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# A Phenomenology of Consumer Goods

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## Introduction

A standard introduction to economics will reveal that the hallmark of an economy is that it contains producers and consumers. Producers create products that are to be exchanged either with other producers or with consumers. If exchanged with a consumer, then the good produced is termed as a ‘consumer good’ and is subsequently ‘consumed’ when it is put to use. Essentially, this rough theoretical understanding of a consumer good reveals that consumer goods travel directly from the hands of the producer to the mouth of the consumer and are not employed in the production of another good. Certainly, this definition does give us a great deal to work with in our understanding of consumer goods, and economists would maintain that it captures the essence of consumer goods. However, it does not give an account of consumer goods as they exist for us in everyday circumstance. The ontology given by economists in their treatment of consumer goods is not thick enough. How do we perceive consumer goods? What do they mean to us? How is our interaction with consumer goods historically contingent? This essay will be an exercise in expounding this definition and broadening our ontology of consumer goods.

In order to uncover these missing elements, we can consult the philosophical method of phenomenology. Phenomenology is sufficient because it is a key tool in unlocking the meaning behind everyday living. (Zahavi 2019: 9). Essentially, its methodology of revealing hidden ontological structures begins with taking note of what in our horizon of experience is meaningfully significant, via tracing our intentionality, and then revealing why it is significant through rooting it to an ontological structure (Husserl 1936: 142). Phenomenological theorists, taking cue from Kant, understand that this fundamental ontological structure is in fact the frame through which we perceive what is meaningfully significant (Loidolt 2017: 111). And so, meaning, for at least Heidegger and Arendt – the two phenomenologists we shall focus on, is only possible

because of ontological structures. In the case of Arendt, these ontological structures are not constant in the sense that they form the essence of the human condition, but rather they change via transformations in the environment presented before us (Arendt 1958: 10). Phenomenology understands that our reality is constituted by a shifting landscape of ontological structures that consistently morph and change the way in which we see things as meaningful. The advantage of understanding the landscape that is present in our relationship with consumer goods is that we get an appreciation of the nuance and complexity behind an individual's consumer experience. Furthermore, we also understand how our relationship with consumer goods is historically contingent via understanding the dynamism of hidden ontological structures. In short, phenomenology is necessary to get at the depth behind everyday interaction with consumer goods, and it stands in significant contrast to how consumer goods are understood from the third-person, detached perspective of economists.

### ***Dealing with consumer goods***

Let us first reflect upon our everyday relationship with consumer goods. Initially, this comes across as a daunting task for how could we possibly come up with an understanding of experiences from riding a bicycle to eating sushi? However, common to all of these varied experiences is the notion that consumer goods are there to accommodate a purpose. These are objects of experience that serve as means to an end. For example: clothing might be 'consumed' to appear fashionable, and for some, clothing is seen to be of value due to how wearing it represents participation in a fashionable trend. From this example, we get the idea that consumer goods carry meaning due to how they can be bent towards a purpose. When we are looking at a shelf at a grocery store only the goods that carry some meaning for us are highlighted. Our eyes seem to glaze over the ones that don't have any relevance to us. To flesh out this notion that our interaction with consumer goods is one that is always pointed to a particular end, let's introduce some terminology from Heidegger.

For Heidegger (1927: 97), entities that are employed to serve an end are called equipment, and within the perception of these entities is a whole totality of referential equipment. The making use of equipment is called dealing with equipment (Heidegger 1927: 95). In the dealing of these entities, our gaze is pointed to a specific end or separate set of equipment that would achieve that end. In Heideggerian terms, the end is called the assignment and the separate equipment complementary to completing the assignment is called the reference (Heidegger 1927: 97). So, for example, when buying clothes, your mind might be directed towards the price tag. Which would then be directed to the cash in your wallet. Which would then be directed to the cashier where we pay for the clothes (if the price is lower than the amount of cash in your wallet). What we encounter in this example is the notion of the totality of equipment that

brightens up, demands our attention, and precedes reaching our end (Heidegger 1927: 97). The cashier, your wallet, the price tag, these are all separate equipment that is necessarily used to consume clothes. This is only so because our attention is not primarily concerned with consumer good itself, it is primarily concerned with the end to which the consumer good can be put to use to, the assignment of the consumer good; hence there may be a totality of referential equipment the consumer good points to in order for us to complete the assignment. So, generally speaking, in dealing with a consumer good, we are aware of and make use of several other equipment.

