

**CONSUMING EXISTENCE<sup>1</sup>:  
CONTEMPLATING CONTEMPORARY  
LIVES THROUGH CONSUMPTION**

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<sup>1</sup> 'Consuming' here is to be understood as an adjective to existence and not as a verb. The title is intended to imply that our existence is a consuming entity and not that existence itself is consumed.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all the teachers at the Department of Philosophy, University of Mumbai for being the torchbearers showing me the way through the vast field of Philosophy in these last two years. I really appreciate Mumbai University for allowing me to pursue Philosophy in spite of not having an undergraduate background of the same. I came to this course primarily to help me resolve my existential crisis but I am glad to say that I have gained much more by studying this subject. One can never get enough of a subject like Philosophy and I intend to keep being its student even after this M.A. course ends. The knowledge and thinking methods that I have soaked in at the masters level here at this university will act as a solid base upon which I shall traverse all my future journeys in this field. For this I will always be sincerely thankful.

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To the person reading this dissertation, thank you for your attention and for taking the time out to read this very modest contribution to the vast pool of philosophical knowledge. I will be much obliged to receive your feedback on the same; it will only help me improve upon this philosophical theory that is far from complete. Please do share your critique.

- Mihir Bhatt

## STATEMENT OF INTEGRITY

As required by the University Ordinance 770, I wish to state that the work embodied in this dissertation titled **Consuming Existence: Contemplating Contemporary Lives through Consumption** forms my own contribution to the research work carried out under the guidance of Prof. Kanchana Mahadevan at the Department of Philosophy, University of Mumbai. This work has not been submitted for any other degree of this or any other university. Wherever reference has been made to the previous works of others, it has been clearly indicated as such and included in the bibliography.

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## MOTIVATION

The motivation for doing this research came to me when I was studying the various existentialist texts, which compelled me to look at my own existence in a new light. I wanted to arrive at a theory for my own existence for the year 2020 by doubting everything that can be deemed not necessary to survive and authentically look at what remains, my existential curiosity only got heightened because of this present lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic which made us all drastically revert to a bare minimum survival mode. I could not shake off the feeling that I'm a consumer no matter what the situation and that I cannot reject this identity. In fact, it is now in my very nature to consume – product, ideas, emotions and even experiences. I, therefore, wanted to delve deep into this theory of existence and consumption. My motivation also stems from the fact that I have worked in the capitalist system for over five years as an advertiser and a marketer where in my job was primarily to find customers and sell something to them effectively. Capitalism might be an exploitative system that maximizes profit by consistently undervaluing the labour of the employees; I have myself experienced this first hand. But the fact remains that we are all its citizens, for better or for worse. It seemed natural then to want to try and better understand how this identity of a being a consumer shapes my existence.

## INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH PROBLEM

What does it mean to exist? Ever since Descartes gave us his dictum '*I think, therefore I am*,<sup>2</sup> philosophy hasn't been the same. His method of doubting everything other than the very act of doubting was what connected with thinkers during and after his time. But Descartes' "meditations" were hardly the end of our search for the meaning of our existence; it was simply the beginning. Up until the '*existence precedes essence*' of Sartre<sup>3</sup>, philosophers have tried to come up with an indisputable definition to this entity called existence that we all possess and share. Existentialism, in general, reversed the ontology of being by placing the onus of meaning on our shoulders rather than on an out of the material world essence or a profound explanation for it. Philosophy post the existentialism phase has mostly put humans in the context of their surroundings (societal structures, choices, etc.) and tried to understand their existence within it. It can be argued that postmodernism is also an endeavour in this direction. In this

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<sup>2</sup> In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, René Descartes rejects all those beliefs that are in the slightest degree open to doubt except the very act of doubting.

<sup>3</sup> In *Existentialism Is A Humanism*, Jean-Paul Sartre proceeds to define existence as that which man conceives of himself after he exists, that he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence.

philosophical research work, I intend to contribute in my own small way to the coming up of a new definition for existence while keeping up with the times. The central aim of this work is to try and understand what it means to exist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, specifically in April 2020.

Capitalism is evidently the single most pervasive and predominant phenomenon in the world today, not least because it exists in all societal structures and has adapted well to the many crises it has faced especially in the last hundred years. The present-day state-backed capitalism has paved the way for neoliberalism to rule over most countries in the world. Karl Marx's critique in *Das Kapital*<sup>4</sup> is significant as are the critiques of various philosophers after him who have attempted to understand capitalism better. These views were the starting point of contention for this research work. Understanding capitalism is the first step towards understanding something very essential for its survival – consumption, which was the focus of my contemplation next. Through the various theories on consumption and the available empirical evidences to me, I have tried to develop a holistic view of the same and delve into what are the implications of it for a consumer. I'd like to point out that my goal was not to look at capitalism or consumption as either good or bad but to simply try and look at them as they are for the contemporary person existing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I have tried my best to pass no value judgements on the same. My focus has been to use these theories and personal empirical evidences as a lens through which we can better see ourselves as we live each day of our lives governed by our need and desire to consume in a society under capitalism.

