

# Authenticity and Alienation: A critique of Consumerism

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## ABSTRACT

A quick appraisal of one's surroundings ought to provide ample evidence of the drastic transformation to which the life-world's content has been subjected. Following the industrial revolution, the global phenomenal field has been overrun by manufactured objects. The length of a room can hardly be paced without bumping into some or other object that requires for its functioning the observance and execution of some or other ceremony. Those who comply are rewarded with the satisfaction of a *functional* object; those who do not, on the other hand, cannot even switch the TV on. Switching on the TV, however, is not the problem. The problem is that the life-world, riddled with manufactured objects, is therefore also rife with the requirements of ceremony – ceremonies which, for the greater part, neither include nor require our interaction with others. The result is a life-world whose navigation demands that greater attention be given to objects than to people.

In short, I argue that consumerism does little to advance our standards of living. The assumption, however, is that a higher standard of living, that is, a greater approximation of the truly good life, is not achieved by a mop that cleans itself, a fridge that reminds one to buy milk or a car with such an ornately decorated interior that it could easily have been the chambers of queen Elizabeth. The assumption, in the first place, is that the truly good life is one worth sharing. The assumption is that there is no point in sharing one's ideas with someone who already shares one's ideas to the letter. At the heart of it all is my belief that we are meant to be complementary beings, not mere duplicates, and that relation, true relation, depends on difference and contrast. The hypothesis, then, is that consumerism denies us precisely that.

Central to this study, which is in essence a cultural critique, is the idea that a shared environment promotes shared perspectives and interpretations. The fewer ungoverned elements there are in a specific milieu, the greater the area of interpretive overlap among the members of a community is bound to be.

In the first part of the study, article 1, I argue in favour of personal differentiation. Moreover, in it, I also tie differentiation to the possibility of leading an authentic life and engaging in meaningful relationships with others. In the second part, article 2, it is reasoned that consumerism, by virtue of confining humanity to a single quarry, dispenses with precisely such differentia as would ordinarily have enabled differentiation among people. And since both authenticity of being and meaningful relationships depend on differentiation, I then proceed to suggest that consumerism, through its distribution of a single class of objects and, therefore, its promotion of a single means of value appraisal, facilitates the alienation of people one from the other and even from themselves.

## PREFACE

I am not one for ceremony. However, I would like to give credit where it is due. In no particular order, then, I would like to thank the following people:

Posthumously, my dad, Johan, for his exemplary commitment to keeping an open mind and teaching me the same. Wish you were here...

My mom, Breggie. Considering the gravity of her part, I won't even try to list her various contributions. To her I dedicate this excerpt from Ann Taylor's poem "My Mother" (1804):

Who ran to help me when I fell,  
And would some pretty story tell,  
Or kiss the place to make it well?

My Mother.

My girlfriend and confidante, Elaigne, for her support, forbearance and love.

My professor, supervisor and mentor, Professor Heyns, for his considerable insight, Platonic manner of prompting and, also, his patience.

My editor, Tim Steward, for ironing out against all temporal odds the most miniscule of creases.

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# INTRODUCTION: ORIENTATION TO THE RESEARCH

## 1 PREAMBLE

*Embodiment brings to our perceptual experience a priori structure whereby it presents itself to us in consciousness as experience of a world of things in space and time whose nature is independent of us. It is our bodily intentionality which brings the possibility of meaning into our experience by ensuring that its content, the things presented in experience, are surrounded with references to the past and future, to other places and other things, to human possibilities and situations. (Baldwin, 2004:10)*

However great the part played by capitalism in the systematic alienation of people from one another, the greater culprit, that is, the very vehicle of said alienation, is, it stands to reason, far more concrete. In a manner akin to colonialism, the systematic dissemination of manufactured objects casts a wide ideological net over the communities of the world and thereby imposes common pursuits. These common pursuits, in light of thematizing the life-world's<sup>1</sup> concrete stimuli, promote the emergence of specific sets of interactive protocols, most notably rituals of exchange. With our interactive relations thus reduced, it stands to reason that the scope of our interpretive horizons might follow and limit our thinking to the promptings of manufactured objects. Such enjoiners, it is my belief, ushers in an age of alienation. Where previously a state of contextual heterogeneity had enabled the authentic expression of the self, the newly homogenized life-world – courtesy of an object-mongering ethos – has since the industrial revolution greatly restricted the algorithms of self-definition available to individuals. In short, not only are our experiential contexts plagued by an object-driven one-dimensionality, but the horizons of interpretation and expression, the allowed scope of intentionality, are greatly circumscribed and hemmed in by rituals of exchange.

Uncovering individuals – in essence, acquainting ourselves with their indissolubility – proceeds in accordance with external cues.<sup>2</sup> Only through the bespoke patterns and content of individual signification do we have access to the intentionality and choices expressive of authenticity. We adopt such external cueing as a means of self-expression and through a mutual understanding of its function allow others access to our authentic selves. It is, in other words, through the objective life-world and our deliberate arrangement thereof that we manifest our intentions, our

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<sup>1</sup> I glean my understanding of the terms life-world and embodiment from Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. In accordance therewith, life-world refers to the fabric of our existence, the spatio-temporal context, and embodiment to our physical integration within the said context.

<sup>2</sup> External cues may include anything from objects to gestures and serve the purpose of signification within the life-world.

beings. Furthermore, beyond merely expressing ourselves through unique configurations of the life-world, we can intend and formulate such expression only in such terms as allowed by the external context.

Now if it is the case that intentionality mediates between the life-world and the individual, that is, ties the Dionysian aspect of a person's potential being to a form-giving context, then it stands to reason that the allowed scope of expression, precisely because of the reflexive relationship between individuals and their environment, will suffer great circumscription in response to a drastically homogenized life-world. In other words, from the systematic exclusion of certain ranges of phenomena – as is the case with consumerism – a specific socio-cultural nomenclature is distilled, which in turn attenuates the allowed scope of individual differentiation.

What, then, can the effect of this one-dimensionality be expected to be on individuals and their self-defining projects, especially in a consumer's world where objects determine the conditions of interpretation, expression and definition? More importantly, how may such a reductive recasting of self-definition be expected to affect the value and meaning of human relations? In other words, can it be reasoned that contextual heterogeneity and the potential for differentiated self-constitution are interdependent? Inversely, can it be argued that homogeneity, by virtue of its reduced ensemble of expressive means, promotes integration, collapses the borders between people and thereby dispenses with the differentiae so important to true dialogue?

## **2. INTENDING THE AUTHENTIC SELF**

*I have the world as an unfinished individual through my body as a power for this world; I have the position of objects through the position of my body, or inversely I have the position of my body through the position of objects, not through a logical implication, nor in the manner in which we determine an unknown size through its objective relations with given sizes, but rather through a real implication and because my body is a movement toward the world and because the world is my body's support. (Merleau-Ponty, 2012:366)*

Is it not the case then that, since the life-world is an aggregate of various objects and subjects, the specific direction in which I move toward the world, the specific objects of my pursuits, reveals a great deal of my intentions? And is it not the case, furthermore, that this directed engagement with the life-world is determined in response to the essences of various phenomena and the horizons of human understanding they allow? Intentions, so considered, are the result of individual appropriations of horizons of understanding and range from blind adoptions of collective ideology to authentic reconfigurations thereof. Thus construed, it is through precisely the introjection of an external system of concomitant objects, cultural and otherwise, that we internalize an external infrastructure and thereby internally map the

conditions of both self-definition and expression. The relationship between human beings and their environment is, in other words, reciprocal, and though their various appropriations and negations of phenomena, they incrementally redirect and modify both the life-world and themselves. Their directed intentionality is in the first place indebted to the objective content of the life-world and the horizons of meaning thereby espoused.

Both intentionality and authenticity are concerned with accessing the external world and its phenomena, yet they are not necessarily mutually inclusive. According to Baldwin (2005:70), authenticity may be explained as

*the condition of those...who understand the existential structure of their lives...each of us acquires an identity from our situation – our family, culture, etc. Usually we just absorb this identity uncritically, but to let one's values and goals remain fixed without critical reflection on them is "inauthentic". The "authentic" individual, who has been aroused from everyday concerns...takes responsibility for their life and thereby "chooses" their own identity.*

Phrasing it somewhat differently, we may explain authenticity in reference to locus of control. An internal locus of control enables the formulation and expression of intentions individually arrived at through conscientious consideration of a public, collective referential framework. An external locus of control, however, merely regurgitates the essences of phenomena and stimuli without having digested them at all. Moreover, Baldwin's formulation of authenticity also suggests the impossibility of a self-defining process – that is, the formulation and expression of intentions – completely divorced from an external referential framework. Merleau-Ponty (2004:27) has this to say: *"Our self-consciousness is always 'mediated' by language that we have learnt from others and which is dependent upon their use of it."*<sup>3</sup>

Thus, if authenticity of being required of individuals a complete detachment from an external context, the resultant ontological regress could not but terminate in solipsism. Authenticity, then, must exist somewhere within the dialectical relationship between the self and others, and it is most likely best illustrated by individuals' conscientious introjection of external stimuli as well as their outward sublimation of intention. Authenticity, thus construed, is reflexive and made manifest through individuals' unique appropriation and configuration of their portmanteau life-world. For this very reason, it is the homogenization of, not participation in, the external framework that threatens authenticity. Such homogenization follows in the wake of a reductionist consumer ethics that expediently distils a single dimension from the life-world.

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that, although I do not consider the terms to be interchangeable, I do consider self-consciousness and authenticity to be causally related; for in outlining our existential understanding of ourselves, we determine the conditions of authentic intentionality.

### 3. ALIENATION OF CONSUMERISM

In 1908, Henry Ford gave us the first moving assembly line, which, in turn, has since then been responsible for the production of the common denominator within the life-world: the manufactured object. According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2004:63),

*people's tastes, character, and the attitude they adopt to the world and to particular things can be deciphered from the objects with which they choose to surround themselves, their preferences for certain colours or the places where they like to go for walks.*

The introduction of the moving assembly line paved the previously un-trodden road between the populous and opulence.<sup>4</sup> Suddenly, due to lowered production costs enabled by mass production, people had access to a proliferation of products within the life-world – products that, through their appropriation and arrangement, opened up new avenues of self-definition and expression. According to Herbert Marcuse (1991:9), “*the people recognise themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed, and social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced*”.

Human beings are a gregarious breed and depend for their views of self and other on a collective nomenclature and shared horizons of understanding. This implies that both man and life-world are simultaneously inwardly and outwardly porous, and that both are subject to the injunctions and limitations of the other. Now consider the notion of life-world. It denotes a habitable space and therefore implies spatial finitude. In a finite realm, it may be argued, the increase of certain phenomena – especially objective phenomena – can obtain only in tandem with a decrease in other phenomena. As purveyors of the consumer genus, manufactured objects in their proliferated state gradually come to excommunicate other genera of being and their respective attributes. The life-world, thus construed, is recast in monochromatic terms and thereby reduces the scope of relevant human understanding to a binary algorithm. Such homogenization predetermines avenues of thought appropriate to its provenance, consumerism, and thereby flattens the human landscape of differentiation. Consumerism, in and of itself one-dimensional, dissuades the mind from probing by confining it to a verdant world of objects. Charles Taylor (2003:97) explains it thus:

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<sup>4</sup> Opulence is used here to indicate the trend of acquisition beyond what serves a utilitarian function.

*To a considerable degree the dominance of instrumental reason is not just a matter of the force of a certain moral outlook. It is also the case that in many respects we find ourselves pushed to give it a large place in our lives...In a society whose economy is largely shaped by market forces, for example, all economic agents have to give an important place to efficiency...*

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

In an age where the encroachment of the manufactured object upon the daily lives of people cannot be denied – an industrial age governed for the greater part by an ethos of exchange – one cannot help but consider the possible effect of such reification<sup>5</sup>. What is it that we stand to lose when the forests, lakes and open plains, which had once inspired onlookers with existential musing and introspection, are replaced by the ideological fruits of industry? What is it that we stand to lose when the paths we take in pursuit of our goals have been reduced to freeways filled with faceless commuters, vending machines, drive-through pharmacies and even isolated clicks of a mouse. What is it we stand to lose when these goals – previously heterogeneous – have themselves become completely indistinguishable from instrumentalism and its various objects? What effect do the obelisk of industry and the proliferation of manufactured goods have on our processes of self-definition, especially where these objects overrun our immediate environments and obscure the “other” and the “natural”?

If, as Merleau-Ponty believes, our bodies provide us with our mode of existing, and if our senses provide us with the impressions midwife to our understandings of self and other, then we are in real danger of becoming alienated automatons through our introjection of a reified and mechanical life-world. “Alienation” may seem an inference, but the collective assimilation of a homogenized exteriority results in a people programmed and guided by a single algorithm. The idiosyncrasies and glitches, which had set us apart in differentiation and so enabled meaningful relationships, recede into an obsolescent referential framework – a dimension unsuited to contemporary computation. The rich textures and shades of meaning intrinsic to interpersonal relationships and perceptions are synthesized into a broad and sweeping binary ethos, oftentimes even resulting in their being purged from the phenomenal horizon of possible intention.

It is my contention that such an unrelenting absorption of individuals into a monochromatic life-world unifies individuals to the point of non-differentiation, thereby rendering all possible relationships in shared terms and reducing them to mere duplicates of one another. If my

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<sup>5</sup> The process whereby the dynamic and open-ended nature of concepts is lost to the imposed crystallization of meanings.

relationship with X ontologically serves the same purpose as my relationship with Y, then, in identifying differentiae with one another, I am alienated from both – perhaps on account, in the first place, of being alienated from myself.

### **Statement of the Problem**

With an eye toward underscoring the gist of this study, I must reiterate that it is through an active, on-going process of self-narration that we come to constitute our differentiated selves. The phenomenal context, our life-world, may be considered a syntax in that its contents are arranged systematically. We may thus be considered daily to be in conversation with the life-world, drawing from the dialogue the bricks and mortar required to erect our respective constructs of identity. The problem with a consumer context is its replication of units of meaning, a consequence of which is the homogenization of the life-world's contents. The repertoire of meaningful units available for our self-constitutive projects, so construed, is more than merely collective; it is impoverished as well. Moreover, it promotes integration rather than differentiation. In short, consumerism dispenses with such differentiae as ordinarily enable the distinction of subjects from one another.

Could it be argued that, for its promotion of a culture fully integrated within a one-dimensional system of exchange, consumerism collapses the distance between people needed to sustain meaningful dialogue and thereby stunts the development of authentic beings? Insofar as sustained dialogue nourishes sincere relations, would its suspension not then usher in the opposite, that is, alienation?

### **Hypothesis**

Beholden at least in part to the injunctions of our phenomenal context, self-narration, which is a prerequisite for authenticity, proceeds along the lines of spatio-temporal situatedness. Such situatedness implies being-in-a-world among objects, people, values and meanings. The proliferation of a single class of objects, that is, the replication of a single class of phenomena throughout the concrete dimension of manufactured goods, impoverishes the repository from which we draw our self-constitutive resources. The result, as more and more differentiae are dispensed with, is the gradual integration of people into a single constellation of meaning, until finally telling them apart from their background becomes rather laborious. Such integration brings people in such close contact, renders them in such similar terms, that the distance required to sustain meaningful dialogue is collapsed. The potential for true relation, so understood, dissipates, and the interlocutors become alienated, unable to access in the other something fundamentally different from themselves. Consumerism undertakes such replication.

### **Sub-questions**

1. What is meant by authenticity of being and what does leading an authentic life require?

2. What is the significance of "distance"?
3. What is consumerism and does it meet the above requirements?
4. If not, should consumerism be considered a threat to both the leading of an authentic life, as well as true relation among people?; in other words, should alienation among people be considered a necessary result of consumer ideology?

Article one sets out to answer questions one and two. Article two sets out to answer questions three and four.

