

# FROM ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF POSSESSION TO THE POSSESSION OF KNOWLEDGE

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**Abstract:**

*Given the nowadays appetite for having and the wide accessibility in doing so, it is necessary to put forward some questions regarding the existential position of the individual relative to possessions and all that lays in the shadow of them.*

*Throughout this paper we take into account the theories of Murray Bowen on the differentiation of self and of Erich Fromm on the principles of “to have” and “to be”.*

*The fact that “to have”, that Fromm speaks about, incite to sumptuous possession and this is always reductive in terms of spiritual development, points to the idea of self-differentiation, of detachment operated inside the emotional and intellectual “space”/universe that Bowen was talking about.*

*Here after we shall make at least some questions on the situation and location regarding the contemporary consumerism, the concept of possession and being possessed, to have or to be. We shall also discuss possible relationships between the material and spiritual values (intellectual, cultural, artistic) as well as the influences and contamination of the two axiological systems.*

*Our initiative is designed to discover patterns and dependencies which, if removed, allow the rediscovery of authentic human values through the detachment of consumerist bad and uncontrolled absorption.*

**Keywords:** *consumerism, differentiation, possession, attachment, dependence.*

Adopting to our context a famous "saying" we could say that: we live in a consumerist society and that consumes all our time. As, although it may seem paradoxical, the fact that we have all we need (maybe more than necessary), is not from far the recipe of happiness or contentment. From the perspective of “not having” (that is living in penury with serious and chronic shortages), it seemed like, once with the establishment of society of abundance for everyone, people should be, or at least do become, happier and more content to live a carefree life, lacking frustrations and dissatisfactions. However, as it seems, the last hundred years of unheard progress and prosperity (at least for the western world) have not determined our long dreamed happiness. But, as shown by Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy: “The hyper-consumerist society is the one of «always more» but there’s never «more happiness»”; as “on one hand, our entire society is turned to the consumerist race; on the other, it fails to create, to «augment» the happiness.” (G. Lipovetsky/J. Serroy, 2008, p. 66). People continue to have discontent, dissatisfaction or different requirements even on pragmatic aspects. We consume more and more, and this does not bring any happiness, peace of mind or calming all our longings. On the contrary, what we can see is an exponential increase of the "consuming drive" in an insatiable and ferocious way, drive that becomes just "art for art" of the citizen of a consumerist globalized society.

What particularly concerns us in this article is not the consumption or the actual consumerism as the possibility of finding alternative for the contemporary man in reporting to the reality. In other words, is the modern man able to stand up and to move away from the idea of consumption to analyze it, somewhat from outside, with a slight philosophical ease to see at least some substrates and basic directions of this impulse. Can we make a step back to gain some perspective on things, to have some distance or

even stop out from a torrent that seems to have become ubiquitous? Are we able to see that beyond the financial, economical or marketing issue there also are, involved in this issue of consumerism, some other psychological, anthropological, axiological or ethical interests? Are we still able to ask the question of meaning (as understood by Viktor Frankl) or to risk globalization of *noogen-ic* neurosis, the inability to find a deeper and satisfying meaning of our life? For how long can we still be satisfied with the meaning given or induced to us by advertising, media or to marketing studies, by globalized consumerism meanwhile turned into globalization of consumerism? Because it is severe, in metaphysical and anthropological terms, the wide universal and unconditional acceptance of the consumerist idea, which became true and the only philosophy of life. That works together with what Zygmunt Bauman and Tim May underlined: “The consumerist attitude regards the seemingly inextricable relationship between life and the market, directing every desire and every effort towards looking for the device or the expertise that can be purchased.” (Bauman & May, 2008, p. 218). A very serious aspect is that such a philosophy of life is considered normal and absolutely natural; the consequence of this is that the consumerist philosophy appears as the only possible option, any other alternative will be viewed with suspicion, annoyance or with a serious degree of condescension for humiliation and/or to its unusual bizarreness. And, any philosophy of life has a goal, *i.e.* an intentionality that can be explicit or implicit. The latter, of a subtle and insidious manner it was best spotted by the French philosopher George Bataille: “At the origin of industrial society, based on the primacy and autonomy of goods – *of thing* – there is the opposite will of placing the essential – which *frightens and fascinates in the sacred trembling* – outside the world of activity, the world of *things*.” (Bataille, 2008, p. 164). Or, this finding is already sending toward a dichotomization that Erich Fromm was to pointed at as belonging to two parallel and exclusive universes.

