**Guilt and Ethical Choice in Consumption: A Psychoanalytic Perspective**

*“Analytic work … brought the surprising discovery that such deeds were done principally because they were forbidden, and because their execution was accompanied by mental relief for their doer. He was suffering from an oppressive feeling of guilt, of which he did not know the origin, and after he had committed a misdeed this oppression was mitigated. His sense of guilt was at least attached to something...’ (Freud, 1916, p. 332).*

**Abstract**

Research into consumer ethics has grown substantially since the 1990s. However, it is predominantly influenced by socio-cognitive and attitudinal models that treat everyday consumer decisions as the outcome of carefully weighting abstract moral principles against utilitarian outcomes. This article counter-proposes a psychoanalytic approach to consumer guilt and moral choice that draws on Freudian and Kleinian contributions. In particular, conceptualisations of unconscious (rather than conscious) guilt, the notion of guilt being the cause rather than outcomeof moral behaviour, and the distinction between persecutory and reparative anxieties. In doing so, it corroborates a view of everyday morality as less rational, less deliberate, and firmly embedded in psychodynamic processes that largely escape individual awareness. Potential implications and avenues for more psychoanalytically-inspired treatments of consumer ethics are discussed.

**Keywords:** Ethical decision-making, consumer guilt, attitude-behaviour gap, ethical consumption, Freud, Klein

**Introduction**

Research into consumer ethics has grown substantially since the 1990s and has provided valuable insights into the ways that people respond to moral and environmental challenges in contemporary consumption. The main thrust of current research focuses on understanding consumers’ ethical decision-making processes, often drawing on socio-cognitive models originally applied in other fields, such as Ajzen’s theory of planned behaviour (TPB, 1986, 1991), Schwartz’s (1975) model of norm-activation, and Hunt and Vitell’s (1986, 1992, 2006) general theory of marketing ethics. These models build on the premise that consumers’ ethical judgments (or related attitudinal constructs) are consistent with behavioural intentions, which are in turn an effective proxy for actual behaviour in most circumstances (Fukukawa, 2002). This premise is undermined by the presence of attitude-behaviour gaps or words-deeds inconsistencies (e.g. Bray, Johns and Kilburn, 2010; Carrington, Neville and Whitwell, 2010; Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith, 2007). For example, consumers often buy environmentally hazardous products regardless of their expression of concern for greener alternatives and reported guilty feelings (Chatzidakis et al. 2004). In this article we propose a radically different approach to consumer guilt and moral choice that draws on common threads within Freudian and Kleinian accounts of morality. Following a recent resurgence of interest in psychoanalytic perspectives across a variety of disciplines, including marketing, we discuss the return of the repressed within consumer ethics research in particular: a view of moral behaviour as less grounded on abstract ethical beliefs or principles and more on developmental and psychodynamic processes that largely escape individual awareness.

Indeed, psychoanalysis, with its focus on the unconscious, can explicitly confront more conventional understandings of consumer ethics. For instance, a psychoanalytic reading of the “attitude-behaviour” gap may suggest that a certain extent of inconsistency may in fact be necessary. Cluley and Dunne (2012) explore this possibility in the context of commodity fetishism. Drawing on Freud’s work on narcissism, they suggest that individuals may be well aware of the exploitative relations and environmental damages that commodity consumption creates but it is precisely this knowledge that makes consumption an ideal context for the displacement of destructive and narcissistic desires. We extend this perspective by introducing unconscious guilt, the key foci in most explicit psychoanalytical accounts of morality (Hughes, 2008). Here, unconscious (rather than conscious or experienced) guilt emerges as the main regulator of human conduct. Unlike dominant ethical decision-making models that assume guilt is a feeling that painfully reaches conscience upon moral transgression, psychoanalysis views the presence of unconscious guilt as inescapable part of human existence. It is in turn this kind of guilt that causes moral (mis)behaviour, through psychodynamic mechanisms that largely escape consumers’ awareness. This breaks away from the commonplace view of consumers as rational intentional individuals that try to meet particular moral standards.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. First, we explain the difference between conventional conceptualisations of “conscious” guilt and psychoanalytic perspectives on “unconscious” guilt. Subsequently the article develops a psychoanalytic account of consumer morality that is contrasted with dominant models of ethical decision-making. The final section discusses potential implications and avenues for future research.

