Sufficiency - does energy consumption become a moral issue?

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This paper addresses mitigation of climate change in the light of sufficiency, using the example of energy consumption. The most sustainable energy is the energy not used. Basically, there are three ways to reduce energy use: First, there are strategies to increase technical efficiency, that is to provide a certain level of energy services with lower energy input; second, there are strategies to increase economic efficiency, that is to “get the prices right”, internalising externalities and thus leading to efficient levels of energy services given individual agents’ preferences. Third, there are sufficiency strategies, which make the levels of energy services itself a topic for discussion and aim at lowering those. In addition to these reduction strategies, there is “clean” energy with relatively low external effects. A combination of those strategies may be most promising for a sustainable energy system. However, the current debate on sustainable energy systems is largely dominated by technical and economic efficiency and clean energy strategies, while sufficiency plays a minor role only. This focus on efficiency faces several problems. First, there are the problems of technical efficiency: the rebound effect or a target shift of targeted measures, or an increasing total despite increasing efficiency. Second, there are the problems of economic efficiency: identifying prices for all goods involved with the corresponding information and weighting problems related to cost-benefit and other valuation analysis. Third, clean energy may face problems of scale, when relatively low external effects add up on aggregate (see e.g. the problems related to bioenergy. Finally, there are the missed opportunities for increased sustainability from not employing sufficiency strategies. Thus, if not for other reasons, the precautionary principle suggests that the current debate on sustainable energy systems be complemented with a discussion of sufficiency. The danger to be avoided in a modern conception of sufficiency are an overly naïve attitude towards behavioural changes and social engineering and being ideological, anti-liberal and fundamentalist. In my research, I explore such a modern concept of sufficiency, which is adequate for a liberal society. In particular, I frame sufficiency in a philosophical context, thus complementing socio-psychological approaches. This requires the question “How should we act?” to be posed as a clearly moral and normative question, accounting for the important role efficiency plays, but not relying on it as the sole legitimate guiding principle. Other principles are the precautionary principle, justice or “do no harm”. These principles and related basic ethical concepts such as “responsibility” are however partly shaped in a historical context of non-global problems and personal interaction. A translation into today's situation and its specific complex problems such as an equitable, sustainable and reliable energy system is thus necessary. This becomes evident when addressing basic questions such as “Who is responsible for climate change?”.

Besides these fundamental problems regarding the adequacy of traditional ethical key concepts for today's problems, there are also fundamental problems regarding concrete action, such as the fact that millions of per se harmless individual decisions can have detrimental effects on aggregate and the separation of actions and their consequences in a globalized world. Such considerations motivate framing life-style questions such as energy consumptions as moral questions. Moralization of some issues in the ongoing debate on sustainable energy systems is one way to incorporate sufficiency. Clearly, the consequences of this course of action for liberal societies have to be discussed in detail, as a key characteristic of liberal societies is the fact that fundamental questions of lifestyle such as religion, sexual orientation or political attitude are decidedly no moral questions any more and clearly should not become such again. A discussion of which lifestyle questions may become moral again and why is thus of paramount importance. In this paper, I avoid this question by focusing on the concrete question whether energy consumption today becomes a moral issue and how this relates to sufficiency. Using an example to discuss sufficiency along the lines laid out above avoids the necessity to differentiate in detail which lifestyle questions are moral, which are not and it avoids weighting different lifestyle aspects. This helps to in detail investigate the process of moralization of such hitherto non-moral aspects. A more general discussion of this has to be provided at a later stage of the research. Focusing on such a concrete example also emphasizes the importance of the single individual as a consumer and of his/her responsibility. It can thus help to make general problems such as responsibility for climate change etc. more tangible. The structure of the paper is as follows. First, the relation of sufficiency to efficiency is clarified. Many strategies for sufficiency can be understood as encompassing long-term strategies for (economic) efficiency. This helps to at least partly reconciling economic or efficiency based approaches with the idea of sufficiency. Second, using the example of a sustainable energy system in
Switzerland, current policies, largely based on technological and economic efficiency and clean energy and their effects are reviewed. Referring to the goals of sustainably energy systems, hypotheses on what is missing to reach those with the above mentioned policies are developed and substantiated. Third, sufficiency is presented as an alternative approach. The potential of a moralization of the problem and a shift in goals is discussed. Then, the consequences of such a new approach are discussed. What would a consequent sufficiency strategy and moralization mean for society at large, which problems may arise, what does it mean concretely and how could it be implemented?