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## AN INQUIRY INTO THE *MOTTAINAI* ETHICS ON CONSUMPTION

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### Abstract

This paper aims to discuss about the ethics on consumption to think of what the wasteful consumption means, mainly referring to the concept of "*mottainai*" in Japanese. This word is introduced to the world by Wangari Maathai, Kenyan environmentalist and Nobel Prize winner. This paper argues that the *mottainai* ethics on consumption was originally based on one's modesty and subjective ideals respecting the virtues of thrift, moderation and self-realization. This paper points out that the recent trend in encouraging the quantification of the objective value of all the goods so that one may not pay more than the value we consume - the so-called "*financialization*" - has changed the criteria for *mottainai* unwisely. They have replaced *themselves* (modesty) with *the market price* as the criteria for judging whether each consumption can be construed as *mottainai*. Insightful perspectives of Thorstein Veblen, Jon Elster and Yasuo Yuasa on consumption are reviewed.

*Keywords:* Envy-avoidance, *Mottainai*, Quality of Life, Wangari Maathai, Yasuo Yuasa

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### 1. Introduction

No taxpayer would be willing to accept the wasteful governmental expenditure. Though whether the governmental expenditure in question is useful or wasteful does not matter from the perspective that it creates an effective demand in the Keynes' term, all the taxpayer would rather not finance if it is definitely wasteful. With the same logic, can we say that no consumer would be willing to accept the wasteful consumption? How should we think of our conspicuous consumption? From the perspective that it can create an effective demand, whether the consumption in question is useful or wasteful does not matter. One says, particularly in a textbook of Management studies, that we should take care of overspending or we should learn how to evaluate the real value of goods and services, so that we may not pay more than the real value we consume. The other says that we should avoid conspicuous consumption and should not exceed our own bounds (we should abstain from buying lavish food and luxurious goods). But another says that it is completely at one's discretion to decide how we consume within the incomes earned upon our talents and efforts.

It is not easy to draw a clear demarcation between useful consumption and wasteful or dissipated consumption. However, we feel that there should exist the demarcation such that the consumption function  $C$  is composed of basic or useful consumption and wasteful or dissipated consumption. In spite of it, the mainstream economics which is based upon the ideals of maximizing the preference satisfaction of *homo-economicus*, typically appearing in the neo-classical economic theory as a maximizer of utility, understates the point. The main activity of *homo economicus* is to calculate preference satisfaction within the available freedom of *manoeuvre*. This

freedom of manoeuvre might be bounded by the preference of others. Though the mainstream economics understates, our economic behaviour on consumption is subject to the preference curve drawn upon our own "subjective" ideals for restraining wasteful expenditures. In our life, we are seeking and often compromising the realization of our own subjective ideals. That is, we would say that our economy is characterized, at the aggregate level, as the result of seeking and compromising our own subjective ideals.

This paper aims to discuss about the ethics on consumption to think of what the wasteful consumption means, mainly referring to the concept of "*mottainai*" in Japanese. Professor Wangari Maathai, Kenyan environmentalist and Nobel Prize winner, is well known as a promoter of *mottainai* as an environmental protection concept. When she visited Japan for an event related to the Kyoto Protocol in 2005, she was given a shirt with the word "*MOTTAINAI*" written on it. She wore that shirt at the Kyoto Protocol conferences and asked the audience to use the word in their everyday lives. She became a widely recognized celebrity particularly in Japan for this.

