



# **Consumer Moral Ambiguity: The Gray Area of Consumption**

**McGregor Monograph Series No. 201401**

**Sue L. T. McGregor PhD  
MSVU Professor Emerita  
McGregor Consulting Group  
11565 Peggy's Cove Road  
Seabright Nova Scotia B3Z 2Y1 Canada  
902-823-2625  
[sue.mcgregor@msvu.ca](mailto:sue.mcgregor@msvu.ca)  
<http://www.consultmcgregor.com>**

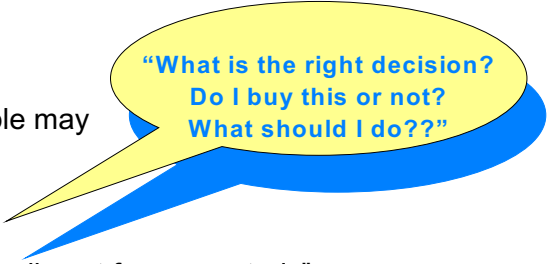
**September 2014**

**Cite as**

McGregor, S. L. T. (2014). *Consumer moral ambiguity: The gray area of consumption* [McGregor Monograph Series No. 201401]. Seabright, NS: McGregor Consulting Group.  
[www.consultmcgregor.com](http://www.consultmcgregor.com)

## Introduction

This monograph is about a new concept called **consumer moral ambiguity**, the uncertainty and doubt some people may experience when they encounter a consumer purchase with moral overtones (their decision may cause harm or injury).



“What is the right decision?  
Do I buy this or not?  
What should I do??”

“Moralism about consumption is a social phenomenon that calls out for more study” (Wilk, 2001, p. 250). Consumption is a central moral problem; hence, moral issues can never be separated from a consumer culture. Every purchasing decision implies some moral choice and all purchasing is ultimately moral in nature (McMurtry, 1998; Miller, 2001; Wilk, 2001). The studies of consumption that adopt a moral agenda are embracing a widening range of terminology and conceptualizations (Caruana, 2007), including a focus on the moral, immoral, amoral (indifference or neutrality) and ethical nature of consumption (Nielsen, & McGregor, 2013; McGregor, 2008, 2010). Because there is always ambiguity in a moral choice (McCormick, 1973), the consumer behaviour and related consumer fields could benefit from a theoretical concept that deals with consumer moral ambiguity, the gray area of consumption. In reality, all serious moral deliberations are fraught with complexity and ambiguity (McGee, 2003), with consumer decisions being no exception.

Despite the existing literature on moral ambiguity (see Banning, 2003; Green, 2004; McGee, 2003), the consumer literature does not have a concept that accommodates *consumer moral ambiguity* (a September 2014 Google search using that term yielded zero results). Ambiguity refers to either (a) multiple meanings and interpretations or to (b) uncertainty and doubt (Sennet, 2011). *Moral ambiguity* is experienced when the outcomes of decisions may create harm or injury (de Beauvoir, 1948). It has been defined as “lack of clarity in ethical decision-making; that is, when an issue, situation, or question has moral dimensions or implications, but the decidedly ‘moral’ action to take is unclear, either due to conflicting principles, ethical systems, or situational perspectives” (Urban Dictionary, 2009). In these complex situations, there are no clear-cut rights and wrongs. Usually, it involves a mental conflict within the person (Moon, 2013).

An ambiguous consumption scenario would be characterized as a gray area (hard to discern right from wrong), replete with haziness, blurred borders, even moving borders (see Figure 1 for two examples of morally ambiguous consumer situations). The ability to make an ethical or moral purchase decision will be obscured and compromised if people become stranded in this morally ambiguous middle ground, a place of ambivalence, confusion and uncertainty. Even the *need* to make a moral or ethical choice may be concealed in these ambiguous gray areas. For clarification, Goodman and Byrant (2013, p. 18) referred to “ethically ambiguous” products produced under suspect labour and ecological conditions. This monograph is concerned with the moral ambiguity experienced by consumers when they encounter such products in the marketplace.

**An ambiguous scenario** (too many interpretations with uncertainty of right choice) might include a consumer trying to decide whether or not to buy a product knowingly made using child labour. One interpretation of this situation is that buying the good keeps the child employed, thereby providing much needed income and security for his or her family. A second interpretation is that if the parent(s) had work, the child would not have to work. Buying the good perpetuates miring the family in poverty. It deprives the child of education and play and the parent(s) of ever finding work because the systemic violence has not been addressed. A third interpretation is that the child may really want to work, and buying the good enables the child to be independent and in control of his or her life choices. There are at minimum three *permissible* interpretations of this consumer scenario, paving the way for a very gray area - what is the moral thing to do?

**An uncertain scenario** (uncertainty and doubtfulness of moral choice for reasons other than multiple meanings) might involve buying an organically farmed product. There is no doubt that the intent of organic farming is to promote the sustainable health and productivity of the ecosystem – soil, plants, animals and people. Organic foods are farmed in an environmentally sustainable and socially responsible way, focusing on soil regeneration, water conservation and animal welfare. Gray areas begin to emerge when pondering the pros and cons of buying products of organic farming. Is it immoral to support agribusiness (opposite of organic farming) when the former is so innovative? Is it immoral to buy non-organic products when their production ensures so many people have employment? Is it moral to buy non-organic foods when one knows that people, animals and the soil may be harmed by their production using oil-based agrochemicals? Is it moral to buy organic food when, in reality, the organic ideal may reflect one's desire for moral superiority? Given all of this *doubt*, what is the moral thing to do?

*Figure 1 Examples of morally ambiguous consumer decisions*

It will be hard for people to morally assess such an ambiguous purchase if they are perplexed, puzzled, bewildered or confused about the rightness or wrongness of their choice; that is, if they experience moral ambiguity. If, due to the moral complexity of the situation, they cannot discern good and bad or right and wrong, they may ignore any moral considerations and act on personal preference (Moon, 2013). This is an undesirable state of affairs because moral ambiguity is a defining feature of all truly significant moral deliberations (McGee, 2003), consumer decisions included. The premise of this monograph is that people must be able to navigate uncertain and complex consumer decisions that have moral overtones, and the consumer behaviour field requires a concept to help researchers explore this aspect of consumer behaviour.