Further, when we do deal with consumer goods, we are situated as a being-in-the-world that can either immerse itself in dealing or can deliberate before dealing. Being-in-the-world is what Heidegger calls our subjective existential state of being (Heidegger 1927: 78). If being-in-the-world, namely the subject, immerses itself in the completion of the assignment of equipment, then the equipment appears ready-to-hand and we immediately proceed to make use of it (Heidegger 1927: 98). Moreover, if the equipment is ready-to-hand then we do not deliberate before dealing with it (Heidegger 1927: 98). In the context of consumer goods, if the consumer good appears as ready-to-hand then we proceed to consume without any theoretical consideration of the consumer good. It is important to note that, an explication of consumer goods as ready-to-hand is exactly the purpose of a phenomenology of consumer goods. For if we are to deliberate before its consumption then the ontological structures that showcase why the consumer good is meaningful remain hidden. This point can be further emphasized by understanding that the knowledge of that which is ready-to-hand is already known to us. The reason why it is already known is because we make use of it so immediately. What we are not consciously aware of is not the 'know-how' of the consumer good, but instead the reason why it is so. Why is its consumption so immediately obvious to our being? The reasons why are exactly the ontological structures that lie underneath our perception of consumer goods. Hence, only in dealing with consumer goods that are ready-to-hand can we reveal what is ontologically meaningful. On the other hand, if we are to depart from viewing equipment as ready-to-hand, then equipment appears as present-at-hand. Seeing entities as present-at-hand is to hesitate and deliberate before making use of an object in your horizon of experience (Heidegger 1927: 101). Accompanied with a methodology of understanding a present-at-hand entity is an attempt to fit the entity in a theory. In the context of consumer goods, this is the attempt made by economists. Although as we have seen, the economist approach to consumer goods lacks an appreciation of the meaning that consumer goods carry for humans in their everyday living. In other words, the present-at-hand entity exists ontically without the support of any meaningful structures through which it takes a position of meaningful relevance in our

perception. Hence, the aim of our investigation is to understand consumer goods as ready-to-hand.

So far, we have been focusing on the perception of a single consumer good. But, as we have shown before, in the phenomenological analysis of a single consumer good, a whole set of referential equipment, a man-made world of equipment, also lights up and demands our attention. What this points to is the notion that our being-in-the-world rests upon perception of an entire world. Furthermore, the totality of referential equipment reveals that being-in-the-world is only possible because of the existence of a world (Heidegger 1927: 91). This is because without a world, namely a whole set of referential equipment that forms the backdrop of any perception, there could be no being-in-the-world. Hence, a key existential condition for being-in-the-world, and therefore our interaction with consumer goods as a whole, is worldliness. Worldliness, and its corresponding activity – dealing with equipment, therefore forms our first discovery of an ontological structure that exists underneath our perception of consumer good. Although, I will elaborate on this notion of worldliness later with our treatment of Arendt. So, all in all, we have a working theory of the structure of our perception when we interact with consumer goods. We exist as being-in-the-world and consumer goods present themselves as a distribution of meaningful equipment. The primary condition upon which our perception is so is the condition of worldliness. Consuming goods is exemplary for the putting to use of the tools and equipment set before us in the world to serve a particular end.

But such a theory seems to only offers us knowledge of what is meaningful based upon the sole existential condition of worldliness. That we exist in this world, and that the condition of our existence is that we exist with equipment. Consumer goods are certainly equipment, and we could very well stop our existential phenomenology here and be content with the answer that consumer goods are ready-to-hand and to be ‘put to use to serve an end’. However, I would rather push our philosophy a bit further. To serve what end? Do we consume in order to survive? Do we consume in order to be social? Or how about in order to transcend mortality? We have yet to account for the specific human motivations and drives in our analysis of consumer goods so far. So, to develop a deeper appreciation of our relationship with consume goods, I propose diversifying the range of existential human activities. We don’t just put things to use for an end, we put things to use in order to survive, in order to create, in order to bond with our fellow humans, in order to escape our limitations. Are these not existential activities? Which in turn are actualizations of existential conditions? Don’t we get the sense that we come into this world with a diversity of conditions that enable to us to do a diversity of actions? Perhaps we should look for a more plural set of conditions upon which the broad range of human activities can be thought of theoretically. This will allow us to think of our activity of consumption more specifically, and it will allow us to

move to a more nuanced perception of how we consume – rather than just the simplistic understanding that it is ‘putting an object in the world to use for a particular end’. Which in turn will allow us to dig deeper into those meaningful ontological structures that underlie our perception and grasping of ready-to-hand consumer goods.