This paper aims to review the origin of *mottainai* ethics on consumption. We find that besides this word is emphasized as a environment protection concept, the *mottainai* ethics was based on one's modesty and subjective ideals respecting the virtue of thrift, moderation and self-realization. It seems that this basis was quite different from the "envy-avoidance" mechanism which works as the cement of society suggested by Jon Elster. On the other hand, this paper points out that the recent trend in encouraging people to quantify the objective value of all the goods so that they may not pay more than the value they consume - the so-called "*financialization*" - has unwisely changed the criteria for *mottainai*. In the Japanese society, they seem to have replaced *themselves* (modesty) with *the market price* as the criteria for judging whether each consumption can be construed as *mottainai*. This paper also reviews the insightful perspectives of Thorstein Veblen, one of the founders of classical Institutional Economics, on "conspicuous waste" and of Yasuo Yuasa, the Japanese philosopher known as a pioneer who conducted a land-breaking work for comparing the business ethics embedded in the Western capitalism and the Japanese capitalism to find different *ethos* in the Max Weber's term.

## 2. "Mottainai" Ethics on Consumption

Professor Wangari Maathai, being awarded the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize, is the founder of the Green Belt Movement, an environmentalist, a civil society and women's rights activist. "*MOTTAINAI*" Campaign - to shape sustainable and cyclical society on a global scale by promoting the most of limited resources and using them as efficiently as possible: as represented by the "3Rs": to "reduce" waste, "reuse" finite resources, and "recycle" what we can - was initiated by her. When she visited Japan in February 2005, she met up with Japanese tongue *mottainai*. She had sympathy deeply for it, and propounded to spread *mottainai* around the world as a common keyword for conserving environment (Mottainai Home, 2012).

*Mottainai* (もったいない、勿体無い) is a Japanese term meaning "a sense of regret concerning waste when the intrinsic value of an object or resource is not properly utilized" (Mottainai Home 2012). The expression "*Mottainai!*" can be uttered alone as an exclamation when something useful, such as food or time, is wasted, meaning roughly "Oh, what a waste!" In addition to its primary sense of "wasteful", the word is also used to mean "impious; irreverent" or "more than one deserves".

It is suggestive that this word seems to have these two different meanings; "what a waste!" and "more than one deserves!". This shows a dimension of traditional Japanese ethics on consumption. On the one hand, *before* they buy a goods (when the goods has not yet been owned by them), they check with modesty whether they deserve the goods. If they find (or they think that they should find) another inexpensive one which they think they deserve,

they think of the first goods as "*mottainai!*" meaning "more than one deserves!". On the other hand, *after* they bought a goods (when the goods has already been owned by them), they check with modesty whether they still deserve the goods. If they throw away the goods which they think they still deserve, they think of the action of throwing it away as "*mottainai!*" meaning "what a waste!". An anonymous writer in *Mottainai* Wikipedia (2012) says that "*Mottainai* in Japanese refers to far more than just physical waste (resources). It can refer to wasted and wasteful efforts and actions, activities, time, souls, talents, emotion, minds, dreams, and potential. It is even used to refer to thought patterns that give rise to wasteful action".

In my view, the word of *mottainai* shows a dimension of traditional Japanese ethics on pre-consumption as well as post-consumption. In the pre-consumption, they were disciplined to buy modest goods, as if they thought that they were not yet worthy for luxurious goods, respecting the virtue of thrift. In the post-consumption, they were disciplined to use their owned goods as long as they could, as if in doing so they tried to become worthy for the owned goods, respecting the virtue of thrift.

This ethics on consumption was underpinned by the virtue of modesty and self-realization. It is said that in the ancient Japanese, *mottainai* had various meanings, including a sense of gratitude mixed with "shame" for receiving greater favour from a superior than is properly merited by one's station in life. *Mottainai* is a compound word, *mottai* plus *nai*. *Mottai* refers to the intrinsic dignity or sacredness of a material entity, while *nai* indicates an absence or lack. The term of *mottainai* was traditionally used by Buddhists to indicate regret at the waste or misuse of something sacred or highly respected, such as religious objects or teaching (*Mottainai* Wikipedia, 2012). Today, the word is widely used in everyday life to indicate the waste of any material object, time, or other resource.

