

# Significant Objects & Authentic People

In this essay, I will explore the relationships between human beings and the objects that surround us. I will draw heavily on Jean Baudrillard's argument in *The System of Objects* about the consequences for human life that follow from our living in a world saturated with objects. In discussing this saturation, I will explain different categories of objects and different tactics that we employ in our interactions with them. In the age of industry and technology, we find ourselves entering into relationships with objects in our environment as a means of achieving the lifestyle that we desire, of developing our personality, and of seeking understanding about our place as human beings in the world around us. According to Baudrillard, it is through our relationships to objects that we learn how to attribute value to the things, ideas, and people that are important to us. Furthermore, as we grow and learn about ourselves and about the world we live in, it is through our relationships with objects that we *signify* who we are and what we stand for. In this essay, I will offer explanation of how and why relationships with objects saturate our lives on a practical and emotional level, and I will criticize the cultural apparatus that produces and teaches us how to interact with these objects. I will argue that there is an underlying and all-pervasive value-structure that dictates human-object interaction—a value-structure that arises from societal standards of successful living, shared aspirations and shared responsibilities that govern our approach in relating to objects. I will argue that this value-structure—which teaches us how to interact with objects—gets carried over into our relationships with other human beings in our community, on both a local and global scale. There are certain assumptions about the project of being a successful human being that inform the production and distribution of objects and that encourage our attachment to them. These assumptions give rise to the set of rules, guidelines, and justifications that allow for the perpetuation of the system of objects as a cultural tool (and a cultural necessity) for achieving what is greatest in human life. By interacting with objects all around us, we participate in a kind of *new morality*, because we believe that there are *better* and *worse* ways to incorporate objects as parts of our lives. Since we practice human-object relationships almost incessantly, it is impossible to separate ourselves from the rules and implicit assumptions governing these relationships when we seek to interact directly with other human beings. Baudrillard argues that the presence of objects and the goals of the apparatus responsible for producing them affects our ability to genuinely and articulately address what is most important or most *real* in our lives. In this essay, I will criticize the value-structure represented by the system of objects as partially-incoherent and necessarily unbalanced as a facilitator of human growth and a teacher of human emotion and human desire. I will employ Charles Taylor's argument in *The Ethics of Authenticity* as an attempt to offer a revised account of what a meaningful life amid the system of objects might look like—an account that acknowledges the values of the system of objects as part of our world while seeking to push beyond them. Despite the shortcomings in the espoused language of technology and industry, which infiltrates our culture through advertising, we do indeed have access to other voices and other perspectives on what is truly most important. I will argue that the value-structure of the system of objects—as a purely mechanistic and individualistic explanation of how we fulfill the existential requirements for living a successful life—is insufficient,

imbalanced, and ultimately working against some of our most deep-seated intuitive concerns. We all want to be successful in our life pursuits, and the cultural rhetoric praising instrumental rationality and individualism as ideological means to this end presents problems that must necessarily be addressed by critiquing and supplementing common modes of attributing value and searching for meaning.

## I. Objects

Our environment is filled with objects of many varieties. According to Baudrillard, the overwhelming presence of man-made, inanimate objects is what distinguishes the present age from all that have preceded it. I will try to show that the physical presence of objects affects our emotional and spiritual concerns as well—which, if acknowledged, should promote consciousness and care in how we interact with our physical environment. It should only take a moment for each of us to realize that our lives revolve around objects. In the first place, it is necessary that each of us reflect briefly on the activities in which we have taken part thus far today. I awoke to my alarm clock. I brushed my teeth in the sink. I fiddled with the coffee-maker. I chose my attire and dressed for the morning. I filled my bag with necessary books, papers, and other items. I rode a bicycle or drove a car to my first appointed destination. Each and every task requires objects. At any stage during the day, the absence of a single object could severely alter our ability to function in the accustomed manner. Additionally, many of our activities that could be designated as purely mental activities are often centered around objects as well. It is necessary to reflect not only on what we have done but on what has occupied our minds over the course of the day. It may be surprising to realize that even when we are not directly engaging objects to carry out our daily tasks, our minds are occupied with the potential for engaging an object in the future or with the success or failure we experienced while engaging an object in the past. What objects in my environment are malfunctioning and in need of repair? What new objects do I need to replace used or discarded ones? What will happen if I am not able to procure the objects that I need? What if an important or sentimental object has been lost or stolen? As we will see, these questions only scratch the surface of how deeply we are concerned with objects in our everyday lives. What we must agree on from the beginning is that our world is saturated with objects. The forthcoming analysis can only be understood or judged fairly if this premise is accepted.

It will be helpful for this discussion to presuppose that humans and objects exist in relationships that are similar but not equal to the relationships between individual people. The existence of a human/object *relationship* simply implies that the way in which an object takes on meaning or exerts influence in the life of a human being is not static or clearly-definable. Rather, the role of the object and the role of the person in relation to the object are constantly changing, constantly evolving, just as relationships between people grow over time. Furthermore, a relationship implies that the object and the person are intrinsically separate—both in function and in ideology—and that it is important to distinguish between human character and object character. As it is necessary for individuals in a relationship with one another to see themselves as self-supporting and independently-different before they can adequately address their mutual concerns and mutual responsibilities, it is necessary to ideologically separate the functioning of humans

from the functioning of objects before we attempt to combine the two as mutually supporting on a deep level. The argument throughout this discussion will be that the modern individual is intrinsically and inevitably tied to an external apparatus—the system of objects—while simultaneously independent of this apparatus, which no longer requires our active or intentional support to function on its own. The technical workings of the system of objects—through industry, commerce, advertising, trade, and the like—are intrinsically related to psychological, as well as practical, needs and desires of human beings. We cannot understand the workings of one apart from the other, but on a fundamental level they represent distinct entities that have entered into a complex and constantly-evolving relationship.

Once we come to recognize the saturation of objects in our world and the relational quality of our interactions with them, we may begin to ask questions about the extent to which objects are *essential* features in our attempts to discover meaning—in our attempts to define ourselves, authenticate ourselves, and explore ourselves. Our cultural value-structure is inescapably dependent on the ways in which individuals relate to objects, because it is through objects and with the help of objects that we learn to be who we are. The structure of human-object relationships can shed great light on how individuals relate themselves to one another and to the society as a whole. The ideals and demands of the production/distribution apparatus affect how we approach objects (and thus how we approach each other) as components of a functioning system. On a different level, specific objects take on particular meanings and play particular roles above and beyond their abstract status as component parts of a systematized apparatus. Whether my relationship to an object is one of physical necessity or emotional attachment, this relationship is partially dependent on a *personal* desire that finds fulfillment in a specific object and partially dependent on the *general* societal approach to evaluating life and offering solutions to its problems. My personal preferences and choices govern the way in which I relate to objects in my life, but these personal factors do not exist independently of the system through which I act them out. Through an analysis of human-object relationships, we may find stark differences between the values espoused as social ideology and the values that individuals seek to act out through the social structure that they are a part of. Discussing the values that drive us to interact with objects as important aspects of our lives and discussing the values that allow for these objects' accessibility to us will open a dialogue on the success or failure of our project as citizens of the technological/industrial age. I will aim the forthcoming discussion towards uncovering some basic trends in the values attributed to objects themselves and in the values attributed to successful relationships between human beings and their objects. My intention, first and foremost, is to convey *that* the system of objects plays an essential role in our lives at a deep level. *How* and *to what extent* this role becomes manifest will vary from person to person.

In *The System of Objects*, Baudrillard argues that we learn to relate to objects based on standards and expectations that glorify, to a dangerous degree, the aspects of the human psyche that are responsible for instrumental calculation and for the organization and manipulation of abstract terms. Within the system of objects, human beings seek to fill a void in their lives by attaching themselves to and associating themselves with

objects of all varieties. This void may be explained in terms of a specific need that must be satisfied or a particular function that must be fulfilled, but it also arises in more general existential language as a desire to discover oneself or project oneself successfully. Either way, whenever I take possession of an object or use an object, I am purportedly doing something greater or more advanced than what I was doing before—and thus filling a void in my life. Additionally, I have freedom to choose the objects that I take on as extensions of my environment and thus freedom to undertake *personal* projects in my relationships to objects. I assume that my void, that my needs, that my desires are unique on some level because they are mine and nobody else's. Therefore, in choosing what objects to purchase, what objects to surround my home with, and what objects to use in my daily life, I add subjective significance to the components of my environment. It is *my choosing* that separates me from every other consumer, decorator, and organizer. Through exercising choice in my relationships to objects, I become an individual and signify my personal distinctiveness to everyone else in my community. How we come to interpret the actions and words of other human beings is largely dependent on the objects that they have chosen to surround themselves with. Objects signify shared sympathies, shared taste, shared concerns, and shared values. We have a tendency to enter into relationships with other individuals whose objects we find appealing, and this tendency is so deeply engrained that we may not even be conscious of what it really is about someone that draws us together. Is it the content of someone's mind or heart that provokes my interest or is it the way that they have chosen to signify the contents of their mind or heart through their personal objects? It may be argued that one's internal state of being becomes authentically manifest through his objects and that it is absolutely necessary to acknowledge someone's objects as conscious or unconscious representations of who they actually are. This argument presupposes the success of instrumental reason in calculating and conveying objective messages—messages that are not specifically directed to a single person but which can potentially be interpreted by everyone. Regarding objects, freedom of choice creates individuality, and individual calculation creates a mode of communication with the rest of the community. Because objects are *mine*, they have something to do with who I am, and because they have something to do with who I am, I have a responsibility to choose them carefully and conscientiously. This responsibility involves instrumental calculation—ordering the objects around me in such a way as to convey an intentional message. It is precisely the assumption that calculation does occur in personal attachments to objects that turns an object into a *signifier* of a human feeling, human characteristic or human personality.

