Overpopulation is bad

but overconsumption is worse

*by David Suzuki* (Populi, May 1993)

**FIRST LEVEL - PARAPHRASING**

[Week 8, Exercise 3 Note: My paraphrases appear in red text enclosed in brackets. Preceding each with the word “Paraphrase” was visually distracting to me.]

After a recent lecture, two people objected vehemently to my suggestion that we in industrialized countries are the major cause of global ecological degradation and pollution. [Not everyone agrees with the author’s suggestion that environmental damage is mainly caused by industrialization.] They blamed overpopulation in the developing world. [Others contend that one of the major contributors to environmental damage is overpopulation.]

I countered by pointing out that the great disparity in wealth and consumption between rich and poor countries has to be addressed. [The author contended that there is a difference between wealth and consumption that has to be taken into account.] Excess population does lead to ecological destruction and it's made worse in the developing countries by their access to so little of the planet's resources. [An increased population results in an increase in use of available resources. This is particularly true in areas where resources are scarce.]

But each Canadian consumes 16 to 20 times as much as a person in India or China and 60 to 70 times more than someone in Bangladesh. [For example, consumption in Canada, an industrialized country, is up to 20 times as much as that of India, and triple that in Bangladesh, with both India and Bangladesh being recognized as developing countries.] Thus we l. l billion people in industrialized nations have the same ecological impact as 17 billion to 77 billion people from the developing world. [So, industrialized countries contribute from 15 to 70 times as much damage as developing countries.]

The planet currently could not take 5.5 billion people living as we do. [A population of 5.5 billion people is unsustainable with the way we currently live.] But if we don't cut back consumption and pollution, poorer nations can rightfully aim to emulate us. [But industrialized countries act as role models for developing countries and follow what they do.] My disputants weren't convinced and retorted: [But some respond this way:] "You're crazy if you expect people in Canada or the U.S. to cut back on consumption. [Industrialized countries aren’t likely to reduce their use of resources.] It's natural to want more." [Like Oliver, people always want more than what they currently have.]

More than 2,000 years ago, Aristotle had come to the same conclusion: [The idea of wanting more goes back to ancient Greece.] "The avarice of mankind is insatiable." [Aristotle stated that human greed is unlimited.] Last century, Leo Tolstoy had backed him up: [This sentiment was evident in the writing of Leo Tolstoy.] "Seek among men, from beggar to millionaire, one who is contented with his lot and you will not find one such in a thousand." [Tolstoy said that no matter how far you search, you will not find someone who is happy with what they have.]

Alan Durning of the Worldwatch Institute raises the issue in his book How Much Is Enough?, which opens: [The issue of consumption is discussed by Alan Durning in his book ‘How Much is Enough?’.] "Consumption: the neglected god in the trinity of issues the world must address if we are to get on a path of development that does not lead to ruin. [As one of the three important issues facing the world, consumption is not being addressed and this can lead to disastrous consequences if this silence continues.] The other two – population growth and technological change – receive attention; but with consumption, there is often only silence." [Population growth and technological change receive all the attention.]

So is it human nature to want more? [The author asks the rhetorical question if wanting is a normal state for humans.] During suggests that today's appetite for more consumer goods was a deliberate goal of American business and government. [The author states that Alan During considered this reliance on wanting to be intentional in industrial development in the US.] Retailing analyst Victor Lebow stated shortly after World War II: [The author brings in a quote by Victor Lebow, an analyst for consumer industries.] "Our enormously productive economy ...demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption ...we need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever-increasing rate." [Where During considered reliance on wanting to be intentional, Lebow states that this is required in our consumer culture and becomes ritualized in our daily lives and imbedded in our psychology.]

The chair of the U.S. Council of Economic Advisers in 1953 pronounced that the ultimate goal of the American economy was "to produce more consumer goods." [The 1953 US Council of Economic Advisers echoed During’s in stating that US industry was striving to keep producing.]