### **Morality of Consumption Caveat**

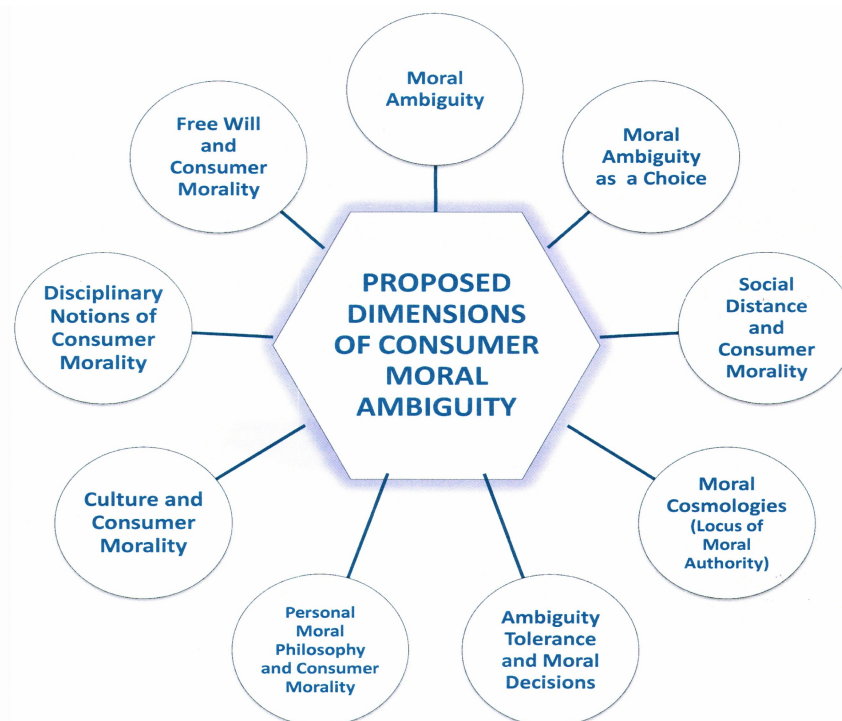
Although “consumption is in essence a moral matter” (Wilk, 2001, p. 246), this statement does not apply to all types of consumption. Borgmann (2000) differentiated between a natural, steady state or cycle of consumption and a paradigmatic state of consumption (in excess of sustenance). The former, life-sustaining consumption, is a simple affair, indeed a condition of all life (with nominal, if any, moral overtones). But, when humans began to consume more than it took to continue the cycle of life, to the point that a consumer culture evolved (beginning in the mid-1800s), consumption became morally problematic, described by Borgmann as a “species of consumption that is paradigmatic for our time” (2000, p. 419). That is, morally problematic

consumption is a dominate pattern epitomizing our present time.

Wilk (2001) agreed, stating that “most moralists argue ... that some kinds of consumption are good, others bad” (p. 250). He asserted, “All human life is based on materialism but I firmly believe that not all materialism is equal” (Wilk, 2001, p.258). Like Wilk (2001), Miller (2001) also challenged the overarching critique that all consumption is an intrinsically bad, destructive activity. He proposed that consumer scholars should strive for empathetic encounters with consumers in efforts to communicate the humanity of consumers. He further suggested that it is the “task of politics to accentuate the possibilities for human welfare and ameliorate the negative effects [of consumption such that]... human welfare is the goal” (Miller, 2001, p .233). Miller actually suggested that a moralistic critique of consumption dehumanizes the consumer. He theorized that moral affect (trying to make a moral difference) may well supercede moral effect (a change for the good resulting from an action). His position notwithstanding, this monograph reflects an attempt to gain deeper understandings of consumer moral ambiguity as a new construct.

### Conceptual Clarification

This discussion begins with an overview of three overarching philosophical approaches to morality, followed by conceptual clarification of three interrelated concepts (morality, immorality and amorality), as well as the concept of ambiguity. The final section of the monograph shares a collection of ideas from the literature that may theoretically or conceptually contribute to our understandings of the concept of consumer moral ambiguity, alone and in complex combinations (see Figure 2).



*Figure 2 Proposed Dimensions of Consumer Moral Ambiguity*

### Three Overarching Moral Philosophies

McGregor (2010, Chapter 2) summarized three overarching moral philosophies. People can be concerned with (a) the action (deontological), (b) the consequences of the action (teleological) or (c) the character of the actor engaged in the action (virtue ethics). Respectively, people can be concerned with the *rightness of the act*, and focus on the intentions or motives behind the person's actions. They ask "What kind of choices ought we to make, using what rules"? The rights of people are privileged over the common good. Second, people can be concerned with the *rightness of the outcome*, the results of the actions on others, ideally striving for a positive balance of consequences for the common good (maximize good, minimized bad). They ask, "What kind of outcomes ought we seek?" The third moral philosophy, virtue ethics, is focused on the moral character of the person, *the righteousness of the person*. The moral rightness of any act is determined by the virtuous character of the actor, such that the actor avoids actions that display a vice or a character deficiency. They ask, "What kind of person ought we be?" Their goal is to consistently act virtuously (McGregor, 2010).

"The more individuals are aware of moral philosophies for their ethical decision making, the more influence these philosophies will have on their ethical decisions, [allegedly reducing moral ambiguity]" (Ferrell & Gresham, 1985, p. 93). However, "different consumers follow different ethical/moral philosophies" (Rawwas, 2001, p.194), and this philosophical variance could affect consumer moral ambiguity. Philosophical confusion and ambiguity could emerge as people strive to be morally responsible in the marketplace. Should consumers be concerned with their character, their intent, or the consequences of their actions? Should one of these three moral philosophies take precedence in consumer decisions? Does one precede the other? Can a person hold a constellation of moral philosophies? Can one moral philosophy be alright for one purchase situation and not another? Perhaps appreciating the nuances between morality, immorality and amorality could ease this moral dilemma.

### Morality

Morality is concerned with the principles of right or wrong, good or bad, just or unjust, honourable or not honourable. For clarification, ethics and morals both relate to right and wrong conduct; however, ethics refer to the series of rules provided to an individual by an *external* source (e.g., their profession, religion or society) while morals refer to an individual's own *internal* principles regarding right and wrong. For further clarification, ethical consumption refers to situations where "consumption is not to much the *object* of moral evaluation [as is moral consumption], but more a *medium* for moral and political action" (Barnett, Cafaro, & Newholm, 2005, p. 11). This monograph is concerned with moral consumption, rather than ethical consumption.

There are two recognized approaches to defining morality: descriptive and normative. The only feature they both have in common is to avoid or prevent harm to others (Gert, 2011). The *descriptive* approach presumes morality is "any code of conduct that a person or group takes as most important" (p.1). The descriptive approach refers to a code of conduct put forth externally by a society and that is accepted by that society as a guide for the behaviour of its members. People in this society would want others to adopt the code of moral conduct but not require that they do so. Those who do not adopt the code are judged to be less moral than those who do but are not judged to be immoral.

The *normative* approach asserts that morality “refers to a code of conduct [,a universal guide to behaviour,] that applies to all [rational persons] who can understand it and can govern their behaviour by it” (Gert, 2011, p. 1). The normative approach holds that “any rational person in any society can know the general kinds of actions that morality prohibits, requires, discourages, encourages and allows” (p. 10). This morality is an informal public system known to all to whom it applies. It is used to govern behaviour that affects others, to lessen harm or evil. In this system of morality, people are rational persons (moral agents) *if* they have sufficient knowledge and intelligence about the universal morality, and *if* they willingly use the morality as a guide to their behaviour (on their own volition). Interestingly, this approach rules out scientific and religious beliefs because they are not shared by all rational people (Gert, 2011).

