

## **Ethics and Sustainable Consumption**

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### **Abstract**

The paper provides a philosophical-ethical perspective on sustainable consumption. We start by briefly outlining a concept of SD. This serves as a background for developing an understanding of sustainable consumption as encompassing behavior that reduces pressure on humanity's environmental and social base of livelihood, that respects other individuals' ability to live a decent human life and that does not overburden its addressees. Subsequently, we introduce the distinction between weak and strong sustainable consumption and argue in favor of the latter. We then turn to (what in our view constitutes) the ethical core issue regarding sustainable consumption: Is it legitimate to claim that individuals need to consume more sustainably? We answer this question in the affirmative and distinguish three equally important, complementary individual duties: duties to comply, to promote and to contribute one's fair share. Finally, we turn back to the claim that such duties must not overburden individuals. We explain why ethics cannot (exactly) delimit an individual's duties but stress that this does not yield individual duties the least bit less binding.

### **1 Introduction**

Ethics constitutes the sub-discipline of philosophy dedicated to the academic study of human practices, customs and conventions (Düwell et al. 2002). One way to describe philosophy is that it is concerned with reflections upon basic concerns within human life. Consuming things essentially belongs to human life. A philosophical-ethical perspective on sustainable consumption aims to make transparent the implicit and sometimes unquestioned assumptions behind arguments. This renders such assumptions accessible and subject to critique (see Ott et al. 2011).

Sustainable development (SD) constitutes a leading model for contemporary societal development. Despite or probably because of this, the complex idea of SD has often been used as a catch-phrase without specific meaning. Different parties interpret the concept according to their particular interests<sup>1</sup>. In so far as this is the case, the concept is no longer suited for guiding societal development. Therefore, to approach sustainable consumption from a philosophical-ethical perspective first of all necessitates delineating what we mean when we

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speak about SD (section 2). This then allows briefly specifying our notion of sustainable consumption (section 3).

Normative ethics focuses on what humans owe to each other as moral persons (Scanlon 2000). Thus, a normative-ethical approach towards sustainable consumption asks if we as a society as well as everyone of us as a single individual are obliged to take up sustainable consumption (section 4). A general principle in ethics is 'ought implies can'. A moral imperative that cannot be met is not valid. The ability to meet moral demands is not limited to cognitive and physical ability but needs to take into account the psychological 'costs' of complying with obligations. Ensuring that claims for sustainable consumption do not overburden individuals is a constitutive and important part of a normative-ethical approach towards sustainable consumption (section 5).

## **2 A normative concept of sustainable development**

Though there exist a multitude of definitions and conceptions of sustainability, they all take responsibility of contemporary humans for posterity as a starting point (Becker 2012; Burger und Christen 2011; Christen und Schmidt 2012; Norton 2005). Acknowledging responsibilities for future humans, it would be inconsistent not to recognize responsibilities towards contemporary humans. Thus, there is a strong link between sustainability questions and questions of intra- and intergenerational justice (Schultz et al. 2008; Schultz et al. 2013). We therefore understand SD as claiming that all contemporary and future human beings should be able to live a decent human life (WCED 1987).

Furthermore, it is constitutive of SD to acknowledge that the ability to live a decent human life necessarily presupposes certain environmental and social conditions. Accordingly, we understand the concept of SD to encompass two kinds of claims: (Voget-Kleschin 2013b)<sup>i</sup>

- (i) Direct claims for justice ask us to behave in a way that our interaction with other people avoids violating their ability to live a decent human life.
- (ii) Indirect claims for justice encompass claims for a handling of our social and natural environment that qualifies as not undermining contemporary and future humans' ability to live such a decent human life.

Finally, we understand direct and indirect claims for justice as equally important and mutually constraining each other.

