

## Philip Cafaro

## Less is More

*Department of Philosophy  
Colorado State University  
226 Eddy Hall  
Fort Collins, CO  
U.S.A.  
Phone (+1) 970 491 2061  
Phone (+1) 970 491 4900  
cafaro@lamar.colostate.edu*

This paper argues that we should judge economic consumption by whether it improves or detracts from our lives, and act on that basis. I seek to place the issue of consumption in the context of living a good life, in order to discuss its justifiable limits. It examines two important areas of our economic activity, food consumption and transportation, from a virtue ethics perspective. Looking at these areas with our enlightened self-interest in mind, we see that less is often more, particularly for middle and upper class members of wealthy industrial societies. This is the proper viewpoint from which to consider environmentalists' calls for limiting consumption in order to protect nature.

*Keywords: virtue ethics, economics,  
consumption, overconsumption,  
preservation, wildlands.*

When it comes to economic activity, less is more. Not always, and not beyond a certain minimum level. Sometimes more really is more, and less really is less. But often, less is more. If all this piece does is open up the question of whether less is more—if all it does is remind the reader that this is a question, and that our answers to it have important repercussions—then it will have served its purpose.

Many ethicists in the ancient tradition argued that human lives could be improved through decreasing our economic activity: consuming less food, avoiding ostentatious building or entertaining, thinking less about money. For Aristotle, Seneca and Epicurus the good life was equally a life devoted to right thinking and a life *not* devoted to wealth-getting or sybaritism.<sup>1</sup> These two aspects supported each other. They were held to be key to *eudaimonia*, that complex term variously translated as 'happiness,' 'excellence,' or 'human flourishing.'

A key issue in ancient ethics was whether the pursuit of the good life entailed limiting and harshly disciplining our natural desires and acquisitiveness, or providing for their moderate fulfillment. This question in turn was related to the role that pleasure and physical satisfaction were thought to play in a good life: whether defining of it, irrelevant to it, or a more or less important part of it. A wide variety of positions were staked out on these issues which I will not attempt to summarize here. The key point is that almost all of the ancient writers argued for limiting material acquisition and our attempts to satisfy our physical desires. This was true for those who thought pleasure the greatest human good and for those who declared physical pleasure irrelevant to questions of how humans should live their

lives. It was true for those who argued that people should set moderate goals and accept moderate successes in life and for those who advocated the pursuit of perfection.

The ancient ethicists argued that limiting our economic activities and disciplining our appetites was necessary in order to live a good life. I agree. But lest I be charged with rank anthropocentrism I hasten to add that my primary motivation for making similar arguments is not humanitarian concern, but rather a concern for the many non-human beings with whom we share planet Earth. I believe that societies focused on fulfilling their true needs and individuals focused on developing their better selves would demand less of Nature. We would demand less as a matter of course in the west, where we already have a surfeit of money and material goods, and more of the same will not improve our lives. And we would actively protect nature in our own self-interest, because pursuing our higher aims demands such protection.

The importance of reining in human economic activity hardly needs emphasis in a journal devoted to bioethics. Environmental degradation and the transformation of wild nature into natural resources are overwhelmingly the result of human economic activities. More benign forms of production and lower levels of consumption are therefore typical goals of environmentalists, in addition to the preservation of wild places and species. These goals reinforce each other. For example, less paper consumption allows for less wood-pulp production. This in turn lessens the pressure to log heretofore unlogged lands, or to convert low-productivity, natural forests into high-productivity, managed tree farms.

One type of argument for such economic reforms builds upon the intrinsic value of wild nature.<sup>2</sup> If there is a value or integrity to wild places and organisms then our right to use or change or destroy them is called into question. Since all human production and consumption potentially affects wild nature, these activities also must be evaluated in terms of these effects. The morality of such use is not settled by our finding intrinsic value in nature, because human needs also generate rights. But it is self-evident that a world made up of intrinsically valuable natural entities demands a different approach than one made up merely of instrumentally valuable resources.

Note the general form of such arguments for limiting our economic activity:

- 1) A has intrinsic value.
  - 2) You should not harm or destroy entities with intrinsic value.
  - 3) Your actions will harm or destroy A.
- 
- 4) You should suspend or modify your actions.

Here “A” may be a place, a species, an individual wild animal. The effects of your actions may range in seriousness from complete obliteration to unnecessarily harassing an animal or frivolously modifying a place. The fact of A’s intrinsic value may compel a range of actions, from proactive protection to leaving something alone (the best action is often non-action) to using it respectfully and in a limited way. In all these cases, however, the question of intrinsic value is of paramount importance. Its presence doesn’t argue against all use, just as a recognition of the intrinsic value of humans does not make all use of them unethical. But it does constrain such use in important ways.

I focus on a second type of argument for limiting economic activity in this paper. Its general form is:

- 1) You should act so as to further your well-being.
  - 2) Limiting or ceasing economic activity A will further your well-being.
- 
- 3) You should limit or cease A.

