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Human beings are 'dissipative systems'. They need to intake (to 'consume') a certain amount of organised matter-energy (and information) per unit of time. Yet human beings are also 'conscious systems' that turn the most elementary acts of consumption into symbolic acts attaching specific value to how the consumption is performed and to the type of goods that are consumed. As 'dissipative systems', profoundly different types of goods are equally appropriate for the maintenance of their metabolism. Instead, as 'conscious (and selfreflective) systems' different goods (and constellation of goods) are valued very differently. Therefore, only culture can explain the consumption patterns observed. In turn, culture is continuously evolving, and the consumption pattern is continuously changing. Since consumption is constrained by the social structure in which individuals are embedded, the social sciences – economics, in particular – cannot avoid addressing the distinction between the desired and actual pattern of consumption – because the relationship between these two patterns has emerged as crucial in modern society: what consumption patterns do individuals aim at within the here/now coordinates? What constrains the consumption patterns of individuals? Categories like 'utility', 'welfare', 'quality of life', 'happiness' have been proposed to conceptualise the relationship between the desired and actual consumption patterns. The category of ‘well-being’ is the most recent attempt to specify this fundamental relationship better.

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