The first aspect (i) does of course entail claims in regard to our consumption behavior in so far as this involves interactions with other people. By way of example, this holds for our interaction with sales personal at the point of sale, meaning that such interactions must not violate their ability to live a decent human life. Furthermore, in buying certain products we arguably interact with individuals in the commodity chain. Thus, in buying fair trade rather than conventional coffee we contribute to fostering certain production conditions. The first aspect entails that in any such interactions we need to respect other people's claims to a decent human life. In addition, (i) entails a further insight: For an individual (or group or society), changing behavior towards more sustainable consumption is often costly in terms of money, time and effort.<sup>ii</sup> Thus, claims for more sustainable consumption burden individuals. Acknowledging that SD is about direct claims for justice does imply that to qualify as more sustainable consumption, a measure or act must not violate the claim to a decent human life of those individuals or societies which we expect to consume sustainably. To put it simply, claims for sustainable consumption must not overburden their addressees. We will come back to this issue in the final section.

The second aspect (ii) translates into the claim that an act or measure does only qualify as (more<sup>iii</sup>) sustainable consumption if it results in less pressure on humanity's environmental and social base of livelihood than conventional consumption. If and in how far a certain act or measure complies with such claims depends on its consequences. It is therefore closely linked to empirical questions. Yet, the question what qualifies as pressure and sufficient reduction of such pressures respectively involves not only empirical information but also value judgments.

The paradigmatic example regards the debate about weak versus strong sustainability. Proponents of weak sustainability argue that natural capital (that is, the natural base of human livelihood) can be substituted for by human and real capital. Therefore, according to weak sustainability, what we need to preserve for future generations is the aggregate capital stock, that is, the sum total of natural, human and real capital: "Loosely speaking, according to WS [weak sustainability] it does not matter whether the current generation uses up non-renewable resources or pollutes the environment as long as enough machineries, roads and ports as well as schools and universities are built in compensation." (Neumayer 2010: 1) By contrast, strong sustainability negates such substitutability. It therefore claims that we need to maintain at least parts if not all of natural capital (ibid.). Elsewhere, we have argued in favor of strong sustainability (e.g. Ott et al. 2011). Among the arguments discussed we have named a critique of the general economic framework on which the concept of weak sustainability relies,

adherence to the precautionary principle and a better compatibility with the argumentative framework of environmental ethics (ibid.). It should be obvious that these arguments – as well as any potential refutation – cannot rely on empirical information alone but necessarily draws on value judgments.

### **3 Specifying more sustainable consumption**

The distinction between weak and strong sustainability is closely connected to distinguishing between weak and strong sustainable consumption.<sup>iv</sup> Weak - or mainstream (Seyfang 2011) - sustainable consumption primarily focuses on improving consumption efficiency, that is, the amount of environmental burden per product unit consumed. It maintains the notion of consumption as a proxy for utility. Thus it can be dubbed 'green' or 'ethical' consumerism. The problem with such a notion of sustainable consumption lies in that it retains 'consumerism'. However, as soon as the rate of increase in consumption exceeds the rate of increase of consumption efficiency, this results in an absolute increase rather than decrease of consumption.<sup>v</sup>

By contrast, strong – or new economics (ibid.) - sustainable consumption aims at reducing absolute consumption levels. It therefore avoids rebounds. Strong sustainable consumption recognizes that consumption of goods and services is not necessarily linearly correlated to wellbeing and investigates alternative, non or less consumptive ways of achieving wellbeing. Furthermore, it acknowledges individuals' embeddedness in infrastructures of provision as well as social institutions (ibid.). This allows diagnosing first how certain infrastructures and institutions inhibit more sustainable consumption and second, how changing infrastructures and institutions contributes to facilitating more sustainable consumption. Thus, strong sustainable consumption constitutes a broad notion encompassing individual lifestyle changes that are not directly related to consuming goods or services as well as institutional and infrastructural changes aiming at governing individuals towards such more sustainable lifestyles.

Table 1 juxtaposes characteristic features of mainstream and new economics models of sustainable consumption.