“A” may stand for the physical consumption of food, time spent at work, or the development of a tract of land you own. The effects on your well-being may be to your physical health, to the overall pleasure you get out of life, to your opportunities to further your self-development. The previous type of argument asserted that recognition of an intrinsic value in wild nature significantly affects our economic calculations and argues for restraint. This second type of argument asserts that a considered view of our own well-being likewise does so.

If the key question in the first type of argument is the nature of non-human entities and whether they have an intrinsic value or integrity that I am bound to respect, the key question in this second type of argument is my own human nature and what constitutes my well-being (or happiness, excellence, maximal satisfaction). The first type of argument is deontological, grounded in an ethics of rights and duties. The second type is eudaimonistic, grounded in an ethics of human happiness and flourishing. Deontological ethics postulate our ability to act altruistically, while eudaimonistic ethics rely on the distinction between thoughtless action and action in our enlightened, widest self-interest.

The first type of argument is biocentric, the second anthropocentric. This has perhaps been a factor in the latter’s relative neglect by environmental ethicists.<sup>3</sup> Another factor may have been doubt as to whether questions of *self*-interest (enlightened or not) are truly ethical questions.<sup>4</sup> A final reason for this relative neglect may be that while the argument for the intrinsic value of wild nature is new to western ethics and hence an exciting issue to work on, the exhortation to avoid materialism and subordinate economic activities to higher values was already old in Athens and Jerusalem 2500 years ago.

Nevertheless I am convinced that greater attention to our true happiness would do as much to protect wild nature as the greater acceptance of the intrinsic value of wild nature for which so many environmental ethicists have rightly argued. Both positions, if taken to heart, would result in less consumption and a more conscious production, and hence in less environmental damage. They thus reinforce each other.<sup>5</sup>

For those of us who care, the frustration of environmental loss is compounded by the fact that so often this loss seems to serve no useful purpose: it does not appear to improve people’s lives. The last few members of a rare species of Macaw are captured and sent overseas to wealthy collectors. The species goes extinct.<sup>6</sup> The spread of photocopiers and computer printers nearly doubles U.S. office paper consumption in a decade, while recycling efforts lag. More forests are turned into tree plantations.<sup>7</sup> These patterns do not lead to genuine human benefits. But they are difficult to change because they serve the *proximate* economic ends of profits for businesses and material possession, diversion, or convenience for consumers. Environmentalists appeal beyond these proximate ends to the intrinsic value of the entities which would be destroyed in order to fulfill them. But we also argue the relative unimportance of the proximate ends to be fulfilled by this destruction. These arguments support each other. Indeed, because humans will use nature, and because

as economists rightly point out decisions of use or preservation always involve “opportunity costs,” a full ethical accounting must take both aspects into account.

In any case, issues of self-interest play an important part in environmental conflicts. If only for this reason they compel our attention. When the dam-builders and the river lovers argue before a town council or national parliament, they often clash over whether a free-flowing river and its wild inhabitants have a value which must be respected. But they also clash over what sort of society is better: one with cheaper electricity and more factories, or one where it is still possible to walk along a natural river and see and study its wild inhabitants. Again, a full account of “costs and benefits” must tote up all these aspects. It is a mistake to neglect such arguments as anthropocentric. They are important for the protagonists, and for coming to correct ethical judgments.

Let me add two caveats before turning to specific issues. First, I have no algorithm for properly meshing deontological and eudaimonistic concerns and no general theory for reconciling these two systems of ethics. This reconciliation, currently a major issue in ethical theory, would be necessary for a truly comprehensive ethics. But the arguments to follow do not presuppose a privileging of one or the other. I take it as a given that eudaimonistic concerns are important, that people will pursue their self-interest, and that one of the jobs of philosophical ethics is to help clarify and improve the judgments we make under this head.<sup>8</sup>

Second, I do not believe that these two types of argument, from the intrinsic value of nature and from enlightened self-interest, always point in the same direction, or always point towards increased environmental protection. My carving up a steak for dinner tonight might increase my pleasure or happiness. Nevertheless both environmental and animal rights concerns argue against meat-eating. Here, perhaps, duty points one way while happiness points another (but see the following section). On the other hand, my happiness depends on eating food and heating my apartment, and when I do so other intrinsically valuable beings pay a price. Here, arguably, duty does not compel nor does happiness require complete environmental abnegation.

What I do assert then is the following. First, that a full ethical accounting must take account of eudaimonistic concerns. Second, that such self-interested concerns often argue for preserving wild nature and for reining in our economic activities. Often but not always, less is more.

\* \* \*

Consider first our consumption of food. This is among our most necessary and pleasurable economic acts. It is also one of the most important ways we affect the environment. For example, “eating lower on the food chain” by switching to a meatless diet uses considerably less resources, whether calculated in land needed to grow food or energy used to produce it. As *The State of the Environment Atlas* notes:

in cycling our grain through livestock, we waste 90 percent of its protein and 96 percent of its calories. An acre of cereal can produce five times more protein than an acre devoted to meat production; and legumes (beans, lentils, peas) can produce ten times as much.<sup>9</sup>

Eating locally grown foods also limits resource use, by cutting out the energy needed to

transport food long distances. Buying food from organic growers discourages pesticide and herbicide use. And whatever diet we choose, the less we consume, the less we take from the earth.