Not only are we looking for a diverse range of ontological structures, but also structures that can be transformed with respect to changes in our environment or the activities of other humans. We need structures that are responsive to human activity, cultural activity and historical activity. This is because consumption patterns have changed throughout history. The introduction of certain economic ideals, political structures, and ideological beliefs have made their impact upon our relationship with consumer goods. Which would imply that the ontological structures present in consumer goods are dynamic. What we are therefore also looking for is a set of existential conditions that are historically contingent, or at least, the process of the actualization of these conditions are historically contingent. It is for these separate reasons – of looking for a plural set of existential conditions that will allow us to zoom in onto our relationship with consumer goods more specifically, and of looking for a set of conditions that are historically contingent – that we move to Arendt’s fivefold existential conditions.

### **Pluralizing our range of existential conditions – Arendt’s fivefold existential conditions**

In the *Human Condition*, Arendt draws a picture of five existential conditions upon which being-in-the-world rests upon. Such conditions are life, worldliness, plurality, natality and mortality (Arendt 1958: 7-10). Each condition forms the ground upon which activity takes place (Loidolt 2017: 113). Further, each condition has a logic to its actualization (Loidolt 2017: 113). Life is the condition of finding oneself in a body (Arendt 1958: 7). It’s actualizing activity – labor – demands the seeking of survival, shelter, water, food, etc. in accordance to one’s metabolic processes. (Arendt 1958: 7). Moreover, labor also demands a participation in nature, as the source of human sustenance is nature itself (Arendt 1958: 96). Because nature itself is cyclical – the change of the seasons, the ripening and decaying of fruit, the decayed food re-entering the cycle of life to provide for more food, etc. – labor too is oriented along this cyclical dimension (Arendt 1958: 98). Eating, sleeping, procreation, excretion – all are bent in accordance to a cyclical logic of release and renewal, exhaustion and pleasure (Arendt 1958: 98). Worldliness is the condition of finding oneself in a totality of equipment (as a student of Heidegger, Arendt did take from him). The condition of being brought into the human artifice, a man-made landscape (Arendt 1958: 7). The logic of work – the actualization of worldliness - is not only dealing with equipment but is also to create a world (Arendt 1958: 7). The aim is to create a world that is durable, to create structures and institutions

that stand the test of time, such that humans can be at home in the great cosmos (Arendt 1958: 137). Plurality is the condition of finding oneself among other people (Arendt 1958: 7). Action is the activity which corresponds to plurality and is manifest in dialogue and speech. The logic of action is to express individuality amongst a plural setting (Arendt 1958: 178). To communicate in order to form a connection with our fellow humans (Arendt 1958: 175). In this essay, the final two conditions have limited reference to consumer goods, but for the sake of completeness they will be mentioned here. Natality is the condition upon which we choose to bring forth things into the world (Arendt 1958: 10). It is the condition that is the source of our effort to add to the world, to our community and to bring about the new. Mortality is the condition upon which our activities are motivated by the threat of death (Arendt 1958: 10). For Arendt, these five conditions are revealed in our everyday experience as humans, in our perception and in our engagement with our surroundings. Now our aim is to root our relationship with consumer goods as an activation of one or more of these five conditions. For this will allow us to speak of the ontological meaning behind consumption. However, before we begin to do this, we must venture into the structure of conditions and how they are actualized through activity.

