The Aesthetics of Garbage
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For many years a large proportion of the public thought of garbage as an environmental problem in its own right. There was worry that landfills were going to run out of room or constituted a threat to nearby waterways and communities. This was more thought than most of us had given to garbage. With the wave of enthusiasm for recycling, though, individuals and communities have started to think of waste as a resource: why make soda and beer cans out of bauxite, when we can make them out of old soda and beer cans? In just the last few years a new way of recycling has appeared (although it clearly has roots in some very old practices): upcycling. Rather than seeing trash as a source of raw materials [metal, glass, plastic, paper, etc.], upcyclers see garbage as a source of actual parts to be assembled into new products. The original products are often still discernable in the new ones, raising some interesting philosophical problems.

In what follows I begin by looking at consumption and the role it plays in how we think about environmental issues. I argue that we would do well to consider consumption as equally, if not more, important than either human population or our level of technical skill.

I then turn to some questions having to do with human subjectivity and its relationship to desire and consumption. I argue (albeit too briefly) that subjectivity can take different forms and that our desires for a certain kind of consumption play a role in shaping the sorts of subjects that we are. If this is true, then reducing consumption will be far from straightforward.

I next turn to upcycling to see whether it can play a positive role in helping to reduce consumption. While it initially appears promising, I argue that it actually tends to reinforce the culture and subjectivity of consumption and thus ought to be regarded with some skepticism.

I conclude with some final reflections on the up- and downsides of upcycling.

Consumption
Consumption and consumerism (the cultural or lifestyle appropriation of consumption as a core value) play an important role in our economy and culture. They also constitute one of the key issues that must be addressed if we are to reduce the human impact on the nonhuman environment in any meaningful way.¹ This seems clear, although the case could be made that other aspects of human culture could be modified to equal or greater effect. One way to think about this problem comes from the field of consumption studies. Many researchers in this field depend upon a model that goes by the acronym IPAT: Impact = Population x Affluence x Technology.²

What the IPAT model suggests is that there are three variables that play a role in human impact on the world. The first of these is population. As with any other organism, each human being requires a certain amount of resources in order to survive or, if possible, flourish. If each individual requires some quantity of resources (we do not yet need to specify how many or what they are), then the more individuals there are, the greater the quantity of resources required. All other things being equal, two people require twice as much oxygen, food, water, and clothing as one does.

The second variable in the equation is affluence. What affluence seeks to measure is material standard of living (which may well not be equivalent to quality of life). The more materially affluent an individual becomes, all other things being equal, the more of an impact s/he will make. While people tend not to eat that much more as they get wealthier, what they eat changes: animal-based foods often replace plant-based one, requiring more land, water, and other inputs to produce them. The world’s poorest may have, if they are lucky, one set of clothes; most of us have many more than that. Thus one person can have a substantially greater impact all by herself just by becoming more affluent. When whole societies become wealthier, their impact increases as well, ceteris paribus.

¹ For purposes of this paper I take it as a given that there is a nonhuman environment and that human activities, especially since the beginning of the industrial revolution, have substantially impacted that environment for the worse.
² Michael Maniates has been quite critical of this view. See his "Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?" in Confronting Consumption, Thomas Princen, Michael Maniates, and Ken Conca, eds. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002, 43–66.
Technology, the third variable, matters because it is what makes any given level of affluence more or less impactful and more or less widespread. More efficient technologies achieve the same goals with lesser impacts. Conversely, more efficient technologies, because they bring down costs, tend to make any given level of consumption more widely available. As a result, some economists, beginning with William Stanley Jevons in the 19th century, have argued that increases in efficiency lead to an increase in resource consumption. This effect, now known as the Jevons paradox, holds that the lowered costs associated with increased efficiency will often result in more people using more of the relevant resource.\(^3\) This paradox suggests an important, and complicated, link between technology and affluence, suggesting that they may not be fully independent variables.