### **Immorality**

Immoral (Latin *in*, not and Latin *moralis*, proper behaviour) refers to people engaging in behaviour that society considers *not proper* (Harper, 2014). It means acting in ways that are not in accordance with standards or conventions of right or good conduct, thereby leading to morally objectionable behaviour. Immorality is the active opposition to morality. The failure to adhere to moral principles is contrary to conscience or public notions of morality (goodness and rightness), and reflects an impairment of virtue (a lack of behaviour showing high moral standards). Immorality involves transgressions against others and violations of duty or moral principles. Persons who are immoral may exhibit instances of being unscrupulous, unconscientious and unprincipled as well as dishonest, wicked and profligate (having lost their sense of decency and virtue) (AudioEnglish.net, 2011; Bartlett’s Roget’s Thesaurus, 1996; Superson, 2009). McGregor (2008, 2010) developed a collection of moral claims and defences that consumers may apply when downplaying the repercussions of, what can be constituted as, immoral consumer decisions. Consumers often strive to justify the negative impacts of their purchasing behaviour, and they continually, or periodically, strive to rationalize their less-than-moral and -ethical consumption decisions.

### **Amorality**

Amoral refers to being ethically indifferent, lacking moral sensibilities, and not caring about right or wrong. People who are amoral have no moral code (Harper, 2014; Pickett, 2006). The distinction between amoral and immoral is *intention* (Collins, 1989). Immoral behaviour is predicated on intentions; the person acting has or is aware of a moral code and breaks it. Unintentional behavior is done without planning to cause the specific circumstances that actually result from the action. Amoral behaviour involves actions taken without awareness of, concern for, or intent to have, moral consequences (creating harm or injury); the person has no moral code to begin with (Collins, 1989). McGregor (2008) pondered whether some consumers may have no moral bearings at all *when it comes to shopping*: Shopping is not good. Shopping is not bad. Shopping just *is*.

Amoral, as a concept, can also refer to places, scenarios or situations where moral considerations *do not apply* (Pickett, 2006). This monograph is predicated on the assumption that consumer decisions *do* have ethical and moral overtones. The past 150 years of consumption have lead to inexorable harm for those consuming, those living elsewhere, future generations, those not yet born, other species, and the planet (see Hilton, 2004; Horowitz, 1984; Wilk, 2001). Consumer scholars are not in error when they apply a moral lens to

consumer behaviour.

### **Ambiguity**

Ambiguity is Latin *ambiguitatem*, double meaning (Harper, 2014). Ambiguity is an important feature of people's cognitive understanding and interpretative abilities (Sennet, 2011). In the absence of ambiguity, there is clearness, perspicuity and unequivocalness; things are easy to understand, with no double meanings, no uncertainty (AudioEnglish.net Dictionary, 2011).

Ironically, ambiguity has two meanings. First, ambiguity can exist under conditions where it is possible to interpret something (information, behaviour or a situation) in two or more different ways. This situation becomes exacerbated when there are multiple, *permissible interpretations*. Things are unclear by virtue of there being more than one permissible meaning (Sennet, 2011). A phrase, for example, would be ambiguous if there were two specific and distinct meanings that made sense, *in the same context*. The phrase "Three-year old teacher needed for pre-school" could mean a teacher for three-year old students or a teacher who is three-years old (if one assumed that students can learn from each other).

Second, ambiguity can exist when there is uncertainty or doubt, a state of being unsure of something (for reasons other than just multiple meanings). The meaning of something cannot be determined *from its context*. This doubtfulness causes uncertainty as regards making sense of the event, situation, circumstances or possible outcomes. In these situations, it sometimes becomes possible to evade an obligation because of a loophole, an inadequacy in a set of rules, including moral rules (AudioEnglish.net Dictionary, 2011; Sennet, 2011). If Peter does not know which of two or more specific meanings is intended, then it is ambiguous. If Peter cannot gauge possible outcomes due to doubtfulness, he is experiencing uncertainty and is more prone to avoid or make erroneous decisions.

For clarification, ambiguity is distinct from vagueness, which pertains to the lack of precision (accuracy) contained or available in the information or the situation (Sennet, 2011). Vague is Latin *vagus*, vacillating, wandering (Harper, 2014). If something is vague, it can have only *one* meaning, *but* that meaning is difficult to determine due to border-line cases (Williamson, 1994). If a nurse is needed for a pre-school, we are certain of the type of school but an attendant query might be "What kind of nurse?" The more details that can be provided, the less vague will be the scenario. If Peter does not know what is meant by something, then it is vague. If Peter does not know which of two or more specific *meanings* is intended, then it is ambiguous. This monograph concerns itself with ambiguity and not vagueness.

### **Proposed Dimensions of Consumer Moral Ambiguity**

This section reflects the results of a review of literature pertaining to consumer morality, the morality of consumption, and moral ambiguity. It yielded several intriguing lines of thought associated with these three concepts. Eight overarching ideas were culled from this literature review. Each is considered in turn for its potential to contribute theoretically or conceptually to our understanding of the concept of consumer moral ambiguity, both alone and in some complex combination (see Figure 2, presented in no particular order at this time).



## Moral Ambiguity

Simply put, moral ambiguity refers to the concept of ambiguity being brought to bear on decisions with moral overtones. The outcomes of such decisions have the potential to harm or injure others (McGregor, 2010). There is no formula for making moral decisions; rather, they involve experience and sensitivity that lead to deeper appreciation for the subtleties of problems with moral overtones. Without solid guidelines for these situations, people will experience ambiguity, complicated by the reality that the repercussions of an immoral or amoral decision are not always evident. Furthermore, because there is often disagreement on what to do in a given situation, more ambiguity arises. Couple that with multiple meanings and permissible interpretations and a moral quagmire begins to take shape. Add to the mix the confounding influence of the importance of context, and the importance of relationships, and a volatile decision making scenario emerges, rife with potential for moral ambiguity. And to make things more complicated, morality is not a separate, special domain of life, to be consulted only on rare occasions; it is ubiquitous (see MacDonald, 2002). That means morality, and attendant moral ambiguity, are central to consumer decisions as well as other life decisions; hence, this attempt to develop the new construct of consumer moral ambiguity.