### **Section breakdown**

1. Introduction
2. Intending the Authentic Self
3. Alienation of Consumerism
4. Conclusion

### **Methodology**

According to Fouché and Schurink (2011:316), the phenomenological approach aims at explaining

*how the life world of subjects is developed and experienced by them. Life world refers to a person's conscious experience of everyday life and social action. This approach aims to describe what the life world consists of, or more specifically, what concepts and structures of experience give form and meaning to it.*

I will explain the bodily contextualization of understanding and identity as concomitant moments of interpretation. Salvaging authenticity, and subsequently meaningful relationships, I will argue, is the task of a hermeneutic transcendental approach. My methodology thus combines elements of phenomenology and hermeneutics.

### **Contribution of the Study**

Through a studiously formulated disavowal of the blithe public allegiance to industrial progress and its current cloak of consumerism – including the subsequent dissolution of self – my hope is to expose the introjection of an expediency meant to govern the external consumer paradigm. Expediency, it ought to be noted, is accusatorily used in reference to the unfettered spread of an instrumentalist ethics. This study – a critique of binary reasoning – is meant to betoken exactly the possibility of alternative thinking, which is so rapidly being absorbed into a cultural propensity of one-dimensional reductionism.

Furthermore, through a modified understanding of alienation in particular and the loss of authenticity in general, the dire consequences of a pervasive instrumentalist ethics will be anticipated. The contribution of this study, accordingly, is akin to choosing sides: I am overtly pledging allegiance to the dimension of alternatives – in actual fact, therefore, refusing to choose sides – and therein hope to sensitize the reader to the following: the importance of alterity in the cultivation of meaningful relationships; the mutual exclusivity of diversity and objectification; and, lastly, the atrophy of authenticity under consumer rule.

### **Brief overview of primary literary sources**

Central to the internal logic of this dissertation is the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. In accordance therewith, essence, or logos as it is interchangeably referred to, is considered an a posteriori construct susceptible to the injunctions of the external life-world.

The thinking of Baudrillard and Marcuse explains how the abovementioned injunctions result from the relationships between objects. Moreover, since these objects are introduced by industry, the injunctions and protocols they imply may be considered, also with due credit to Baudrillard and Marcuse, vehicles most notably of industrial objectives.

Considering Varga's understanding of a productionist view of authenticity of being, in accordance with which the authentic self is a matter of self-constitution, the consumer culture may be shown to operate in opposition to the tenets of authenticity of being, thereby stunting the development of authentic individuals.

The division of labour, as envisioned by Marx, is considered at length and shown to be one of the greatest threats to the development of authentic selves.

# ARTICLE 1: INTENDING THE AUTHENTIC SELF

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*'Who are you?' said the caterpillar. This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, 'I – I hardly know, sir, just at present – at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.'* (Carrol, 2010:38)

Most of us go about our daily lives for the greater part preoccupied with eking out an existence in a demanding environment. However, in the dead of night when the din of business chatter and traffic has subsided, most of us also question the purpose of subjecting ourselves ad nauseam to the noise, clutter and seeming futility of what can only be termed the proverbial rat race. We search for meaning, but, since the rat race itself is the cause of our anxiety and concern, we cannot very well find it in the humdrum customs and superficial relations offered by daily life. We therefore turn inwards, asking if the worth of existence may not be found in a more enlightened approach to the drudgery of life. Most of us would agree that a life worth living is a receptive, sensitive and conscientious one – an authentic existence marked by the transcendence<sup>6</sup> of an otherwise insufferable repetition of rites, procedures and customs. How, however, does one lead an authentic existence? How does one know that one's intentions, decisions and actions are not merely the phenomenal expressions of an omnipresent ideology? In short, how, if at all, can we reach beyond the life-world's repository of interpretations and there, in the malleable half-light of Dionysian potentiality, formulate a unique take on life? For such self-constitution would be expressive of more than the environment and thereby refer back to the person, not just the life-world. To be of any consequence, however, these references to the self-need to highlight the difference between people and their environment, that is, the manner in which their origin/provenance may be considered unique and their logos, like a work of art, authentic. We are here, thus, concerned with those marks of differentiation, the foundations of authenticity. Closely tied to the question of authentic being is the implied question of meaningful relation: can people be said truly to relate in a meaningful way to others in the absence of differentiated selves, or would such vacuity merely amount to the expression of relations between the constituents of the system?

Hardly exclusive to any single person, the question of authenticity, then, is concerned with determining the conditions of leading one's own life. It has haunted man since time immemorial. This is evident throughout history and the rise of innumerable religions, most of which posit that

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<sup>6</sup> The process whereby the reification of meaning is overcome. It requires reimagining the relationships among phenomena.

human beings play an integral part in existence. This, in turn, bestows upon people the status of a privileged, authentic existence. The assumption here is that, since at least some religions must be considered the fruits of human reflection, the human intellectual enterprise has always been closely bound to proving human value and authenticity of existence. Moreover, since at least some religions must be man-made, and since many religions also propose the bespoke value of each individual – that is, individual authenticity – it stands to reason that humankind's narratives of identity have always included at least an implied reference to private authenticity. Now if individual authenticity is a matter of essential differentiation, then humankind's concept of authentic being must at least in certain cases have been premised on an essence a posteriori. For if people's essence, their logos, had existed a priori, any claim to authentic being would have amounted to no more than an expression of accidental inheritance. This is exactly what in general we do not have in mind when considering authenticity of being. In short, humankind's narratives of self have always inferred, at least in part, the self-constitutive subjectivity of authentic being. Sartre (2004:349) explains it thus:

*There is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man...What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards...Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing – as he wills to be after that leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism.*

Apart from lending credence to my inaugural line of reasoning, this quotation from Sartre also explains how Alice, in the earlier quotation, could have been essentially changed since that morning. Moreover, it also allows me the proposition that individual authenticity of being, since it is, as we have seen, a subjective matter, must in some way break with group affiliation. This stresses the epistemological contrast between the questions *who am I?* And *who are we?* Thus construed, defining authenticity of being requires the presence and enumeration of personal qualities in excess of those endowed by affiliation with some or other substrate; for without it, we would at best have an account of membership.

This, however, steers us into treacherous waters. For taken to its logical extreme, an exclusively subjectivist account of authentic being may very well lead us down a path of relativism towards an ill-fated endorsement of solipsism. Ontologically, so construed, there would be only the self and, therefore, any debate regarding the nature of authenticity mere folly.

Perhaps we ought to refrain from attributing to group affiliation a complete impotence as regards self-expressive authenticity. Granted, non-reflective, expedient group affiliation does little more than highlight the areas of overlap among people. But if we consider the choices by which people subscribe to one group and avoid others, we have at our disposal a means by which to differentiate among subjects. For in choosing this group and avoiding that, we calibrate the world around us in a manner expressive of our intentions and, by extension, our selves. If the status quo is marked by a haphazard subscription to groups x, y and z, it is not because the groups in themselves undermine authenticity. Rather, it is the generic pattern of intention and inquiry created by expedient and non-reflective affiliations that undermines authenticity. In my subscription to groups x, y and z, I may very well represent the generality of people. However, through my subscription also to groups f and g, I may be combining in a heterodox manner groups generally dissociated. This is not to say that groups f and g are of themselves unequivocally unique, only that the combined subscription to them and groups x, y and z creates an uncommon web of interaction. It is therefore through our assiduous choice of affiliation that we may create a transcendental web of interaction visible, and expressive, for its very divergence from the general patterns. Authenticity of being, so construed, does not preclude reflexive, instinctual affiliations; it does, however, imply a transcendence of the general patterns of conduct through the conscientious weaving of an interactive web.

## **2. AUTHENTICITY**

### **2.1 Objects and Subjects**

I would like to commence the following treatise on authenticity with an account of its most basic applications. According to Varga and Guignon (2015),

*The term authentic is used either in the strong sense of being "of undisputed origin or authorship", or in a weaker sense of being "faithful to an original" or a "reliable, accurate representation". To say that something is authentic is to say that it is what it professes to be, or what it is reputed to be, in origin or authorship.*

Generally understood, thus, authenticity is a qualitative attribute concerned with the verification of authorship and/or origin. In this regard, it can for example be said that a dispute over the authenticity of an object that owes its existence to the intentions of a subject would be more relevant than, say, a dispute over the authenticity of a drop of rain, since the latter, we know, most likely has its origin in the overhanging cumulonimbi.

A further interpretation of the term authenticity requires of us to consider it a kind of yardstick by which the correspondence between the expressive accuracy of an object, or gesture, and the

author's intentions may be measured. So construed, an object/gesture is authentic if it succeeds in truthfully representing its author under certain circumstances. Within the domain of aesthetics, nominal authenticity and expressive authenticity respectively account for the concepts of origin and expression. Varga (2012:15) contends that "*we may speak of nominal authenticity when establishing that a work of art is correctly identified in terms of origins, authorship, or provenance. Additionally, we may speak of expressive authenticity when discussing the artifact's character being a genuine expression of the author's beliefs or central values in a given socio-historical context*".

The focus of this treatise, however, requires a look at how the term may be applied to people, their narratives of identity and their expressive endeavours. This, it should come as no surprise, is almost incalculably more complex than the mere verification of origin or the quantification of the correlation between expression and intention. I believe, however, that Varga's notion of expressive authenticity may be effectively used towards a formal account of authenticity.

As a principle, expressive authenticity may be translated from its aesthetic idiom into that of ethics. Allowance for this is made, I believe, by a widened understanding of the term *object*, which may be taken also to include gestures, cultural values, units of meaning and other such intangible phenomena. We may thus, in line with Varga's conception, consider the authenticity of a gesture in terms of its expressive coefficient.

This, however, is but the tip of an existential iceberg. For example, I may sincerely intend any given cliché I had uttered through the use of a hackneyed phrase. There will, if clichés are truly overly publicized units of meaning, thus be no discrepancy between my intentions and their linguistic representation. The expression, so understood, may be labelled authentic. But did it say something about me, or was it merely a nonchalant regurgitation of an expediently adopted referential framework? It would seem, then, that expressive authenticity, if it is to be expressive of an individual, not just their environment, must contain something unique to the author – perhaps an inflection of sorts.

It is my view that the term authenticity, and disputes over it, most relevantly applies to situations that allow for counterfeiting. For this very reason, the scope of application of the term authenticity is inchoate, expanding in tandem with the widening reach of industry. What had posed no valid reason for concern regarding matters of authenticity a century ago has recently come to require some measure of authentication, especially since, within the unfolding consumer context, the overlap of meaning among seemingly divergent objects – that is, duplication – has drastically increased.

Although the difference between authentic self-expression and imitation is a simple one, an example may clarify this difference. Consider Vincent Van Gogh. According to Derek Fell

(2005:95), "*Vincent's work rewarded him with more than satisfaction; it gave him a sense of serenity, if only briefly*". We may think of his art as a means by which he disseminated what he felt most acutely, his most visceral aspects, thereby lessening interior tension (if only briefly). In a letter to his youngest sister, Willemina Jacoba Van Gogh, Vincent (2005:103) explains that "[b]y intensifying all the colours one arrives once again at quietude and harmony. There occurs in nature something similar to what happens in Wagner's music, which, though played by a great orchestra, is nonetheless intimate". From this it should be clear that art and painting were for Vincent something more than mere means; they were ends in themselves. Through his choice and use of colours, he mapped his personal view of objects. This view, removed from both the objects' immediate injunctions and the general interpretations thereof, allowed him an expression of self. This is clearly the case in *Self Portrait with Straw hat* (Fell, 2005:95) where a sunken right cheek testifies to a recently extracted tooth. It would seem as though he intended through his painting a narrative of identity. We may thus consider Vincent's painting centrifugal, emanating from within as an expression of personal logos. In short, his paintings may be thought of as rooms, the furnishing of which he *carefully* undertook through the assiduous arrangement of objects and colours around himself. Consider, for example, Heidegger's (2010:67) understanding of Dasein:

*What is used and produced become accessible when we put ourselves in the place of taking care in the world. Strictly speaking, to talk of putting ourselves in the place of taking care is misleading. We do not first need to put ourselves in the place of this way of being in dealing with and taking care. Everyday Dasein<sup>7</sup> always already is in this way.*

It would appear that Heidegger is describing a condition of experience. He suggests that our access to being is mediated by the exteriority of life. Without it, we would have no means by which to realize our intentions. We produce and use, avail ourselves of and deploy, our external milieu in various ways, each of which, it is my contention, serves to express an inner, private component of our beings. In such a manner, we effectively reproduce, or sublimate, ourselves in the collective language of objects and their attendant liturgies.

In fact, it is exactly through our taking hold of our environment that we can direct our lives towards goals of our choosing – goals that capture our logos. Unfortunately, however, it is

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<sup>7</sup> "Heidegger uses it [Dasein] for 'the entity which each of us himself is' and 'the being of man'. Dasein is a neutral term: It does not commit us to viewing man as a biological entity, as a consciousness, or as essentially rational. Dasein has no determinate essence; its being consists in its possibilities, in what it can make itself be...It is 'there' in the world. But it is not confined to a particular place (or time); it 'transcends' and is 'there' alongside other or past events. It is the 'there' or locus of 'being': without Dasein there would be beings, but no being as such." (Inwood, 2005:189)

through humanity's collective pursuit of a limited class of objects that people's pursuits come to resemble each other's. Such replication is akin to forgery and stands in stark contrast to truly authentic narratives of self.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2004:63) suggests that "[p]eople's *tastes, character, and the attitude they adopt to the world and to particular things can be deciphered from the objects with which they choose to surround themselves, their preferences for certain colours or the places where they like to go for walks*". We are, in the first place, as Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology proposes, geared into a world toward which our preferences, intentions and decisions are directed. These intentions, in turn, arrange around each individual a constellation of objects and people and in so doing establish said individual as something both distinct and accessible within the life-world. The constellation, thus, serves externally to represent the interior veering of the subject in question and as such may be considered a behavioural map of its essence – a Rosetta Stone of sorts.<sup>8</sup> In short, we have access to people, their beings, through their particular entanglement in the world, its objects and values.

## 2.2 Figure/Background

But no one can express in a single moment the totality of their beings – the necessary result of localized spatial insertion into the world. Nor can anyone be actively entangled in all aspects of their lives, their total constellation, simultaneously. This implies contextual being, which in turn presupposes a distinction between figure and background. Let us then consider the figure/background distinction and its bearing on authenticity of being.

With an eye towards clarifying what is meant when authenticity is attributed to a subject, I would like to cite the central tenet of Gestalt theory. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012:4) states:

*When Gestalt theory tells us that a figure against a background is the most basic sensible given we can have, this is not a contingent characteristic of perception that would, in an ideal analysis, leave us free to introduce the notion of impression. Rather, this is the very definition of the perceptual phenomenon, or that without which a phenomenon cannot be called perception. The perceptual "something" is always in the middle of some other thing, it always belongs to a "field".*

Now, as Merleau-Ponty (2012:209) argues later in the same work, "[o]ne's own body is in the world just as the heart is in the organism: it continuously breathes life into the spectacle,

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<sup>8</sup> According to the *Chambers Dictionary* (2011:1355), the Rosetta Stone is "a tablet, found near Rosetta in Egypt in 1799, which carried the same inscription in hieroglyphics and demotic script and also in Greek and thus enabled a beginning to be made in deciphering hieroglyphics; any comparable first clue".

*animates it and nourishes it from within, and forms a system with it*". It thus follows that we perceive (as, also, we are perceived) in a fashion similar to figures against a background. One may even say that people as individuals are themselves the object, and the life-world, composed of various other phenomena, the field. Therefore, any account of authenticity of being ought to be mindful of the subject/object configuration of the life-world; for this differentiation, in fact, differentiation per se, is the condition of anything's being authentically set apart.

