



**The ‘double dividend’ discourse in  
sustainable consumption:  
happiness, human nature, and the  
reproduction of economic doctrine**

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## Abstract

The sustainable consumption literature is peppered with claims that a reduction in consumption can not only benefit the environment, but also make us happier—often referred to as the ‘double dividend’. This claim is in direct opposition to the received view of consumption: as one of the main ways in which people pursue happiness. Over the course of our analysis, we show how the ‘science of happiness’ is used to lend a particular type of legitimacy to the double dividend discourse, which is then used to *incentivise* individuals to reduce their consumption, where *moralising* had failed in the past. We show how the double dividend uses discursive truths about *happiness*, *human nature*, and *needs*, to legitimise a radical reduction in consumption, just as the received view of consumption uses its own discursive truths to legitimise the status quo. Ultimately we demonstrate that the double dividend is being used as a *sales technique*: as a means of incentivising individuals to act out of self-interest and make a rational choice to consume less. Paradoxically, this reproduces the economic doctrine of *incentivisation*, *individualisation*, *self-interest*, and *rational choice*—at odds with the explicit values of the double dividend’s proponents.

Key words: sustainable consumption; happiness; well-being; individualisation; voluntary simplicity

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## ***Fait accompli?* The double dividend discourse**

In a widely cited paper, Jackson asks: “Is there a ‘double dividend’ in sustainable consumption?” (2005, p.19). Jackson brings together ideas from hitherto disparate disciplines—including psychology, economics, sociology, and philosophy—to explore the argument that we could “devise a society in which it is possible to live better (or at least as well as we have done) by consuming less, and become more human in the process” (*ibid.* p.33). This theme is advanced to varying degrees in a clutch of other works (Jackson, 2006; 2008; Jackson & Michaelis, 2003) and has received significant attention throughout the sustainable consumption literature (see for example: Alexander & Ussher, 2012; Berg, 2009; Knight & Rosa, 2011; MacKerron, 2012; Madjar & Ozawa, 2006).

The basic argument is that a) *per capita* consumption in industrialised nations has been increasing for several decades, b) self reported happiness has not been increasing at the same rate and therefore c) we can safely reduce environmentally damaging consumption without causing any loss of happiness. The double dividend then takes this one step further by arguing that d) consumption—or rather, consumer culture—is antithetical to happiness, therefore a reduction in consumption would not only benefit the environment, but would also make us happier: hence the *double* dividend.

The double dividend discourse stands in direct opposition to the received view that consumption is one of the main ways in which people pursue happiness. According to the received view, consumption is the result of revealed preference in the marketplace: the rational decisions of informed actors seeking the greatest utility at the lowest cost (Mankiw, 2007). Within this paradigm, a higher income facilitated by economic growth provides greater purchasing power, which in turn enables the pursuit of happiness. The received view of consumption is problematic on many levels; consumers might not have a consistent interpretation of the ‘rational’, or are not always fully informed when making decisions. In addition to such axioms, empirical research from other disciplines complicates the link between income and happiness (Inglehart et al., 2008), with some even arguing—in line with the double dividend—that the consumer society does not necessarily benefit the consumer, or the society as a whole (Kasser, 2002; Schor, 1999). The implication being, no matter how rational and informed, we consumers still do not know what is ‘good for us’.

The unravelling of the received view of consumption has left a vacuum into which the double dividend has rushed. It has become part of the lexicon of sustainable consumption, proffered with various levels of enthusiasm from ‘possibility’ to *fait accompli*—and this is where it becomes an issue. The

double dividend is constructed of ideas and data from several disciplines, which do not always share an ontology or epistemology, and the methodologies used to attain such information pass largely unchallenged. Results presented as ‘fact’ by one discipline might be interpreted as pure conjecture by another, or at least severely limited in terms of what can be known and how. Yet such unresolved disputes are rarely reflected in the literature.

The use of language when presenting the double dividend, purposefully or not, often gives the impression that the hypothesis is accepted as fact. For example, Alexander & Ussher, strong proponents of the double dividend, champion the idea by arguing that “a ‘double dividend’ can flow from living simply, or even a ‘triple’ or ‘quadruple’ dividend” (2012, p.77)—note that ‘living simply’ is a reference to the anti-consumerist practice of ‘voluntary simplicity’, which we will discuss later.

Where Knight and Rosa mention “the ‘double-dividend’ of lower consumption and higher well-being” (2011, p.945) they do so without questioning its basis. Instead, they casually present it as an accomplished fact—‘the’ rather than ‘the proposed’ or ‘the hypothetical’ double dividend. This seemingly innocuous choice of words has a significant effect, in that it treats the double dividend as something to be taken as read.

MacKerron more soberly states, “at least in theory, growth in [subjective well-being] could be de-coupled from GDP growth” (2012, p.718), and carefully situates such ideas at “the more radical end of [subjective well-being] and consumption literature” (*ibid.* p.728, note 22). However, without refuting the claims of the double dividend, even such careful steps allow it to nestle further into the literature.