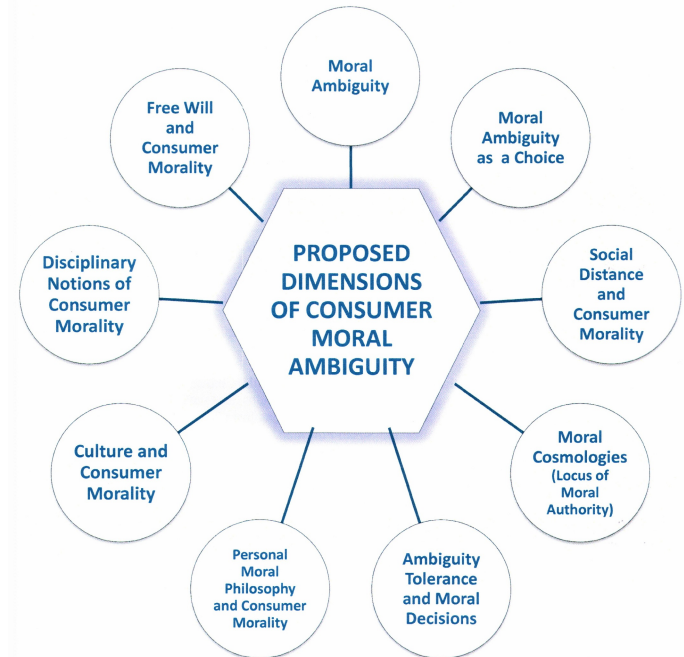


Figure 2

## Moral Ambiguity as Choice

Some approach moral ambiguity as a choice. Because people cannot come down on both sides of an issue, they must choose. That choice is dictated by the standard of authority they choose to follow, whether they acknowledge the standard or not. "The tendency of modern man [sic] is to be morally ambiguous" (Ruffner, 2005, p.1). People's moral sight is repeatedly impaired by ambiguity (Dorr, 2001). This monograph argues this impairment is especially true during their consumption-related activity.

As mentioned earlier, humans have to struggle with moral ambiguity because it is a defining feature of all truly significant moral deliberations (McGee, 2003). The resultant ambivalence (mixed or contradictory feelings) leads to attempts to cultivate a sense of what is right in the face of social-cultural flux, never knowing for certain the absolute rightness of one's choices (Caruana, 2007). Banning (2003) found that people's locus of control (perceived control over their life) plays an important role in how readily they can learn to tolerate ambiguity. Those with an internal locus of control (versus an external locus of control) have higher tolerances of ambiguity. They tend to actively seek information about their environment, mitigating the affect of uncertainty and/or of multiple interpretations of a situation. These efforts can reduce the moral ambiguity experienced in difficult situations.



Green (2004) identified several additional compelling factors that can explain why people experience moral ambiguity, factors that relate quite readily to consumer scenarios. These factors include the complexity of the activities, the difficulty of defining harms and of identifying victims, and the diffusion of responsibility among many responsible agents. Regarding the latter, McGregor (2010, Chapter 12) discussed consumer accountability and identified similar quandaries. She especially focused on the dilemma of collective responsibility for each other and the commons in an individualistic marketplace, blaming this dilemma on the market morality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: one of rational materialism stripped of commitments to moral virtues.

### **Social Distance and Consumer Moral Decisions**

Today's global markets create real and perceptual distances between peoples. It is well established that social distance between people (physical, geographic, emotional and/or psychological) affects how humans conceptualize and treat each other. Those people that are perceived as similar (i.e., socially close) are accorded higher moral status and receive more humane and just treatment (Atwood-Harvey, 2005). Although distant others may be harmed by the fallout of purchase decisions, holding consumers morally accountable in these situations is a challenge. People have become too removed from the origins of the goods and services they consume. Geographical and mental distances compromise people's ability to establish trust relationships, gain and apply knowledge of ethical and moral principles, respect a sense of community and solidarity, and believe that they can make a difference (Klintmann & Boström, 2006).

Social distance also makes people lose a sense of their moral agency; that is, they lose sensitivity to the impact of their actions on themselves and others. With distance, it becomes easier for them to *morally disengage* from actions they otherwise might find morally objectionable. Social distance and moral disengagement make it much "easier to deal with feeling ambiguous about behaviour" (Atwood-Harvey, 2005, p.318), consumer behaviour included.

### **Moral Cosmologies (Locus of Moral Authority)**

Consumer moral engagement may also be influenced by moral cosmologies (i.e., religious worldviews of what constitutes who should be the judge of the morality of behaviour). Don Slater commented that people articulate and perform moral cosmologies through their consumption (Panel Discussion, 2010). Miller (2001) concurred, speculating that cosmology and morality are absorbed in and expressed through the consumer material culture. The moral cosmology approach to consumption (or any other human behaviour) assumes that people differ in their beliefs regarding the locus of moral authority (Hunter, 1991). This approach focuses on people's beliefs about whether God or individuals constitute the ultimate basis of moral order. In particular, they distinguish between (a) religious orthodoxy, which holds that God is the ultimate moral arbiter of right and wrong, and (b) the modernist assertion that individuals are the ultimate judges of what constitutes moral action. *Modernist cosmology* views individuals as largely independent from God in determining their fate and destiny while *religious orthodoxy* assumes God is watching over, affecting and judging people's daily lives (Davis & Robinson, 2006; Starks & Robinson, 2007, 2009).

Slater brought this perspective to consumption. He explained that consumers' beliefs

about the locus of moral authority affect and are affected by other social relationships, processes, systems, and powers. He maintained that consumption is “morally serious.” In an individualist consumer society, moral cosmologies “deform social processes,” including consumption-related processes (Panel Discussion, 2010, p. 283). Slater noted that the export of northern moral consumerism anxieties, especially “the projection of northern moral quandaries onto the rest of the world” (Panel Discussion, 2010, p. 283), has caused far-flung and vulnerable places to pay the cost. Miller (2001) shared this concern that the anxieties of the consuming rich are obscuring the suffering of the poor, the distant other. The pain experienced due to this gray area of consumption (moral ambiguity) is exacerbated by the concept of social distance, noted earlier.

### **Ambiguity Tolerance and Moral Decisions**

How well do (should) people tolerate ambiguity in situations with moral overtones? Tolerance is Latin *tolerantia*, endurance, fortitude, the ability to take large doses (Harper, 2014). Ambiguity tolerance is the ability, or not, for people to perceive uncertainty in an open way, to tolerate change, and to act on ambiguous and misleading cues (Sennet, 2011). This ability impacts their decision making, decision confidence, ability to cope with complexity, and choice of decision making approach (Banning, 2003). This monograph proposes that one’s tolerance of ambiguity (i.e., tolerance of double meanings, permissible interpretations, and uncertainty) affects people’s performance in many domains of life, including consumption.

Weisbrod (2009) found that people with a higher tolerance of ambiguity (i.e., they are willing to live with the uncertainty that occurs when they go beyond normative rules) make less ethical decisions because they are more willing to violate ethical norms and are less willing to report on others who do so. Conversely, those who have a low tolerance of moral ambiguity are less willing to break moral codes of conduct because they are uncomfortable with possible moral backlash. More compelling is his finding that people with a high tolerance of ambiguity (i.e., are comfortable acting immorally) are more likely to violate ethical norms if they are experiencing negative affect (i.e., they are in a dark mood or disposition, experiencing fear, hostility/anger, guilt, and/or sadness/loneliness). This negative moral propensity does not bode well in a consumer society, which is replete with stressed and overwrought consumers experiencing a preponderance of negative emotions (see McGregor, 2010, Chapter 10).

