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The Problem With This Thesis. A Preface

“Minimalism is indeed an ambiguous and polymorphous culture, ‘stuck’ between a certain aesthetic, a practice that is itself often on the edge between self-help and spirituality, and a more or less socially active lifestyle in an anti-consumerist or environmentalist sense, all of this held together by a sub-/counter-cultural status”¹: this is how almost five years ago I¹ defined, from my first impressions of it, what was about to become my doctoral object of study for the coming years, in the brief hypothetical outline of my project as a PhD candidate (my translation from the Italian original). As I did, I was in no way expecting or anticipating that by the end of my research this (non-)definition would still hold as it is, as if my efforts in transforming it in something else – which is the aim of inquiry – had been all in vain. In other words, I did not at all suppose that my project too would remain stuck in the stuck-ness of its object. I hoped that, even while never just severing the thread of its complicated knot with a cut, I would be able to untangle it and therefore eventually clarify all of the ties in the phenomena it gathered. In fact, I was so naively ambitious as to believe that I could deal not only with this knot, but also – and mainly, in the initial outline of the project – with the related knot of minimalism as a contemporary pop-cultural phenomenon on the one hand (that is, the first knot) and minimalism as a historical artistic tendency on the other hand, with a meeting point in

¹ Being concerned with the overall meaning and – above all – limitations of the present study, rather than the unfolding of a discourse wherein writer and reader are to a degree merged into a moving first person plural, I will use the first person singular in this preface alone.

design (especially interior design, but also design related to fashion, products and graphics): could there be some third meta-language that could make all of these things somewhat comparable, highlighting the similarities in their operations as well as the differences? I certainly thought so, and I thought that such a meta-language could be supplied by semiotics – of course –, a discipline that I was trained in and whose name was in the heading of the PhD course I was applying for. If I could translate the meaningful structures and processes of these wildly different phenomena into the abstract models offered by semiotics, I would then have the mediating basis to link them and regroup them into new distinct types independent from their original contexts – the same operations, once abstracted, could be seen at work in a painting or sculpture as much as in a piece of life advice on a blog, in a neatly ordered wardrobe as much as in a streamlined desktop icon, in the pictures of neutrally-coloured, naturally lighted, sparse and tidy homes – whether out of a design magazine or an influencer’s feed on social media – as much as in the advertised eco-friendliness of some product or producer. If this streak of allusions to things that could be described as “minimalist” may already feel too heterogeneous to be taken seriously as representative of a plausible research object, the fact that it is far from an exhaustive list, coupled with even a dim awareness of the diversity internal to each of the areas these items denote – the differences between an all-black striped painting by Frank Stella and a vivacious set of Anne Truitt’s colourful columns, for example –, makes it almost incredible. Is there a way to speak of all these things with one and the same language, and still tell something interesting and intelligible about them? Can one uncover the meaning of “minimalism” as such, the meaning of the pursuit of a minimum via the reduction of some cultural excess, as somehow underlying those phenomena? Would that touch something inherent in the phenomena themselves – something literal –, or would that rather be more of a metaphor externally gluing them together a posteriori, if not mere hallucination provoked by their mostly contingent homonymy?

If this thesis, the final result of my efforts, remains largely unfinished and leaves these questions still somewhat open, it is first and foremost because I have taken the questions as seriously as possible, despite the incredulity they should call forth. I cannot say for sure without having gone all the way in doing it, but I suspect that it would not be that hard to come up with some abstract, a priori classification scheme in order to

break up “minimization” into types, and then fit the various aspects of each phenomenon into these types regardless of their provenance, without any concern for the meaning of this very operation, this gesture carried on in the name of academic research. This is what I have avoided doing in all these years (even at the cost of doing a lot of other things that were not immediately helpful, and that might look like wasteful wanderings from outside): I have resisted the temptation to solve the problem in too easy a way, flee and fit everything into too generic an abstraction, even while not discarding the problem and the search for abstractions altogether; instead I kept running in place, I kept staring at the problem as it slowly morphed into something more difficult that I was largely unprepared to deal with, but also unwilling to let go of. In other words, I traded simple solutions for an ever more complicated problem, one that increasingly infected – and then inflected – the way I understood what it was that I, not the minimalists of whatever sort, was trying to do with “minimalism” in my research, as well as the way I understood the semiotic lens I wanted to do it with. I let the problem grow from being a problem of minimalism into being a problem with minimalism, a problem in its company, for both me and (what I knew about) semiotics; I kept nothing safe nor secret from the uncomfortable, distressing reach of the problem. Although my sense of deep dissatisfaction with half-baked ideas played a part in this “trajectory” (since it cannot be called a proper choice), and although I insisted and persisted far beyond all practical reasonableness and at my own risk and peril – including that of this thesis never coming to fruition and never being evaluated and discussed –, it was not out of any peculiar virtuousness of mine that I stayed with the problem until it made renewed sense, without hurrying to clear-cut solutions. Part of what held me back, for example, is of course – put poetically – the blinding kaleidoscope of phenomena that I had to get into and familiarize with, from the artworld to the blogosphere, each of which demanded a familiarity with different strands and corners of semiotics as well as awareness of work done in other disciplines both near and far; all of which amounted – more prosaically – to a huge workload that always loomed over the horizon and threatened to prove too much for getting anywhere in time, if not getting anywhere at all. If the things that could be gathered under the heading of “minimalism” had not been this numerous and varied, if they had not pushed me back and forth without end from a heterogeneous art movement in the 1960s to an amorphous but aesthetically connoted “lifestyle” trend in the 2000s, I might have felt much less of a resistance at the idea of perhaps simplifying too much of what I was

studying (a feeling as obviously ironical, given that its object was minimalism, as the title I ended up giving to so long-winded a thesis). In my exploratory surveys, the cacophony of both the objects to analyse and the tools I had at my disposal for analysing them made it difficult to deny that whatever it was I was trying to do, it was not something to be taken for granted, no transparent and self-evident gesture. For example, I was faced with vlogs on YouTube discussing – in the name of “minimalism” – anything from home organizing to budgeting, from sustainable products to digital detoxes, from morning routines to healthy foods, from wardrobe tours to productivity tips or motivational speeches around one’s true self, and on and on. It was quite evident that these influencers were keen to tie together in unclear ways all sorts of very different things; but then was I?

