

I Can't Believe It's Ontological!

(A Philosophical Essay on Consumer Psychology)

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Practical needs are concerned with our physical existence. We're thirsty, so we drink; we're cold, so we clothe ourselves and build a house. If only life were that simple! But it's not, for we also have ontological needs. Ontology is that branch of philosophy that asks, "What is real?" Ontological needs are concerned with our effort to be real, to achieve selfhood. "

A rock is a rock, and a cow is a cow, but the reality of human beings is continually open to question. We might feel unreal because we are unknown to other people. A

person says, for example, "I feel like a nobody, a nothing, like I don't even exist." We might also feel unreal because we have a sense of the transiency of our existence, or because our life lacks continuity, meaning, and purpose. Our quest to be real, to attain selfhood, is what makes the world go round and, as we shall see, spins the wheels of our consumer economy.

What, then, do consumer products have to do with our quest to be real? As we shall discuss, we drink Coke because it promises to connect our transient earthly existence to the eternal, because it is the "real thing." We use Dawn dish detergent because its name suggests the early morning, the time when all the world seems fresh and clean; washing dishes is therefore associated with self-renewal. We wear jeans because their uniform quality — they are all made from blue denim — promises to overcome our sense of separateness, isolation and alienation from other people. Furthermore, the fact that jeans are made of natural fibers is an expression of our desire for authenticity, for a "real" life. The success or failure of a consumer product depends on whether or not it appears to satisfy ontological needs.

We must introduce another new idea here. Consumer products appeal to us ontologically only because we are able to shift to "the symbolic level of awareness." This is the level of awareness we are in when we dream at night, but we also enter it many times during the day.

On the discriminative level of awareness, we are practical beings. We wear a certain coat or sweater because it keeps us warm, is comfortable and reasonably priced. But on the symbolic level of awareness, we wear cowboy boots, for example, not because we rope cattle, but because it is symbolic of rugged individualism. Just as we are what we wear on the symbolic level of awareness, we are what we eat and we are what we drive.

What follows is an examination of some popular consumer products. This will give us a firmer grasp of the ontology of marketing. If some of these examples appear to

be outlandish, it is because we are illuminating an enterprise that is itself outlandish -- the effort to attain selfhood in such domains as eating, driving, sexuality, work, and clothing.

Cars, Post-It Notes, and Cake Mix

Why do cars named after animals — Jaguar, Cougar, Mustang, Impala — have an immediate appeal? Why are we fascinated by commercials in which a driverless car zooms through a desert or a jungle? Such images do not appeal to the practical need of getting us where we want to go -- inexpensively, quickly and safely. They invite us to identify, on the symbolic level of awareness, with creatures of power, speed and daring. We seek identification with animals when we feel oppressed by all the burdens and responsibilities that belong to being human.

There are, of course, many other ontological interests to which car companies appeal. The car with the invented name "Acura" sounds like "accurate" and, therefore, carries with it the mystique of science and technology. The car named "Infiniti" appeals to our longing to be infinite, an ontological desire. It made sense, therefore, that the original ads for the Infiniti didn't show the car. After all, the infinite cannot be pictured; doing so would be to make it into something finite. For the same reason, the features and benefits of the car cannot be described. The tag line for a recent Infiniti ad is, "Infiniti. Own one, and you'll understand."

What happens when a car does not have an ontological appeal? It bombs, as did the Edsel. Because of its name, consumers viewed the Edsel as stuffy and pretentious, qualities with which they would not want to identify. Names matter, but ontological interests also respond to other cues. When GM started offering cars not only in basic black, as Ford had been doing, but in a variety of colors, their sales topped Ford's. Henry Ford had underestimated the human need to express individuality — an ontological need -- even if it means having to pay a premium for a product. Burger King's ad, "Have

"It Your Way," is based on this same appeal — allowing customers to express individuality through their purchases. An ad for Saab — a car with a stylish, but odd and unique look to it — said, "Find your own road." The slogan appealed to people seeking an iconoclastic, non-conformist, individuality.

Often what is required for success is not only to discover what is ontologically satisfying to consumers, but to avoid what is ontologically displeasing or disturbing. For example, 3M Company's small self-stick removable pieces of paper — Post-It Notes — was a very practical invention, but 3M improved their design satisfying an ontological interest. They made the glue on the back of the notes, the release liner, invisible to the eye. On a practical level, visible glue would not limit effectiveness. Why should invisible glue be an important consideration?