As noted above, by way of moral cosmologies, people articulate and pursue *moral purposes* by assembling and using material and symbolic artifacts (i.e., they buy and use consumer goods and services) (Don Slater in Panel Discussions, 2010). The attendant, vigorous pursuit of self-interest by private economic entities (consumers included) is one of the greatest causes of moral problems in the world (Willbern, 1984). To offset this harm, people need to be able to harness the ability to discern the relevance or non-relevance of moral factors introduced into these decision making situations, all the while learning to tolerate huge volumes of ambiguity when thinking ethically (Caroll & Buchholtz, 2008). By association, they must know how to decode ambiguous cues that are embedded in social and decision contexts (Banning, 2003), including consumer decisions made in a consumer society.

### **Personal Moral Philosophy and Consumer Morality**

One’s moral philosophy of life also comes into play during consumption decisions, thereby affecting consumer moral ambiguity. “Individual differences in personal moral

philosophy are significant determinants of one's stance toward controversial ethical [and moral] issues" (Nickell & Herzog, 1996, p. 54). This line of thinking began with Forsyth's (1980) development of a two dimensional taxonomy of ethical ideologies. "Individual differences in ethical ideologies have been shown to vary as a function of (a) rejection of universal moral rules in favour of *relativism* and (b) *idealism* [moral optimism] in the evaluation of actions and consequences" (Forsyth & Berger, 1982, p. 53, emphasis added, see also Gert, 2011). For clarification, ethical and moral ideologies constitute a person's outlook on life in general rather than an attitude toward a specific issue (Nickell & Herzog, 1996).

Put simply, not everyone agrees on what is moral and what is not (Forsyth, 1980). *Absolutists* reject the use of an action's consequences as their basis for moral judgements; instead, they appeal to rationality to determine moral judgements. They adhere to moral absolutes and believe that behaviours should lead to positive outcomes for others. *Exceptionists* believe that the morality of an action depends on the consequences it produces. One is ethically bound to act in a way that produces 'good' consequences (greatest good for the greatest number). They do not believe that good things will always prevail but they do rely on moral principals to guide their behaviour. *Situationists* advocate for an individual analysis of each act, in each situation. While rejecting moral rules, they demand that favourable consequences flow from people's behaviour (the best possible outcome). Finally, *subjectivists* appraise situations based on their personal values and perspective rather than universal moral principles. They believe all people should act to promote their own self-interest rather than focus on positive outcomes for others (Dubinsky, Nataraajan, & Huang, 2004; Forsyth, 1980; Forsyth & Berger, 1982).

The first two (absolutist and exceptionist) represent idealism (moral optimism) and the latter two (situationist and subjectivist) represent moral relativism (context matters) (Forsyth, 1980). Idealism focuses on the intrinsic rightness of behaviour as the determinant of which behaviour is followed and relativism focuses on the social consequences on others of the behaviour (van Kenhove, Vermeir, & Verniers, 2001). Consumers may adopt one of these four approaches when making moral and ethical judgements, thereby differing significantly when formulating their moral judgements. Moral perceptions are a direct result of the personal moral philosophy of the perceiver (Nickell & Herzog, 1996).

### **Culture and Consumer Morality**

Forsyth (1980) (see above) focused on personal moral philosophies (the individual). Grounding his work in Hofstede's (1983) cultural typology, Rawwas (2001) developed a four-dimensional typology of consumers' orientations to ethical and moral beliefs. His study confirmed that belief orientations differ from one country to another: culture (the social collective) definitely influences consumer ethics and morality. *Functionalists* apply practical moral reasoning to determine the morality of a situation and what ought to be done (instead of using rules formalized by others). They are very pragmatic about making moral decisions, seeking to take charge of their lives. *Survivors* weigh various actions and then choose the action that helps them achieve their goals. They are not very strict about following moral codes of conduct or established rules and standards. They believe a questionable behaviour is alright as long as they can get away with it.

Although *enthusiasts* willingly accept an authority figure's orders, they are amenable to

not completely adhering to these orders or rules *if* they can gain an advantage. They do not consistently abide by moral codes or rules of behaviour. Finally, *deferents* closely follow rules established by an authority figure. They yield to the latter's opinions and directives, hoping to shield themselves against anxieties about their future. They do what is socially correct and proper, and they judge ideas and actions in terms of right and wrong (Rawwas, 2001). Although all consumers live in the consumer society (permeated by market values), consumers living in different cultures will embrace different moral and ethical beliefs that play out in the consumer society.

### **Free Will and Consumer Morality**

To *will* something is to desire, want or wish for it or to choose it. *Free* will eludes to acting voluntarily on said desires, wants or wishes or being the soul cause of one's choices and actions. "Freedom of will relates to freedom of action" (Timpe, ca. 2005, p. 1). The term *free will* is from the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Harper, 2014), moving into prominence as a concept during the 17<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment period "when philosophers argued about our capacity to use rationale judgement to determine both truth and moral behaviour" (Wilson, Gaines, & Hill, 2008, p. 400). Wilson et al. tendered the idea that "our [moral] culpability in situations is dependant upon making conscious choices among the variety of options available and acting voluntarily" (p. 400). Free will is typically taken to be a necessary condition of moral responsibility (McKenna, 2009).

Although there is no *one* definition of free will (Vihvelin, 2011), philosophers tend to agree that *free will* is the ability to select an option from a set of alternatives *without* external influence (see Timpe, ca. 2005). Free will is also linked to the concept of determinism; that is, for everything that happens, there are conditions such that, given them, nothing else *could* happen. There are two main free will/determinism camps: (a) those who accept determinism thus rejecting free will (incompatibilists) and (b) those who accept free will, thereby rejecting determinism (compatibilists) (O'Connor, 2010). The word *compatible* (i.e., existing together without conflict) refers to whether or not philosophers agree that moral responsibility is linked to determinism.

There are four dominant strands of determinism (no free will): (a) what happens now has to happen because of what happened in the past, (b) God wills it, (c) it is fixed in our genes, or (d) there are truths about what we will do tomorrow (Vihvelin, 2011). In all of these instances, the free will to evoke any given choice is really an illusion because the choice was made all along, oblivious to the decider (Van Inwagen & Zimmerman, 1998); it was predetermined. Incompatibilists (no free will) argue that all choices are caused by events and facts outside one's control, thereby seeming to make traditional moral judgements an impossibility. Compatibilists (there is free will) presume the opposite, that humans are the cause of their own choices and actions, and are thereby morally responsible and accountable for their actions because they control their own actions (Vihvelin, 2011).