**Conscious Guilt: Conventional Conceptualisations**

According to Singh (2000), guilt is a concept that forms part of “a matrix to do with moral division and reunion: transgression, fault, accusation, blame, plea, shame, contrition, remorse, repentance, apology, punishment, revenge, forgiveness, reparation, reconciliation” (p.5). Concurrently, it is the most studied among the so-called moral or self-conscious emotions, including shame, regret, embarrassment, and pride (Katchadourian, 2010). There is inter-disciplinary consensus that such emotions are common but not native; that is, they emerge, in an inevitable fashion at some point in early childhood but unlike so-called primary or native emotions (e.g. anger and fear) they do not have a clear biological basis (Katchadourian, 2010). Nonetheless, their role in regulating human thoughts, feelings and actions has been paramount in nearly every civilisation (Katchadourian, 2010).

Although the possibility of experiencing guilt without having committed a transgression has been considered at least since World War II (with the emergence of concepts such as survivor, collective and existential guilt; see Katchadourian, 2010), the typical narrative of guilt instantiation depicts is as an emotion that painfully reaches conscience as a response to violating moral norms. Correspondingly, guilt in consumer research has been defined as “emotional state involving penitence, remorse, self-blame, and self-punishment experienced after committing a violation or contemplating a future violation of internalized standards of proper behaviour” (Huhmann and Bortherton, 1997, p.36). “Improper” and “darker” variants of consumer behaviour may involve the violation of various religious doctrines (Cloke et al. 2010), laws (e.g. shoplifting; Kallis et al. 1986; Cox et al. 1990) social and “felt norms” (Jackson et al., 1993), personal ethics (Chatzidakis et al. 2004) and sense of self-control in compulsive (O’Guinn and Faber, 1989) and addictive consumption (Becker and Murphy, 1988).

Furthermore, in the face of environmental degradation and increased global inequality, even previously perceived as relatively benign, pleasurable and demoralised activities, such as driving and consuming imported goods, are invested with significant moral meaning. As Barnett et al. (2011) observe, contemporary consumption is going through a phase of increased “responsibilisation” and “remoralisation” following a period of demoralisation during the mass commodity consumption movement of the mid-late 20th century. For Bauman (2008), we now live in a period of liquid-modernity (contrasting with Freud’s solid-modernity) where proscriptions and prescriptions are no longer posed in a finite fashion by institutions such as the church and the state. Instead societal functions of the previous solid-modern world are deregulated and privatised, shifting moral responsibility away from top-down institutions and into the individual consumer-citizen: “it is now up to each individual to set the limits of her or his responsibility for other humans and to draw the line between the plausible and the implausible in moral interventions” (2008, p.51). Consequently, the possibilities for experiencing moral inadequacy and guilt in consumption have expanded to include various everyday acts of “omission”, such as failing to support environmentally sustainable and Fairly Traded products (Cremin, 2012).

Notwithstanding, extant studies into both consumers “doing bad” and failing to “do good” have predominantly viewed guilt as a conscious emotion that follows the violation of their internalised ethical standards. Contrasting this commonplace assumption, Freud and his followers suggested that guilt may be unconscious rather than conscious and that on many occasions the presence of unconscious guilt may be the cause rather than outcome of a transgression.

**Unconscious Guilt: Freudian and Kleinian Contributions**

Freud distinguished between conscious feelings of guilt or “real guilt” that arises from committing a misdeed, and unconscious guilt which arises as a reaction to “the two great criminal intentions of killing the father and having sexual relations with the mother” (Freud, 1916, p. 333). Through this Oedipal configuration emerges the super-ego, which is the symbolic internalisation of the paternal figure and cultural regulations that maintain a sense of morality and proscription from taboos. Further, as Freud explains in *Civilisation and its Discontents*, whether one has killed one’s father in reality or has avoided doing so is not really the decisive thing. In fact, it is only when the authority is internalised through the establishment of a super-ego, “…that we should speak of conscience or a sense of guilt. At this point, too, the fear of being found out comes to an end; the distinction, moreover, between doing something bad and wishing to do it disappears entirely, since nothing can be hidden from the super-ego, not even thoughts.” (Freud, 1930, p.125).