While it may be helpful to utilize objects as a medium for communication between individuals, our environment's saturation with objects may encourage an almost exclusive use of this medium at the expense of others. The danger is that placing more and more emphasis on *what is signified* as representative of something authentic below the surface may promote exclusive focus on the world of objects. However well utilized, the system of objects still represents something intrinsically non-human—something which is, at best, a partial reflection of human drives and human feelings and, at worst, a complete distraction from everything purely human that goes on inside of us all. We know that our objects are interpreted as representations of ourselves, and we believe that objective representations have at least some degree of reflexive truth because of the

individual choice factor. Thus, we undertake the process of successfully calculating how we wish to signify ourselves to the rest of the world. Inasmuch as this process facilitates genuine expression, it may be helpful in discovering and sharing ourselves. But as signification becomes a project of censoring, controlling, and manipulating the messages that we send to others—covering up the parts of ourselves that we do not want to be seen by not choosing to signify them—we employ our calculating abilities in a dangerous way. As we learn to choose the proper objects to convey the proper messages, we also learn to abstract our very essence as human beings into a set of component parts operating as appropriate signifiers. That is, once the line between calculating who I am and calculating how I want to appear has become blurred, it may become progressively more difficult to access what it is *within me* that I seek to signify through my objects. This is how the glorification of instrumental calculation becomes problematic within the system of objects. The ability to calculate may itself become more important than what is being calculated. And when it is human lives that are being calculated, as if they are merely abstract components of a rational system, we should consider deeply what it is that we are doing to ourselves.

It should not be disputable that our drive to signify personal concerns and personal values through objects is largely dependent on the rhetoric of advertising. It takes money to support the perpetual production of objects, and the experience of personal lacking—of needing more things to complete ourselves or further our projects—is what encourages spending money. Thus, the industrial apparatus influences our constantly-renewed desire for more objects by convincing us that we cannot be satisfied without them, that we are not full beings without them. And this conviction starts us on a quest that we can never possibly complete—a quest for achieving satisfaction and for realizing personal distinctiveness through the purchase of commodities. The freedom of choice within the system of objects is a precarious form of freedom, because the ability to calculate objective relationships does not make us free from the apparatus that creates the objects fit for calculation. The rhetoric of individuality and consumer choice disguises our utter dependence on a system concerned with its own perpetuation over and above the well-being of any people operating under its care. And the task of successful signification is indeed sold to us through advertising—convincing us that attaching ourselves to *personal* objects is the best way to get what we want and communicate who we are. Baudrillard argues that “the whole philosophy of idealized consumption is based on the replacement of live, conflictual human relationships by a ‘personalized’ relationship to objects” (187). It is truly important to realize that all of the time we spend concerned with objects and with the messages conveyed by objects is time not spent concerned with other things. Baudrillard claims that objects work as mediators between persons. Ideally, concern for another person would precede concern for their objectively signified messages and concern for ourselves would precede concern for successfully signifying ourselves. But the new morality manifested through the system of objects encourages us to view people as components of a calculated environment, as reducible to a set of signified messages. This view trades sympathetic concern and authentic feelings for the ability to efficiently and expediently accomplish tasks.

Baudrillard's argument in *The System of Objects* is a complex criticism of the frame of mind that is encouraged by the saturation of objects in our environment. Basically, Baudrillard claims that the ideals of technology and industry have infiltrated human consciousness in a way that separates us from one another and separates us from instinctual human drives that are not efficient or rational, that do not mirror the aspirations of technological development. We have come to view technological development as indicative of human flourishing, and we consciously or unconsciously align ourselves, in our own thinking and our own actions, with the values that permit human rationality to manipulate, organize, and systematize the environment in which we live. Through our relationships with objects, we learn how to control and interpret signified messages. We continually sculpt our world by adding new objects, replacing old objects, and participating in the relationships that others have created with their objects. More and more scientific advancements represent successful mastery of the world, just as creating new relationships with objects, while replacing or augmenting old ones, represents successful mastery of our personal environment. When dealing with technology generally and when dealing with objects personally, there is always room for advancement towards something better. And this drive towards advancing ourselves, whether in the case of buying a more luxurious car or in choosing a garment that fits my personality better than the old one, continues ad infinitum. Each new advancement is only valuable as a success momentarily, because each step forward always implies many more forward steps that have yet to be taken. Inasmuch as this ideal of limitless growth and limitless perfectibility becomes part of our outlook on life, we become virtual pawns within the system of objects—being manipulated by the rhetoric of advertising and technology in an analogous way to how we ourselves are manipulating the objects around us. The language of individual choice and personal distinctiveness teaches each of us to look for his *own* path in life, while distracting us from the inescapable truth that each time we produce and object, purchase an object, or even interpret an object's meaning we participate in a systematized apparatus of homogenized consumers. We embrace the values of the system of objects in hopes of becoming distinctively successful and truly authentic beings, but these values prevent us from actually accomplishing the purported goals, because relating to objects in the prescribed manner interferes with our human relationships. We objectify, manipulate, and interpret people in the same way that we interact with objects and in the same way as the system as a whole interacts with us, as necessary components for its continued functioning. According to Baudrillard, we are, in a sense, living in a dream world—where objects instead of living beings have become the most basic constituent and where the ideal of the machine has replaced the ideal of the ecosystem as most representative of successful functioning.

We may find support for this argument by looking at significant objects in our lives—evaluating the factors governing purportedly successful relationships with them. In *The System of Objects*, Baudrillard discusses many different types of objects—categorized mainly by their function in people's lives, the roles that they play, the atmosphere that they create, and the reciprocal demands that they place on their owners/users.

## **i. Functional Objects**

We may distinguish types of human-object relationships in the following way: by considering what *purpose* an object holds for a human owner/user and by considering what *tasks* may be required of a person in order to ensure that an object adequately lives up to its designated or assumed purpose. The first major class of human-object relationships that I will examine is what Baudrillard calls the *functional* relationship. In this type of relationship, an object is required to perform a function, to accomplish a practical or artistic goal for the sake of a human being or for a human being's environment. The concept of functionality is central to the ideological makeup of the system of objects as a whole, and the psychological experience of human *lacking* in the realm of functionality may be understood as a primary impetus for the creation of objects in the first place. Let us consider the desire for a *fully functional* environment--the desire that gives rise to human-object relationships of the functional variety.

An industrial or technological outlook on the world encourages us to look for mechanical solutions to rational problems. Technology embraces the ideal of functionality in a positive sense: we have the capacity through rational manipulation to improve the functioning of our environment. But technology also embraces this ideal in a negative sense: we are never as functional as we could possibly be and are forever lacking without the help of new inventions. On the surface, the language of *problems and solutions*—spoken by industry and commerce through the mouthpiece of advertising—seems straightforward and unidirectional. It seems that humans have certain needs that must be met and that particular objects are technically designed to meet those needs in a functional way. I need a place to prop my feet up when I get home from work, so I go the furniture store and buy an easy chair to satisfy this need that I have. We forget, however, that the needs themselves are manufactured alongside the products that satisfy those needs. We forget that most of the problems solved by technology are not problems inherent in the human condition but rather problems specific to the post-industrial man. For example, if I didn't have a television in my living room, then I might not need an easy chair to prop my feet up in when I got home from work. I might sit on the floor with my children or at a table with my wife instead. According to Baudrillard, this shift in lifestyle brought about by industrial advancements represents our enslavement to a self-serving apparatus. Our willingness to trade old values, such as family conversation, for new values, such as the availability of a television, signifies acquiescence to a cultural shift. And this shift, according to Baudrillard, springs from the multifaceted manipulation inherent in the system of objects, which traps us in a misunderstanding of what is most important in human life.

Nonetheless, the choice to purchase the easy chair cannot be criticized as a mere passive succumbing to media-prescribed values. On a different level, this choice represents freedom, advancement, and the ability to control my atmosphere within the limits of my economic resources. Choosing the style of chair, purchasing it, and strategically placing it in my living environment represent a personal exertion of power over the world around me. Each object that I attain to perform a function reinforces the idea that I am capable of structuring and organizing my own life, and the system of objects provides me with the opportunity for achieving this peace of mind. This idea of functional capacity governs a complex set of requirements that we place on ourselves as

successful manipulators of our environment—a set of requirements unsurprisingly similar to those placed on objects that are supposedly functional themselves. It must be recognized that the demand for functional objects—functioning to meet a rational need or solve a rational problem—goes hand in hand with the desire for technical manipulation. If we did not want to make the world more functional, more streamlined, more efficient, or calculably better in any way, then we would not demand that our objects meet strict standards for technical capacity.

Let us consider the objects in our living space—keeping in mind that the human-object relationship may be analyzed with respect to the purposes served by objects in this space and with respect to our own tasks in helping the objects achieve these purposes. A normal interior in the modern home contains furniture, appliances, and decorations. The style and variety may differ greatly depending on factors of personal taste, economic resources, cultural setting, and the like. We may notice common trends, however, in how the objects of interior design *function* both as independent entities and as component parts of a greater organism. Generally speaking, the purpose that an object takes on within our living space is twofold: it satisfies a specific need or takes on a specific role that is particular to its own character as a functional object, and it plays a secondary (but perhaps more important) role in the establishment of an overall atmosphere by interacting with other objects in the space. I choose a particular chair for my living room both because it is comfortable or suitable to my figure and because it *makes sense* as an addition to the world of objects that already constitutes my living room. It is important to note that the atmospheric function may not be a simply a matter of style but may involve such considerations as who I will be entertaining in my living space, how I want these people to be positioned in relationship to one another, and what sort of mood I want to foster in the room as a whole. It is important not only that a new object fits in with the room's aesthetics but also that this object fits with the practical, emotional, and spiritual life of a room. For the feng shui artist, the concern with successful juxtaposition and creation of overall atmosphere is completely conscious, but for many of us these concerns may be merely intuitive. On any level, however, a single object is never completely isolated in its function. It must be successful on its own terms but also successful with respect to a larger community or grouping of objects. Indeed, the space as a whole is largely responsible for dictating the demands on particular objects and for creating a meaning or encouraging a lens of perception with which particular objects will be evaluated.