As this partial list of some favourite “minimalist” topics online already shows, even my later choice of mostly setting aside the second knot – that concerning minimalism in the arts – in order to focus on the contemporary discourses around a “minimalist lifestyle” could not do much to ease the problematic nature of this object, though it made it more manageable in terms of range of materials to be analysed (not, however, in terms of their sheer quantity: there are by now almost twenty years’ worth of blog posts, YouTube vlogs, discussion threads on forums and various websites online, not to mention books, a couple movies and TV series, and lots of newspaper articles – all of this even if we just consider materials that are more or less explicitly tied to the name of “minimalism”). Clearly the first knot remained such, and by that point I was far too aware of it – and interested in its nature – to go further and give it another cut, limiting my study to this or that set of topics on that list: I could no doubt limit myself – by way of an academically legitimate fiat – to texts addressing only consumption practices in a strict sense, or only tips for sustainability, or advice for either home- or self-improvement, but that would have meant merely avoiding a real problem I had met to find myself an artificial problem just for the sake of solving something and thereby justify my PhD scholarship, which felt absurd and annoying. The more I went on with my exposure to minimalist texts, the clearer I saw that not only the problematic knot was quite real, but it was also the most – or perhaps the only – real thing going on about “minimalism”: there was pretty much nothing, in the discourses circulating online under its banner, that was in any way unique to it rather than derivative from other pre-

existing discourses; nothing but its very banner, that is, its rhetorical label, and the aesthetic common sense that appeared to be always on the background, whether just linguistically referenced or visually reproduced, whether metaphorically or literally employed. In other words, stripped of its amorphous gathering and merging of all those disparate topics, “minimalism” actually disappeared, dissolved into thin air: if, for instance, I had decided to study the “minimalist” discourse on sustainability, I would have merely met with an especially watered-down, naïve and individualistic version of broader, deeper and more interesting discourses going on elsewhere, or rather of the commonsensical deposit these discourses have started to sediment and cement. In fact, I found again and again that as soon as a text got into this or that particular topic, the very label of “minimalism” vanished, often barely doing any actual work in the discourse except perhaps at the start: just like the aesthetic commonsensical background, the label’s purpose too had first and foremost to do with a framing of the discourse; “minimalism” increasingly revealed itself to be a rhetorical framing device for something else, and in fact for anything else. Studying “minimalism” for what self-described “minimalists” promoted – whether as influencers or as ordinary users of social media and online platforms – was ironically to lose sight of it. At the same time, symmetrically, studying “minimalism” by doing myself the work – through my semiotic meta-language – of making it make sense, much more sense than it appeared to have, was tantamount to bypass the discourse and constructing something actually non-existent (or barely existing), only to then claim that it was already there from the start, that I was indeed just studying rather than inventing something. Later on, when I came to see inquiry as in fact a productive or at least transformative enterprise like any other, I would have been less hesitant about – and thus more tempted by – this second path, though I would have certainly tried to be crystal clear about what I was doing, making it explicit. In the meantime, however, I had already started analysing discursive materials of all kinds to see how the minimalist discourse itself – with its own rhetorical hands, unaided by mine – constructed “minimalism” as a distinctive and integral lifestyle, with its label and its style and its core practices, plus everything else it somehow managed to gather through their gravitational forces as framing devices. That the discourse failed in such construction was frustratingly evident from the inextinguishably opaque, inconsistent and incoherent vagueness that this “minimalist lifestyle” always appeared to return and withdraw to. That the discourse nonetheless succeeded was also just as evident in its unabated

ed popularity, which had also spiked the very year I presented my project as a PhD candidate: at the very start of 2019, Marie Kondo's TV series on Netflix rekindled the worldwide interest in her decluttering method – that “life-changing magic of tidying up” that all of us have met with even in the small book sections of service stations –, and Cal Newport published his *Digital Minimalism* book, repackaging under this label old digital detox advice on managing one's use of digital and social media; meanwhile, “minimalist” influencers old and new kept singing the praise of the lifestyle, as if indeed it existed. More than once I was tempted, as I have just admitted, to assemble myself a minimalism worth studying, one more interesting than either the nebulous one held onto by the discourse or the clichés of the contents it fed and filled itself with, but I resisted the urge and tried to look as closely as possible in search of reasons behind both the discourse's failure and its success. I followed the discourse around with a demand, an insistent demand though not a command, that it untangle the knot and be clear and distinct about what this “minimalism” thing is supposed to be, that it determine and develop it further than it ever has. I did so only methodologically, so to speak: I have never interacted with any “minimalist”, much less asked anything of one; I have just done everything I could to neither accept that opaque vagueness nor to clarify it myself and pretend it was the discourse to do it.

This is, then, what I have actually ended up studying in these four years, and what this thesis is all about: the ways in which a mostly online discourse about “minimalism” as a lifestyle constantly fails to actually construct it, rather preferring to succeed by keeping it at the “minimum possible” of determinacy and development and thereby manage to hold together, via the knot of its vagueness, all sorts of otherwise different phenomena (which can then be talked and advised about by influencers, of course). A lifestyle that one can identify oneself with and communicate with others around is already something of a surplus value with respect to any one of the things the discourse appropriates from other discourses and promotes as its own. In fact, from that point of view it can very easily be argued – as to some extent will be argued in this thesis – that “minimalism” works not so much as a lifestyle but rather as the lifestyle, as the very (supposedly, though not really) empty idea of a “lifestylization” of each individual's life through a personal selection from the large plate of home-/self-improvement practices on offer in the media (together with, to a lesser degree, the

world-improving ones of ethical and sustainable consumption). And yet of course, despite often posing as a quite literal blank slate that each individual can authentically fill up for himself or herself, minimalism does have its “minimum possible” of determination, and that minimum has its weight – without it, it really would end up collapsing into the idea of “lifestyle” as such, while maintaining it allows it to still pass for an integral, distinctive lifestyle of its own, implicitly or explicitly contrasted to others, and especially to some problematic ways in which ordinary people supposedly live their lives. The label of minimalism, its simple, white, clean, tidy, clear and bright – or dim but naturally lighted – style, as well as its core practice of discarding things unused or unloved, all qualify in fact the lifestyle as a particular lifestyle, not just any lifestyle at all. Their meaning shifts along with shifts in emphases among the various components the minimalist discourse rhetorically builds upon, but they do have a meaning at any one time; they do make a difference, contributing to the appeal and promise of minimalism as lifestyle, regardless of what is promoted in its name. The tension between the universality of lifestylization, that is, of the universalized though individualistic life advice that characterizes the self-help/ -improvement discourse at large on the one hand, and on the other the particularity of a lifestyle that remains firmly grounded – through the home-improvement practice of decluttering – in certain ideals of style, lies at the core of the discourse’s hesitancy in going all the way through in constructing a determinate, developed and perhaps differentiated minimalist lifestyle. Incorporating self-improvement – with more or less of an anti-consumerism bent – as an ethical-practical component, the discourse must insist that its minimalist lifestyle is universally beneficial and transformative for any individual as such (and for the world as well, of course), but incorporating decluttering as an aesthetic component it must either concede to its particularity – which it cannot, as just said –, or else reject it while taking refuge in indeterminacy so that it can nonetheless retain it. This is what most interested me about the discourse: it is ambivalent, contradictory – since it cannot accept to be just disassembled and thus dissolved into all the disparate pieces it gathers and glues together –, and this very contradictoriness is endlessly expressed, or perhaps performed, within the discourse itself, which can all the time be caught denying this or that side of itself, disavowing this or that aspect of minimalism, in order to both evoke and swiftly exorcise the crises its vagueness leads into (all while consequently putting up an air of self-critique, adding to the air of criticality it draws from a moralized anti-consumerist discourse).