Merleau-Ponty (2012:4) further states that "*[a] truly homogeneous area, offering nothing to perceive, cannot be given to any perception. The structure of actual perception alone can teach us what it is to perceive. Pure impression is thus not merely undiscoverable, but imperceptible, and therefore is inconceivable as a moment of perception*". The perceptibility of an object, or, in this case, a subject, thus depends on its qualitative differentiation from its enveloping field. Were figure and background not incongruous, the border separating them would not exist and any speak of a perceptible subject would amount to no more than ontological inference.

It is from this Gestalt-theoretical understanding of differentiation that I will formulate an understanding of authenticity of being, which, from here on out, will be designated interchangeably using also the term originality.

Any appreciable figure or subject is, as we have seen, by definition different from its background; that is, an object exists or, rather, may be perceived to exist, only insofar as being ontologically separate from its surroundings. Thus construed, authenticity is a result of contrast. But contrast is a matter of degree. A reference to the colour spectrum and the fact that different people see different shades of purple, on the one side, and red on the other, ought to abate accusations that my latter claim is nought but inference. Where one person sees only the white background against which the light is cast and there marks the outermost reach of violet, for instance, another discerns even deeper shades thereof – ultra-violet, in other words. This phenomenon is true of red also and testifies to the inaccessibility of certain marginally idiosyncratic phenomena. The result, then, is that, even for certain phenomenal idiosyncrasies, a figure may still not emerge from its enveloping background. Hence the claim that a figure may, by way of a cumulative separation, progressively emerge from a background. The inverse is also true: absorption is similarly progressive. For example, if the colour green were cast against a backdrop of blue, the gradual extraction of the colour yellow from it would incrementally reverse the differentiation and cause a regression that finally terminates in the absorption of the

waning green within the blue. Inversely, the gradual administration of yellow to a patch of blue paint would lift a new, synthesized figure out from the background – that of green.<sup>9</sup>

But unlike objects and patches of green and blue, we do not perceive an individual's differentiation in terms merely of static, physiognomic counter-position; we distinguish individuals from their environment based on movement. But since so much in the world is moving, a mere discernment of movement cannot of itself qualify a thing as human. We therefore distinguish between individuals in accordance with perceptible variations in patterns of movement – directionality, if you will. What inspires the unique directionality of individual movements is what we are concerned with in our appraisal of authenticity. In other words, what is it that people are moving towards and how, if at all, is it different from the generalized movement of the status quo? For it is only in opposition to the status quo, which is of itself the psycho-social matrix of the previously mentioned homogeneous matrix, that people may affirm their heaccuity and thus doing escape indeterminacy. In the opening remarks of this article, the reader will recall, the possible differentiation of a subject was premised on exactly such idiosyncratic constellations of interaction. Thus, to formulate any description of authenticity of being, we must first understand that from which the authentic individual emerges – the homogeneous "they".

### **2.3 Selves and others**

In considering the self as opposed to others, we would be wise to observe two things: their mutual dependency and, secondly, their correlation with authenticity and generality. It is my understanding that context is indispensable to the emergence of authentic being. But not just any context. If a figure is to emerge from the background, it has to be different. This was explained in the previous section. In the case of subjects, their authenticity may be measured in proportion to their fundamental divergence from generality and, sometimes, even insofar as standing opposed to other subjects. If all subjects were in all respects completely authentic, the status quo would have been that of perfect authenticity. Thus construed, authenticity would have been no more than mere membership of an immutable mass. The inter-subjective status quo, however, is an amalgam of shared customs, habits, objects and ideals and thus allows digression from it to be a mark of distinction and originality. Thus, it is due precisely to the contextual mediation of objects, values and customs that differentiation is possible in the first place and that it may serve to validate authenticity. Phrased inversely, if all had been authentic, all would have been the same.

Let us look at Heidegger. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (2010:123) says:

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<sup>9</sup> The colours are merely meant to represent possible qualities, attributes, objects, values, subjects, etc.

*The public "surrounding world" is always already at hand and taken care of in the surrounding world nearest to us. In utilizing public transportation, in the use of information services such as the newspaper, every other is like the next. This being-with-one-another dissolves one's own Dasein completely into the kind of being of "the others" in such a way that the others, as distinguishable and explicit, disappear more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the they unfolds its true dictatorship.*

Heidegger (2010:123) continues:

*We enjoy ourselves and have fun the way they enjoy themselves. We read, see, and judge literature and art the way they see and judge. But we also withdraw from the "great mass" the way they withdraw, we find "shocking" what they find shocking. The they, which is nothing definite and which all are, though not as a sum, prescribes the kind of being of everydayness.*

It would seem that, for Heidegger, "the they", since it refers to no specific individual, designates a certain collective subscription to shared protocol – a manner of being in the world. In accordance herewith, people go about their daily lives in lockstep with a collective impetus – driven by the same needs, availing themselves of shared frames of reference, keeping up, catching up. And since the subscription is wholesale, the operational matrix thereby established – such conventions as govern understanding, reflex and action – represents the psycho-social corollary of the Gestalt-theoretical homogeneous background. And although it is exactly this homogeneity that enables the emergence of authenticity, we ought still to ask what inspires humankind's gregarious nature. Why do we think and act in the manner of a herd? Why are we so eager to renounce private cogitation to the power of automation? The answer, I believe, is rooted in the principle of utility and the nature of species-wide needs.

It may be argued that the most basic of human needs are what prompts the gregarious nature of humanity. Ascent through Maslow's hierarchy of needs, possible only through the nourishment of each level's respective requirements, finally leads the anonymous member of the "they" out of the initial object-oriented tiers into the apex of self-actualization – the very condition of authenticity.

#### **2.4 Needs and deficits as interactive impetus (intentions)**

Let us first consider exactly what these fundamental needs are. In *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (2005:646), Andrew Belsey reasons as follows:

*It seems indisputable that human beings objectively and universally need air, water, food and shelter, whatever cultural wants, desires or preferences they happen to have. Objective human needs can plausibly be defined more abstractly as the necessary conditions for flourishing through the exercise of essential human capacities; in brief, physical and psychological health, and freedom.*

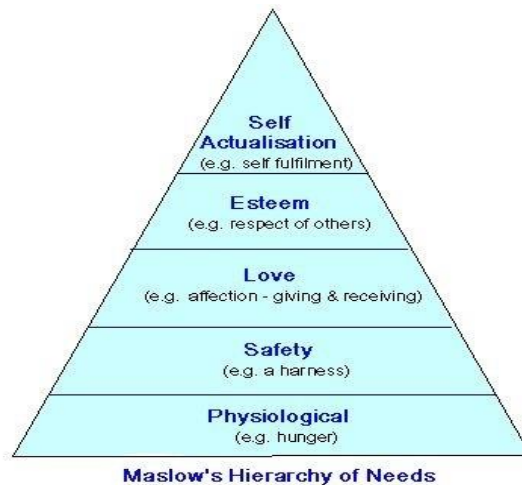
The foregoing account of basic human needs implies a dynamic of human enterprise indispensable to any account of intentionality: a drowning man does not philosophize. His actions are driven by the sole intention of surviving and may thus be considered akin more to instinct than to rationality. Since instinct and reason, we may safely assume, are at opposite ends of the intentionality spectrum, and since reason and authenticity are indissolubly bound, the precedence of instinct leads to the suspension of that very faculty required for authentic being. Einstein (1949:1201) suggested something of the sort when he stated that "*[h]unger does not breed reform; it breeds madness, and all the ugly distempers that make an ordered life impossible*".

It is due to the nature of fundamental, basic needs that man must continuously concern himself with their satisfaction. And since such needs are global, people struggle side by side against the tides of hunger and the elements. In their intentions and purposes, thus, people come to mimic one another as they consolidate their efforts to satisfy these relentless needs. More than merely binding people in a common plight, this necessary fixation with basic-need satisfaction also gears people towards an overly objectified life. The most basic of the human enterprises is, thus, more concerned with the concrete fabric of existence than with laying bare its existential nuances (the latter of which greatly facilitates the cultivation of authenticity). That a relentless subscription to such a collective project does little to highlight the authenticity of a person needs no clarification. The presence of birds in a forest hardly makes that forest unique; the presence of birds deep within underground chasms, however, does much to qualify the nature, the essence, of such subterranean chambers, for we would readily call them mines.

Before proposing that an ascent through the various levels of need is the only route to becoming an authentic being, we should consider Maslow's hierarchy of needs. According to Andreasen and Kotler (2008:102),

*Maslow held that people act to satisfy the lower needs before satisfying their higher needs. A starving man, for example, first devotes his energy to finding food. If the basic need is satisfied, he can spend more time on his safety needs, such as eating the right food and breathing good air. When he feels safe, he can take the time to deepen his social affiliations and friendships. Still later, he can develop pursuits that will meet his need for self-esteem and the*

*esteem of others. Once this is satisfied, he is free to actualise his potential in other ways. As each lower-level need is satisfied, it ceases to be a motivator and a higher need starts defining the person's motivational orientation.*



The foregoing typology of needs, along with its implied motivational force, suggests that intentions provide a barometer for determining a person's altitude within the ascending hierarchy of needs. For since intentions are for the most part reflexive, that is, mirroring a specific set of circumstances enveloping the given subject, they clearly indicate what said subject considers important. To clarify, since we all respond reflexively or, rather, instinctually, to concrete/objective needs, our pursuit thereof can hardly be considered idiosyncratic. The same applies to safety needs, social needs and exigencies of esteem. Granted, one may display some degree of industry in one's pursuit of satisfying these needs, but in one's pursuit thereof one still shares in the general flow of life and cannot thus be differentiated. It is only within the realm of self-actualization that one can cut ties with what is public and embark upon a private pursuit of authentic being. This does not, however, preclude the possibility of generic self-actualization; for one may as easily get caught up in higher pursuits widely shared. But such pursuits, however existentially adorned, are in fact no more than highfalutin offshoots of the penultimate level – esteem needs.

At this point, I would like to anticipate a general point of criticism sure to be levelled against me – that what makes us human can certainly not be attributed solely to an uncompromising authenticity. I will concede the point; well, at least in part. I wish in no way to oppose the idea that human worth is intrinsic. A person is human in the light of, well, being human. But being human hardly implies leading an authentic life. Moreover, we can hardly fault people for their observance of general customs and behavioural protocols, for these are mostly the result of their utilitarian efficacy. Humankind's pursuit of satisfying these basic needs is nonetheless reflexive. Where the authentically human enterprise enters into play for the first time is on the level of esteem needs: with complex commitment we set out to satisfy these needs and

inasmuch as we do, we may be considered vastly different from the animal kingdom. Yet, despite marking a break with animal instinct, esteem needs are still species-wide. Their pursuit and satisfaction proceed in accordance with a global human system of appraisal and can therefore not be considered a mark of distinction beyond that of status. The assumption here is not that people are incapable of innovation in their pursuit of esteem, but that the pursuit itself requires observance of a single, global system.

It is only at the final level of needs, that of self-actualization, that we are liberated from such desires as bind us to the object-world hierarchically.<sup>10</sup> Exigencies of esteem and the corresponding ordering of the object-world in combination prescribe which objects are to be preferred and which sets of etiquette to be considered prestigious. The prescribed objects/interpretations in question are public, and their systematic acquisition testifies to membership, not differentiation. On the final level of needs satisfaction, we are freed from this public component and may there proceed in line with the bidding of our private beings. It is there, in the malleable margin between the given and the intended, that the injunctions engendered by our private reflection may uniquely arrange objects around ourselves and, in so doing, weave a kaleidoscopic mesh expressive of authentic Dasein. I agree with Heidegger's (2010:122) following statement.

*In taking care of the things which one has taken hold of, for, and against others, there is constant care as to the way one differs from them, whether this difference is to be equalized, whether one's own Dasein has lagged behind others and wants to catch up in relation to them, whether Dasein in its priority over others is intent on suppressing them.*

Unfortunately, however, the life-world, as overrun by the manufactured object since the industrial revolution, has been reduced to a system of mere exchange value. What we are left with in our appropriation of objects, thus, is not the expression of self through the mediation of object-utility, but the expression of the system's hierarchic nature.<sup>11</sup> Jean Baudrillard (2005:67) suggests that objects no longer serve utilitarian aims but, rather, have become mere transposable signs:

*Functional in no way qualifies what is adapted to a goal, merely what is adapted to an order or a system: functionality is the ability to become integrated into an overall scheme. An object's functionality is the very thing*

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<sup>10</sup> Insofar as being a function of industry, object acquisition is controlled. Fashion determines the preference for certain objects while the rules of economy determine the conditions of purchase.

<sup>11</sup> By object utility is meant an object's main function, such as that of a paintbrush serving the expressive intent of the painter or the pen the writer's hand.

*that enables it to transcend its main "function" in the direction of a secondary one, to play a part, to become a combining element, an adjustable item, within a universal system of signs.*

This system of objects, he argues elsewhere,

*therefore constitutes less a language, whose living syntax it lacks, than a set of significations. Impoverished yet efficient, it is basically a code. It does not structure the personality, but designates and classifies it. It does not structure relationships, but breaks them down into a hierarchical repertoire. In its formal expression it constitutes a universal system for the identification of rank: the code of "status" (ibid:212).*

May Heidegger have been suggesting this with the terms *catching up* and *suppressing*? Either way, for all their variation in colour and supposed function, manufactured objects are of the same ilk insofar as they serve the same purpose – that of increasing the bearer's status. Thus construed, a life-world flooded by uni-functional objects is one drastically impoverished by said objects. The resultant homogeneity is thinly veiled by the supposed variety of objects. It is due to their main significance as status-coefficients that these objects, widely distributed, cannot facilitate differentiation – well at least not in a way other than status. They can serve only through their redistribution to widen or close the gaps they created in the first place, hence *catching up* or *suppressing*. You either have more or you have less, you do not have *different*.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs implies the importance of deficit as a motivating factor. In accordance therewith, intentions are aimed towards such objects the acquisition of which will bring about the levelling-up of the concerned party. Satisfaction of the penultimate level of needs, which is centred in exigencies of esteem, also sees the termination of predominantly object-oriented motivation ("predominantly", because conclusively satisfying these needs, as with the other needs also, is not possible). I therefore postulate that any person predominantly concerned with amassing objects – whether to level up, whether to differentiate within the penultimate level – has not yet broken through the concrete mould into the sphere of self-actualization. According to Maslow (2011:31):

*Deficit needs are shared by all members of the human species and to some extent by other species as well. Self-actualization is idiosyncratic since every person is different. The deficits, i.e., the species requirements, must ordinarily be fairly well satisfied before real individuality can develop fully.*

The point, however, is that object deficits govern movement between the median levels of need and, higher up, even within them. It may even be argued that the whole system of objects – manufactured objects, that is – is based on the level of esteem needs. And since these

exigencies of esteem are part of the human condition, they enable manufacturers to dispense with functionality in favour of creating transposable symbols of rank. As a result, objects lose their use-value and, along with it, all expressive potential beyond that of prestige. And so, instead of mobilizing the painter in the direction of self-expression, the paintbrush now becomes a symbol of prestige and, possibly, also a cause for angst: is the handle made of expensive Brazilian rosewood or mere mahogany; are the bristles that of exquisite red sable or commonplace camel hair? Such questions underscore a fundamental shift in the means of appraisal, in consequence of which the artist may lose sight of exactly what sets him apart, what serves to express his narrative of identity – his craft. But this ethos of exchange also informs those who witness the artist and appraise his work. They, too, may become fixated on signifiers of his success (the status coefficient) rather than his art. Thus construed, true meaning is sacrificed in favour of hierarchical differentiae and, along with them, also the means of appreciating authentic value. I consider exigencies of esteem to fall under what Maslow terms deficit-needs. He highlights a crucial qualitative difference between deficit needs and self-actualization needs:

*Just as all trees need sun, water, and foods from the environment, so do all people need safety, love and status from their environment. However, in both cases this is just where real development of individuality can begin, for once satiated with these elementary, species-wide necessities, each tree and each person proceeds to develop in his own style, uniquely, using these necessities for his own private purposes. In a very meaningful sense, development then becomes more determined from within rather than from without. (Maslow, 2011:31)*

It would seem, then, that object-oriented intentions, as well as the resultant behavioural inflections, reveal but a generic mode of being, something inherent in all human pursuits: the desire to be rid of deficit, all deficit. On the other hand, intentions issuing from the desire to self-actualize are in general turned inwards and have as object the insatiable state of growth. It is within this state of self-actualization that people may cultivate an authentic existence. As an aside, both exigencies of deficit and motivations pertaining to growth are part of the human condition. Everybody, as was mentioned in the opening of this article, experiences the need to differentiate themselves. This need alone, however, does not differentiate them.

