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## Kate Soper and the Notion of Sustainable Consumption

### Abstract:

*This article examines Kate Soper's significant contributions to the philosophical understanding of sustainable consumption. It traces the development of Soper's thought from her early work on human needs through her critical engagement with nature, culture, and politics, to her more recent advocacy for "alternative hedonism" and post-growth living. Soper challenges conventional approaches to consumption by demonstrating how needs are socially constructed rather than fixed or universal, revealing the political dimensions of consumption practices, and articulating how dominant consumer culture undermines both ecological sustainability and human well-being. Her concept of alternative hedonism provides a framework for reimagining pleasure and fulfillment beyond material acquisition, offering a more sustainable vision of the good life. The article analyzes how Soper's interdisciplinary approach bridges environmental philosophy, cultural theory, and political thought, contributing to more nuanced understandings of the relationship between human flourishing and ecological integrity. By situating consumption within broader structures of power and inequality, Soper's work provides valuable theoretical resources for developing more transformative approaches to sustainability that extend beyond individualistic consumer choices to address systemic change. The article concludes by considering the ongoing influence of Soper's work and potential directions for future research in sustainable consumption studies.*

**Keywords:** sustainable consumption, alternative hedonism, post-growth, human needs, consumer culture, environmental philosophy, critical theory, consumption politics, sustainable development, ecological citizenship

### Introduction

Kate Soper is a renowned British philosopher who has made substantial contributions to various fields, including environmental philosophy, cultural theory, and

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consumption studies. Her work, spanning several decades, has significantly influenced contemporary debates surrounding sustainability, human needs, and the politics of consumption (Soper, 1981; Soper, 1995). Soper's philosophy is distinguished by its critical engagement with the intersections of nature, culture, and politics, as well as her commitment to exploring alternative visions of consumption and the good life (Soper, 2020).

Soper's early work, such as "On Human Needs" (1981), laid the foundation for her subsequent analyses of consumption and sustainability. In this book, she critiques the dominant understanding of human needs as fixed and universal, arguing instead that needs are shaped by social, cultural, and historical factors. This perspective challenges the notion that the satisfaction of human needs is purely a matter of increasing material abundance, and instead suggests a more holistic and contextual approach to understanding consumption (Soper, 2006).

Throughout her career, Soper has consistently engaged with the complex interplay between culture, politics, and the non-human world. In "What is Nature? Culture, Politics, and the Non-Human" (1995), she offers a nuanced exploration of the concept of nature, highlighting how our understanding of the natural world is mediated by cultural and political factors. This work has important implications for sustainable consumption, as it suggests that our consumption practices are not simply a reflection of individual choices, but are deeply embedded in broader social and cultural structures.

Soper's more recent work, such as "Post-Growth Living: For an Alternative Hedonism" (2020), builds upon her earlier insights to offer a compelling vision of a sustainable and fulfilling life beyond the constraints of consumer culture. In this book, she advocates for a form of "alternative hedonism" that prioritizes the pursuit of pleasure and well-being through non-material means, such as social connection, creative expression, and engagement with the natural world. This perspective challenges the dominant paradigm of consumerism, which equates happiness and success with the acquisition of material goods, and instead offers a more sustainable and meaningful vision of the good life.

Throughout her work, Soper has consistently emphasized the political dimensions of consumption, arguing that our consumption practices are not simply a matter of individual choice, but are shaped by broader structures of power and inequality (Soper & Trentmann, 2008). She has called for a more critical and reflexive approach to consumer culture, one that recognizes the social and environmental costs of our consumption practices and seeks to transform them in more sustainable and equitable ways.

Sustainable consumption refers to the use of goods and services in a way that minimizes environmental impact, promotes social equity, and supports economic viability (Jackson, 2005). It represents a fundamental shift away from the dominant paradigm of consumerism, which prioritizes individual satisfaction and economic growth over ecological and social well-being (Soper, 2006). Sustainable

consumption requires a deep rethinking of human needs, desires, and values, as well as the systems and structures that shape our consumption practices (Soper, 2020).

