Where Claxton Falls Short: The Illusions of Consumption Addiction

ABSTRACT: Guy Claxton suggests that post-Industrial Revolution westerners are consumption addicts and argues that we must embrace a more frugal and environmentally considerate lifestyle. However, I argue that Claxton's analysis and solution to consumption addiction does not penetrate far enough. Through Warren's ecofeminist reasoning and Heidegger's notion of technology, I show that the anthropocentric assumption inherent in western consumption engenders a destructive and oppressive worldview by creating the illusion that we are justified in subordinating non-human entities.

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In the essay "Involuntary Simplicity: Changing Dysfunctional Habits of Consumption," Guy Claxton suggests that post-Industrial Revolution westerners are consumption addicts, whose identity and sense of self-worth have come to depend on possession so that excessive consumption is "no longer experienced as a fortunate option, but a matter of absolute necessity."[1] Claxton claims that technological innovation and eco-political reorganization are not satisfactory solutions to the environmental effects of dysfunctional consumption habits, and instead calls for the liberation of millions of individuals from an unconsciously self-destructive worldview.[2] For Claxton, this liberation consists of first understanding the "nest of assumptions that link identity, security and consumption," and once this is done, an individual is likely to become more environmentally considerate and embrace a frugal lifestyle.[3]

In what follows, I will argue that Claxton's analysis and solution to consumption addiction does not penetrate far enough, as it merely focuses on correcting an addict's misappropriated need to consume. Instead, this paper takes issue with a misappropriated way of seeing the world: merely as a thing to be used and consumed by humans. I will follow Karen Warren's ecofeminist reasoning and Martin Heidegger's notion of technological thought to justify my position that the anthropocentric assumption inherent in consumption addiction is a phenomenon not to be simply curtailed, but to be eradicated all together, giving way to a less destructive and less oppressive worldview.[4]

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1. Guy Claxton. "Involuntary Simplicity: Changing Dysfunctional Habits of Consumption." Reprinted in *The Environmental Ethics & Policy Book*. Eds. Donald VanDeVeer and Christine Pierce, (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 2003): 282-648.
2. Claxton, 643.
3. Claxton, 647.
4. Karen J. Warren, "The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism." Reprinted in *The Environmental Ethics & Policy Book*. Eds. Donald VanDeVeer and Christine Pierce (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 2003): 282-293. Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology" in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1977)

Claxton argues that our rampant consumption is the result of a self-enforcing psychological trap, a situation where, within one way of seeing the world, it is impossible to conceive of or act upon certain beliefs.[5] Our situation is not unlike that of a drug addict who knows she should not be using the drug because it is ruining her body and may eventually kill her, but her immediate need is so pressing she continues use. When the addict is drugged, her short-term need to feel good is satiated and she is then able to consider her long-term interests, such as the benefits of quitting; however, when the decision to quit is enacted and she returns to a non-drugged state, her deprivation of what is needed becomes so painful that quitting seems unbearable. Thus, either the addict abandons the decision as unreasonable or feels it necessary to return to the state from which she initially made the decision "in order to make the decision seem valid again."[6] In either case, the addict is likely to continue drug use in order to return to a normal mindset, inhibiting her from fully enacting crucial moral decisions.

Claxton's main focus is that this psychological trap will likely inhibit an addict from acting on any concern she might have for how she is affecting the world around her. However, Claxton fails to show that how one sees oneself in relation to the world affects how one values and treats the world. Claxton's solution of frugal living may help to limit the destructive effects consumption has on the environment, but it does not ensure the elimination of the attitude many westerners have about consumption that engenders their addiction.

Heidegger refers to this pivotal attitude as being technological in nature. The primary feature of technological thinking is its insistent aggressiveness, an attribute that "depends upon the anthropocentric assumption that [humans are] the hupokeimenon, the fundamental subjects who determines the nature of Being."[7] Heidegger's concept of technology refers the Greek word techne, a phenomenon of revealing or manifesting. Heidegger posits a contrary meta-physical account, holding that "the ultimate responsibility for being lies within Being itself; Being is the ultimate 'cause' of beings."[8] However, in western thought, humans as makers have come to hold authority over causality, and misappropriate the idea of causality as instrumentality; "technology as a mode of uncovering does not let beings manifest themselves as what they are, but instead, involves a production (i.e. a domination) of beings by [humans]."[9] In effect, the environment is reduced to the status of mere raw material, stock on hand for immediate use by humans.[10]

A confounding danger of technological thinking is that it perpetuates itself. In western culture where Claxton sees consumption addiction at its most extreme, consumers pressure producers to meet the demands of their addiction. Driven by profit or the need to satiate one's own addiction, a producer will seek to harvest and allocate resources in the most efficient way possible. This frames the way the producer will see the world. For example, a profit-motivated mine operator will see a mountain merely as an untapped deposit of ore; the mountain is only seen for its instrumental economic use. In order to show how technological thinking works to justify consumption addiction on an individual level which in turn perpetuates further technological thinking in society, I will place the issue in the conlogical

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5. Claxton, 644.
6. Claxton, 643.
7. Harold Alderman, "Heidegger: Technology as Phenomenon," in *The Personalist*, Vol. 51 (Fall 1970): 535.
8. Alderman, 538.
9. Alderman, 539.
10. Catherine Frances Botha. "Heidegger, technology and ecology." in *South African Journal of Philosophy*. 22 No. 2. (2003): 160.

thinking works to justify consumption addiction on an individual level which in turn perpetuates further technological thinking in society, I will place the issue in the context of an ecofeminist standpoint.