To come up with a definition for existence I attempted to look at something that is undeniably true for us all when we exist. For this definition to ring true as a sign of our times, I have chosen to look at something that is especially true for the 21<sup>st</sup> century existence of a human being. Consumption is very peculiar to our times when anything and everything can be and is sold to us. Moreover, we have learnt to consume so effectively that we end up consuming even when we aren't actively being sold to. Consumption today primarily happens through products and services but it can take many different forms because commodities are increasingly becoming abstract and late capitalism<sup>5</sup> has been successful in creating consumers of different ideas too. As a populace we are segmented along various lines be it religion, politics, gender, nationality, etc. and we are also divided as consumers, based of the brands we choose to buy for example. One can reject their religion, be apolitical, reject gender norms, change nationalities even but can one truly reject being a consumer? Will we still be able to

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<sup>4</sup> See *Capital : Volume 1* by Karl Marx

<sup>5</sup> The term 'late capitalism' as used in Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* and also prior to him by Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

survive among other consumers if we did? Hardly. Of course, there is the possibility of turning into absolute nomads and existing completely out of society. My aim here is to however try to understand our existence within society through the lens of this inescapable identity of ours of being a consumer. I'll be arguing to prove that the 21<sup>st</sup> century existence of a person is intertwined so much with consumption that it governs and shapes the very meaning that they give to their lives. Consumption is central to our existence since we are born and up until we die. We find our essences in the commodities we consume and consumption gives meaning to our existence.

The problem that will form the heart of this research would be pertaining to how we perceive our contemporary existence and whether we can look at it through the lens of something which is essential for our survival, consumption. The need for such a viewpoint is imminent also because capitalism governs major aspects of our lives making us all consumers of various products, services and ideas. Also, there seems to be an absence of substantial texts dealing with the ontology of consumption. I shall be attempting to look at existence as a form of consumption and try to answer the question of what does it mean to exist through the question of what does it mean to exist as a consumer? The research problem can be thus summarized as follows: 'Can we define the 21<sup>st</sup> century existence of a human being through their identity of being a consumer?' My aim will be to try and fill this lacuna in our knowledge of consumption as an end-in-itself.

One cannot say that philosophy of consumption is completely absent. Adam Smith, who advocated for a *laissez faire* capitalism, saw consumption from a purely economic perspective and as an end goal of all production, emphasizing the importance of the consumer over the producer. Karl Marx's briefly talks about consumption as a kind of production. Contemporary philosophers like Marcuse, Baudrillard and Lyotard have criticized consumption. The existential texts too are inadequate in directly dealing with consumption, I think Sartre would have most likely seen it as bad-faith or inauthentic - as a way of humans considering themselves as a being-in-itself while they consume. But can consumption be really looked at as something just passive? Isn't consumption rooted in freedom, a freedom similar to, as Sartre has pronounced, which humans are condemned to once they exist? And what does it mean to exercise this freedom? Also, in the times of 360 degree marketing and advertising, is a consumer truly free to make their own choice? All these and more existential questions related to consumption need contemplating upon which is what I intend to attempt to do while trying to solve this research problem.

The hypothesis statement that I will defend in this dissertation can be thus outlined as follows, existence of a person in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be likened to and defined solely through consumption. The reason for choosing this hypothesis statement is two-fold. First, as we delve deeper into the analysis of modern consumption through its roots in capitalism and its present form, we see that consumption has seeped deep into our lives with there even being a possibility of spending our entire days and nights consuming products and services. Second, as we start seeing our consuming behaviour more closely it becomes apparent that apart from the commodities we consume, we in fact consume everything all the time. By approaching existence through the lens of consumption, I wish to argue that our existence is, in fact, one big act of consumption. Moreover, consumption is all that we indulge in when we exist. Everything we do, think, experience, in other words receive when we are alive, is fundamentally a consumption in action.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research methodology I shall be primarily applying in this research work will be a critical interpretation for the various texts on capitalism, consumption and existentialism. Phenomenological bracketing will be used to first look at existence for what it is without any presuppositions after which Descartes' method of doubt will be applied to arrive at that aspect of our existence which is inevitable for us to exist, thereby linking existence with consumption. Also an epistemic reduction of existence will be undertaken to identify what is it that lies fundamentally at the base of our existence so as to define it anew. This research is empirical to the extent of my own lived experiences, how they affect the perception of my existence and how I perceive this existence in these contemporary times of the lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The literature that I have used for this work is as follows: for understanding capitalism and its structures/forms through its advent up until the present times, I have mostly looked at thinkers like Karl Marx (*Capital: Volume 1*), Fredric Jameson (*The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*) and Adam Smith (*Enquiry into the Wealth of Nations*). Secondary sources are also referenced for the aforementioned thinkers like Robert L. Heilbroner (*The Worldly Philosophers*) and Mark Fisher (*Capitalist Realism*). For understanding the theories on consumption I have primarily looking at thinkers like Karl Marx, Jean Baudrillard (*The Consumer Society, The System of Objects*), Herbert Marcuse (*One-Dimensional man*), Jean-

Francis Lyotard (*The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*), Hannah Arendt (*The Human Condition*) and Thorstein Veblen (*The Theory of the Leisure Class*). Lastly, to develop the ontology of existence I have referenced existentialist authors like Jean-Paul Sartre (*Being and Nothingness*), Simone De Beauvoir (*The Ethics of Ambiguity*) and Albert Camus (*The Myth of Sisyphus*).