So *if* we value environmental protection, we have a strong *prima facie* argument for eating less, for eating less meat, and for being conscious generally about what we do eat. But my main point here is that “selfish” interests also argue for many of these changes. This is true whether we consider our health or our purse, and whether we define our well-being in terms of pleasure or personal excellence.

All our pleasures and achievements rest on staying healthy, and from a health perspective westerners eat too many calories and too much meat. Studies commonly suggest Americans consume 20-30% more calories than is advisable.<sup>10</sup> Regarding meat, according to one massive study involving 26,000 respondents in California “meat eating is strongly related to deaths from heart diseases and diabetes. The more meat consumed, the greater the risk.”<sup>11</sup> This same study found that respondents who practiced vegetarianism and abstained from coffee and cigarettes lived 12 years longer than the national average. Israeli, Finnish and Australian studies have found that vegetarians have low incidences of high blood pressure, and American vegetarians are also less than half as likely to be obese as meat-eaters.<sup>12</sup> While debate continues over whether we should cut back or cut out meat from our diets, authorities seem to agree that consuming less fat and less calories is a key to living into a healthy old age.<sup>13</sup> At a minimum it seems clear that health may be preserved with a wholly vegetarian diet, so that health considerations do not stand in the way of our acting on our environmental principles (acting on the basis of deontological considerations grounded on the intrinsic value of nature).<sup>14</sup>

Objective, scientific studies are perhaps less definitive than suggestive to individuals, who must decide for themselves how and how much to eat. Here every reader must consult her own experience, and perhaps enlarge it through experiment and greater attentiveness. Personally I have found that removing meat from my diet hasn’t harmed my health or limited my vitality. My backsliding has been caused not by health problems but as a concession to taste and convenience. Indeed during those sad times when I find myself working all day at a desk a small, meatless lunch leaves me feeling better and more able to work than a larger, heavier meal.

Simple meatless diets are also less costly than more elaborate ones. Eating simply thus frees up money for other uses. And it frees up time: the time devoted to earning the money for elaborate meals; the time devoted to preparing them. One of the benefits of living in a wealthy country is that one *can* spend less on food, comparatively: in the United States people spend an average of 10% of their earnings on food, while in African countries the average is 50% and above.<sup>15</sup> Our wealth provides the opportunity to concentrate on other things besides food. But it is also possible to use up this potential savings by eating more expensively and constantly dining out. And a rich man may be just as obsessed with food as a poor man, obsessed not with whether or how he will obtain food, but with its quality.

Here though a meat-eating gourmand might reply: “I *like* my current diet! I enjoy the taste of meat and sampling varied and rich foods. I don’t want to eat what’s good for me or for the planet, but what I find most pleasurable. That is what makes life enjoyable. Further, I am wealthy enough to afford it!”

The proper response to this depends, first, on the resources commanded by this person

and their own definition of the good life; second, on whether we wish to contest this definition, or merely suggest its more efficient pursuit. Let us assume that we are talking to a wealthy person who believes that increased pleasure is life's great desideratum, and let us further accept this definition of the good life for the purpose of argument. Even in this case, reason and the nature of our physical bodies argue for moderation in eating.

First, there is a natural limit to the amount of food our bodies can handle. Beyond that point we endanger our health and hence our ability to feel pleasure. If our interlocutor says that he values current, certain pleasures over future, uncertain pains, the reply must be that rationality demands probable reasoning and the disciplining of current actions in the service of future happiness. Anyone who has been seriously ill, to the point where life itself became a burden, will be more likely to calculate rightly here.

Second, there is a natural limit to the pleasure we can obtain by eating and drinking. While a fat sirloin steak might give one great pleasure at the dinner table, two steaks aren't likely to double the pleasure. A beer at the end of the day tastes wonderful and two beers sends me into a pleasurable state, but four do not make me feel better and eight are disastrous. If I want to maximize pleasure, my best means are to remember the maxim that "hunger is the best spice" and go for an all-day hike. That is when my food tastes best, and many a gluttoned gourmand has failed to enjoy his dinner for lack of this spice. (This points to an important limitation concerning the *passive* gratification of desires, a point I return to below.) At the very least, the hungry hiker and the satisfied gourmand are on a level in terms of enjoying their dinner at the end of the day. Thus a person may enjoy food while partaking of it modestly, if her environmental principles so incline her.

This leads to a third point: that we find a variety of sensual pleasures in the active use of our healthy bodies, and overeating can lessen or make impossible these pleasures. It is a pleasure to hike along a mountain ridge or bicycle for 50 kilometers through a green countryside. It feels good to use our muscles. It even feels good to push these to the point of exhaustion (and it feels good when we stop!). There are no lack of physical, sensuous pleasures to be found in a walk through the woods: the dawn chorus of newly-arrived birds in spring, the taste of ripe huckleberries in autumn. For many people greater sensuous pleasure could be found in devoting less time to passive types of consumption and more to the active use of their bodies.<sup>16</sup>

I have been arguing as if with a wealthy person who defined the good life solely in terms of maximal pleasure. But many of us are *not* wealthy, and must cook the majority of our own dinners and pay for the rest out of a finite paycheck. It is something of a comfort then to think that with no more than a vigorous morning hike I can come to my lunch with as keen an appetite as Donald Trump to his. I do not need fancy dishes. As diverting and enjoyable as these may be, I can enjoy simpler meals just as well. And therefore I need not worry about earning the money to purchase these fancy things, or envy Mr. Trump.