It was precisely the fact of unfailingly witnessing in the discourse such a rhetorical disavowal that confirmed, to my eyes at least, that the problematic knot I had felt was real, by which I mean that it was not merely tied to my own need to put together an overall object to study, but was rather an actual aspect of the minimalist discourse: if it kept incurring into crises and thus had to deal with them on a regular basis by rhetorically exorcising – though again, never really expelling – a certain side of itself as the cause of its evident problems, it was because it did in fact demand from itself the coherence of an integral, distinctive “minimalist” lifestyle, that is, it did take itself to be more than an ill-assorted puzzle or collage; in fact, in such occasions it usually set up an opposition between a false minimalism – a stereotypical, standardized, idealized minimalism – and a more true, authentic minimalism beyond it, which is of course presented and promised as not at all contradictory or even problematic (while it rather just benefits from the relief offered by the disavowal and the indeterminacy it returns “minimalism” to). Despite denying itself again and again – and in ways that, despite attacking the supposed stereotypes about minimalism, are themselves stereotypical (in fact, attacks of this kind can be traced to the earliest times of the discourse, and have barely changed) –, the minimalist discourse never really does away with what it denies, since it actually depends on it – unless, of course, it makes difficult choices and straightforwardly faces its contradictions as such, as real, in a way that would make both the discourse and its lifestyle grow in meaning, determining and differentiating and developing themselves. That growth, however, does not appear to have occurred at all in almost twenty years of discourse, and that is what surprised me most of all: the discourse is largely “stuck” not only in the way in which one can be statically stuck in the midst of a knot, as blocked midway in the nowhere land between ethical-practical life and aesthetic style, but also and especially “stuck” in the way of a broken record that keeps repeating itself without end – including the parts in which the lyrics announce they will not be repeating themselves anymore. Though I have not listened to all iterations and variations of that record – nobody can, especially in a qualitative study –, I have followed the discourse from its inception around 2006, with Leo Babauta’s first popular blog *Zen Habits*, to the (once) latest vlogs on YouTube, all through many threads on the dedicated forum on Reddit, and as I said I have found it everywhere failing to succeed. The rhetorical project of constructing “minimalism” is constantly abandoned in order to project it as a vague, ambiguous but appealing quality that lends itself to be infused into all sorts of advice. It

is thus left at its inchoate, indeterminate state, despite being promised as something that is quite determinate, something one can learn about and then become. Similarly, the discourse turns its back on the very criticality it promises, which it is unable to manage and deal with except again by oscillation: the normalcy and normativity which pervades ordinary life is rhetorically refused at once in a (pseudo-)critical way (through anti-consumerist rhetoric, which rejects life in modern consumerist societies wholesale as materialistic and aestheticized) but also in an anti-critical way (through the individualist subjectivism of authenticity, from whose standpoint each individual should be free to determine his or her life without interferences from others and society at large); the net outcome is that the normativity of the advice given by minimalists themselves is managed and attenuated – it is turned into more authentic advice from authentic influencers – by mere contrast to that of society on the one hand, and that of the false minimalist stereotypes or standards on the other.

From this perspective, what “minimalism” adds to the discourses it merges is (i) the prospect of their lifestylization, their integration into a coherent and consistent whole, (ii) the promise of the more qualified – though mostly indeterminate – lifestyle of minimalism, a distinctive as well as integral lifestyle, but also and perhaps especially (iii) the possibility of managing and alleviating – by way of a regular dose of rhetorical contrast and catharsis – the contradictions of those discourses in themselves as well as in relation to one another, and therefore their criticality: at times the discourse appears to be hyper-critical of modern society and life – thus also of ordinary people as participating in it –, at other times it is hypo-critical in reassuring that there is no judgement nor shared standard implied beyond whatever each individual desires, while in most cases it strikes the more or less conciliatory balance of tips and advice presented as critical and yet somehow innocuous and authentic. More than just isolating the various components of the discourse from one another, what I have tried to do in my analyses is highlighting the ways in which they play off each other, mutually reinforcing despite there being no clear, explicit links among them beside that indeterminate glue of the label, the style and the core practice. For example, minimalism can offer an easier entry-way into the broader self-help and self-improvement discourses by making one start with the concrete, accessible practice of decluttering: putting one to work on home-improvement, the discourse also makes it easier to be increasingly drawn to the work of

self-improvement, even though in some cases the former is presented precisely as a way to avoid the latter and accept oneself as one is, within one's ordinary domestic life. Vice versa, of course, decluttering is invested with a "life-changing" power that goes beyond home-improvement into self-improvement. Similarly, the aesthetic style can range from the "cosy" connotation of domestic immediacy and intimacy sheltered from the weight of the world and of work – including that of endless self-improvement – to the moralistic connotation of sacrifice by giving up things for the planet or one's own spirit; it can be imbued with the sense of possibility of a blank page as much as that of impeccable discipline in keeping oneself and one's life in order; and it can gesture towards the contentment with one's home and things as enough as much as elicit aspiration for a beautiful home where everything matches everything else and fits perfectly the available space (usually a lot of it). Since the discourse itself ultimately holds on to one "minimalism" rather than breaking it up into plural minimalisms – there are attempts of this sort, but they usually present the resulting pieces as either facets or types of minimalism one can freely choose from, without addressing their inconsistencies –, I too have thus refrained from making proper typologies out of the differences I observed in the landscape of the minimalist discourse online. Instead, what I have tried to construct are continuous dialectical spectra wherein not only each presentation of "minimalism" finds its place as a matter of emphasis, of degrees, but also implicitly depends on the other presentations elsewhere on the spectrum, and thus ultimately on that vague indeterminacy tying them all together. I wanted to push to the fore and stress, in other words, the background lurking behind – and actively contributing to – every presentation of minimalism, both in the form of other presentations and in the non-form of the whole aesthetic, rhetorical and ethical-practical glue. The cacophony has been there all along, of course, to the point that – if itself reduced to its minimum possible – the only glue that seemed to never wear out, for "minimalism", was the ethical-practical core practice, the prescription that people discard some or most of their things: it is around this concrete – but also, at the same time, extremely abstract – form of reduction that the discourse expands its reach to all other sorts of literal or metaphorical reductions, from tidying up one's home to reduce its disorder – its clutter – to letting go of negative emotions and thoughts as "mental clutter", from cutting down on one's daily tasks or prioritizing them to cutting ties with superfluous or "toxic" people in one's life, from downsizing and streamlining one's clothes in order to also reduce time and effort spent on getting

dressed to restricting one's screen time on social media, and on and on (again). In other words, the gesture of discarding one's things – which is insistently demanded all across the board – is key to the discourse because it is what enables it to also employ the label and the style as framing devices while largely not admitting that one is doing so, that is, without ever making it explicit where it is that the literal ends and the metaphorical begins. By discarding things, one is properly inscribed into the minimalist discourse, which builds on that gesture to support all its other advice by framing it in terms of reduction and restriction. Anything that can in any way be framed as a form of reduction of some excess from which a meaningful surplus can be gained – in line with the “less is more” motto that the discourse borrows from design, just like its modernist aesthetic style – can then be labelled “minimalist” so long as things have been discarded, especially if that is visibly evidenced by a style that is in line with the minimalist aesthetic common sense. Thus minimalism at its minimum possible of determinacy is what allows it to be almost anything and everything, each minimalist author or influencer selecting his or her own favourite emphases and mix of topics, while always talking as if they are all talking about the same thing after all, the same minimalism and minimalist lifestyle.

