

"Bridge over the River Why"
CONSUMER, ARGUMENTS AND
PRODUCERS

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Introduction

Every decisionmaking starts with arguing! Why should we do this or why should we buy that? And every time we also want to know in the first place if we are on the right ethical track. So that varying circumstances allow us to decide differently if necessary, but without too much bad feelings! *To be really motivated every time that we make a decision it is important to know exactly what lies at the basis of our arguments!* All the ethics and all the emotions have to be transparent to which basic arguments they are related. And in the end to which facts these arguments are pointing!

The last factor in the row is of course always the human being him/herself! Why should we decide one way or another? And to make all choices visible we always have to look to both extreme possibilities and see how these two extremes interact with each other. Before we take a decision we therefore have to think first about "black" and "white" and all colours in between! In fact we visualise the bridge and walk a few times to the other end and back to where we came from. And again and again. Until we know exactly WHY we should decide to do this or to buy that.

Arguing from A to Z and back

If you put the consumer/citizen in the centre of your thinking, and look from a helicopter/cosmic view cq from the complete 360 degrees horizon of producing possibilities, you are already thinking from one extreme to the other. And then you are already making visible two piers for possible bridges to build and to walk over - and back! In the same way as between light and darkness there is a rainbow of colours to choose! *And when we know how we can build bridges in our thinking, we are better equipped to build bridges between people. Between different points of view, between social differences, and between different economical parties.*

For instance the environment, the generations to come, and health as hot items to talk and think about. These three items are very fundamental today for our motivation in the long term.

- The environment vs the human being

When we are for instance discussing the environment it is in the end not nature but the human being himself, the consumer who will succumb to environmental disaster! Because nature is ten times stronger than the fragile creatures we are! We can see that when we look for instance one year after their eruptions to Mount St Helens or Mount Pinatubo, where no one survived under the ashes, but plants were growing in all colours ? So we can conclude that taking care of the environment is by definition taking care of our OWN survival.

- The next generation vs us

What is our responsibility for the next generation? If that is the main question I could start thinking about the meaning of life for myself first! If life is a game taking place between birth and death and no more, then what is the meaning of it at all? Perhaps an easy question, but not for those who have staggering problems most of their life. The only way to survive then is faith, or the conviction that we live more than once ? If indeed so, then it becomes clear that it is not only important for our children and grandchildren, but also in the end for OURSELF!

- Our health vs our joy

When you're getting emotional about your health as a must, most of the time you will be going to argue in the same way as every smoker or other addict does. Why should I stop or why should I change? When I only live ten years less but have a lot more fun, it's okay isn't it? In that case you need to go a step further to get to the basics. Because every addiction is an answer to what I do NOT want, a kind of fleeing for all kinds of problems or responsibilities. So the first question to be asked is what I really DO want! Otherwise you might stop smoking and finish a negative way of living, but you still would have to start thinking in a positive direction ? If I first decide about what I really want to live for or to fight for, then all other questions become a lot easier or even peanuts! (From my own experience I can tell that from 40 tot zero cigarettes per day took me only three days with a only few cold turkey reactions, without any tricks or help! Now more than ten years ago (PD)).

In search for basic arguments

All different questions and arguments in our "consumer governance" have to be more and more related to the most basic facts of life if we want to stay on track in our motivation for a sustainable future. *As we mentioned already, in the end it is all about ourself, about what we really want, and even about how we think about our future in the long term, and then and only then the other questions of how to go forward are much easier to understand.* For instance quality, quantity and price as the main factors in every transaction between consumers and producers of products and services in our daily life.

- Quality: sustainability vs income

How can we get more quality and more sustainability if everybody - consumers and producers - have to struggle about their income? Is there a relation between quality and the system of sharing the things we make together? What is fair trade at all? What is quality?

- Quantity: myself vs the other

What do we really need? What is enough to meet our needs? And isn't it reasonable that everybody has the human right on a REASON-able income for a reasonable way of living?

- Price: consumer vs producer

And what is price exactly when environmental damage has to be paid for by taxes later? Which we pay ourselves! Perhaps we have to take more time to make things even financially transparant, to find the right arguments. To take better decisions and buy better products.

- Guarantee: Quality of life

In the end we have in our own bookkeeping the mirror of our decisions! In which we can look back and plan forward. What does quality of life mean to us?

Intermezzo

So far an introduction on arguing which might give us an opening to an animated discussion! How can we give direction to and be creative in all our decisions? Joseph Beuys said over and over again: everybody is an artist! (Jeder mensch ein Kunstler). And what about reincarnation, projective geometry, more-dimensional mathematics, or last but not least the inner quality of all things? How can they help us to visualize our arguments? *Building bridges is an art, a*

social art. Only when we are deeply interested in the other "side" we can hope that a bridge can be built in between! Between consumers and producers (fair trade and transparent bookkeeping). Between all parties in a product-channel. Between parents and teachers, citizens and politicians, north-south, east--west, between rich and (yet) poor consumers worldwide!