Human beings have an aversion to that which is sticky, or viscous. We speak of a sticky situation, a sticky wicket, or say a person has a slimy handshake. The philosopher Jean Paul Sartre explained that when we try to do things in the world, to create things, to make the world into our own image, or objectify ourselves, the world has a curious habit of grabbing us in the process and limiting our freedom. When we seize the world, it sticks to us. Psychologically, we fear that the world threatens to suck us back into itself. It makes sense, therefore, that 3M Company would create a self-stick note in which the ontologically displeasing glue is invisible to the eye. Instead the notes stick as if by magic.

Many products advertise, "No muss, no fuss," "No wax buildup," appealing to the desire for the clean and stick-free. But there are times when we actually want it sticky. Vance Packard, in his classic, *The Hidden Persuaders*, tells how in the 1950s Betty Crocker created an instant cake mix to appeal to the practical concerns of busy women. But sales of the cake mix were disappointing. What went wrong? Women who used the product had the unfulfilling sense that they had not created anything. Betty Crocker caught on to what the real problem was and changed their cake mix, requiring

housewives to crack an egg into the mix. Why an egg and not flour, sugar, or baking soda? What could be more sticky, slimy, and messy, than an egg? The egg is the very symbol of creation itself, and gave the housewife the sense that she was creating the cake.

Potato Chips and World Destruction!

It is amazing that an activity as practical as eating can be entirely overlaid with ontological meanings. When being filled full becomes a surrogate for the ontological need to be fulfilled, we overeat. More specifically, each food has a particular ontological appeal.

Potatoes, for example, are a practical food, but potato chips are an ontological food. After all, if potato chips were a practical food, why would we need to manufacture them to be wafer thin and crisp? Doing so does not make them nutritious. Neither does frying them in oil and adding salt and sugar. When we see an ordinary food — a potato — transformed into something unlike anything existing in nature, it is time to suspect that something deep is going on. The clue to the meaning of potato chips is crunch. To crunch something is to destroy it. But what is being destroyed in the crunch of a potato chip? It may sound silly when apprehended from the standpoint of rational awareness, but on the symbolic level of awareness, the potato chip is the entire world. We say "is" rather than "stands for," or "represents," because symbolic thinking is not merely a case of metaphorical thinking. At the moment of crunching, there exists no separation between the potato chip and the entire world.

What is the origin of this wild desire on the part of normal people to crunch the world into smithereens? The structures of the world are often experienced as confining, inhibiting, limiting. These rigid structures include huge corporations, bureaucracies, governments, and laws. We may feel oppressed by these structures, which we refer to as "the system," and feel powerless to avoid, change, neutralize or negate such restrictions

on our freedom. Here is the amazing part — what we feel impotent to do practically, we accomplish symbolically. In crunching the potato chip, we symbolically crunch away and destroy these limiting and confining structures.

Since many foods, such as carrots, celery, and nuts, are crunchy, why do potato chips have so much more symbolic appeal than carrots, celery, or nuts? Crunching a carrot is a chore, requiring arduous chewing of the recalcitrant cellulose. Chewing nuts leaves a gummy paste in the mouth.

Here we see ontology as the driving force behind technology. Potato chips have been designed to be wafer thin, which means that after a few easy bites, they are gone. Furthermore, their saltiness makes us salivate, which aids in their quick passage down the gullet. After a few bites: Abracadabra, it's gone! As the solid and confining structures of the world instantly transform into liquid and disappear, we are refreshed because the destruction of limiting form is experienced as freedom.

But symbolically experienced freedom is not true freedom. That is why the magic lasts only a moment. If we put down the bag of potato chips, our experience of limit returns, and we pick up the bag, compelled to repeat the act of crunching again and again. The famous ad for Lays Potato Chips accurately declares, "I'll bet you can't eat just one." Only one ad has ever exploited the true ontological power of chips — Dorito's ad showing someone taking a bite out of a Dorito Chip in which the force from his crunch was so powerful that an annoying person who had been standing in the cruncher's way was sent flying backwards as if he had just been slammed in the chest with a haymaker. The question of crunch is vitally important not just for salty snacks, but for cereals as well. Most people do not like cereal that stays hard when placed in a bowl with milk. Crunching dense cereal in the morning is too much work, and an ominous suggestion of what the rest of the day has in store. But cereal that gets soggy at once when the milk is poured over it is also unsatisfying, for the symbolic destruction of

the world, and everyone in it -- the real joy of crunching -- is absent then. The art of the cereal manufacturer is to find the golden mean.