### **Activities, Conditions, and Spaces of Meaning**

Within our perception, consumption goods are ontologically rooted in a plurality of spaces of meaning. However, before we get to spaces of meaning, let's first understand the relationship between conditions and activities. Activities guide our behaviour, comportment and perception. Arendt's 3 activities - labor, work and action - are not 'labels' or 'categories' that singular events can be shelved under (Loidolt 2017: 111). They are experience-ordering. They reveal what is meaningful to us upon their enactment (Loidolt 2017: 111). They are "ways of taking place" that unfold and spill over into our everyday life (Loidolt 2017: 111), thereby tainting and coloring everything that we see. So, eating, drinking, sleeping, these are not activities of labor, but rather are activities through which we experience labor as a guide to our comportment. On the other hand, conditions are "actualized" into activities (Loidolt 2017: 113). And in their actualization, and the subsequent reflection of being-in-the-world, or 'Dasein', they are revealed as fundamental structures that exist as antecedent to activity (Loidolt 2017: 113). So, for example, labor, as that activity that bends our experience towards sustaining the biological process of the human body, is only shapes our experience because of the fact that we are alive (Loidolt 2017: 113). If we were robots then we would not be alive in the same way that we are, and there would be no need for labor as an experience-ordering perspective. The activity cannot exist without its condition and the condition cannot be revealed to us without its actualization into activity (Loidolt 2017: 113). For Arendt, the enactment of a condition directly results in the taking on of a

hermeneutic perspective, in which entities appear rooted to ontological structures. The hermeneutic perspectives that we take on as a result of doing labor, work and action are animal laborans, homo faber and zoon politikon (Loidolt 2017: 114). Our surroundings are subsequently morphed into a space of meaning whose inner rules are determined by the specific hermeneutic perspective we take on (Loidolt 2017: 114). We do not just embody one hermeneutic perspective at a time. Homo Faber needs food, Animal Laborans uses tools (Loidolt 2017: 113). Meaning that these modes of existence, hermeneutic perspectives, enactments of conditions are consistently folding into each other (Loidolt 2017: 116). Their respective spaces of meaning, the ontological structures that underlie our surroundings, also overlap and interpenetrate each other (Loidolt 2017: 116). Now that we are armed with a whole plethora of conditions and hermeneutic perspectives, we can use these to develop an understanding of how we perceive consumer goods. Upon first glance we already notice that depending upon the consumer good we wish to analyze the distribution of the spaces of meaning present changes. So for clothes and fashion, there is an element of survival in that some clothes are necessary for protection against the weather, and therefore the labor space of meaning is present, but there is also an element of expression, of showing that you are different from others by wearing different clothes, and hence the action space of meaning is also present. Furthermore, the consumption of non-necessary goods is in itself an activity that does reveal an attribute of your individual persona, and hence it must be constituted by either the action or work space of meaning. However, I would maintain the consumption of necessary goods such as water, food, goods whose sole purpose is to enter and sustain the life cycle, is constituted mainly by the labor space of meaning. Although for the most part, we see that in our perception of consumer goods there is a folding of several spaces of meaning into each other.

### **Dynamic Spaces of Meaning**

Whilst our perception of consumer goods does contain a diverse set of spaces of meaning, not all of these spaces of meaning are equal in how they constitute the entirety of our horizon of experience. There are dominant spaces of meaning and they are submissive spaces of meaning (Loidolt 2017: 118). Dominant spaces of meaning take up much of the entirety of our horizon of experience and they are concomitant with the domination of a particular kind of hermeneutic perspective (Loidolt 2017: 118). The domination of a space of meaning is contingent upon certain historical events. Broadly speaking, historical events are characterized with the introduction of new logics that depart from prior logics of activity. This introduction therefore also changes what is meaningful in the corresponding hermeneutic perspective and the space of meaning itself. Subsequently, any activity that derives its purpose from that changed space of meaning must change with respect to the new logic. If the new logic proves to be

particularly successful by the metrics of a society, then the space of meaning will expand and envelop much of the horizon of experience of the conscious subject. Hence, in order to get a grasp at our experience with consumer goods, we must understand which space of meaning is dominant in our perception of consumer goods and understand how that space of meaning has grown to be dominant. We must, therefore, embark on a project of building the history of ontological structures behind our current perception of consumer goods.

