

Needs and desires: transcending the ‘bipolar tendency’

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Abstract The paper connects two of the concerns of this special issue: the way to transcend the ‘bipolar tendency’ of the market culture and to ‘deal with the swings between prophecies of doom that serve only to paralyse us further, and the unbridled consumerism that makes things worse’, and how to remain human when being mediated by technology in contrast to how we are in the presence of others. Our contribution is based on an extensive conception of human beings (HBs). HBs cannot be considered only as cognitive subjects but also in their anthropological integrity. What we mean by this that they think and feel, they share concepts and emotions, they plan and desire. It implies that any attempt at reducing this complexity is a way to diminish human beings and their capabilities. HBs need meaningful course of actions to manage complexity and to tackle alternatives. Meanings come from purposeful activities, and people’s purposes are based not only on utilitarian or rational enquiries but also on what they consider right and good, according to their vision of the world. This is also the key to overcome the ‘bipolar tendency’.

Keywords Needs and desires · Modern capitalism
artificial world · Consumerism · Sociality · Civilization · Narcissism

1 Consumerism and its social consequences

Transcending the bipolar tendency between prophecies of doom and unbridled consumerism requires a thorough analysis of the dynamic between needs and desires. People make physical objects or machines because of the belief that their utilities assist them to live easier and better. This is the root cause of the drive to the creation of an artificial world, which is based on its utility value.

There are different ways to achieve it: through prosthetic tools, that is, functional extension of humans, extending our human capabilities or autonomous machines, such as the clock that ‘*dissociated time from human events and helped create the belief in an independent world of mathematically measurable sequences: the special world of science*’ (Mumford 1963: 15). The birth of information and communication technologies, providing a resource for building new devices, pushes the concept of autonomous machines further in the direction of an artificial world functioning independently from us, and “*this rejection of direct experience was to become one of the principal characteristics of modern science*” (Weizenbaum 1976: 25). It implies, therefore, a different role for human beings (Ehn 1989), and in this role, we are in driven by an ongoing trend based on autonomous machines.

In a capitalist society, the production process cannot be just based on the fulfilment of individual or societal needs for a better and easier life, that is, on utility values, but also to achieve profits in a never-ending circle. It leads to the design and production of new products that substitute the old ones through an improvement of their performances. This means, for example, different releases of the same good as in the case of the different iPhones or a device with the capability of doing a brand new activity, as in the case of the virtual music keyboard on a computer or a smart

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