As we have stated, we do not necessarily want to discuss about consumption itself but about the adjacent philosophy of live, arising directly from a certain psychology often quite impersonal and strongly depersonalizing. Obviously, everything found (as a way of life) at a large number of individuals is of collective nature, usually anonymous but with an enormous power to influence, respectively coercion. Of course, such an analysis is not new, yet the one who came and made categorical distinction between the universe of "to have" and that of "to be" was E. Fromm. The German psychoanalyst and sociologist, having lived some years in the United States, drew, towards the end of his life, a serious warning about the unilateral direction followed by contemporary man. The huge emphasis on the "to have" removes any opportunity of having any option. The individual caught in the toils of consumerism along with everyone else, has the impression that "this / that's life." Asking such a man questions regarding his standards and values can be confusing as he simply dose nor understand that there is something else out there but the money and the goods they can buy. More severe is the fact that cognitively – this man was not given any alternative, and from a psychological perspective – he was so docile to take as a good answer to the problems of life the only answer offered. In addition, alarming is this successful psychological conditioning that narrows the *Homo sapiens* universe of options, reducing him/her to a "Daily shopping/consumer basket" and the salary slip. We may speak in this context of a reductionist diversion of the axiological universe with a concomitant focusing of it on a single issue, already universal, self-sufficient and invasive, a true metastasis of the existential, psychological and ethical levels. Moreover, as Fromm emphasized, denouncing the estrangement and the distortion that we are subject to: “If I am not able to analyze the unconscious aspects of the society I live in, I cannot know who I am because I do not know in what aspect I am not myself.” (Fromm, 1996, p. 103).

However, the condition of the possibility of consumerism, respectively the very universe of "to have" is given by the substrate of "to be". The indelible condition for any further action, be it of a possessive direction, is the very being (as in: existing/to be). For, in order "to have" I firstly have to be. This however, as obvious as it is un-visible to us, is self-evident and therefore, it eludes any possibility of analysis and questioning. In addition to this, the being is very unproblematic (at least at a superficial view), our existence seems so unavoidable that it becomes unquestionable. Nevertheless, a very mature approach to this can be represented by a loop that re-curves toward the being itself and its foundations, while making a detour of the territory of "to have" just to return to the point of origin. Fromm already argues in this sense in "Man for Himself": Humanistic conscience is the reaction of our total personality to its proper functioning or mal-functioning; not a reaction to the functioning of this or that capacity but to the totality of capacities which constitute our human and our individual existence." (Fromm, 2008, p. 119). In other words, we need an overview, of course from a possible and necessary external positioning, detached from the ordinary, covering the ensemble of our being considered as a whole. Here we speak about "seeing" the *anthropos* as an organic whole, systemic and autopoietic that cannot be reduced to any of its parts or components, even if it is considered as material.

From a psychological viewpoint, universalization of consumerism seems to pursue the preservation of an infantilization of an unbelievable programmatic character. At this point Murray Bowen's thinking might be helpful precisely his theory of "self-differentiation" that aims at the human evolution by considering the break between emotional and intellectual. Impossibility or difficulty to separate – to differentiate – between our own two systems points to a specific retard of the ontogenetic development. Here we are talking about stagnation or "stumbling" on a level of undistinction between emotion and judgment, between feeling and clear thinking that comes as a handicapping factor of an adequate existential insertion. According to Bowen, in such cases we shall have: "(...) individuals manifesting the greatest confusion between feelings and reflection and the poorest performance. For their existence they inherit a large percentage of problems." And, on the other hand: "Those who have the greatest ability to distinguish between emotions and intellect or those manifesting the greatest degree of self-differentiation, they demonstrate more flexibility, adapting the best when confronted to existential tensions, having therefore a greater degree of freedom to solve problems of all kinds." (Bowen, 1984, p. 62). We can see that, ultimately, it is about the ability to solve or not problems, to adapt and be flexible or remain stuck and stiffened in unnecessary patterns, pernicious and/or obsolete. The two typologies described by Bowen lie in the extremes of his scale of self-differentiation and adequately illustrate the difference between what we call infantilism and maturity. The emotionally attached ones are inextricably linked to their own subjectivity, continuously centred on subject, respectively on themselves, for interminably and continuous gratifications in a life that they want devoid of any worries. However, regarding the consumption society, we realize that its main purpose is to create a system of gratification instant if possible, concerning the most diverse desires. Contemporary man can fulfil virtually any permission (of course, depending on the guarantees he can offer to the crediting bank) without using the complicated and frustrating saving mechanism typical for older generations. Currently everything lies in the "here and now" or how Freddie Mercury sang: "I want it all, I want it now" because we do not have the time or patience when life is so short and we want to live to the fullest.