And they were immensely successful. [The beliefs of During, Lebow, and the US Council of Economic Advisers reflect the reality of US business.] The contents of the average North American home today would be the envy of kings and emperors of the past. [The things we keep in our homes would have made the leaders of history wanting, as well.] We now classify cars, television, telephones, refrigerators, microwave ovens, and stereos as necessities. [What was once deemed a luxury, like cars, televisions, refrigerators, etc., are now considered essential to our daily lives.]

We even think of ourselves as "consumers," and "shopping" is a recreation. [Consumption has now become both our identity and leisure.] Consumption has become so crucial for the economy that in periods of recession, the consumer is often blamed for not spending enough while business and governments seek ways to increase consumer confidence to stimulate spending. [Because consumption is pushed by business and we believe the idea that consumption is a natural state, when the economy weakens, business and the government blame the lack of consumption by people to be the problem and tries to get the populace to spend.]

Media propaganda pounds home the message that consumption brings happiness. [The media furthers this idea of the necessity of consumption by equating it with personal happiness.] But possessions can't fill the emotional and spiritual needs for human relationships, community, and some purpose beyond accumulation of wealth and goods. [Consumption may be able to fill in the spaces on our homes, but cannot fill the spaces within our psyches, spirits, and communities.]

During quotes a psychologist who finds "there is very little difference in the levels of reported happiness found in rich and poor countries." [The idea of the inability of things to fill our psychological, spiritual, and communal needs is reiterated by a psychologist During quotes, but not here cited, that happiness is largely the same between industrialized and developing countries.] In spite of the steep rise in consumption, the fraction of people who feel happy with life has not changed during the past 40 years. [Over the past 4 decades, increased consumption has not correlated with increased happiness.]

And continued escalation in consumption is not sustainable. [Consumption cannot continue to increase in any sustainable way.] As Durning says: "In constant dollars, the world's people have consumed as many goods and services since 1950 as all previous generations put together. [In the 40 years prior to this article, the amount of consumption was equal to all of consumption before that.] Since 1940, Americans alone have used up as large a share of the Earth's mineral resources as did everyone before combined." [In the 50 years prior, American, one of the most industrialized nations, consumed as many resources as all peoples on Earth before then.]

It is a fact that everything on Earth is limited. [Resources are not infinite and will run out if they are continued to be used.] So endless increases in consumption cannot continue and will fall. [So, because of the limited nature of resources, consumption also has limits.] But that does not mean the future must be a bleak life of denial and sacrifice? [Does this point to some dystopian future of unsatisfied wants?] Much of our consumption is based on inefficiency and waste. [The faulty manner of production leads to our wanting behaviors.] We can reduce our ecological impact severalfold simply by improving our efficiency. [Improving the manner of production will lead to a more positive environmental impact.]

Overconsumption is not a goal that society must maintain at all costs; [Our current consumption behaviors are not we should be striving for;] it has become a symptom that something is wrong because no matter how much we possess, we are not fulfilled or satisfied. [Our current consumption behaviors cannot satisfy our deeper needs.]

Our lifestyle extracts a heavy price: violence, alcoholism, burglary, vandalism, drug abuse, alienation, loneliness, pollution, and disruption of family and neighborhood. [There are many sociological problems that arise because of our behaviors.]

Making do with less and designing a future that is based in communities with greater self-reliance and self-sufficiency makes ecological and social sense. [Addressing the issue of overconsumption by not focusing on the acquisition of things and focusing on collective humanity is a natural solution.] But we won't get started until we stop trying to shift the responsibility elsewhere. [We must realize that this refocus cannot happen until we address the actual issue.]

**SECOND LEVEL – EXPLICATING**

**The Main Thesis**

While population growth and technological development have received the attention when addressing the issues facing the environment and modern society, overconsumption is ignored. The problems caused by and the reasons for overconsumption are significant and need to be addressed.

**Elaboration of the Thesis**

When overconsumption is ignored as a contributing factor to the Earth’s and society’s problems, then any solutions offered will not address the issue adequately. It is an essential perspective that must be considered.

**Example**

Our overconsumption leads to significant amounts of waste. This waste must be processed or dumped somewhere. Some of the waste produced is incredibly hazardous and may not be able to be processed so as not to cause environmental damage. The waste households produce is largely dumped in a landfill; a big pile of trash is no proper solution and can lead to environmental damage as well.