Baudrillard argues that the modern individual largely defines himself in the following way: *I am the order that I put into things* (26). Perhaps both the greatest beauty and the greatest problem inherent in this mode of self-identification involves our dependence on external tools and materials. The task of rational manipulation and calculation requires us to abstract particular elements or components—to isolate them as pieces of a puzzle. This task is epitomized by the mathematician who reduces human beings, land, animals, natural resources, products, waste, energy, and profit to numeric figures that can be related to one another in an abstract yet superbly systematic manner. On a basic level, every citizen's primary concern is utilizing and manipulating abstract components to achieve desired results—results ranging from economic advancement, as



in orchestrating a business deal, to a pleasant response from a visitor, as in orchestrating an interior design scheme in one's home. We learn to approach our environment as a set of ingredients and to assign ourselves the role of creating the greatest possible state of affairs using the given ingredients. An object comes to be *functional* by virtue of its ability to be arranged and organized into a schema. For an object to be functional, I must be able to manipulate it to my advantage—bringing it to life through my rationalization. According to Baudrillard, the praise of malleability as an ideal virtue affects how we approach the world on a deep level.

Let us consider two possible objects that could be used in furnishing a modern home: the dining room table that has been in the family for generations and the futon that could be purchased at Wal-Mart. The dining room table is large, heavy, and difficult to move, but it is also invested with many years worth of memories and shared experiences. In a very real sense, its physical cumbersomeness represents the amount of human spirit invested in it—as a *weighty* object in an emotional way as well. The table is intentionally symbolic of the family's unity, because it is the center for sustenance—the center for fulfilling common needs in a unified way. It is also highly likely that such a table spans generations, that its practical and symbolic functions are not isolated in time as momentary solutions to momentary problems. The second object in this discussion—the futon—functions in a quite different way. It can become a sofa or a bed, a place to study or a place to make love, the center of attention in a room or a mere potentiality tucked away in a corner. The governing ideal of the futon is flexibility, and it is thus light-weight, easy to assemble, easy to move from place to place. The futon may be considered symbolic, but in a different sense than the old family table. While the table shared by my great-grandmother, my grandmother, my mother, myself, and *possibly* my own children can be said to symbolize a simple, stable force or ideal that persists over time, the collapsible futon symbolizes a force or ideal that can only be identified in the abstract—as flexibility or freedom, comfort or openness to possibilities. The moral character of the table and the moral character of the futon are extremely different. While the table embodies a moral dimension of fixity, established order, or firm sense of place, the futon embodies a moral dimension of freedom—echoing the ability and the desire to overcome constraints of all kinds. It is only a flexible object that I am capable of manipulating and organizing in the systematic manner that I desire. The dining room table is powerful because of its fixed presence, while the futon is powerful, in a way more appealing to a contemporary frame of mind, because of its flexibility.

A technological outlook urges us to take control of the environment around us, and it affects our ideas about what is *functional* by demanding that objects of all kinds submit to the organizing and calculating abilities of the human mind. The purpose of the futon is completely contingent on momentary desires or momentary requirements. It is the futon's abstraction—its freedom from deeply rooted symbolism or from a fixed role—that allows its owner/user to completely dominate the relationship on a physical and emotional level. The futon can be arranged or organized, put away or discarded without ever demanding anything. For reasons like these, we see modern homes furnished with more and more items like the futon and fewer and fewer items like the (ancestral) family table. The *functionality* of a living space is largely dependent on our

ability to maintain the relational attitude that we desire between ourselves and the objects around us. Our task of calculation and manipulation is just as important as the object's task of fulfilling a purpose—making flexibility and malleability important value-features of our objects.

Baudrillard says the following on functionality:

We are beginning to see what the new model of the home-dweller looks like: 'man the interior designer' is neither an owner nor a mere user—rather, he is an active engineer of atmosphere. Space is at his disposal like a kind of distributed system, and by controlling this space he holds sway over all possible reciprocal relations between the objects therein, and hence over all the roles that they are capable of assuming. (It follows that he must also be 'functional' himself: he and the space in question must be homogeneous if his messages of design are to leave him or return to him successfully.) What matters to him is neither possession nor enjoyment but responsibility, in the strict sense which implies that it is at all times possible for him to determine 'responses' (Baudrillard, 26).

The notion of responsibility is essential in understanding the task of organization. By undertaking this task, we bring the ideals of the technical paradigm to life. We exert rational order in the form of physical control, and our calculations may be understood to represent a manifestation of the technical ideal of the world as an open system capable of manipulation. If we conceive of the world as truly mechanical in nature, then we not only desire calculation but feel *compelled* to calculate as a means of becoming true to our own nature—as a means of authenticating ourselves. Having the ability to control, every choice we make becomes indicative of our success as human beings based on the extent to which our choices result in consequences or responses that are measurably superior to those that could have followed from other choices. With respect to functional objects, every aspect of their arrangement in a space represents a choice that has been made by the human organizer. The objects in my space may be understood as vessels through which I project myself, because I am responsible for them. Thus, as an 'engineer of atmosphere,' I discover myself through the experience of success and failure, which follows from my demonstrable ability to calculate.

In considering human-object relationships of the functional variety, it is essential to remember that the ideal of functionality operates on two levels simultaneously. An object, in the abstract, must perform its function by successfully serving a prescribed purpose, and a human being, as the controller of this object, must perform his function by successfully arranging or employing it in a calculably successful manner. This relationship requires that the object operate as an abstract component of atmosphere, that the object be malleable. Only a system of abstract components allows us to function in relation to those components in the desired fashion. Through such a system, we are able to create atmosphere by manipulating potential interactions between objects. The atmosphere of a room makes an impression that is more important than the impression that could possibly be achieved by any single object in an isolated encounter. The painting in my living room is valuable first and foremost because of its contribution to the life of the room as a whole. It is valuable as an isolated artistic entity only in a

secondary sense. This is not to say that I would necessarily compromise my artistic tastes for the sake of matching a superficial color scheme but only that I would not purchase a painting if I was not confident that it could be incorporated successfully into my space. Perhaps I have established my living room in such a way that allows for simple rearrangement or for fashionable design shifts—allowing myself more freedom to integrate a new painting into the existing space while maintaining high standards for atmosphere. The extent to which I have freedom to choose the specific components while maintaining atmospheric integrity on a larger scale represents my success as a designer—my functionality with respect to objects. The key factors in human-object relationships that follow from this functional drive are the *abstraction* of objects into atmospheric components and the human *responsibility* to control these components successfully.

These factors contribute to what Baudrillard calls the *logic of atmosphere* that follows from the desire for a functional world. Objects are laden with meaning, and our lives are informed on a practical as well as an emotional and ideological level through what is signified by the objects of our atmosphere. No functional object, however, is free to act as an isolated symbol, because its functionality is bound up in its ability to relate to other objects and its ability to affect (and be affected by) human beings as a component of atmosphere. Additionally, no person is completely free from his objects, because he is responsible for the responses that they engender. According to Baudrillard, objects take on significance based on what they signify about the person who is responsible for them. He argues that in the modern age tactical values—such as control and organization—take precedence over more instinctual, less rational values. He claims that we crave successful signification of appropriate messages over and above the successful manifestation of authentic instincts. This perspective is supported by the recognition that we tend to arrange the objects in our lives in such a way as to echo the ideals of comfort, flexibility, fashion, and organization—all of which point to our rational mastery of an open system. If we think about what messages may be culturally acceptable, at least in a public sense, it becomes clear that it is important to maintain a facade of openness to objective messages, of comfort with oneself, of being in control. Thus, we may seek to signify, through arrangements of objects, feelings of warmth or intimacy, naturalness or authenticity, before we seek the actual experience of these culturally valued emotions or states of being. Part of our responsibility as organizers and manipulators involves projecting ourselves in the appropriate manner. But the task of signification may replace the more basic tasks of feeling or being. In this sense, the demand for *logic of atmosphere* affects our freedom to take on roles other than those of calculation and organization (Baudrillard, 39-54).

I believe that there are physical, moral, and emotional drives that are never intentionally manifested within the system of objects because these drives do not signify culturally acceptable messages. While we have greater and greater power to control atmosphere, the accompanying tendency to replace instinctual action with calculated action may prove ultimately frustrating. A person who is highly successful in the rational task of arranging and projecting objective messages may be incapable of incorporating primal, non-rational, emotional, or spiritual yearnings into his project. The ideal (or myth) of a fully functional world—an ideal that proceeds from the notion that the rational

tendency is ultimately perfectible and ultimately authoritarian—affects our ability to communicate authentically within the system of objects. Functionality in human-object relationships is based on the incorporation and utilization of abstract signs as a reminder of our supremacy as controllers and manipulators of a system. An object is functional only as part of a successful atmosphere—an atmosphere that has been responsibly ordered to signify appropriate cultural messages. Thus, functionality often has much less to do with the *work* that is actually done by an object or by a person through an object than we might expect. My argument is not that people fail to employ objects that work for them—objects that symbolize a personal concern or take on another productive purpose. Rather, I am claiming that all functional objects also pay tribute to ideological cultural standards, such as the values of control, malleability, and instrumental calculation. Creating atmosphere can be a tool for achieving status as an integrated member of the technological community and as a successful human being on a more general level. To consider an object's place in an overall atmosphere or an overall system of signs is to abstract the object as a component fit for manipulation. Thus, the process of self-realization or self-authentication sought in human-object relationships is oftentimes a confused or conflicted process because abstract components are employed as the medium for conveying supposedly organic, human concerns.

In *The System of Objects*, Baudrillard argues that there has been a severe shift in the way that people relate to the objects of their atmosphere. He claims that the perception of objects as functional expedients has replaced their status as human creations that are valuable in and of themselves. In the past, objects such as the dining room table signified familial and moral solidarity for our ancestors—represented in the simple and symbolic character of their households. Now, we have fallen into a cheapened and fragmented mentality epitomized by gross consumerism. Baudrillard notes particular worries about excessive production—which leads us to purchase and discard objects at a much faster rate—and about the accompanying tendency to secularize (instead of spiritualize) the components of our environment (Baudrillard, 15-29). While Baudrillard is correct in noting a shift in cultural perspective, I believe that he is too extreme in his condemnation of contemporary modes for assigning value. It seems clear enough that the technological age has brought about a revolution in the way that we acquire and utilize produced goods. However, the impetus behind what we are doing remains predominantly moral in character. In seeking functional ideals, we are indeed operating on shared standards for what sort of approach to life is most appropriate for our present circumstances. The problem lies not in the desire to be free and flexible or in the desire to calculate and control what is best for ourselves but lies in the inconsistent application of our most sacred values. The cultural apparatus of the system of objects is detrimental only inasmuch as it fails to provide the freedom, flexibility, and opportunity for self-realization and self-expression that it claims to provide.