Further, most of us judge our well-being not merely in terms of pleasure but also in terms of character and personal achievement. From this fuller and (to use an archaic but necessary word) less ignoble perspective, it is very much to the point that we *may* limit our consumption of food to what will gratify a healthy appetite and sustain our higher aspirations. This, I assert, is the real benefit of living in a wealthy, free society —not the opportunity to dine largely or elaborately.

In *Walden* the American philosopher Henry David Thoreau likens the provision of

economic necessities to stoking a furnace. He goes on to ask his readers:

When a man is warmed by the several modes which I have described, what does he want next? Surely not more warmth of the same kind, as more and richer food, larger and more splendid houses, finer and more abundant clothing, more numerous incessant and hotter fires, and the like. When he has obtained those things which are necessary to life, there is another alternative than to obtain the superfluities; and that is, to adventure on life now, his vacation from humbler toil having commenced. The soil, it appears, is suited to the seed, for it has sent its radicle downward, and it may now send its shoot upward also with confidence. Why has man rooted himself thus firmly in the earth, but that he may rise in the same proportion into the heavens above?<sup>17</sup>

This may sound grandiose but the question is: do you believe it? And if not: what do you believe instead? All our other judgments upon our economic lives depend on our answer here: all our calculations of profit and loss, of lives well- or ill-spent.

We need not follow Thoreau so far as to see merely an instrumental value in “stoking the furnace.” We may believe that pleasure is a necessary part of a good human life, and still agree that achievements besides maximizing pleasure are also important. First in importance is the creation of ourselves: that is, the development of personal character and lives of which we can be proud. But also such achievements as raising happy children, publishing a novel, or saving a free-flowing river for posterity. These are the things for which we strive, and on which serious people judge the success of their lives. Such self-development and personal achievement depend not on the greatest or most refined gratification of our appetites, for food or anything else. On the contrary, they demand some knowledge of when less is more, and the discipline to act on that knowledge. The healthy side to all asceticism and self-denial is its fostering of this necessary discipline and its recognition of higher goals.

The relative value of pleasure, self-development and personal achievement in a good human life, is perhaps the most vexed question in virtue ethics theory.<sup>18</sup> We may strive to live lives which further all of these, while recognizing that sometimes we must choose between them. Each of us answers this question within our own lives.<sup>19</sup> Whatever our answer, our economic lives should support it. This is not necessarily to put on a hair shirt. To the extent that wealth, or possessions, or physical pleasure further our true goals, they should be pursued—but no further. For “there is no more fatal blunderer than he who consumes the greater part of his life getting his living,”<sup>20</sup> unless it is he who consumes the greater part of his life consuming.

The most important thing wealth can buy us is the freedom to live according to our principles. We have a selfish interest in acting from principle, if only because self-esteem demands it. Thoreau writes:

It is hard to provide and cook so simple and clean a diet as will not offend the imagination; but this, I think, is to be fed when we feed the body; they should both sit down at the same table.<sup>21</sup>

Both environmental and animal rights concerns argue strongly for a simple, meatless diet.<sup>22</sup> If these concerns are our concerns, a new diet may prove easier to stomach in more

ways than one. Here is yet another way in which duty and happiness may coincide, and less may be more.

It is easy in a matter as mundane as food consumption to simply do as we have always done. And certain features of the modern economy conspire to keep us from facing up to the ethical implications of our economic choices, including an intricate division of labor and sterile modern food packaging. Little is left to overtly remind us that land is plowed and animals killed in order to sustain us. But they are. A closer attention to our experience as consumers and to what truly brings us pleasure, combined with a closer attention to our principles and what they demand, will point us towards a better way here. These are the keys to understanding what is best for ourselves and the earth, overcoming inertia and reforming our economic lives.

\* \* \*

What holds true for food holds true for consumption and use in general: whether pleasure or self-development is our goal, it is an intelligent and moderate consumption which makes for happiness, not the endless pursuit of ever more of these. Consider a second important area of our economic activity: transportation.

Transportation is as important in its environmental effects as food production and consumption. While simple forms of transportation are non-polluting and relatively benign, the spread of “car culture” at the expense of pedestrians and bicycles (and public transportation) is a leading factor in many environmental problems. Again according to *The State of the Environment Atlas*:

Cars are the largest single source of air pollutants [worldwide]. In OECD countries, for example, on average 75% of carbon monoxide emissions, 48% of nitrogen oxides, and 13% of atmospheric particulates are produced by cars and trucks . . . Lead pollution, a serious health problem in many cities especially in the Third World, is largely attributable to motor vehicle emissions . . . Expanding road networks consume scarce space, destroy wildlife habitat, and degrade both natural ecosystems and agricultural land.<sup>23</sup>

Cars are also a major source of CO<sub>2</sub>, the primary greenhouse gas, and thus important contributors to global warming.<sup>24</sup>

So if we are concerned about protecting natural areas and human health, we have a strong *prima facie* reason for using alternative modes of transportation. But as with food consumption, there is a happy confluence between what is best for nature and our own self-interest, even narrowly defined. We can lead better lives, and have more livable cities, by limiting our use of cars. But the case for this can only be made if we look critically at the purposes of transportation and all of its effects on our lives.