Minimalist decluttering is decluttering infused – or confused – with the moral values of anti-consumerism and/or self-improvement (both reductively understood as individualist matters), while minimalist self-improvement is vice versa not only cast in the morally better light of a (slightly) less self-centred anti-consumerism, but also infused with the tangible, sensible and emotional appeal of decluttering and home-improvement. In this sense, it seems as though the proper project of a minimalist discourse would have to be precisely that of highlighting all the many ways in which an aesthetic transformation can positively impact on an ethical-practical if not political one and vice versa; without doubt it would not have to necessarily pursue this task in so explicit a way as to turn it into a properly philosophical project, of course, but still one would expect that it would try to rhetorically mediate between an aesthetic and ethical-practical dimension in the attempt of thus constructing a “minimalist lifestyle” in fact, rather than just assuming it already possesses an adequate existence. It is not, however, what the discourse actually does, largely for the reasons we have already alluded to before: it is unable to handle with care the criticality that would be involved in such a pro-

ject, and in fact it retains on the one hand a strong idea of the aesthetic dimension as an entirely subjective matter of individual taste – the usual *non disputandum* that actually leads to endless disputing –, and on the other hand an equally strong, one-sided idea of the ethical dimension as instead a matter of universal, exception-less, abstract objective rules and standards; and it merely oscillates between these two extremes (just like between offering a lifestyle and the lifestyle). While the discourse tirelessly disavows its criticality in a subjectivist manner, so that it often claims there are no rules or standards in minimalism, it also offers little more than such rules and standards, all the more so since it makes them indeterminate to attenuate their critical force: for example, all minimalists will maintain that it is necessary to discard things – it is the core practice, as I noted –, to the point of always insinuating that people’s resistance to doing so is problematic if not pathological, that their reasons are mere rationalizations and so on, but they attenuate the force of this injunction by claiming that how much is discarded is irrelevant, entirely subjective, up to the individual; yet this does not make it any less of an universal, exception-less and abstract objective rule that is predicated on the traditional insensitivity to qualitative context, to one’s concrete conditions and circumstances (which is, instead, one key way in which the ethical dimension has inherent aesthetic roots). In a specular fashion, and surprisingly for anyone even remotely familiar with the discourse and the pervasiveness of its aesthetic common sense (in fact it is probably the most pervasive aesthetic on social media or even the media in general), minimalist influencers and practitioners often disavow and dismiss the aesthetic style as a mere subjective taste, a mere appearance that has nothing to do with the “true” minimalist lifestyle having only to do with how one lives – and improves – one’s life, in a purely ethical-practical sense. The two contrary pushes if combined constantly dismember minimalism as a lifestyle, as something that stylizes a life and vitalizes a style, rhetorically weaving the aesthetic with the ethical-practical, and as I just said, that is due to a deep-seated discomfort with criticality: whether it is the normalcy of a certain aesthetic common sense or the normativity of certain ethical-practical rules or standards and so on, the minimalist discourse is only able to back away from criticality altogether in a subjectivist manner, only to then disavow and dismiss its own subjective, aesthetic appearance and present itself as a critical, ethical-practical lifestyle.

This is, then, the main contradiction of the minimalist discourse, the one I have kept track of in my analyses of the discourse, which as I said can be seen as a regular refusal to actually construct a minimalist lifestyle rather than assuming it exists (as a premise) and thereby rhetorically exploit it in the appealing but vague indeterminacy of its inchoate state (as a promise). At times, the refusal is almost an actual surrender, especially among ordinary practitioners discussing on online forums like Reddit: they will say that “minimalism” is just a label, that it indicates something so vague as to actually mix up very different things and people, that it is – again through subjectivist rhetoric – but a trap for those who wish to identify with something instead of authentically being themselves, that it is also exploited as such by certain influencers and authors, and so on; sometimes they then suggest some different label – as if that would ever be enough –, but other times they just stop there, accepting that the label will forever remain vague and simply advise against attaching oneself to it. This is also, however, a rhetorical move one often sees among those very influencers and authors, which of course makes it clear that it does not work after all: they will often criticize if not dismiss “minimalism” as a label, but they rarely ever stop using it, just like with the style – which always remains in the background, literally or not – and with the core practice of discarding things. Therefore, all is at one time or another disavowed, dismissed, denied, yet all is also retained and reproduced in the end, without end. The proper way out of such vicious circles would be, in my view, the proper advancement of that rhetorical project of constructing a minimalist lifestyle – as well as clarifying a general idea of lifestyle as bridging the aesthetic and ethical-practical (but also political) dimensions –, but as I said that is not what I have done in this thesis; if anything, my work here can be taken as an exposure of the vicious circles that would obstruct any effort in that direction, that is, as a merely negative contribution to it. This contribution does not address only the minimalist discourse itself – understood as the minimalists’ discourse –, but also the critical discourse about minimalism, journalistic as well as scholarly, which I have also taken up as materials in my analyses: being often predicated on not so deep an acquaintance with the minimalist discourse and thus a lack of recognition of not only its varieties but also the many ways in which it is constantly at odds with itself, the ways in which it is contradictory in its indeterminacy, external criticisms of the discourse have for the most part missed the target, especially when they have amounted to that same sort of (pseudo-)criticisms that the discourse is already fond of repeating again and