As Michel Onfray highlights: "Our desires, our aspirations and our pleasures sign up for us a membership to which we consent depending the extent to which they also express a corporative or a tribal social satisfaction." (Onfray, 2001, p. 182). And

currently our "tribal" satisfaction is given by the consumption, by "to have", by their imperious and immediate, defining at a planetary level. In the same way, the things are with any self-un-differentiation, with all confusions between emotional and intellectual, as with the psychological imbroglio of adults having mentalities and expectations of children. From a piagetian point of view, we can see here an intensive process of assimilating the world to the self (by bulimic incorporation to which we are persistently invited by the widely and intensely mediatized advertising) in the detriment of any accommodation of self to the world. From such a perspective the adaptation is crippled with one of its halves – the most difficult to achieve – in order to seize the other half, the easy and affordable one, a branded feature of the child. Thus, an "extract" is done or a sublimation of a crude amputation of a complex process designed by Jean Piaget in two interdependent and therefore inseparable steps (assimilation and accommodation). The new global order of consumerism proves however, that such theoretical and practical prestidigitation is still possible provided a massive implementation of the possessiveness philosophy at the expense of any psychological reason that would take into account the psychological evolution of the human being. That is because contemporary man, with or without his will, has only come on the slope of assimilating products or tempestuously offered services. We "read" the world only by what it can offer to us without asking what we can offer to the world. Such a dys-balance of the balance of ethics and equity eventually leads to braking the inner growth process, process so needed in maturing personality. For we cannot grow psychologically unless we can cope with the challenges arrived from the slope of accommodation to a tough reality, problematic and often different from our desires.

Maturation, inextricably linked to adulthood, is a complex and lengthy process that from the beginning involves the recognition or at least intuition of a incompleteness of the being, inseparably welded to the need for self-development or (to speak in Abraham Maslow's terms) the necessity for self-realization. All this process involve the possibility of a differentiating separation of the landmarks of "to have"s world (of course considered as a whole) to inspect other existential opportunities, alternatives to the consumption of products, services or information often irrelevant or inconsistent. We refer here to the opposite direction, as the world of "to be" thought by Fromm, centred on fundamental ethical values, based on an essentially self-referential existential option, devoid of unceasing reporting to possessions which, in the opinion of the author leads to passivity. Moreover, such passivity of those who just have to receive and consume will be inextricably found as an offer dependence, as material servitude (coupled with the media one), subject to blind consumption. Nevertheless, these major characteristics of the human subscribed to the registry of "to have", *i.e.* passivity and dependence strikingly remind of two of the major characteristics of the child. However, what is normal at a child is distorted, perverted (in the etymological sense) and completely displaced at an adult. This, unlike the first, has the ability to question, to analyze issues related to possible existential positioning and therefore cannot be content with an idea of how the world is and how the man should be, idea given by the news, commercials, soap operas or whatever the others say. Beyond the ability to think - with complex and multi-layered exploration – there also should be present the possibility to distinguish carefully between drive, desire, need, necessity and/or sufficiency.