Berg identifies the concept as having permeated policy circles, quoting a Finnish government committee member as saying: “what is aspired [*sic*] is also the wellbeing of people, not in economic sense but perhaps more like joy and happiness. And I don’t remember how we put it ... it was less stuff and more life quality. That, in my opinion, kind of pictures the goal the society could set for itself” (2009, p.86). This demonstrates the far reaching influence of the double dividend, despite its hypothetical basis.

There are of course examples of more careful reference to the double dividend. Madjar & Ozawa for instance, refer only to the less contentious claims that “non-materialistic people can have very high levels of happiness or that some countries with low GDP per capita score high on happiness” (2006, p.108). However, this does not alter the fact that the sustainable consumption literature is awash with the double dividend. Any reader familiar with this literature will be aware of the profusion of its basic argument—that less

consumption equals more happiness—and this is the argument we will examine herein.

We will begin, then, by deconstructing the double dividend, situating the components from which it is formed, and revealing the tensions inherent within. Next, we will analyse the most significant of these components—happiness and human nature—showing in turn how each of them are used by the double dividend discourse, and how the use of such forms of knowledge [re]produce discourses of power, within academia and beyond. Finally, we take all of the components combined and—following Ahmed (2010)—ask ‘what does the double dividend *do*?’ In answer we identify that it inadvertently reproduces the values of economic doctrine, at odds with the explicit values of the double dividend’s proponents.

## **Deconstructing the double dividend**

Although the double dividend discourse is commonplace, few scholars have been as instrumental in its impact as Tim Jackson, whose work is widely cited throughout the sustainable consumption literature and elsewhere. Jackson’s contribution to sustainable consumption scholarship cannot be overstated, and many of the major debates in this field have been initiated or advanced thanks to his influence. With this in mind, we will use Jackson’s exposition of the double dividend discourse as the starting point of our analysis and discussion.

Jackson (2006) situates the double dividend within a dichotomy, arguing that interpretations of sustainable consumption can be conceptually split between two groups: those who would have us consume *differently*, and those who would have us consume *less*. The former are concerned with ecological modernisation, resource efficiency, market mechanisms, techno-fixes, and decoupling of economic growth from pollution, whereas the latter look to a more radical reorganisation of social and economic structures and practices in order to minimise our reliance on production and consumption. The consume *less* group is where the double dividend sits.

As discussed, the received view of consumption is as a means to pursue happiness, whereas the double dividend suggests the opposite. A parallel can be drawn between this and the aforementioned dichotomy: those who view consumption as a means to happiness would urge us to continue consuming but, for the sake of sustainability, to consume *differently*; and those who see consumption as detrimental to happiness would urge us to consume *less*. The reality is obviously more complex—as pointed out by Jackson (2008)—but the simplification serves to position the double dividend within the debate: in opposition to orthodoxy.

Jackson's (2005) conception of the double dividend is rooted in what he calls the 'eco-humanist' view of consumption, which is largely based on ideas emanating from the psychology of consumer behaviour. For Jackson, the eco-humanist view "arises as a dialectical response to the conventional economic insatiability of wants" (p.32), which is embedded in the economic view of consumption. Jackson makes frequent reference to the standard economic tropes of 'self-interest' and 'rational choice' (2005), as well as the 'individualism' encouraged under a consumption based economy (2008), leading the reader to regard these concepts as at best over-simplistic, and at worst profoundly damaging to society and the environment. The reader is left in no doubt that the double dividend—and the eco-humanist view in general—is intended as an antidote the values of individualisation, self-interest, and rational choice that underpin the received view of consumption.

### Voluntary simplicity and the double dividend: one discourse

The double dividend is already being pursued by a small but significant anti-consumerist movement known as 'voluntary simplicity'—the proponents of which extol the virtues of low consumption for the benefit of personal well-being. Much of the literature on voluntary simplicity is written by and for its proponents (Alexander & Ussher, 2012; Elgin, 1993; Schor, 1999) and exudes partiality, which results in an evangelical tone. For instance, Elgin, an influential author within the movement, describes voluntary simplicity as:

...a manner of living that is outwardly more simple and inwardly more rich, a way of being in which our most authentic and alive self is brought into direct and conscious contact with living...

(Elgin, 1993, p.25)

Elgin's language—'inwardly rich', 'authentic', 'alive self'—heavily implies that 'we' are currently disconnected from our 'proper' state of being, which can only be remedied through the doctrine of voluntary simplicity. This form of discourse, which is typical of voluntary simplifiers, produces a particular ontological and epistemological standpoint: that there is such a thing as an 'authentic alive self'—a natural state of being or shared human nature—that we can all tap into, and that 'inward richness' only exists in tandem with 'outward simplicity'—a euphemistic reference to reduced consumption. The double dividend relies upon the same *discursive formation* (Foucault, 1972), which can be easily identified in Jackson's description that:

...we could collectively devise a society in which it is possible to live better (or at least as well as we have done) by consuming less, and become more human in the process...