Personal experience has convinced me that despite the existence of car-centered infrastructures, many of us living in the urban west would be better off without cars. When I first moved to Boston, Massachusetts six years ago, a friend who was leaving the country gave me an old, beat-up auto. Having acquired the car for free, I was surprised at how much money it nevertheless cost me. Parking, insurance, fuel and repairs all took hefty bites out of my paycheck. I also had to spend my time attending to these things. Then, six months



after my move, the car was stolen. This forced me to buy the bicycle I had been intending to buy and to put together a car-less life. I found the changes an improvement.

Living close enough to the university to walk to it in twenty minutes, my morning commute was a head-clearing and relaxing introduction to the day. When I was in a hurry I could bicycle to work in five minutes. Either way allowed me to look around my neighborhood and feel the weather. In the ensuing years I usually saw my first warbler of spring not on a bird watching trip but walking by a neighborhood park. I commuted to teaching jobs around the city by subway and by bicycle. These bicycle commutes sometimes took up to an hour, much longer than by car, but they gave me exercise. Once or twice a year I rented a car for trips outside of town.

The reader may protest that one man's experience hardly proves Truths concerning The Way which is best for Humanity. I agree, and ask nothing more than that the reader consult her own experience and make her own decisions in this area. Still there are limits to human diversity. Let us take the following as the main factors affecting our personal transportation decisions: health considerations; cost considerations; considerations of convenience; environmental considerations; and what I will loosely call "experiential" considerations — our experiences in using these various transportation modes. My contention is that for many of us considerations in *all* these areas argue for junking our cars, and for walking, bicycling and mass transit. It is simply inertia and lack of imagination which keep us in our cars.

Regarding health, bicycling can help keep us active and fit. Incorporating daily exercise into our everyday schedules keeps us at it on days when we might shirk a trip to the health club. A minimum amount of exercise helps wake us up in the morning and sleep well at night. Some amount of such *active* exertion is necessary for our health, and even for our comfort. For this reason advertisements for luxury automobiles showing acres of plush upholstery and complicated features for maximizing their interior comfort, are misleading. The people getting into these autos are never pasty-faced or flabby, as they often are in real life. Better even to suffer some inconvenience and discomfort, the occasional unexpected drenching rain or grease spot on your pants, if it keeps you active and fit.

Next consider the monetary cost of owning an automobile. Those on a tight budget can appreciate the savings from not owning, insuring, fueling, or paying to park a car. These costs amounted to around 15% of my annual income, before my expenses were pared by the benevolent thievery already mentioned. Of course this was a function of my total wealth: a person with more money will calculate differently here. But cars are expensive. The money spent on them could be spent in other ways. This money also supports automobile and petroleum corporations which lobby heavily against strong environmental laws. Why support these efforts when it is possible to avoid doing so?

One answer is convenience. Here where one lives and works makes a big difference as to whether one can set up a car-less life. But the convenience factor should be *evaluated* rather than simply used to prop up our inertia. We should ask: are our lives really made more convenient by owning a car? Once one factors in the hassles involved in parking and fixing a car the answer could well be "no." Cars are often seen as more convenient because quicker than alternatives, but I have been surprised at how often I could beat my car-driving friends across town, while they were stuck in traffic or finding a parking space somewhere within five blocks of our destination (I locked my bicycle right in front, of course). Perhaps the person commanding the greatest convenience is the owner of both a car and a bicycle, and

the money to easily support them. But someone with a bike and generous car-owning friends might be even better off.

Finally, concerning “experiential “ considerations, there is a value in being out in the world on a bicycle or afoot, compared to the insulation of a car. Even in terms of comfort there are many dry and warm days when a bicycle is superior to a car. And comfort can be overvalued: aren’t we sitting on cushions rather much in the modern world? Getting rained on while cycling is usually no fun, and on garbage day the walk to work might get a little odoriferous, but at least one knows that it is raining and that it is garbage day. One knows and experiences what is happening today in one’s neighborhood. The value of this is difficult to rate, much less to weigh against convenience and other values. Yet it is a value. As an environmentalist I want to experience my environment, even when it is not pleasant.

Make this simple experiment. Select a stretch of road which you have often traveled by car, and bicycle along it instead. Next, take a bit more time and walk it. I once did this along a 10-kilometer stretch of rural highway in coastal Oregon. Having roared down it every day for a whole summer to and from work, the next summer I traded in my motorcycle for a bicycle, commuting along the same route. There were a thousand and one things that I only noticed once I began to bicycle. People, houses, trees; smells, sounds; the pitch of the terrain, the different water levels in the river at high and low tides. Not all that I noticed was pretty. There were trash dumps and junked cars. Nor was I always comfortable: one hill in particular I could have done without. But that was where I lived.