Of course, such "mind gym" wants installed itself as long duration habit in order to be fully effective, which would recreate from scratch a cultural space so necessary for our spiritual and soul living. A culture - in the broadest sense - is ultimately something defining for man, but as a next instance, a question arises: to which kind of culture are we affiliated to and therefore we allow it to define us? As, by the so fitted expression of Edward T. Hall: "One of the functions of culture is to provide a highly selective screen



between man and the outside world. In its many forms, culture therefore designates what we pay attention to and what we ignore.” (Hall, 1981, p. 85). In terms of collective or individual defining we may have implemented, as an indicative force, a mass culture, as the consumerist one is or, conversely, we may guide following a customized culturalization psychological founded on an inherent introverted tendency, constantly oriented towards the self-assumed autonomy and independence from the usual values and markers (customs, prejudices, stereotypes and so on). For in the extended and containing frame of the comprehensive culture that we socially belong to, there is plenty of room left for each individual to establish his own axiological and ethical guidelines to shape and define himself. Such an act of great personal responsibility belongs to our freedom of choice - defining quality for the adult in the maturation process, able to implement a life program based on personal rules and options. Only in this way can be circumvented the mono-valence of the un-differentiated individual, eternal prey of external pressures, determined by anything that moves around him, un-capable of choices based on thoughtful and carefully weighted criteria, filtered through personal life experience. We may mention here the description given by Bowen to the differentiated person, by contrast to the lower levels of differentiation: “A more differentiated person has a greater chance of manoeuvre; he/she may participate in the emotional sphere of others without fearing to deepen too much into it. He/she is also free to return to a calm and logical reasoning to make important decisions for his/her own existence.” (Bowen, *op.cit.*, p. 72). Such a person has an internal equilibrium placed on the strong foundations of the difficult process of differentiation and implicitly of maturation that he/she has adopted programmatically.

This brings us to the central idea of our article: knowledge and its possession. For it is one thing to have, or to possess knowledge at a so-called theoretical level and it is quite something else that this knowledge to be implementable and therefore viable. Knowledge without correlation with action and behavioural reality is extremely shallow and practically useless (literally). We cannot imagine a harmonious human being, integrated and mature, if he/she fails to inventory and then to coordinate the different personality levels or "floors" in a clear and well thought existential direction. Precisely such a process leads to that maximum level of differentiation of self (by Bowen) that allows free action with all our "tools" respectively abilities and skills. By knowing the idea of possession and the entire universe of "to have", so capturing, polymorphic and ubiquitous, can be made the leap towards possession of knowledge to such an extent that he knowledge becomes functional and applicable to the personal lives. For, after all, what should this way of "to be" be if not action, facts or activity and (self) realization? We must emphasize here that we must not mistake the tempestuous and full of turmoil and stress activism of the "to have" mode to the work done for self-fulfilment of the "to be" mode. If the first, especially if seen "from above", looks more like the Brownian motion of a continuous agitation, the second presents as a deliberate action, constructive and "edifying" of personality, bringing contentment, peace and self-reconciliation with. We have therefore, in this second case, an activity that does not take distance from the individual respectively the actions that continuously orbit around the person that they built and that builds itself throughout these facts. In the distinction that Fromm made between the two modes of activity, it is specified: “(...) that my activity is a manifestation of my power and ability, that I and my activism is the same as the result of my work.” (Fromm, 1997, p. 91). Precisely here lies the importance of the correlation between internal and external, between self and world, between subject and object, achievable only in a mature state, integrated and consistent with the finely judged and carefully implemented guidelines and values. This is what may be called the being's congruence respectively its self-assumed integrality, agglutinated around what Bowen

called "solid ego".