Furthermore, this account allows the possibility that a sense of guilt may not be the consequence of committing a misdeed but its actual explanation. In *Criminals from a Sense of Guilt* (1916), Freud writes “of the surprising discovery that such deeds were done principally because they were forbidden, and because their execution was accompanied by mental relief for their doer. He was suffering from an oppressive feeling of guilt, of which he did not know the origin, and after he had committed a misdeed this oppression was mitigated. His sense of guilt was at least attached to something” (p.332). Therefore, the underlying presence of guilt may not only be unconscious, but also so unbearable that individuals will commit immoral acts with a view to attach unconscious feelings of guilt to more conscious or “real” manifestations.

With Freud’s development of the superego, guilt acquired paramount significance in psychoanalytic understandings of morality. It was however Melanie Klein that helped provide a more consistent and comprehensive account of unconscious guilt and morality. According to Hughes (2008), Klein significantly extended Freudian understandings of guilt in at least three stages. In the first stage, she located the emergence of unconscious guilt earlier in post-natal life, during the infant’s dyadic relationship with its mother. Second, she developed a more multi-layered theory of object relations that, in prior stages of development (the *paranoid-schizoid* position), it includes the formation of good and bad objects and mechanisms of introjection and projection. Third, Klein significantly departed from Freud by conceptualising the *depressive* position, reflecting a later developmental stage in which the infant moves from a part-object to a whole object relation.

Melanie Klein’s *paranoid-schizoid* position represents a primitive mode of mental organisation, located during the infant’s early developmental stage (first few months) and characterised by inability to experience the mother (or caregiver) as a whole object. Instead, the mother’s breast is split into a “good breast” and a “bad breast” with a corresponding division of love and hate (Klein, 1946). These early affective states are *schizoid* because bad and good objects are split for the young child but joint in reality. They are *paranoid* because of the threat entailed in realising that the good objectassociated with satisfaction (the feeding breast) is also a frustrating object (non-feeding breast) that cannot be relied upon. A bad experience (e.g. frustration of hunger) provokes rage against the object (e.g. the bad breast) as well as persecutory anxiety (or guilt) that bad objects may retaliate for the range that has been projected upon them. As Hollway (1999) explains the implications of this position for morality is that: “…more often than not the bad is projected out so that the self can be experienced as good. Hate is split off from love and if hate is predominating, the capacity for concern is unattainable…the morality associated with this position is…'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'” (p.5).

Klein significantly departed from Freud by further conceptualising the *depressive* position, reflecting a later developmental stage in which the infant moves to a whole object relation and becomes capable of recognising good and bad aspects in the loved and loving object (first being its mother) that it has previously inflicted harm upon. Subsequently the infant experiences anxiety and an intrinsic sense of guilt that prompts reparation. This kind of “depressive” or “reparatory” guilt is in turn distinguished from “persecutory” guilt that characterises the paranoid-schizoid position (Klein, 1946) and which is more in line with the Freudian view of a punitive superego: “…the super-ego is built up from the devouring breast (mother) to which is added the devouring penis (father)” (Klein, 1948, p.117). The depressive position is viewed as fundamental to a more mature model of moral sensibility where both good and bad qualities can co-exist in the same object (e.g. Segal, 2004).

Despite the differences between Freud and Klein (see Gay, 1995), and significant advancements in the understanding of unconscious guilt and morality since their work was published (e.g. Reiner, 2009; Westernick, 2009; Barnett, 2007; Sagan, 1988), they both helped to set a broader terrain in which an explicitly psychoanalytic understanding of guilt and morality became possible (Hughes, 2008). Perhaps the most important elements in this psychoanalytic view is Freud and Klein’s converging opinion that first, guilt can not only be conscious but also unconscious and second, the somewhat paradoxical implication that often children (and adults) engage in conscious wrongdoing (and right-doing if in the depressive position), as a way of alleviating their deeply unconscious sense of guilt and anxiety. As Freud (1916) observed in the case of criminal behaviour, by attaching unconscious guilt to actual situations with predictable punishments, the deeply unsettling feelings of criminals are at least attached to something. Unconscious guilt, for both Freud and Klein is therefore inescapable: it is the cause (rather than result) of wrongdoing and paves the way for conscious (displaced) guilt and self-punishment to be experienced. The remainder of this article draws inspiration from these two key ideas with a view to provide a psychoanalytic account of guilt and morality in everyday consumption.