Compatibilists also believe that free will (choice) means people simply engage in voluntary behaviour, which they control. Because some people may voluntarily do what someone else tells them to, incompatibilists believe free will manifests when the person is the ultimate or originating cause of his or her actions (Kane, 1996). As well, free will can either (a) guide one's decision process (which includes but is not limited to moral overtones) or (b)

regulate one's actual behaviour when choosing between alternatives. The former leads to a (im)moral choice (intention) and the latter actualizes the choice (O'Connor, 2010). Free will holds implications for whether individuals can be morally responsible for their actions, even in the marketplace.

"Free will is intimately connected to moral responsibility because without free will the agent would not be accountable for the outcomes of his or her choices" (Mick, 2008, p. 19). From a consumer behaviour perspective, he proposes it less a matter of whether consumers are truly free to make choices and more a matter of whether they *believe* in free will. The *belief* in freedom may shape the way people act (Baumeister, Sparks, Stillman, & Vohs, 2008). Baumeister et al. suggested that belief in free will is woven into the fabric of everyday social life and into the assumptions about how people should relate to each other. Perhaps consumer moral ambiguity undermines one's belief in free will. If it does, this subversion could lead to antisocial actions and a reduction in socially desirable behaviour (helping and caring for others) (Baumeister et al.).

Conversely, perhaps a belief in free-will informs consumer moral ambiguity, making consumers more likely to be morally responsible. Mick (2008) posited that people's natural tendency is to associate free will with morality, intimating that consumers tend to associate their free will in the marketplace with the morality of their choices. O'Connor (2010) agreed that most philosophers presume free will is very closely connected to the concept of moral responsibility. The conventional philosophical position is that "the sort of freedom required for moral responsibility ... requires that the agent could have acted differently" (O'Connor, 2010, p. 8).

Being able to do otherwise (act differently) is a bone of contention with moral philosophers. One camp holds that people would have done otherwise if something had tipped the scales in favour of one alternative. The other camp believes people can choose differently without something tipping the scales in favour of one option over another. The deciding factor, instead, is the free agent him/herself, not the extenuating circumstances. A "free agent [is] capable of acting upon any of a set of plurality of motives making attractive more than one course of action" (O'Connor, 2010, p. 8).

Exerting conscious will is often thwarted in a free-market economy and a consumer society because, in this context, consumers are distracted from slowing down, reviewing needs and querying desires before they act (Mick, 2008). Wilson et al. (2008) referred to this aspect of consumer behaviour as "disruption of the will" (p. 401), threatening people's ability to follow preferences and control their actions according to their free will. Indeed, most people understand free will to be a *means* to control their actions. Forms of free will include: (a) self-control (resist temptations and discipline oneself); (b) planful action (intentionally having many plans and alternatives); and, (c) rationale choice (enlightened, intelligent decisions) rather than randomness (Baumeister et al., 2008).

In a free market system, each individual is presumed to be free and able to pursue their own self-interest. In their discussion of the morality of the market, Blank and McGurn (2004) posited that the market *depends on the virtue of consumers* to keep it moral, on their self-restraint, honesty and 'willingness' to defer gratification. Blank and McGurn maintained that the market's morality is contingent on the willingness of cultures and societies. This position is deeply flawed, given that our consumer society and the consumer culture are permeated with

market values of competition, wealth accumulation, survival of the fittest, profits, and individualism. This situation exacerbates consumer moral ambiguity, especially if one presumes free will facilitates life in human society (Baumeister et al., 2008).

The idea that consumers have free will is a “completely uncharted terrain” in consumer research (Mick, 2008, p. 19). Focusing on the consumer’s mind and free will as it pertains to consumer moral ambiguity is an intriguing idea. Habitual or mindless consumer behaviours are especially susceptible to the inhibition of free will. Conversely, “consumers who have more highly developed metacognitive abilities with respect to [how the market system works] will more readily (a) recognize the situations in which self-efficacy and self-control must be earnestly called upon, (b) recognize their range of options, and (c) know how to frame the alternatives to ensure that they themselves are the strongest source of their [free] will” (Mick, 2008, p. 20). Appreciating conscious and non-conscious factors affecting free will could lead to deeper insights into consumer moral ambiguity.

### **Disciplinary Notions of Consumer Morality**

A final dimension under consideration is the academic discipline in question that is studying consumption. Carauna (2007) developed the argument that the meaning of morality differs from one discipline to another. These different disciplinary approaches to “what is morality” sharply influence research questions, theoretical developments and conceptual innovations, preferred philosophical methodologies, research design (methods of data collection and analysis), and other aspects of consumer scholarship. Depending on how scholars define “what is morality?”, some aspects of consumer morality may become privileged and others may gain no currency at all, indeed, not even be considered. Carauna blamed this situation on too much uni-disciplinarity and not enough multi-disciplinarity in consumer scholarship; that is, too few multiple perspectives on morality.

To offset this scholarly trajectory in consumer moral research, Carauna (2007) strived for clarity by profiling morality as understood by four disciplines: philosophy (both enlightenment and post-enlightenment), psychology, economics, and sociology (both structuralist and post-structuralist). He proposed six types of *moral man* [sic]: ethical, ambivalent, conscious, rational/self-interested, pre-social, and social. Each is now described, deeply appreciating that the use of *man* is not gender neutral.

An *ethical man* (enlightenment philosophy) grounds his actions in his innate rational powers to reason about rights, consequences and related moral issues of justice and fairness. Every person should have access to equal entitlements to which other moral agents also have the duty to respect and protect (a universal basis from which everyone can judge the rules that they are obligated to follow). Whereas the ethical man could turn to a governing metastructure (the universal basis), the *ambivalent man* (post-enlightenment philosophy) faces multiple notions of truth in a world characterized by moral fragmentation and uncertainty. An ambivalent man can never be sure of the moral truth of his actions, but must make a decision. He is always making moral designs in uncertain contexts (Carauna, 2007).

As for the *conscious man* (psychology), he gains moral maturity as he progresses through several stages of moral development, culminating in being fully conscious of his ethical self. The conscious man has learned how to rationalize the correct, moral course of action in any situation; he is not bound by any particular rules about consequences or what is right

(Carauna, 2007). McGregor (2010) used this approach to conceptualize the idea of consumer moral adulthood. She surmised that consumers can only be morally responsible if they are capable of recognizing a moral situation. If they are not morally awake (a fully evolved *conscious man*), they cannot be held responsible for the consequences of their actions, or even their intent.

The discipline of economics presumes that the market is the ultimate channel of morality; it matters not if individuals are “morally interested or disinterested” (Carauna, 2007, p. 220). Man’s nature is to be a *rational, self-interested man*, and if he acts this way consistently, goodness will ensue as a residual goodness of the sum of the moral actions of all individual, rational men. Micro individual consumer purchases will culminate in beneficial macro-social outcomes (the infamous *trickle-down principle* of mainstream economics).