The difference between "to have" and "to be" can be discussed in terms of enslavement or servitude, for in the case of possessive tendency the human being is simply mastered by the idea of accumulating goods (whether object, relational or information) while, in the case of focusing on the existence, the human being will be mainly on self-control. We have therefore an individual possessed or enslaved in the first case and a free, self-controlled one in the second. Determined by objects (in the most general way, i.e. everything external to the subject) together with the constant need to possess – in the case of "to have", compared to the establishment at the control panel of passions, desires and expectations – in the case of adhesion to "to be". Normally, we may be tempted to believe that things are not so exclusive: „But, *to be* is the contrary of *to have*; then when we no longer refer to our possessions (the material ones, but even the aspirations, desires, expectations that *we have*), we can *be*, defined by ourselves and not on the basis of some values, goods, possessions or external cues.” (Gozo, 2013, p. 5). After all it is an or/or and by no means an and/or as we might be tempted to believe. Although the universe of "to have" cannot and should not be removed completely, the idea that we want to emphasize here is that we deal with a specific inner orientation pertaining to setting a centre of gravity (and implicitly of interest) of the human being. Although the adult world consists mostly of running for possessions (mobile or immobile), yet we have the option to detach ourselves from this absorbing vortex if we address our intellectual capacity, the only one that can do the careful differentiation we are talking about. It all depends on the ability to meta-positioning towards himself, on accomplishing an epistemological leap, on a higher level of (self) knowledge. In this way, one can achieve possession of a knowledge liberating from the social, political and economic predefinition net that transforms us into good and faithful consumers. Not objects define the individual but the individual becomes defining for choosing his personal affiliation to a universe or another. For, after all, the world of "to have" or the one of "to be", beyond their ontological dimension, relates primarily to a cognitive and emotional reporting of each individual, as well as the adhesion of some entire populations. They are predefined and maintained at the mental level (including emotional or sentimental) of dependencies and determinations or, conversely, they are seen in the light of judgment detached from the habitual emotional subjugation.

The two systems theorized by Bowen and the modalities of being predicted by them, emotional and intellectual, could be transposed in terms of "stupidity" and "wisdom". After all, living under the government of the emotional system relates to a serious and indelible stupidity while the access to the intellectual system values, as well as the ability to differentiate between them and the values of the emotional system, is placed in the ineluctable realm of wisdom (in *statu nascendi* at least). We can agree here with Gabriel Liiceanu's opinion in his essay "Despre limită" (Ro: "On Limit"): "If in its essence the spirit is mobile, his freedom manifesting in its permanent capacity to adapt the project and eventually in its power to renounce at it, stupidity as spiritual frost is the sclerotic project and the bad type of perseverance." (...) "By its nature stupidity is in-sistent, is the tenacious retard inside the project, a continual setting into it." (Liiceanu, 2004, p. 102). Nevertheless, beyond this "in-sistence" the stupidity is hardly consistent, it insists to remain empty of content, devoid of judgment and lacking knowledge. All that there is on its level is of a "second hand" character, actually a pseudo-self, an inauthentic, borrowed one that looks, in Bowen's description, like this: "The pseudo-self is a "window" self. It is therefore acquired to comply with the environment, getting to edifies out of the mixed principles that aim to establish a harmony in front of some social groups, economic institutions, political parties or religious groups." (Bowen, *op.cit.*, p. 74). The American author also specifies that such

pseudo-self is a complete actor able to perform a number of roles depending on the circumstances. Highly adaptable, it can do so precisely because it lacks the backbone. Stupidity petrified in the project is actually petrified in the construction project of self (which it completely ignores), which does not prevent it to be socially engaged (social, as either real and human or, as more recently, virtual and informational). Not that there is a commitment, but the fact that this project is so distorted and derailed is the shocking aspect of the problem. By "throwing out" the ego, by its conformist and desirable anchoring in the window pseudo-self, there is no time left for strengthening or at least to edify a solid self (by Bowen), a reporting to the self by setting the personal mental and existential benchmarks. Precisely here, in the redundancy of the thinking and acting mode characteristic to stupidity, stands the petrifying into the project, the stiffening into the habitual and conventional. This happens because, as noted by Petru Creția: "The stupid does not have a clear self-awareness, does not learn from experience and as such is not self-corrective. Stupidity feeds from its own littleness and regenerates from its own substance, always remains equal to itself." (Creția, 2011, pp. 37-38). In other words, stupidity is inert, lacking flexibility and mobility, self-sufficient and cognitively unable to scan a wider range of possibilities and potentials, it is unable to differentiate, to analyze or to ask questions of substance.