It is important to understand that we are able to accomplish a great deal by relating to objects, but it is also important to realize that there are many shortcomings inherent in our cultural approach that are not discussed on television. With the ability to calculate comes the burden of an infinite reservoir of possible calculations—more than enough to supply a lifetime of rational concerns. There are certain values wrapped up in

the structures of production and consumption that support an incessant feeling of *lack*. On a scientific level, we are always lacking the next possible invention, the next means of streamlining our lives. On a personal level, we are always lacking some advertised good that we *desire*, or are taught to desire. When we think about systematizing a set of objects and an accompanying set of signified messages, the presentation of atmosphere is always lacking perfection. We can always present ourselves, through objects, in a more effective manner than we are currently doing, and if we choose to make it so, the process of seeking perfection in this creative task can be a never-ending and all-consuming one. However, we are only truly lacking in a functional sense, if human nature is completely based on our ability to calculate, and this is arguably not the case.

We may indeed, have sympathetic aspects to our nature that intuitively or instinctually drive us to interact with other beings as more than mere functional expedients. The system of objects teaches us that we are lacking, which is indeed the case, but the consumer solution espoused by advertising will ultimately only suppress this lacking momentarily and ineffectively. In the name of becoming more functional, more complete, or more successful, we destroy our natural environment and replace it with a more mechanistic one. To the mind conditioned by the system of objects, a Costa Rican rainforest is a fair price to pay for the ability to choose designer clothes from a mail-order catalog. The lives of one hundred Middle-Eastern civilians is a fair price to pay for cheaper gas, which also implies more efficient travel, commerce, business, and leisure for the world's most rational (most evolved) animals. Conceiving of economic freedom, in the sense of American capitalism, as solely representative of our rational abilities to calculate and control our immediate environment is a root cause of many ideological and moral dilemmas in our world. The freedom to choose and the freedom to be authentic beings with personal sympathies and personal concerns is not bound by the confines of the system of objects. As beings of the technological age, we have supposedly learned to rationalize the components of our environment into the most effective or most appealing state possible. But inasmuch as we become closed off from the effects that our actions have on other people and other beings of all kind around the world, our freedom to succeed is limited based on the limits of our vision. Each factor of the technological/industrial world that we must ignore on an emotional level in order to be satisfied with ourselves and our lives represents a stone left unturned by the powerful human mind. Becoming functional in how we approach our environment is not itself a problem, but becoming functional in the most authentic sense must involve overcoming the pervasive tendency to ignore the effects of our actions that reach beyond what is immediately and physically present to us.

By practicing systematic control in our relationships to functional objects, this ability may become engrained in such way that we apply it in circumstances where the instrumental approach is inappropriate. Within the system of objects, it is often difficult to distinguish who and what is being manipulated. Effects on objects, effects on people, and effects on the environment are all represented as abstract components in a malleable system. While most of us would claim that manipulating an object in our environment and manipulating the livelihood of another human being represent morally distinct categories of action, we proceed blindly in our exploitation of life around the world with

the rhetoric of personal freedom close at hand. To grow in our capacities as rational beings capable of calculating cause and effect and capable of organizing component parts into a smoothly-functioning whole, we need to distinguish our concerns and our desires from those espoused by the affluent yet destructive apparatus that craves our money over and above our peace of mind.

## ii. Symbolic Objects

Although most objects are at least partially functional in character, there are types of human-object relationships that are not based purely on the ideal of a functional world. Let us consider antiques or collections, for example. Their purpose is not to perform any task or even to be manipulated in any primary sense. Rather, their purpose is merely to exist, to be owned, or to be displayed. Antiques signify history, and they act as reminders that the current age has evolved from people and traditions of the past. Antiques represent origin and rootedness, which are values commonly overlooked within the framework of technological ideals, and their presence within the system of objects provides an implicit critique of looking at the world through a lens concerned with functional expediency in the abstract. Antiques represent naturalness by suggesting nostalgia for a more basic, more primitive state of being. There is something in us that yearns for what is old, for what has been overtaken by streamlined industry, production, and consumption. Signs of origin—in a culture seeking to replace more traditional values with modern yearnings for materialistic progress—provide some form of satisfaction that is truly ironic. Our satisfaction with a potted plant is similarly ironic as praise of the natural world, since it is our very modes of seeking satisfaction that have irreparably damaged the earth. The technological outlook has guided us through a process of overcoming traditional means of moral identification—by offering up the project of self-creation through the mastery of industrial commodities as a more practical and more flexible alternative. However, we still find some way to incorporate signs of the past into our predominantly modernized atmospheric schema, because we believe we are somehow more authentic if we come from *somewhere* and if we express our nostalgia for origin through the presentation of antiques or other cultural relics. These objects may echo our fear of the possibility that *all* objects will one day be powered by computer chips or the possibility of *completely* forgetting that technology has not always reigned supreme. At any rate, the place of antiques and cultural relics in the system of objects raises some interesting issues of how and what we are communicating through our relationships to them (Baudrillard, 70-77).

Baudrillard says:

Man is not 'at home' amid pure functionality—he requires something like that luster of wood from the True Cross which would make a church truly holy, some kind of talisman—a shard of absolute reality ensconced, enshrined at the heart of ordinary reality in order to justify it. Such is the role of the antique object, which always takes on the meaning, in the context of the human environment, of an embryo or mother cell (Baudrillard, 79).

The purely symbolic object reminds us that our environment has not been completely mastered by technological ideals, because we experience craving for things that are by no stretch functional in the way described above. According to Baudrillard these objects signify a transcendence of the cultural tendencies towards universal abstraction into component parts. These objects represent non-rational, passionate, or instinctual drives becoming manifest in the way that is most convenient given cultural circumstances.

A sparkling rock that I found in the woods sits on my window sill. Bookends from my grandfather's house sit on my dresser, without any actual books to support. I love these objects, and I give my attention to them specifically almost every day. They represent who I am and what I care about--making their purpose predominantly psychological instead of practical. In a moment of quandary or depression, these objects provide greater strength than any functional object specifically designed to provide psychological support. A punching bag, for example, may help me express my anger or express my longing for physical power—thus serving as a psychological tool. Its presence in my life, however, does not represent an endearing or loving or mutually-supporting relationship but only echoes my indebtedness to technology and industry—which have provided me with the ability to employ objects as means to achieving personal ends. It may be extremely helpful that I am able to manipulate and control the punching bag without feeling the moral qualms that would follow from punching a living person. However, its purely functional character as an object keeps me from becoming attached to it in a deep sense, in the way that I become attached to purely symbolic objects. I can never truly love the punching bag as the punching bag, although I may enjoy the rush that I get while hitting it or the solace that follows from being able to physically express my emotions. In a similar way, I can arguably never truly love the Wal-Mart futon as the Wal-Mart futon, although it may be comfortable, convenient, and suitably functional—its flexibility and malleability empowering me as an expressive organizer. Any object that operates in relationships as a means to a functional end cannot completely satisfy our moral, emotional, or spiritual cravings. Although the new morality aims to deify the values of technical control and efficient calculation over and above passionate or non-rational attachments, we still seek out objects that are purely symbolic and without *use value* as necessary components of our environment.

My sparkling rock symbolizes my connection with nature, and my bookends symbolize my connection with family and tradition. These objects are among the most important, because my feelings for them and my communication with them has nothing to do with the success or failure of their functioning. If I choose to discard my rock, sending it sailing back to its home in the woods, then this separation is most likely based on love or, at least, sentimentality instead of on frustration or anger regarding its failure as an object of my atmosphere. If I choose to discard a functional object, like my coffee maker, this separation is probably based on some perceived problem in the relationship between myself and the object. It may be old and malfunctioning, or I may simply be displeased with its style or its technological abilities—wishing, in either case, to replace it with something that will serve my needs better. I do not mean to imply that symbolic objects escape certain functional requirements of atmosphere, because they are *intended* to function psychologically once we arrange them into our space. The difference is that

antiques and relics of all varieties were created for a purpose besides our present employment of them in a partially functional way. If they were intended, in their origination, to serve psychological functions for me in the present, then they would be incapable of operating symbolically in a deep way. Similar to how a bird weaves 'unnatural' twine and plastic into its nest and how beavers take up residence in metal pipes discarded as industrial waste, we incorporate objects whose origins are essentially non-functional into a system that *appears* to operate exclusively on the technological ideals wrapped up in production and consumption. Just as human presence and intervention has shaped the natural world into something less than purely natural, in an ideological organic sense, the remnants of non-functional, emotional, or spiritual drives intervene in the technological approach of human beings, making us less than purely instrumental in our operations.

My attraction to the sparkling rock is not based on desires for functional expediency or for exerting control, but I may come to view this rock as a *possession* even though the relationship originated without any drive for personal domination. Baudrillard says:

Let us grant that our everyday objects are in fact objects of a passion—the passion for private property, emotional investment which is every bit as intense as investment in the 'human' passions.... Apart from the uses to which we put them at any particular moment, objects in this sense have another aspect which is intimately bound up with the subject: no longer simply material bodies offering a certain resistance, they become mental precincts over which I hold sway, they become things of which I am the meaning, they become my property and my passion (Baudrillard, 85).

An emblem of nature or an emblem of traditional origins or other emblems of value-expression can be easily interpreted as *personalized* signs, as representations of a self that is intrinsically *connected* to his sources of meaning, if these emblems are possessed instead of merely admired. There is obviously a level of communication between myself and nature that occurs as I am walking in the woods--taking in impressions and being affected by the environment. Likewise, there is a level of communication between myself and my family heritage when I visit my grandmother's house—observing and reflecting on what life has been like for my family in the past. Once I remove a sparkling rock from the woods or receive my grandfather's bookends as a gift, however, there is a new and different form of communication going on between myself and the things to which I ascribe value. Once a symbolic object can be considered *mine*, its significance no longer resides as purely external to who I am as an *individual* being, as a being capable of intentional and creative self-expression.