## **2.5 Authenticity**

Having established that fostering an authentic being requires operations at the level of self-actualization (even if only there to have formulated an insightful, private approach to the mundane, everyday interactions with the environment), and having seen that an ascent through

the ranks, respectively satisfying each level's requirements, is needed to reach said summit, we may now consider exactly what authenticity of being entails. This requires the further examination of Gestalt theory. According to Feldman *et al.* (2012:1219):

*From the very beginning, the following ideas were central to Gestalt thinking. Phenomenal experience consists of part-whole structures, configurations, or Gestalten. A Gestalt is an integrated, coherent structure or form, a whole that is different from the sum of the parts.*

We shall, in line with phenomenological tenets, consider that our access to the world, our operations in it and our manner of self-expression are limited to the realm of phenomena. Accordingly, we may consider the life-world, with its objects both concrete and cultural, as a holistic matrix that simultaneously provides both the means of self-expression and the background against which it takes place. This holistic whole, comprising objects, subjects and the relationship between them may, as far as our experience of it is concerned, then further be divided into substrates corresponding to Maslow's hierarchy of needs – in other words, a living nomenclature of objects, subjects and values existing within the life-world.

Our goal of defining authenticity of being requires us to look beyond the first four levels in the needs hierarchy; for the human intention to satisfy these needs is focused primarily on collective objects – worse even, in the case of esteem needs, it is focused primarily on quanta of exchange value. These objects, thus, cannot be thought of as idiosyncratic marks of originality. In short, although a life lived solely in pursuit of satisfying lower-order needs does not necessarily preclude the cultivation of an authentic being, it does however render it improbable. For the preoccupation with the collective customs aimed at redressing lower-order needs necessarily submerges one in an abstract collective identity. However, reaching the summit of needs, that is, that of self-actualization, although allowing for greater variation of intention and greater digression from humdrum custom, does not guarantee authentic being either. This becomes apparent if we consider that self-actualization, at its most extreme, strives beyond the cultivation of a true self towards the eternal preservation of that self. And since such preservation implies either a hereafter or a legacy, or both, we are once again here in the realm of custom and membership.<sup>12</sup> And, as Nietzsche (1899:124) suggests, such memberships facilitate the investment of meaning in a hereafter at the possible expense of a meaningful here and now: "*The true world unattainable at present, but promised to the wise, the pious and the*

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<sup>12</sup> A legacy is something of quantifiable worth to which one's progeny, or the rest of humanity, have access and must, if it is to be of value, be measurable by prevailing standards or customs. Therefore, in one's creation of the said legacy, one must observe the yardsticks by which worth is determined and thus doing subscribe to some or other public appraisal of value. Entering the pearly gates, on the other hand, regardless of the religion, also requires the observance of a formal liturgy and thereby implies membership within a group. In neither case can the observance of requirements be said to set individuals apart or underscore their indissolubility.

*virtuous man.*" And since, in such a case, the individual shifts his focus towards what as yet has not transpired, his applications of self to the present may then also be considered in essence absent.

To be clear, I am in no way excluding efforts pertaining to legacy or religion from the possibility of authenticity. Nor am I here arguing that one's rank in Maslow's hierarchy of needs either guarantees or forestalls the possibility of leading an authentic life. I am merely implying that needs foster ties which of themselves represent membership. Through one's amassment of various objects meant to satisfy corresponding needs, one essentially subscribes to groups engaged in similar actions. Moreover, in the case of esteem needs, membership nowadays is marked by the acceptance of an ethics based on exchange value. In such a system, objects signify little more than their corresponding monetary value, robbing them of their true meaning and their expressive potential. The difference between people is, in other words, calculated quantitatively. Qualitatively, however, we are fundamentally indistinct. Even rank has been purged of its true meaning. Jean Baudrillard (2005:212) phrases it thus:

*No doubt objects have always played an identifying role of this kind, but formerly they did so in parallel – and this often in a purely auxiliary way – with other systems: gestural, ritual or ceremonial systems, language, rank at birth, codes of moral values, etc. The peculiarity of our own society is that all such other means of gauging rank are gradually giving way to the code of “status”.*

What we are looking for, then, in our search for the conditions of authenticity is an expression of intention incongruous with even the most intimate of a person's *adopted* frames of reference. We are looking for the glimmer of reflection and thought in the actions of individuals. The authentic being is a being despite. The authentic being is a being, at times, in conflict with its own choices. For example, following devout reflection, one may come to identify with a specific existential idea. Since one came to identify with it, it should be self-evident that the idea existed a priori, or at the very least prior to one's discovery of it. With choice, then, I am referring to the conscious adoption of said frame of reference. Further reflection may then reveal certain aspects within the adopted frame of reference at odds with some aspect or other of one's own orientation.

Transcendence, then, lifts one out of the adopted frame of reference and its attendant modes of expression and leaves one in an immutable domain of private signification. Here there exists no ready-made objects capable of sublimating one's gestures, ideas or intentions. Blindly groping in this malleable sphere, the individual is engaged in mapping an uncharted territory and configuring it in a manner that will, eventually, allow the sublimation of these wholly private intentions and thoughts, desires and inclinations. The rearranged environment and heterodox utilization of phenomenal means, both concrete and ideological, result in the emergence of a

unique interactive entanglement in opposition to what may be considered the homogeneous background of convention. It is my contention that stemming the tide of the generic requires a creativity of interpretation and expression. Through one's creative application, one may transcend the various conventions established to demarcate groups according to need-oriented object observance and simultaneously cultivate a sense of self contingent finally upon a private understanding of public phenomenal means. The resultant tension establishes oneself as an idiosyncratic being in motion as opposed to the inert conventions marking the life-world. Maslow (2011:97) explains it thus:

*As we seek for definitions of identity, we must remember that these definitions are not now existing in some hidden place, waiting patiently for us to find them. Only partly do we discover them; partly also we create them. Partly identity is whatever we say it is. Prior to this of course should come our sensitivity and receptivity to the various meanings the world already has.*

Charles Taylor (2003:29) similarly employs the idea that self-creation is indispensable to an authentic existence: "*Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own.*"

I would like to make it clear that I do not consider membership of various groups an encumbrance by default to the cultivation of authentic being. Or, phrased somewhat differently, I do not endorse relativism. Instead, taking my cue from Neurath and reapplying his bootstrap analogy, I contend that the homogeneous background – the humdrum customs of society and the fixed values in combination – provide an opportunity for transcendence. According to Neurath (2005:100), "*we are like sailors who have to rebuild their ship on the open sea, without ever being able to dismantle it in dry-dock and reconstruct it from the best components*". Nor can all the wooden beams be simultaneously replaced whilst at sea, for the boat would obviously sink. Although conventionally deployed as a rebuttal of foundational theories of knowledge, Neurath's analogy highlights also the crux of my understanding of authenticity – that not all aspects of an individual can be simultaneously authentic, for this would result in an unhinged being completely severed from any form of contact (solipsism). Moreover, were all the traits authentic, none of them would stand out against a background, since this background would itself be an immutable, kaleidoscopic mesh. Charles Taylor (2003:66) echoes this view:

*Authenticity (A) involves (i) creation and construction as well as discovery, (ii) originality, and frequently (iii) opposition to the rules of society and even potentially to what we recognize as morality. But it is also true, as we saw, that it (B) requires (i) openness to horizons of significance (for otherwise the*

*creation loses the background that can save it from insignificance) and (ii) a self-definition in dialogue.*

## **2.6 The obscurity of authenticity**

My concern in this article has chiefly been the elucidation of authenticity and, where possible, laying out its conditions and defining its emergence. Regarding the former, I admit defeat (though not an ignominious one). For my reasoning has been precisely that authenticity is the predominantly private affair of transcending a shared context. This implies two things: firstly, that the development of an authentic being depends on a homogeneous, collective context; and secondly, since authenticity is the private transcendence of said context, that the authentic being resists conclusive definition. If, by way of the attribution of public qualities, authenticity could be reduced to an algorithm, it would immediately return to the public domain and thereby forfeit its essential opacity. Authenticity, thus, may be defined in relation to its lack of transparency; for insofar as our actions conform to cultural custom, they are bound to be interpreted, and are most likely also intended, in line with the collective understanding of meaning. This renders our actions and their underlying intentions translucent. Moreover, this state of commensuration, exactly for its assumption of transparency, dispenses with receptivity towards nuances of meaning.

Let us consider Merleau-Ponty's conceptualization of experience and objective thought. Explaining the conditions of fully appreciating an object's meaning, that is, acknowledging its contextual nature, he suggests that meaning, like a diamond, is a multi-faceted affair. In *The Phenomenology of Perception* (2012:71), he states:

*I can see one object insofar as objects form a system or a world, and insofar as each of them arranges the others around itself like spectators of its hidden aspects and as the guarantee of their permanence. Each act of seeing that I perform is instantly reiterated among all the objects of the world that are grasped as coexistent because each object just is all that the others "see" of it. Thus, our formula above must be modified: the house itself is not the house seen from nowhere, but rather the house seen from everywhere. The fully realized object is translucent, it is shot through from all sides by an infinity of present gazes intersecting in its depth and leaving nothing there hidden.*

Now consider the application of the above concept not to an object, but to a subject or, rather, an individual. Lest such a transposition seem unfounded, I draw the attention of the reader to Merleau-Ponty's (2012:335) suggestion that "[t]he perceived is not necessarily an object present in front of me as a term to be known, it might be a unit of value that is only present to me in practice". It should be noted that these "units of value" are well represented by human gestures,

understandings and various other cultural cogitations. So, let the house stand for the subject, and let its various structural elements, contemporaneous perception of which would, according to Merleau-Ponty, facilitate the taking hold of its essence, stand for intentions seen through the gestures, interactions and other character traits of said subject.

Now, if taking hold of a subject's logos, that is, truly discerning it, hinges on the simultaneous perception of its various facets, then the assumption is that the significance of these facets is itself already known or, at least, knowable to the supposed observer. Returning to the subject, the objects that were considered spectators now become the various subjects who each perceive the central subject in its dealings with life. Within this inter-subjective dimension of the phenomenal matrix, only a consolidation of all these perspectives, including also the subject's apperception, could render the individual translucent. A crucial condition of such a laying bare of a subject, however, is that the significance of the central subject's actions must be knowable. And since the cloaking of even a single facet's significance must result in an only partial sketch of the subject, truly transcendental gestures will always obscure the subject from at least some angles and consequently render them opaque. For truly transcendental gestures – the concrete kin of transcendental thoughts and intentions – outrun the protocols for interpretation established by public solidarity and thereby hide themselves from the identification of others. In this respect, what is truly authentic can never be fully identified with anything else, at least not in a definitive manner, for its opacity obscures the very thing needed for even a preliminary identification. The authentic person, in resisting conclusive rendering by way of conventional interpretive means, is opaque.

I will preface the inverse of the latter hypothesis with an allusion to Merleau-Ponty's (2012:17) mast/boat analogy:

*If I am walking on a beach toward a boat that has run aground, and if the funnel or the mast merges with the forest that borders the dune, then there will be a moment in which these details suddenly reunite with the boat and become welded to it. As I approached, I did not perceive the resemblances or the proximities that were, in the end, about to reunite with the superstructure of the ship in an unbroken picture. I merely felt that the appearance of the object was about to change, that something was imminent in this tension, as the storm is imminent in the clouds. The spectacle was suddenly reorganized, satisfying my vague expectation.*

In a similar fashion, the significance of a person's actions may initially elude us and provide us with but a fragmented perspective of their bespoke composition. The tension will be promptly resolved as soon as the significance of the gesture, itself contextualized and thereby offering cues as to relevant interpretation, becomes clear. But should the gesture remain in essence

obscured, the person before us will remain suspended in this tension and resist absorption in a shared constellation of meaning. Their fundamental unity will, thus, not be restored in our eyes. An authentic gesture does exactly that; it emboldens its author against integration. The authentic individual is opaque and, consequently, indissoluble.

I am not proposing, however, that what is authentic in a person must remain imperviously indecipherable; no, hermeneutics explains how such seeming incommensurability may be dialogically overcome. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (2006:291) states that

*the process of construal is itself already governed by an expectation of meaning that follows from the context of what has gone before. It is of course necessary for this expectation to be adjusted if the text calls for it. This means, then, that the expectation changes and that the text unifies its meaning around another expectation. Thus the movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole.*

Such interpretive oscillation requires conversation. Gadamer (2006:356) continues:

*Recognizing that an object is different, and not as we first thought, obviously presupposes the question whether it was this or that. From a logical point of view, the openness essential to experience is precisely the openness of being either this or that. It has the structure of a question...the knowledge of not knowing.*

Precisely this *not knowing* ought to drive us, in dialogue with others, toward further inquiry. Instead, we are not confronted by a sense of not knowing, since the meanings of the objects referred to in conversation have become reified within a one-dimensional system of exchange. I am, thus, proposing that what is immediately accessible, especially as regards gestures and their antecedent intentions, is by definition public and therefore provides no clue as to the true logos of the bearer (unless, of course, said subject's logos is collective, in which case talk of authenticity seems somewhat erroneous anyway). I am, thus, comfortable with venturing the claim that authenticity, rather than referring to some or other set of specific attributes, is best described as a constant state of becoming – an ability to assimilate and then transcend context in a manner that draws from the horizon such elements and significance as have thus far eluded discovery. True, these elements, as with all things phenomenal, are ultimately communicable. But their communication in essence diffuses them and thus doing revokes their transcendental status. The authentic being, considering the latter statement, is a being inextricably bound up with the transcendence of self, others, and their interposing environment.

Regarding the conditions and emergence of authenticity, on the other hand, I believe that the explanation of how unfulfilled basic needs inhibit the development of an existential inclination

and forestall the ascent through the different levels successfully tied the possibility of originality to the constraints and ambience of environment. This was mirrored by Heidegger's notions of care and objects taken hold of. For through our attendance to the environment, the inclusion of certain objects/values and rejection of others, we reveal ourselves and express our intentions.

## **2.7 Authenticity: a formal account**

The heading of this section may strike one as being oddly incongruous with the general ambience of the article. In the spirit of a privatized, interior authenticity, I have, throughout, decried the possibility of conclusively defining authenticity. This, were it not for my observance of and commitment to existential tenets, could easily have cast the article in a specious light and opened it to criticisms of implied solipsism. Also throughout, however, I have premised my understanding of authenticity upon transcendence, which of itself presupposes an exterior dimension. Moreover, the opening remarks of the article proposed the drawing of a parallel between agency and the aesthetic aspect of expressive authenticity. What follows is a definitive account thereof.