The recent trend in encouraging people to quantify the objective, at least, *objectifiable* value of all the goods and services so that they may not pay more than the value they consume - the so-called "*financialization*" named by Ronald Dore, a famous Japanologist - has unwisely changed the criteria for *mottainai* in Japan (see also Dore 2011). When they do not feel that the ostensible value of a goods deserves the offered "price", they have come to use "*mottainai*" just meaning "this is too expensive!". Here, we should note that they seem to have replaced *themselves* (modesty) with *the market price* as the criteria for judging whether each consumption can be construed as *mottainai*. In other words, they used to be "spiritual seekers" to buy modest goods and to train themselves (*kokki*) to deserve the goods, but they are becoming merely "utility maximizers" as *homo-economicus* based on the market price in accordance with the tread of *financialization*.

### 3. Veblen's Insight on Consumption and the Mechanism of Envy-avoidance

Though we would say that no consumer in general would be willing to accept wasteful consumption, we have to admit that we occasionally enjoy conspicuous consumption and occasionally regret that type of consumption as it is considered wasteful later. Furthermore, we occasionally accuse of the others' conspicuous consumption. This reminds me of classical Institutionalists' view on conspicuous consumption. Thorstein B. Veblen (1857-1929), one of the founders of classical Institutional Economics, said in his celebrated book; *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, on the concept of "conspicuous waste" as follows;

Whatever form of expenditure the consumer chooses, or whatever end he seeks in making his choice, has utility to him by virtue of his preference. As seen from the point of view of the individual consumer, the question of wastefulness does not arise within the scope of economic theory proper. The use of the word 'waste' as a technical term, therefore, implies no deprecation of the motives or of the ends sought by the consumer under this canon of

conspicuous waste. But it is, on other grounds, worth noting that the term 'waste' in the language of everyday life implies depreciation of what is characterized as wasteful (Veblen, 2005: 41).

Generally speaking, no one would prefer to make any wasteful consumption which does not serve human well-being as the whole. However, as Veblen (2005) pointed out, it is intrinsically difficult to differentiate useful consumption from wasteful one.

“It frequently happens that an element of the standard of living which set out with being primarily wasteful, ends with becoming, in the apprehension of the consumer, a necessary of life; and it may in his way become as indispensable as any other item of the consumer's habitual expenditure. As items which sometimes fall under this head, and are therefore available as illustrations of the manner in which this principle applies, may be cited carpets and tapestries, silver table service, waiter's services, silk hats, starched linen, many articles of jewelry and of dress. The indispensability of these things after the habit and the convention have been formed, however, has little to say in the classification of expenditure as waste or not waste in the technical meaning of the word. ... It is obviously not necessary that a given object of expenditure should be exclusively wasteful in order to come in under the category of conspicuous waste. An article may be useful and wasteful both, and its utility to the consumer may be made up of use and waste in the most varying proportions (Veblen, 2005: 41-2)”.

Everyone would rather not pay for conspicuous consumption if one feels that it is definitely wasteful. However, it is extremely difficult to draw a clear objective demarcation between useful consumption and conspicuous waste.

$$C = C_0 + C_1(Y) + C_2(Y), \text{ where}$$

$C_0$ : Basic consumption,  $C_1$ : Useful consumption,

$C_2$ : Conspicuous wastes

Of course, the propensity to consume useful goods ( $C_1$ ) and the propensity to consume conspicuous wastes ( $C_2$ ) may vary at individual levels in accordance with its ethics on consumption. This is why we would say that the demarcation finally depends on each individual's subjective ideals. Accordingly, the improvement of our quality of life depends on how the individual's subjective ideals are sought and compromised in society. In this context, we have to look at the structure and principles in our behaviour of abstaining conspicuous consumption in society. It is at one's discretion to judge which consumption at the individual level is wasteful or not. At the same time, it appears that we are monitoring each others' behaviour in consumption by occasionally accusing them of lavish and conspicuous consumption if the conspicuousness is considered as harmful to society.