**Towards a Psychoanalytic Model of Consumer Guilt and Ethical Choice**

As noted in the introduction, current attempts to understand consumers’ ethical decision-making process have in the main drawn from socio-cognitive and attitudinal models originally applied in other fields, and have assumed consistency between ethical judgments (or related attitudinal constructs), behavioural intentions, and actual behaviour. For instance, in Hunt and Vitell’s general theory of marketing ethics (originally adapted for a consumer context by Marks and Mayo, 1991; Figure 1), the ethical decision process begins with the consumer perceiving an ethical problem (exogenous variables including factors such as the consumer’s cultural environment, reference groups and past experience; Marks and Mayo, 1991). Subsequently, s/he combines a deontological (duty-based) and a teleological (consequence-based) evaluation to arrive at a moral judgment (i.e., attitude about the ethical problem)[[1]](#footnote-1) which, in turn, influences the consumer’s behavioural intentions. Teleological evaluations affect intentions indirectly through ethical judgments but also directly. That is, an individual may not choose the most ethical alternative due to the desirable consequences of a less ethical one. Furthermore, intention may differ from actual behaviour due to situational conditions enabling consumers to engage in unethical behaviour (e.g., the opportunity to adopt an alternative). In the case of choosing an unethical alternative however, the consumer might experience *guilt* feelings that will affect future behaviour.

[Insert Figure 1 Here]

Models such as Hunt and Vitell’s are therefore underpinned by two fundamental assumptions. First, consumer moral choice is implied to be highly instrumental-rational and conscious, at least until it becomes habitual. Ethical behaviour is the outcome of a careful weighting of various internalised moral duties against the positive and negative consequences of the act in question. Second, guilt emerges either as the main undesired outcome of following a morally inferior course of action (reactive guilt) or, alternatively, as an anticipatory emotion that is (consciously) taken into account prior to reaching a decision (Steenhaut and Kenhove, 2006). Both of these are assumptions are undermined by the empirical observation of widespread “attitude-behaviour” gaps (e.g. Bray et al. 2010; Carrington et al. 2010) and the related conclusion that such models can at best only partially account for the complexity of everyday moral decisions. A psychoanalytic approach, with its explicit opposition to the idea of rational moral choice and focus on unconscious (versus conscious) guilt as the main regulator of human conduct seems to offer a particularly suitable angle with which to revisit the conceptual foundations of these models.

Paralleling the dominance of the “model of justice” in other fields – emphasising rationality, impartiality, and autonomy (e.g. Hollway, 2006) – studies on consumers’ ethical decision-making are underlined by abstract principles of Enlightenment-based moral philosophy. The deontological versus consequential distinction in Hunt and Vitell’s model (figure 1), for instance, draws on Kant’s duty-based ethics and Mill’s utilitarianism (see e.g. Beauchamp and Bowie, 2008). Moral choice and potential feelings of guilt are viewed as the outcome of an instrumental-rational process in which moral doctrines are weighed against positive and negative outcomes. Instead psychoanalysis assumes a more developmental moral-psychological narrative (Hughes, 2008). Morality is an emergent phenomenon that starts in the early infancy and is thereafter driven by unconscious motives and anxieties that largely escape conscious awareness. For Freud, the “higher”, moral side of human nature is located in the formation of the super-ego, the internalisation of parents and other authority figures. Klein and post-Kleinian scholars assume a similar model of morality in the paranoid-schizoid position but also stretch the potentiality of the depressive position, a different developmental stage whereby capacity for moral concern and “real care” for others can develop. According to Alford (1989; cited in Hollway, 2006, p.48) for instance, whereas it was the model of “talion morality” (i.e. an eye for an eye and a tooth for tooth) characterising both Freud’s guilt-based model and Klein’s paranoid-schizoid positions, the depressive position is “based not merely upon the desire to make sacrifices, in order to make reparation for phantasised acts of aggression; it is based also upon an ability to identify deeply with others, to feel connected with their fates. This is the morality of the depressive position – reparative morality, it might be called. It might also be called simply caritas.”