The gap that I found in the available literature resources and one that I wish to fill through this work is that there is no definitive text that has tried to combine the concepts of existence and consumption or tried to even develop the ontology of consumption. Thinkers who have critiqued capitalism like Marx, Jameson, Smith, etc. have all regarded consumption as a consequence of capitalism as opposed to it being an end-in-itself. Even Jean Baudrillard who has written a lot about the consumer society falls short of extending his critique of the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ to the very act of consuming itself.<sup>6</sup> His emphasis on the consumption of signs as opposed to objects resonates well but he fails to discuss the fact that both are fundamentally acts of consumption. The ontology of consumption is missing a thorough and bracketed analysis by a dedicated philosopher. The ontological necessity regarding consumption is missing in all these texts that I’ve come across so far for this research. The existential texts of Sartre, Beauvoir, Camus, etc. all fail to adequately discuss existence in the context of consumption or vice-versa. Maybe the reason for this is that consumption wasn’t as pervasive and seeped into people’s lives in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century as it is today so we can suppose that it failed to arouse significant interest even among the existentialists of the time. In a lot of ways, I see this research work as step further than that taken by these great philosophers. They stopped at emotions such as dread, anxiety, anguish and experiences like the absurdity while ignoring the obvious fact that all these collaterals that came along with existence had to be fundamentally consumed by an individual first. Even Descartes stopped at doubting his process of doubting while I intend to go ahead and say that even though one cannot doubt that one is thinking, all thoughts need consuming as well. ‘*I consume, therefore I am,*’ is what I will strive to arrive at in this dissertation.

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<sup>6</sup> In *Fatal Theories*, Baudrillard criticizes the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ as theories that try to establish anything beyond the obvious.

## (I) CONTEMPORARY EXISTENCE

*“It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness.”*

– Karl Marx<sup>7</sup>

What do we understand by existence? There have been many philosophies dealing with this question especially since Descartes’ dictum of *‘I think, therefore I am,’*<sup>8</sup> in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* where in he doubted everything except the very act of doubting, up until the existentialism movement where Sartre in his *Existentialism is a Humanism* speech proposed that *‘existence precedes essence’*<sup>9</sup> putting the onus for giving meaning to our lives on our own shoulders. Even more contemporary thinkers have updated this definition of existence while keeping up with the times like Herbert Marcuse who says in *One-Dimensional Man* that we recognize ourselves in our commodities, find our soul in automobile, hi-fi stereo, kitchen equipment<sup>10</sup> (Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 11) suggesting that we find our essence in the products we buy and possess. Moreover, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century commodities have become an inseparable and inevitable part of our existence, so much that our inescapable identity of being a consumer can be visualized as lying underneath all our other identities that we might associate with.

I too would like to answer this question of existence here through a phenomenological bracketing and reductionism of my existence and then arrive at a definition that is justifiable for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I am contemplating on existence while existing in April 2020, so its definition should also come from this time for it to be authentic. I am writing this as I am forced on a self-isolation due to the coronavirus pandemic that is co-incidentally proving to be quite conducive for my contemplations. This global pause is working in my favour for doing this research as I am forced to confront my existence face-to-face at its bare minimum, as are billions of people around the world. While we consume bare essentials in terms of food, shelter, etc. needed to survive, it can be argued here that for most of our items of daily consumption it

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<sup>7</sup> Quote from the preface of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* written by Karl Marx in 1859.

<sup>8</sup> In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, René Descartes rejects all those beliefs that are in the slightest degree open to doubt and discovers *Cogito, ergo sum* (‘I think, therefore I am’) as a first principle for his new philosophy.

<sup>9</sup> In *Existentialism Is A Humanism*, Jean-Paul Sartre proceeds to define existence as that which man conceives of himself after he exists, that which he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence.

<sup>10</sup> As depicted by Herbert Marcuse in his influential work *One-Dimensional Man* first published in 1964.

is difficult to ascertain exactly what is essential and what is not for everyone, what is really important for me to consume won't necessarily be of any value for you.