Not owning motorized transport limited my trips outside of town, and this was a genuine constraint. But I was forced to find wild nature closer to home, and perhaps this made up for my inability to seek it further afield. Traveling slower, I also noticed new construction and shoddy logging practices along the way. This made possible my informed participation in local zoning hearings and town council debates.

Because I no longer owned a motorcycle I didn’t have the choice of driving to work, and was forced to bicycle on days when I often would not have. Here less choice equaled more experience, and less convenience equaled greater knowledge of the local landscape. Modern microeconomics unequivocally says that more choice is better: give an individual a greater number of choices and more money to spend on them, and he can more fully satisfy his preferences.<sup>25</sup> Modern advertising sends the same message: look at the many new, improved car models to choose from! But this is unconvincing. For we can choose wrongly, and in such a way as to lead to less pleasure, less health and less knowledge of the world around us. One of the ways we can choose wisely is in deciding to limit our options and leaving them limited. Also, part of choosing correctly is limiting the amount of time we spend choosing, thus leaving our minds free to deal with more important things. Even concerning choice, less can be more.

We should remember that our economic actions affect us in complex ways. Transportation does not just take us from point A to point B more or less efficiently (in terms of cost and time). It also relates us to everything in between—or it can do so. Transportation changes *us*: helps make us flabby or fit, for example. And of course transportation changes the world, and in the west, that typically means choking it on pollution or destroying it by paving it over. It isn’t clear that this is in our best interests, comprehensively defined, for this world we are rushing through is also the world we must live in.

Here though the discussion must be broadened. In discussing both transportation issues

and food consumption I have focused on *individual* economic decision-making. But even from a purely selfish perspective we recognize that the actions of others affect our own well-being.<sup>26</sup> And as *citizens* we must take a wider perspective, looking to make decisions which will be best for all our fellow citizens, current and future. For both these reasons we must place questions of less or more economic activity in the realm of social policy and our vision of a good society. When we do so, considerations of a broadened self-interest often argue for communal action and mutual restraint.

Whether or not it is more convenient for *me* to own or drive a car, *we* must evaluate the effects of different transportation regimes on society. And the effects of the car have been disastrous for those urban centers which have surrendered to them. One-third or more of the total available space in the average modern city is devoted to the automobile infrastructure.<sup>27</sup> Many vital neighborhoods have been torn apart by highways, turned from places to live into places to go through.<sup>28</sup> Polluted air weakens the health of millions and governments warn parents not to let their children play outdoors.<sup>29</sup> Too often this has been accepted as the price of progress. But no amount of increased mobility, convenience, or productivity is worth the cost of air pollution so dangerous that it forces mothers to keep their children indoors on a sunny summer day. The opportunities to watch your children play and to feel your own muscles work as you exercise, are essential to a good human life. The opportunity to drive across town in half the time it would have taken by public transportation is not similarly essential.

The car promised efficiency, mobility and more individual autonomy. And in some places it has provided these to those who can afford it. But it has also reminded us of the value of communal space. It has shown us new limits to the economist's cardinal value, efficiency, for the ever faster movement of people and goods has generated tremendous noise, pollution and urban dislocation. Here we should at least recognize that choices must be made. If more personal mobility and the faster through-put of goods can only be bought at the expense of the peace and healthfulness of our homes and neighborhoods, transportation policy should be made in full awareness of that fact. And we should consider the likelihood that providing fewer personal transportation choices can improve a city's quality of life.

As cars have transformed the modern city, so they have transformed rural and wild areas. Expanding transportation networks have demanded an ever greater share of land, and the price for their development has included a massive loss of biodiversity. Roads cause direct habitat destruction, habitat fragmentation, invasion by exotic species, air and water pollution, and increased human access and activity.<sup>30</sup> They allow for the industrial development of formerly remote, inaccessible areas. Today continued road-building is one of the main threats to biodiversity worldwide.

For these reasons environmentalists oppose more roads into natural areas. We thus argue *eo ipso* for less human access, less corporate profits, and less commodification and transformation of the natural landscape generally. We do so because we believe wild nature has intrinsic value. But also because we recognize the value these organisms and places have for us and for society as a whole, *as wild and unmodified*. Just as a healthy and pleasant urban life involves reining in cars, so an enlarged view of human well-being involves reining in transportation and other developments to protect our remaining wild areas. Among the higher human activities we may include science, history and storytelling, poetry,

the visual arts and religious contemplation. All of these arguably depend on the preservation of natural areas, and hence on less human economic activity.

This is clearest in the case of science. Ever since Darwin sketched the framework of organic evolution, biologists have worked to understand the mechanisms which allow organisms to survive and adapt and thrive; the details of their community and ecosystem interactions; and their evolutionary history. Their ability to continue to do so depends, in part, on the preservation of the species which are the products of evolution. As we lose unique species and natural communities, chapters in *The Story* are lost forever. Biology also requires the preservation of large areas as “natural laboratories” for the study of unmanipulated natural processes. For non-scientists, wild places offer the opportunity to learn about and *experience* nature, and to understand, even in a rudimentary way, this tremendous story. Both great national parks and local ponds and woodlots can foster this increased understanding. They fulfill roles that books cannot, partly because evolution happened not in books but in places, partly because human understanding involves not just the intellect but the senses and imagination.