Common in both models however, is a move away from the instrumental, cognitive and rational elements of moral decision-making. Instead, the capacity for moral reasoning – and behaving – is viewed as subject to the infant’s relationship with its parents or caregivers. In later developmental stages, it is reliant on individuals’ further social relations and unique life circumstances. In addition, post-Freudian and post-Kleinian scholars have attempted to illustrate the intersection of this predominantly moral-psychological narrative (focused on biographical and inter-subjective experiences) with socio-cultural accounts (focused e.g. on discursive and institutional-level processes). For example, Rustin (1991, 2006) illustrates how forms of paranoid-schizoid or punitive reasoning are both reflected and reproduced by the legal institutions and socio-cultural structures of a given society. Focusing on individuals’ “capacity to care”, Hollway (2006) distinguishes between “institutional care” and “relational care”, to talk of the discourses and institutional practices that allow forms of reparative reasoning to extend across difference and distance.

Concurrently, in both Freudian and Kleinian models of morality it is unconscious (persecutory and/or reparative) guilt that is foregrounded as the key analytical concept. Freud’s (1916) “criminals from a sense of guilt” or “pale criminals” – in his appropriation of a phrase first used by Nietzsche – commit morally and legally forbidden actions exactly because they are forbidden and the reason for doing so largely escapes their conscious awareness. Through psychoanalysis, it can be revealed that moral wrongdoing serves unconscious, previously unbearable and free-floating feelings of (persecutory) guilt. Furthermore, it does so both at a cognitive and an emotional level: transgressions not only give unconscious guilt something on which to attach itself to, a way to rationalise its existence but also a means with which to dissipate itself, to provide emotional relief (*Ibid.*). In this psychoanalytic model of moral choice the concept of guilt therefore plays a radically different role. On the one hand, unconscious guilt remains the underlying motivating force and (de)regulator of human conduct whereas on the other, the more conventional notion of conscious guilt, the one attached to specific moral transgressions, plays the secondary role of rationalising unconscious guilt’s existence.

Importantly, this account is relevant not only to the case of extreme criminal behaviour but also to the “ordinary naughtiness” observed in children and adults (Winnicott, 1965, p.27). According to Winnicott, whenever unconscious guilt becomes intolerable and unexplainable, it makes for a feeling of madness. Subsequently the moral wrongdoer “gets relief by devising a limited crime which is only in a disguised way in the nature of the crime in the repressed fantasy...At first the substitute crime or delinquency is unsatisfactory to the delinquent, but when compulsively repeated it acquires the characteristics of secondary gain and thus becomes acceptable to the self” (*Ibid.*). Here, contemporary consumption, having gone through a period of increased responsibilisation and remoralisation emerges as a particularly suitable candidate for application. As a myriad of previously benign, demoralised consumption activities enter the sphere of moral discourse and contemplation, the fear of experiencing moral inadequacy and guilt has risen. According to Garcia (2003), the weakening of traditional institutions has thrown nearly all contemporary consumers into a new state of traumatic helplessness that has interfered with the constitution of a more solid superego – as meant in Freud’s world – and has allowed a constant perpetuation of the Oedipal situation.

Concurrently, as persecutory anxiety is replaced by feelings of helplessness and inadequacy, Klein’s reparative or “depressive” guilt has gained prominence over “persecutory” one. In fact, in this over-demanding, highly-fragmented world a state of periodically intolerable, unconscious guilt and anxiety may indeed be the default position for the majority of consumer-citizens rather than a relative minority of offenders. From this perspective, the seemingly surprising observation of “attitude-behaviour” gaps is no longer unexplainable. A certain amount of inconsistency between espoused moral beliefs and actions may indeed be necessary in order to sustain a certain level of unconscious guilt – or inadequacy – that serves an important adaptive function. The opposite (perfect attitude-behaviour correspondence) is not only unlikely due to the ever-increasing number of moral demands posed in consumption but also, and more importantly from a psychoanalytic point of view, because it would imply a resolution of unconscious guilt and anxieties that seems all the more impossible. In other words, *a certain amount of conscious consumer guilt, as an outcome of moral attitude-behaviour inconsistency, is necessary so that unconscious guilt finds both periodic relief and a more rationalised, cognitive explanation.*