Much more could be said about the IPAT model. I will limit myself to only two observations, the first formal, the second political. Formally, it is worth noting that the model stipulates that the environmental impact of human activities can be understood, if the model is right, through a multi-variable equation. If the goal is to reduce impact, a reduction in any of the three variables ought to be as good as a reduction in either of the other two. For example, a small human population living an affluent life with inefficient technologies may well have a comparable impact to a large human population living a simple life with efficient technologies. Clearly a small population living a simple life with efficient technologies will be the least impactful while a large population living an affluent life with inefficient technologies will be the most impactful.\(^4\)

This formal observation leads immediately to the political one. Those who have sought to reduce the human environmental impact have often found it politically expedient to suggest one of two strategies. The first strategy suggests that other people should undertake steps to address human impacts. The widespread focus on the size of the human population

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\(^3\) For a straightforward, albeit popular, introduction to the paradox see David Owens, “The Efficiency Dilemma: If Our Machinery Uses Less Energy, will we just use them more?” in The New Yorker 20 December 2010: 78ff.

\(^4\) I recognize that all of these terms—large, small, affluent, simple, efficient, and inefficient—are woefully underdeveloped. Partly this is because they are all relative terms and can’t be made clear in any substantive way.
regardless of the level of affluence of that population follows this strategy. When, for example, Holmes Rolston III argued that additional children in the less developed world were a tragedy, he ignored the fact that it is children in the developed world—our children—that have the far greater environmental impact. It is much easier politically to say that “those people” should have fewer children than to address the impact of our lives. The second strategy focuses not on population, but on technology. Our environmental impact, on this view, is to be reduced primarily, if not exclusively, through more efficient technologies: mass transit and bicycles, energy efficient appliances, renewable energy, recycling, carbon sequestration technologies, etc.

To focus on either population or technology is to make environmental impact reduction someone else’s problem. In the first case, it is the world’s poor and undereducated, who tend to have the most children, who are the problem. In the second case, it is the world’s scientists and engineers, who we might note tend to be well-off and well educated, who are to be entrusted with the solution. Of course, these two approaches are easily combined into a double strategy that conveniently sees the third world’s poor as the problem and the first world’s scientists as the solution. Much more could be said about this, but that is not my focus. Rather, I wish us to see that either strategy conveniently leaves out the second leg of the IPAT triad and relieves those of us who live well off lives of any responsibility for reducing environmental impact.

What happens if we focus on affluence and thus consumption instead of population or technology? It’s just as easy to say that we simply (simply!) need to reduce our consumption, as it is to say that people should have fewer children, or that scientists should (will?) come up with solutions to our problems. Yet reducing consumption is not so straightforward. The drivers of consumption are many and complex. Obviously a certain level of consumption is necessary to sustain an organism. We might term this biologically necessary consumption. What this level will be is somewhat variable, and is, to a certain degree, dependent upon external factors: climate, availability of resources, etc. However, other than the poorest of the
poor, most of us consume more than this minimal level (and the world’s poor would like to consume more than they do). We might divide this additional consumption into two categories: socially (or culturally) necessary consumption and voluntary consumption. Just as biologically necessary consumption will vary depending upon where one lives (people inhabiting arctic regions require far more clothing, shelter, and calories than those living in the tropics), one’s socially necessary consumption will vary depending on one’s society. People living in industrially developed contemporary societies are likely to perceive consumer goods such as washing machines, indoor plumbing, water heaters, cars, and cell phones, and the like not as luxury items but as necessities. Of course, we might say, one could imagine living without such things. There are indeed many folks living in our society who don’t have one or more of these items. Yet, with the exception of people living in just a few urban areas, those who don’t have a washing machine or a car are almost all poor. That is, not to have items such as those on my list is to be marked as a member of a lower social class. Which is just to say that one of the ways one marks oneself as a member of the middle (or upper) class is by having a (newer, nicer) car, a washing machine in one’s home, and a (nicer, newer) cell phone. Perhaps, though, we might wish to add a few additional items to our list of social necessities for a middle class life: a dishwasher, an air conditioner, a computer (or two or three), a television (or two or three), a second (or third, or fourth) car, etc. We can thus begin to see that the minimal level of consumption in a society such as ours is in fact quite a bit higher than mere biologically necessary consumption or even that in a subsistence culture. One’s class status is secured in part through one’s level of material consumption, which means that reductions in consumption would require a recalibration of a number of societal norms.