At the very centre of my understanding of authentic being is the existential notion of essence. But not an essence a priori. Rather, it is an essence preceded by existence and must therefore be thought of as contextual. In *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*, Macintyre (1985:519) refers to Sartre as suggesting that essence succeeds conception (existence). The nature of the individual's logos, that is, the potential for authentic being, must then be related to cumulative introjections. The phenomenal world, its exteriority, is thus indispensable to the possibility of cultivating an authentic being. Macintyre (ibid.:519) continues: "*The essential content of human nature for Sartre, then, is that it is an as yet undetermined project. It is open toward the future. It is the form of intentionality which has to be filled out with content.*"

For Heidegger (2010:185), this process of self-narration is beholden to a concrete existence – he calls it a kind of *taking care*. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012:26), also paying homage to the pre-eminence of the phenomenal field, considers the concrete human world to be "*the milieu, and, as it were, the homeland of our thoughts. The perceiving subject ceases to be an 'acosmic' thinking subject, and action, feeling, and desire remain to be explored as original ways of intending an object*". Our being geared into a concrete existence is thus what accommodates our intentionality. As was explained earlier, it is precisely this *directionality*– through its inflectional reformulation of general interactive patterns – that enables the emergence of authentic being. Now consider Varga's (2012:104) account of authenticity:

*According to the inner sense model, authentic inner traits, projects, wishes, etc. are stable and given entities that one can access introspectively. The practice of authenticity is then bound to the introspective identification of these*

*individual features. In striking contrast, the productionist model emphasizes the (aesthetic) self-constitution of individuals, often modelled on the production of art. Who I really am is not a matter of discovery then but of a matter of creation or production.*

Considering my understanding of essence, that is, that it succeeds existence, and considering the tangible presentation of the phenomenal world, I am obliged to adopt the latter formulation of authenticity (productionist model). This allows me the context from which to defend transcendence as indispensable to the emergence of authentic being. This context is the phenomenal world, which consists of, most notably, the referential frameworks governing the management of objective life. These referential frameworks, to be clear, are represented by the political, economic and ideological systems of the day and imply the emergence of roles/parts conducive to their continued functioning.

Describing a waiter in a café, Sartre (2004:314) explains roles/parts as follows: of the waiter he says that

*his movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes toward the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer. Finally there he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton ... All his behaviour seems to us a game ... But what is he playing? ... The game is a kind of marking out and investigation ... [his] condition is wholly one of ceremony. The public demands of them that they realize it as a ceremony.*

Central to an understanding of these roles/parts is an acknowledgment of their place in, even indebtedness to, the dominant social systems – not unlike the characters found in Shakespearean plays and the like. Such roles require the observance of liturgies that *realize* their functions. And since existence precedes our essence, and we are born into an ongoing historical continuum, the chances are that we will have had our various roles thrust upon us. An inauthentic existence entails blindly assuming these roles. An authentic existence, on the other hand, involves the inflectional reformulation of these roles so as to allow them expression beyond that of their mere functionality. True authenticity of being requires an evolution of these parts through the introduction of our selves into them. Thus construed, true authenticity escapes concise definition exactly for its being inexorably perpetual. True being, that is, authentic being, is in fact the continued state of becoming. "*But what does this mean if not that I am constituting myself as a thing? Shall I determine the ensemble of purposes and motivations which have pushed me to do this or that action? But this is already to postulate a causal determinism which*

*constitutes the flow of my states of consciousness as a succession of physical states."* (Sartre, 2004:319)

The authentic being is neither this nor that. In fact, the authentic being is exactly the opposite of any this or that. Authenticity of being may be most emphatically defined, I believe, by perpetuity – a person's refusal conclusively to be defined by any single referential framework. The authentic being is inchoate, and they both know as well relish that.

Of the silencing of opinion or, for our purposes, the repression thereof, erroneous though it may be, John Stuart Mill (1869:493) says the following: "*Though the silenced opinion be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of truth. And since the general or prevailing opinion on any subject is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied.*"

Since life is incomplete – an inference drawn from the hypothesis that existence precedes essence – it can also be argued that the truth, for its subjective and contextual historicity, can only be approximated. Finally and conclusively mooring in any conceptual harbour undermines exactly this dialogical imperative. Authenticity of being is all but non-being: it is, per se, becoming.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

Now if the life-world provides an object/subject-oriented context wherein individuals, through their intentions, have at their disposal certain means whereby to express their directionality, then the drastic homogenization of the life-world cannot but result in a proportional delimitation of the directionality. Since authenticity is marked, as we have seen, by the transcendence of the horizons imposed by one's context, this need not be a problem, right? Wrong. For transcendence is a skill honed through practice and exposure to a dynamic life-world. Instead, the life-world in which we are meant to practise these transcendental skills has become an impoverished one and mostly inspires membership and integration into the "they". Membership is not the problem. In fact, as I have reasoned above, it is a condition of authenticity. The problem is that society is being totally administered, that is, every sensation, experience and thought, regardless of their supposed subversive force, have been catered for, planned for and integrated into an objectifying taxonomy of life. The problem is the subtle yet relentless, institutionalized disavowal of divergence. Herbert Marcuse (1991:61) explains this as a kind of neutering of dialectical tension:

*The absorbent power of society depletes the artistic dimension by assimilating its antagonistic contents. In the realm of culture, the new totalitarianism manifests itself precisely in a harmonizing pluralism, where the most contradictory works and truths peacefully coexist in indifference.*

Such powers of absorption are well represented by an objectifying culture, which, first and foremost, is bent on naming everything and thereby diminishing the referential framework through taxonomical reification. In such a milieu, the general understanding of life evolves into the idea that everything can be named. Should an object, or an aspect of it, fall outside the scope of preconceived ideas, the residual meaning is mostly overlooked or, worse, summarily dismissed. Thus follows the reification of language, the very fabric from which we are meant to weave our understanding of the world. This bodes ill for that which, by virtue of being authentic, escapes easy classification.

The dynamics in a life-world circumscribed by a consumer ethic invariably bind the bulk of society to a predetermined set of expressive and interpretive protocols. The shared means by which each person comes to articulate his or her private view of life must be considered the content of an ethics of generalization. Plunge the world into an hierarchical system based on class differentiation – and establish the means of movement between classes in terms of object/subject acquisition – and surely you will have a world wherein what should have been alternative points of view have become unified within the limited means of sublimation. Working backwards, the limited signifiers and symbols prescribe, ultimately, what is to be felt, thought, said and intended. For transcendence is a skill learnt through the gradual development of cogitations capable of reaching beyond the didactic. In a world, however, where interpretive protocols have been set in place and govern even the most parochial elements of existence, the stimuli and experiences needed to cultivate an inquisitive proclivity have been subsumed within a grossly generalized and universally applied modus operandi. The Achilles' heel of authenticity, thus, is diffusion. What the consumer culture has given us is the means of diffusion, populating society with objects all of the same ilk and thereby prescribing the nature of what may be ventured, either in thought or in action.

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## ARTICLE 2: THE ALIENATION OF CONSUMERISM

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The following article considers the socio-behavioural effects of total administration and suggests that an impoverished referential framework, as results from a homogenized phenomenal field, promotes the development of an almost exclusively collective world view. Such wholesale integration of people within an administered paradigm essentially dispenses with that distance between people needed to tell them apart. Phrased somewhat differently, such integration dispenses with the differentiae, as borders, that allow the distinction between figures and background. The very essences in line with which individual figures may be said to stand in unique relationships to one another are consequently lost, rendering relationships transposable and people replaceable. This seems to indicate, somewhat inauspiciously, that an alienated existence follows in the wake of a consumer-driven ideology.

The title of this article, especially in the light of its close association with the political agenda, may easily give rise to mistaken expectations regarding the aims of this inquiry. To be sure, no critique of culture in this day and age can completely dispense with reference to the political sphere. This is the case, quite plainly, because the various spheres of life, namely culture, politics, religion, and so on, are superimposed upon one another and in combination solidify into what we know as the phenomenal field. Moreover, much has been said by many a respected philosopher about the politics of consumption. Michael Sandel (2013:5), for instance, argues that "*[w]e live at a time when almost everything can be bought and sold. Over the past three decades, markets – and market values – have come to govern our lives like never before*". In *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse (1991:3) suggests that "*[t]oday political power asserts itself through its power over the machine and over the technical organization of the apparatus*" and in so doing mirrors the Marxian notion that political power is predicated upon "*the system of producing and appropriating products*" (Marx & Engels, 2015:22). Since all the above theorists were concerned with property and, by extension, objects, it stands to reason that manufactured objects, within the current consumer culture, have come to serve a political agenda. This is a valid concern and most certainly deserves the attention so widely given to it.

My concern in this article, however, is not with exposing the political underpinnings of the consumer culture. Rather, I would like systematically to determine its reach and document its effects on human relational efforts, asking, finally, whether or not it really does serve the greater goal of human relation. From several angles, I will describe alienation among subjects, and also from themselves, as the necessary consequence of a consumer-driven ethics (in essence, a reformulation of Gadamer's (2006:295) suggestion that understanding a text, or another, depends on a kind of distance between the interpreter and the interpreted).

These lines of thought will also provide the basis for my opposition to the current cultural trajectory and fuel my overtures against claims of supposed progress. One of these angles proceeds along phenomenological lines, describes the life-world and then proceeds to posit that the dissemination of manufactured objects renders all in homogeneous terms and thereby undermines the distance between things and people needed to differentiate them. A further view, involving a reformulation of Marx's notion of divided, alienated labour, conceives of the spread of manufactured objects as a kind of systematic automation of inter-subjective channels and interruption of interaction among subjects. Yet another approach likens the consumer object to Benjamin's Panopticon. These critiques, however seemingly divergent, have as common denominator the conclusion that alienation issues necessarily from the rule of consumption.

## **2. THE LIFE-WORLD**

### **2.1 Operationalism**

Significant parallels can be drawn between the current trend of mass consumption and the principles of operationalism, especially regarding the status and definition of objects. Understanding consumer ethics requires at least a cursory reading of the basic tenets of operationalism. Consider the Nobel laureate Bridgman's operationalism. According to him,

*we evidently know what we mean by length if we can tell what the length of any and every object is, and for the physicist nothing more is required. To find the length of an object, we have to perform certain physical operations. The concept of length is therefore fixed when the operations by which length is measured are fixed: that is, the concept of length involves as much and nothing more than the set of operations by which length is determined (Bridgman, 1927:58-59).*

From the above analysis, it would appear that a concept's definition is tethered to its context and may therefore be considered contingent. This attests to the primacy of procedure over that of inherent meaning and, when brought to bear on the realm of objects, suggests that even basic taxonomies, especially those concerned with describing everyday life, are the result of a cultural context. Things are, thus construed, what they are made to be.

Hung (1997:231) states that Wittgenstein, to whom the inception of logical positivism owes a great deal, similarly proposed that "[t]he meaning of a term is a function of its use". Bearing this in mind, now consider what is both positivism's central tenet and the consumer culture's underlying impetus: the notorious verification principle of meaning. Ashby (1985:498) suggests

that a proposition's meaning derives from the method used to verify it: "*The meaning of any statement is completely determined by the circumstances that would verify it.*"

A term, so understood, especially where designating either cultural or concrete objects, therefore derives its meaning from the procedures that realize it. Consider the spade. It is a spade, and only a spade, since it is used for digging and contains within its definition a whole ensemble of operations. Swinging it like an axe would not put it to good use, at least not insofar as its primary function, digging, is concerned. Since it identifies a thing with its use, logical positivism precludes the possibility of transcendental definition and thereby limits the meaning of an object to its accepted function.

The refutation of logical positivism notwithstanding, its basic reductive principles pervade what has become a near global subscription to the idea of buying happiness. In short, objects are considered synonymous with their supposed function of satisfying some or other need. But more of this later. For now, suffice it to say that logical positivism and the consumer culture have in common a radically reductionist approach to the unfolding of meaning and thereby preclude discernment of an object's auxiliary meanings.

## **2.2 Culture of consumption**

Before, however, the latter claim can be substantiated, we need to consider exactly what a culture of consumption entails; though its salient features stare one squarely in the face, their exact meaning and function resist easy classification. According to Jean Baudrillard (2005:144): "*With the advent of our consumer society, we are seemingly faced for the first time in history by an irreversible attempt to swamp society with objects and integrate it into an indispensable system designed to replace all open interaction between natural forces, needs and techniques.*" Baudrillard's latter overture seems to hint at the loss of unfettered channels of communication among interlocutors. Our access to natural phenomena, which may also include other people, is nowadays mediated by manufactured objects. According to Celia Lury (1996:1), "*one of the most important ways in which people relate to each other socially is through the mediation of things. Material culture is the name given to the study of these person-thing relationships*". Through an epistemic interdependence, these objects establish a referential framework within the confines of which humanity dwells and thinks. And since these objects populate the space between people, effectively mediating their access to one another, the operational procedures they require for their utilization also greatly influence the relation among people. Arnould and Thompson (2005:869) argue that "*[c]onsumer culture denotes a social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources, and between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, are mediated through markets*".

This was not always the case. Herbert Marcuse echoes this sentiment when he refers to the changed environment, from pre-industrial times to the now wholesale technological era:

*With its code of forms and manners, with the style and vocabulary of its literature and philosophy, this past culture expressed the rhythm and content of a universe in which valleys and forests, villages and inns, nobles and villains, salons and courts were a part of the experienced reality. In the verse and prose of this pre-technological culture is the rhythm of those who wander or ride in carriages, who have the time and the pleasure to think, contemplate, feel and narrate. (Marcuse, 1991:59)*

Whatever the consumer culture may or may not be, its transformation of the life-world seems a fait accompli generally accepted. What such a transformation of the life-world brings about for the general populous, however, is not so clear.

As expressed by Marcuse, the life-world of the pre-industrial age comprised many naturally occurring phenomena: lakes, open fields, country roads, and so on. Similarly, human beings' engagement of them, their interaction with and among them and their participation in their significance and function, remained mostly ungoverned. I suspect that they went about interpreting such instances of life in accordance not with some pre-established protocol or code of conduct, but, rather, in line with the injunctions and sway of these things themselves. Nor was the individual coerced by the injunctions of an imposed referential framework into collective interpretations of the life-world and its stimuli. This is not to say, however, that no constellation of signification and interpretation existed prior to the industrial revolution. The point is merely that, prior to our current technological age, more of the physical world, our concrete existence, remained unmediated by the operational requirements of artificial objects. People, during the course of their daily goings-about, had greater liberty in their interpretation of the objects surrounding them and therefore ran less a risk of being completely integrated into a superimposed system of exchange.

That such a system of exchange, in fact, any system of exchange, together with its prescripts of decorum, protocol and interpretation, would be assimilated by the individual may be clearly substantiated through the notion of introjection. Marcuse (1991:10) explains it thus:

*The term introjection perhaps no longer describes the way in which the individual by himself reproduces and perpetuates the external controls exercised by his society. Introjection suggests a variety of relatively spontaneous processes by which a self (Ego) transposes the "outer" into the "inner".*

In other words, whatever the ambience of concrete existence may be implies the interpretive infrastructure of those participating in it. The flattening out of the external world is thus bound to detract from the texture of the inner landscapes of individuals. In short, a mechanized external reality cannot but impose an equally automated, operationalist internal reality.

### **2.3 Homogenization**

To further clarify the concept of introjection and its bearing on society as a whole, I would like to call upon the game of golf as metaphor for societal dynamics – more specifically, the putting green.

Firstly, the game of golf implies on the part of the participants an intention to guide a ball across an extended playing field through a series of obstacles towards a hole in the ground. They do this through a combination of applied technique and calculation, the former of which results from years spent training various types of swing. My concern, however, is with the latter: calculation.

Consider the putting green. It represents the final concrete phase of the ball's trek to the hole and requires the specific skill of putting. More often than not, the putting surface, with its various slopes and climbs, is undulated. This means that, depending on one's previous approach shot, one will often find oneself milling over the variables of gradient and propulsion whilst trying to formulate the ideal putting angle and force. Apart from the obvious X/Y axes – an upward or downward slope, and a left or right break – one has also to consider the firmness and texture of the green. These variables in unison determine which angles and velocities will be required for sinking the putt. In other words, a heavily undulating green discourages automatic putting, as failure to consider the variables, especially where they are extreme, is bound to lead to an unsuccessful attempt.