again about itself. It is not like criticisms of minimalism have been wrong or false, but rather that they have often been far too easy and directed at its most obvious problems – especially its playing into a merely more refined alternative consumerism –, and they have also done so by perpetuating the same dismissals of the aesthetic dimension of our lives, or the same impasse with the ethical-practical and political ones. In other words, minimalism is so blatantly aestheticized and aestheticizing that to hit that target is actually to miss it, because minimalists themselves rely on the disavowal of their aesthetic common sense often as much as they rely on its reproduction, its implicit or explicit, literal or metaphorical background presence. From the start, I was well aware of the many problematic aspects of the minimalist discourse, but as I have explained those are mostly inherited from the pre-existing discourses that minimalism merges into itself, rather than unique features of it: decluttering manuals and the whole literature of domestic management already weighed more on the shoulders of women than those of men; anti-consumerist messages already distracted from needed structural and production-centred changes in the disproportionate call for individual responsibility in buying, consuming and handling unused things or dispatching waste; self-improvement sermons already propagandized a neoliberal idea of subjectivity as authentic, autonomous and in themselves asocial – and abstractly universalized – individuals, whose problems were only to blame on their own faults and defects; and all three of these main discursive strands conflated into minimalism were already shot through with contradictions. Having had past experience especially with self-help discourses because of my previous grappling – for my master’s degree thesis – with two forms of Japanese Buddhism, both related to that other contemporary vague panacea which is mindfulness (one that overlaps minimalism in many ways), I was never a naïve reader of minimalism, even though in a sense I methodologically tried to be one and follow it closely for what the discourse around and about it actually say – not because I disagreed with the criticisms or even dismissals of the discourse, but rather precisely because I agreed with them and I would not have found anything interesting in merely repeating what has been better said elsewhere. More than anything, I have tried my best to say something new about a discourse that never seems to say anything new, and in fact disavows the only novelties it brings to the table. The result may be used to dismiss and hold back as much as to restart and advance the work of constructing a “minimalist lifestyle”, understood first of all as a

rhetorical project. That is, I think, what productive criticism should above all aim and allow for – neither shut down nor insist blindly.

But is it even the business of an academic study to be at all critical of the phenomena it studies, when they are social phenomena? And what about semiotics more specifically? These questions bring us to the other side of the coin, the problematization that from the knots in my object spread to the meaning of my very studying it in a “semiotic” way. Although for reasons that I will shortly explain I have had to eventually set aside for the most part a direct critical engagement with the discipline, there is a reason why “minimalism” and “semiotics” are put on the same plane in the subtitle of this thesis, both followed by “common sense”: like minimalism, though of course in very different ways and to a far lesser degree, semiotics too increasingly appeared to me as glued together by a vague, indeterminate commonsensical glue which I found more and more opaque when looked at as a whole, even when this or that singular strand within it resulted intelligible enough on its own. The discipline has expanded all over the place in its seventy or so years of proper existence, progressively reaching practices, experiences and whole cultures beyond texts or discourses, thereby coming to deal with all sorts of objects otherwise studied by other disciplines in the social or human sciences. I have given my current though still unfolding thoughts about it in the introduction to the thesis and a section of the first chapter; here I just want to account for how critical reflection upon it has been an even more engaging, laborious and distressing a task in my path than grappling with the elusiveness of minimalism, despite what the page counts for the parts of this thesis might make one believe. The first year of my PhD research was marked by a crisis with regard to the semiotics I knew as deep as that of the pandemic alongside which it happened, and resulting in not dissimilar a lockdown – one that has also lasted a couple years at least. There is no need to get into any details, of course; suffice it to say that my initial theoretical surveys – or more accurately, wanderings – also led me to having a look at the pragmatist tradition I knew little to nothing about (I had only met a few decontextualized notions from Peirce, and had never even heard of Dewey at all anywhere, though I had read his book on the philosophy of democratic education for my own interest and delight), and a quite fortunate choice of introductory books soon gave me a glimpse of what I was missing on, sucking me in once and for all. From that moment on, also thanks to being segregated at home away from all university

contacts and concerns, I have studied without stop the pragmatist philosophy first of Peirce, then also of Dewey, in a way that for better or for worse irreversibly converted me to it. To the semiotics I knew – or “semiology”, as I came to call it again for reasons that will be explained in the thesis –, another one was placed side by side which looked quite different than how it was presented to me in my studies (the very few times it was): it was not a scientific discipline with a leading purpose in studying actual socio-cultural phenomena as signifying structures and processes, but rather a philosophical and critical endeavour, the preliminary stage of logic (understood as a theory of self-controlled thought through signs, or a theory of inquiry). Looking back, there is a particular evening that I take to be the actual start of my path and seed of this thesis: right in the midst of my first engagements with Peirce’s semiotics, I was schematically outlining his main classification of the sciences, when I have begun thinking – overlaying the scheme with notes in a red pen – about where I would have placed the many different strands of the semiology I knew, and how they would have fit that place, drawing all sorts of new hints and suggestions from that well. I am not the kind of person that jumps from one idea to another without a care for what is left behind; moreover, I have always known full well that eventually I would have had to translate the ideas I was gathering back into the academic meta-language of semiology as I knew it, since that was after all what my actual audience would have been familiar with. Because of this, my pragmatist studies have always been deeply involved in a continuous interplay with the semiological background I came from – its narratology, its encyclopaedic modelling of cultures, its at least de facto critical attitude towards social phenomena, its questioning of subjectivity, its emphasis on discourses and then its attempts to nonetheless move beyond them, and on and on –, so that each step forward in my understanding of the former also always brought something unexpected to my rethinking and revaluation of the latter (and vice versa). While I have spent most of my time and effort trying to put together a pragmatist critical framework by combining insights from both Peirce and Dewey (though also looking in all sorts of other places, especially in ethical or aesthetic philosophy), I had actually never meant this framework to stand on its own: the first thing it had to frame was not minimalism, but semiotics – that is, semiology. I kept reflecting upon semiology all along for that reason, and even got some way into addressing it, until it became undeniably clear – sadly – that I was asking too much of myself and my PhD research.

The upshot of my efforts remains, I think, nonetheless alive and well in the kind of analysis I have carried on as well as in my work as a whole, whose implications for semiology – while indeed implicit – would hardly escape any of the semiologists I know as soon as they paid the attention. To put it in the most general of ways, what I have found is that in a sense the knot I hit upon on the side of minimalism was mirrored in the knot I felt on the side of semiotics: this knot too had everything to do with a certain difficulty and opaqueness in handling both criticality at large and its aesthetic or ethical-practical dimensions in particular, while at the same time clearly retaining them in the background as givens – the horizon of sense and meaning-making behind signification – or recuperating them more explicitly via various supplements from other disciplines, without however totally clarifying how these were related to – and perhaps demanded adjustments of – the fundamental theories of semiology, especially those concerning the sign itself. In other words, I could not adequately address the problems I have just described with minimalism through semiology, without clarifying the relationship that semiology itself had with criticality and the aesthetic and ethical-practical dimensions, especially since it is a discipline that is largely bent to think in logical and often formal terms, even when it handles narrativity, and is also still often keen to present itself as scientific in the out-dated sense that ties that attribute to a negative neutrality, rather than a mediating critical reflexivity around one's situated choices and more or less active interventions upon some materials. This is, of course, a barely defensible oversimplification and overgeneralization, but I put it forward because it is not meant to be an attack, so it does not require any defence at all. There can be found, in the vast repertoire of semiological approaches, theories and studies, resources for dealing with the problems I have been dealing with, including good justifications – and illustrious precedents – to legitimate a critical stance of the sorts I needed. Semiological tools are also often flexible enough to make them do work they were never intended to do – a problem for sure, and yet a problem with its advantages. I could have probably managed to do some pretty decent study of “minimalism” without getting this far off the rails. Still, what I have found in pragmatist philosophy is genuinely something I have yet to find equivalents of anywhere else, and once seen it I cannot ignore it – that was the real problem, not the impossibility of getting by with what I had already. I could have done a study of minimalism nonetheless, but I doubt I could have done this study of minimalism. I do take it to be a fully semiological study: it is a mainly rhetorical analysis of an