Table 1: Comparing mainstream and New Economics models of sustainable consumption

	<b>Mainstream Sustainable Consumption</b>	<b>New Economic Sustainable Consumption</b>
<b>Objective</b>	Incremental improvements in resource efficiency; continual economic growth through ,consuming differently’	System-wide changes in infrastructures of provision to reduce absolute consumption levels by ‘consuming less’
<b>Mechanism</b>	Sustainable consumers send market signals for sustainably-produced goods and services, which drives innovation and improvement	Collective action reshapes socio-technical infrastructures of provision, creating new systems and non-market alternatives where necessary
<b>Consumers</b>	Individual green consumers	Ecological citizens within communities of place, practice and interest
<b>Progress measured by</b>	Traditional measures of economic growth; consumption as a proxy for utility (happiness)	New measures of sustainable wellbeing; consumption not necessarily related to wellbeing
<b>Theories of consumption</b>	Utilitarian Social/ psychological	Social/ psychological Infrastructures of Provision
<b>Examples</b>	Green and ethical consumerism; corporate greening of global capitalism; social marketing	Local provisioning e.g. farmers’ markets; mutual aid e.g. LETS; self-reliance e.g. low-impact development

*Source: Seyfang 2011, p. 21*

In the remainder of this paper we adhere to a position of strong sustainable consumption. The first reason for doing so is that we adhere to strong sustainability (Cf. Ott et al. 2011, Voegt-Kleschin 2013b, submitted). Strong sustainability inter alia encompasses a critique of the general economic framework of neoclassical mainstream economics (Neumayer 2010, Ott et al. 2011). As demonstrated in table 1, weak or mainstream sustainable consumption is very much grounded in these same neoclassical assumptions. Accordingly, we hold that from a position of strong sustainability, strong sustainable consumption is much more convincing than weak sustainable consumption. More specifically, we hold that weak sustainable consumption will run into rebound effects (see above, especially footnote v) and does therefore fail to relieve the pressure on natural capital. Because of this, it is not universalizable. In our view, weak sustainable consumption constitutes an improvement of consumptive patterns in rich societies but does not offer a role model for a globally emerging middle class. This is so because we do not conceive of weak sustainable consumption as a first step that might or will eventually lead into strong(er) sustainable consumption. Rather, in our view, in so far as weak

and strong sustainable consumption are grounded in different objectives and theories of consumption they constitute two different trajectories.

As table 1 shows, strong sustainable consumption asks for more radical lifestyle changes. Therefore, ethical questions related to sustainable consumption are more pronounced in regard to strong sustainable consumption. This constitutes the second reason for our focusing on strong sustainable consumption in the remainder of this paper. However, the same ethical questions do also occur in regard to weak sustainable consumption, though probably less pronounced. Accordingly, even those readers not convinced by our (necessarily brief) justification of strong sustainable consumption might gain from the subsequent discussion of related ethical issues.

## **4 Is it legitimate to ask individuals to consume in a (more) sustainable manner? <sup>vi</sup>**

In the philosophical literature on individual obligations regarding what is called environmental duties several authors have denied that there is such a thing as duties to change one's individual behavior such as one's consumption behavior (e.g. Neuteleers 2010; Johnson 2003; Sinnott-Armstrong 2010; Sandberg 2011, Cripps 2013). These authors generally argue that obligations regarding SD primarily apply to governments. Governments are assigned the duty to implement political institutions that ensure SD. Obviously this is not without implications regarding individual behavior. First, the aim of political institutions actually is to govern individual behavior. Therefore, for institutions to be effective requires individuals to *comply* with these institutions. Second, although political institutions result from collective action broadly conceived, such collective action is not detached but rather emerges from individual behavior. Therefore, in a situation where political institutions are lacking, a claim for collective action aiming at implementing such institutions yields a corresponding individual obligation to engage in collective action to *promote* such political institutions. Thus, the above-mentioned authors reason individuals' obligations as encompassing duties to comply and duties to promote.

### **4.1 Duties to comply**

Formal, political institutions constrain individual behavior.<sup>vii</sup> It seems plausible that individuals promote such formal political institutions only if they are prepared to accept the corresponding constraints. Democratic political changes necessitate that a majority of individuals promotes institutional changes. However, political institutions do not only bind

those individuals who show their acceptance by politically promoting them or leastwise accept them for internal reasons (rather than because they are linked to external sanctions). On the contrary, institutions bind everybody falling under their scope.