The point here is that most of our consumption is not for the satisfaction of biological needs. Rather, most of what we consume either satisfies social needs (the sorts of things one has to have as a member of a particular society or a particular group or class within that society). In order to think through how to reduce consumption, we need to consider not only
the social character of desire, but the way in which that desire may well shape who and what we are.

The Logic of Desire

Of course, the recalibration of societal norms is easy in theory, but strikingly difficult in practice. I make no suggestions as to how to bring about such changes. Rather, I will look at one actual, if small, change to see whether it is actually effective. But first, let me elaborate on norms.

We might consider societal norms to have two sides to them. We can call these, for lack of better terms, their sociological and psychological sides. By sociological I mean only the way in which norms circulate and function to demarcate social groups. As discussed above, such norms may include certain expected levels of material consumption, although they often regulate behavior in other ways. What I mean by the psychological side of norms is the way in which we as subjects internalize those norms and how they come to shape our behaviors. Norms so considered may well be regarded as something foreign but they often function as constitutive of who one is. Some norms, when integrated into oneself, become part of one’s subjectivity, such that one desires what the norm requires. For example, while there may well be a natural desire for food, there couldn’t be a natural desire for particular consumer products. While some consumer products, such as washing machines, make an onerous, if socially mandated, task easier and thus appear to be natural desires, even in cases such as this it isn’t at all clear. The wearing of clothes is surely a cultural phenomenon and the need for those clothes to be cleaned with any sort of regularity is certainly even more cultural. Yet one can imagine, nevertheless, the washing machine having satisfied a desire that pre-existed the introduction of the product. With other consumer products, e.g., cell phones, tablet computers, or in the egg eggbeaters, it seems far more likely that the product arrived in need of having a demand created for it. Many of us now desire both cell phones and tablets, perhaps couldn’t even imagine living without them. In order for us to desire them, we have to
have, at minimum, internalized the socially constructed desires for such products. However, there is a stronger version of this claim: these social desires, as they become psychological desires, actually form our subjectivity. That is, who we are as subjects living in a particular society is a product of that society.

We can call the role that desire plays in shaping who we are the logic of desire. Unlike sexual desires, which most of us would agree we do not choose (although even sexual desire would seem to have a cultural aspect to it, e.g., a shoe fetish), it seems as if consumer desires are, at least partially, under our control. Consumer choice is certainly a given of neoclassical microeconomic theory, although the grand tradition of philosophical tradition of speculation on weakness of the will might lead us to believe that it is more regulative than actual. It is certainly a given of contemporary corporate culture that consumer desires are at least open to manipulation and are even capable of being created. The problem for environmentalism, which seeks to reduce our overall impact, is the reduction, transformation, or even elimination of desires. Arne Naess once wrote “If a camera is said to be much better than yours, it may nevertheless be much worse for you. It may not be sensible to buy it, and the ecosopher will then not feel any regret at not possessing it.” What Naess overlooks here are the ways in which our desires operate independently of ourselves and that even if we do not wish to have the desires that we do have (a problem discussed at great length in the wake of Harry Frankfurt’s work), we nevertheless are pained at not fulfilling them.

All of this having been said, there do seem to be cases where people have, either individually or communally, chosen to change their own consumer desires. In the remainder of

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the paper I will investigate a particular example of this phenomenon and discuss how these changes relate to the logic of desire.