Jon Elster, a Norwegian influential social and political theorist, points out in his book, *The cement of society*, several features of "envy", including the mechanism of "envy-avoidance". The first urge of envy is not "I want what he has", but "I want him not to have what he has, because it makes me feel that I am less" (Elster, 1989: 253).

"I may give to assuage the feeling of guilt that your envy causes me to have. I might even abstain from becoming superior in the first place, to prevent any envy from arising. [...] The social consequences of the private vice of envy depend on the reactions of the envied or potentially envied to the fact of envy. Envy-avoidance is closely related to witchcraft and, especially, to accusations of witchcraft. In many societies, successful people have been branded as witches (Elster, 1989: 259)".

According to Elster, successful people would rather not get too rich (or would donate their wealth to the poor) by the fear that they will be too envied, while the poor would try to prevent from getting too poor by the fear that they may be provoked into witchcraft (Elster, 1989: 261). Elster asserts that egalitarian society results from a combination of envy and altruism, with the latter in turn being largely the effect of envy-avoidance (Elster, 1989: 261). Envy and envy-avoidance function as the glue and cement of binding people in society.

According to John Rawls, one of the most influential contemporary political philosophers, a rational individual under his (Rawlsian) ideal society is not subject to envy, at least when the differences between himself and others are not thought to be the result of injustice and do not exceed certain limits (Rawls, 1971: 532). Rawls follows Kant's definition of envy as "one of the vices of hating mankind" (Rawls, 1971: 532), which is collectively disadvantageous: the individual who envies another is prepared to do things that make them both worse off, if only the discrepancy between them is sufficiently reduced. Rawls argues that a well-ordered society is unlikely to give rise to feelings of envy, partly because material inequalities are likely to be relatively small (Elster, 1989: 253). However, we do not always live in a well-ordered society. To a certain extent the mechanism of envy-avoidance may have created a particular ethics on consumption while binding people in society.

#### 4. Review on the Mechanism of *Mottainai* Ethics on Consumption

Does the behaviour on the "*mottainai*" ethics also result from a dimension of the above mentioned envy-avoidance mechanism in which successful people would rather not get too rich (would abstain from buying luxurious goods) by the fear that they will be too envied? The tendency to seek the levelling down equality (also to respect altruistic behaviours to others) in the seemingly *telic* (teleological) egalitarian society often referred to as a social feature of Japan may be related to the mechanism of envy-avoidance. Nevertheless, as was mentioned earlier, we should recall that the term of *mottainai* was traditionally used by Buddhists to indicate regret at the waste or misuse of something sacred or highly respected<sup>2</sup>. It seems that the behaviour of *mottainai* was more related to their subjective ideals or belief in the Buddha's teaching for training themselves (*kokki*) to have religious enlightenment.

Yasuo Yuasa (1925-2005) is the Japanese philosopher and known as a pioneer who conducted a land-breaking work for comparing the business ethics embedded in the Western capitalism and the Japanese capitalism to find different *ethos* in the Weber's term, being required for the evolution of each mode of production and redistribution.

According to Yuasa (1967), in the feudal mode of production, people attached the highest value to agriculture. He pointed out that in the typical closed and self-sufficient feudal economy, the basic *ethos* of economic agents was to respect the virtue of accepting the present as it is *enough* (not exceeding their own bounds) and sharing goods among the members -*Chisoku-Anbun*. Concretely, the virtue of "thrift" in the dimension of "consumption" and the virtue of "charity" in the dimension of "redistribution" were the most respected in the economy. The feudal mode is characterized by the need to operate much larger agricultural areas with a sparse population. Since the productivity of agriculture was subject to natural conditions, no other response was effective except the passive response to the scarcity of goods through the thrift in consumption and the charity in redistribution (Yuasa, 1967: 65).