The same may be said of *human* history and historical understanding. Preserving wild areas also preserves the worlds our ancestors inhabited. While we cannot duplicate their experiences, seeing landscapes similar to the ones they saw and traveling across the land in ways and at a pace similar to theirs, allow us to better understand them. Whether as living pictures of the past, or as the scenes for our own temporary and imperfect reenactments, wild areas spur the historical imagination. They also, of course, preserve actual historic sites. If we value our history and the study of our history, we must value and protect such places.

Artists have found inspiration in wild nature from the time of the cave painters to the present day. While much modern art is abstract or urbane, the loss of wild areas forecloses possibilities for revived naturalisms in art and literature. Indeed, the loss of wild and pastoral landscapes cuts our ties to the artists and poets of the past. Would Wordsworth or Thoreau remain available to us without at least the partial preservation of the Lake District, Walden pond, and those wild areas which lie closest to our hearts? Granted that humanity will still have art and poetry in the tame, commodified, managed future toward which we are moving: we should not cut our ties needlessly and limit future poetic options.

Finally, wild areas have traditionally been places of prayer and religious inspiration, where some find spiritual experiences unavailable to them in cities and man-made temples. Whether as refuges for quiet meditation or as inspirational examples of divine power, natural areas may play a role in our spiritual lives. They remind even the atheist that there are other worlds besides the human one and other concerns besides the mundane. The value of such reminders can only increase as the world becomes busier and more crowded, at least if we continue to value wisdom and a balanced perspective on life.

A satisfactory conception of well-being extends beyond mere pleasure and physical health to encompass these nobler human activities. If we value them, we must limit those economic activities which undermine them. In a recent work, John O'Neill develops an argument for such economic restraint in the name of human development:

Those who can respond to objects only in terms of how far they impinge on narrowly utilitarian or commercial interests fail to develop their specifically human capacities of perception. The farmer who sees the world simply in terms of production yields sees not a rat,

a kestrel or a wolf but different kinds of vermin. He sees not a plant with its specific properties and qualities, but a weed . . . Hence [Aldo] Leopold's contrast: "The swoop of the hawk . . . is perceived by one as the drama of evolution. To another it is only a threat to a full frying pan."<sup>31</sup>

A poor, ignorant farmer with his back up against the wall can be pardoned for seeing rats and hawks solely as "a threat to a full frying pan." But wealth and education are valuable precisely because they allow us to move beyond this. For the wealthy and educated to imitate this narrowly utilitarian view of nature is ignoble and self-limiting.

It is in the pause from consuming, from putting things into our mouths, that we pursue knowledge, or write poetry, or commune with God or Nature. Here we are each free to pursue our own goals —within socially-constrained parameters. The key point is that decisions taken today will shape the lives of future generations. We *may* preserve natural areas from our own gross economic consumption, in order to make possible future generations' "non-consumptive" use of these areas, and the activities and achievements dependent upon it. Or we may not. Thoreau once wrote that "the gross feeder is a man in the larva state; and there are whole nations in that condition, nations without fancy or imagination, whose vast abdomens betray them."<sup>32</sup> He might have added that our vast abdomens may also betray our posterity, by limiting them to those infantile pursuits that we ourselves were content to follow.

\* \* \*

When the ancient moralists turned to economic issues, they generally argued that less was more. Recent critics of orthodox economic thinking have returned to this theme, often with environmental issues in mind. Amartya Sen asks that we replace overall Gross National Product or per capita GNP as measurements of third-world development, with measurements that more carefully track improvements in the lives and "capabilities" of citizens. Robert Lane argues that advanced economies should be judged by the happiness of their participants and the opportunities for self-development they provide, rather than solely by their capacity to create wealth. Herman Daly and John Cobb, Jr. go further, and argue that an economy which undermines local communities and environmental health is a failure, regardless of "the bottom line."<sup>33</sup>

These writers have two things in common. They engage the root question of economics: what is the purpose of the production and consumption that make up our economic lives? And their answers, while diverse, all reject wealth or increased consumption or even happiness defined as maximal pleasure, as the whole of that goal. In other words, they take orthodox economists to task for defining economic development without adequate reference to true human happiness and the development of better people and better societies.

Sen, Lane and Daly write as political economists, while I have primarily discussed the individual's personal economy. Yet our arguments run parallel. They, too, are saying that there are alternatives to viewing the purpose of economic activity as the maximization of either wealth or production/consumption, and that to ignore this is to slight our human nature. They too, along with environmentalists, see clear limits to the benefits of economic growth. Recognizing this puts economic activities in the proper, wider context of our attempts to live good lives and create good societies.