Upcycling

While all of us are familiar with recycling, upcycling, a special sort of recycling, is a less familiar term. We might divide recycled products into three types: those which appear as if they were made from virgin materials thus hiding the fact that they are made from recycled materials, e.g., new aluminum cans made from recycled aluminum; those which show that they are made from recycled materials, but give no clue as to what those materials once were, e.g., recycled glass, whose greenish tinge gives away [or announces] that it’s recycled, but not exactly from what it was recycled; and those which conspicuously, even flamboyantly, display not just that they are recycled, but are made up of former consumer products or parts thereof without having broken those products down into their component materials. It is these latter products that I am interested in. Unlike other forms of recycling, in which materials are, at best, turned into something of equal value as the original product in which they were used, these upcycled products take trash and turn it into products that may well be worth more than the original products were. For example, Alchemy Goods makes belts, wallets, messenger bags, etc. out of discarded bicycle inner tubes and old seat belts. Hipcycle sells wineracks made from old bulldozer parts, lamps made from traffic light lenses, as well as many products made from bottles, vinyl LPs, and circuit boards.

All of these products not only are made using waste, they conspicuously display this waste. This conspicuousness is important; these products mark themselves and their owner as environmentally hip. That is, unlike the first two types of products made from recycled materials, upcycled products aestheticize the very fact that they are made from garbage.

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\(^a\) Alchemygoods.com
\(^b\) hipcycle.com
It would seem that upcycled products are, all things being equal, environmentally virtuous. They require far less extraction of virgin materials, keep stuff that would otherwise end up in landfills from doing so, and, unlike more traditional recycled products, don’t require the energy of transforming the raw waste into new materials for new products. In addition, they make an environmentalist statement, helping to make environmentalism cool. Finally, many upcycled products are rather “crafty,” meaning they were made by skilled [or at least creative] people in a non-industrial setting, so perhaps some of them help to create interesting and meaningful work. It thus seems that upcycling has no downside. Some of these virtues, however, may not be as clear as they at first appear. While it’s true that an upcycled product keeps its materials out of a landfill, in many cases this is a mere delay. The inner tubes making up an Alchemy Goods bag will almost certainly end up in a landfill: as a bag.10 A hurricane lantern made of steel cans will almost certainly be recycled as cans. Still, getting more useful life out of materials does seem to be a good thing, just as reducing the energy and material costs of production seem to be environmentally virtuous. My question is whether these products, despite these apparent virtues, nevertheless do more environmental harm than good.

What role do upcycled goods play in the logic of desire? Do they do anything to change our consumer subjectivity or do they, even as they appear as signs of environmentalism, serve to reinscribe the desire that form us as consumers? Upcycled products are, at the end of the day, products. They are made to be consumed and, like most other products, they are marketed. How does this marketing work? Hipcycle says that their “mission is to offer upcycled alternatives to traditional home decor, jewelry and fashion as a way to reduce global waste. We aim to educate consumers on the benefits of upcycling, so when given the choice, they purchase an upcycled product over selecting a new one.” This all sounds good. Even better, Hipcycle encourages visitors to their site to “sign up to be a Hipcycle insider! Join a community of upcyclers, receive upcycling news, and be the first to know about sales and