**Metaphor or Analogy**

The problem of disregarding overconsumption reminds me of raising a dog. Often, food and exercise are what are emphasized and discussed in raising dogs. But stimulation is equally important. While proper food and exercise address the dog’s physical needs, improper stimulation will lead to behavioral issues, like becoming aggressive or going to the bathroom in the house.

**THIRD LEVEL – LOGIC OF THE ARTICLE**

1. **The author’s purpose:** to argue for the importance of overconsumption as a factor in environmental and societal damage.
2. **The most important questions, problems, or issues in the article:** Is overconsumption important? What leads to overconsumption? How does consumption relate to available resources? What are some of the key differences between industrialized and developing nations? How does human desire factor into consumption? How is it perpetuated? Does consumption lead to happiness?
3. **The most significant information or data in the article:** The comparative levels of consumption and happiness between industrialized and developing nations, as well as that between current and historical levels of consumption.
4. **The most basic conclusions of the author:** Overconsumption is a problem that needs to be addressed. It leads to ecological and societal damage. While we are lead to believe that consumption leads to happiness, it does not. Things do not help to fill our deeper needs.
5. **The most basic concepts, theories, or ideas used by the author:** industrialized and developing nations; consumption; happiness; resources; business; sustainability.
6. **The most fundamental assumptions of the author:** We have a duty to the planet and each other. People should realize that their happiness does not matter on things but on each other. Our current patterns of behaviors will only lead to disaster.
7. **The most significant implications of the article:** We must make our treatment of the Earth and each other a priority.
8. **The author’s point of view:** The Earth and society are important and we can live in a better way.

**FOURTH LEVEL – INTELLECTUAL STANDARDS**

1. **Does the author say clearly what he means, or is the text vague, confused, or muddled in some way?** The author is clear on the points he wants to make. They are easily identifiable and discussed enough, for an editorial, to give us an idea of what he is talking about.
2. **Is the author accurate in what he claims?** I do not know. Although the author references a book by Durning, and such a reference gives the color of authority, without me digging into the data that is referenced, I cannot tell you if what is stated is accurate.
3. **Is the author sufficiently precise in providing details and specifics (when relevant)?** This article appears to be an editorial to me. As such, there are not many details that are needed, only those that may exemplify the points the author makes. What data that is referenced appears to be cherry picked.
4. **Is the author true to his purpose or does he wander, thereby introducing irrelevant material?** There doesn’t appear to be any irrelevant material in the article. The information he includes seems to directly relate to his thesis and its development.
5. **Does the author take us into the important complexities inherent in the subject, or is the writing superficial?** The writing is superficial. None of the points he raises are deeply explored. He states that the two other factors, population growth and technological development, receive all the attention, but the three factors together contribute to the environmental impacts he’s concerned about. He does not explore this triad in any meaningful way as a system of factors.
6. **Does the author consider other relevant points of view, or is the writing overly narrow in its perspective?** Considering this to be an editorial, his perspective is entirely concerned mainly with his thesis.
7. **Is the text internally consistent, or does it have unexplained contradictions?** At first, I thought there was an important inconsistency. The author says that our problem of overconsumption began with the push of business to produce and the marketing equation of consumption equals happiness. As the article progresses, the author moves from business and ends up discussing only consumers. So, the author shifted our attention from the true root of the problem to a false symptom. I would have thought that if the author’s contention was that business and media were the source of the problem, his focus should have remained there. That is, until I reread the final line. Just as his article shifts from the root to a symptom, he concludes with “we won’t get started until we stop trying to shift the responsibility elsewhere”.
8. **Is what the text says significant, or is the subject dealt with in a trivial manner?** The subject the author discusses is important and he is bringing it up as something that needs to be discussed and investigated.
9. **Does the author display fairness, or is the subject dealt with in an unfair manner?** I think so. The author presented his view without attacking opposing views. It would have been beneficial for the author to explore the topics in more detail, but that would have resulted in a much larger article than what he most likely intended.