Institutions aiming at more sustainable consumption typically result in constraints on so far (rather) unconstrained behavioral possibilities, namely such that are widely conceived of as private, e.g. mobility behavior, behavior related to one's place of living, or food consumption. Therefore, an important line of argument against such institutions points to the liberal principle according to which the state should not interfere with individuals' ideas about how to live (principle of neutrality).<sup>viii</sup> However, as Rawls (1988) points out, some of the connotations the term neutrality evokes are highly misleading. To put it simply, as social practice theory demonstrates, any kind of individual behavior is always influenced by social constraints, norms of social interaction, infrastructures and material organization of spaces, timescapes and routines (see Southerton et al. 2004). Though political institutions cannot determine any of these, they deliberately aim to and in fact do influence all of them. However, if any institutional frame affects individual choices as well as the effects these choices have on individuals' quality of life, it is inadequate to assume that a situation prior to the implementation of an institution aiming at eliciting more sustainable consumption does generally involve less constraints as compared to a situation post such implementation. Take the example of introducing a tax on kerosene. Assume that the aim of such a tax was to govern individuals to increase train and coach rides at the expense of air travel. Our argument than reads as pointing out that it is more adequate to perceive the situation prior to the implementation of this tax as involving *different* constraints (e.g. no tax on kerosene, tax on railway and coach travel) as compared to a situation post such implementation (e.g. tax on kerosene, tax on railway and coach travel). While the situation with a tax on kerosene does arguably entail disincentives regarding air travel, so does the situation without such a tax entail disincentives regarding other forms of travel.

Thus, the state cannot avoid setting some institutional frame. Therefore, it cannot avoid influencing people's choices, ranging from narrow market choices to more seminal choices such as where to live or which job to take. This means that neutrality of influence is chimerical. Rather than asking if constraints resulting from institutions aiming at overcoming global environmental problems are legitimate we need to focus on *how* and *to what degree* individuals' choices can be legitimately constrained (see Voget-Kleschin, submitted). We will come back to this issue in section 5.<sup>ix</sup>

## **4.2 Duties to promote**

Duties to promote initially refer to any kind of action that primarily aims at promoting yet non-existent formal institutions as well as infrastructure, e.g. public transport systems. Examples for duties to promote include classical political actions such as voting and participating in demonstrations but also action such as supporting an environmental organization, participating in a consumer boycott or trying to convince friends of an opinion (Neuteleers 2010). However, possibilities for promoting are not limited to such political behavior. Rather, individual behavior not primarily aimed at promoting formal institutions may nevertheless contribute towards promotion. First, it can act as political signal to policy makers. By way of example, if I, as well as a sufficient amount of other people, each decide to commute via public transport rather than by private car, this can motivate the authority in charge to increase frequency of public transport. Thus my behavior can promote formal institutions (ibid.). Furthermore, my behavior may also feature communicative value towards fellow citizens. Accordingly, my behavior might first, directly motivate other people to adopt certain consumption choices. Thus, a friend of mine might like my tasty vegetarian cooking and try out some vegetarian recipes herself (direct diffusion, see Neuteleers 2010). Second, if many people change their lifestyles in a certain way, this might influence customs, habits, norms and status, that is, informal institutions (indirect diffusion, ibid.). Finally, the communicative value of individual behavior is not limited to positive signals towards more sustainable consumption. Rather, it can also work in the opposite direction. By way of example, Sinnot-Armstrong (2010) thinks it legitimate to adhere to a certain behavior such as driving a gaz guzzling SUV for fun while concurrently engaging politically to constrain just such behavior. He reasons this claim by the allegedly higher effectiveness of political behavior as opposed to individual behavioral change. However, he overlooks the communicative disvalue of his act: his Sunday joy ride might well undermine his political efforts by rendering them hypocritical. Thus, individual behavior that runs counter to one's political efforts towards more sustainable consumption antagonizes the success of such efforts by undermining an individual's credibility.<sup>x</sup>