10 My thanks to Josh Finnell for making this point at an earlier presentation of this material.
special discounts. Woohoo!” Yet, I’m not so sure. What sort of community is this? In describing their housewares selection, Hipcycle writes, “when you can get products that are this beautiful, functional, and eco-friendly, why go anywhere else? Go on ahead [sic] and browse below for home goods [you know you want to].”¹ I don’t wish to put too much weight on the ad copy from a small, well-intentioned, website whose products look to be primarily crafted by small artisans. However, the phrase “you know you want to” suggests that part of the idea is to create buzz for a lifestyle that can present itself as environmentally conscious while simultaneously continuing to engage in the sort of high consumption practices that are so environmentally destructive. This point becomes clear when we look further into some of the products available here. [I wish to be clear that Hipcycle is not the only source of upcycled products. I take them simply as illustrative.] Hipcycle sells drinking glasses made from wine bottles. They come in sets of four, in two different sizes and five different colors. They clearly are made from wine bottles and would be easily recognized as such.² The wine bottles they come from, however, are anonymous. That is, there is no indication of which wine the bottles held in their first life. For more money [about one-and-a-half times as much], one can buy glasses that are identifiable by the brand of liquor which the bottles had once contained.³ That is, just as one must pay more for clothing that conspicuously advertises its manufacturer, if one wants the caché of a particular high-end alcohol, that costs more. This fact points to something important about upcycling: this is a phenomenon confined almost entirely to middle and upper-middle class hipsters. One might contrast these glasses with an older phenomenon: the use of Mason jars as drinking glasses. One can still find these jars used in this way in many rural homes or in honky-tonk bars, yet they connote a very different sort of style. All of which is to say that upcycling is about class. Pint-sized Mason jars cost $1.25 apiece. Branded upcycled glasses from Hipcycle are $65 for four or thirteen times

¹ hipcycle.com/housewares/
more expensive than Mason jars. The Hipcycle and other upcycling websites and boutiques describe themselves as being about environmentalism, their products are marketed almost exclusively to the class of consumers who already consume the most and are quite likely to be purchasing these products not instead of some other ones, but as yet another set of glasses to add to what may already be a large collection of drinkware. It appears as if the Hipcycle community is made up of like-minded shoppers. (To be fair, there is an alternative way to upcycle, which involves sourcing used materials oneself and making new things out of them. This practice of upcycling might lead to some sort of community, just as any other shared activity [even shopping?] can.)

The conspicuousness of the upcycled materials in products such as those described constitutes as well a form of advertising for the makers of the original products. While the makers of the original products may have nothing to do with the upcycling process, they certainly benefit from the additional advertising their branded packaging produces as it goes on to another life. That is to say, the manufactured caché that makes some upcycled products so desirable continues to redound to the manufacturers of that caché. Some corporations have taken notice of this phenomenon and have praised it. Just as beer and soda producers recognized in the 1970s and 80s that recycling could be passed off as environmentally virtuous so that they would no longer need to deal with returnable and refillable bottles, corporations are starting to recognize that upcycling is even better than plain old recycling, since it keeps their name in people’s field of vision even when people aren’t consuming their product, thus fostering, they hope, further demand down the road. Upcycled products, at least those that carry a brand name upon them, thus continue to function as more advertising, which is, of course, intended, to create demand, thus furthering the cycles of consumption.

Depending upon the brand for which one opts, the glasses may be only slightly less expensive than the original bottle with its liquor inside of it. Coca-Cola has done so here: http://www.coca-colacompany.com/stories/trash-to-treasure-5-upcycled-boutiques. Ironically, Coca-Cola bottles are turned by Hipcycle into juice glasses.
Final Reflections

In closing let me return to the distinction between biologically necessary, socially necessary and voluntary consumption I addressed above. I have argued that upcycled product, because of what they are and how they are marketed, often act to reinforce the form of subjectivity associated with a high level of socially necessary consumption. Indeed, like many “ordinary” consumer products, they create their own desires, although in this case using their supposed environmental virtues in order to do so. While it seems clear that in cases where there is an actual need (although figuring out just when such cases occur is far from straightforward), it may well be that an upcycled product is the best way to satisfy that need. Of course, figuring out the environmental costs of reusing materials as compared to producing new ones is not simple and it may well be that it is better, at least in some cases, to use virgin materials.

On the other hand, upcycled products can (but don’t necessarily) make present some of the environmental costs of “normal” products. If they manage to keep in our view the environmental costs that are so often hidden from us, they may well play an important heuristic role as part of broader efforts to reduce consumption.