### **The Rise of Homo Faber**

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt goes to great lengths to deliver a historical overview of the dynamics of different spaces of meaning. We will examine those dynamics that have a direct impact on our current perception of consumer goods. In order to avoid recounting the whole of Arendt's historical excursion, we will just focus on the Renaissance era onwards. With that in mind, let us begin in the Renaissance where the dominant space of meaning was the work space of meaning. Some of the initial key figures that proposed this perspective were Galileo, Leonardo Da Vinci, and Michelangelo. Galileo, in particular, had a huge role to play because of the successes of his scientific experimental method (Arendt 1958: 295). He had shown that via fabricating natural processes, in a controlled way, we can come to learn about what nature is (Arendt 1958: 295). Nature can then be revealed via understanding its processes (Arendt 1958: 295). This offered mankind an immense power over nature, and this power became increasingly obvious such that more people began to trust in the ideals of homo faber; namely, they began to trust in the vision that our surroundings are constituted by processes (Arendt 1958: 296). The dominant space of meaning, therefore, became that of work. Everything, all of nature, the human body itself, became a means, a tool to be used. We see this most clearly in the mechanistic philosophies as promoted by Hobbes and Descartes and in the introduction of biology to the scientific community (Arendt 1958: 296-297). This attitude to which the people of the Renaissance and Early Modern era brought to their shared horizon of experience could be encapsulated in this quote from Immanuel Kant – "Give me matter and I can construct a world out of it" (Arendt 1958: 296).

With the accumulation of wealth and technology, the world began to resemble nature, therefore initiating the corruption of the work space of meaning by the logic of labor. Upon the dawn of the industrial era, we see that mankind has complete trust in the vision of homo faber. This resulted in mankind experiencing huge surpluses in wealth and technology (Arendt 1958: 105). Furthermore, built in the logic of homo faber was the expectation that the activity of world-building would only continue (Arendt 1958: 7). That the building of an economy would result in further growth of the economy. That "money begets money" and "power begets power" (Arendt 1958: 105).



As a consequence, the world - as the sum of wealth, technology, man-made equipment, tools - was growing by an incredible rate. Homo faber became so successful in its world-building mission that in the eyes of mankind, the size of the world began to resemble the size of nature. Moreover, the incredible flow with which wealth and technologies superseded each other resembled the great cyclical processes of nature (Arendt 1958: 106). The growing abundance of necessary goods mirrored the fertility of nature (Arendt 1958: 106). The growing number of goods also promoted further consumption, and this promoted industries to create more goods (Arendt 1958: 133). The cyclical nature of this consumption found its way into all industries and economies, beginning with necessary goods like food, to all sorts of superfluities such as luxury goods (Arendt 1958: 133). Hence, more and more, what were originally products of work, slowly became products for consumption. What we are beginning to see is how the previously dominant space of meaning – that of work - is being dominated by the labor space of meaning. The logic of labor slowly spills into the work space of meaning as processes became faster and more repetitive, thereby approximating the logic of exhaustion and regeneration. This logic found its way into the work space of meaning because the boundaries between world and nature began to crumble as the world grew in size and grew to resemble nature. We slowly began to see the world through the eyes of animal laborans, as something that is to be incorporated in great cyclical processes.

### The Victory of Animal Laborans

Due to the emphasis on production the labor space of meaning becomes dominant. During the industrial era, production became an ideal (Arendt 1958: 307). In order to sustain the abundance of consumer goods and economic success, production in the workplace needed to be stressed. This had the effect of moving the value in a produced good from what it is essentially, to what it could be used for to produce more (Arendt 1958: 308). Shifting this value subsequently contributed to the deterioration of the world, for if there was no value to be found in possible permanent, durable features of the world, then there is no necessity to keep them (Arendt 1958: 309). Instead, their value stems from what they can be used for, which essentially made them valueless in themselves (Arendt 1958: 309). The valuelessness of the world, as the sum of valueless producer goods, therefore, demoted the work space of meaning as subservient. This contributed to the fall of homo faber. Furthermore, In the modern era's manic pursuit of 'productivity' certain production efficiencies were introduced. Such as the Division of Labor, which was essentially to divide the production process into multiple departments such that unskilled workers can participate in the workforce, thereby heightening the number of people working at once, and shortening the duration and cost for product creation. In doing this, the ideals of homo faber were undermined as the goods created were not the product of skilled workmanship (Arendt 1958: 123).