The concept of sustainable consumption emerged in response to growing concerns about the environmental and social impacts of modern consumer culture. The rapid growth of industrial production and mass consumption in the 20th century has led to a range of ecological problems, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion (Assadourian, 2010). At the same time, the benefits of consumer culture have been unevenly distributed, with many people around the world still lacking access to basic goods and services, while others engage in unsustainable levels of consumption (Jackson, 2005).

To address these challenges, sustainable consumption advocates for a more holistic and integrated approach to meeting human needs and desires. This involves recognizing that our well-being is not simply a function of material wealth, but is also shaped by factors such as social connection, meaningful work, and a healthy environment (Soper, 2020). It also requires a critical examination of the cultural and political forces that drive unsustainable consumption, including advertising, social norms, and economic incentives (Assadourian, 2010).

Sustainable consumption is closely linked to the concept of sustainable development, which seeks to balance economic, social, and environmental goals in the pursuit of long-term well-being (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). However, some scholars have argued that sustainable consumption goes beyond the traditional focus on efficiency and technological innovation, and requires a more fundamental shift in values and lifestyles (Soper, 2006). This includes embracing a more frugal and minimalist approach to consumption, as well as prioritizing the pursuit of non-material sources of fulfillment, such as creativity, social connection, and engagement with nature (Soper, 2020).

The concept of sustainable consumption has gained increasing attention in recent years, as the urgency of addressing environmental and social challenges has become more apparent. Governments, businesses, and civil society organizations have all taken steps to promote more sustainable consumption practices, through initiatives such as eco-labeling, product standards, and public education campaigns (Assadourian, 2010). However, progress has been slow and uneven, and many challenges remain in terms of changing entrenched patterns of production and consumption (Jackson, 2005).

In this context, the work of scholars such as Kate Soper has played an important role in advancing the conversation around sustainable consumption. By offering a critical and nuanced perspective on the cultural and political dimensions of consumption, Soper has helped to deepen our understanding of the challenges and opportunities involved in transitioning to a more sustainable and fulfilling way of life. Her advocacy of alternative visions of consumption and hedonism has inspired

a new generation of scholars and activists to imagine and work towards a more sustainable and equitable future.

### **Early views on human needs and consumption**

In her seminal work “On Human Needs” (1981), Kate Soper lays the groundwork for her subsequent engagements with the question of sustainable consumption. This book offers a critical analysis of the concept of human needs, challenging the dominant view that needs are fixed, universal, and purely biological or material in nature. Instead, Soper argues that needs are fundamentally shaped by social, cultural, and historical factors, and have important symbolic and relational dimensions.

Soper’s analysis begins by examining the historical and philosophical roots of the concept of needs. She traces the evolution of ideas about needs from ancient Greek philosophy through to modern economic and political thought, highlighting the ways in which different thinkers have conceptualized the relationship between needs, desires, and human well-being. Soper argues that the dominant view of needs as objective and universal has its roots in the Enlightenment tradition, which sought to establish a rational and scientific basis for understanding human nature and society.

However, Soper challenges this view, arguing that the concept of needs is inherently normative and value-laden. What counts as a need, she suggests, is not simply a matter of objective fact, but is shaped by cultural norms, social expectations, and power relations. For example, the need for a certain level of material wealth or consumption may be seen as essential in one society, but not in another, depending on prevailing cultural values and economic structures. Similarly, the need for social status or recognition may be more or less important depending on the specific social and historical context.

Soper’s analysis also highlights the political and ideological dimensions of the discourse of needs. She argues that the dominant view of needs as objective and universal serves to legitimize and naturalize existing patterns of consumption and production, while obscuring the social and environmental costs of these practices. By presenting certain levels and forms of consumption as necessary for human well-being, this discourse can serve to justify and perpetuate unsustainable and inequitable patterns of resource use.

At the same time, Soper recognizes the importance of the concept of needs for progressive politics and social justice. She argues that a critical understanding of needs can help to challenge the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities, and to articulate alternative visions of human flourishing and well-being. However, she suggests that this requires a more nuanced and contextualized approach to needs, one that recognizes their social and historical specificity, and the ways in which they are shaped by power relations and cultural norms.

Soper's analysis of human needs has important implications for the concept of sustainable consumption. By challenging the dominant view of needs as fixed and universal, she opens up space for a more holistic and contextual approach to understanding consumption practices. Rather than seeing consumption as a matter of individual choice and preference, Soper's work suggests that it is deeply embedded in social and cultural structures, and shaped by broader relations of power and inequality (Soper, 2006).