The most uninvolved putting surface (the most ideal, as well, some are bound to argue) is marked by a perfectly consistent distribution of qualities. It is, in other words, homogeneous. But such a green expects of the golfer little in the way of conscientious involvement. No anticipation of variables is expected and the golfer's relationship to the putting surface and its navigation is near reflexive. An undulating green, however vexing the calculation of its variables may be, brings to the fore the very private affair of interpretation. No longer does the golfer have at his disposal the luxury of reflex. Exactly that, however, brings him into contact with himself, insofar as calculation and personal interpretation are required, as well as with the game he is playing. The viscosity of the external context to be waded through is determined by the proliferation of dynamic variables within it, each acting effectively as a resistor insofar as requiring calculation and thereby dilating time and slowing down movement. In short, the more complex a situation is, the greater the requirement for presence of mind or subjective involvement.

Now if the variables on a distended putting green in combination congeal into a highly viscous problem, the solution to which is a highly calculated putt landing the ball in the hole, then it is so exactly because no ready-made protocols exist for redress of the highly dynamic interaction among these variables. The inter-subjective phenomenal field, our life-world, is no different. Its viscosity, which determines the requirements for personal involvement tailored according to each context, increases or lessens in proportion to the dynamic interrelation of variables: the greater the number of unmediated factors bearing upon a situation, the greater the requirement for personal application (assuming, of course, that the objective is the resolution of tension). A homogeneous problem, such as that posed by a level putting surface, leaves the subjects out of play and alienates them from themselves and the other (the game of golf, in this case). Homogeneity, thus, pacifies the individual. We have considered the makings of a homogeneous putting green; what, however, underlies a homogeneous life-world?

## 2.4 Wholes and parts

Consider briefly the Greek-derived term *homoeomerous*, which holds that any of the constituent parts of a greater whole or volume are identical with the unit they compose. Contrariwise, the term *anhomoeomerous* describes a composite unit made up of various, differentiated parts. According to Alexander Mourelatos (2006:391-392), *homoeomerous* may be understood as

*having parts, no matter how small, that share the constitutive properties of the whole...Thus, if a certain physical volume qualifies as blood, all its mathematically possible subvolumes, regardless of size, also qualify as blood. Blood is thus homoeomerous. By contrast, a face or a stomach or a leaf are anhomoeomerous: the parts of a face are not a face, etc.*

Thus conceived, a dynamic culture synergistically implies a referential framework other than the sum of its parts. A homogeneous culture, however, will reveal upon prying inquiry an indefinite repetition of parts within the whole.

Bear in mind, however, that this does not imply a life-world necessarily composed of a proliferated, single object. Phenomenology reminds us that things, be they cultural values, objects or subjects, derive their meaning not only from their concrete existence, but also from the implications of a larger constellation of signification. In *The World of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (2004:44) explains that "[t]he physics of relativity confirms that absolute and final objectivity is a mere dream by showing how each particular observation is strictly linked to the location of the observer and cannot be abstracted from this particular situation". But location, if it is truly to furnish us with a unique perspective, must surely then assume a certain heterogeneity of the phenomenal field. Thus construed, the reproduction of meaning through the systematic

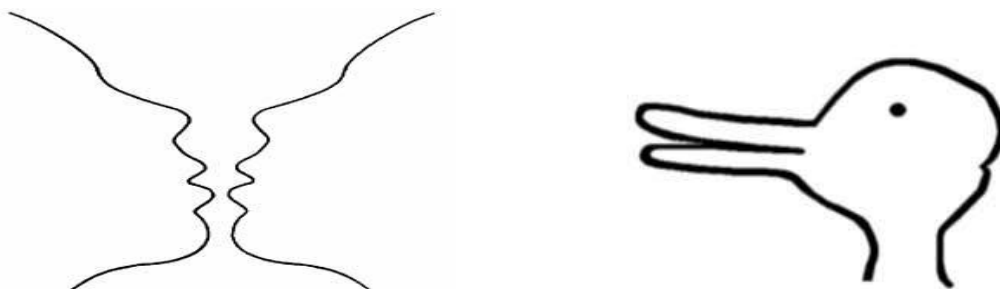
dissemination of a single class of objects could easily bereave spatial location of its unique vantage point. The resultant homogeneity promotes an impoverished interpretive constellation.

This enveloping constellation of signification may be best understood historically. Patrick Gardiner (2005:383) explains that, according to the principles of historicism, "*[t]he nature of any phenomenon can only be adequately comprehended by considering its place within a process of historical development*". History, thus, has led us through the industrial revolution down an objectifying path towards a fabricated forest – a concrete jungle in which we, the fauna, must navigate an almost exclusively manufactured flora.

The flora, if it is not clear by now, are the modern age's objects of consumption. Some may object that modern industry is giving us with accelerated efficiency an ever-expanding range of objects and is thereby also expanding the choices available to us. They would, however, be guilty of overlooking the shared ideological injunctions set forth by all these objects.

We may thus consider the dissemination of a singular exchange value throughout the sphere of manufactured objects, that is, the modern milieu, a kind of flattening of the cultural context. It reduces various objects, and also values, which generally pertain to some concrete state of affairs, to interchangeable, transposable phenomena. Herbert Marcuse (1991:14) understands this reduction as the flattening of negation; a process that, through the globalization of a specific context, insidiously dispenses with the peripheral meanings of objects. The various objects' remaining nuclei of meaning, so understood, reflect only the globalized context and can serve to differentiate these objects only in terms of degree. It is exactly through this wholesale purging of differentiated qualities – variables distinct in quality, not only degree – that the spectacle of culture is robbed of its dynamism. Where the focal figure is in hue and quality like the background against which it takes place, all tension dissipates and interpretation is reduced to an automated introjection.

Consider briefly, and before diving into a cursory reading of Gestalt theory, Wittgenstein's reversible figure, the duck/rabbit, or Edgar Rubin's, the face/chalice. In both cases, a kind of cognitive reversal results in the inversion of the imagery, seeing now this, now that. In the latter case, that of Rubin's, the inversion implies primarily an alternation in figure/background.



According to Robert Richardson (2006: 311), "*figure-ground effects are used to enforce the conclusion that interpretation is central to perception, and that perceptions are no more than hypotheses based on sensory data*". This explains how, under certain conditions, Wittgenstein's reversible duck/rabbit would at first appear a singular figure. Moreover, however indeterminate a background or context may seem, however non-descript its ambience or hue, there exists in it a tension that favours resolution by way of certain interpretations, the emergence of specific images.

Consider, for instance, Merleau-Ponty's (2012:17-18) mast/forest analogy:

*If I am walking on a beach toward a boat that has run aground, and if the funnel or the mast merges with the forest that borders the dune, then there will be a moment in which these details suddenly reunite with the boat and become welded to it. As I approached, I did not perceive the resemblances or the proximities that were, in the end, about to reunite with the superstructure of the ship in an unbroken picture. I merely felt that the appearance of the object was about to change, that something was imminent in this tension, as the storm is imminent in the clouds. The spectacle was suddenly reorganized, satisfying my vague expectation.*

Now, bearing in mind the latter account of tension, we may venture the claim that the figure, in this case the mast which was initially part of the background, resisted by way of aesthetic discrepancy complete integration into the view of the forest. Its individuation was attested to exactly by its indissolubility, its relational conflict with proximal stimuli. Inversely, the background may in many a case be present, by implication, in the figure. Take, for example, a collection of colour-designating nouns, including among others the term orange. The most immediate interpretation of the term orange, I would wager, would be that of a colour, notwithstanding the possibility of its also being a fruit.

This is echoed by Koffka (1935:176) when he proposes that "*[t]he whole is something else than the sum of its parts, because summing is a meaningless procedure, whereas the whole-part relationship is meaningful*". The implications of the latter statement ring true for the colour/fruit illustration. Taken as a unit, we consider the collection of nouns a kind of linguistic colour wheel, which precludes transcendent interpretations pertaining to edibles. But through summing we arrived at the conclusion that all parts must, if a certain kind of contiguity among them is observed, abide by this synthetic relation.

However, in this case, the whole is different from at least one of its parts, orange, and may thus not be considered homoeomerous. But, in the final account, the whole most definitely influences

the process of interpretation. At times, the whole, on account of its vastness, escapes our perception; it is, however, nonetheless implied by our apprehension of its contiguous parts. Culture is such a whole. Within such a whole, the meaning and values of proximal significations determine, at least in part, the nature and quality of any perceived figure. Essence, thus conceived, is both evanescent and contingent, dependent upon historical factors and instrumental, by way of various configurations and sequences of phenomena, in the formulation of the referential framework. The significance of the whole/part relationship and units of value gave rise to the central tenet of Gestalt theory. According to Crochetière *et al.* (1994:910): "*The core of it was a faith that the world is a sensible coherent whole, that reality is organized into meaningful parts, and that natural units have their own structure.*"

### **3. THE CONSUMER CULTURE AND FLATTENING OF THE PHENOMENAL FIELD**

Now that we have established the bearing of proximal stimuli, be they concrete or cultural, upon the subject's interpretive processing, we may proceed to take a closer look at the effects of a drastically homogenized life-world. The basis, if it is unclear, is that the life-world is composed of stimuli, and that the consumer industry's relentless distribution of a single class of objects must surely reduce the individual's referential framework to the one-dimensionality implied by said objects. This essentially flattens the landscape people inhabit and crowds out, for the sake of promoting an exchange-based ethos, many an alternative view.

#### **3.1 Deficit needs**

Let us start by considering the composition of the phenomenal field, our life-world. By phenomenal field we mean everything to which human beings, in their daily goings-about, have access, everything that bears upon their senses and impresses upon them the reality of being-in-a-world. Two kinds of object populate the phenomenal field: one concrete, and one incorporeal. The former includes such things as one may gain physical access to, including also other subjects. The latter, which owes a great deal of its hue and ambience to the concrete aspect of life, includes cultural values, protocols for engagement, interpretations and so on.

Consider how, as Maslow (2011:31) suggests, "*deficit needs are shared by all members of the human species*" and that "*the deficits, i.e., the species requirements, must ordinarily be fairly well satisfied before real individuality can develop fully*". Bearing this in mind, people's intentions, the nature of their specific approach to the world, will most likely reflect their concrete situation. In other words, an individual's concern with higher-order needs suggests that the lower-order needs, specifically those of nourishment and shelter, have been or are continuously satisfied. Maslow (2011:31-32) argues:

*The needs for safety, belongingness, love relations and for respect can be satisfied only by other people, i.e., only from outside the person. A person in this dependent position cannot really be said to be governing himself, or in control of his own fate. He must be beholden to the sources of supply of needed gratifications. Their wishes, their whims, their rules and laws govern him and must be appeased lest he jeopardize his sources of supply.*

This would suggest that, if the objects meant to satisfy certain deficit-needs are to be successfully obtained and utilized, the subject must adhere strictly to the laws of their exchange and the protocols<sup>13</sup> governing their operation. Thus construed, if a luxury vehicle is to be obtained and fulfil, apart from its primary function of transport, its secondary function as status coefficient,<sup>14</sup> then it must be earned and driven in the right way, at the right time and in the right place (so as to be seen); it cannot be acquired via illicit channels, nor driven in hiding. The implication of the latter statement is that, once basic needs have been satisfied and we are in the realm of status and acknowledgment needs, the liturgy by which an object's status coefficient is brought to bear often outranks other, more natural protocols of interaction and is afforded precedence over those customs pertaining merely to primary functioning. It is exactly through the margin between function and stature that object acquires its exchange value.

According to Baudrillard, this margin between utility and exchange value, relative to which status can be quantified, may be considered a phenomenon of waste. In other words, the purchase of an object at a price exceeding its utility, strictly speaking, serves to display precisely how much an individual can afford to spend on redundant features/functions. It is one's affluence expressed through waste, thus, that becomes a mark of status. He explains it thus:

*The notion of utility, which has rationalistic, economistic origins, thus needs to be revised in light of a much more general social logic in which waste, far from being an irrational residue, takes on a positive function, taking over where rational utility leaves off to play its part in a higher social functionality – a social logic in which waste even appears ultimately as the essential function, the extra degree of expenditure, superfluity, the ritual uselessness of expenditure for nothing becoming the site of production of values, differences and meanings on both the individual and the social level.*  
(Baudrillard, 1998:43-44)

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<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that liturgy and protocol may be used interchangeably and that both refer to the specific techniques and actions required to realize an object's function, primary or secondary.

<sup>14</sup> Status coefficient refers to the object's secondary function, that of increasing one's standing, and implies an exchange value in excess of the object's use-value.

We may argue that the latter hypothesis owes its veracity to the nature of deficit needs, which, in general, is marked by shortage. The best expression, thus, of mankind's dominion over nature, his having risen above the most basic states of indebtedness, is through a systematic and institutionalized profligacy. This psychological exigency is catered for by the consumer industry. It provides us with an ever-expanding range of objects, the exchange value of which is no longer governed by utility, strictly speaking, but by an ensemble of superficial differentiae representative of excess.

In this respect, Sanjay Sood and Claudia Townsend (2012:415) "*propose that products that are aesthetically beautiful are indeed a form of self-affirmation*". They further argue that "*[t]his beauty premium applies to product choice such that associating oneself with a beautiful product similarly improves a consumer's sense of self*" (ibid.). Such a heightened sense of self is also borne witness to by other people, themselves also well aware of the dynamics and liturgies involved. So understood, a product's aesthetic qualities may serve the aims of esteem. It should be noted, however, that a product's aesthetic potentiality may be accounted for by more than mere symmetry of form. In our day and age, a product's aesthetic superiority, and by extension its status coefficient, is effectively represented by what Baudrillard (1998:90) dubs marginal differentiation, an example of which, he continues, is "*a toaster that makes you initialled toast*". Moreover, he adds, "*[t]hese marginal differences mark out the most rigorous social discrimination, in accordance with a general law of the distribution of distinctive matter...Not everything is permitted, and violations of this code of differences, which, though it is a shifting one, is no less a ritual for all that, are punished*" (ibid.). The result is a society eager to buy into gadgets and gimmicks.

Consider, for example, the most recent supposed advancements introduced into the realm of the *home theatre* (which is in and of itself already an expression of waste). Mirrored by the price, we have at the apex of TV engineering those TVs most elaborately embellished with functions almost completely detached from the actual visual experience. One such a function is found in the new "smart" range of TV sets, allowing the viewer complete control over the navigation of channels, the adjustment of parameters and selection of applications using only gestures of hand. What is exorbitantly sold through this function is the supposed benefit of dispensing with the traditional remote control. This, it is implied, redresses such problems as flat batteries, misplacement or malfunction due to an unruly puppy's penchant for chewing whatever is in view. Such problems, however, are completely superficial and have, I would argue, hitherto posed no real threat to the viewing pleasures of the devout sofa-spud. It is, thus, the solution of an imposed, superficial problem that is awarded the stamp of status and pounced upon by the consumer in the hope of climbing the ladder of prestigious differentiation. But since the problem is superficial, that is, grounded almost entirely in, first, its solution, any added function may

become the mark of distinction. If by some gratuitous turn of events, a viewing angle perfectly perpendicular to the screen comes to be considered of vital importance to one's viewing pleasure, then the motorization of an automatically adjusting rotating screen, using some or other eye-tracking device, would become the obsessive objective of the engineering department. Once it has been designed, it is bound to be sold at stratospheric prices attesting to the aristocratic conquering of nature and the excess of resources left after having done so.

The point, however, is that the supposed benefits of a perfectly perpendicular viewing angle are fabricated, reformulated as a problem and then sold as a highly specialized solution. This unnecessary specialization becomes the mark of distinction. Moreover, most acutely visible in the ludicrous nature of the latter examples of specialization, these gadgets, these boasts of ego, are completely contingent, interchangeable and therefore devoid of any true signification, individuation or authentic value. Dressing up in objects of this kind would thus do little to express any true aspects of the individual's unique being – apart from their penchant for profligacy, that is.