Karen Warren's "The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism" sheds light on the oppressive nature of consumption addiction by calling us to examine our conceptual frameworks, the sets of "basic beliefs, values, attitudes and assumptions which shape and reflect how one views oneself and one's world."[11] When a conceptual framework explains, justifies and maintains relationships of domination and subordination, it is oppressive. Warren claims that there are three fundamental aspects of oppressive frameworks: (1) value-dualisms arise when one's perception is based on oppositional disjunctive and exclusive pairs (e.g. male vs. female); (2) value-hierarchical thinking places prestige or higher value on only one side of the value dualism (e.g. male over female); and (3) a logic of domination is a structure of reasoning that allows one to justify to oneself that entities in the non-prestigious class of the value-dualism may be subordinated due to possession or lack of a relevant trait.[12] If we examine the anthropocentric assumption inherent in technological thinking and consumption addiction, we find a value-dualism between humans and non-human entities; a value-hierarchy that places prestige on humans; and hence, a justification of the subordination of non-human entities, such as the environment.

Ecofeminism is distinct from other ethical systems insofar as it aims to show how a moral agent is in relationship to other entities, as these relationships act in defining who one is.[13] Ecofeminism does not separate moral agents from other entities through organization and ranking, because such separation lends itself to a logic of domination. Thus, when an individual sees herself as distinct from, and superior to, other entities, she can then justify subordinating them in service to her own ends. This is precisely how technological thinking's anthropocentric assumption gives way to the illusion that the addict is justified consuming or dominating the world around her. When an addict feels justified in her consumption, her way of seeing the world lends itself to others, as producers adopt a similar logic in order to meet the ends of the consumer.

Claxton is correct in claiming that the liberation of consumption addiction is an issue of identity. However, the fundamental issue of consumption is not that westerners have come to identify themselves by what and how much they possess, but that humans identify themselves as separate from and superior to the world around them, which then justifies humanity's domination and consumption of the world. Technologically thinking humans treat the existence of other beings as a phenomenon contingent upon a particular thing's use to humanity. Instead, Marilyn Frye's loving perception makes the correct assumption: "the object of the seeing is another being whose existence and character are logically independent of the seer and who may be practically or empirically independent in any particular respect at any particular time."[14] This way of seeing does not inhibit other (non-humanist) modes of manifesting; rather it respects and treats beings as beings, not as things to merely be used.

David Rooney asserts that "culture can be defined as a shared pattern of beliefs that leads to relatively stable patterns of behaviors and attitudes in groups that are held together by taken for granted assumptions about such things as value, necessity and power."[15] In western culture, where consumption addiction reigns, it is urgent that we recognize the "taken for granted assumptions" that characterize our anthropocentric logic of domination. The oppressiveness of a consumption addict's logic of domination is amplified due to its nature as a social or cultural process. A consumption addict's need to service her own ends enables her to become an über-technological thinker as she begins to calculate and possibly regard other human beings merely as instrumental entities that can be used at will in order to efficiently aid her addiction (i.e. the need to feel normal). Heidegger feared that this calculative way of seeing would eventually replace all modes of thinking: "philosophic thought would be replaced with utilitarian cognition; artistic creativity would atrophy as a result of endless innovative production, and political action would be obviated by social engineering."[18] The behaviors and interests that many of us identify as uniquely human may expand and further give way to the behavior and interests that characterize technology, which is a process that is concerned with efficiency, not oppression. Thus, Heidegger's concern with technology is ultimately a concern about human dignity.[19]

Claxton's call for the liberation of an unknowingly self-destructive worldview opens the door for discussion of what truly engenders consumption addiction. However, he fails to reveal western thought's most essential assumption which lays at the heart of consumption. Through paralleling Warren's logic of domination with Heidegger's conception of technological thinking, I have shown that the traditionally western anthropocentric assumption not only engenders consumption addiction but also justifies and maintains it. Ridding ourselves of consumption addiction necessitates ridding ourselves of the arrogant assumptions of technological thought and the logic of domination that characterizes an addict's domination of the world. ∎

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11. Warren, 283.
12. Warren, 283.
13. Warren, 290.
14. Marilyn Frye, "In and Out of Harm's Way: Arrogance and Love" in *The Politics of Reality: essays in feminist philosophy* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1983): 77.

15. David Rooney, "Knowledge, economy, technology and society: The politics of discourse." *Telematics and Informatics*. Vol 22. 2005: 408.
16. Botha, 163.
17. Botha, 160.