internally composite discourse as tying together a cultural whole – in this case a certain “lifestyle” – in and through all sorts of signs and texts, positioned with regard to the larger whole of a global consumerist and hyper-mediated culture, continuous with other broader discourses – decluttering, anti-consumerism, self-improvement most centrally, but also with forays into anything from mindfulness and spirituality to digital detoxes, financial advice and so on –, and finally also replete with ties to social conditions and consequences (as highlighted themselves by still other counter-discourses). If anything, my pragmatist studies have deepened and clarified the sense of the continuity and reciprocity between a researcher – or even external observer more generally – and the people he ultimately studies either directly or by studying the objects of their discourses: whatever mode and degree of involvement a researcher opts for, it is always the case that his or her discourse itself contributes – directly or indirectly – to those other discourses it studies, and their objects and subjects and so on; this is something that semiology already taught me well. What engagement with pragmatist philosophy further taught me is, in a way, how to be thoroughly faithful to this and other such insights or ideals I had already received.

This helped me take seriously the aesthetic/ethical-practical ground of experience as irreducible to any of its semiotic mediations and remediations, and – in holistic terms – defuse any absorption of common sense into the encyclopaedia, defending the role of the former side by side with that of the latter, with the dialectical diaphragms of critique, art and experience in between them. This is what most informed the sort of implicit semiological analysis I ended up carrying on: I have studied a discourse and its rhetoric – and in that sense also an encyclopaedic se(lection) –, but always with a critical eye to how it managed or failed to both draw from common sense (not just other discourses) and mediate, remedy and remediate it, so to determine, differentiate and develop itself beyond it. As I understand it, a discourse like that of minimalism is engaged at one and the same time, just like that of semiology in its own academic way, with both a philosophical task of articulating a “critical common sense” – to use Peirce’s term (though in a slightly more Deweyan fashion) – and a cultural task of constructing, maintaining and continually adjusting the ways and means for a certain shared form of life, or in this case again a “lifestyle”, and its problematic knots are largely tied to its inability of clearly distinguishing the two tasks (as well as unpreparedness with especial re-

gard to the first one, of course). Behind the contradictions I have mentioned lies, as the thesis will show – hence the subtitle, again –, a contradiction in the minimalist discourse’s attitude towards common sense: when it disavows its aesthetic common sense and dimension wholesale as too subjective or superficial, or its ethical-practical rules and standards as too objective and extreme, the discourse sets up a “false” minimalism of mere stereotypes in order to reject it (and thus exorcise its own crises and project the promise of a “true” minimalism all over again), and by doing so it rejects common sense altogether, as it already does with regard to the consumerist common sense of modern society that it would like to critically oppose; however – just like with all its other disavowals – rejecting common sense in so stark, rigid and indiscriminate a way has the paradoxical effect on the discourse of filling it up with nothing but vague, indeterminate and quite commonsensical ideas (including the consumerist ones). As I have put it in the general title for my analysis of the minimalist discourse, minimalism is positioned “on the other side of common sense” – but there really is no other side to common sense as a whole, just like there is no other side to experience or to the encyclopaedia. Rather, as a pragmatist philosophy aids in doing, it is possible and necessary to come to terms with common sense in all its complexity and contradictions so to better orient oneself within it, train one’s ear to be attuned to a continuous spectrum of ways and degrees of criticality, of community or communication, of mediation and remediation, of determination and differentiation and development, and so on. The pragmatist critical framework I have put together is one way of articulating into a map such a critical common sense, and it is an inherently synechist, naturalist, radically empiricist, pluralist and democratic way of doing it. It unties the knots – those evident in minimalism as much as, I believe, those still to some extent haunting semiology – not by solving or dissolving them entirely, much less by denying them outright, but rather by carefully reworking their dualisms into dialectics. And the answer it offers to the question that was raised earlier, regarding the possibility and opportunity of academic research being critical, is that it would barely be actual research otherwise. Rather than shy away from critique altogether, as if it was necessarily a monolith looking down on the unenlightened one studies, what is needed is a careful – and caring – sensibility to all its various modes, ways and degrees, its internal tensions and its subtleties, fragilities, and vicious and virtuous circularities.

In the first, theoretical part of the thesis I have made a very tentative – and to some extent already out-dated (most of it was written about a year and a half ago) – attempt at outlining a pragmatist critical framework based on both Peirce and Dewey. Its purpose is indeed to frame the analyses of the minimalist discourse in the second, thematic part of the thesis, and do so first and foremost by articulating a critical common sense that, even just by sheer contrast, may hopefully illuminate why it is that the discourse’s endless dualistic oscillations, as well as its monistic flights into perhaps all-inclusive but almost meaningless indeterminacy, appear forever unable to come to rest: they cannot rest both because experience is irreducibly complex, contradictory and problematic, and because on top of that dualistic or monistic responses only aggravate the problems they promise a final solution for. Of course, this critical framework in its current state is far from being remotely satisfactory – it too is developed only to the minimum possible extent. That is also true, despite its surely excessive length, of my work on the minimalist discourse: as I have said, I have concentrated all of my efforts in drawing out in the open and bring into focus the minimum possible that lies at its core, but in doing so I have also doomed my analyses to offer little more than that, while I believe that interesting things may indeed come out of a critical engagement with minimalism – in the arts, in design and in lifestyle, side to side – that did not care as much as I have about not overstepping the discourse and push it where it is either unwilling or unable to go on its own. However, the real minimum possible in my results is neither in the theoretical part (that is, the “common sense” part) nor in the thematic part (that is, the “minimalism” part); it is in the non-existent middle, methodological part – the “semiotic” part. As I briefly explain in the introduction, the thesis was meant to have three parts corresponding to the three elements in the subtitle, and the middle part had to consist in a reconstruction of a few semiological tools – through the lens of the pragmatist critical framework, of course – that would then be explicitly used in the analyses of the discourses around minimalism. Instead, just like the vague indeterminate minimalism of the discourse, that part ended up being almost purely virtual – an implicit premise and an inchoate promise, again. When I have felt ready enough to at least start tentatively tackling this reconstructive task, which as I have noted earlier I had always looked forward to, I have found at my expenses that with the limited time I had left, it was impossible to do it in any way that I would not have totally hated in the end. What I have done – hence the “expenses” I have just alluded to – is then focusing in on a single semiolog-