A key implication from the above proposition is that unconscious guilt may be served in and through a variety of alternative behavioural domains. Indeed, for Freud (1924) the observation that various neuroses that had defied any therapeutic effort vanished once patients got involved in a different suffering meant that in the end, “all that mattered was that it should be possible to maintain a certain amount of suffering” (p. 166). In this sense, a psychoanalytic account of consumer guilt and moral choice retains an *intrapsychic* or individual-centred as opposed to a more *act-specific* focus that underlines current models of ethical decision-making. The moral act in question, be it shoplifting, buying organic products, recycling and so on, is simply one among a variety of potentially suitable behavioural targets that have the capacity to satisfy a deeper intrapsychic process. Concurrently, assuming that one (or a set) of consumer activities serves unconscious guilt in a relatively efficient manner, there should be no need for additional substitute experiences. In other words, psychoanalysis implies a somewhat *compensatory model of guilt feeling and moral (mis)behaviour*. In a radical departure from how consumer guilt and moral choice have been conceptualised to date, focusing on seemingly independent decision-making dilemmas, psychoanalysis asserts that whether an individual behaves ethically or not in one instance could do with whether they do so (experience adequate guilt) in another.

Therefore, attitude-behaviour gaps should be considered at a different level of aggregation, across different behavioural domains sharing in common the capacity to generate conscious guilt. For instance, guilt following a period of excessive drinking may be linked with an attempt to gain self-control in areas such as eating and spending habits. Some indirect empirical evidence adds plausibility to this interpretation. It has often been observed, for example, that consumers that are “bad” in one context often feel they are “good” in all others: in Harris and Daunt’s (2011) study, consumers justified fraudulent returns of used goods on the basis of being otherwise law-abiding, whereas McGregor (2008) notes how users of SUVs and other environmentally-polluting products often point to their good environmental track record in other areas. Conversely, the assumption of spill-over effects in pro-environmental research, meaning that sustainable consumption in one domain has a tendency to “spill over” into other behavioural domains, has been often disconfirmed (Thogersen and Olander, 2003). That is, although one would expect consumers to aim for consistency in their everyday practices (Thogersen, 2004; from buying organic milk to reducing private transport), they often do not, which is in line with the psychoanalytic idea of needing to maintain a certain amount of guilt and ambivalence.

However, Freud’s idea of a punitive superego seems less applicable in explaining why consumers fail to do “good” rather than do “bad”, in contexts such as Fair Trade buying and downshifting (e.g. Shaw and Newholm, 2002). Here a potentially useful distinction could be made between “guilt-inducing” and “guilt-alleviating” activities or “acts of commission versus omission” (see Wollheim, 1988). Guilt-inducing activities include all these consumer acts that require actively doing something wrong either in terms of strong legal or moral condemnation (e.g. consumer fraud; Rosenbaum et al. 2011) or loss of self-control (e.g. binge drinking, addictive shopping). In one sense, the moral context surrounding these acts seems to have changed relatively little since Freud’s era. His idea of a punitive superego, projected in a variety of clearly defined legal and ethical sanctions, and of a “need for self-punishment” - a term Freud (1924) used as a more psychologically correct, outward expression of unconscious guilt (see Carveth, 2006) - still seem largely relevant and intuitively applicable. On the contrary, Bauman‘s suggestion that guilt and fear of nonconformity to parental and other authority figures have now been replaced by fear of moral inadequacy seems rather tenuous in these contexts (Brinkmann, 2010).

Moral discourse around contemporary consumer culture, however, has shifted considerably towards everyday acts of omission. In the face of increasing representations of environmental disasters and of people deprived of basic human needs, consumers are called to assume some responsibility through what Cremin (2012, p.57) has recently labelled “the fetishised guilt complex”. In this process, contemporary (western-affluent) consumers are called to exchange their (collective) guilt of omission with ethical and ecological services and products such as Fair Trade coffee, green clothes and DIY fundraising parties for the likes of Amnesty International and Oxfam. Cremin’s observation to some extent echoes Bauman’s (2008) view of morality in the liquid-modern world but in line with authors such as Žižek (2008), he moves further to criticise this process as a “pseudo-individualised quantum of politics proper” that in effect leaves the material base of capitalism unaffected (Cremin*,* 2012, p.57).

Notwithstanding, this type of guilt alleviation through consumption departs from Freud’s original theorising of unconscious guilt as serving a punitive superego (or alternative accounts focused on consumer narcissism; Cluley and Dunne, 2012). It is more in line with the Kleinian notion of “depressive” or “reparative” guilt, what Winnicott calls (1965) “capacity for concern” and Hollway (2006) later conceptualises as the “capacity for care”. Within consumption research, it coincides with a recent resurgence of interest in the ethics of care, an alternative philosophical perspective that emphasises the relationality, inderdependence and gendered nature of moral decisions (see e.g. Shaw, McMaster and Newholm, 2013). In sum, whereas *“unethical” consumption is to a large extent driven by persecutory guilt, positive “ethical” consumption is likely to be driven by depressive guilt, an unconscious effort to engage in reparation*. The core premises of the psychoanalytic perspective advanced in this article are summarised in figure 2.