What shall I define my existence in terms of? My mind? My body? Yes, these two are very crucial to exist and often discussed majorly in philosophy but are they sufficient to base my existence upon? What else could then do we associate our existence with? Thoughts? Emotions? Ideas? Again, they are quite elementary to exist but are they truly fundamental enough? How about our experiences? I do make sense of my existence through all of my experiences but can I really say that I exist because I experience such and such things? What then could form the fundamental block of my existence? What is it that can be unshakably true for my existence? It is questions of this nature that prompted me to research my own existence thoroughly to find out an answer that satisfies these curiosities. To answer these existential questions we'll have to first decide what are we basing the definition of existence upon and what is existence if not that which is omnipresent throughout our lives? After all existence has been the focus of discussion throughout modern philosophy because we closely identify our day-to-day lives with it, isn't it? Hence, we need to define existence in terms of something that we are doing all the time when we exist and what this is, is for me to figure out step by step through this dissertation.

I intend to prove that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century existence that is significantly intertwined with capitalism, it is consumption that we indulge in all the time, even when we are not specifically being a consumer of a product or service. I'd like to point out here that I would be looking at consumption in a new lens so as to look at it beyond the notion of it being simply a consequence of capitalism. Attempt will also be made to arrive at the ontology of consumption. Whether we look at consumption as a passive or as an active life project, as probably it would have been by Jean Paul Sartre or Simone de Beauvoir, Simone in fact has stated that existence is consumption because it makes itself only by destroying<sup>11</sup>, I intend to see it essentially as an existential project. Living, in fact, can be seen as one big act of consumption and I shall arrive at the conclusion that *to exist is to consume*.

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<sup>11</sup> Simone de Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity* talks about the need for thinking about the freedom of others, the success of our projects depends upon them being adopted by others. If we view consumption through the lens of this idea of a project then it becomes very closely connected our freedom as well.

## **(II) EXISTENCE RE-DEFINED**

First, let us try to understand why we need to re-define existence, after all philosophers over the centuries have already defined it several ways. These existing philosophies throw great insights on the notion of existence but they were put forth by the people who were living in those times, within the context of their times. If we were to embark upon a journey to define existence that would ring true for our present times then it is imperative that we situate it in our present times in order to come up with an authentic enough definition. Our existence in this lockdown for example should be looked at entirely on its own without the projections of previous theories for us to make an honest sense of it. Only what we are doing right now can authentically tell us all about what it means to exist today. It is important to state here that existence is understood as something that precedes essence in this research and essence is understood as something that comes into existence. The philosophy that will be brought about in this dissertation could be understood as being post-existentialist if you may.

Let us now try to look at a day in a contemporary person's life in April 2020, I will be the subject for this observation because of the limitations imposed on fieldwork due to the present scenario and because it is me who wishes to understand my own existence. I shall begin with the moment I wake up and finish at the moment I go to sleep at the end of my day. On the surface an ordinary day of my existence these days looks somewhat like this, in more or less the same order – I wake up, get ready and do household chores, work/study, eat lunch, rest, work/study, think, interact with other people online, spend time with family and my pets, drink tea and snacks, watch a film/series, read *The Plague* by Albert Camus, check news about this pandemic, try not to think too much about death, go on to social media, eat dinner, sleep, dream maybe, repeat. This is just my schedule and it will most certainly not be the same for others but the overall picture would be quite similar. The first week or so of the lockdown being announced I struggled to keep the things that I was attached to before, eventually accepting my new reality and finding new activities to help me spend my days. If and when this lockdown gets lifted and our society overcomes this pandemic, I shall find my old activities back or maybe keep some from the lockdown period or maybe find altogether new things to do. But the question we should be asking here is that whether I can reduce my existence into any of these activities. The answer will be no because for that I'll have to find what is common between all of them as our existence is what lies at the base of all these activities. This is important to figure out because everything else gets built upon it. Existence is something that lies underneath all our other activities that we do while we are alive. Therefore, existence has to be re-defined in terms of something that we do all the time that we exist. The first premise

to prove my argument in this dissertation can thus be formulated as follows: Existence is *what we do all the time that we exist*.

### (III) CONSUMPTION

When we attempt to define existence in context of our present times we need to first identify the epoch of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and what is more contextual of the times we live in than capitalism? Capitalism, or late capitalism as it gets often referred to<sup>12</sup>, has now managed to seep into our very existence so much that we indulge in contractarian relationships even with people using the commodity logic, just as Karl Marx's historical materialism predicted.<sup>13</sup> Commodities exist everywhere and we indulge in commodity fetishism also as Marx described it in his *Capital: Volume One*.<sup>14</sup> Commodity empowers as well as disempowers us while money is unprejudiced because it is equally harsh on us all. Even the mixing of different cultures is facilitated through economic interests across the world. But this circulation of commodities need not necessarily always be a bad thing as the critics of consumerism and conspicuous consumption would have us believe.<sup>15</sup> This is not to say that the critiques of capitalism are unfounded but only that there can be positives in it as well, capitalism can also be credited with an infinite circulation of knowledge, as interpreted by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*.<sup>16</sup> Whether we see the system of capitalism as a survivor or as an exploiter, it is undeniable that it wins in any given social situation it gets thrown into, including the many crises it has faced ever since its inception. In fact, as Marx has very well illustrated, these crises are an integral part of the design that makes capitalism work.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The term 'late capitalism' as used by Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Jameson in fact credits the Frankfurt school for the origination of the term.