## **4.3 A third kind of individual duties**

The contentious issue that the above mentioned authors negate relates to the question if there exists a third type of duty, namely a duty to change one's lifestyle<sup>xi</sup> even if this does not have any kind of communicative value. A typical example refers to reducing time in the shower or to shower with cold water so as to save energy and water (see Neuteleers 2010). Given that most people might not be inclined to discuss their showering habits with others, this action does not feature communicative value. Rather, the intuitive argument behind such a duty is

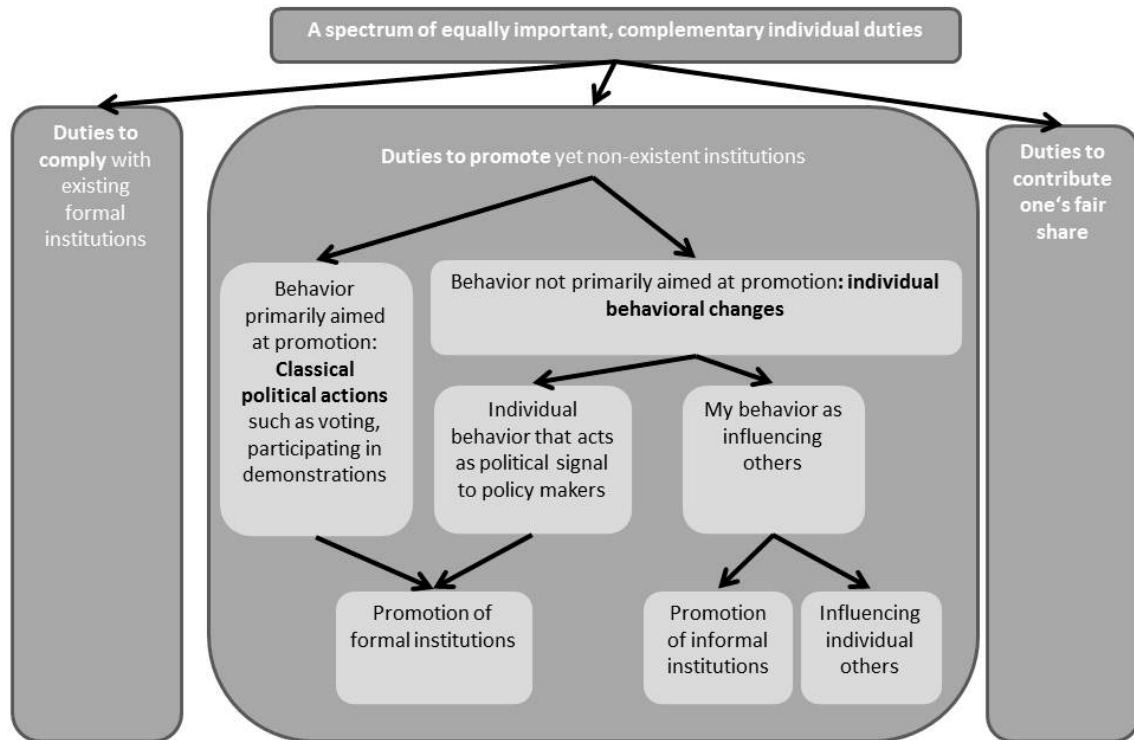


that each individual should contribute her bit towards collective sustainable development. It can thus be designated as a duty to contribute one's fair share (see Baatz 2014). It is important to note that the question is not whether we have a duty to comply and promote *or* a duty to contribute our individual fair share. Rather, the question at stake is if, *in addition* to our duties to comply and promote we *also* have a duty to contribute our individual fair share. A common argument against such a duty points out that individual behavioral changes feature negligible effects only (Sandberg 2011). However, first, the empirics of this claim can be contested (Hiller 2011, Nolt 2011, 2013). Furthermore, in so far as this claim does hold, one could argue that it applies to duties to promote as well. That is, political institutions usually emerge by individuals lobbying for such actions. However, imagine I engage in a Greenpeace campaign to cut GHG emission or lobby for a green party. Given that I might be a very poor campaigner or a bad team player, not only might the effect of my joining the collective effort be negligible, it might even constrain rather than support the political endeavor.