(Jackson, 2005, p.33)



'Live better' takes the place of 'inwardly rich', 'consume less' replaces 'outwardly simple', and 'become more human' follows the 'authentic alive self'. The very same standpoint is produced: that there is a shared human nature, that it is possible to become 'more human', and that 'living better' is a direct result of 'consuming less'. The double dividend is, in effect, a manifestation of the voluntary simplicity discourse.

### On consumption and happiness

Central to the double dividend's argument is the concept of happiness, for which it relies on a body of research that claims some insight into the relationship between income and happiness. According to Inglehart *et al.* (2008) for example, survey data averaged across countries suggests that income—or GDP *per capita*—contributes to happiness up to a rather modest point, but thereafter exhibits rapidly diminishing returns. By using income or 'purchasing power' as a proxy for consumption, we are left to infer that consumption would have similarly diminishing returns in terms of happiness.

This forms the basis of what we might call the *single* dividend—where a reduction in consumption could conceivably deliver environmental benefits without necessarily affecting happiness. However, in order to achieve a *double* dividend the reduction must have a further positive effect, for which we must draw on other evidence from the happiness studies literature, including a rise in reported depression and anxiety in income-rich countries, high levels of reported happiness in income-poor countries, and studies correlating 'materialistic values' with low levels of psychological well-being (Jackson, 2005; 2008). The double dividend sits alongside other ideas in this respect, including the work of Schor (1999) and Kasser (2002), who make similar arguments as to the possible detrimental effect of consumption.

Schor's (1999) sociological study of the 'life/work balance' explores a growing discontent with the culture of working longer hours to consume more, which has prompted many people to 'downshift'—to work fewer hours and consume less—for the sake of their happiness. Schor argues that the unhappiness caused by working longer hours outweighs any benefits brought about by greater purchasing power, thus society would prosper given more leisure time.

Kasser's (2002) empirical work consists largely of quantitative psychological experimentation, and suggests a strong correlation between what he terms 'materialistic values' and unhappiness. Kasser believes that this link is causal, based on the supposition that a less materialistic lifestyle would satisfy what he refers to as 'intrinsic' human needs, resulting in greater psychological well-being.

What sets the double dividend apart is its use of research from a much broader set of disciplines. Where Schor relies largely on elements of consumer culture theory and economics, and Kasser on psychology, Jackson attempts to combine all of these along with philosophy, evolutionary biology, and more. There are, however, common themes running throughout. The 'downshifting' described by Schor is very similar to 'voluntary simplicity', whose basic assumptions on human nature and needs—and how they relate to consumption—are mirrored by the double dividend. Similarly Kasser's argument on causation is rooted in his assumptions about intrinsic qualities of human nature and needs.

### On consumption, human nature, and needs

We observe that human nature and needs constitute fundamental components of the double dividend's argument. Jackson points out that there is a raft of "radically different underlying assumptions about human nature" (2005, p.21), and identifies with several approaches from philosophy, psychology, and behavioural evolution—although neglects to discuss the view of human nature as a social construction rather than a universal trait. He draws attention to "an essential distinction, present in the writings of all those concerned with human well-being" (*ibid.* p.24): the notion that there are *subjective* desires which are distinct from *objective* needs. In the case of the double dividend, Jackson reasons, our subjective desires override our objective needs to the detriment of our well-being.

The particular theory of needs to which Jackson defers originates from Max-Neef (1991), who presents a list of fundamental human needs that must be satisfied in order to meet the conditions of well-being. For Jackson's (2005), not only can these needs be met with fairly low levels of consumption, but some forms of consumption are in fact violating those needs and therefore obstructing the conditions required for well-being; furthering the argument that high levels of consumption are not 'good for us'. It would seem that the construction of a universal human nature and associated set of needs is a necessary pre-condition when attempting to define what is universally 'good for us', and functions as such for the double dividend; without universality there is merely a lifestyle that works for some people but not for others.

### The ontology and epistemology of the double dividend

Jackson's argument includes an element of critical reflection where he asks: "how realistic is this perspective? Is it consistent with fundamental understandings about consumer behavior and human motivation? Does it reflect socially achievable and culturally relevant ambitions? Or is it simply a delusion based on utopian understandings of human nature?" (2005, p.21).

This critical reflection reveals more about the basis of the double dividend discourse.

The ‘fundamental understandings’ to which Jackson refers are taken as constant, a yard stick against which the double dividend can be validated, rather than the contested claims of particular epistemic communities. The language of ‘delusion’ and ‘utopian understandings’ serves to position ‘delusional’ *idealism* in opposition to ‘understood’ *rationality*, and the further reference to ‘human nature’ reiterates the assumption of a shared human nature that can be known, even if in this case it turns out to be misunderstood.

It is clear that the concepts of happiness, human nature, and needs are fundamental to the construction of the double dividend discourse, and as such the following sections provide a more detailed discussion of these concepts, how they are used, and the possible implications of such use.

## **Happiness studies: its uses and their implications**

The term ‘happiness studies’ has become a catchall for the various strands of research investigating happiness and well-being. Although traditionally a philosophical pursuit, the study of happiness and well-being is now more readily associated with psychology, being the focus of numerous studies. The resultant body of literature has found its way into a range of other disciplines, permeating discussion across the social sciences and humanities, capturing the attention of the wider public, and influencing government policy.