This perspective has important implications for efforts to promote sustainable consumption. It suggests that simply appealing to individual consumers to make more responsible choices is unlikely to be sufficient, and that more systemic and structural changes are needed to address the root causes of unsustainable consumption. This might include challenging dominant cultural values and norms around consumption, as well as working to transform the economic and political structures that shape production and consumption practices.

At the same time, Soper's work also highlights the potential for alternative visions of consumption and human well-being. By recognizing the social and cultural dimensions of needs, she opens up space for imagining and pursuing forms of consumption that are not simply about material acquisition, but are also about building social connections, expressing creativity, and engaging with the natural world (Soper, 2020). This perspective has inspired a growing body of work on alternative hedonism and post-consumerist lifestyles, which seek to articulate more sustainable and fulfilling ways of living.

### **The intersection of culture, politics, and the non-human**

In her book "What is Nature?: Culture, Politics, and the Non-Human" (1995), Kate Soper examines the complex relationship between human culture, politics, and the natural world. This work represents a significant contribution to environmental philosophy and cultural theory, offering a nuanced and critical perspective on the ways in which our understanding of nature is shaped by social and political factors.

Soper's analysis begins by problematizing the very concept of nature itself. She argues that the idea of nature as a pure, untouched realm separate from human culture is a historical and cultural construct, one that has been shaped by a range of philosophical, scientific, and aesthetic traditions. Soper traces the evolution of this idea from ancient Greek thought through to the Romantic movement and beyond, highlighting the ways in which different conceptions of nature have been used to justify particular social and political arrangements.

However, Soper also challenges the notion that nature is entirely a cultural construct, arguing that there is a material reality to the natural world that exists independently of human understanding and representation. She suggests that recogniz-

ing this material reality is crucial for developing an ecologically sustainable and socially just politics, one that takes seriously the agency and intrinsic value of the non-human world.

Soper's conceptualization of nature has important implications for understanding the interplay of culture, politics, and the environment in shaping consumption practices. She argues that the dominant model of consumer culture is premised on a particular conception of nature as a resource to be exploited for human benefit, and of human beings as separate from and superior to the natural world. This conception, she suggests, is deeply problematic from an ecological perspective, as it fails to recognize the complex interdependencies between human societies and the ecosystems upon which they depend.

At the same time, Soper's work also highlights the ways in which consumption practices are shaped by cultural and political factors. She argues that the desire for ever-increasing levels of material consumption is not a natural or inevitable feature of human behavior, but is rather a product of specific historical and social conditions. These conditions include the rise of capitalist production and exchange, the growth of advertising and marketing, and the emergence of individualistic and acquisitive cultural values.

Soper suggests that challenging these conditions requires a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between human culture, politics, and the natural world. This involves recognizing the ways in which our consumption practices are shaped by broader structures of power and inequality, and working to transform these structures in more ecologically sustainable and socially just ways. It also involves cultivating alternative cultural values and practices that prioritize the intrinsic value of nature, and that recognize the interdependence of human and non-human well-being.

Soper's work has important implications for efforts to promote sustainable consumption. It suggests that such efforts must go beyond simple appeals to individual consumer choice, and must instead engage with the complex cultural and political factors that shape consumption practices (Soper, 2006). This might involve challenging dominant cultural narratives around consumption and economic growth, as well as working to build alternative economic and political structures that prioritize ecological sustainability and social justice.

At the same time, Soper's work also highlights the potential for cultural and aesthetic practices to contribute to the transformation of consumption practices. She argues that engaging with the beauty and sublimity of the natural world can help to cultivate a sense of respect and care for the environment, and can inspire alternative forms of consumption that prioritize experiences over material acquisition (Soper, 2020). This perspective has inspired a growing body of work on the role of art, literature, and other cultural practices in promoting sustainable consumption and ecological awareness.