### **3.2 Superficial meaning**

Our phenomenal context, the life-world we are geared into, has since the industrial revolution been overrun by exactly such objects and requires us to navigate between, and interact with, transposable superfluity. Baudrillard (1998:30) seems to be lamenting what he considers the forfeiture of diversity when he says of naturally occurring phenomena:

*These things which were once dispersed, which once generated anxiety and complexity in real life, in our anarchic and archaic towns and cities, all these sundered activities, these activities which were more or less irreducible one to another, are now at last mixed and blended, climatized and homogenized in the same sweeping vista of perpetual shopping...the substance of life unified in this way, in this universal digest, can no longer have in it any meaning: what constituted the dreamwork, the labour of poetry and of meaning – in other words, the grand schemata of displacement and condensation, the great figures of metaphor and contradiction, which are based on the living interconnection of distinct elements – is no longer possible.*

It would seem that reproduction – in this case, the reproduction of the status coefficient within the superfluity margin introduced globally into the consumer object – detracts from the potential, peripheral identity or value of a thing or rite. Walter Benjamin (1936:246) explains this, and simultaneously mirrors Baudrillard's view, through his notion of aura:

*If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch. This image makes it easy to comprehend the social bases of the contemporary decay of the aura. It rests on two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things closer spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction.*

Once again, it should by now be clear that the introduction of the status coefficient through the institutionalization of waste reduces the consumer object to a single class of signification. These objects, as we have seen, are so widely spread throughout the phenomenal landscape, leaving only the most remote reaches of civilization unblemished, their signification weaves a web of interpretation, a referential constellation of sorts that covers all of society and prescribes all manner of interpretations. According to Baudrillard (1998:89), under an aegis of self-affirmation and differentiation, "*[i]t is industrial monopoly concentration which, abolishing the real differences between human beings, homogenizing persons and products, simultaneously ushers in the reign of differentiation*".<sup>15</sup> I have referred to the above, earlier in this article, as the homogenization of the life-world – a process of reification in consequence of which cultural values, objects and linguistic units congeal into their most socio-economically relevant meanings. This, in turn, prevents transcendental interpretations as would ordinarily have followed from unique configurations of distinct, diverse proximal elements.

Consider the following illustration of the latter statement.

Silver	Green	Orange
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Notwithstanding those among the readership who anticipated my argument, in all likelihood several interpretations of the terms in the latter list were overlooked. If considered not a theory of truth, but rather a description of how people generally arrive at their various interpretations, then coherentism ought to provide an apt explanation for such omissions. According to DePaul's (2006:154) account of coherentism, "*[b]eliefs representing knowledge are known or justified in virtue of their relations to other beliefs, specifically, in virtue of belonging to a coherent system of beliefs*". This corroborates Merleau-Ponty's mast/forest analogy insofar as drawing on the same principle of tension. If our immediate interpretation of a thing, be it a cultural value, object or

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<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that Baudrillard uses the term *differentiation* in reference to the marginal differences between manufactured objects.

subject, is not accompanied by a sense of tension, a dissonance in what is phenomenally given, our initial perspective will likely persevere. It is only through tension that we become aware of the borders between differentiae and come to consider them conceptually/objectively distinct. Such tension, however, reflects in the first place a diversity of the individual's inner landscape. It stands to reason that someone well acquainted with maritime concepts would more easily detect the mast. A broadened referential framework, in other words, would most likely allow a greater number of interpretations.

Bearing this in mind, let us now return to the list of supposed colours. It should now be clear that, apart from their respective designations of colour, each term also has further meanings: silver is also a precious metal, orange also a fruit and, perhaps less obviously, green is also a state of immaturity. That accounts for the additional meanings available within the confines of being all of them nouns. However, one of these terms is actually a verb as well, but since we live in an age where one hardly comes into contact with smiths, it probably completely escaped detection: the term silver also denotes the process whereby a mirror is crafted.

The point I am trying to make, contrary to probable anticipation, is not that shades of meaning are overlooked by interlocutors steeped in conversation. This would require in the first place deployment of such extracurricular shades of meaning. No, my view is that these shades of meaning are, in fact, absent altogether from what we may intend through our speaking, writing, showing and interaction – that is, an introjected homogeneity in accordance with which people think, say and mean the same things by the same symbols. Though this, at first glance, seems an auspicious indicator of the probability of effective communication among subjects, such effective communication would be thus exactly in virtue of being, in the first place, superficial and one-dimensional. Devoid of all dynamics, all discrepancy and, most importantly, the unique differentiation that, as a kind of distance, allows the individuated existence of subjects/objects, such communication contributes little to either the expression or comprehension of the interlocutor. It does, however, perpetuate the total administration of a synthetic equilibrium that, by virtue of flattening the textural qualities and suppressing dynamic difference, makes for such smooth operation as is in general only to be expected of the machine.

Herbert Marcuse (1991:174) explains this homogeneity as follows:

*The language which provides most of the material for the analysis is a purged language, purged not only of its unorthodox vocabulary, but also of the means for expressing any other contents than those furnished to the individuals by their society.*

The effect, essentially, of such impoverishment of the referential infrastructure is the loss of the distance between things, between people, that allows their differentiated existence. Brief

consideration of Pauli's exclusion principle ought to clarify this. According to Paul Murdin (2001), the Pauli exclusion principle is "*a principle of quantum theory, devised in 1925 by Wolfgang Pauli (1900-58), which states that no two fermions may exist in the same quantum state. The quantum state of a particle is defined by a set of numbers that describe quantities such as energy, angular momentum and spin*". The idea that no two objects can simultaneously occupy the same space is an extension of Pauli's principle. A difference in state thus implies a distance between objects. Inversely, an identical state of distinct elements may be considered to collapse the interposing distance by allowing them to occupy the same space simultaneously. This notion is more generally understood as transposition and implies that the distance between separate things, in the case of their being reducible one to the other, is at most contingent – one might even say merely nominal. Walter Benjamin (1936:246) explains *authenticity* as an aura dependent on spatial differentiation: "*The concept of aura which was proposed above with reference to historical objects may usefully be illustrated with reference to the aura of natural ones. We define the aura of the latter as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be.*"

The reader will, I hope, allow me the following supposition. Communication among interlocutors, if it is to be of any worth, must in some way or other refer back at least in part to the logos of the conversing subjects, which in turn depends on there actually being an authentic logos based in more than the mere introjection of marginal difference. In the absence, thus, of authenticity of being, it may be argued that contact with both oneself and others will suffer and subsequently lead to a breakdown in communication. Phenomenologically speaking, the formulation of perspective issues from the introjection of the phenomenal field, the proximal stimuli of which, their nature and dynamics, greatly dictate the possibility of authentic being. The unfettered dissemination of a single ideological framework, such as is the case with consumer culture, effectively dissolves the space between subjects, as well as objects, and brings their superimposed, superficially rendered selves in such close contact that selves and others can no longer be told apart. The logical implication of this is that one's various inter-subjective relations come to represent no more than mere transposition, and the people they are tied to no more than mere variables within an administered operationalism. This insipid, homogeneous life-world, which stands in stark contrast to that milieu envisioned by the metaphor of undulation, alienates people first from themselves and then, correspondingly, also from those around them. For it is the not knowing what is meant by a phrase or gesture that keeps us asking questions, and the asking of questions that lifts us from ourselves so as to enable appreciation of the other's indissolubility. It is this *not knowing* that is systematically being overcome by an institutionalized distribution of a single curriculum.

### 3.3 The manufactured object as panopticon

We have seen that the drastic homogenization of the life-world leads through introjection to a similar impoverishment of the cognitive landscape. One's experience of the life-world, in turn, is then reduced to a prescribed set of possibilities. Since these possibilities are greatly limited, the epistemic distance between parts also greatly suffers and leads to the mistaken identification of objects one with the others. But how is the phenomenal context in the first place homogenized? Through the manufactured object, of course.

Before delving into Jeremy Bentham's formulation of the panopticon, a few remarks and some allusion to Heidegger can help to set the stage. Since the consumer industry is, as was suggested earlier, an extension of operationalism, we are here concerned with the identification of objects with the techniques used to activate them. So construed, there exists a formal liturgy to be observed if the object is to function and fulfil its purpose. Heidegger (2010:67) seems to be saying something of the sort when he states that "*[t]he closest kind of dealing is not mere perceptual cognition [Erkennen], but, rather, a handling, using, and taking care which has its own kind of 'knowledge' [Erkenntnis]*". Interpretation, I am given to understand, requires more than mere discernment. It seems that, for Heidegger, it also includes a subject's active engagement with the object/matter in question. Moreover, he seems to be suggesting that such engagement is beholden to a special kind of knowledge – perhaps a kind of knowledge peculiar to the object itself. So construed, the function of manufactured objects, that is, their roles as status coefficient, implies observance of certain rites and creates expectations of sorts. And since the manufactured object is so widely distributed throughout our life-world, it is ideally positioned for the didactic dissemination of norms and perspectives. The object thus becomes a kind of custodian, overseeing behavioural aspects and promoting specific interactive processes amongst subjects. You, the reader, will allow me, I hope, a comparison between the object so construed and behavioural conditioning. Moreover, the increase in status resulting from an object's being properly taken hold of also implies, inversely, a loss of status where the rite is not observed and the object not properly taken hold of. Such a loss serves as a deterrent and effectively positions the object as a means of discipline.

Let us now consider Foucault's (1991:206) understanding of discipline as a means of power and mechanism of ideological dissemination:

*“Discipline” may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a “physics” or an “anatomy” of power, a technology. And it may be taken over either by “specialized” institutions, or by institutions that use it as an essential instrument for a particular end, or by pre-existing authorities*

*that find in it a means of enforcing or reorganizing their internal mechanisms of power, or by apparatuses that have made discipline their principle of internal functioning, or finally by state apparatuses whose major, if not exclusive, function is to assure that discipline reigns over society as a whole.*

To be clear, so as to advance its own ends of total administration and power, the consumer industry demands a kind of enforceable subservience on the part of the subjects. In this respect, Foucault's understanding of discipline applies rather well to the modern milieu. The variety of objects provided by the consumer industry pacifies us through the illusion of freedom of choice. For though the procurement of the specific object is a matter of choice, its generic function of status-coefficient is not. Thus we are socialized into a system of superficial value attribution, indebted to its objects and constrained by its liturgy. In the light of its global distribution, its having penetrated into almost every nook and cranny of our lives, as well as its imposition of formalized ritual, the manufactured object very much represents the same play of power relations found in the panopticon. It is akin to a disciplinary technique that, according to Foucault (1983:153), *"does not simply replace other forms of power which existed in society. Rather, it invests or colonizes them, linking them together, extending their hold, honing their efficiency ..."*. Let us then consider this panopticon and its implied relations of power.

In his article "Jeremy Bentham", Jim Thomas (2004:2) explains that *"Bentham conceptualized a single round building with a floor-to-ceiling guard tower in the centre surrounded by tiers of cells ... Most significantly, this new technology would allow a single guard to have visual access of every cell and prisoner"*. Central to the panopticon as disciplinary technique is the fact that, as Kim Davies (2012:1) explains, *"[t]he panopticon would make each inmate unsure of whether he or she was being viewed. Such ambiguity would make prisoners feel as if they were always being watched"*. Thus convinced of continuous surveillance, and thereby running the risk of reprimand in the event of transgression, each inmate becomes in himself an administrator of prison protocol.

The modern life-world, replete with consumer objects that demand for their functioning an observance of a formal, institutionalized liturgy, is no different. Each consumer object enforces observance of its protocols exactly through the threat of diminished status. The status coefficient, paradoxically present in each object as an explicit subliminal function, thus essentially represents the prison warden, and the objects, in turn, represent the cells.

There is, however, a notable difference between the dynamics present in the panopticon and those in consumer society, but, ironically, in the case of society, that difference serves to further bolster the efficacy of institutionalized control. In the panopticon prison, cells are isolated one from the other, and therefore their inmates hidden from one another. Such is not the case in

society. There, most interactive processes take place on a public stage in full view of others. Complete observance of the object's rituals, apart from being dually enjoined by deficit-needs and the status coefficient, is further enforced by the knowledge that others bear witness to our observance of liturgy and can thereby map our progress towards, or from, status. The object, and its attendant status coefficient, thus facilitates the formation of a society of policemen and women wherein each individual becomes both warden and inmate. A state similar to this was envisioned by the clairvoyant George Orwell (1983:16): suffice to say that "*[a] day never passed when spies and saboteurs acting under his directions were not unmasked by the Thought Police*". The result, once again, is a life-world homogenized and populous repressed by a globally administered ethos of exchange; only, in this case, the coercive, martial nature of the consumer industry is on the foreground. We are left once again with a flattened landscape wherein transposition is the norm and subjects may be easily substituted for one another – an alienated state of non-being based in a material penal code of sorts. The proliferation of consumer objects, however, amounts to more than just consumptive martial law; it also interrupts the unfettered space between individuals.

#### **4. THE CONSUMER CONTEXT AND ITS IMPLIED DIVISION OF INTERACTION**

The modern consumer environment differs markedly from that of the pre-industrial age in various respects, the whole ensemble of which is not relevant at present. However, one aspect in particular is rather important: the overthrow of natural phenomena following the relentless and far-reaching distribution of manufactured objects. This overthrow is considered by Featherstone (2007:13) an explicit feature of consumerism: "*Consumer culture is premised upon the expansion of capitalist commodity production which has given rise to a vast accumulation of material culture in the form of consumer goods and sites for purchase and consumption.*" The displacement, thus, of all things non-consumerist is a dominant feature of consumerism itself. Precisely this proliferation of objects, effectively disrupting the inter-subjective distance, allows me to draw from the Marxian theory of alienated labour a further critique of the consumer age, and once again the point of criticism is that of imposed alienation.

Now, let us start with the simplest of the consumer-induced forms of inter-subjective alienation. Here follows my reasoning.

Since objects are not people, and since objects, following the industrial revolution, have become widely proliferated and crowd the space among people, it may be argued that the interaction among people is increasingly subjected to the mediation of said objects. Moreover, since the manufactured object requires for its functioning as *status coefficient* observance of a formal liturgy, it stands to reason that the human-oriented protocols are being crowded out. Thus, the object represents a kind of barrier to inter-subjective interaction, which, since the dissociation is

necessarily proportional in degree to the degree of object proliferation, has come to be rather extensive. In short, the object constantly interrupts. The alienating effect upon the relations among people should be clear.

However, there exists within the consumer culture a far more insidious mechanism of alienation. Its dynamics may be best described in the light of the Marxian theory of divided labour. In his article, "Alienation, the division of labour and free social activity", Peter Critchley (2001:5) interprets the effects of alienated labour as follows: "*The capitalist division of labour fragmented the individual and the community, stunted individual growth and confined the individual to fixed roles and tasks leaving no scope for personal development. The individual thus became reduced to a fixed occupational role.*"

My concern here, as the above quotation suggests, is with the reduction of people to isolated functions peculiar to the production of specific objects. This process, which, by virtue of dispensing with the need for an individual's holistic involvement in the productive project, insidiously leads individuals over a period of time to identify themselves with a singular function. Thus they are alienated from themselves and cast in terms exactly like those sharing a similar plight.

Marx (1985:217) says of alienated labour: "*Labour is exterior to the worker, that is, it does not belong to his essence. Therefore he does not confirm himself in his work, he denies himself, feels miserable instead of happy, deploys no free physical and intellectual energy, but mortifies his body and ruins his mind.*"

Under such conditions, he proceeds, "*[m]an (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions of eating, drinking, and procreating, at most also in his dwelling and dress, and feels himself an animal in his human functions*" (ibid.).

It would seem, then, that the fragmented mode of production introduces into the labour process, which is the human being's means of subsistence, a cultural trend demanding that whole lives be spent fulfilling a single operational function such as screwing on toothpaste caps or bolting on nuts. Not only is the worker estranged from the final product in whose creation he had a hand, but he is also denied, in his daily goings-about, the expression of a plethora of personal attributes and skills.