It is important to note some disagreements over the language of happiness and well-being. Psychologists are in broad agreement over terminology, and often use the terms ‘happiness’ and ‘well-being’ interchangeably (see Veenhoven, 2012). However, Raibley, writing on the philosophy of happiness and well-being, argues that the terms are not interchangeable, offering the example of a patient suffering from dementia, who appears to be constantly happy: “on any plausible theory of episodic happiness, she would seem to be quite happy. But most will agree that she is not well-off; she is not doing or faring well” (2011, p.9). As Raibley demonstrates, the concept of ‘happiness’ cannot serve as a substitute for the concept of ‘well-being’. Thus, we can understand the definition of well-being used by psychologists as being limited to *psychological* well-being—known in common parlance as ‘happiness’—and not physical, societal, or otherwise. In short: happiness and well-being are *not* interchangeable.

Prominent discourses of happiness studies—namely those of the psychologists—promote a particular standpoint regarding the nature of happiness, its measurement, and the extrapolation of results across populations and cultures. The basic assumptions on which these discourses

are based may be common among psychologists, but can jar with the social, cultural, and philosophical scholars who do not share the same ontology or epistemology. Aggregated quantitative data, suggestions of causation from correlation, assertions of biological predeterminism and of universal human nature; these are among the themes contested across the disciplines, not limited only to the *production* of knowledge, but also the *use* of such knowledge in shaping discourse, policy and behaviour. The use of happiness studies is central to the double dividend discourse, and the following section casts a critical eye over such use.

### Subjective well-being: the science of happiness

Subjective well-being (SWB) is by far the dominant concept in happiness studies, and is founded on the principle that psychological well-being is best determined by the individual experiencing it. Often presented as the definitive 'science of happiness' (see Diener et al., 1999 for an overview), its methodologies are mostly quantitative, relying on numerical data gathered from experimentation, observation, and surveys—a typical survey question being along the lines of: 'on a scale of one to ten, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole?' (Inglehart et al., 2008).

The larger national or cross-national studies compile survey data from huge datasets such as the World Values Survey (2013), The Gallup World Poll (2013) and the World Database of Happiness (2013), aggregating results to represent large groups of people. Of course, SWB data averaged across entire countries do not represent the diverse range of experiences within those countries, nor does a single SWB score take into account the range of factors that constitute happiness or well-being, rather these large studies can be thought of as an 'economics of happiness'—with the inherent limitations implied therein.

The double dividend discourse uses the science of SWB to build a rational argument based on empirical evidence, which lends it a particular type of legitimacy. However, a careful review of the SWB literature reveals that, even from within the world view of SWB—and please note that this point is made from *within* such a world view—the data do not suggest the existence of a double dividend. We looked at three of the major topics in SWB research most relevant to sustainable consumption—*income*, *discrepancy*, and *adaptation*—and explored the claims on which the double dividend rests. All of those studying the relationship between SWB and *income* argue that rising incomes—and by extension, rising consumption—go hand in hand with rising SWB, but beyond a modest point offer greatly diminishing returns, or at worst simply plateau. None, however, claim that rising incomes actually *reduce* SWB, and many point out that high earners within countries are much more likely to report high SWB than their low earning compatriots (Diener &

Seligman, 2004; Diener et al., 1999; Easterlin, 1995; Frank, 2012; Hagerty & Veenhoven, 2003; Inglehart et al., 2008; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2008; Zuzanek, 2012). Similarly, SWB studies that look into the effects of *discrepancy* and *adaptation*—commonly presented in the consumption literature as ‘keeping up with the Joneses’ and ‘the hedonic treadmill’—do not support Jackson’s (2005; 2008), Kasser’s (2002), or Schor’s (1999) notion that increased consumption leads to unhappiness. Rather, the psychological literature suggests that different personalities react in very different ways to their own diverse circumstances (Brown & Dutton, 1995; Diener & Fujita, 1997; Diener et al., 2006; Diener et al., 1999; McFarland & Miller, 1994).

That is not to say the findings of SWB studies ‘prove’ the double dividend to be false—such a claim would only make sense from within that particular world view—we simply note that, even on its own terms and from its own ontological and epistemological standpoint, the argument that reduced consumption would result in greater SWB is highly problematic.

#### Beyond subjective well-being: ‘what does happiness do?’

Beyond the field of psychology there is a broader debate about how happiness and well-being are situated in relation to wider issues of society, culture, and politics—far removed from the ‘scale of one to ten’ measurements that underpin the science of SWB. In philosophy, the nature and causes of happiness and well-being have been at the fore of human thought for thousands of years (see Haybron, 2010). As historian McMahon (2006) details, the meaning of ‘happiness’ has been aligned at varying times with luck, virtue, spirituality, and pleasure. Even now ‘happiness’ has many meanings, easily understood in the fluid use of language, but much harder to pin down for quantitative measurement and analysis—which is troublesome for a science of happiness.