There was no record of the individual inside these products (Arendt 1958: 123). Rather, the meaning behind these goods was derived from the labor space of meaning. These goods are meant to be consumed at a rapid pace, there were not meant to be durable entities that stand the test of time (Arendt 1958: 125). So, we also get the broadening of the label 'consumer good' to not only include goods to be literally consumed but also 'goods' that used to be products of work such as 'chairs, tables, houses, etc.' As *homo faber* fell, animal laborans rose.

The promotion of the principle of happiness and the introduction of new life philosophies further cemented the dominance of animal laborans. As consumer goods became more abundant, the pleasure of consumption became more accessible (Arendt 1958: 108). This combined with the reduction of pain and effort in the production process resulted in the promotion of the principle of happiness (Arendt 1958: 108). "Happiness became concomitant with labor itself", which cemented the logic of life as this was the kind of happiness found in surplus consumption and limited labor (Arendt 1958: 108). This notion of happiness became so overwhelming that philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham had founded whole philosophical systems, like utilitarianism and the principle of the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people, to it (Arendt 1958: 309). Our experience is now bent towards the notion of procuring economic progress and consumer good abundance. Such that we can continue to consume and to be happy in our repetitive consumption. In addition to this, there were a number of philosophies and scientific discoveries that seemed to also promote the purpose of human existence as sustaining the life process such as Darwin's evolutionary theory and Nietzsche's 'will to power' (Arendt 1958: 116-117). The deterioration of the world, the focus on productivity and abundance, the expectation of happiness upon consumption, and the rational ground upon which labor can be said to be the purpose of human existence provided by thinkers such as Darwin and Nietzsche, all combined to promote the hermeneutic perspective of animal laborans over all. Consequently, our society today seems to be oriented around the logic of "securing the necessities of life, providing for their abundance", and the seeking of happiness in consumption. To sum up, our comportment towards consumer goods today derives its orientation from the labor space of meaning. Consumer goods are seen to be entities that can not only provide sustenance but also provide happiness, a release from exhaustion. Further, they are seen to be highly abundant to the point where they resemble the fertility of nature, and hence our awareness of the limited resources used in their creation is itself very limited. Moreover, by the domination of the labor space of meaning over the work space of meaning, products of work that were meant to be worldly "lose their character and become more and more objects of consumption". For people in this consumer society, the whole world, no longer viewed from the perspective of *homo faber*, becomes a consumer good (Arendt 1958: 132).

## Conclusion

All in all, the philosophies of both Heidegger, who gave us the methodology of understanding consumption goods through perceiving it only as ready-to-hand, and Arendt, who provided us with a historical overview of the hermeneutic perspectives we take with respect to consumer goods, have provided us with a rough picture of the hidden ontological structures underneath our perception of consumer goods. The plurality of these ontological structures, spaces of meaning, have allowed us to diversify the range of reasons why consumption is meaningful. And, the tracing of the history of these plural spaces of meaning has shown us why our current perception of consumer goods is more or less constituted only by the labor space of meaning. Of course, that is not to say that there is no element of the work and action space of meaning present in our perception of consumer goods, only that the labor space of meaning has grown to be the most dominant. With this in mind, it is important to stress that our Arendtian approach to a phenomenology of consumer goods is far from finished. We have yet to dig into the history of the action, natality and mortality spaces of meaning with respect to consumption. How is the consumption of a good an expression of our individuality? Is repetitive consumption of goods effectively silencing our ability to act? Furthermore, there is a vast multitude of historical events that have spanned the time since Arendt wrote the *Human Condition* and I began writing this report, all of which had an effect on the logic of all spaces of meaning. The fall of competing economic systems such as that of the USSR, the introduction of e-commerce and fast fashion, the increasing immateriality of consumer products such as music streaming and online subscriptions, the pressures of climate change and environmental degradation to cease consumption altogether – all alter the spaces of meaning present in our perception of consumption goods. A phenomenology of consumer goods for today would account for these historical shifts. Whilst this paper does show how the phenomenological methodologies of Heidegger and Arendt are extremely relevant at getting behind the meaning of consumption, it is still incomplete in that it does not offer us a complete breadth of analysis of all existential conditions, nor does it offer a complete history of the dynamics of all relevant spaces of meaning. Although, future projects in the phenomenology of consumer goods may now depart from this point.

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