

0.1 Chapter 1: capitalism: Consumption

0.2 Consumption

1 Consumer Self-Knowledge

We are always making consumption decisions: where to go on holiday; which handbag to purchase; which mortgage lender to go to; what style of socks or make of car to buy; what to have for lunch. We don't normally spell it out, but each decision is a shot at understanding ourselves in some sector of existence, big or small. The range of our options is inevitably constrained but ideally, in exercising choice, we are promoting our happiness to the greatest possible extent. Even apparently modest things like what we put in the trolley in the supermarket or what shoes we wear are distillations of large, nebulous notions: who we think we are, how we wish to live and what we think will contribute to our well being. From different directions, all our actions as consumers are tapping into the same central question: what will make me happy?



We tend to think of consumption going badly or well mainly around price. We get annoyed with ourselves for spending too much. Or were really pleased if we pick up a bargain.**** ****

But there's another way things can go wrong around consumption choices. We choose the wrong things because we don't know ourselves well enough to select what will best work for us.



It can initially sound like a strange and rather insulting idea. How can you possibly say that I am not qualified to know what I want? The idea that we might have a shortfall of self-knowledge around purchasing decisions can feel offensive. **** *

The pursuit of happiness through personal choice is a key notion of modern capitalism. And it is tied to a critical but rarely admitted assumption, which is that we already naturally have enough self knowledge and a good enough grasp of our true needs to make the right choices for ourselves.



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But the problem is that self-knowledge isn't as easy and obvious as we might naturally suppose. With hindsight, we can sometimes see we've made mistaken choices. One ends up thinking things like:

I thought I'd be wearing that dress all the time, in fact it's hardly left the wardrobe.

I seriously underestimated how stressed the mortgage would make me.

I thought moving to the country would be great, but I just can't stand being cut off from my old friends.

What am I doing in Croatia at the beach!***** *****

The regrets could be summed up as the thought: if I'd known myself better at the time I'd have made a different decision.



It's natural at times to blame ourselves for these mistakes. But really we were more deserving of sympathy than criticism, because there are some pretty serious obstacles to the necessary consumer self-knowledge. Here are a few of these obstacles:

One: We track prestige too much

What we think we want is produced culturally. We're strongly inclined to take our cues from other people and to take to heart whatever has prestige in our society. We see this with comic clarity in societies far from our own, especially those in the past. There were times and places where adolescent boys were desperately excited by the idea of possessing a walking stick.



Aged fourteen, theyd long for the day when they too could tap the pavement with an ebony cane. It seems funny in retrospect, but it is really just evidence about the power of prestige. We naturally want the things that convey social status though, of course, what things have prestige changes dramatically over time.

Prestige is a problem when the things that enjoy prestige are not the ones that happen to serve our own best interests. We are so dependent on the regard of others, we may well forget the signals from deep within us that are hinting to us that we are not actually happy with the standard paths being proposed.



Cecil Beaton Studio Archive, Sothebys London

In the late winter of 1961, the portly literary critic Cyril Connolly wrote an article in the Sunday Times about his recent holiday to Barbados. And in it he took a brave decision. He decided to tell the wider world about his passion for snorkelling. Since then (and partly thanks to him) it no longer seems very strange for a seriously minded middle aged individual to don a rubber mask and a special breathing tube and bob around looking at cuttlefish and unusual kinds of seaweed. But at the time it was a very unusual activity indeed. There must have been a great many serious people who in fact would have liked it, if they had given it a go. Connolly was distinctive in the degree to which he was aware of his own needs and pleasures and was prepared to accord them time and respect; his snorkelling activities were connected to self-knowledge. Its a tiny instance of a huge issue. We dont automatically know ourselves well enough to know what wed like. And specifically we are put off by anything that seems potentially odd. We generally fail to trust ourselves over the habits of other people.

*Two: We have difficulty registering self-data***** ******

Generally speaking, attention is selective. You might have walked past an old building many times; then someone mentions that the chimney is an usual shape. You must have seen this on countless occasions in the sense that your eyes had flitted over the roofline but not actually noted it. Its a reminder of something slightly disconcerting about how our minds work.

We often have fleeting sensations of pleasure or disappointment which we are marginally aware of, but

don't focus on. For instance:

The indicator in a particular kind of car makes a strangely attractive clicking sound.

Some cutlery designs feel nicer to hold than others.