Taking an alternative approach, Ahmed presents a thorough cultural study of happiness, asking “not so much ‘what is happiness?’ but rather ‘what does happiness do?’” (2010, p.2). With this line of enquiry Ahmed is focussing not on the description or measurement of happiness itself but rather the influence, effects and consequences of its use in academia, governance, and the practice of everyday life.

Among the many claims of the science of SWB is that happiness—in both its meaning and measurement—is consistent across all cultures, and that asking someone how happy they are will elicit an accurate and unbiased reply (Diener et al., 2012). However, as Ahmed points out, “if happiness is already understood to be what you want to have, then to be asked how happy you are is not to be asked a neutral question” (2010, p.5), the question cannot help but provoke a culturally charged, value laden response.

Happiness is so embedded in the language of success and aspiration that its correlates—as selected by the science of SWB—easily slip into the role of causation. The SWB literature contains many examples of correlations assumed to be—or implied as being—causal. Actual evidence showing the direction or even the existence of causation is thin on the ground (Diener & Fujita, 1997; Diener et al., 1999), but as the same correlations are reiterated time and again, the message that filters through into the social imaginary is that scientists *know what makes us happy*.

Built in to the double dividend is the notion that sustainable consumption will *cause* happiness. This claim not only reproduces the causation myth, but also feeds into what Ahmed refers to as ‘the happiness duty’. Ahmed writes, “by finding happiness in certain places, [SWB] generates those places as being good, as being what should be promoted as goods... if we have a duty to promote what causes happiness, then happiness itself becomes a duty” (*ibid.* pp.6–7). When viewed through this lens, the happiness purportedly found in the double dividend is used to generate sustainable consumption as being ‘good’; the duty to consume sustainably quickly reverts back to the duty to pursue happiness, thus, rather than a duty to end environmental degradation or the gross inequality of access to resources, the duty reproduced in the double dividend is self-interested happiness, and its performance merely forms part of the simulacra of an illusory sustainable consumption.

For Ahmed, the happiness duty goes beyond the individual to form part of a social obligation: “so much happiness is premised on, and promised by, the concealment of suffering, the freedom to look away from what compromises one’s happiness. To revolt can hurt not only because you are proximate to hurt but also because you cause unhappiness by revealing the causes of unhappiness” (*ibid.* p.196). This is at the root of the double dividend’s use of happiness: the underlying arguments for sustainable consumption are fundamentally ‘unhappy’—ecological ruin, global inequality—to reveal them is to cause unhappiness. When Jackson states that we will require “more than wishful utopian thinking or angry ecologism” (2005, p.21), he alludes to the failure of environmental doomsayers to win the ‘moral’ argument, precisely because of their gloomy message. Thus the double dividend uses happiness to incentivise rather than moralise, and in doing so diverts attention from its unhappy origins.

The desire to ‘look away from what compromises one’s happiness’ alludes to a tacit knowledge of the environmental degradation and global inequality that marks current patterns of production and consumption. Ahmed argues that “we recognize how much the promise of happiness depends upon the localization of suffering; others suffer so that a certain ‘we’ can hold on to the good life” (2010, p.195). This consumption-based happiness depends on both

the suffering of others, and the concealment of that suffering. For Ahmed this phenomenon is not new, happiness was used as a justification for imperial colonialism—happiness for both the empire that gains resources, and for the colonial subject who would be ‘civilised’. To this we can add that the received view of consumption, as a means to pursue happiness, uses happiness to rationalise the expansion of production and consumption, in the same way that the double dividend uses happiness to rationalise a reduction.

The double dividend discourse explicitly seeks to overturn the belief that consumption leads to happiness, and show that happiness need not depend on the ‘localisation of suffering’. Nevertheless, by incentivising through the use of happiness, it reproduces and legitimises happiness as a noble reason for action—past and present. By reinforcing the primacy of happiness as *the* reason for action, the double dividend risks marginalising its own aim of reducing consumption, because it negates any action that does not result in happiness. If an act of consumption causes more happiness than the double dividend can provide then consumption prevails, and if the absence of consumption causes *unhappiness*, then consumption prevails. By reproducing self-interested happiness as the reason for action, the double dividend risks inadvertently reproducing the conditions that led to the environmental destruction and global inequality it seeks to redress.

## **Human nature, needs, and universalism**

Alongside happiness, the concept of human nature underpins the double dividend and forms the basis on which much of its argument is built. The basic premise—that a certain level of consumption is not ‘good for us’—positions ‘us’, the human race, as a single entity for which high levels of consumption may or may not be universally ‘good’. It implies that this universal ‘good’ is a fixed condition waiting to be—or having already been—discovered, or an essential set of needs to which ‘we’ are predisposed. Without a universal human nature to bind us, or predetermined needs to map our well-being, there could be no question of reduced consumption being ‘good for us’, only ‘good for some’.