How to Breath Under Water

The average supermarket stocks an entire aisle with sodas and seltzer. Since carbonation has no nutritional value, ontological appeal must explain its popularity. People today have an antipathy towards thinking, consciousness, and self-awareness. The animus against self-reflection is expressed in such popular advertising slogans as Nike's, "Just do it!," Budweiser's, "Don't ask why, drink Bud dry," and the motto for Nascar racing, "Who needs philosophy!" This hostility is based on the fear that thinking will cause self-paralysis, that a person who thinks becomes like Hamlet, impotent to act due to the weight of endless questions. The goal, then, is never to pop out of one's feelings and examine them. But there is a negative side to this. One can drown in emotion, becoming so overwhelmed by feeling that one loses all self-consciousness. Then one might act irrationally, and endanger oneself as well as others. Feelings can be a most unreliable, and even dangerous, master.

We want to be unselfconscious, but without experiencing its dark consequences. A carbonated beverage offers a symbolic solution, which depends on the symbolic significance of liquid and air. Liquid symbolizes the unconscious dimension of life, the realm of the feelings. Feelings are not consciously thought out, deliberated upon, and willed, but just flow out of us. Being unselfconscious, just letting it happen, is reflected in the expression "to go with the flow."

Air symbolizes consciousness, the realm of thinking, reason, intelligence. Soda has air trapped in water; thus the unconscious paradoxically contains consciousness. This is paradoxical because consciousness displaces unconsciousness, just as air displaces water. If you become self-conscious, you can no longer be in your feelings; you can no longer go with the flow. Then you are hamstrung by self-doubt. Unselfconscious

feeling and conscious deliberation are mutually exclusive, like water and air. The carbonated beverage symbolizes the impossible state of the two polarities of human reality existing together, of being unselfconscious without the danger of drowning.

No wonder carbonated beverages are so popular! -- and particularly among the young, who so strongly fear self-consciousness on the one hand, and the power of their dangerous emotions on the other. Carbonated beverages are the magical elixir that gets them through the day.

Plato Drinks Coke, Hegel Drinks Pepsi

When two brands differ little from each other in taste or flavor, marketers will position them against each other in terms of ontological differences. A war of different images of reality then ensues. What is meant by real in the case of the cola wars? Real is that which is infinite and eternal. This is not a definition proposed by religious leaders and philosophers. It is an *a priori* criterion of what it means to be real, to which we all unconsciously subscribe.

Existence is inevitably experienced as quite the contrary of what we take to be real; we experience it as finite and transient. We therefore judge our present existence as less than real. We do not tolerate this condition, but quickly make a whopper of a metaphysical assumption: if reality — i.e. infinitude and eternity — is not to be found in the present, then it is to be found in the past or in the future. The battle of Coke versus Pepsi deals with the question of where reality is located -- in the past or in the future. Coke claims that reality is to be found in the past. It is the "real thing" because the formula for Coke is a timeless, mysterious secret, like a law of nature. Its new slogan is "Always Coca Cola!" "Always" is a synonym for the everlasting. Coke is appealing to the mystique of origins, to the myth of the golden age. This is the mythical timeless period before time began. Plato's eternal Ideas likewise reside there. Naturally, the ads stress tradition, calling their product "Coke Classic."

Similar are the ads for Dewars Whisky, which also capitalize on our longing for traditional values, for heritage, such as comradery between father and son. Dewars' slogan is, "The good things in life stay that way." Coke's great marketing fiasco was "New Coke." If Coke is the real thing, it cannot change. A product called New Coke suggested that either Coke was not truly the real thing, or that New Coke was an "imposter." Instinctively catching on that New Coke had challenged the company's basic ontological appeal, Coke returned to their original formula, calling it Coke Classic.

Pepsi, on the other hand, claims the value, not of the past, but of the future, with its mystique of progress, science, and technology. The metaphysics of progress began to be popular in the middle of the 19th century. Philosophers like Hegel believed that reality -- the infinite and eternal -- is not to be found at the beginning, but only at the end of time and history. Pepsi's ads, with their emphasis on youth, "choice of a new generation," "for those who think young," and "Generation Next," reflect this ontology. Their new slogan, "The Joy of Cola," doesn't really say anything, but their use of a little girl in their ads does suggest the ontology of the new.

