embrace the inconvenience!

Bibliography

Ashley, R., Blackwood, D., Souter, N., Hendry, S., Moir, J., Dunkerley, J., Davies, J., Butler, D., Cook, A., Conlin, J., Squibbs, M., Britton, A. & Goldie, P. (2005). Sustainable Disposal of Domestic Sanitary Waste. Journal of Environmental Engineering, 131, 206–215.

Bénabou, R., and J. Tirole. (2003). Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation. The Review of Economic Studies, 70(3), 489-520.

BNF. (2013) Tomatoes grow underground and pasta comes from animals, according to UK school children and teens. British Nutritional Fund. URL https://www.nutrition.org.uk/nutritioninthenews/pressreleases/1059-bnfhew2017.html [accessed 24 November 2017]

Botonaki, A. & Mattas, K. (2010). Revealing the values behind convenience food consumption. Appetite, 55, 629–638.

Davidson, A. (2012). Narratives of Menstrual Product Consumption. Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society, 32, 56–70.

Drengson, A. (2012). Some Thought on the Deep Ecology Movement. URL http://www.deepecology.org/deepecology.htm [accessed 23 November 2017]

Harding, S. (2015). What is Deep Ecology? URL https://www.schumachercollege.org.uk/learning-resources/what-is-deep-ecology [accessed 24 November 2017]

Katz, E., A. Light, and D. Rothenberg. (2000). Beneath the Surface: Critical Essays in the Philosophy of Deep Ecology. Journal of Political Ecology: Case Studies in History and Society. Cambridge, MA & London, UK: The MIT Press, 8, 328.

Koltko-Rivera, M. E. (2006). Rediscovering the later version of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: self-transcendence and opportunities for theory, research, and unification. Review of General Psychology, 10(4), 302–317.

Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. Psychological Review, 50, 370–396.

Maslow, A. H. (1969). The farther reaches of human nature. Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, 1(1), 1–9.

Naess, A. (1986). Self-Realization: an ecological approach to being in the world. Murdoch University, Murdoch.

Padoch, C. and Redford, K.H. (1999). Conservation of neotropical forests: working from traditional resource use (pp 104). Columbia University Press, New York.

Schwartz, S. H. (1992). Universals in the content and structure of values. Theoretical advances and empirical tests in 20 countries. Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 25, 1–63.

Talukder, M. (2016). On "Self-Realization" - The Ultimate Norm of Arne Naess's Ecosophy T.

Symposium, 3(2), 219-235.

Woersdorfer, J.S. (2010). When Do Social Norms Replace Status-Seeking Consumption? An Application To The Consumption Of Cleanliness. Metroeconomica, 61, 35–67.