The notion of universality is difficult to maintain—or rather it is easily *falsifiable*. As put by Guba & Lincoln: “whereas a million white swans can never establish, with complete confidence, the proposition that all swans are white, one black swan can completely falsify it” (1994, p.107, with reference to Popper, 1959). Likewise, if a million people were to benefit from the double dividend, this does not establish the proposition that all people would benefit—and only one exception would be required to demonstrate as much. This of course does not preclude the double dividend from benefiting a great many people, but where

it is argued in terms of human nature or needs there is an explicit assumption that it will benefit all, and this is the assumption we would like to challenge.

### Human nature

Notions of human nature will always be open to a very simple criticism: everyone must share the essential human features without exception, and if there are exceptions then those people must be somehow less human. Of course, this simplistic argument might not capture the intent of the double dividend's proponents—who are obviously not suggesting that people who are both happy and enjoy high levels of consumption should have their humanity revoked—but Jackson's assertion that we could “live better... by consuming less, and become more human in the process” (2005, p.33), necessarily positions the happy consumer as being ‘less human’ to begin with, thus anyone who chooses not to change would retain this lesser status.

Ashcroft *et al.* approach the problem of human nature from a post-colonial perspective, noting that “even a brief analysis of the ‘universal human condition’ finds it disappearing into an endless network of provisional and specific determinations in which even the most apparently ‘essential’ features of human life become provisional and contingent” (1995, p.55). They draw attention to an alternative interpretation of the universalist discourse, in their case relating to colonialism and European notions human nature: “The assumption of universalism is a fundamental feature of the construction of colonial power because the ‘universal’ features of humanity are the characteristics of those who occupy positions of political dominance” (*ibid.* p.55). Those who dominate *use* the idea of human nature to justify and legitimise their dominance, and those who *wish* to dominate *use* the idea of human nature to justify and legitimise their ascension.

The dominant view of consumption—the received view—has its own discursive ‘truths’ about human nature and needs—consumption as rational choice, as revealed preference, ‘Homo economicus’ acting out of self-interest to maximise utility—and such ‘truths’ are rooted in the dominant mode of knowledge production: economics. When sustainable consumption filters through this world view we arrive at ecological modernisation, decoupling, and ‘green consumerism’. Proponents of the double dividend, however, are in opposition to the dominant view of consumption. Strong discourses challenging the ills of consumerism—going ‘back’ to a more ‘natural’ state, becoming ‘more human’—are adapted into the double dividend, and these alternative ‘truths’ of human nature serve to legitimise its construction. This struggle for legitimacy—through the use of human nature—is part of a broader struggle to become the dominant mode of knowledge production in sustainable consumption.



The question of whether or not there is a universal human nature is somewhat beside the point. More significant is how the idea is *used*—in this case to justify a particular political position as if it were the objectively correct position to take. Rather than ask whether or not the double dividend is a condition of our ‘natural’ state of being, we should accept that this is, in the Derridean sense, an unresolved/unresolvable conflict (Derrida, 1976), borne of divergent ontological and epistemological assumptions. If we believe in a universal human nature then it stands to reason that the double dividend—or something like it—might be of benefit to all. If, however, we view human nature as socially constructed then that double dividend can only be of benefit to those whose values or tastes converge upon it.

### Needs

Theories of human needs are similarly employed to argue the case for a double dividend. Jackson (2005) discusses at length some basic theories, pointing out that divergent assumptions about human nature strongly affect our conceptualisation of needs. Jackson rejects the conventional economic doctrine—that there are no ‘needs’ as such, only desires, preferences and demands—and instead shows support for a theory of needs set out by Max-Neef (1991).

It is not our intention here to provide an alternative theory of needs or to debunk any existing theory; rather it is to draw attention to the problems of universalism—theories of human needs suffer from the same ontological and epistemological challenges as theories of human nature, in that any claims to universality are easily falsifiable, and theories of needs can just as easily be *used* to justify and legitimise a particular political position. However, debates about needs differ from those of human nature in the complex interplay between universalist and relativist viewpoints—their respective merits and failings are not purely philosophical. As observed by Soper: “The higher the level of abstraction at which any argument for universal needs is cast, the less controversial it is likely to prove, but the more open it becomes to the charge of being vacuously uninformative as a guide to specific welfare provision” (1993, p.113). Likewise, bold claims of universality may be easily falsifiable, but relativist claims of ‘each to their own’ may be entirely unhelpful in terms of actually satisfying any agreed ‘needs’ *en masse*.

The theory of needs referenced by Jackson (2005)—that of Max-Neef (1991)—belongs to a family of theories that propose a list of universal needs, common to everyone (see also Doyal & Gough, 1991; Nussbaum, 2001); as opposed to theories in which individual, geographical, or cultural factors generate relative needs depending on context (*cf.* Sen, 1999). In making the case for the double dividend, Jackson (2005) endorses an essential distinction between *objective* ‘needs’ and *subjective* ‘desires’. On this basis,

consumption borne out of subjective desires could be curtailed without causing any 'real' harm, leaving greater resources to provide for objective needs. However, if we take the view that all needs are somehow or other subjective, then the objective/subjective split could be read as a moral distinction; the authentic/inauthentic needs of worthy/unworthy consumers. The use of needs in this way evokes what Ahmed describes as a "moral economy" (2010, p.34), where judgements of taste translate into value judgements; if our 'needs' have been deemed mere 'desires', then they are less 'worthy', because they are 'inauthentic'. Jackson touches upon this argument elsewhere, but rejects it on the basis that it "provides few clues how we might proceed in escaping from hedonic treadmills and creating sustainable societies" (Jackson et al., 2004, p.27).