<sup>13</sup> A student of Hegel's dialectic, Marx reacted against his idealism to develop his theory of historical materialism that he considered to be the key nexus between economic theory and the science of social revolution.

<sup>14</sup> Marx describes the fetishism of the commodity as this mystical character that attaches itself to the product of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.

<sup>15</sup> The concept of conspicuous consumption was first introduced by Thorstein Veblen in his *The Theory of the Leisure Class* where in it is defined as the vicarious consumption of goods. Consumerism is a theory that advocates the increasing acquisition of goods and services and it even gets projected as being good for the economy.

<sup>16</sup> In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard discusses his views on capitalism and discusses how the status of knowledge is completely altered in the postindustrial age as cultures enter what is called the postmodern age.

<sup>17</sup> As Heilbroner analyses accurately in *The Worldly Philosophers*, Marx understood crisis as the way the capitalism system works and not the way it fails. Each crisis serves to renew the capacity of the system to expand.

Capitalism thrives and survives due to something that is very crucial to its continual existence, consumption. Let us try to understand what consumption is generally understood as at present. Most definitions and critiques of the 21<sup>st</sup> century consumption tend to describe it as akin to the profit for profit's sake obsession of a capitalist, a consumption for consumption's sake - we consume more than we want or need. But consumption also leads to a carving out of an identity as Jean Baudrillard has described well - an individual has a deep desire to distinguish themselves through a rational and hierarchical system of needs.<sup>18</sup> In a sense we are consumers for life and we can say that we become what we consume. Leisure is also work and duty as it gets consumed as well, leisure becomes the consumption of non-productive time. Thorstein Veblen said in his *The Theory of the Leisure Class* that the leisure class' aim is the predatory seizure of goods without work and that the workers do not seek to displace their managers, as predicted by Karl Marx and Frederic Engels' *Manifesto of the Communist Party* that the proletariat class will eventually overthrow the capitalist class, rather they seek to emulate them.<sup>19</sup> Even Hannah Arendt seems to have understood this when she said in *The Human Condition* that Marx was wrong in thinking that free time will emancipate men from necessity, the spare time gets spent in nothing but more consumption and that eventually no object of the world will be safe from annihilation through consumption.<sup>20</sup> Modern day marketing and advertising segregates its audience into various divisions or segmentations before deciding on their communication strategies for any audience. One can also argue that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we get introduced to the world and life at a very young age through the marketing and advertising of products, will the kids of today even practically know about these products if they weren't promoted to them? Baudrillard believed that the objects we acquire are no longer the ones that were produced by the worker but rather they are the ones imposed by advertising. He thought that the idea that primary needs govern the society was a myth and that no object exists as isolated from other objects, every object being relational. Maslow's hierarchy of needs<sup>21</sup> could also be seen as closely related to our hierarchy of consumption

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<sup>18</sup> Baudrillard says that in the postmodern society, an individual displays what he buys in order to differentiate themselves socially. This behaviour is similar to how members of tribal cultures display their differences by the use of certain tattoos or feathers.

<sup>19</sup> Veblen illustrates how in the capitalist society everyone, workman and middle-class citizen as well as capitalist, sought to demonstrate their predatory prowess through the conspicuous expenditure of money and through its conspicuous waste.

<sup>20</sup> Arendt critiques Marx's prediction that the *animal laborans* once free themselves from the need to be productive will automatically nourish other 'higher' activities.

<sup>21</sup> A. H. Maslow in his 1943 paper *A Theory of Human Motivation* claimed that man is a wanting animal and presented a hierarchy of five sets of needs which motivates him in an ascending order of importance. These are physiological, safety, love, esteem and self-actualization.

choices, the highest priority given to consuming essentials like food, clothing, shelter and going up all the way to consuming for our self-actualization needs. In the present lockdown period this could be very well experienced, we currently exist in a basic consumptive mode receiving only what is fundamentally necessary to survive. While some of are privileged enough to have access to commodities like the Internet which can satisfy our higher needs, a lot of us are also struggling to consume basic necessities by trying to return back home. Marx suggests that consumption is an active thing, what capitalism is all about and hints at how production could also be thought of as consumption. Adam Smith before him thought of consumption as the sole end and purpose of all production making the consumer a king.<sup>22</sup> Smith had once said that the desire for food may be limited by a man's stomach but his desires for clothes, furniture, luxuries and ornaments seemed incalculably large. Baudrillard proposed that in the present time we only consume signs in a society based on simulation while Herbert Marcuse thought that we live in a one-dimensional society. While all these thinkers have discussed consumption, could it be that they neglected thinking about it at a deeper fundamental level? Can consumption be observed in an existential manner?

