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Overproduction vs. Overconsumption: Which to Focus On

Overproduction: Howard Lyman, “Mad Cowboy”

Lyman’s goal in this article is to prove that it is necessary for developed countries to re-adopt organic farming practices and to stop consuming meat. He explains that farming techniques that are now called “conventional” have the aim of outsmarting nature and working against it instead of with it, and that these farming techniques are damaging to the surroundings, the farmer, and the consumer. They push the Earth’s production past its limit, and this has dire consequences. He writes definitively, “Our challenge had been to defeat Nature. And we found that we could do it. But only by destroying the land, and with it, ourselves” (Lyman 5). He is explaining that conventional farming techniques do increase yield but cause other damage and that increased yield is not worth it. He explains the damage done to the soil, appealing to the senses to describe how much it has changed. He says, “I thought about how rich the soil had looked when I was a kid. Now it crumbled in my hands” (Lyman 5). He has noticed a marked difference in soil quality, and uses a morose tone to describe it by saying it crumbles in his hands.

At the turning point of his narrative, he realizes the extent of the damage done to his body when he develops spinal cancer (Lyman 5). Even after his tumor was removed, his health was still less than ideal. He explains that he had many of the health problems many Americans

experience. “My own health was hardly exemplary; I weighed 350 pounds, my cholesterol topped 300, my blood pressure was off the charts, and I was getting nosebleeds” (Lyman 5). The conclusion he came to is that he ought to stop eating meat, and when he did, his health problems disappeared (Lyman 6). This is one way Lyman attempts to prove that the United States as a whole should stop eating meat and using harmful chemicals in excessively efficient, unsustainable farming.

Lyman appeals to the larger scheme of things as well as personal health to prove that eating meat is damaging to the environment. He lists off a number of statistical facts that show the cost of producing meat and the damage it does to the Earth, including the fact that 50% of the nation’s water usage is for meat production and that it takes sixteen pounds of grain to produce one pound of beef (Lyman 6). He also informs the reader that the government’s regulations on which chemicals are not acceptable to use are easy to work around. He says, “I never met a rancher who suffered in any way from breaking any regulation meant to protect the safety of our meat. The whole procedure is, in short, a charade” (Lyman 4). This means that even though a critic may say that dangerous chemicals are already banned and known to be dangerous, Lyman responds by saying that banned chemicals still end up in our meat and vegetables because the price growers pay by not using the chemicals is steeper than the price of getting caught violating the law (Lyman 4). Thus, overproduced food is more harmful to the health of every living thing than consumers may realize, and we would benefit from changing our farming practices.

Lyman puts most of the blame for the environmental crisis on the producers of food, not the consumers.

Overconsumption: Gambrel & Cafaro, “The Virtue of Simplicity”

Gambrel and Cafaro aim in their article to assert that people in developed countries must stop consuming things in excess, including food, which is to practice what they call simplicity. This is necessary in order to better the wellbeing of humans and other living things on the planet. The article states, “...achieving a good human life is furthered by material simplicity, that because of this simplicity is indeed a virtue, and that particularly in our time we neglect this virtue at our peril” (Gambrel and Cafaro 1). They define simplicity as being “...a conscientious and restrained attitude toward material goods” (Gambrel and Cafaro 3). They give six reasons why simplicity can be beneficial (Gambrel and Cafaro 11):

1. Basic individual flourishing
2. Basic societal flourishing
3. Individual freedom/autonomy
4. The acquisition of knowledge
5. Living meaningfully
6. The flourishing of nonhuman beings

The points that are most relevant to this paper are numbers 1 and 6. The authors use multiple statistics on American health decline due to overconsumption of food to back up their first point, including the fact that many of our top causes of death are obesity-related and that the recent depression epidemic may have to do with the poor nutrition content of our food (Gambrel and Cafaro 11). They also mention that we spend too much money and have to work longer hours to make up for debts we’ve incurred by doing so. They inform the reader, “Financial over-commitments are another leading cause of unhappiness in modern America” (Gambrel and Cafaro 11). Their last point on interspecies suffering due to overconsumption is also strongly

supported with statistics, showing that the Earth cannot handle the way developed countries are consuming. The authors declare that “Due primarily to overpopulation and overconsumption, humans are extinguishing animal and plant species a thousand times faster than natural background extinction rates” (Gambrel and Cafaro 12). They also mention that we are on track to lose a third of the species on Earth in 50 years at the current rate of extinction (Gambrel and Cafaro 12). Furthermore, they stress that improved technologies and setting aside land is not enough; there is no sustainable or healthy way to produce as much as we are currently consuming (Gambrel and Cafaro 12-13). The only true solution is to consume less as a society and get used to having only what we need.

Gambrel and Cafaro see materialism at the consumer level as the root of the environmental crisis.

Comparison of the Two

Of these two focuses for the roots of the environmental crisis, I argue that although they are both correct and useful, Gambrel and Cafaro’s is much more comprehensive and better supported.