[Instert Figure 2 Here]

**Discussion**

Against the backdrop of an ethical decision-making tradition founded on abstract Enlightenment-based principles, psychoanalysis foregrounds morality as a developmental phenomenon that starts in the early infancy and is thereafter driven by psychodynamic processes that largely escape individual awareness. In his conceptualisation of unconscious guilt, Freud lives little space for genuine altruism or benevolence. Instead, the “higher”, moral side of human nature is located in the formation of the super-ego. It is the “fear of punishment”, first by the parents and subsequently by other internalised authority figures that helps explain consumers’ abiding to various legal, religious and social norms that apply to marketplace behaviour. Conversely, “improper” consumer behaviour – from shoplifting to overspending and through to self-harming behaviours – are explained by an unconscious “need for punishment”, the presence of destructive drives and persecutory guilt that may at times seek periodical release into more conscious or “real” manifestations.

Although Klein locates the emergence of unconscious guilt earlier in post-natal life, she converges with Freud in so far as it is the same model of “talion morality” (Alford, 1989) characterising her paranoid-schizoid position. However Klein and her followers also stretch the potentiality of the depressive position, a different developmental stage whereby capacity for moral concern and “real care” for others can develop. Being driven by reparative rather than persecutory urges, and an ability to view others as “whole objects”, individuals in the depressive position are able to extend their care across difference and distance. Here, having gone through a phase of increased responsibilisation (Barnett et al. 2011), contemporary consumption emerges as a key arena for the mediation and objectification of care: from buying Fair Trade products in support of distant others to showing care for the environment through recycling and buying environmentally sustainable products.

However, as Hollway (2006) stretches in her psycho-social conception of a Kleinian model of morality, care remains a tentative “capacity” subject to various biographical-developmental experiences but also discursive, political and institutional-level processes which may also largely escape awareness. That is, care logics and practices are both enabled and constrained by the broader institutional context of consumption and modes of production. Fontenelle (2013) illustrates, for instance, how media and marketing discourses *produce* (reparative) guilt that can in turn be alleviated through consuming from environmentally and socially responsible companies. More psycho-*socially* then, the transferring of care into everyday acts of consumption can be viewed as a phenomenon that addresses diverse sets of motivations and discourses employed by actors other than the “caring consumer” (Caruana and Chatzidakis, 2013). More *psycho*-socially, it can be read as a process that displaces consumers’ unconscious reparative urges into highly commoditised and politically sanitised realms, which, for authors such as Žižek (2008) and Cremin (2012), is in line with the reproduction of neoliberal logics and practices.

Beyond unsettling current understandings of consumers’ ethical decision-making, this article advances some key propositions – first, the notion of unconscious guilt as the cause of (im)moral behaviour; second, the view of guilt as intrapsychic rather than act-specific and third, the distinction between persecutory and reparative guilt – that are of relevance to a variety of further research areas pertaining to consumption guilt and morality. For instance, the assumption that people are guilt-averse and will respond pro-socially when presented with “guilt appeals” has been applied widely in public policy and charity advertising, often raising inconsistent findings (e.g. Basil et al. 2006). A psychoanalytic reading could claim that this assumption is in part misguided: at least for some consumers, guilt appeals may point to substitute behaviours for attaching unconscious guilt rather than behaviours to avoid. Likewise, consumers are not assumed to be entirely guilt-avoidant, as in a variety of studies that have reported rationalisation strategies and defence mechanisms employed by “norm-violating” consumers who aim to alleviate guilt (e.g. Strutton et al. 2004; McGregor, 2008). Instead, the psychoanalytic perspective advanced here assumes that individuals may need to experience at least some amount of guilt in everyday consumption. In turn, cognitive strategies such as rationalisations may serve to manage conscious or real guilt’s intensity rather that aim for its complete alleviation.