From this perspective, we will often find that less is more. Less commodification of the

landscape equals more wild nature to study and enjoy. Less resource use and smaller corporate profits equal more areas left for science, poetry, skylarking and reverence. Reason cannot tell us unambiguously what is right or best here. But it can lay our options clearly before us. Less economic consumption and production equals more wild nature. Fewer people equals more flourishing non-human life. The choices are ours to make.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For Aristotle see *Nicomachean Ethics* bk. 1 chpt. 5, and *Politics* bk. 1, chpts. 2, 8-10. For Stoics and Epicureans see Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire* (Princeton: 1994), 103-4, 360-2, 501-2.
- <sup>2</sup> On the intrinsic value of wild nature see Holmes Rolston, III, *Environmental Ethics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988) and Paul Taylor, *Respect for Nature* (Princeton: 1986).
- <sup>3</sup> This neglect is beginning to be remedied. See Thomas Hill, Jr., "Environmental Virtue Ethics: A New Direction for Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 15: 259-74 and John O'Neill, *Ecology, Policy and Politics: Human Well-Being and the Natural World* (London: Routledge, 1993).
- <sup>4</sup> Within the past fifteen years scholarly attention to eudaimonistic or "virtue ethics" has grown from a trickle to a torrent. Important to this resurgence has been Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Notre Dame Press, 1984). A useful recent collection is Peter French et al., *Midwest Studies in Philosophy Volume XIII: Character and Virtue* (Bloomington: Notre Dame Press, 1988).
- <sup>5</sup> But while a belief in the intrinsic value of wild nature is clearly a radical departure for western ethics, the "higher values over economics" argument is long-standing and is at least paid lip service by a majority of our fellow citizens. It also has the merit of appealing to their *enlightened* self-interest, and self-interest, as the economists rightly remind us, is the major well-spring of human action.
- <sup>6</sup> Edward Wilson, *The Diversity of Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 240-2.
- <sup>7</sup> Joni Seager, *The State of the Environment Atlas* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 26, 72.
- <sup>8</sup> My failure to take a position on the correct relationship between these two halves of a complete ethics imparts a systematic uncertainty to the applied conclusions which follow. This is best recognized at the outset. At the same time, it leaves the door open for those with a different meta-ethical position to consider the substantive issues raised.
- <sup>9</sup> Seager, 103.
- <sup>10</sup> *The New York Times*, May 10, 1995, "Personal Health: Common Sense and Conflicting Health Studies," by Jane Brody, section C, page 12.
- <sup>11</sup> *The New York Times*, November 11, 1986, "Adventists are Gold Mine for Research on Disease," by Jane Brody, section C, page 1, column 1.
- <sup>12</sup> *The New York Times*, October 12, 1983, "Personal Health: New Research on the Vegetarian Diet," by Jane Brody, section C, page 1, column 1.
- <sup>13</sup> Brody, 1995.
- <sup>14</sup> Brody, 1983.
- <sup>15</sup> Seager, 14.
- <sup>16</sup> Arne Naess makes this point convincingly in *Ecology, community and lifestyle: outline of an ecosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 51.
- <sup>17</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government*, 2nd ed., (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 10. Note the passage's transition from a mechanical to an organic metaphor.
- <sup>18</sup> See Amartya Sen, *On Ethics and Economics* (Oxford: 1987), 43-46, and Sen, "Capability and Well-Being," in Sen and Nussbaum, *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: 1993). Sen argues that general

- disagreements concerning what constitutes the good life need not preclude agreement on specific measures for economic and social reform. Similarly I believe that hedonists and ascetics can sometimes agree to limit their economic activity in order to support their very different life goals.
- <sup>19</sup> My “failure” to answer it definitively in this paper again imparts an ambiguity to the conclusions which follow, as did my earlier agnosticism regarding the proper relationship between deontological and eudaimonistic ethics. See the preceding note.
- <sup>20</sup> Thoreau, *Reform Papers* (Princeton: 1973), 160.
- <sup>21</sup> *Walden*, 144.
- <sup>22</sup> Standard arguments for animal rights and against meat-eating are found in Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Avon Books, 1975) and Tom Regan, *All That Dwell Therein: Animal Rights and Environmental Ethics* (Berkeley: 1982).
- <sup>23</sup> Seager, 108-9.
- <sup>24</sup> Seager, 31, 50, 115.
- <sup>25</sup> Paul Heyne, *The Economic Way of Thinking*, 7th ed. (New York: MacMillan Press, 1994), 178.
- <sup>26</sup> Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” in Hardin and Baden, *Managing the Commons* (San Francisco: Freeman Press, 1977).
- <sup>27</sup> Seager, 108.
- <sup>28</sup> For insight into this process in the United States see Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* ((New York: Knopf, 1974).
- <sup>29</sup> Seager, 28-9.
- <sup>30</sup> Richard Primack, *Essentials of Conservation Biology* (Sunderland, MA: Sinauer and Associates, 1993).
- <sup>31</sup> O’Neill, 160. Like many of the philosophers and economists calling for the economic reforms suggested in this paper, O’Neill looks to Aristotle and the early Marx for support.
- <sup>32</sup> *Walden*, 144.
- <sup>33</sup> Amartya Sen, *The Standard of Living* (Cambridge: 1987); Robert Lane, *The Market Experience* (Cambridge: 1991); Herman Daly and John Cobb, Jr., *For the Common Good* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989). Before these works there was E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* (London: Blond and Briggs, 1973).