The self-limitation that we emphasize here, also involves, beyond pernicious social, political or moral disseminations, a psychological substrate, namely avoiding the anguish, respectively that existential fear that rises, at a most acute possible way, the question: "What do I do?". This anguish, constant at least at subliminal levels, was placed by Bowen at the base of his theoretical vision, where from: "(...) the idea that chronic anguish is a variable permanently present to some extent, and that depending on the decrease or increase of its level, someone may appear normal or abnormal." (Bowen, *op. cit.*, p. 70). We see that the anguish may be defining for the human behaviour, considered as a whole, and its social expression (*intramuros* or *extramuros*), which happens precisely because it is so basic and universal, especially to a being who questions. Moreover, as the interrogative capacity increases and deepens the more we approach our existential anguish core. Nevertheless, a society of consumption has the answer to such possible existential breaches prepared in advance; it will prescribe the right remedy, the only thing that actually it has to offer, ready made for anyone, prefabricated universal and ultimate at the same time. Through this movement, the society of consumption succeeds to metamorphose any existential care so as: "The objects, *possessive* and *depriving* of individuality, are not perceived by most consumers as a factor of alienation, constituting themselves as a tool to display personal success. (Bolea, 2012, p. 274). What is possessing (and dispossessing of individuality, as specified by Romanian author) becomes, by an astounding prestidigitation (with deep scientific base in psychology of advertising and marketing), something to be proud with and with that we may even induce envy from our peers.

The extent to which, such response or option is satisfying or not for the individual, becomes an indicator for personal standards: moral, psychological, axiological and human. These standards are given to me by my cultural immersion, framed, at its turn, at a historical, geographical, social or political level. But my "culture" depends also on my familial, micro-societal (neighbours, neighbourhood, city, etc.) affiliations, redesigned or only thickened by the compulsory schooling. All these spheres of cultural influence instil the individual with a number of value or normative benchmarks that become as many emotional and cognitive dependencies defining his/her mentality. Once perfected, our cultural impregnation (which "melts" to the most intimate levels of our being to become *habitus* – as Pierre Bourdieu said), will have two major directions: the fetish, on the one hand and the taboo on the other. In other words,

we will have things that we worship, appreciate, want etc., and others we must ignore, avoid or defame. Generalizing and pushing the abstraction to the extreme, we talk here about a mental world in black and white, maximum dichotomized in "yes" or "no" specific to the infantile level of moral judgment (Piaget fixed this level as "pre-operational" active from two to seven years). It is either worshipping and surrendering the being up to the most degrading or ridiculous dependencies or up to the on-principle rejection, refusing and visceral repudiation foreign of any judgment. These axiological and ethical swings determine at the psychological level a cyclothymic instability that sweeps without being able to stop, from one extreme to another, and precisely by this, continuously placed outside the subject. The result of this type of extremism is a constantly throwing in the objectual, so radical and repeated that the individual has no chance to touch oneself, to rest in his own substance. As Jean-François Mattéi emphasised: "Our modern subject devastated, shattered, destroyed represents a state of suspension of any form of structure, of edification or thinking." (Mattéi, 2005, p. 136). Eccentric and thrown outside, placed in a world that increasingly resembles an emotional desert, our modern (or post-modern) subject sees himself alienated from his human condition to be transformed (with his will) in a consuming machine that needs to be stimulated to boost the market economy. In an era in which the market dictates the course of the world, individual values related to development, self-realization and maximum fulfilment of the individual increasingly seem unusable and superfluous.

On the other hand knowing the consumerism also means to analyze how deep it is enrooted in our personality. Recalling here the "*habitus*" syntagma presented by Bourdieu, we notice that the consumerist idea roots itself at the body level, penetrating in every somatic detail of our being. We may easily discuss about a "*habitus*" of consuming; when we say that we do not think to our psychological character habits only but at a deeper and organic installation at the body level. For the *habitus*, so to speak is not satisfied only with the thinking reflex, but it is creeping at a physiological level, conquering the being from the base up. Given such implementation, it is understood that the *habitus* cannot be addressed using simple psychological means. Observation, drawing attention, criticism or friendly advice, even counselling will not bring any prejudice to certain organic and physiological reflexes so deeply implanted that the individual thinks he cannot live without them. Adrian Hatoş, in his "*Sociologia educației*" (Ro.: Sociology of education), presented a comparison between *habitus*-es and what we call "human nature" respective the way of being which: "(...)is that which is stable, predictable in the perception, thinking and acting of individuals, without the individuals to be aware of the functioning of these mechanisms." (Hatoş, 2006, p. 212). This is the force of habit, expression of *habitus*, became consubstantial with our being; true alter ego of a psychoid character (to use a term that C.G. Jung proposed for everything on infra-psychic levels, mostly collective and constrictive).

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