Most people in the Middle Ages in Japan as well as the Western societies were in a sense of ethics such that the real meaning in human life can be found in the religious salvation, therefore felt only the ancillary meaning in life from the economic benefits (Yuasa, 1967: 37). In Japan, the virtue of thrift and charity may have been fostered

among even the commoners in the eighteenth century, through the commoner schools that were usually grouped together as “parish” or “temple” schools (*terakoya*) and village (*go-ko*) schools. These schools proliferated; 47 *terakoya* were established between 1751 and 1788, then 1,286 between 1789 and 1829, and 8,675 between 1830 and 1867 (Jansen, 2000: 189).

Having looked at the history of Western economic thoughts, it was considered in the Middle Ages as an obligation for the rich to have “mercy” on the poor. Yuasa (1967) referred to the words by *Thomas Aquinas* (1225-1275), an influential philosopher in the tradition of scholasticism, such that those who do not extend mercy on the people in adversity should be put to death. This way of thinking upon the virtue of charity and almsgiving had existed in the Western society until the seventeenth century, but eroded in accordance with the rise of Protestantism. *Jean Calvin*, an influential French theologian and pastor during the Protestant Reformation, referred to St. Paul’s word; “Whoever refuses to work is not allowed to eat” (Paul’s Second Letter to the Thessalonians, 3:10). Calvin regarded laziness as human’s sin and accused of mercy as the inducement to shirking work (Yuasa, 1967: 31).

The virtue of charity was considered one of the basic economic ethics in the feudal society. Yuasa (1967) pointed out that the virtue which underpins the process for redistribution disappeared in accordance with the rise of the primitive mode of Capitalism (Yuasa, 1967: 36). The Protestants, in particular, the Puritans emerged in the Western societies attached their highest value to the spirit of “self-sufficiency & self-independence” and the virtue of “diligence”. According to the Puritans, based upon the *ethos* of self-sufficiency & self-independence, the virtues of diligence in production and thrift in consumption were emphasized as the economic ethics. Yuasa (1967) pointed out that *Adam Smith* mentioned in his famous book, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, about thrift as the primary engine and diligence as the secondary one for accumulating the capital. It seems that the virtue of thrift was respected less for the purpose of seeking social justice and salvation, while respected more for accumulating the capital for further investments.

As was mentioned earlier, the recent trend - the so-called “*financialization*” - in encouraging people to quantify the objective value of goods and services so that they may not pay more than the value they consume has changed the criteria for *mottainai* in Japan. They used to be the followers of Buddha’s ethics with modesty to buy modest goods and to train themselves (*kokki*) to deserve the goods, but they are becoming merely “utility maximizers” occasionally with some arrogance based on the market price.

We can see the similar words and wisdom as *mottainai* in the other Asian countries and languages; “*mubazir*” or “*eman-eman*” in the Javanese / Indonesian culture, “*opocoi*” in Bengali and “*aehtadal*” in Urdu. In the most societies, we can see the similar *ethos* of economic agents respecting the virtue of thrift (referring to something that if not fully utilized will be a waste), the virtue of accepting the present as it is *enough* (not exceeding their own bounds), the virtue of moderation and the virtue of sharing goods among the members. There is a tendency that these *ethos* were dominated in our daily life in the developing or underdeveloped stage when our income level was not so high. In other words, there is a tendency that these virtues are less stressed out as our income level grows.

Though we have a vague feeling of uneasiness from the tread of *financialization*, it is not easy to propose a viable alternative economic mode because we cannot resume the old mode of production and redistribution. However, we can review the elements in the old mode to be resurrected for proposing a viable alternative mode. According to Yuasa, from a long-term and wider perspective, we should have a firm belief that the most powerful economic power lies in the real ethics. Then, we should live a life of courage, while understanding the others’ positions and

feelings, to respond to unjust and wrong affair and to calmly persuade them. These behaviours act as a seedbed for a higher sense of ethics based upon the individualism and the individual's social responsibility (Yuasa, 1967: 170). A viable alternative economic mode can only be constructively adapted through a process of trial and error in socializing subjective ideals.