It is safe to say that whenever someone talks about consumption, it is understood as something that is a consequence of capitalism. There's production and then there is the consumption of the things produced. The philosophies that speak about the ill effects of consumption also understand it within the context of capitalism. Consumption can be understood as binding as well as freeing but is consumption this entity that is just a by-product of capitalism or could it be something even more fundamental? We consume everything we are sold to and indulge in an obsession over these products yes but are these the only objects of our consumption? Whether existence itself can be objectified is debatable, Sartre would have disagreed based on the distinction he provided between the being-in-itself and the being-for-itself<sup>23</sup>, so it will not be very reasonable to say that we consume our existence itself because that would mean we are implying that consumption precedes existence. Nevertheless, consumption does constitute a significant aspect of our existence that demands a dedicated philosophical introspection. Is consumption just a part of the capitalist system or is it something

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<sup>22</sup> According to Smith, the great intended beneficiary of the (market) system was the consumer and not the producer he also castigated those systems that place the interest of the producer over the consuming public. Wealth consists of the goods that all the people of the society consume, although not, of course, in equal amounts.

<sup>23</sup> Sartre defines the being-in-itself as the objects of the world with inherent properties whereas the being-for-itself is the human consciousness. We are said to be indulging in bad faith when we try to see ourselves as beings-in-themselves.

within our nature that the capitalist system exploits for its benefit? Could it be that the approach towards this notion of consumption has always been unfairly narrow? It is therefore important to re-define consumption as an end-in-itself, as described by Immanuel Kant<sup>24</sup>, rather than think of it just as a consequence of capitalism. I'll try to develop the ontology of consumption next to redefine it in terms of what it fundamentally could be because we don't consume only when we are in contact with any product or service of capitalism, we consume everything else as well. The need to do this is clear, as there is a dearth of philosophical studies that discuss consumption just as how we practice it, with or without capitalism. I shall attempt to do just that and arrive at a new definition that not only satisfies its capitalism context but also the context of everything else that we do when we exist.

#### **(IV) ONTOLOGY OF CONSUMPTION**

What then could consumption be? To answer this question we need to first ask what all do we consume? Let's start listing them down – air, food, sights, smells, sounds, etc. are all self-evident. But there are many things that we consume without realising that we are in fact consuming them – art, news, ideas, emotions, films, music, thoughts, memories, beliefs, knowledge, philosophy, etc. These are all consumed as well, isn't it? While Marx has suggested that the producer is also a consumer implying that we are capable of creating what we need to consume, it was Jean Baudrillard who first put forth the notion of us being consumers of ideas and of symbolic value as the meaning objects give to our existence.<sup>25</sup> In our consumer society, value is in the ideas, or in the signs of objects and value is in the meaning that an object gives to existence. He believed that we are living in a hyperreality that is a heightened sense of reality which sustains the amalgamation of production and consumption and in which we consume only signs. There are copies without an original, the copies being more real than the real. Baudrillard also proposed that we work to buy spare time in order to then consume it as well and that the lines between reality and consumption is questioned through consumption itself. The commodity fetishism of Marx has been surpassed by the sign value and consumption has become a social work, a duty to society. According to him, capitalism generates hyperconsumption but it also creates creativity. Objects do not have an exchange value as Marx

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<sup>24</sup> Kant prescribes in the humanity formula under his Categorical Imperative that we must treat people as an end-it-itself and never only as a means to an end.

<sup>25</sup> Jean Baudrillard finds consumption to be not just a mechanism for satisfying needs but deems it as a defining mode of our industrial civilization. Consumption for him means the systematic manipulation of signs.

proposed but they have a sign value and consumption means an activity of systematic manipulation of signs, object becomes a sign then consumed. Consumption is limitless and must keep surpassing itself in order to remain a reason for living according to Baudrillard, consumption is irreplaceable because it is founded upon a lack just as existence is founded upon nothingness as Sartre puts it in *Being and Nothingness*.<sup>26</sup> Consumption and existence might thus share a much closer relationship and resemblance than we originally thought.

Our existence relies on us consuming a lot of things, in fact all the time. Right from the time we are born until the time that we die, we consume. When we stop consuming altogether, we die. It can be consequently said that we give meaning to our lives through consumption. Consumption is therefore a deeply existential notion rather than being just a consequence of capitalism. So then how can we re-define consumption in a way that all of these elements are incorporated? Instead of looking at what we consume, we must divert our attention at how we consume to arrive at this new definition. We receive all of these things that were enumerated, so is consuming the same as receiving? This seems like it is partly true because receiving implies a receiver. So where is it that we receive these things that we consume? Sense organs? Mind? I'd like to propose that we receive everything within our body with our sense organs and mind both functioning within this body. After all, we exist in our bodies, isn't it? The question of mind and body dualism still persists but we cannot deny that mind exists within the body itself. Hence, consumption can be re-defined as *the act of anything getting received by the body*. This new definition satisfies all the notions of consumption within the context of capitalism and the other elements that we consume while we exist. Even the acts of production or creation are first consumed by us in the form of an experience. When you practise giving, someone else is receiving while you consume the experience of giving. Consumption can be either active or passive but it functions as a reception by our bodies and therefore it makes sense to re-define it as such.