Looking further

But where lie the origins of the gaps for which we have to build all those bridges and think up all those arguments? For that we have to go back to the Genesis of mankind (or to the big bang for dummies). Where out of the wholeness the human being came into the picture by a big differentiation into 6 billion and more people, with an equal amount of individual points of view. Plus all the different careers by dividing all the jobs to be done in the world economy! From here on we can get an overview of gaps, bridges, arguments and decisions in general.

Bridging points of view

In the vast sea of knowledge, opinions and points of view in general it takes a lot of energy to search for the right answers to all our questions. Although a tremendous amount of information is available there is also a lot of desinformation. Especially in the fight for survival, in other words income, it is a struggle to look further than the surface appearances. As producers are haunted by stockholders value, the consumer is fighting for a basic income or just shopping around for the lowest price only.

Therefore the endeavour to look further to the real (inner) quality of products and services is not readily taken up! That's also the reason why so little research is done beyond natural sciences! The world consists of more than its physical aspects. To really understand the laws of plants, animals and human beings already Goethe paved the way for new ways of research: the breathing principle of all plants, the characters of animals and the biography as basis of the individual human being. These three areas are forming the bridge to the higher levels of knowledge in strengthened thinking, feeling and willing (head, heart, and hands) called imagination, inspiration and intuition. So there are seven steps to go in understanding the world around us. *Science must undergo a metamorphosis! ALL questions need to be asked!*

But lucky as we are the process of consciousness is by definition irreversible. When consumers keep asking questions the answers will come from the other "side", whether from producers, scientists or by surfing on the internet or getting insight through one's own research. Then and only then can we really make a further step in the development of sustainable agriculture, medicine, education, architecture etc.etc.

Bridges between people

Don't do anything upon someone else that you would not do upon yourself! That's the basic rule of the world of justice and all kinds of laws and regulations internationally. Although it sounds so simple, it has been embattled throughout the centuries! In relations, between two or more people, between nations and between all people worldwide in two great wars and now in the struggle about climate change, debt release and fair trade, and the right for clear drinking water.

What do we really need, what is a REASON-able income for a reasonable way of living? That's the question to be asked to each other again, and it has been in the centre of attention for two years now. Discussions about basic income but also about (extreme) top salaries are the beginning of a new era where we have to decide how we could and should divide all the products and services we are making (during the time when we are in our role of producer).

These questions are so important because all the struggles for goods, and even wars for commodities and materials, are based on the idea of some two hundred years ago that maximum egoism leads to economic prosperity, also promoted by Adam Smith the great economist. Although it helped to build up the economy it is now running out of hand. In the world of economy too it is clear that a new "life cycle" of economical insights has to come about. Ethical and sustainable ways of producing are recognised more and more as profitable, just as the ways of thinking about fair trade can bridge the financial gaps between all peoples.

Bridging the division of labour

Thousands of years ago we lived in a do-it-yourself world, we were consumer and producer as well. After forming villages we decided to divide the labour in such a way that everybody could specialise and become a producer (from nine to five). When it became more complex trading and banking emerged for bridging the gaps we had invented ourselves. So we are still making gaps every moment when we split up companies, tasks, services, departments, new combinations of organizing our work. Every moment there are new roles as consumer or producer, even between companies (business to business BtoB).

In the fifties of the last century consumption was necessary to revive and experience freedom of all sorts, in food, architecture, travelling, cars and enjoying life in all directions. In the sixties we realised things became too un-sustainable and started protesting. In the seventies and eighties we realised that we had to discuss things too and make them financially possible. Consumer-associations and new ethical banks emerged. The human being as individual and as citizen also became an active consumer! The 21st century is all about maturity!

And that means that we have to learn to turn the old marketing concept of supply and demand into a conscious marketing concept of question and answer. The consumer has to build the bridges together with producers and should ask the best questions to get the best answers. Consumer governance means that the consumer has become a manager until that point where he/she asks the questions including the financial aspects in subscription, contract or prepaid. The personal influence of the consumer is only one salary per month. But together with six billion other consumers we're talking about the total world budget!. Isn't it?

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The author is founder and chairman of the Free Consumer Association (Vrije Consumenten Vereniging) in the Netherlands. He studied management at Nyenrode University and accountancy at Erasmus University. Worked at ING Bank and helped with the start of the Triodos Bank for new ethical ways in financing. After years of research in all kinds of consumer associations he wrote the book Consumer Freedom and Responsibility (Consument vrijheid en verantwoordelijkheid) 1998, 60 pages, ISBN 90 76206 01 5. A second edition is in preparation, a concept english summary is available on the website www.vrijeconsumenten.nl

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