ical model, the one that was explicitly meant to analyse lifestyles in a “semiotic” way: Eric Landowski’s semiotic square(s) of the various “regimes” of sense; yet the mere negative deconstruction of the model has taken me almost seventy pages and a couple months of work, and by the end there also was so little I could save that the positive reconstructive part would have had to necessarily encompass other semiological tools more in tune with the pragmatist critical framework. The pressure of the calendar eventually led me to set aside the task and just move on to the thematic part of the thesis, despite having no explicit and specialist tools to carry on my analyses. In fact, the pragmatist critical framework of the theoretical part is not meant to be a set of such tools: its tools are in the first place and last instance philosophical in nature, and their proper purpose is as stated above – the articulation of a critical common sense. Just like there is a gap between any mathematical – or more generally schematic – model and any use of it within an empirical context, such as scientific research, so there is a gap between a philosophical model and its uses in other empirical contexts, and while it is a narrower gap, it is an important one for any philosophy that does not want to lose sight of common sense as such, putting one’s articulations of it at the risk of being misread as a self-sustaining specialized theory for specialized purposes. Since the heart of this thesis is the unavoidability and indispensability of common sense, it was a risk that I thought it was best to avoid – partly also because I hoped that I would be able to reshape and use semiological tools instead, of course, but still, even when it became irreversibly clear that it just would not happen, I preferred not to use any tool at all (except for a tentative analysis, near the end of the thematic part, of the minimalist discourse’s “less is more” motto as subjected to different commonsensical readings: here I did refer to the pragmatist framework in order to better disentangle the readings and highlight their insistence on different dimensions or elements of experience).

From this point of view, my thesis is actually an unfinished work (which is why a preface is fitting, like a lost dusty work then found and published regardless of its state). I have no doubt that I would think the same even if I had managed to finish writing that middle part on semiology, but as things stand, it is then all the more the case. On the other hand, I have been learning the hard way to accept and even appreciate unfinished things, as they can prove useful and fruitful just like finished and polished ones. Despite of its lack of an explicit, specialist and systematic methodological tool-

box, I do not believe that my analyses of the minimalist discourse – and the discourses surrounding it – is not methodical or lacks method just because of that. On the contrary, I think the hidden lesson of these analyses is that the first and last of all methods is just reading with attention. I do not mean by this that one only needs to make some especially strenuous effort and all the rest will take care of itself, but that method is a matter of a well-shaped, educated, docile, careful and caring attention. It is ultimately this attention that all sorts of tools must aid and serve, and it is its reshaping that is the primary work of philosophy and its critical common sense. Whatever sense my analyses make, I believe it goes to support that it is well worth it to do that work, to at least engage pragmatist philosophy in doing it, and to not underestimate its contribution to our more or less specialist inquiries, like those of semiology in all its varieties, spread all over Peirce's map of the sciences (or the arts more generally, as I have come to think of it under the increasing influence of Dewey). This is not to say that I deny equal worth to explicit tools or that I refuse methodology as such, of course: the reasons why there is a lack of it in this thesis remain the contingent reasons they are – if I had had the time, I would have surely tried to procure and produce myself all the tools I might have needed. It is just that, especially when it comes to qualitative analyses like the ones I carried on (though in such a naively overblown numbers that at times they looked as if they had to become quantitative), nothing is as important as following the immanent lead and clues of experience. As one reads with attention, it is the very materials one experiences and grapples with that will suggest some apt words to describe them in ways that cast them in a different light. What my analyses lack in explicit tools – semiological or not – is at least somewhat compensated by a long line of such words and wordplays, starting of course from the title of the thesis itself. If there is one benefit in this non-method, though an often uncomfortable one, I think it must be that it helps a bit in not letting go of a good, difficult problem. That has been the problem with my thesis.

0. Introduction

What is life stylized into when it becomes a lifestyle? What is it stylized from? Or, vice versa, what is the difference between any style whatsoever and one that has been and still is being vivified, that is, made alive? A semiologist should find these questions oddly familiar, even when coming from a more textually carved out and specialized sub-field of semiological inquiry, whether its objects are movies, advertisements or newspapers, comic or literary books, artworks, videogames, board games or even games full stop, and so on. Whatever the degree in which the object of study and the particular tradition and approach to it – as there were many from the very start (Traini 2013) – afford the safety, solidity and stability of closure from whatever is external to some kind of “text”, a commitment to studying not just signs but the “life” of signs (Ferraro 2012: 13-15) can be said to have been or become the underlying aspiration that implicitly or explicitly animates most varieties of semiology, at work on turning Saussure’s prophecy more and more into a project. That life of signs is mostly understood in its original qualification as a “social” life, but this of course makes it no less literal or lively an instance of life if properly understood: even if the horizon of overlaps between processes of life and sign processes of translation or simulation (Marais 2018, Ponzio 2008) remains on the background, the sense that signs materially and sensibly move around “en plein air” (Paolucci 2010: 165-172) might have been somewhat lost from sight at some junctures in semiology’s eighty years of history, but it has clearly been there all along – in praxis when not in theory. All sorts of very different results has followed in the continuous ne-

gotiation and recalibration of semiology's disciplinary thresholds, and there is much of value in most of them. The general tendency has been one of progressive expansion towards life at large, explicitly thematizing in terms of signification anything of interest from the kaleidoscope of culture (to the point that it has been half-jokingly suggested that the discipline may be defined as the one that studies "anything that is interesting": Danesi 2018: 8²). Semiology's scope has increasingly widened to encompass not only signs and then whole texts, but also broader discourses and practices as embedded in their mediatic backgrounds, that is, as mesoscopic dimensions between the microscopic sign and the macroscopic semiosphere or encyclopedia – more or less organized (sub)cultures, or messier archives of all kinds –, all the while moving further out towards a different encompassing frame, that of experience (Lorusso 2010: 154-169). This doubly outward movement of the discipline towards culture and towards experience can sometimes turn into an awkward movement when a semiologist bumps either into a researcher that pretty much studies the same things but with no direct mention of signification, or into another semiologist that vice versa studies extremely different things though with the very same handful of conceptual tools. The tensions that are thus generated are of a piece with those that should be discerned into the "life of signs", as life and sign are at once inherently tied and yet not at all identical with one another, not reducible to one another. When, in its endless struggle to remedy or exorcise its own (supposed) crisis as a definite discipline, semiology tries to convert everything and anything into signs of whatever size to mark out a distance and difference with other disciplines on the one hand, while soothing or glossing over comparable distances and differences among its practitioners on the other, the tension between life and sign risks being betrayed along with that very outward movement, contradicted by an inward movement which reduces at best all mediations to sign mediations, and at worst all qualities and reactions as well, finding in these material for controversies around "iconism" or reference which are implicitly controversies about semiology's relation to reality (Bertetti 2019). The opposite solution of shifting from "sign" to "sense" also betrays the life-sign tension, as it collapses it – or at least conceals and confounds it – into one category according to what one intends to study, while often still implicitly conceiving the all-

² At the end of this first, introductory theoretical part of the thesis, this quip about semiology's tie to the interesting will hopefully become itself more interesting, as it is precisely in terms of "interest" that we will also define what grounds and yet exceeds semiosis in its strictly logical sense: the aesthetic dimension of critical experience.

encompassing “sense” only or mainly in terms of signification, subordinating de facto the former to the latter despite meaning to do the contrary.