Lyman’s article is weaker and less comprehensive because it has a much smaller focus on farming specifically, not on all production in the United States. He uses mostly anecdotal evidence to back up his argument, which can only be applied to him or speculated about. However, he also uses some statistical evidence, which can be generalized to a greater population and is therefore stronger evidence. One of his pieces of anecdotal evidence is what the damaging chemicals did to his land. He notes that “...the trees were starting to die, and that in spite of the herbicides, the weed problem seemed to be getting worse” (Lyman 5). Clearly,

these herbicides were wreaking havoc on the environment by killing things it was not supposed to kill. He also notices that animals nearby were also dying, and every living thing on his farm was dead. “The farm was no longer a living, breathing thing; it was an increasingly precarious chemical equation” (Lyman 5). This shows that conventional farming laid waste to *his* farm. However, this evidence is only anecdotal and does not say anything about what conventional farming has done to other farms across the nation. Also, it mostly serves to emotionally appeal to the reader and does not contain solid reasons why one should eat organic.

Lyman also uses anecdotal claims about his personal experience with his feedlot operation. He shows that the health of the cows and the healthfulness of their meat declined dramatically when he switched from a grazing operation to a feedlot operation. He recounts that his cattle got sick at an alarming rate from being forced close to one another, saying, “Unfortunately, with so many animals from different origins concentrated close together, disease became my worst enemy” (Lyman 3). This required him to extensively use antibiotics and insecticides to keep most of the cows alive, which likely affected the meat as the insecticides were absorbed into the cow’s body through the skin (Lyman 4). This proves that conventional livestock practices are damaging, but it does not prove that this will be solved if we stop eating meat. It will be solved if we stop feedlot operations, which are a form of overproduction. Lyman also mentions that he changed the cows’ diet from grass to grain, which damaged the cows’ digestive systems and made their meat very fatty. He explains, “Gradually I increased the percentage of grain until they were 90% grain fed. This made their meat extremely fatty and gave it the nice white flecks you see in the better cuts of beef in your grocery stores” (Lyman 3). Fatty meat is not the healthiest meat to eat because animal fat is especially hard on our arteries, which is why Lyman struggled with his weight, cholesterol, and blood pressure before becoming

a vegetarian. It is not because meat is not healthy to eat; conversely, it is because Americans are eating low-quality feedlot meat and overconsuming it because it is cheap.

Lyman's stronger evidence is statistical and based on widespread data, so it is specific and can be generalized to the entire population. He asserts, "...we were losing topsoil at a rate of one inch every sixteen years, and much of that loss of topsoil was related to cattle grazing and to the chemically intensive methods that factory farmers were using..." (Lyman 6) This is a fairly strong piece of evidence against conventional farming because it shows that conventional farming affects more than just Lyman's farm; it affects the entire nation. However, it stops there and Lyman does not explain further why we should care about our topsoil, nor why this trend of overproduction continues despite clear consequences.

In contrast, all of Gambrel and Cafaro's evidence is statistical and research-based. Every one of the six benefits of simplicity listed in their article has plenty of solid, objective data to back it up, as mentioned earlier in the article. Also, the topic of their article has a broader implication than does Lyman's. In fact, their claim for the virtue of simplicity is at the root of and the explanation for Lyman's claim for eating organic and vegetarian. Lyman's reasoning for eating this way fits within points 1 and 6 of Gambrel and Cafaro's six benefits of simplicity; benefitting individual human health and nonhuman health. Gambrel and Cafaro do touch on the same sentiment that Lyman does in discussing practical ways to live out simplicity, saying "...consuming less is not enough. We also need to consume *differently*. We may buy and prepare more healthy foods for ourselves; buy organic foods and local foods and eat less meat, all of which decrease environmental harms..." (Gambrel and Cafaro 4) This is exactly the entire aim of Lyman's paper, but this is only an example for a way to execute the virtue of simplicity in Gambrel and Cafaro's paper.

Therefore, materialism is the real underlying solution to the problem of environmental destruction. The marginalization of organic farming methods leading to overproduction of meat and grain and other produce is merely an effect of materialism, which leads people to try to produce more to earn more money to get nicer things. The desire to earn more money is what drives all of industry and technological advancement, and it is what drove Lyman to adopt the new age ideas of the Green Revolution. Just as Gambrel and Cafaro would predict, Lyman was not made happier by all the money he earned. He laments on his hospital bed before his emergency surgery, thinking to himself, “Having 10,000 acres and 7,000 head of cattle didn’t count. Having 30 trucks and 20 tractors and seven combines didn’t count. Having a \$5 million-a-year agribusiness didn’t count. My family counted, and the land counted” (Lyman 5). Lyman’s discovery is essentially that of the virtue of simplicity, which is really at the root of his argument. However, he does not discuss it further as it pertains to all areas of life, not just food and farming, as Gambrel and Cafaro do.

Anticipating Lyman’s Rebuttal

To this, Lyman might reply that overconsumption does not drive overproduction, but the other way around: overproduction drives overconsumption. When farmers produce more food, there is more food available on the market and the prices drop. Then, there is an abundance of cheap and easy-to-produce food, which encourages people to overconsume because there is an abundance and they can afford to overconsume. In this case, it would be true that massive increases in supply of a certain good would contribute to the endlessly desiring and materialistic culture in developed countries. However, all innovations stem from a need, and the innovations of the Green Revolution would not have arisen had there not been a demand for more and cheaper food.

Works Cited

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Lyman, Howard F., and Glen Merzer. *Mad Cowboy: Plain Truth from the Cattle Rancher Who Won't Eat Meat*. Simon & Schuster, 1998.