If we combine the ontological power of fizz with the eternity of Coke or Pepsi, we see the immense power of soda pop. These products attempt to fulfill our desire not for nourishment but for reality. In any case, there are many products that can put the ontological appeals of the old and the new to good use. Which strategy is best depends upon what marketing mavens, Al Reis and Jack Trout, call "positioning." If you are the established company, then you will profit by positioning yourself in the minds of consumers as the real thing. Being first implies, to most customers, that you are the best. Consequently, you will get the lion's share of the market. If you are the contender, then you should aim to be the choice of a new generation. What if the first two slots in your industry are already taken? Then you would profit from 7--Up's strategy, which we shall now discuss.

Spinoza Drinks 7-Up

What is the meaning of "the Uncola?" The philosopher Spinoza stated that, "All determination is negation." To determine anything, to give it a character or nature, or describe it in any way, is to limit it and, therefore, to negate it as ultimate and absolute. Many people do not want to be determined in any way. They keep their options open for as long as possible. In college they wait a few semesters before declaring a major. They defer marriage. Any choices that they do make, they consider binding only for the moment. Or they act on whimsy so as to suggest that their choices do not limit them. The word "decide" literally means to cut off, or to cut out. To "decide" is to cut oneself off from the infinity of possible options.

Here is where 7-Up's "the Uncola" enters as an image of reality. The Uncola has no determinations. It possesses the infinite dimension by not being anything in particular. This is similar to the *via negativa* chosen by theologians who said that God could not be described. On the symbolic level of awareness, to drink the Uncola is to drink the infinite, and to drink the infinite is to be the infinite.

7-Up has another symbolic appeal. Its clearness and lightness symbolize consciousness, in contrast to the dark depths of the unconscious symbolized by the colas. Thus 7-Up's ads featured Zen masters asking their disciples whether they could choose correctly. Could they choose (Seven-Up) consciousness over (the colas) unconsciousness, the light over the dark, clarity over emotional confusion? The notion of the "un" can be used, and has been used, to successfully market other products -- the un-university, the un-jeans, the un-chair, the un-dating service, the un-long distance telephone company, and the un-mutual fund.

An un-product gains consumer interest by hooking into dissatisfaction with the status quo. Coors Brewing Company introduced a clear beer called Zima ClearMalt. Although they have not called it "the un-beer," it does have that ontological appeal. The target market for Zima's ads is single women. Bob Garfield, in the July 1996 issue of

Advertising Age, observes that Zima's ads address women's present-day feeling of discontent with their life. Drinking Zima is associated with finding the right partner, and a new and fulfilling life. It will be interesting to see whether the ontological appeal of Zima's ads can overcome a practical problem -- Zima doesn't taste so great.

Contradiction

What do consumers want today? We can know the answer only if we know what people take themselves to be. For the first time in history, we are all beginning to suspect what the existentialists have known for a long time, that selfhood is riddled with contradiction. For example, we want to be innocent, immediate and spontaneous, but we also want to be emotionally controlled, self-aware and hip. We want to have our problems taken care of by another person or by society in general, but we also want to be self-reliant. We want to be care-free, but we also want to be responsible. We want to be emotionally involved with other people, but we also want to be independent. We want to live for the present, but we also want to be goal-directed and live for the future. We want to choose a direction, but keep our options open. We want to take risks, but play it safe. And so on.

In the past, people parceled out the polar opposites in an institution called marriage. But it is a strong trend of our zeitgeist that each of us seeks to embody all of the polar opposites. Of course, it is no more possible to embody polar opposites than it is possible to make a left turn and a right turn simultaneously. It has been dawning on us that we are caught up in an impossible effort. Now there appears on the market a true sign of the times -- a woman's perfume, and a men's cologne, by Calvin Klein, with the name, "Contradiction."

The implication of this name is that selfhood is essentially contradictory and, therefore, an impossibility. But that's OK -- the ads suggest. The fact that we are contradictory beings makes us all the more mysterious, ungraspable, and fascinating!

Calvin Klein is on to something big. The mystique of contradiction would probably not sell most products. It certainly would not sell products that offer viable solutions to everyday problems. But contradiction would be the key to many sales campaigns.