On a physical level, we seek symbolic objects as appropriate signifiers, as means for communicating successfully with ourselves and with others around us. On a psychological level, we participate in more general, existential projects such as self-realization or self-authentication. The rock in my window sill is important, in the first place, because when I see it I am reminded of my love of nature, even though I may not have time to get out for a hike every day. Also, visitors to my room respond to the rock



based on the assumption that it is somehow important to me and that I have intentionally placed this symbolic object in plain view. In this way, personalized objects help us communicate. The rock is simultaneously important on a different level, because by having it in my room I am somehow more *complete* that I would be without it. I would feel truly naked, vulnerable, and unsatisfied without the symbolic objective emblems that have become extensions of myself. The feeling of being *invested* in our objects is indicative of what I am calling existential projects. And it is largely within the act or state of possession that this investment originates. If I consider my sparkling rock as belonging to mother nature instead of belonging to me, then I may have no reason to be sad if it disappears from its place. It would indeed be simple to find another emblem of the natural world, if it is merely the physical task of communication with which I am concerned. The presence of symbolic objects in our environment is important precisely because this presence reminds us that our connections are at least partially emotional in nature.

Baudrillard discusses relationships of possession as simultaneously satisfying and disappointing. We may strive to add more or better objects to our symbolic, self-reflexive repertoires, because we have never completely symbolized everything that is important. Furthermore, our notions of what is important evolve over time—constantly restoring the need to adequately portray ourselves. Baudrillard argues that the ‘game of possession’ is necessary for our survival and that we would be incapable of functioning in the modern age without the comfort brought by attaching ourselves to objects in a domineering capacity. Possessing objects allows us to exert some sort of control in a pervasive discourse of signs and symbols. But our communication through this objective media brings with it a plethora of potential problems—ranging from the experience of perpetual lack and anxiety about incompleteness to the dangers of misinterpretation and our inability to successfully calculate others’ (and our own) responses. Human-object relationships based on symbolic projection via possession and association represent a form of internal monologue that is never fully completed on a subjective level and never fully comprehended by others in our environment. (Baudrillard, 86-97).

It is important to note the inevitable shortcomings of seeking meaning based on human drives and feelings through the employment of non-human signifiers. However, the beauty of purely symbolic communication between humans and the objects that they are passionate about must be acknowledged as well. Within the cultural apparatus that we are a part of, we will never escape the desire to possess things or to call things *mine* just as we will never escape the cravings for control and calculation. Although my symbolic relationships to objects may never perfectly represent who I am or what I am trying to communicate to the rest of the world, these relationships are nonetheless partially based on more organic and instinctual drives than human-object relationships of the purely functional variety. And this incorporation of emotional disposition into the system of objects is important in the face of the potential for an exclusively rational and mechanistic mode of assigning value. Any relationships where the value or status is not calculated but rather emerges on its own serve to remind us that we are not in complete control of the world.

### iii. Mechanical Objects

Machines and automatons make up another basic variety of objects. These objects are definitely *functional* in character, but their functionality is different from that of non-mechanical objects. My toothbrush and my chair are functional inasmuch as their purpose is to satisfy practical needs, and my task in relating to these objects involves successfully employing them and successfully incorporating them into the scheme of my atmosphere. These objects contribute to my livelihood by facilitating my ability to sustain myself in the desired fashion, and they are easily mastered in a physical sense. The mechanical element of my relationship to the toothbrush or to the chair requires calculating the best mode of manipulation or utilization, but I am always the one *working* mechanically in the relationship. When we consider the functional relationships between ourselves and machines, it must be acknowledged that the objects operate as calculators to a greater degree than we do. We have, in effect, created objects to perform tasks characteristic of the rational human mind. An automatic coffee-maker relieves me of the physical tasks of boiling water and straining grounds. It reduces the variables that I am responsible for calculating and executing in order to achieve a goal. On a much more complex level, a computer can calculate and arrange information much more efficiently than any human being, although it is indeed the *human* capacity for instrumental reason that is reflected in its functioning. Machines mirror the human consciousness in its rational aspects without succumbing to distracting, inefficient emotional or psychological factors. With the use of machines, we can observe our own instrumental mastery without actually having to participate in the execution of tasks that we already know ourselves to be capable of accomplishing if we had the time or energy. Machines are anthropomorphized objects, and in many ways they have come to set standards for human behavior. By isolating rationally efficient human properties and creating a seemingly living object to embody them, we have set a precedent for what humans could be like if perfected as scientific beings. Thus the ideological significance of machines, according to Baudrillard, involves our aspirations towards living up to their abilities—both for rational mastery and for emotional detachment (Baudrillard 109-119).

Our tasks in relation to machines are almost never physical tasks, because the machines are working so that we do not have to. A successful tractor operator needs only to start the engine with a key or button, hold the steering wheel relatively straight, and then sit back and relax while the work gets accomplished. Many factory workers pull levers and smoke cigarettes, without ever having to make anything with their hands. A modern engineer works predominantly with a computer mouse instead of measuring tools, pencils, and paper. It is essential for our own state of mind to remain at least minimally involved—as a gesture symbolic of our control over the work that is done—so that we do not lose our sense of human potency to a potentially overwhelming sense of enslavement or dependence on an apparatus that is more powerful than we are. Machines, in their greatest efficiency, represent a threat as well as a testament to human supremacy and mastery of a malleable world. The greatest scientific minds advance technological ideals by inventing and employing machines to successfully replace human workers and thinkers. This advancement has psychologically detrimental effects on beings who crave control but are becoming increasingly aware that the nature of their control is more and

more symbolic, while less and less physical. Non-mechanical objects can be arranged and utilized—offering humans a clear role in the creation of a functional environment. Mechanical objects, while in one sense more efficient in their functional abilities, deprive their owners/users of much responsibility. Mechanical objects take on the responsibility of calculation as well as that of execution, which may prove extremely helpful but may also dismiss the notion of human accountability in a potentially dangerous way. Just as no office worker can be held accountable for a computer malfunction and the resulting loss of information, the universal mechanization encouraged by technological ideals foists all responsibility for reprehensible action onto the system itself. And the system can never be blamed, because its functioning one way or another can never be attributed to a responsible party. Within the system of objects, the only true responsibility is responsibility to oneself and one's own desires and one's own signified messages. A single business or a single person operating within this apparatus takes on analogous responsibility for the livelihood of all involved as the impotent mouse-clicker takes on when his computer crashes.

Relationships between humans and objects of the mechanical variety blur the distinction between the functional and the symbolic. Machines fulfill a purpose that is truly functional in nature, but the human task in facilitating this purpose is almost purely symbolic. While mechanical objects perform work that is human in many ways, the actual people involved with these objects are forced to acknowledge that they are only in control of their machines on a very nominal level. Our tasks in relationship to mechanical objects are almost purely symbolic tasks—ironically echoing the role that we play in relation to antiques or cultural relics. There is little calculation, instrumentation, or rationalization left for us to do once we employ machines. Pushing a button, pulling a lever, clicking a mouse, or plugging in a power cord are only functional tasks on the most minimal level. What is important is that we signify a state of control whether we actually have it or not.

#### **iv. Fashionable Objects**

The lines between the functional and the symbolic are blurred in a reciprocal manner when we consider objects of fashion and style. These objects have a symbolic purpose, and they provide an opportunity for functional human roles of calculation, instrumentation, and organization. As discussed above, functional human tasks in relationship to objects require a level of abstraction—assigning value to objects as components of a system as opposed to distinct entities in themselves. For example, as an object of fashion, a plaid suit is never just a plaid suit, because it represents a complex and variable set of human moods, desires, and personalities. While its purpose, on a practical level, is to be worn, the meaning and value of the suit extends far beyond its satisfaction of a basic physical requirement. It is important to note that once an object is perceived as (attempting to be) stylish or fashionable, its effect becomes almost purely symbolic. The role of the functional human mind is important regarding objects of fashion, because we recognize not only the ability but also the tendency to calculate according to considerations of style. Any object that I attach to myself is potentially symbolic, simply because it is culturally acknowledged that *intentional* expression

through symbolic objects is possible. Thus, whether or not someone is calculating according to style, their objects will almost necessarily make a symbolic impact.

Concerns with fashion have definitely become mainstream and all-encompassing within the system of objects. In many instances, fashion dictates our practical needs, and in almost all cases purely functional objects have come to embody an element of fashion. Baudrillard points out that in pre-industrial society there was a stark distinction between functional and fashionable objects. Before the cultural supremacy of the technological paradigm, normal people did not have the means, nor arguably the desire, to concern themselves with fashion in the all-pervasive way that we notice in the present. Now, we have so many objects competing with one another for a place on department store aisles that these objects must by default attract us by other means than their mere ability to function practically. That is, even the most basic object must be fashionable in order to sell. In pre-industrial societies, what we call the 'style of the period' refers to the tastes of the aristocratic class, because these were the only people that had the liberty to concern themselves with grand aesthetics. Even if peasant classes had the desire to appear noble, there would have been little that they could do about it. These considerations are important in juxtaposition to our present state of affairs in which even the most humble budget can most likely support cravings to become fashionable. Culturally acknowledged articles of style are available not only from fancy French designers but also from Wal-Mart. Indeed, there is a gulf between high-class style and low-class style, as determined by economic standing, but the *concern* for style is no longer a socially exclusive concern. Even the cheapest functional object aspires towards becoming fashionable, and the distinction between what is fashionable and what is useful is virtually nonsensical—which is, commercially, quite a lucrative jumbling of terms (Baudrillard, 137-141).