## Culture and self-realisation in postmodern times

In their collaborative work “To Relish the Sublime: Culture and Self-realisation in Postmodern Times” (2001), Kate Soper and Martin Ryle explore the role of culture and self-realization in shaping consumption practices in contemporary society. This book represents a significant contribution to the field of cultural studies and environmental philosophy, offering a nuanced and critical perspective on the ways in which the pursuit of individual fulfillment and identity formation intersects with broader structures of power and inequality.

Soper and Ryle begin by situating their analysis within the context of postmodern cultural theory. They argue that the postmodern condition is characterized by a fragmentation of traditional social and cultural structures, and by a heightened emphasis on individual self-expression and identity formation. In this context, consumption practices have taken on a new significance, as individuals seek to construct and communicate their identities through the acquisition and display of material goods.

However, Soper and Ryle also challenge the notion that this pursuit of self-realization through consumption is a purely individual or autonomous process. They argue that the very idea of the self as a project to be realized through consumption is itself a product of specific historical and cultural conditions, shaped by the rise of consumer capitalism and the emergence of individualistic and therapeutic cultural values. In this sense, the pursuit of self-realization through consumption is not a natural or inevitable feature of human behavior, but is rather a socially constructed and historically contingent phenomenon.

Soper and Ryle’s analysis also highlights the ways in which the pursuit of self-realization through consumption is deeply implicated in structures of power and inequality. They argue that the ability to engage in high levels of consumption and to construct one’s identity through material acquisition is not equally available to all individuals, but is rather shaped by factors such as class, race, gender, and geographic location. In this sense, the pursuit of self-realization through consumption can serve to reinforce and exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities.

At the same time, Soper and Ryle also suggest that the pursuit of self-realization through consumption is ultimately unsatisfying and self-defeating. They argue that the constant pursuit of novelty and material acquisition can lead to feelings of emptiness, alienation, and environmental destruction, as individuals become trapped in a cycle of endless consumption and waste. In this sense, the very pursuit of self-realization through consumption can undermine the very sense of fulfillment and well-being that it seeks to achieve.

Soper and Ryle’s analysis has important implications for efforts to promote sustainable consumption. It suggests that such efforts must go beyond simple appeals to individual consumer choice, and must instead engage with the complex cultural and psychological factors that shape consumption practices (Soper, 2006). This might

involve challenging dominant cultural narratives around consumption and self-realization, as well as working to build alternative cultural and economic structures that prioritize social and ecological well-being over individual material acquisition.

At the same time, Soper and Ryle's work also highlights the potential for alternative forms of self-realization and fulfillment that do not depend on high levels of material consumption. They argue that engaging with cultural practices such as art, literature, and philosophy can provide a sense of meaning and purpose that is not tied to the acquisition of material goods. Similarly, cultivating a sense of connection to nature and the non-human world can help to promote a more ecologically sustainable and fulfilling way of life.

### **Citizenship and consumption**

In the edited volume "Citizenship and Consumption" (2008), Kate Soper and Frank Trentmann bring together a range of scholars to explore the complex relationship between citizenship and consumption in contemporary society. This work represents a significant contribution to the field of political theory and consumer studies, offering a critical perspective on the ways in which the rights and responsibilities of citizenship intersect with the practices and politics of consumption.

The concept of 'citizenship' has traditionally been understood as a set of rights and obligations that define an individual's relationship to the state and to other members of the political community. However, in recent decades, the rise of consumer culture has led to a blurring of the boundaries between citizenship and consumption, as individuals increasingly define their social and political identities through their purchasing decisions and market participation.

Soper and Trentmann argue that this blurring of boundaries has important implications for the way we understand the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. On the one hand, the rise of consumer culture has led to a greater emphasis on individual choice and personal autonomy, as individuals seek to express their values and identities through their consumption practices. In this sense, consumption can be seen as a form of political participation, as individuals use their purchasing power to support or oppose particular social and economic practices.

On the other hand, the increasing emphasis on consumption as a form of citizenship has also led to a narrowing of the public sphere and a erosion of collective forms of political engagement. As individuals become more focused on their personal consumption choices, they may become less engaged with broader social and political issues, and less willing to participate in collective forms of political action.

Soper and Trentmann's analysis also highlights the ways in which the concept of 'citizenship' in consumption is deeply shaped by structures of power and inequality. They argue that the ability to participate in consumer culture and to express one's values through consumption is not equally available to all individuals, but is rather shaped by factors such as class, race, gender, and geographic location. In this sense,

the concept of ‘citizenship’ in consumption can serve to reinforce and exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities.