If a product is redolent with contradiction, it will be viewed by consumers in one of three ways: Option #1: It will be viewed as a confusing mess, and will have about as much aesthetic appeal as an hermaphrodite in a circus side show. Option #2: If, on the other hand, the ads directly state that the product embodies the contradictions implicit in selfhood, consumers may feel, "Aha, this product is about me -- a mysterious sophisticated modern urbanite attempting the impossible. Very good product!" This is the strategy of Calvin Klein's "Contradiction."

Option #3: If the advertising message states that the product helps one ascend to the mystical level of awareness, the consumer gets the message that Contradiction can be overcome on a level where life's opposites are admitted, but transcended. With this overview in mind, let us consider a product that embodied a contradiction. Some years back, PepsiCo introduced a drink called "Crystal Pepsi." Crystal tasted like a cola, but it was clear like an uncola. Crystal was a complete flop. Why did it fail?

First of all, it failed because while it sought to be a solution to a problem, it was a solution to the wrong problem. We must remember that in the early 1990s a number of products were coming out that had that appeal: Miller Clear beer, Zima Clearmalt beverage, clear soap, Amoco clear gasoline, clear mouthwash, deodorants, dish washing detergent, and so on. 7-Up already existed, and there were, in addition, other clear colas introduced at the time, including Tab Clear soda and China Cola Clear.

The introduction of all of these products were part of the New Age appeal to purity. Its ads appealed to the mystique of purity, the fact that Crystal was free of caffeine, sugar and additives. Although purity has an ontological appeal, it will not make for a winner in the soda pop wars. PepsiCo should have promised to answer a different

question with Crystal Pepsi, "How are we to deal with the contradictions that we experience in life?" Crystal Pepsi was a cola, and thus suggestive of all that is symbolized by cola -- the dark depths of un-self-conscious immediacy. We seek these depths when we are in flight from the hardships involved with being self-aware. The psychologist, C.G. Jung, associated the depths of the unconscious with the mother archetype. The appeal of sleep, alcohol, drugs, absorption in TV and, symbolically, cola, is the longing to lose individuality and return to the mother. Unlike a cola, Crystal Pepsi was clear, and thus suggestive of all the attributes of "the Uncola." In other words, it possessed the virtues of consciousness: light and clarity.

Crystal Pepsi failed because it ended up, unwittingly, with what we have referred to as option #1. It came across as a confusing melange of opposites, as a mess. Consequently, those consumers who wanted all that dark cola symbolizes, rejected Crystal. And those consumers who wanted the Uncola rejected Crystal. If PepsiCo had chosen option #2 or option #3, its clear cola would probably have been a viable product. Choosing option #2 would have meant stating outright that their new beverage embodies opposites. Then they might have called it something like "Contradiction," or "Antinomy." Choosing option #3, the mystical route, would have meant calling their product "Paradox," or another name suggesting that contradiction is admitted, and simultaneously transcended.

Don't Be a Crumb

An ad for Burger King's Chicken Tenders once stated, "There's nothing like the real thing, Baby." There is the magic word again -- real. When we hear "real" in an advertisement, we know that the appeal made to the consumer is ontological. The implication was that the product of their competitor, McDonalds Chicken McNuggets, was not real chicken. Burger King did not mean that Chicken McNuggets consisted of horse meat, kangaroo meat, sawdust, or anything that was not chicken. The implicit

allegation was that Chicken McNuggets consisted of pressed-together bits and pieces taken from different parts of the chicken. Burger King's Chicken Tenders, on the other hand, each consisted of a piece of chicken breast.

On the symbolic level of awareness, the usual duality between who a person is and what he eats does not exist. That is why the notion, "we are what we eat," sounds like nonsense to our conceptual understanding, but makes complete sense to us when we operate on the symbolic level. Symbolically, by eating bits and pieces of chicken, we become bits and pieces; in other words, fragmented. We could, on the other hand, become whole by eating the unbroken piece of chicken offered by Burger King.

A similar appeal to wholeness explains the popularity of whole grain foods. It may or may not be the case that whole grain foods are more nutritious, but if you want to be whole, symbolically, you must eat what is whole. To call someone a crumb, or a flake, is an insult, since crumbs and flakes are not whole, but only broken off parts of a whole. The type of wholeness that Chicken Tenders, or a company that sells whole grain foods, promises is a "unity."

A more complex type of wholeness is a "totality." In a totality, the many are unified into one, without losing any of the parts. Wholeness as totality suggests that individualism can be maintained, but transcended by integration into a greater good, just as separate musical instruments can be integrated into an orchestra.