Finally, structuralist sociology assumes morality is derived from social constructs, from the norms, values and beliefs embedded in societal processes and structures. The latter rigidly define what is right and wrong and the *social man* will act in ways predetermined by these social constraints, ways that are good and proper for the community. Post-structuralist sociologists eschew the ‘guiding arm of the social structure’ assumption. Instead, they presume each person is an individual agent who, while instinctively urged to act ‘For the Other,’ is left to his own devices to manage any moral problems he encounters. This is the *pre-social man*, named so because he has to construct his own social rules of right and wrong (all the while trying to act for the good of others without access to pre-determined, socially sanctioned moral standards) (Carauna, 2007).

## Summary

Experiencing moral ambiguity when consuming means people either encounter doubt about the moral overtones of their consumer situation or they encounter too many plausible interpretations of the moral fallout of a particular consumer decision (see Figure 1). If someone does not know which of two or more specific meanings is intended, then the consumer decision is ambiguous. If the person cannot gauge possible outcomes due to doubtfulness, he or she is experiencing uncertainty and is more prone to avoid or make erroneous decisions.

Figure 2 profiled the eight ideas garnered from the literature that may have potential to contribute to future thinking around the construct of consumer moral ambiguity, summarized in the following text. Succinctly, how people gauge the moral ambiguity (multiple interpretations or doubt) of their consumer decisions may be shaped by this mosaic of factors, including (a) their tolerance for ambiguity and (b) their inclination or not to see morality as a special domain of their lives, separate from consuming. This mosaic also includes both (c) people’s locus of control (regardless of moral overtones) and (d) their moral cosmology (locus of moral authority). That is, do they think God is the basis of moral order, watching and judging them, or that individuals themselves are the ultimate arbitrator of right and wrong, independent of God?

Whether or not a consumer decision becomes morally gray (multiple interpretations or doubt) may also depend upon (e) people’s moral philosophy of life. First, if people reject moral rules in favour of relativism (the philosophical doctrine that all criteria of moral judgement exist in relation to culture, society and historical context, to all individuals and related situations), they



may not perceive as much ambiguity because they are secure in their ability to act in their own self-interest (subjectivists) or to analyze the situation hoping to ensure favourable moral consequences (situationists). Second, if they embrace idealism (a philosophy that focuses on the *rightness* of the behaviour), they may either assume that the morality of their action depends upon the consequences that unfold (exceptionists) or they may eschew the consequences in favour of rationality to determine the morality of their consumer decision (absolutists). For idealists, there is little ambiguity if they are confident that they have engaged in the right *behaviour*.

(f) The moral ambiguity mosaic also includes culture. The moral ambiguity of a consumer scenario is informed by the acculturation process shaping people's approaches to morality in the marketplace. Moral clarity for some arises from eschewing rules formalized by others and by using practical moral reasoning to determine the morality of their pending decision (functionalists). For others, it entails getting away with a questionable behaviour, as long as it serves their self-interest (survivorist). Still others are quite comfortable with abiding by moral codes of behaviour established by others, but will occasionally disobey if they gain a personal advantage (enthusiasts). Finally, some cultures socialize people to closely follow, to yield to, the moral rules set by established authority figures. There would be little grayness in this situation. Either the choice is right or wrong according to the dictates of the authorities (deferents).

(g) Even free will plays a role in determining the moral grayness of consumer decisions. If consumers exercise free will, they exert their ability to avoid external influences while making a choice between alternatives. Two scenarios could emerge. Either moral ambiguity (multiple meanings or doubt) could undermine free will, or free will could mitigate any moral ambiguity. Given that people's natural tendency is to associate free will with morality, the latter is more likely. A *free moral agent* in the marketplace would be sight to behold (free from moral ambiguity). This person would eschew habitual or mindless consumer behaviour, favouring instead conscious, responsible consideration of the moral implications of one's purchases, all the while remaining open to being accountable for the consequences. Free will is a necessary condition of moral responsibility. With free will should come less moral ambiguity.

(h) On a closing note, how consumer researchers opt to (un)consciously broach the topic of consumer moral ambiguity will depend upon how they understand morality and what constitutes a moral person. This disciplinary orientation in turn shapes future insights garnered around consumer moral ambiguity. The four main disciplines that provide insights around consumer morality each tend to take a different approach (economics, sociology, psychology, and philosophy) (Carauna, 2007). Taken together, they provide a powerful intellectual lens (six perspectives) from which to examine the consumer moral ambiguity dimension of consumer behaviour. People can be: (1) ethically governed by a universal moral basis, (2) ambivalent (angst in context of uncertainty), (3) morally conscious due to their progression through stages of moral development, (4) rational and self-interested, (5) guided by the predetermined percepts of society (for the good of community) and, finally, (6) an individual agent left to their own devices while trying to act for the common good. Obviously, the proclivity for perceiving the existence and extent of moral grayness varies given which disciplinary perspective, or combination, is brought to bear on the consumer phenomenon of moral ambiguity.

## Conclusion

Morality is about causing harm or injury, intentionally or not, due to improper societal behaviour. This monograph was especially concerned with the rightness or wrongness of people's behaviour as consumers in a consumer society. The moral ambiguity inherent in contemporary consumer scenarios was the focus of the discussion because most consumer decisions are heavily laden with moral overtones, whereby other humans, species and the Earth are in danger from immoral or amoral fall out (see Figure 1). de Beauvoir (1948) argued that any action taken by humans should not forget humanity along the way. If the action becomes the focus (e.g., consuming), *rather than* humanity being the focus, the action (consuming) will lose its meaning or will take on an unforeseen meaning. When this transmutation happens, the integrity of the human action (i.e., consumption) comes into play, creating a morally ambiguous situation.

We have reached that point; current consumption patterns tend to ignore and neglect humanity. Continuing to function ineffectively or irresponsibly in the gray area of consumption does humanity, other species, and the Earth a grave disservice. As a reminder, there is always ambiguity in a moral choice (McCormick, 1973) and all serious moral deliberations are fraught with complexity and ambiguity (McGee, 2003), consumer decisions being no exception. People must be able to navigate confusing, muddy, messy, complex consumer decisions that have moral overtones. Alarming, some of these choices are life and death decisions, a hard pill to swallow as a 21<sup>st</sup> century consumer, especially since most consumers never intend to cause harm (McGregor, 2010). To better understand this deeply philosophical dimension of consumption, consumer scholars and consumers can benefit from the new construct of consumer moral ambiguity.