I offer the following example. Consider a 16th century carpenter. He had at his disposal no ready-made cuts of wood. Quarter-sawing had to be done manually by him; so too the chiselling, joinery and, finally, the polishing of his handiwork. In his creation of, say, a table, therefore, he was called upon to display and master a multitude of skills and techniques, the dynamic combination of which, in its peculiar arrangement and deployment, served as a means of true self-expression. Finally, he also had dominion over his creation. Precisely the opposite

conditions obtain in the production-line. There the plethora of skills an employee may have are repressed and ultimately atrophy, for there is no time or energy left after a day's work to practise them. Nor does the worker stand in any other than a relation of exchange value to the manufactured object (in accordance with which the money earned creating the product has to be spent buying it back). The latter of these interrelated forms of alienation is not my chief concern; rather, it is the alienation of humankind's holistic nature that interests me and also provides the basis for the argument to follow.

At various instances throughout this article mention has been made of the drastic transformation to which our life-world has been subjected since the industrial revolution. The relentless dissemination of consumer objects was suggested as the cause of the interruption of the space between people –the very space that allows differentiation. It has been noted, with due credit to Jean Baudrillard, that these objects imply a formal liturgy to be observed if their function as status coefficient is to be realized (a requirement inherent to an exchange-based system of relation). There exists, thus, an institutionalized protocol for the interaction with others and the environment.

But apart from rendering people's actions bland and uniform, this institutionalized protocol, like the modern factory, also dispenses with the requirement for holistic human involvement. It does this by replacing interactive moments between subjects and subjects/objects, which had prior to the manufactured objects' encroachment been the preserve of human reflection, with mediating objects and their attendant liturgies.

Let me explain. Between interlocutors, the interposing objects require observance of certain operational protocols if they, the objects, are to be activated and thereby serve as links between people (the assumption here is that objects are crowding out all inter-subjective space and must therefore be moved through to get to another person). Some of these protocols, however, are so rudimentary – a supposed benefit, since now autopilot takes over where our minds should have been active – that they may be observed almost automatically, that is, they become mechanized. If we grant that interaction among people is nothing short of an advanced system of signification and interpretation, then we would also grant that the automation of its various aspects must surely greatly impoverish the relationships themselves.

This is the case exactly on account of the "outsourcing" of interactive means, the management of which had originally been the preserve of rationality. Now, however, in this landscape of consumer objects, what is required of the individual steeped in conversation, or otherwise engaged inter-subjectively, is the sheepish recitation of generic, transposable mantras from which the haecceity of the interlocutor is becoming increasingly absent. A subject's indissolubility is founded upon such haecceity and finds expression only through the individual's holistic involvement in every-day life. But in the absence of holistic involvement, what we are

brought into contact with during our engagement of others is the same set of observances we undertake ourselves. We see in others only ourselves exactly because all selves, in such a system, are mere clauses in an imposed object treaty. The conceptual distance between people is tragically overcome by the interpolation of superficial object-links and, as a consequence, the requirement for searching dialogue among people is rendered moot (since little or no difference between people remains to be addressed by such dialogue). By virtue of being buried beneath an interminable number of automated, dissociated rituals and formalities, a decorum of sorts, the essence of the other, and the self as well, remains obscured, inaccessible and alienated.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The life-world is changing. What used to be a natural landscape has since the industrial revolution been systematically transformed into the operational terms of a global factory bent on profit, pacification of the populous, dominion over nature and, in general, total administration. Towns envelop cities, cities encircle central business districts and everything is furnished in the sterile style of a complete functionality, operationalism and exchange value. Even though we are already seemingly teetering on the brink of complete automation, this centrifugal process, whereby nature and people alike are overthrown and replaced by an efficient one-dimensionality, seems to be gathering momentum. People no longer live among the spontaneous beauty of rivers and forests, nor do they wake up to the natural clock of birdsong; instead, they navigate and negotiate an endless labyrinth of objects, obstacles, to a synthetic rhythm imposed by a ritual of exchange.

This is the consumer industry's legacy: a life-world consisting predominantly of synthetic signifiers, signs and symbols. And since our understanding of life, objects and each other depends, as the tenets of historical consciousness suggest, upon the texture of our concrete existence, an impoverished object matrix must surely drastically limit our access to uniquely transcendental interpretations. We have come to experience and define ourselves, others and objects in operational terms that mirror the veering of the system rather than differentiating between unique phenomena in accordance with their own indissolubility. Even our interactions with others have been subjected to the institutionalized liturgies tied to interposing, interrupting objects. As if to add insult to injury, the system of objects also oversees our subscription to the consumer ideology, rewarding those who abide and ostracizing those who do not. The system, furthermore, also promotes the integration of subjects into an operational nomenclature – a kind of forced sublimation, which, dispensing in particular with such meanings, interpretations and intentions as do not fit the prescripts of the consumer constellation, disavows any kind of transcendental self-expression. The resultant flattening of individual idiosyncrasy renders people in homogeneous terms and consequently undermines the very epistemic distance that enables differentiation, in turn also alienating them from themselves as well as others.

If we grant, at the very least, that our understanding of life, and also our access to the transcendental potentialities in nature and ourselves, develops in lockstep with the ebb and flow of our surroundings, then surely we must concede that superficial, homogeneous proximal stimuli bode ill for any project of true relation and authentic being. Moreover, if we grant that truth is a subjective matter determined historically over and above the mere utility of a thing, then surely we must also admit that things, having been administered over the course of centuries by institutions intending little apart from domination, necessarily contain the ideological infrastructures of those who sanctioned and financed their design, manufacture and distribution. These objects, these illusions of bounty, indebt all and any to a universal praxis of exchange that renders people interchangeable in line with operational terms. These objects bind us to an impoverished system of meaning and interpretation, which in turn shapes the world we live in. From the loss of transcendental potentiality, a single uniform is tailored and distributed among the occidental world's unfortunate inhabitants, leaving them differentiated contingently in terms only of mere superficial plumage.

As a drop in a homoeomerous mass of water can be known, in the final analysis, only volumetrically, so too are we mere indeterminate exchange values increasing the mass of this omnipresent system of consumer objects. If I am you, and you are them, how are we to be told apart? How are we to know each other if we cannot be known individually ourselves?

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## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

### 1. THE PROBLEM PROPOSED BY THE STUDY AND FINDINGS

Our age is one of commerce. Its ensemble of stock includes the greater part of our life-world's contents. Such contents, it was argued, are not limited to material phenomena but also include units of value, gestures, cultural perspectives and the like. Now, since the commodification of the life-world's phenomena subjects us, humanity, to an ethos of functional exchange, it stands to reason that even those of our interactions that fall outside the domain of commerce are nonetheless influenced by principles and value appraisals based on exchange. A dire consequence of this is the commodification also of character traits, idiosyncrasies, inflections of logos and intentions. In accordance with the hierarchical ordering of tradable material property, the individual's character and attributes come to be appraised in terms of their exchange value. The result of this is a world in which the self-expressive meanings of an individual's gestures and object engagements are dispensed with in favour of more functional, integrated interpretations. In short, horizons of meaning contract as the plethora of meanings to which an object/gesture may have been subjected are drastically reduced to accommodate but a few functional interpretations.

Within such a life-world, we have at our disposal objects/gestures expressive of the system of exchange, not of our differentiated selves. The problem, then, may be formulated as follows: if one's interpretation of the life-world's phenomena, as well as one's subsequent expressive use of them, is prescribed by principles of exchange rather than exigencies of self-narration, how is one to express any authentic, transcendental aspects of oneself above and beyond the system itself?

For a homogeneous phenomenal context, by virtue of a diminished contrast between its elements, limits the expressive potential of objects/gestures by integrating their meanings into a single class of signification. Should we argue that the potential for differentiation, as provided by a heterogeneous phenomenal context, is indispensable to the cultivation of an authentic self, then it follows that authenticity of being will greatly suffer under the yoke of one-dimensionality. Moreover, if it is through the discernment of our fellow interlocutors' differentiae that we may access in them that which sets them apart and so doing participate in meaningful dialogue, then how could true relation be possible under the repressive rule of one-dimensional functionality? In short, can it be argued that a consumer ethics, by fixating us on liturgies of exchange and subjecting us to superficial models of value attribution, essentially obscures our transcendental human qualities, alienating us from both ourselves and others?

Answering the following questions was the objective of Articles 1 and 2 respectively.

- What does authenticity of being entail; how, if at all, is it based in the phenomenal context and what part does it play in the cultivation of meaningful relationships?
- What is consumerism; how does it transform the phenomenal context and what, if any, are the consequences for human relations?

## 2. ARGUMENTS AND CRITIQUE

Regarding authenticity, we have seen that the term may be used in reference to both the origin of a work as well as the expressive coefficient of an object/gesture – that is, the ability of said object/gesture accurately to express the intentions of its author. The latter formulation, to which we turned in an attempt to document the conditions of authentic being, was defined as expressive authenticity. This formulation, it was further argued, draws from both the external phenomenal context and the internal, private propensities of the subject. In fact, *expressive* implies a kind of making public and therefore requires the mediation of a phenomenal field external to the individual. We may, thus, consider authenticity of being a kind of conscientious synthesis of world and will. Following this, one's truly unique intentions drive one, firstly, to expressively harness one's surroundings and then, subsequently, to transcend in one's use of them their conventional usage/meaning.

Moreover, it was argued that for people to be in meaningful contact one with the other, their use of gestures/objects must in some way refer the other party back, beyond what these units imply about the phenomenal context, to some or other bespoke aspect of themselves. Failing this, there would be no sense to their communication, for it would be as though they were merely in contact with the system to which they owe their shared perspectives. Thus considered, communication owes its potential value to a certain distance between the ideas of the involved interlocutors. Obscurity, ironically, provides exactly such distance – a kind of dissociation forcing us dialogically to overcome our own perspectives in an attempt to understand the other's. Suspending judgment so as to reach beyond one's own perspective in an attempt to understand the other is nothing short of transcendental – a movement of sorts. And through this movement we may come to appreciate not only the nuances of the other's perspective, its contextual validity, but also the value of interpretive mobility. It is in this *becoming* that we may avert the stasis implied by collectivity and rise to an elevated plain of thoughtful, authentic being. It is in this *becoming* that we may know of the other that they too are *becoming* and that they are not merely the indiscriminate regurgitations of an imposed phenomenal context. Authenticity of being, that is, *becoming* instead of mere arrogation, is central to a non-alienated existence.

Regarding the origins of consumerism, it may be argued that it is the species-wide dependence on material means that gave birth to an ethos of exchange, which, through a formal

institutionalization brought about by the industrial revolution, sanctioned a consumer ethics. Consumerism distributes a certain class of objects and in so doing also facilitates the dissemination of a certain class of liturgies. These rites, as it were, crystallize into a referential matrix of interdependent meanings (not unlike the principle on which foundational coherentism is based).

The liturgies clinging to objects prescribe the terms by which an object's functions, primary or secondary, may be realized. The system, however, dictates which functions are to be considered primary. In the case of consumerism, the objects' function of status coefficient takes the lead. These objects come to define their owners hierarchically and set them apart vertically. The reader will recall that realizing these functions requires the observance and execution of certain interactive protocols/liturgies. Moreover, since liturgies are also a means of sublimation, their sublimatory potential is restricted by the prevalent system of interpretation. A fixed system based in the governed exchange of material means, such as consumerism, thus circumscribes and greatly limits the sublimatory scope of the phenomenal context's contents. Our self-expressive resources, so understood, are effectively rationed and deprive us of the means by which, in thought, to transcend the system's prescribed interpretations. What is dispensed with in the process are the contents of would-be transcendence, including for the greater part such private, visceral proclivities as idiosyncrasies and inflections of logos. But since these are being systematically socialized out of us by the prescripts of a status-indexed object order, the transcendental potentiality of cognitive viscera within us wilts, until finally we are left mere actors reciting the dialogue required by a bureaucratic system of exchange. And since we are constantly being hemmed in by this ethos of exchange, an ethical decorum of sorts, we grow accustomed to the narrowed scope of expressive means and finally unknowingly come to abandon our transcendental intentions in favour of a more integrated, functional existence. In the final analysis, my reasoning as regards consumerism has been that its broad, indiscriminate brushstrokes smudge all the differentiae that set people apart and enable meaningful relationships.

### **3. SUMMATIVE REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The displacement of natural phenomena by an industrially fuelled dispersion of manufactured objects seems the inevitable fate of a consumer age. Instead of being outraged by the systematic overthrow and functionalization of our natural habitat, however, we are distracted by these objects' promise of fulfilment. Not unlike sirens preying on the erotic fatally to ensnare unwitting sailors, so manufactured objects prey upon the human condition and its exigencies of worth, indebting us in the process to its laws and liturgies of exchange. Such exigencies of worth, I believe, can be of great motivational potential and under the right circumstances may

very well lead one down a searching path towards a terminus of authentic self-expression. And what is self-authentication if not the vocabulary by which to set oneself apart?

Since, however, we are beholden for our self-expression to the sublimatory means provided by the phenomenal context, we are thereby also moulded, at least in part, by the contents of said phenomenal context. An open-ended phenomenal context (that is, one the interdependence among objects/gestures of which is not governed by a synthetic protocol of exchange) allows subjects some leeway in their interpretation of the life-world and its contents. In other words, an open-ended phenomenal context allows an object/gesture to become an expression of the subject's inflections of logos and thereby gives a true account of the individual in question.

On the other hand, however, a closed system of exchange is premised on the hierarchic ordering of objects and, therefore, represents a specific model of reciprocity. In accordance herewith, the liturgies governing the exchange of material property congeal into prescripts of value attribution, which in turn come to thematize the sublimatory scope of whichever objects happen to form part of the system's tradable repertoire. Where such a system presides over the trade of all the objects within a phenomenal context, nothing escapes the reductive thematization. As a direct consequence, many auxiliary meanings, especially where such meanings do not promote the goals of the system, are systematically socialized out of the objects. Consumerism, which commodifies almost everything, is such a system.

Now one may argue that a thematized life-world facilitates communication through the formulation of a succinct taxonomy and the avoidance of seemingly obsolescent meanings. But the wholly thematized life-world, courtesy of a totally administered referential framework, also disposes of the different meanings in objects/gestures through which people may have expressed the manner in which they are different from the system. Worse, even, is the regressive effect of such an homogenized life-world: people come to intend only what is catered for by the imposed constellation of meaning. So much is lost.

This, then, brings us to the recommendations for further study. If objects and gestures, values and symbols, no longer specifically refer back to either a true function (in case of objects) or a unique aspect of the author (in case of gestures), but rather refer us back only to the injunctions of an exchange-based ethos, then it may be asked if the resultant constellation of meaning has any basis in concrete reality. In other words, can it be argued that the one-dimensionality espoused by the hierarchic exchange of signs must then lead to a reality very much detached from its material component? For as was explained, the primary functions of objects are no longer literal, but rather figuratively refer us back to the hierarchic ordering of objects and a whole culture of virtual exchange.

The loss of the real, it was proposed, is an inevitable consequence of the trade in signs. For signs, not unlike, say, a certain shorthand, are mere referents that implicate the *real* only by extension. In the case of consumerism, however, the referents themselves often refer only to further referents. Bearing this in mind, the trade in signs is premised on a superficial, fabricated appraisal of the life-world. I therefore suggest the further reading of literature dealing with hyper-reality, more specifically Jean Baudrillard's *Selected Writings*. Furthermore, attention ought to be given to the means of promoting such a vacuous reality. For who, pray tell, would buy into an impoverished, restrictive virtual reality when the real thing has so much more texture to offer? Well, that depends on what this *virtual reality* claims to offer. The supposed spoils of this superficial dimension are carefully mapped according to salient human desires, neatly packaged and then sold as marks of success and affluence. Indexing signs, or objects, if you like, to human desire is a momentous task and can be accomplished only through astute collaboration among the various advertisement agencies (even though they seem to be in competition). Any study of consumerism, accordingly, also warrants a close look at the roles of the media and advertising in the process of social conditioning.

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