The concept of fashion in the modern age is complexly and deeply engrained. For reasons I will explain below, the form that fashion takes within the system of objects echoes a severe ideological contradiction that may prove indicative of the structural malaises of the system as a whole. Objects that operate as models—as ideal representations of a particular class or type of object—claim uniqueness and in many cases claim cutting edge status, which appeals without restriction or exception to the technological mind. Once a model has set a precedent for what can be created or represented, an entire community of similar objects follow in its wake. Each of these objects attests to the appeal of the original model, while simultaneously positing some minor difference that makes it unique on a level secondary to the uniqueness of the original invention. Almost infinite variations of these minor differences will saturate the market until the consumers stop responding. Multiple but functionally insubstantial variations on a deified model object represent the infiltration of fashion. Fashion is important because it allows for a maximal number of products to claim status as unique entities. Although only secondarily or marginally, a red shirt is unique from a purple shirt, and a tri-fold wallet is unique from a bi-fold wallet. These differences give rise to the recognition of consumer *choice*, which is empowering as a testament to our freedom as individuals. The ability to express freedom in this way is itself a catalyst for consumption based on the need for self-expression over and above the need for practical,

functional aid that objects can provide. An object that is unique on some level is capable of becoming personalized—as an objective integration that signifies both my individuality on a general level, because I am the one who chose it, and my personality specifically, because its purported uniqueness is a verification of *taste*. Because it is culturally important to distinguish myself from other individuals and because the simplest mode of distinction comes in the form of purchasable signifiers, the fashionable aspect of serially-produced objects makes them appealing not only as supplemental luxuries but as emotional and psychological necessities (Baudrillard, 143-155).

We attach ourselves to objects of fashion with the intent of authenticating ourselves. Through our own style, we signify self-realization and successful individuation to an entire world of beings that are distinguishing themselves in the exact same manner. Thus, the ideological contradiction of marketable fashion becomes apparent with the recognition that differences in style follow from nothing more than different consumer choices. These choices are indeed generated by an industrial apparatus whose very function is to sell the most items to the most people, and it is this source of our glorified choices that makes consumption according to fashion suggestive of mass integration as opposed to purported individualization. We perpetually crave self-expression but are continually frustrated by achieving only partial success in this endeavor through our relationships with signifying objects. Since we have never truly or completely communicated our own uniqueness as individuals, there is always room for a little bit more fashion to aid the process. What we continually fail to realize, however, is that the incorporation of fashionable considerations may be the very aspect of our lives that integrates us continually into an impersonal, systematized apparatus which curbs our progress towards successful self-expression. Baudrillard discusses the desire for subjectivity, when expressed within the system of objects, as the constantly-renewable foundation of our dispersion into the masses:

Personal achievement is indeed an obligation haunting the modern consumer in the context of forced mobility....In the area which concerns us here, this constraint is paradoxical: it is clear that in the act of personalized consumption the subject, in his very insistence on being a *subject*, succeeds in manifesting himself only as an *object* of economic demand. His project, filtered and fragmented in advance, is dashed by the very process that is supposed to realize it. Since 'specific differences' are produced on an industrial scale, any choice he can make is ossified from the outset; only the *illusion* of personal distinctiveness remains (152).

It must be acknowledged, despite these seemingly malignant criticisms, that choices invested with personal value may indeed represent distinctions between individuals that are by no means completely illusory. A practical fact is that people become satisfied through consumptive tendencies and do indeed express personal moods, impulses, and orientations of all varieties through the rational calculation of appropriate fashion. So, my argument is not that fashionable objects are devoid of authentic value by virtue of their origin in an exploitive system, but rather that conscious recognition of ideological inconsistencies in the realm of fashion might lead us to search for self-expression in other ways as well. Perhaps our frustrations regarding incomplete personal establishment or

unsuccessful communication could be better answered through expressive modes not dependent on an apparatus whose ultimate vitality depends on the perpetuation of our experience of *lacking*.

## II. *Objective Value-Structure*

Throughout this analysis of relationships between humans and objects, I have tried to shed light on some basic trends and basic problems that follow from approaching the world with an outlook based on the ideals of technology and industry. It is the desire to calculate, to produce, to control, to systematize, and ultimately to construct an instrumental path towards achieving *the good life* that leads us into relationships with objects. But it is also clear that there are basic emotional, spiritual, or, as I have called them, existential drives present in us which arguably preceded the industrial age as aspects of human nature. This is not to say that the *language* of self-authentication or self-realization can exist or be meaningfully applied in a context not governed by the ideals of the technological paradigm. Rather, this language can be understood as a modern version of a timeless human concern for ascribing value to what is greatest or most important. Additionally, I must not be misinterpreted as claiming that the desires for rational mastery are exclusively modern in character. I believe that all cultures attempt to find rational interpretations and explanations of the human condition based on shared concerns and shared recognitions about the environment in which they exist. The point is that technology and industry have allowed for a world in which we perpetually relate and attach ourselves to produced objects—as a practical means of survival, as an interpersonal means of cultural communication, and as an existential means of discovering who we are and what we value. To discuss how and why a modern human being grows to understand and interact with the world in the way that he does, an observation and analysis of the prevalence of objects seems essential. With the help of objects—through our relationships with them—we hone certain human skills to an extent that we would be incapable of achieving without their assistance.

However, the tendency to isolate and deify the skills necessary for taking part in human-object relationships may be detrimental to the cultivation of other skills and other considerations of value that are not an explicit part of the system of objects. Relationships to objects can never be separated from the cultural apparatus that produces and distributes these objects. That is, to even begin to interact with objects in a meaningful way, there is a certain required degree of conscious or unconscious faith in the system that governs how these objects enter into our lives. Baudrillard critiques the culturally espoused method of finding and attributing meaning through objective vehicles precisely because the apparatus of the system of objects is not itself aligned with the deepest concerns of those that are seeking value within its structure. Because this system operates on a set of values that is inconsistent at best—constantly disguising motivations based on integration and submission as opportunities for liberty and individualization—the faith that individual aspirants are required to place in the structure prescribing their medium for self-discovery is indeed a precarious faith. Thus, a criticism of the system of objects—as a medium through which we customarily find meaning and attribute value—is necessary for furthering our pursuits as beings seeking what is greatest.

Despite the multiple variations of human-object relationships, some of which have been discussed here and others which I undoubtedly left out, I believe that we can give a general account of the value-structure implicit in the very task of employing, using, owning, and *loving* the objects around us. Let us now review some of the complexities that contribute to the ongoing narrative informing these relationships. We confer value on objects because they represent potential solutions to our problems or satisfactions of our needs and desires. The role of instrumental reason in assigning value can account for this description of their significance in our lives. In effect, the ability to calculate represents a means of improving our current situation. And objects take on a role as facilitators of our calculation. The inconsistency of this purely instrumental approach, however, lies in the recognition that many of our purported problems are constantly *replaced* by new problems of a similar variety instead of actually being solved in a conclusive manner. To better understand the complexity of the language of problems and solutions we need only to reflect briefly on the messages of advertising.

Advertising is unwavering in its message that the industrial/commercial apparatus is committed to ensuring our well-being. At the same time, however, there is an implicit criticism of our lives as incomplete or lacking. Thus, by combining critical and caring messages, advertising convinces us that it is in our own best interest to seek self-improvement in the prescribed way. The ideal posited is a complete relief of the tension that we feel as only partially-actualized, partially-satisfied rational beings. Baudrillard draws a distinction between our reaction to the rhetoric of advertising in the imperative sense and in the indicative sense. We may very well criticize particular advertisements as misleading, ineffective, or even immoral, but at the same time our immersion in a culture centered around this type of communication—*I have what you want, and you know how to get it*—leads us to believe in advertising as a genuine cultural expression. Advertising, in a sense, puts society on display right before our eyes, and it is advertising that teaches us how to take care of ourselves in a capitalist culture. The function of advertising thus extends far beyond selling a particular good or service, because as a general mode of expression advertising teaches us what is required to function in society and why that mode of functioning can be gratifying as a facilitator of solutions to our problems. Thus, Baudrillard argues that the entire method of acquiring, buying, or attaching ourselves to objects can never represent a completely authentic process of self-discovery or a completely successful project of value-attribution. Since the system of objects sells us the desires that we seek to satisfy through it, this process can never facilitate true understanding or true fulfillment (Baudrillard, 164-178).

Inasmuch as we may try to separate ourselves from the language of calculated, mechanical resolutions, however, we become disillusioned within a culture that rationally creates and rationally appeases a complex set of needs and desires. This disillusionment itself, while perhaps a temporary escape from the requirements of a system that provides many opportunities for rational as well as moral condemnation, can lead to anxiety about separation from the community. This feeling is not independent from the engrained notion of competition between individuals—as if what we share as a group is a common self-interest—that we are all striving for in an ironically collective fashion. Indeed, if I fall out of favor with society, I can no longer compete as an individual in the way that I

have grown accustomed. There is of course a rational solution for this anxiety, just like all anxieties, which involves re-integration—albeit grudging re-integration—into the inescapable reality of our cultural situation. While we may become disillusioned by the perpetual movement of desired objects away from our grasp, at least there is an entire global community struggling along with us. In addition to being safe and convenient, we may justify integration into the capitalist society as a responsibility that follows from its allotment of *rights* and *freedom* to each individual citizen. Feelings of commitment may very well take on a moral as well as a practical character. It does seem paradoxical, however, that our strongest, or most conscious, collective bond is the mutual desire to satisfy individualized needs with individualized products—in a sense, communally sharing the desire to be ultimately separated. I thus sympathize with Baudrillard's critique while simultaneously recognizing that what is inescapable should not be the primary object of our concern. Rather, it seems that acknowledging our sympathies with the system of objects—in which we feel quite at home most days—while also seeking consciousness of its incompleteness as a value-structure will guide us towards living the most productive, most authentic, and perhaps most revolutionary lives that we could possibly lead.

Ideological problems aside, the language of freedom and choice is extremely attractive and extremely powerful. We do indeed have the liberty of flexibility in choosing what objective signifiers are best suited for our own creative expression. As I mentioned above, it is important not to discount personal investitures based purely on general structural shortcomings of our cultural environment. It is crucial, however, to note the discrepancies between the value assigned to objects by individuals on a personal level and the value assigned by the system of objects itself to its own perpetuation and growth as a global experiment in the application of technological ideals. We find value in objects, because they allow us to project ourselves, because they allow us to calculate, to systematize, to choose, to control the variables of our own lives. We are free to rationalize and manipulate the objects of our environment in whatever way seems fitting—as a means of communication with the rest of society and with ourselves. We are honestly seeking success as human beings and simultaneously seeking justification for the mode in which we are doing so. If we do not *believe* in the rationality of our expressive and explorative function, then we cannot perform it adequately. The system of objects both provides a medium for our human project and provides justification for that project. The technological paradigm calls for continual perpetuation of its espoused ideals, because exaltation of this magnitude allows us to believe in what we are doing and in how we are ascribing value. At some level, however, justification is not advantageous if it disguises monumental structural deficiencies in our environment—deficiencies that are affecting our evolution in a potentially correctable way. Feelings of contentment dependent on large-scale scarcity of vision may not be justified as ultimately helpful in the project of becoming successful human beings in the fullest sense possible.