## 5. Concluding Comments: Consumption and Quality of Life

In February 2008, the President of the French Republic, Nicholas Sarkozy invited Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and Jean-Paul Fitoussi to create a Commission to be called "The Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (CMEPSP)". The CMEPSP aimed to identify the limits of GDP as an indicator of economic performance and social progress, including the problems with its measurement; to consider what additional information might be required for the production of more relevant indicators of social progress; to assess the feasibility of alternative measurement tools, and to discuss how to present the statistical information in an appropriate way (Stiglitz *et al.*, 2005: 1).

One of the key messages in the report by the CMEPSP is that "the time is ripe for our measurement system to shift emphasis from measuring economic production to measuring people's well-being" (Stiglitz *et al.*, 2005: 10). They raise twelve recommendations, five out of which are related to the dimension of consumption which we are concerned about in this paper<sup>3</sup>;

- *When evaluating material well-being, look at income and consumption rather than production:* material living standards are more closely associated with measures of net national income, real household income and consumption.
- *Emphasize the household perspective:* trends in citizens' material living standards are better followed through measures of household income and consumption.
- *Consider income and consumption jointly with wealth:* a household that spends its wealth on consumption goods increases its current well-being but at the expense of its future well-being. The consequence of such behaviour would be captured in a household's balance sheet, and the same holds for other sectors of the economy, and for the economy as a whole.
- *Give more prominence to the distribution of income, consumption and wealth:* a rise in average income could be unequally shared across groups, leaving some households relatively worse-off than others. Thus, average measures of income, consumption and wealth should be accompanied by indicators that reflect their distribution.
- *Broaden income measures:* Once one starts focusing on non-market activities, the question of leisure arises. Although valuation of leisure is fraught with difficulties, comparisons of living standards over time or across countries needs to take into account the amount of leisure that people enjoy (Stiglitz *et al.*, 2010: 11-15).

More economists have recently come to be concerned about the well-being from the consumer's or household's perspective. There has emerged a new trend of placing the higher priority to improving our quality of life (QOL) rather than to maximising the profit or the rent opportunities from the producer's perspective. The way of improving the QOL is related to the realization of subjective ideals in each person, at the aggregate level, in each society and each nation. Needless to say, the subjective ideals vary. As was mentioned earlier, one may think that we should avoid lavish consumption or conspicuous waste. This behaviour may give a negative impact on the GDP through the negative multiplier. Some people may criticize that impact. But that ethical behaviour in consumption may make the QOL better off, at least, the QOL of that consumer.

Economics as a social science was, in general, required to clarify the structure of logics which underpins the actions taken by the economic agents, though many contemporary economists are too much concerned about the economic phenomena emerged as a result of the actions taken by the economic agents (Yuasa, 1967; Yuasa *et al.*, 1989). In order to capture the law of motion in the economic society, economists should look closer at the human-beings as economic agents who take actions at their discretion in accordance with their own subjective ideals, and should investigate how the economic agents act for seeking (also compromising) their subjective ideals in the economy. Much attention should be paid to the economic ethics as the study of shedding light on the structure and principles in the human economic behaviour and actions. We should not hesitate to take a process of trial and error to find a viable alternative system to our economic sustainability and humanity. The *mottainai* ethics on consumption, I believe, gives us a hint to discuss about a subjective ideal to be socialized.

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting a distinction between what Derek Parfit (1991) has called teleological (*telic*) and deontological (*deontic*) egalitarianism. Telic egalitarians think inequality is in itself (or intrinsically) bad. Deontic egalitarians do not. For, unlike telic egalitarians, deontic ones would seem to have no objection to natural inequalities or to inequalities between people living in different communities that do not interact with one another.

<sup>2</sup> It is reported that one of the earliest appearances of the word *mottainai* was in the book *Gempei Josuiki*, a Record of the Gempei War in 1247 (Mottainai Wikipedia, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> The remaining recommendations are mainly addressed to our understanding on how well-being is multi-dimensional.