An example of totality would be an ad that appeared for Oldsmobile, "Over two thousand parts, but a single car." Another example was Coke's ad, in the 1960s, showing people from all over the world singing together in a chorus, "I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony, I'd like to buy the world a Coke and keep it company..." Recent ads by companies like Nortel and Cisco Systems also appeal to the ontology of totality. They promise that they, through the connection of the internet, will bring the world together. Some ads, on the other hand, appeal to those seeking unity through the obliteration of individuality. An ad for Velveeta Cheese said, "Many cheeses, but a single

cheese." This is because Velveeta actually consisted of a meltdown of whatever cheeses the company could purchase on market at any given time. Velveeta had cleverly changed what many people would perceive to be a negative — a melange of disunified ingredients, i.e. a mess — into the positive image of a melting pot that transforms multiplicity into unity.

Today, diversity is the ruling ontology for many people. They neither seek a totality, nor a meltdown. Each of the ingredients must be free and independent. How is unity to be achieved? It would be akin to tossing incongruous ingredients into a bowl, and then claiming that since they are in the same bowl they are unified. The marketer, who seeks to appeal to people who valorize diversity, should think "mixed nuts."

Free, If You Buy Now!

For free" has perennial ontological advertising appeal because it taps into the longing to sneak back into Eden, to jettison the burdens that belong to working for a living. Bargains are powered by this same desire to get something for free. When a merchant advertises that an item is 10% off, it really means that it is 10% for free. "Fat free" has this same ontological appeal. It means that we can eat a certain tasty food, but without paying the price of hardening of the arteries. When we are on the symbolic level of awareness, to be free in one instance — to get a discount on a sweater, for example — is to be free altogether.

Some merchants advertise, "Buy this item and get a second one for free." Others advertise, "Buy this item and get a second one for only a penny." The latter ad, "for only a penny," is more appealing to those people who want to believe that they have legitimately earned their freedom, their entry back into paradise. They have done this by virtue of their shrewd business skill, the acumen to recognize a good deal.

When a product is offered on sale, freedom — or reality — is not intrinsic to the product, but is achieved by paying less. By exploiting the basic ontological appeals,

marketers need not rely on sales, and cutting their profit margins. A product with an intrinsic ontological appeal is fixed in the minds of the public, and has far less competition from other products. This establishes, through ontological means, what billionaire Warren Buffet calls an "exclusive franchise," or what people in the advertising business call, "a unique selling proposition." The monopoly is based on the fact that no one else is selling a similar product that promises the same ontological benefit. Consequently, a value-added premium can be charged.

Wheaties, for example, will always have competition from other cereals — many of which are at least as nutritious and as tasty as Wheaties. But a child who wants to be a sports hero knows, on the symbolic level of awareness, he must eat "the breakfast of champions."

Summary: Different Ontological Strokes for Different Folks

Our analysis of various ads reveals what we are seeking — we want to be real. But what is the meaning of real? We all unconsciously employ a certain criterion to determine the truly real — to be real is to be unlimited. We have used related words to express this same meaning — freedom, infinitude, and eternity.

There are endless ways in which we seek freedom from limits, but they are of three basic modalities.

- 1) We might attempt to simply deny, destroy, or flee from life's limits. For example, we might, symbolically, destroy everything in our way by eating crunchy foods. Or we might seek to make limits disappear by not "being there," by submerging back into the unconscious, into Mother Night. The anxiety that our emerging self-awareness

will cut us off from our connection to the mother is expressed in those ads that ask us, "Got milk?"

We might seek, symbolically, to drive past limiting, finitizing and sticky situations before they grab us, as they are wont to do. This is the ontological longing that has launched 10,000 automobile ads. The ads of companies in the travel and tourism industry promise to magically transport us beyond the limits that belong to our present situation in life. We have only mentioned a few examples of how we attempt to be free of limits in this modality, but the possibilities are endless.

- 2) The second form of seeking to be unlimited, and therefore real, is tied up with the quest for identity and individuality. Often it involves identifying with a person who symbolizes the free life. It might be the Marlboro Man, the rugged cowboy who doesn't have to worry about paying off a mortgage because he sleeps beneath the stars. It might be the affluent sophisticate, driving a Lexus, or smoking a Benson & Hedges, whose life expresses the philosophy, "The world is my oyster."

