

Education for a simpler, more frugal life?

John White

Despite the trials of lock-down Britain, many of us find we are enjoying the respite from our usual life of getting and spending – rediscovering nature, having more time to ourselves, being with our families, gardening, reading, cycling. Last autumn, when I began work on whether children should be brought up to lead a simpler, more frugal life, I had no idea that by this spring the issue would have become so relevant to our day-to-day lives. Even before Covid-19, it had been gaining in prominence owing to the climate crisis. Danielle Zwarthoed (2015, 2018), for instance, sees the latter as reinforcing the liberal-democratic obligation to promote sustainable development for the sake of future generations: parents in her view should bring up their children with ‘a stable disposition for little consumption’.

Calls for a simpler life based on a low level of consumption predate, of course, the two crises under whose shadow we are currently living. It goes back at least to Epicurus in the fourth century BC (Westacott 2016). It can also take different forms. A simple life embracing, for instance, being close to nature and enjoying uncostly pleasures can be enjoyed for its own sake, while a life of little consumption with the well-being of future generations or – what is not synonymous – saving the planet in mind has extrinsic considerations in view.

These kinds of frugality are autonomously chosen, for either self-regarding or moral reasons, or both. But frugal living can also be imposed on one. The car-less, plane-less, commuting-less, work-less life, for instance, that we have been living under lockdown has been forced on us whether we like it or not. There is also a kind of frugal life that few people or no one would choose – the life of severely restricted consumption and opportunity necessitated by war or poverty.

I have recently been exploring these and other aspects of frugal living and relating them to educational issues (White 2021). These include: should children be encouraged by their parents and teachers to live frugally rather than in the high consumption way many of us are attracted to in richer countries? Or would this bring with it the danger of steering children towards a favoured way of life with insufficient respect for their own autonomous choices? Would such steering be justifiable, however, given the catastrophic effects of climate change and of the depletion of the world's resources? If it *is* justifiable, would this mean discouraging children from engaging – either for leisure or with careers in mind – in expensive, resource-hungry, pursuits like opera, orchestral music, theatre, high-end sport?

There are other questions, too. How should children learn about frugality and perhaps be encouraged to live frugally? What role might parental example or school ethos play? What more explicit forms of teaching are appropriate? Should they include classes, perhaps interdisciplinary ones, and perhaps

supplemented by on-line presentations, in the history and economics of high-consumption societies, and in the causes and effects of climate change? Is citizenship education a good site for discussions about what frugal living involves and of the complex ethical and political issues surrounding it? How, if at all, should frugality figure in a national curriculum? With regard to climate change, is learning to be personally frugal *enough*, or is Greta Thunberg right that young people should also be activists (White 2020)? How might our hectic, high-consumption way of life and the work-orientated school system that feeds it change if, as some predict, we are soon to face ‘a world without work’ (Susskind 2020)? Will simpler, often time-consuming (White 2016), pursuits – like those with which the Covid-19 crisis has reacquainted us – then come into their own?

References

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Westacott, E. (2016) *The Wisdom of Frugality* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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Zwarthoed, D. (2015) 'Creating Frugal Citizens: The Liberal Egalitarian Case for Teaching Frugality.' *Theory and Research in Education* 13(3)

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Q&A with John White

For anyone who's stumbled across this video before your blog post, could you offer a brief summary or precis of the main points?

An abstract for a standard 6000 word article is about 200 words. On the same basis, a summary of a 600 word blog should take 20. So here goes. 'I look at the many faces of frugal living and ask whether educators should steer children towards it.' OK, I know you're going to tell me that's only 18 words, not 20. But it's a blog on *frugality*, after all!

**Could you speak to us about frugality: what sparked your interest in it?
What's its philosophical and-or educational significance?**

Frugality was a part of my life at an early age. I was a primary age child during World War 2, so hard grey bread and so-called raspberry jam with bits of wood in place of pips were part of our everyday diet. Of course, frugality was imposed on us all then and I wouldn't want to go back to such enforced deprivations. You might say that Covid-19 has imposed a new frugality via lockdown and all that comes with it, but at least we've got amply stocked shops and for some of us home deliveries these days, so that's quite different from the war and living off unappetising grey bread!

As well as Covid-19, climate change and threats to global resources have also rekindled my interest in a low consumption life and – perhaps triggered by my early experiences – I’ve long been attracted by ideals of the simple life in philosophy and elsewhere.

Part of my blog looks at aspects of the concept of frugality. This is preliminary to asking whether schools and families should encourage children to lead a low-consumption life or whether this would be to wrongfully impose on them a controversial view of how to live.

As yours is the first PESGB blog post, could you offer some thoughts on blogs, philosophy, and education? What might the affordances/advantages of online, short-form writing be?

I was really delighted when you and Mary Richardson invited me to launch our new PESGB blog series. It’s a new platform for disseminating our ideas, along with the [Journal \[of Philosophy of Education\]](#) (JOPE) and [IMPACT](#). Of course, a blogger can’t present complete arguments in a few hundred words, but they can use blogs to create an interest in a topic and provide references for those who want to pursue it. Comments on a blog can also generate mini-debates and further ideas and references to explore. Our blogs may be especially useful for students in our subject, as well as academics.

Blogs can also be used for purposes other than constructing mini-arguments. Examples might include: short reviews of books; telling readers about interesting new articles or debates; reporting on conferences; suggestions about future directions for PESGB and *JOPE*. The blog is also a good vehicle for helping us to forge closer links with the wider educational world. We should think of attracting philosophically-minded teachers via pithy pieces that speak to their concerns. Overlapping with this is the role of the blog in commenting from a philosophical angle on policy issues, including those currently in the headlines.

My own view is that our blog page should become a go-to place not only for people in the academic world but also for teachers, journalists, politicians, civil servants and union officials.