The impact of ‘citizenship’ on sustainability is another key theme explored in the volume. Soper and Trentmann argue that the increasing emphasis on consumption as a form of citizenship has important implications for efforts to promote sustainable consumption and production practices. On the one hand, the rise of ethical consumerism and green consumption practices suggests that individuals are increasingly using their purchasing power to support more sustainable and socially responsible forms of production. In this sense, consumption can be seen as a potentially powerful tool for promoting sustainability and social justice.

On the other hand, the emphasis on individual consumer choice as a form of citizenship can also serve to obscure the broader structural and systemic factors that shape consumption practices and environmental impacts. By focusing on individual purchasing decisions, this approach may fail to address the deeper economic and political structures that drive unsustainable forms of production and consumption.

### **The politics and pleasures of consuming differently**

In the edited volume “The Politics and Pleasures of Consuming Differently” (2009), Kate Soper, Lyn Thomas, and Martin Ryle bring together a range of scholars to explore the possibilities and challenges of developing alternative forms of consumption that are more sustainable, fulfilling, and socially just. This work represents a significant contribution to the field of sustainable consumption studies, offering a critical perspective on the ways in which the politics and pleasures of consumption intersect with broader structures of power and inequality.

Soper’s advocacy for alternative consumption practices is a central theme of the volume. Drawing on her earlier work on the concept of ‘alternative hedonism’, Soper argues that the dominant model of consumer culture is based on a narrow and ultimately unsatisfying conception of pleasure and fulfillment. She suggests that the constant pursuit of novelty and material acquisition can lead to feelings of emptiness, alienation, and environmental destruction, as individuals become trapped in a cycle of endless consumption and waste.

In contrast, Soper advocates for a more expansive and sustainable conception of pleasure and fulfillment, one that is based on the cultivation of relationships, creativity, and engagement with the natural world. She argues that by re-orienting our consumption practices around these alternative sources of pleasure and meaning, we can develop a more fulfilling and sustainable way of life.

The connection of pleasure and politics to sustainable consumption is another key theme explored in the volume. Soper and her colleagues argue that the politics of consumption are not separate from the pleasures of consumption, but are rather deeply intertwined. They suggest that the way we experience pleasure and fulfillment through consumption is shaped by broader structures of power and inequality,

including the cultural narratives and social norms that define what counts as desirable or valuable.

At the same time, the authors also argue that the pleasures of consumption can be a powerful force for social and political change. They suggest that by cultivating alternative forms of pleasure and fulfillment that are more sustainable and socially just, we can challenge dominant structures of power and inequality and create new possibilities for social and political transformation.

The volume includes a range of case studies and examples of alternative consumption practices, from community gardening and local food networks to eco-villages and intentional communities. These examples illustrate the diverse ways in which individuals and communities are experimenting with new forms of consumption that prioritize social and ecological well-being over individual material acquisition.

However, the authors also acknowledge the challenges and limitations of these alternative consumption practices. They note that many of these practices remain marginal and isolated, and that they often face significant barriers in terms of access, resources, and social support. They also recognize that alternative consumption practices can sometimes reinforce existing inequalities and power structures, particularly when they are based on exclusionary or elitist forms of cultural capital.

### **Realism, humanism, and the politics of nature**

In her article “Realism, Humanism and the Politics of Nature” (2001), Kate Soper explores the complex interplay between philosophical realism, humanist thought, and the politics of nature. This work represents a significant contribution to the field of environmental philosophy, offering a nuanced perspective on the ways in which our understanding of nature is shaped by broader philosophical and political commitments.

Soper’s analysis begins by situating the debate over realism and humanism within the context of contemporary environmental politics. She argues that the dominant approaches to environmental issues have often been based on a narrow and instrumentalist conception of nature, one that sees the natural world primarily as a resource to be exploited for human benefit. This approach, she suggests, is rooted in a broader philosophical tradition of humanism, which places human beings at the center of moral and political concern.