The sleeves of a jacket are slightly too long.

It could be very nice just to eat a cheese sandwich at a restaurant.



We may have these sensations in a subliminal way, but don't pay much attention to them. Later someone else might point what the lovely or annoying thing was that was going on. And with their help we learn to see more clearly what we want or don't want. We get to know ourselves a little better in some part of existence. In principle, this is something we can do for ourselves. We don't have to wait on the chance of another person guiding our attention more carefully. But we generally fail to act on our spontaneous feelings.

Three: We underrate the long-term

The present instant looms extremely large in consciousness. But our choices will have lasting repercussions. In theory, we know this perfectly well. Yet, with shocking regularity, we make decisions based on the mood of the moment, which turns out to misrepresent our better long-term interests.*****

It's not so surprising we have this tendency. The human mind developed to tackle short-horizon problems. In a more precarious world than we inhabit now, this makes perfect sense. For hundreds of thousands of years the primary issue was to make sure you could survive the next 24 hours. That's the

mentality we've largely inherited. The long-range, strategic mind is less closely connected to our appetites and emotions. **** *

Four: Our habits are responses to earlier problems

At critical moments of development we take up attitudes which enable us to cope with certain problems.



One's father may have been stymied in his career and so any conspicuous success would look like a criticism of him. It seemed at that time necessary to disdain any expensive item. So later on, one feels compelled to order the least expensive dish in a restaurant or wear only very modest clothes, even though there's a part of oneself that might relish *homard américain* or an elegant winter coat. But because of the pressure of the past, these areas of self-knowledge don't get explored.

Having in the past suffered from not being able to afford things, one might develop a compensatory strategy of insisting always on luxury. It's an attempt to fix an early humiliation. It can easily continue to override a more accurate assessment of one's needs. One is still warding off a worry of ten years ago rather than carefully sifting one's current needs.



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These four big factors make it tricky for the mind to know itself. Its very unfortunate, but not surprising, that it can take so long to sift through them and slowly arrive at self-knowledge. There is information inside our minds that the conscious self doesnt have easy access to, though this information is central to the project of finding out what we want.***** *****

If perfect self-knowledge markets existed, it would be possible to readily generate satisfaction. Unfortunately, we are very far from possessing anything like perfect self-knowledge. Our predictable failures of self-knowledge have large and very unfortunate consequences for the economy.***** *****

Demand is geared towards things that dont produce happiness

When people dont understand themselves very well (by understand, we mean, dont understand the path to *eudaimonia*), then what happens is: we misunderstand our own needs and make purchase that are misguided: that is, that fail to lead to what we ourselves are aiming at our own happiness.



Work is low in meaning

Because meaningful work can be defined as work that properly enhances the wellbeing of others, if we sense that others don't actually need what we're involved in producing and perhaps would if their self-knowledge were greater, actually reject it, we are left with a nagging undercurrent of suspicion: one's labours are sadly counter-productive. One feels a subterranean sense of shame. One edges towards cynicism.

*Opportunities for job and wealth creation are missed******

The evolution of new and very important industries depends upon enough people recognising that they need and want things that hitherto have not been on offer. At its best, this would mean better targeted offering that had an important contribution to make to people's pursuit of *eudaimonia* a happy life. But successful innovation of this kind relies on there being a sufficiently large receptive audience; a large enough constituency of people with the requisite bit of self-knowledge in place so they have an appetite for the new product or service.*****



Conclusion ****

Problems around self-knowledge lead to problems in the economy. And one big idea starts to look tempting: does this show we should start dismantling our present economy, built around freedom of choice, and try to replace it with one that's more directed one that limits the scope given to the individual? That was tried in the Soviet Union and other places. It clearly doesn't work...

The other option is to address our problems around self-knowledge. This is more hopeful for two reasons.

One: We've got lots of evidence that self-knowledge can be improved; only, up to now, the process happens in a slightly haphazard way. It's far from impossible, only it's not organised. **** *



Two: Gains in self-knowledge benefit the individual, because (as we've been saying) a gain in self-knowledge is really a gain in knowledge about how to live a happier life.

And this is one of the principal routes along which we could collectively advance towards a much better economy. Governments are hugely committed to improving the economy and direct vast resources to this task. They should be turning a lot of attention to the philosophical question: how can we improve consumer self-knowledge to maximise the chances of consumption going well?