## **(V) EXISTING AS CONSUMERS**

Now that we've arrived at the new definitions for existence (as something that is done all the time that we exist) and for consumption (as getting received by the body), let us try to see how closely connected they actually are. Existence as understood in terms of what we do

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<sup>26</sup> In his groundbreaking work *Being and Nothingness*, Jean Paul Sartre pursues the question of being and arrives at a definition of our existence, a being-for-itself that is fundamentally based upon a lack or a nothingness. Moreover, the being-in-itself and the being-for-itself both get expressed through the being-for-others which is also crucial for the expression of our freedom.

all the time means that existence must be defined with something that is true throughout our existence at every moment. So, if we were to understand the new definition of existence for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have to figure out what is it that we do all the time that we exist. What do our lives build upon?

Consumption as understood in terms of the things that are received by the body, mind included, means that we can assign the status of consumption to everything that we come into contact with through our bodies, again mind included, and receive them. To survive, we need to receive a variety of things, from our basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter to our esteem needs of being in a community going up all the way to our self-actualisation needs. We consume things to satisfy these needs and we in a way become what we consume. We tend to find our essences in the things we consume, from products to belief systems. Our bodies are in constant states of reception with our surroundings, our physical receptors being our sense organs and our mind being the receptor of everything abstract. We are therefore consuming all the time in order to continue living. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this rings true more than probably at any other time in history when we have so many choices to purchase and also spend our time consuming them. This is not to say that we weren't consuming earlier but only that it probably never has been this self-evident. It is important to keep consuming in order to survive because a state of zero consumption will be death.

Simply put, all of us can be seen as consuming organisms and capitalism itself can be perceived as a consuming organism that also survives and thrives due to consumption, just like us. After all, according to Robert L. Heilbroner, economists see society as an organism that has its own life history and he also goes on to say that there is something about the technological orientation, the efficiency and the sheer dynamism of capitalist ways of production that makes the expansion of the system irresistible. But maybe what truly makes this economic system of capitalism so irresistible is that its nature is so close to our own existence, it too consumes to survive. We have thus arrived at our second premise to prove my hypothesis, it can be formulated as follows: *We consume all the time that we exist.*

## **(VI) EXISTENCE IMPLIES CONSUMPTION**

Let's briefly recap what all we have covered. We established existence as something that is omnipresent throughout our lives and then we established that we consume all the time that we exist. Hence, we now arrive at our conclusion that can be derived as follows: *to exist is to consume.*

One can say here that okay, we are consumers and we consume a lot, so what? To that question I'd like to say that what I intended to prove here was that consumption is 'all' that we

do when we exist, meaning that *existence implies consumption*. This ontology of consumption is different than consumerism or conspicuous consumption. Moreover, this notion of consumption is not restricted to only humans but can be ascribed to any other living entity to which we can ascribe existence - plants, animals, birds, nature, etc. The conclusion could also be framed as *if I exist then I consume* and if I were to take inspiration from Descartes' meditations, we can frame it as '*I consume, therefore I am*'.

Based on further contemplations and discussions with my peers, I can clearly see that this theory could be countered in two ways – by either giving a credible example of an existential activity that can be said to not be consumed based on the new definition of consumption or by refuting this definition of consumption itself. For the first response I can say that I wasn't able to figure out any such activity so far. What about meditation? Couldn't it be seen as a non-consuming experience? It is true that meditation, Vipassana for instance, is probably one of the few activities that we indulge in in our lives that emphasises on not consuming instead of consuming something. But even here we'd see that we are in fact de-consuming when we are in a meditative state. Even in an ideal state where hypothetically we stop consuming all thoughts, attachments and emotions, we would still be consuming air to survive and the experience of meditating itself. The therapeutic effects of mindfulness meditation could be looked at as a direct result of this de-consumption. To the second response of refuting the definition of consumption as a reception by the body, I would like to say that a more fundamental description is not available in my knowledge horizon right now but I look forward to one if and when it arrives. Until then, this definition must hold true.

If all this seemed like the first half of a philosophical doctrine, it is intentionally so. I ventured on this path to firmly establish an existential theory around consumption and nothing beyond that. How one chooses to use this theory and take it forward, if at all, is up to them. And personally, contrary to what Marx said which was that philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways but the point is however to change it<sup>27</sup>, I think that philosophy must simply accurately describe the world, existence in our present discussion, and not try to change it or prescribe a remedy or a way forward because this is precisely where the danger of going astray arises. Just because one is confident that they have managed to describe their existence accurately doesn't necessarily mean that they can also successfully prescribe an accurate path going ahead.