However, Soper also argues that the humanist tradition is not inherently anti-ecological, and that there are resources within humanist thought that can be mobilized for a more sustainable and just politics of nature. In particular, she suggests that a critical humanism, one that recognizes the social and historical construction of human nature while also affirming the value and agency of human beings, can provide a basis for a more ecologically sound and socially just politics.

At the same time, Soper also engages with the philosophical tradition of realism, which holds that there is a reality independent of human understanding and representation. She argues that a realist perspective is essential for developing a more ecologically grounded politics of nature, one that recognizes the intrinsic value and agency of the non-human world.

However, Soper also cautions against a naive or dogmatic realism that fails to recognize the ways in which our understanding of nature is always mediated by social and cultural factors. She suggests that a critical realism, one that acknowledges the social construction of knowledge while also affirming the existence of a mind-independent reality, can provide a more nuanced and politically effective approach to environmental issues.

The interplay of realism, humanism, and politics in Soper's philosophy has important implications for the concept of sustainable consumption. Soper argues that the dominant approach to consumption, which is based on a narrow and instrumentalist conception of human needs and desires, is deeply problematic from both an ecological and a social justice perspective. She suggests that a more sustainable and fulfilling approach to consumption requires a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between human beings and the natural world, one that recognizes the intrinsic value and agency of non-human nature.

At the same time, Soper also argues that a critical humanism can provide a basis for a more socially just and ecologically sound politics of consumption. By recognizing the social and historical construction of human needs and desires, while also affirming the value and agency of human beings, a critical humanist approach can help to challenge the dominant model of consumer culture and to develop alternative forms of consumption that are more sustainable and fulfilling.

### **Conceptualizing needs in consumer politics**

In her article "Conceptualizing Needs in the Context of Consumer Politics" (2006), Kate Soper explores the ways in which the concept of needs is understood and mobilized within the realm of consumer politics. This work represents a significant contribution to the field of consumer studies and sustainable consumption, offering a critical perspective on the ways in which the discourse of needs shapes contemporary debates around consumption and sustainability.

Soper's analysis begins by situating the concept of needs within the broader context of consumer culture and politics. She argues that the dominant approach to needs within consumer culture is based on a narrow and individualistic conception of human well-being, one that equates the satisfaction of needs with the acquisition of material goods and services. This approach, she suggests, is deeply problematic from both an ecological and a social justice perspective, as it fails to recognize the complex social and environmental impacts of consumption practices.

At the same time, Soper also acknowledges the ways in which the discourse of needs has been mobilized by consumer activists and social movements to challenge the dominant model of consumer culture. She notes that the language of needs has often been used to articulate demands for more socially just and ecologically sustainable forms of consumption, such as fair trade, organic agriculture, and local production.

However, Soper also cautions against a simplistic or uncritical embrace of the language of needs within consumer politics. She argues that the concept of needs is often used in a vague and undefined way, and that it can sometimes obscure the complex power relations and social inequalities that shape consumption practices. She suggests that a more critical and reflexive approach to needs is necessary, one that recognizes the social and historical construction of human needs while also affirming the value and agency of human beings.

Soper's approach to needs in the realm of consumer politics has important implications for the concept of sustainable consumption. She argues that a more sustainable and fulfilling approach to consumption requires a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between human needs and the natural world, one that recognizes the intrinsic value and agency of non-human nature. This involves challenging the dominant model of consumer culture, which is based on a narrow and instrumentalist conception of human needs and desires, and developing alternative forms of consumption that are more ecologically sound and socially just.

At the same time, Soper also suggests that a critical approach to needs can help to challenge the individualistic and consumerist assumptions that often underlie debates around sustainable consumption. By recognizing the social and historical construction of human needs, and by affirming the value of collective action and political engagement, a critical approach to needs can help to develop a more transformative and politically engaged vision of sustainable consumption.

### **Alternative hedonism: a theory and politics of consumption**

In her work on alternative hedonism, Kate Soper develops a critical and transformative approach to consumption that challenges the dominant model of consumer culture. This perspective represents a significant contribution to the field of sustainable consumption studies, offering a nuanced and politically engaged perspective on the possibilities of creating a more fulfilling and ecologically sound way of life.