A second important argument against duties to contribute one's fair share points out that such duties overburden individuals. That is, taking up more sustainable consumption necessitates individual resources such as knowledge, competence, being prepared to turn away from beloved routines and habits not to mention time and (sometimes) money. The argument goes that asking individuals to invest these resources into more sustainable consumption is asking for too much. However, once again this argument does not specifically cover duties to contribute one's fair share. Rather, it applies to duties to promote as well. This is because obviously complying with duties to promote might be as demanding in terms of the individual resources listed above as complying with a duty to contribute one's fair share.

Furthermore, we hold the argument that claims for individual contributions (in terms of promoting institutions and in terms of contributing one's fair share) can overburden individuals to be a very important argument. This is so because according to the understanding of SD as laid down in this paper (cf. section 2) demands that overburden individuals do not qualify as contributing towards SD at all. Nevertheless, we hold that pointing to such possibilities of overburdening does not undermine the task of reasoning claims for individual contributions towards SD. Rather, it highlights that such claims need to be specified in a way that avoids such overburdening. We will address this issue in the final section. Figure 1 summarizes the spectrum of individual duties.

Figure 1: A spectrum of equally important, complementary individual duties



Source: own, building on Neuteleers 2010: 510

## 5 Specifying obligations: individual duties as imperfect duties

Lifestyle changes may be linked to quite substantial economic, social and/or psychological costs. These costs will vary, depending on the circumstances individuals are in.<sup>xii</sup> By way of example, it will presumably be easier for an urban single to give up her car than it will be for a rural family to abandon even their second car. The obligation to change one's lifestyle only holds if doing so can be reasonably demanded. On a general level of analysis, it is not possible to specify this claim, because to determine whether or not certain obligations overburden individuals, we need information regarding the circumstances an individual is in. If we knew the exact circumstances a person is in, we would be able to determine whether or not certain obligations overburden her. However, we cannot know so because of structural reasons. That is to say, we cannot determine from the outside (i.e. from the perspective of a fellow citizen) how big the costs involved in certain actions are for specific individuals. Returning to the shower-example, how big the burden of taking a cold shower really is cannot be determined from the outside but can only be judged by the individual herself. Therefore, individual lifestyle

changes are imperfect duties in the Kantian sense (Johnson 2011).<sup>xiii</sup> According to Kant (1996: 156), perfect duties are determinate whereas imperfect duties are wide duties in that “the duty has in it a latitude for doing more or less, and no specific limits can be assigned to what should be done”. In so far as ethics thus cannot (exactly) delimit an individual’s duties, imperfect duties mark limits of ethics as ethics.

However, this does not mean that what should be done is left to an individual’s convenience. Imperfect duties remain duties: First, in so far as they have information regarding the situation individuals are in, common deliberation among moral persons can determine a range within which the fulfillment of imperfect obligations should fall. For example, we might judge that it is less problematic to nudge or even oblige an urban single to give up her car than to apply the same measures to a rural family. Second, that duties are imperfect does only mean that their extent cannot be determined from the outside. This does not make them the slightest bit less binding. In terms of our example, the individual herself must assess how great the burden of taking a cold shower is for her. That is, an individual cannot do as she pleases but must (try to) assess as impartially as possible what she ought to do from the moral point of view.

## **6 Conclusion**

In this paper we have provided a philosophical-ethical perspective on sustainable consumption. We have argued that doing so first of all necessitates clarifying our understanding of SD. In this regard we have briefly outlined a concept of SD as encompassing direct and indirect claims for intra- and intergenerational justice. Turning to sustainable consumption, we have argued that against this background, sustainable consumption encompasses behavior that reduces pressure on humanity’s environmental and social base of livelihood, that respects other individuals’ ability to live a decent human life and that does not overburden those individuals which we expect to consume sustainably. Subsequently, we introduced the distinction between weak and strong sustainable consumption and argued in favor of the latter. We then turned to what in our view constitutes the ethical core issue regarding sustainable consumption namely if it is legitimate to claim that individuals need to consume more sustainably. We answer this question in the affirmative and distinguish three equally important, complementary individual duties: duties to comply, to promote and to contribute one’s fair share. Finally, we turn back to the claim that such duties must not overburden individuals. We explain why ethics cannot (exactly) delimit an individual’s duties but stress that this does not yield individual duties the least bit less binding.