**In invite comments and responses to the ideas in this monograph** [sue.mcgregor@msvu.ca](mailto:sue.mcgregor@msvu.ca)

## References

- Atwood-Harvey, D. (2005). Death or declaw. *Society and Animals*, 13(4), 315-342.
- AudioEnglish.net Dictionary. (2011). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University. Retrieved from <http://www.audioenglish.net/dictionary>
- Banning, K. C. (2003). The effect of the case method on tolerance for ambiguity. *Journal of Management Education*, 27(5), 556-567.
- Bartlett's Roget's Thesaurus. (1996). New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.
- Barnett, C., Cafaro, P., & Newholm, T. (2005). Philosophy and ethical consumption. In R. Harrison, T. Newholm, & D. Shaw (Eds.), *The ethical consumer* (pp. 11-24). London, England: Sage.
- Baumeister, R., Sparks, E., Stillman, T., & Vohs, K. (2008). Free will in consumer behavior: Self-control, ego depletion, and choice. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 18(1), 4-13.
- Blank, R., & McGurn, W. (2004). *Is the market moral?* Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Borgmann, A. (2000). The moral complexion of consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 26(4), 418-422.
- Carroll, A. B., & Buchholtz, A. K. (2008). *Business and society*. Mason, OH: South-Western

- Cengage Learning.
- Caruana, R. (2007). Morality and consumption: Towards a multidisciplinary perspective. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 23(3/4), 207-225.
- Collins, D. (1989). Organizational harm, legal condemnation and stakeholder retaliation: A typology research agenda and application. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 8(1), 1-13.
- de Beauvoir, S. (1948). *The ethics of ambiguity*. Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press.
- Davis, N., & Robinson, R. (2006). The egalitarian face of Islamic orthodoxy. *American Sociological Review*, 71(2), 167-190.
- Dorr, G. P. (2001, May 10). The Forrest Gump morality massacre [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://archive.dorrk.com/2001051015/Writing/Essays/The-Forrest-Gump-Morality-Massacre.htm>
- Dubinsky, A., Nataraajan, R., & Huang, W. (2004). The influence of moral philosophy on retail salespeople's ethical perceptions. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 38(2), 297-319.
- Ferrell, O. C., & Gresham, L.G. (1985). A contingency framework for understanding ethical decision making in marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, 49(3), 87-96.
- Forsyth, D. R. (1980). A taxonomy of ethical ideologies. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39(1), 175-184.
- Forsyth, D. R., & Berger, R. E. (1982). The effects of ethical ideology on moral behaviour. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 117(1), 53-56.
- Gert, B. (2011). The definition of morality. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University. Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/morality-definition>
- Goodman, M., & Bryant, R. (2013). *Placing the practices of alternative economic geographies: Alternative retail, the spaces of intention and ethical ambiguities* [Working paper # 58]. London, England: King's College London, Department of Geography. Retrieved from <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/geography/research/epd/GoodmanBryantWP58.pdf>
- Green, S. P. (2004). Moral ambiguity in white collar criminal law. *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics and Public Policy*, 18(2), 501-519.
- Harper, D. (2014). *Online etymology dictionary*. Lancaster, PA: Self-Published. <http://www.etymonline.com/>
- Hilton, M. (2004). The legacy of luxury: Moralities of consumption since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 4(1), 101-123.
- Hofstede, G. (1983). The cultural relativity of organizational practices and theories. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 14(Fall), 75-89.
- Horowitz, D. (1984). *The morality of spending*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Hunter, J. D. (1991). *Culture wars*. New York, NY: Basic.
- Kane, R. (1996). *The significance of free will*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Klintmann, M., & Boström, M. (2006). Editorial: Special issue on political and ethical consumerism. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 30(5), 401-404.
- MacDonald, C. (2002). *Moral decision making: An analysis*. Halifax, NS: Saint Mary's University, Department of Philosophy. Retrieved from <http://www.ethicsweb.ca/guide/moral-decision.html>
- McCormick, R. A. (1973). *Ambiguity in moral choice [The Pere Marquette Theology Lecture]*. Milwaukee, MI: Marquette University Press.
- McGee, D. B. (2003). Moral ambiguity? Yes. Moral confusion? No. *American Journal of Bioethics*, 3(3), 11-12.
- McGregor, S. L. T. (2008). Conceptualizing immoral and unethical consumption using neutralization theory. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*, 36(3), 261-

- McGregor, S. L. T. (2010). *Consumer moral leadership*. Rotterdam, the Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- McKenna, M. (2009). Compatibilism. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University. Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/compatibilism/>
- McMurtry, J. (1998). *Unequal freedoms*. Toronto, ON: Garamond.
- Mick, D. G. (2008). Degrees of freedom of will. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 18(1), 17-21.
- Miller, D. (2001). The poverty of morality. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 1(2), 225-243.
- Moon, E. (2013, April 1). Moral complexity v. moral ambiguity [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.paksworld.com/blog/?p=1807>
- Nickell, D., & Herzog, H. A. (1996). Ethical ideology and moral persuasion. *Society and Animals*, 4(1), 53-64.
- Nielsen, L., & McGregor, S. L. T. (2013). Consumer morality and moral norms. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 37, 473-480.
- O'Connor, T. (2010). Free will. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University. Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/freewill/>
- Panel Discussion. (2010). Critical and moral stances in consumer studies. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 10(2), 274-291.
- Pickett, J. (Ed.). (2006). *The American Heritage Dictionary* (4<sup>th</sup> ed). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Rawwas, M. Y. A. (2001). Culture, personality and morality. *International Marketing Review*, 18(2), 188-209.
- Ruffner, R. L. (2005). Dealing with moral ambiguity. *The Gospel Preceptor*, 4(3). Retrieved from <http://www.gospelpreceptor.com/Ruffnr27.htm>
- Sennet, A. (2011). Ambiguity. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University. Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ambiguity>
- Starks, B., & Robinson, R. (2007). Moral cosmology, religion and adult values for children. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 47(1), 17-35.
- Starks, B., & Robinson, R. (2009). Two approaches to religion and politics: Moral cosmology and subcultural identity. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 48(4), 650-669.
- Superson, A. (2009). *The moral skeptic*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.
- Timpe, K. [ca. 2005]. Free will. In J. Fieser & B. Bowden (Eds.), *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from <http://www.iep.utm.edu/freewill/>
- Urban Dictionary. (2009). *Moral ambiguity*. Retrieved from <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=moral%20ambiguity>
- Van Inwagen, P., & Zimmerman, D. (1998). *Metaphysics: The big questions*. Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishing.
- van Kenhove, P., Vermeir, I., & Verniers, S. (2001). An empirical investigation of the relationships between ethical beliefs, ethical ideology, political preference and need for closure. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 32(4), 347-361.
- Vihvelin, K. (2011). Arguments for incompatibilism. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University. Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/incompatibilism-arguments/>
- Weisbrod, E. (2009). The role of affect and tolerance of ambiguity in ethical decision making. *Advances in International Accounting*, 25(1), 67-63.
- Wilk, R. (2001). Consuming morality. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 1(2), 245-260.
- Willbern, Y. (1984). Types and levels of public morality. *Public Administrative Review*, 44(2), 102-108.
- Williamson, T. (1994). *Vagueness*. London, England: Routledge.
- Wilson, R., Gaines, J., & Hill, R. (2008). Neuromarketing and consumer free will. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 42(3), 389-410.