However, the current application of psychoanalytic premises has been selective, aiming to set the ground for the development of a psychoanalytic account of (consumer) morality that could be usefully extended on the basis of post-Freudian and post-Kleinian contributions (see e.g. Hughes, 2008). For authors such as Winnicott (1965), for instance, the proposition of unconscious guilt as a cause rather than outcome of moral wrongdoing was only part of a more comprehensive account of morality, including the possibility of guiltlessness. In addition, psychoanalytic models have been criticised for their persistence on a moral-psychological account of morality as opposed to models that can sufficiently accommodate more macro-level, socio-cultural influences. Correspondingly, as noted above, Freudian and Kleinian followers working in fields such as psychosocial studies (see e.g. Frosh, 2010) have attempted to overcome binaries of individual/society and agency/structure through the development of theoretical models that treat the social and the psychic as mutually constitutive. For instance, integrating Kleinian and post-Kleinian contributions with the care ethics literature, Hollway (2006) attempts a psycho-social understanding of moral subjectivity as neither overly individualising (as in current ethical decision-making research) nor socio-culturally reductionist (as in typical critiques of contemporary consumer culture).

The propositions advanced in this article could be corroborated in various streams of future empirical research. For instance, there is a long tradition of psychological research that reformulates psychoanalytic claims into testable hypotheses in experimental settings (see e.g. Baumeister et al. 1998). Within consumer research, “unconscious emotions” have been examined through a variety of techniques, from nonverbal research tools (e.g. paintings, pictures) and implicit association tests (e.g. Maison et al. 2004; Gibson, 2008) to hypnosis (e.g. McDonald, 1998). With few adaptations, such techniques could be integrated into research designs aiming to capture both unconscious and conscious dimensions of guilt. Furthermore, psychoanalytically-informed approaches can be applied to qualitative data, as a more “penetrative” mode of analysis attentive to “both individual experience and the social psychodynamics that operate in the construction of the research environment” (Clarke, 2002, p.173). Such approaches often rely on a minimum of intervention by the researcher, aiming to imitate “free association” techniques in a research interview context (Clarke, 2002). They can be particularly useful in terms of corroborating a more “psycho-social” conception of moral agency, one that is sensitised to both participants’ unique life stories (and unconscious defences) and their positioning within particular discursive and institutional domains (see Hollway and Jefferson, 2000).

Regardless of the specific form future research on psychoanalysis and consumer ethics may take, as Felman (1977) notes, it should involve reflecting what psychoanalysis offers but also what is reflected back into psychoanalysis from applications outside their original therapeutic context. In this sense, it is unlikely that psychoanalysis, as a body of language and a body of knowledge, can provide a fully comprehensive account of consumer morality, not least because of its emphasis on “human” rather than inanimate, consumption objects. As Miller (1998) notes, even within relational and objects relations traditions, prominence is given to linguistic processes (at least once infants enter the realm language) whilst applications outside the clinic are most typically concerned with works of art rather than the social life of more mundane inanimate objects. There is therefore little in the way of explaining how “dead” objects mediate relationships between “living” subjects; even less so in terms of recognising the possibility of “ethical nature” or moral agency in (consumption) objects themselves (but see Baraitser, 2009). Furthermore, it remains questionable (and subject to further reformulations) whether Freudian and Kleinian understandings of morality retain a critical enough edge that can contribute to some kind of progressive ethics and politics in relation to consumption. It is easy to trace what Stonebridge (1998) calls the “redemptive” element and Frosh (2010) the “normalising” tendencies of psychoanalysis, which although “recognises the split nature of the subject….pursues a sense-making agenda that everything comes together in the end…” (p.205).

Notwithstanding, in a research field preoccupied with the development of highly de-contextualised and abstract models of ethical decision-making, psychoanalysis retains a radical impulse; in its insistence that everyday morality is less rational, less instrumental and firmly embedded in a variety of developmental and psychodynamic processes. By revealing and re-introducing these repressed aspects, psychoanalysis raises critical questions that can help the consumer ethics field move forward.

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**Figure 1: Hunt and Vitell’s General Theory of Marketing Ethics (Adapted by Marks and Mayo, 1991, p. 722).**



**Figure 2: A Psychoanalytic Model of Consumer Guilt and Ethical Choice**



1. Teleological ethical theories hold that the moral worth of actions or practices is determined solely by the consequences of the actions or practices. On the other hand, deontological theories hold that one or more fundamental principles of ethics differ from the principle of utility; they are in turn based on principles of duty such as “never treat another merely as a means to your own goals” (Beauchamp and Bowie, 2008) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)