We might identify with an entire group of people -- the "Saturn Family," or the "everyday people" who drive Toyotas, "Generation Next," or the "un" people who drink 7-Up. In all such cases, we lose our alienating, and isolating, sense of separate personal identity and gain the identity of a person or group who seems real to us. Levi Straus has advertised that wearing their 501 Jeans makes the wearer a nonconformist, despite the obvious fact that it means joining another group -- those who conform to a fashionable image of nonconformity. Levi Straus' claim about nonconformity is absurd, but it is smart marketing. Powerful images of selfhood need never pass the test of logic.

We may note that the desire for security is essentially the desire to stay as we are, to maintain our identity. How does the unlimited or freedom dimension enter in? Maintaining our identity requires that we be free of life's vicissitudes. The perfect

image of the secure life is Prudential Insurance Company's logo, a gigantic rock, undisturbed by the crashing waves of the sea.

Rather than attempting to preserve our personal identity, we might seek to transcend it. One means of doing so is to connect who we are, in a finite sense, to an eternal identity. This is the appeal of "the real thing," and other ads that invoke the mystique of heritage, tradition, and the past.

- 3) The third form of seeking to be unlimited involves the quest for wholeness, completeness, and unity. It is the quest to "get it together." We seek to unify our life and to connect who we are to a larger whole. In so doing we transcend our sense of being disunified, finite, and limited.

Wholeness conceived of as a simple unity was the appeal of Burger King's ad for Chicken Tenders. On the other hand, if we seek a totality, internet advertising — with its promise to bring the world together — might be particularly appealing to us. We can seek wholeness through the meltdown offered by the Velveeta ad. The ad for the perfume, "Contradiction," is a confession that it cannot be "gotten together," that unity of self is an impossibility. In this case the person has failed to satisfy this third modality of the quest to be real but, in doing so, has established an identity (the second modality) — he or she belongs to that class of people who supposedly are hip, mysterious, and fascinating.

There are endless varieties of the effort to be real in all three of the basic modalities. Our intent has merely been to indicate a direction for further research. The important thing to keep in mind, for the present, is that there are different ontological strokes for different folks. Some people, for example, dislike crunchy foods such as potato chips. That's why there exists white bread, yogurt, and tofu. Soft foods have a different ontological appeal. For those people who do not like carbonated beverages there is iced

tea. The company that wishes to offer a number of brands of the same basic product should segment these brands, not only in terms of price — which was a major innovation of General Motors under Alfred P. Sloan Jr.'s leadership — but also according to ontological appeal. The cigarette companies have done this. There is a cigarette for people who take themselves to be rugged individualists, another for sophisticates, another for liberated women, and so on.

A product intended to be all things to all people is bound to be a dud. People who like their jeans baggy and very wide in the legs have a radically different image of true reality than those who prefer their jeans to be skin tight, as Levi Straus has only recently discovered. Each group of consumers should be separately targeted along ontological lines.

Conclusion:

Good marketing communicates the benefits of a product by indicating how it can satisfy our needs. Ontological marketing aims at what is really our most fundamental need — the need to be real, to attain selfhood. Successful marketers have always known this intuitively, but they have never formulated it as such. Consequently, their efforts have been haphazard. Our intent has been to describe the target's precise location. Analysis of our desire for various products — from adhesive notes to Jaguars — indicates that our purchases are motivated not merely by practical concerns, but by a quest to be real, to attain selfhood. Some industries, such as the overnight express package industry, cater to practical needs. Other industries cater to what are only ontological needs. The perfume and cologne industry serve as an example, as their names immediately reveal — Tabu, Dreams, Envy, Perhaps, Opium, Ambush, Poison, Happy, Contradiction and Stetson.

But all businesses, even those that would appear to be completely practical, can hook into people's ontological interests. If they fail to do so, their customers can be grabbed away by a competitor that does make a strong ontological appeal.

For example, in the car rental business, Avis found a strong ontological hook -- identification with the underdog. The basis for their slogan, "We try harder." The underdog myth, as old as the war between the generations, stems from the evolutionary notion that what is new is truly good and real, and that the new must battle the repressive powers of the old order. Only then can life's creative energies emerge victorious and renew the world. This illustrates that even a seemingly mundane industry like car rentals -- successfully employs an ontological angle.

Our intent, in this essay, has been to illustrate an important truth about the business of marketing and the business of life: the power of a successful consumer product lies in its promise to satisfy our quest to be real.