A CONSUMER SELF-KNOWLEDGE EXERCISE

Assistance around self-knowledge would most usefully come from the company of a wise friend: In their absence, we may have to do it ourselves. **** *

Ideally, the thinking-friend asks a range of carefully targeted questions and listens carefully to our answers. But on our own, it's possible to recreate this beneficial experience by listing some central questions and writing answers to them. **** *

Below, we set out certain questions which provide a framework for self-knowledge.*****

You and Money

Do you get anxious at any point in your financial life? Elaborate ...

Who in your past had the best relationship to money in your eyes? Describe their attitudes.

Who had a problematic attitude? What was going wrong?

How much money do you need? What do you need it for? Be as precise as possible.

Do you think some people have more money than they need? Explain your answer.



What have been your worst financial decisions? What was the mistake? Why did you make them? What lessons should you draw? Have you been able to fully absorb the lesson? If not, what is the difficulty?

To what extent do you link your economic status to the idea of a successful life (to what extent do you link money and happiness)?

How well (or badly) do you deal with financial administration in your own life? If this is less than ideal, describe your troubles. What do you think you have them? In theory, how could you improve this? In reality, why don't you?

Do you waste money? Go into detail ... Describe one instance. Why did you do this?

You and Travel

In fantasy, what would be your ideal holiday? Elaborate as much as possible. What is it about this that appeals so much to you?



What has in fact been your best travel experience? Go into detail. What was it about this that went so well? Why doesn't it happen more often? If you could bottle an insight here, what would it be? How seriously do you take this insight?

What would your ideal traveling companion be like?

Why do you travel? When travel is voluntary, what motivates you? To what degree are these motives fulfilled?***** *****

You and Technology

Does anything stress you or annoy you around technology? Go into detail ...



Do you ever feel you should have a digital detox? What does that phrase suggest to you?

Do you feel you waste time online? If so, describe a typical way this happens.

Imagine your ideal relationship to technology. Describe it. What stops this happening in your life?

What machine would properly help you to live the way youd like? Do you have it?

Your Relationships

What was your parents relationship like? To what extent has that influenced your ideas about what can go well or badly around consumption? To what degree have you learned good lessons from that history?



In what ways might you be a difficult person to live with?

How open are you to being educated/changed by another person?

Do you have a strict template of your ideal partner? How is that going? Why do you have this particular template?

In secret, how loveable do you consider yourself to be?

In what way could you be a better partner? Realistically, why don't you change?

What degree of imperfection can you tolerate? Go into detail around how you have actually accomplished this?

You and Food

Who in your childhood had the strongest influence of what you ate?



Describe their influence at the time

What kinds of food do you especially like? Describe your enjoyment. what is it about them that pleases you?

Are you happy with your diet? Say more about this ...

How do you eat when no-one is around? Be very honest.

Whats your ideal restaurant/cafe like?

Do you feel you spend too much/too little on food? Why do you do this?

If you could change one thing about what you eat, what would it be? Realistically, why dont you do this?

Describe your ideal meal with friends.

Does anyone (or anything) irritate you about food? Who (or what) and why?

What do you feel about your weight?

You and Work

When you were a child, what did you imagine work might be like? Where did these ideas come from? In retrospect, how do you feel about those early ideas?



Flickr/Peter Voerman

Have you had a job that you particularly disliked? What specifically was wrong with it?

What is your ideal job? Realistically, what are the obstacles?

You and Clothes

Have you ever felt intimidated by any seller in a clothes shop? What do you fear might happen? What is the origin of this anxiety?



If no one in the world could know, how would you ideally like to dress?

What messages do you think your clothes send to other people? Is this the message you wish to send?

If you had to wear the same clothes everyday, what would your uniform be?

Do you spend too much or too little on clothes?

To what extent do you judge other people by their clothes?

In your childhood, were there any stand-out experiences around clothes?

How did you feel about the way your parents (or other people in your childhood) dressed? What's your view of them now?

What goes well (or badly) around fashion? Refer as much as possible to people you know well.

You and Home

What was your home like when you were growing up?



Flickr/Peter Voerman

Whats your ideal of home?

What are your secret hopes and fears around how others might judge your home? Where have these hopes and fears come from?

Do you ever feel dismayed or excited by the places your friends live? Go into detail.

How do you feel about being tidy? When you hear the word tidy what do you think of? Why does that association come to mind?