Instead Jackson defers to the theory of needs developed by Max-Neef (1991), who provides a well described methodology involving a large number of focus groups across several countries. Each group was asked to develop their vision of what constitutes fundamental human needs, which resulted in a definitive list. What Max-Neef has shown through this process could also be described as a *consensus*. If we arrive at the data with a prior belief that there must be some sort of universal human nature, then we could argue that this consensus simply reveals the needs that reside within us all. If, however, we believe that human nature is socially constructed, then this consensus merely reveals the participants' collective agreement—or forcefully argued positions—on what should be considered 'needs' within their particular value system.

That is not to say we should abandon the common causes shared by many within and across cultures. Just because something is subjective does not make it devoid of value. Is it not a reasonable aspiration for a society to live by some form of consensus rather than by dictate?

The real source of tension is the universality inherent in the language of human nature and needs. Soper argues that "for most human beings most of the time the avoidance of 'serious harm', construed as the avoidance of death/severe damage to mental and physical health, is so over-riding a priority as to justify defining it as both universal and objective, despite some individual exceptions to it" (1993, p.117), but such 'individual exceptions' are precisely what prevent it being defined as 'universal and objective'. Undeniably there can be such a resounding consensus on what we 'need' that we can agree to have a 'right' to it, but let that be reflected in the language: what is being described in these instances are 'consensus' and 'rights' rather than 'human nature' and 'needs'.

Even if a basic level of welfare can be agreed, whether its basis is universalist or relativist, we may still be far from solving the problem of sustainable

consumption. As cautioned by Soper (1993), countries with the best record for meeting 'needs' and providing welfare are also likely to have a very high *per capita* carbon footprint and disproportionately large share of resource use. Blindly fulfilling such 'needs' without prioritising environmental considerations can easily render the *satisfiers* of those needs—the forms of nourishment, forms of shelter, forms of freedom—as counter to the aims of sustainable consumption. The danger of committing to an 'objective' list of needs—especially when exceptions exist—lays in what to do if the result is still unsustainable.

## **What does the double dividend *do*?**

In the spirit of Ahmed, then, we must consider the influence, effects, and consequences of the double dividend's use. We have shown above how the discourse is constructed, how it is informed by and informs the voluntary simplicity movement, and how it has been recognised as a potential policy objective. Here we consider how the use of the double dividend shapes discourse, policy and behaviour around sustainable consumption. We begin by examining the way in which it conceives of governance in relation to sustainable consumption and the consuming subject.

One of the key functions of the double dividend discourse is to reframe sustainable consumption in a positive light. This stems from a recognition that the 'doom and gloom' of messages about, for instance, catastrophic climate change, do not motivate widespread engagement with environmental issues. The perceived association between moralistic environmentalism and imagined subjects such as 'tree huggers' can act as a barrier to involvement for people who do not see themselves as political activists (Hobson, 2011). Popular rhetoric valorising a return to 'old fashioned' values and consumption practices, or 'giving stuff up' in sacrifice to the common good, constitute further attempts to make a moral case for 'environmental citizenship'—which have also failed to gain significant support.

In its attempt to put a positive spin on environmentalism, the double dividend turns from *moralism* to *incentivisation*. Its basic argument—that a reduction in consumption would not only benefit the environment, but would also make us happier—is effectively being used as a *sales technique* for sustainable consumption. The message of 'choose to consume less and you will be happier' is a variation on the standard marketing message of 'choose to consume *this* and you will be happier'.

To this end, the double dividend discourse inverts the conventional economic view that 'consumption makes us happy'. It uses the science of SWB in an attempt to legitimise this counter-intuitive 'truth' in the face of contrary

received wisdom, lived experience, and normative cultural practice. The consuming subject—the individual—is then faced with a rational choice: consume more and lose, or consume less and gain. The individual who would benefit from the double dividend is therefore positioned as a self-interested, rational actor.

Intriguingly, this echoes the economic view of the consumer, to which the double dividend is set in opposition. Understood as a self-interested, rational, and fully agentic actor, the individual is expected to behave like a perfect consuming subject, even when performing anti-consumerism. Such a position could prove counter-productive: by assuming people behave as self-interested, rational actors, the double dividend reproduces a culture of self-interest. Promoting happiness as the result of self-interest and rational choice could result in these being reified as a means of performing one's 'happiness duty' (as per Ahmed, 2010). Happiness becomes an instrument as well as consequence here. It functions to uphold economic doctrine as the primary means of organising society—what Couldry (2010) describes as 'neo-liberal doctrine', or what Binkley (2011) aligns with a 'programme of neo-liberal governmentality'; happiness-seeking as a personal identity project, regulating the self-governing individual.