How we learn to relate to objects affects how we learn to relate to other human beings, and in many cases the extreme demand to relentlessly form human-object type relationships—a demand to do this out of *necessity*, because we need to—causes us to become dangerously removed from the human community. Inasmuch as we can



consider ourselves *free* as individual consumers and as individuals attached to objects of our own choosing, our freedom is undoubtedly precarious when we consider the way that an entire culture of people have learned to interact with one another—all of us choosing *personalized* signifiers from the same department store aisles which supposedly represent each individual's ability to communicate distinctive and authentic messages. We are purportedly free to resolve our own tensions, free to possess our own objects, and free to control the objective components of our own atmosphere, and this *individual* freedom is indeed a dominant moral postulate binding our society together. An individual simultaneously reconciles his mode of existence with himself and with the group by acknowledging shared goals and shared language employed in the process of self-actualization. As a moral postulate, the freedom to satisfy individual desires and project individual messages—the freedom to remain separate—is the very ideal that binds us together, albeit on a secondary level. While Baudrillard's claim that *personalized* human-object relationships intentionally replace relationships between people is true on some level, it does seem that human relationships remain a primary concern but are simply approached in a different way because of our environment's saturation with objects. Tendencies toward expressing ourselves in relationships to objects do not suppress our drive to connect and communicate with other living beings, but the way in which we do so is oftentimes mediated by objects. I employ objects as signifiers, as means of projecting objectifiable messages that are nonetheless open to evaluation and interpretation, and this signification streamlines interpersonal communication in a calculable and mechanized manner. The necessary role of interpretation—in others' perception of my projections—leaves plenty of room for improving our communication, because it is always possible to *better* calculate the responses that we will receive. Our repeated failure to communicate complex or non-stereotyped messages to other people, however, is balanced by the absolute freedom from conflict and misunderstanding that we experience in our relationships to our own objects. Objects appear so diverse and so intricate, because of the practically infinite varieties we have to choose from, that we, in a sense, feel that human-object relationships are deeply significant in and of themselves. The diversity of objects, however, is different from the diversity of people, because objects are never themselves critical or conflictual in our relationships to them. As the human party in the relationship, I am always in absolute control to acquire, employ, and discard at will without resistance from anyone besides myself.

Objects constitute distinguishing marks of our personalities, of our concerns, and of our place in society. Hierarchies and classifications of objects have in many ways replaced a range of distinct values as the constituent medium of our culture's ethos. Our emotional attachment to the objects that we have and to the prospect of improving the status, quality, or quantity of these objects informs the freedom of unlimited consumption and of human-object association as the dominant moral imperative of the present age. The moral order is thus inescapably bound to the wishes of individuals, because only individuals can experience freedom in this manner. The status of individuals—as achieving a place in the socio-economic hierarchy and as achieving some degree of self-reflexive satisfaction with their acquired signifiers—is a community-sanctioned moral order. How much control I have to freely attach myself to appropriate image-signifiers, how comfortable I am with the symbolic value of my own life, and how successfully I

integrate myself into a community that recognizes my attempts at self-authentication determine my moral status as an individual within the system of objects. Baudrillard does in fact argue that this moral code is not exclusive of other codes, just as value attributed to objects does not necessarily or completely exclude value that can be attributed to other aspects of our lives. But the new morality espoused by the system of objects is acknowledged as relevant and meaningful on some level by every member of modern society. Even in criticizing the potential wrongs of this value-code, we believe in its power as a force to be reckoned with in our world and can never escape its language if we are to communicate evaluative dissonance with others around us (Baudrillard, 191-194). Mutual sympathies with this cultural apparatus of value-attribution should, however, guide our community to revise and reform the apparatus based on shared ideals. Indeed, choosing either extreme—of passive succumbing or of violent dissonance—will not provide the answers that we are looking for.

The dangers of a moral code based on individualization and communication through a system of objective signifiers involve the possibilities of covering up or failing to duly acknowledge aspects of our character as human beings that are not supported by the rhetoric, ideology, and self-furthering goals espoused by the system of objects. As discussed above, the life of an object does not begin when it is already possessed, and the origins of our objects cannot be independent of the community values that we adopt in relating to them. In the first place, it is obvious that a purely technological/industrial outlook allows us to view human beings as commodities themselves—as labor or skill in the abstract. As commodities, humans are dismissed as beings with emotional, spiritual or existential needs and employed as abstracted components of a mechanized system. It is precisely the nature of our relationships to objects that has taught us to rationalize in such a way as to overthrow potential moral worries about sweatshop labor, cultural imperialism, and any tactics for that matter than involve *using* living beings as a means to materialistic ends. It does not seem appropriate to use the language of rights to discuss the grotesque level of pride implicit in the social and economic undertakings of the world's most *affluent* culture. It is precisely the language of rights that initially separated the individual as an isolated being—who is *free* to find happiness, prosperity, comfort, and even God as an entity completely isolated from the rest of the human community. The rhetoric of rights degrades the value of communities to mere means for satisfying the needs and desires of individuals, and thus an incoherence arises regarding social issues such as sweatshop labor: the workers may have *rights* as human beings to be treated fairly, but the Gap also has *rights* to facilitate contractual agreements with starving citizens of third world countries. Here, the language of rights is paradoxical as a moral postulate, because someone's right is inevitably allowed to triumph over another's right. The determining factors in whose rights are most worthy of consideration involve issues like freedom of mobility and freedom of choice, which arise as values from the technological/industrial rhetoric of perpetual advancement through calculated control. Since the Gap has freedom to choose from a plethora of third-world countries where it could potentially establish its sweatshops, its rights as an *independently functioning* institution come to dominate the rights of entire classes of people who are struggling for the mere *opportunity* to survive instead of the best choice for *how* to survive. Since the moral code wrapped up in the system of objects teaches us that the freedom to choose

depends on the glorified ability to abstractly calculate our success as *individual* human beings, we justify our purchases at the Gap, even despite moral sensitivities that we might have (or claim to have) for those who are being used for the sake of our liberty.

In the second place, the technological/industrial paradigm seeks to further itself as a more or less exclusive mode of value ascription before it seeks to sympathize with potentially non-mechanistic concerns of the individuals employing its values out of necessity. As discussed in relation to advertising, commodity culture represents a never-ending spiral of manufactured desires and manufactured satisfactions. It is not simply that people demand fashion or need fashion to make themselves happy, but the Gap is itself responsible for selling us a sense of lacking, selling us a means for self-expression and self-actualization to overcome this lacking, and also implicitly selling us a justification for the employment of sweatshop labor to accomplish consumer goals. It is precisely because the Gap is *well-formed* instead of *ill-formed* according to industrial ideals that self-serving, exploitive corporate values are accepted as legitimate by the masses. The rational skills of calculation, systematization, and abstraction of particulars into malleable component parts are not only what we use to find value in specific objects but are the governing principles of the entire system that produces them—executed on a large scale to ensure a consistent context for the *individual* application of these skills. The semblance of unlimited liberty and mobility is ultimately misleading, because we can never *choose* to relate to objects outside the confines of the apparatus that produces them. That is, it is impossible to serve our own ends without allowing the system that produced and distributed the means for this project to serve its own ends in an analogous manner on a much larger scale.

It seems apparent that we are indeed doing a disservice to certain moral or spiritual aspects of our existence in the process of calculated abstraction that is required for our participation in the value-structure of the system of objects. It is oftentimes the *absence* of objects, instead of the presence of objects that brings us into communication with one another. On the most abstract level, business encounters are based on the absence of potential profit and thus the absence of potential satisfaction. The absence of particular goods and services that we desire brings individuals into communication with businesses large and small. A shared sense of lacking brings people together while they are at work or while they are out shopping and running errands from place to place. This feeling of desire or incompleteness informs our state of being on a deep level, and we bring this feeling into almost all interactions with other people. It is not that I *only* interact with people when I am out to get something, but, nevertheless, much of our communication is centered around topics of what is needed (apart from what we already have) to achieve a more ideal state of being. We in turn project desires onto the people in our lives almost unconsciously, because we have deeply engrained the language of calculable solutions through our perpetual relationships with objects. Speaking of needs and requirements, desires and rational ways of satisfying them, is a truly self-reflexive mode of communication. The degree of listening and sympathy involved in the value-language furthered by the technological paradigm, while possibly described as conscientiousness for others, inevitably involves some aspect of expected or anticipated reciprocity. We are by no means in the wrong for entering into our relationships with

intents for rational calculation: *I'll scratch your back and you scratch mine* is indeed a successful approach in many ways for achieving unity with another person. However, the overwhelming force of the rational tendency in the modern age, causes us to forget that sometimes there may be no *solution* to interpersonal conflicts—both on an individual level and on a political level. We forget that the language of solutions is not the only way of approaching potential tensions, and we forget that calculation is a process that will never end once it has begun. Just as my sympathy for sweatshop workers may not be strong enough to overcome my culturally-informed desire to shop at the Gap, my sympathy with loved-ones may not be strong enough to overcome my culturally-informed tendency to project my own desires and my own expectations as requirements that they must fulfill. Even though we oftentimes crave the ability to rise above individual desires, to escape the project of calculation based on a *personalized* schema, certain tendencies are engrained too deeply in our value-structure for us to completely set them aside in moments where it might seem appropriate. Seeking other perspectives on value-attribution and other modes of interpersonal communication is imperative in light of the practical and ideological tensions within the system of objects.