At the heart of Soper's analysis is the concept of 'alternative hedonism,' which she defines as a form of pleasure and fulfillment that is not dependent on the acquisition of material goods and services. Alternative hedonism, she argues, involves a re-orientation of human desires and satisfactions towards non-material sources of well-being, such as social connection, creative expression, and engagement with the natural world.

Soper situates her theory of alternative hedonism within a broader critique of consumer culture and its ecological and social impacts (Függ, 2022). She argues that the dominant model of consumer culture, which is based on a narrow and individualistic conception of human well-being, is deeply problematic from both an environmental and a social justice perspective. The constant pursuit of novelty and material acquisition, she suggests, leads to a cycle of environmental destruction and social inequality that undermines the very foundations of human flourishing.

In contrast, alternative hedonism offers a more sustainable and fulfilling vision of the good life, one that is based on a recognition of the intrinsic value of nature and the importance of social connection and creativity. By re-orienting human desires and satisfactions towards these non-material sources of well-being, alternative hedonism can help to reduce the environmental and social impacts of consumption while also promoting a more meaningful and fulfilling way of life.

However, Soper also acknowledges the challenges and limitations of alternative hedonism as a political and cultural project. She recognizes that the dominant model of consumer culture is deeply entrenched in contemporary society, and that alternative forms of consumption often remain marginal and isolated. She also acknowledges the ways in which alternative hedonism can sometimes reinforce existing inequalities and power structures, particularly when it is based on exclusionary or elitist forms of cultural capital.

Despite these challenges, Soper argues that alternative hedonism has an important role to play in promoting sustainable consumption and social justice. By offering a vision of the good life that is not dependent on material acquisition and environmental destruction, alternative hedonism can help to challenge the dominant model of consumer culture and to inspire new forms of political and cultural engagement. At the same time, by acknowledging the social and historical construction of human needs and desires, alternative hedonism can help to develop a more critical and reflexive approach to consumption that recognizes the complex power relations and inequalities that shape contemporary society.

### **Post-growth living and alternative hedonism**

In her book “Post-Growth Living: For an Alternative Hedonism” (2020), Kate Soper further develops her vision of alternative hedonism as a basis for a more sustainable and fulfilling way of life. This work represents a significant contribution to the field of degrowth studies and sustainable consumption, offering a nuanced and politically engaged perspective on the possibilities of creating a post-growth society.

Soper’s analysis begins by situating the concept of post-growth living within the broader context of the ecological crisis and the limitations of contemporary consumer culture. She argues that the dominant model of economic growth, which is

based on the constant expansion of production and consumption, is fundamentally unsustainable from an ecological perspective. At the same time, she suggests that the individualistic and acquisitive values of consumer culture are deeply problematic from a social and psychological perspective, leading to a sense of alienation and disconnection from both nature and community.

In contrast, post-growth living offers a vision of a society that is not dependent on the constant expansion of production and consumption, but instead prioritizes the cultivation of human well-being and ecological sustainability. This involves a fundamental re-orientation of economic and social priorities, away from the pursuit of material wealth and towards the cultivation of non-material sources of fulfillment and satisfaction.

Central to Soper's vision of post-growth living is the concept of alternative hedonism, which she defines as a form of pleasure and fulfillment that is not dependent on the acquisition of material goods and services. Alternative hedonism, she argues, involves a re-orientation of human desires and satisfactions towards non-material sources of well-being, such as social connection, creative expression, and engagement with the natural world.

Soper argues that alternative hedonism has an important role to play in promoting sustainable consumption and post-growth living. By offering a vision of the good life that is not dependent on material acquisition and environmental destruction, alternative hedonism can help to challenge the dominant model of consumer culture and to inspire new forms of economic and social organization. At the same time, by acknowledging the social and historical construction of human needs and desires, alternative hedonism can help to develop a more critical and reflexive approach to consumption that recognizes the complex power relations and inequalities that shape contemporary society.

However, Soper also acknowledges the challenges and limitations of post-growth living and alternative hedonism as political and cultural projects. She recognizes that the transition to a post-growth society will require significant changes in economic and social structures, as well as in individual values and behaviors. She also acknowledges the ways in which alternative hedonism can sometimes reinforce existing inequalities and power structures, particularly when it is based on exclusionary or elitist forms of cultural capital.