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<sup>27</sup> The eleventh thesis from *Theses on Feuerbach* written by Karl Marx in 1845 states that "Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it." Incidentally this quote is also inscribed upon Marx's grave.

Lastly I'd like to conclude by saying that I don't intend this philosophy to help people give meaning to their existence, they will have to do it themselves by engaging with what they choose to consume. Neither is this philosophy akin to a nihilist view of existence. Philosophies are also consumed yes but there are many more out there and in my opinion, an individual must ideally attempt at coming up with their own philosophy based on what they have understood of their lives through their lived experiences, like I have attempted to do here. This was not a scientific reduction but rather an epistemic one, so the end goal is not to build concrete knowledge on top of it and so it should suffice to make the reader aware of the true nature of their existence, as that of a consuming existence. That being said, if and when a person is faced with the meaninglessness of existence, this theory has the potential to give solace as one would realize that they can then chose to prudently give meaning to their existence, through a selective consumption as opposed to a mindless consumption served on a platter which, as can be argued, advertising and marketing has us pursue by default. We already try to find meaning in our lives through commodities rather than face the absurdity of existence, as Albert Camus would have prescribed.<sup>28</sup> It isn't exactly a piece of art but this philosophy could by all means comfort the troubled and trouble the comfortable.

## CONCLUSION

*"It is easier to imagine the end of the world and all life than to imagine the end of capitalism."*

– Fredric Jameson<sup>29</sup>

Whether we think of capitalism as good or evil, we can't deny that most probably we are all condemned to live and die within this system, we are all in the true sense the children of capitalism. The aim of this research was not solving capitalism but to find at least the possibility of an iota of optimism in consumption and by linking it directly with existence this appears to have been achieved. By properly understanding the nature of consumption in this new light we can hope to lead better lives by being actively self-aware consumers. Life then becomes a series of consuming choices with different people choosing to consume differently and thereby giving their own meaning to their lives through consumption. Consumption then

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<sup>28</sup> In his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* Albert Camus urges us to face the absurdity of existence head on which he understands as the phenomenon that occurs when a person's relentless search for meaning meets the unreasonable silence of the universe.

<sup>29</sup> Mark Fisher understands this phrase by Jameson (and also Slavoj Žižek) as the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it.

becomes the act through which we exercise our freedom. Thus, our consuming existence makes us all consumers for life, in an existential sense.

This present pandemic and the lockdown that followed must have surely changed a lot of our perspectives with which we viewed our existence. By being forced to change our consuming choices we are also forced to change the meaning that we choose to give to our lives. Once this phase is over we will again have a choice to decide what kind of meaning we want to give to our lives and whatever we may end up choosing, this new meaning will be given through our various acts of consumption. Most of us are finding the current times of uncertainty to be very uncomfortable and disturbing to deal with and maybe this is because our routine life has made us forget how fragile our reality really is. We consume the idea that we know and understand the world with certainty and that things can happen just as we wish for them to, maybe we need to consume this idea in order to survive. It is times like these which forces us to confront our existence for what it truly is without all the elaborate ideas that we choose to ascribe to it. Whichever philosophy works to help you get through this tough time, we must not forget that it was in fact consumed by us because our existence functions at a much deeper level than we give it credit in most philosophies.

We exist in time, which is limited, and so our consumption choices are also limited by time. Commodities under capitalism are always vying for this attention; companies are always soliciting you while appearing to care about you. We are essentially consumers of time and space but how we choose to exercise this consumption determines the meaning of our lives. We can learn how to live better by learning how to consume better. We are all consuming organisms that consume until they don't and die. Consumption is thus a great leveller and capitalism could be used as an instrument to bring about a certain egalitarianism. Commodities can be thus looked at as empowering and not simply as a weakness. Jean Baudrillard saw the contemporary world as governed by the meaninglessness of life as an enchanted form and the seduction of production as a disenchanted form (Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 180). Although Baudrillard believed that there is no choice or liberation possible through consumption, the possibility of giving meaning to our lives through consumption is enough to empower a person in my opinion. People even unite over the things they consume together or bond over similar consuming behaviours. If nothing, this theory has the potential to help people survive their day-to-day existence by being better able to co-exist with capitalism, like a modern day labourer whose life is akin to the life of Sisyphus as described by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

By understanding the nature of our existence authentically through consumption and thus capitalism, one can hope to be able to imagine Sisyphus happy!<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Sisyphus is a character out of the Greek mythology whom Albert Camus finds to be a ideal absurd hero who was condemned to roll a rock up the mountain, watch it fall back down as soon as it reaches the top, go back down to it again, roll the rock back up the mountain only to watch it fall back down again and repeat this for eternity. Camus compares Sisyphus' predicament to that of a modern day worker whose life is spent toiling futilely in factories or offices, Sisyphus' punishment is also in a way a representation of the human condition of perpetually struggling to find meaning without a hope for success. Towards the end of his essay, Camus famously says that the struggle itself is enough to fill a man's heart and that one must imagine Sisyphus happy.

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