### III. Authenticity

Charles Taylor, in *The Ethics of Authenticity*, discusses the existential project of self-realization in terms of a drive to become authentic—a drive to become true to our own nature and to successfully articulate what is most important in our lives. As I have tried to establish over the course of this essay, criticizing cultural values and culturally-engrained modes of expression is a project ultimately aimed towards affirming instead of negating our existential project. Through the foundation of human-object relationships, we strive towards an ideal that, although inconsistent and incomplete in application, is ultimately legitimate as an inevitably entrenched goal indicative of the context in which we find ourselves. Taylor discusses the ideal of authenticity as worthy in motivation, while deficient in application, and he argues that a critique of the common modes of attempted expression can indeed help us become more authentic—in the sense of becoming true to the deep-seated intentions behind our drive to actualize ourselves in the culturally-prescribed manner. Taylor critiques the language of individualism, the blind employment of instrumental reason, and the political consequences of fragmenting ourselves ideologically. There are three simple premises that must be accepted for Taylor's argument to be relevant: Becoming authentic is a valid ideal. It is possible and legitimate to argue about the conformity of ideals and practices. And these arguments can make a difference in the quality of our lives on a deep level. Thus, if we accept the drive for self-authentication as an appropriate expression of value and seek to live out this expression in the best way possible—for our own sake and for the sake of others—then we will open ourselves up to criticisms, not regarding the legitimacy of what we are trying to do but regarding the success of our practices in achieving our greatest aspirations (Taylor, 1-23).

When the aspiration for authenticity gets played out through the language of individualism, we implicitly express that the truth or validation of one's life is ultimately dependent on the actualization of *personal* concerns in a way that is relative to particular differences between individuals. What I care about indicates what is right for me in a

moral sense. There is some degree of communal sensibility present, inasmuch as I acknowledge everyone's right to seek their own satisfaction and their own expression in whatever way is fitting for that particular individual, but these aspirations towards subjectivism take a cultural form that ultimately negates the value of community. It has become common, at least in the intellectual community, to refuse moral explanations for how people interact in favor of more social or practical explanations. This tendency relegates morality to the realm of individual choice, and we oftentimes claim that our moral sympathies are products of personal disposition instead of community agreement. The structure of the system of objects is largely responsible for this understanding of morality, because furthering industrial development and economic growth is the system's espoused *end in itself*. The notion of individuality, embraced by the masses, is imperative for the system's perpetuation and incessant growth. Mechanical or instrumental progress necessarily contradicts certain moral postulates, but if these postulates are themselves conceived as items of consumption—invested with value in the same *personalized* way as produced objects are invested with value once they are purchased—then they must always submit to the system that allows for our *liberty* to consume them. So while the search for authenticity may be truly moral in nature—as a responsibility taken on by individuals in a community—the common mode of expressing this value requires the fragmentation of individuals in order to achieve a purportedly shared ideal.

Taylor claims, in a seemingly ironic fashion, that reasoned calculation itself may be impossible when each individual is concerned with inwardness and exclusively personal expressions and accomplishments. Rational utterances depend completely on the context in which they are rational, and the context for linguistic expressions depends on open dialogue between human beings. Thus, I cannot make rational claims, if there is nobody to back me up—ensuring that the logic of my thinking is based on some level of objective agreement. In seeking authenticity, we want to calculate the best or most appropriate way to define and express ourselves as individuals, and the very mode of instrumental calculation presupposes a community of beings for which this mode is logically understood. If I wear a cross around my neck, it is only an authentic expression of what is important to me if others are privy to the logic that would inform my decision to attach myself to this object. Thus, while the choice may be purely personal in an abstract sense, the meaning of this choice is dependent on shared values within my community. Self-definition never excludes the nature of our relationships to other people, because their perception of who we are and their desire to influence who we are is an inescapable aspect of how we come to understand the world and our place within it. In many cases, we aspire to align ourselves—in our so-called self-expression—with the values of friends, family, and all the people who we respect. In other cases, we struggle to separate ourselves from the demands that others try to place on our lives—wanting to establish ourselves as something distinct from what they want us to be. Either way, however, the drive towards self-expression is fundamentally indebted to other voices besides our own. Who we are is dependent on the human context in which we live, and our concerns for establishing ourselves and completing our own existential projects cannot be adequately understood through the blinding rhetoric of individualism. Taylor says:

To shut out demands emanating beyond the self is precisely to suppress the conditions of significance, and hence to court trivialization. To the extent that people are seeking a moral ideal here [by becoming authentic], this self-immuring [positing individualism as the rubric for moral agreement] is self-stultifying; it destroys the condition in which the ideal can be realized (Taylor, 40).

Explaining authenticity as an ideal relative to the individual, while feeling that the drive towards self-realization is itself mutually-acknowledged and mutually-sought-after, represents a deep-seated confusion about the sources of meaning in our lives. Becoming authentic involves entrenching ourselves in the *human* context of our environment, because it is precisely our dialogue with each other that justifies our existential project as a rationally-defensible goal and as an authentic mode of discovering what is meaningful to us (Taylor, 30-41).

When we reflect on the shared ideal of personal choice and individual expression, it is important to realize that positing freedom of choice as something valuable involves an implicit criticism of personalization or individualism as ideologically exclusive. It should be obvious that choosing to place stock in things besides individual liberties is indeed a valid choice in itself. Thus we may recognize the ideological inconsistencies of the system of objects in a way that resonates deeply in its very language. I make individual choices and express individual commitments. These choices and commitments are significant as contributors to my makeup as a person. They can be acknowledged as meaningful within my community because we all share cultural ideals that allow for (at least partially) successful communication. Cultural ideals posit the value of instrumental calculation as a means of individual expression. We satisfy the agreed upon standards of value-ascription by making individual choices and expressing individual commitments that are purportedly separate. However, these choices and commitments are practically linked through the industrial apparatus that creates our medium of expression and morally linked through our communally agreed upon standards. The drive for individualization is necessary to momentarily satisfy and continually perpetuate the self-serving demands of industry, but it is an inarticulate rubric for describing the context in which it is possible for us to live meaningful lives.

According to Taylor, individualism as a moral principle must provide a view on how individuals interact successfully with one another and live together in a community where value depends on the acknowledgment of interpersonal connections. The call for an inwardly-generated mode of being is incoherent when we consider that shared interests and shared language is essential for making our lives meaningful. The recognition of individual differences must be applied to a project of working successfully with each other in a mutually-supporting way. And this project requires looking beyond concerns for momentary satisfaction and looking for non-instrumental modes of relating to one another. Self-definition that ignores the effects that our actions have on other beings cannot be a moral drive in the manner that cultural rhetoric claims that it is. Fundamentally, it is incoherent to buy into an ideal of authenticity that seemingly requires individualism while ignoring the fact that we are *authentically* part of a community—both local and global, both natural and rational (Taylor, 43-69).

Furthermore, it is impossible for a society to operate on a single principle or a single impulse, while remaining open to the reality of conflicting interpretations and conflicting perspectives. As fragmented individuals it is difficult if not impossible to rally behind a common purpose other than the purpose of remaining fragmented. The paradigm of technological/industrial actualization of purely instrumental and almost always materialistic ends reinforces fragmentation by clinging in an unbalanced fashion to a singular and systematic mode of describing what is most important and describing how we are supposed to find it (Taylor, 109-121).

Striving for authenticity is, in effect, striving to become whole and to become honest. Within the system of objects, we learn to live out this desire in a way that overlooks fundamental aspects of how an existential and ethical ideal such as authenticity comes to take on significance for an entire culture of people. We express ourselves as functional beings and as symbolic beings by entering into relationships with objects in a manner that oftentimes excludes considerations of the greater context in which our actions have effects. And the very nature of human-object relationships, as distinguished from relationships between living people, involves necessarily adopting a view of ourselves as beings committed to personalized projects. We carry the notion of human beings as isolated aspirants into our community interactions, and thus experience repeated failure in attempting to communicate what we have defined as expressions of *individual* concern. Furthermore, we repeatedly sacrifice intuitive moral ideals for the sake of practical integration into the culture of individuals, and we are allowed to participate largely unconsciously in the destruction of other people's lives and of the natural world behind the veil of doing what is necessary to survive in the way that we have been taught to do so. In order to become truly authentic, if that is actually what we desire over and above materialistic progress, we must recognize that what we consider meaningful can never be isolated as separate from the context that makes it so. The technological paradigm is incapable of explaining human context with its own language, because the notion of limitless instrumental advancement is incoherent as an end in itself. We must be advancing *towards* something, towards becoming fuller in some genuine, non-materialistic way, for the ideal of advancement to be rational as a primary concern. If we are truly seeking progress towards a more enlightened, more fulfilling, more honest, and more authentic existence, then we must necessarily exercise care in our participation in the system of objects. It must be acknowledged that the governing principles of this system, while claiming an emotional, spiritual, moral, or truly human dimension, are self-serving first and foremost. We must take on responsibility as individual beings to seek authenticity through other modes implicit in our being but not espoused by the established cultural authority. There is indeed no sense in becoming purportedly authentic based on what is convenient or culturally dominant, while ignoring the fundamental paradoxes inherent in the established rhetoric—paradoxes of inconsistency between true motivation, alleged values, and practical effects.

Denying the cultural force of the system of objects will get us nowhere, because it *is* supremely powerful and supremely influential in our lives. Embracing unquestioned the prescribed values of the system, however, is also an ineffective approach if we are truly seeking coherent and authentic existence. Whether we approach

it out of love or out of disgust, this cultural apparatus is in need of revision and restructuring. We may find solace and satisfaction in a shift in perspective that takes into account serious criticisms of the established social order. Far from becoming dissidents or destructive reactionaries, we can effectually further the dialogue that dictates standards of shared significance. Looking below the surface of popular language, it is easy to uncover the basic misadventure of people striving for what is greatest through an expressive mode that ultimately leaves important pieces of the existential puzzle unacknowledged. By exercising care in our *choice* to interact with the world of objects and by seeking sympathetic understanding of other human beings apart from the purely mechanistic lens encouraged by technology and industry, we can overcome the inevitable frustrations indicative of the human-object mode of relationship. We can overcome the fear of isolation, and we can seek improved articulation of what it is that we truly want from our life—both for our own sake and for the sake of our community.



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