Despite these challenges, Soper argues that post-growth living and alternative hedonism have an important role to play in creating a more sustainable and fulfilling future. By offering a vision of a society that prioritizes human well-being and ecological sustainability over economic growth and material acquisition, post-growth living can help to inspire new forms of political and cultural engagement. At the same time, by cultivating alternative forms of pleasure and fulfillment that are not dependent on environmental destruction and social inequality, alternative hedonism can help to create a more meaningful and sustainable way of life.

## Conclusion

Throughout her extensive body of work, Kate Soper has developed a rich and nuanced philosophy of sustainable consumption that challenges the dominant paradigms of consumer culture and offers a vision of a more fulfilling and ecologically sound way of life. Central to Soper's philosophy is a critique of the individualistic and acquisitive values of consumer culture, which she argues are deeply problematic from both a social and environmental perspective (Soper, 2020).

Soper's early work on the concept of human needs lays the foundation for her subsequent engagements with sustainable consumption. By challenging the idea that needs are fixed and universal, Soper opens up space for a more critical and historically situated understanding of consumption practices (Soper, 1981). This perspective is further developed in her work on the politics and pleasures of consumption, where she argues for the importance of cultivating alternative forms of hedonism that are not dependent on material acquisition and environmental destruction.

Soper's engagement with the philosophy of nature and the politics of environmentalism also plays a crucial role in her thinking on sustainable consumption. By developing a critical realist approach to nature that recognizes the intrinsic value of the non-human world, Soper provides a philosophical foundation for a more ecologically grounded politics of consumption (Soper, 2001). At the same time, her engagement with the humanist tradition offers resources for a more socially just and politically engaged approach to sustainability.

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of Soper's philosophy of sustainable consumption is her concept of alternative hedonism. Through this concept, Soper argues for the possibility of a form of pleasure and fulfillment that is not dependent on the acquisition of material goods, but instead arises from engagement with the natural world, social connection, and creative expression. By articulating a vision of the good life that is not tied to the cycle of production and consumption, Soper offers a powerful challenge to the dominant values of consumer culture and a glimpse of a more sustainable and fulfilling way of life.

Ultimately, Soper's philosophy of sustainable consumption is grounded in a deep concern for human flourishing and the integrity of the natural world. By offering a critique of consumer culture that is both theoretically sophisticated and politically engaged, Soper provides a valuable resource for those seeking to imagine and create a more sustainable and just future.

Kate Soper's work has had a significant influence on the field of sustainable consumption studies, as well as on broader debates in environmental philosophy, political theory, and cultural studies. Her critique of consumer culture and her vision of alternative hedonism have inspired a range of scholars and activists who are seeking to develop new ways of thinking about and practicing sustainability (Soper, 2020).

One of the key contributions of Soper's work has been to challenge the individualistic and depoliticized approach to sustainable consumption that has often characterized mainstream environmental discourse. By situating consumption practices

within broader structures of power and inequality, and by emphasizing the importance of collective action and political engagement, Soper has helped to push the field in a more critical and transformative direction (Soper, 2006).

At the same time, Soper's work has also played an important role in bridging the divide between environmental philosophy and political theory. By bringing insights from the humanist tradition to bear on questions of sustainability and justice, Soper has helped to enrich the theoretical foundations of the field and to open up new avenues for interdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration (Soper, 2001).

Looking forward, there are a number of potential directions in which Soper's work could be developed and extended. One important area of focus is the role of alternative hedonism in shaping new forms of economic and social organization. While Soper has provided a powerful vision of a post-consumerist way of life, there is still much work to be done in terms of translating this vision into practical strategies for social and political change (Soper, 2020).

Another key area for future research is the intersection of sustainable consumption with questions of social justice and inequality. While Soper has been attentive to these issues throughout her work, there is a need for further exploration of how alternative forms of consumption can be made accessible and appealing to a wider range of social groups, and how they can be integrated into broader struggles for social and economic justice (Soper, 2006).

Finally, there is a need for more empirical research on the lived experiences of those who are attempting to practice alternative forms of consumption and hedonism. While Soper's work provides a rich theoretical foundation for thinking about these issues, there is still much to be learned from the everyday struggles and challenges of those who are seeking to live differently in a consumer-driven world.

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