The idea that lifestyle change, particularly through voluntary simplicity, will lead to greater happiness is a familiar trope throughout the sustainable consumption literature. Its effect is individualising: it situates the problem as belonging to the individual, with happiness measured as a property of the individual. It also positions the individual as personally responsible for the solution, for finding happiness—in this case through reduced consumption—and the 'solution' to consumerism and its ostensible ills is the pursuit of personal, as opposed to societal, development.

The expectation that the agency of the individual will create both a happier and greener society feeds into the reproduction of economic doctrine: that social change is equivalent to the sum of individual actions. This is rather an 'article of faith' as Humphrey (2010) puts it, given both that voluntary simplicity is a minority interest, and that sustainability is often argued as requiring action at more than the individual level. Recent interest in the role of 'community' in sustainable consumption (see Middlemiss, 2011), suggests that policy-makers and practitioners are attempting to harness the social in promoting change. There are tensions in such an individualised approach to sustainable consumption that have been recognised more broadly, not least that the individual is unlikely to possess sufficient agency and resources to effect substantive change (Maniates, 2001). Further, the promotion of individual happiness as a goal could be seen to be at odds with attempts at collective responses to the challenges of sustainable consumption. The consuming

subject brought about by the double dividend discourse looks less like the environmental subject acting for the common good, and increasingly like a self-interested hedonist, rationally seeking out a better life for themselves—perhaps not what the double dividend’s proponents had in mind.

## Concluding remarks

The idea of the double dividend discourse has garnered significant attention, and has noticeably influenced sustainable consumption in both academia and policy circles. In the absence of healthy and robust critical debate, its basic assumptions and arguments have passed largely unchallenged in the sustainable consumption literature, allowing the idea to take root and flourish.

Over the course of this analysis, we have deconstructed the double dividend discourse to reveal its ontological and epistemological basis—along with some inherent tensions. We have shown the stark similarity between the double dividend and voluntary simplicity discourses, and how they rely on particular conceptions of happiness and human nature to build a rational argument for reduced consumption. Further, we have identified two important points about what the double dividend discourse *does*:

*Firstly*, its use of knowledge to occupy spaces of power in academic discourse—we saw how the ‘science of happiness’ is used to lend a particular type of legitimacy to the double dividend discourse, feeding on the popular conception that scientists *know* what *makes* us happy. This legitimacy is used to justify sustainable consumption on the basis that it will *cause* happiness, and the promise of happiness is used to *incentivise* individuals to reduce their consumption, where *moralising* doomsayers had failed in the past. We saw how the received view of consumption has its own discursive truths about happiness and human nature, and how this knowledge has been used to legitimise current patterns of production and consumption. In response, the double dividend uses alternative truths to legitimise its own view of consumption. Crucially, this struggle for legitimacy is part of a broader struggle to become the dominant mode of knowledge production in sustainable consumption.

*Secondly*, its reproduction of economic doctrine—whereas these discourses of legitimacy take the form of an ontological and epistemological dispute within the space of academia, the double dividend discourse also has the more explicit aim of shaping policy and behaviour across consumer culture. To this end, the double dividend is being used as a *sales technique*: as a means of incentivising individuals to act out of self-interest and make a rational choice to consume less. Paradoxically, this reproduces the economic doctrine of *incentivisation*, *individualisation*, *self-interest*, and *rational choice*—

at odds with the explicit values of the double dividend's proponents. In reproducing the economic doctrine, the double dividend inadvertently reproduces the conditions that enable the environmental destruction and global inequality it seeks to redress.

### A critical sustainable consumption

The double dividend discourse brings together several concepts from a range of disciplines in an attempt to gain an overview of the issues relating to sustainable consumption. Although formally an 'interdisciplinary' approach, the arguments put forward for the double dividend neglect to assume the full implications of interdisciplinarity. It fails to account for the ontological and epistemological differences that divide the disciplines, and understates the tensions within and between them.

An interdisciplinary approach does not simply take two knowledges and add them together to make one greater knowledge; instead it searches for the limitations of each methodology, interrogates the basic assumptions and world views of each author, and constructs a more detailed picture of how various ontologies and epistemologies interact. In many cases different forms of knowledge may not map neatly onto one another, or may be completely incompatible—being based on entirely different assumptions—and it is important to be aware of such limitations before drawing any conclusions. Sustainable consumption is necessarily interdisciplinary and, as such, deserves this same level of critical engagement.

Throughout this analysis we have sought to engage with the double dividend discourse in just such a critical manner, to unpick the ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies that underpin it, and to reveal their inherent limitations. Our use of deconstruction and discourse analysis was our reaction to the text that presented itself to us through our reading of the literature. This enabled us to uncover not only the tensions that exist within the double dividend, but also the wider social and political ramifications of the discourse. Other situations might call for different forms of analysis, but we would urge anyone researching the interdisciplinary aspects of sustainable consumption to consider this approach; to lay bare the limitations of any given scientific paradigm before presenting it as established fact.

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