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<sup>i</sup> It is important to note first, that such a concept of SD is embedded in higher-ranking normative positions regarding normative ethics. In our case this takes the form of a commitment to discourse ethics. Second, depicting SD as encompassing direct and indirect claims for justice as such does not suffice for reasoning action-guiding claims. Rather, action guidance necessitates further specifications, most notably in regard to scope, pattern and currency of justice. (see Voget-Kleschin 2013a)

<sup>ii</sup> It is questionable if such a behavioral change is *necessarily* costly. On the one hand there are win-win possibilities, especially in regard to monetary costs. Thus, reducing travel, living space or meat consumption goes along with reducing expenses in these areas. On the other hand, the relation is less clear in regard to time and effort. In so far as most if not all everyday-behavior is based upon routines and habits, any change will *initially* produce costs in terms of time and effort. As new routines and habits develop, these initial costs will cease. In regard to the general question if more sustainable practices are more or less costly regarding time and effort, we tentatively propose an inverse relation regarding time and effort: Some more sustainable practices, such as travelling less will indeed free up time. However, we propose that many individuals will experience such drastic changes as being rather costly in terms of reducing quality of life. Other, less radical changes such as substituting a private car by public transport will be less costly in terms of effort but will prove more time-consuming.

<sup>iii</sup> We do not hold it to be possible to define a (group of) lifestyle(s) as sustainable. What we do hold is that it is possible to ordinally rank different lifestyles according to their sustainability. Again, we do not hold that it is possible to give a complete ordering. The less demanding thesis we presuppose here is that it is (sometimes) possible to identify different choices as well as different lifestyles as more and less sustainable respectively.

<sup>iv</sup> However, it is important to note that though they are closely connected, the two distinctions do not necessarily coincide.

<sup>v</sup> This phenomenon is generally designated as rebound effect. Historically, this effect was first described by William Stanley Jevons. (see Jevons 1866) Since increase in consumption as a result of increase in efficiency runs counter to popular intuition, the effect was historically called 'Jevons' paradox'. (ibid.)

<sup>vi</sup> The arguments in this section draw on Voget-Kleschin und Baatz 2013.

<sup>vii</sup> As discussed in the introduction to section four, duties to comply and to promote are grounded in an argument according to which governments are assigned the duty to implement political institutions that ensure SD. Accordingly, in duties to comply with *institutions* the term institutions refers to a narrow understanding of formal institutions. This is not to say that we generally equalize the term institutions with formal institutions. Rather, in adopting a strong sustainable consumption perspective we explicitly acknowledge the existence and importance of informal institutions. Furthermore, in regard to duties to promote we discuss the promotion of both formal and informal institutions (cf. section 4.2).

<sup>viii</sup> See Grunwald 2010. Corresponding arguments are often implied in popular protest against regulations of so far unregulated issues such as public smoking. A recent and rather vigorous example consist in the protest against a proposal of a mandatory veggie day in all public canteens, issued by the German Greens in the course of their election campaign. (see Hawley 2013)

<sup>ix</sup> Note that it is not paternalistic if citizens themselves democratically opt for laws, regulations and incentives that constrain their behavior.

<sup>x</sup> Note, that the credibility of persons who promote (strong) sustainable consumption will always be challenged by opponents who try to find remaining 'weak points'. Those who won't change at all always like to accuse forerunners as hypocrites.

<sup>xi</sup> In the following, whenever we speak of duties to change one's lifestyle, we presuppose that the current lifestyle is unsustainable.

<sup>xii</sup> Among others, these circumstances do also encompass whether others do their fair share. The question if and how non-compliance by other individuals affect the duty of complying agents is a major question within so called non-ideal theory. (see Murphy 2003)

<sup>xiii</sup> Johnson discusses duties to lower one's GHG emissions but his argument equally applies to individual lifestyle changes more generally.