This last tendency is what, in our research, we have found in the semiological tool that gets in many respects closest to our project: Landowski’s (2014a) semiotic square of “lifestyles”, a heading under which he indeed programmatically set out to push semiology towards sense in its various regimes beyond the strictures of (structuralist) signification (Landowski 2012a). In fact, beside the current two parts in which our thesis is divided – a theoretical framework and a thematic case study of the contemporary discourse around the “minimalist lifestyle” –, there was also supposed to be an intermediate part of transition that attempted a critical theoretical deconstruction and reconstruction of Landowski’s semiological project, closely following it through its many variations and iterations. A draft of this part was largely written, and it mainly consisted in showing on the one hand how the model mapped very well onto the pragmatist critical-theoretical framework sketched here, while on the other hand – by contrast with it – illustrating its shortcomings, limitations and ambiguities, all of which can be traced to Landowski’s literal “squaring” of Greimas’ legacy: rather than critically engaging and challenging it, Landowski takes up his teacher’s legacy and on the whole accepts it, as he simply circumscribes its validity to a quadrant of a broader semiotic square – one that, however, literally reproduces most of that legacy’s problematic aspects, starting of course from its very being a priori a semiotic square (which is a strictly logical model with dualistic underpinnings, varieties at odds with each other and a static structural bent whose processuality, when it is even stressed, must nonetheless move within its closed, congealed categorical confines; Paolucci 2010: 321-331; Ferraro 2012: 109-120; Barbieri 2019). We find this gesture of squaring³ just as problematic as we nevertheless find Landowski’s aspirations quite sound, and for both reasons we still believe that his model would be an ideal entry point for a pragmatist reconstruction of semiology as we have pursued in our research (with important stress to be placed on the indeterminate article “a” behind reconstruction). Unfortunately, however, the tasks at hand have proved to be too many and too weighty to be handled by an inexperienced – and thus unstable, because constantly experimenting (if not wandering at all) in order to grow –

³ Just like for “interesting”, “squaring” too will hopefully gain added meaning later into the thesis, as that is how we will characterize the minimalist discourse’s overall rhetorical strategy for ultimately reproducing itself and steering or keeping away from actual self-critique.

PhD researcher. Unable to lead the task of reconstruction to even just a temporarily satisfying completion, or at least to revise the deconstructive half of it which was mostly finished and leave that to witness our efforts, in the end we have preferred to cut the intermediate part out from the thesis, hoping to carry out the task elsewhere in the future in the way we believe it deserves. The reason we point this out at the start, making this absence present, is that it is impossible to properly understand our path – and the limited results deposited in this thesis – without keeping in mind that a (no doubt naïve, excessive) ambition to reconstruct at least some of semiology’s main tools is what guided us all along. Like semiology – at least from our point of view – our thesis has one foot in philosophical reflection (theoretical part) and one foot in scientific analysis focused mainly on a discourse and its rhetoric (thematic part), and Landowski’s move can be understood as a reopening of semiology’s philosophical horizon (Landowski 2012b), which – as we have suggested – represents a general movement that has been more and more participated across the board, with openings to anthropology when not to philosophy (Landowski 2020, Lorusso 2020); notwithstanding the limitations we find in many of such attempts, it is evident that we are – or rather would have been, if we had concluded our own – in no way proposing something that this discipline itself does not show at all turns to be well disposed to do.

Beyond this too generic statement, of course, a reader who has already some familiarity with Landowski’s work will likely see equally well by himself or herself the overlaps with the theoretical framework we are going to outline, upon which we were building our tentative deconstructions and reconstructions: the correspondence of the three regimes of adjustment, manipulation and programming to the aesthetic, ethical and logical dimensions of critical experience respectively (with the regime of assent – which comes, in a sense, first among all regimes: Fontanille 2020 – corresponding perhaps also to the phenomenological-mathematical background of experience); the implicit dialectical thrust of the processual reading of the semiotic square, with a path through the four regimes; its inherent tie to the regulation of criticality as the “risk” entailed by all meaningful experiences, especially with regard to the relation of self to otherness (though submerged in a dualistic subject-object framework); the related pragmatic centring of “interaction” in meaning-making, the four regimes of sense also being regimes of interaction; or the revaluation of the qualitative, emotive and even more importantly

tentative grounds of meaning, which comes with Landowski's explicit taking of critical sides in favour of the regime of adjustment (setting aside the very problematic repercussions of this often too enthusiastic gesture upon his model, which ends up being in most cases strongly reductive and thus easily dismissive of the "traditional" regimes of manipulation and programming, instead of trying to critically remedy and remediate them, not just taking this or that side). These are only the broadest points of contact between Landowski's project and our own, and they are confirmed by his trajectory after the original proposal. For example, interaction and its implications found a better articulation – though they appear to have been abandoned there – in Landowski's essay on the use of things as objects, wherein a reciprocal active-passive "grasp" precedes and constitutes both subjects and objects at once, with the most evident manifestation of the model's mostly untapped dialectical thrust (Landowski 2009). The tie between the four regimes and the critical dimensions has become increasingly visible in subsequent essays, and especially in the particularly tangible characterization of the regime that is the spatial iteration of the square, wherein programming is for example depicted as the thoroughly determined "texture" of a clearly logical map, a "closed, saturated and reassuring world" (Landowski 2010); similarly, manipulation has been explicitly associated by Landowski (2014b) to ethics (unfortunately exhibiting, as in the case of logic, his quite reductive understanding of it), while yet another of his iterations (Landowski 2019a) addressed aesthetics – under the heading of "taste" in general – in an attempt to move beyond both subjectivist-relativist and objectivist approaches (though, like the original model, it fails to deliver something that does not fall back into a subjectivism too suspicious of mediations – and we are not alone in thinking this: da Silva 2014). Landowski's stance in favour of adjustment was most openly expressed in a "little manifest" (Landowski 2017) that more generally stresses, along with the rest of the issue (including the somewhat competing framework of Fontanille, who in fact provides a counterpoint: Fontanille 2017), the critical dimension of semiological analysis, complemented most recently, apart from one more iteration of the model applied to literal political regimes (Landowski 2019b), by an acknowledgment – once again quite pragmatist in spirit – of a creative, prospective side to it (Landowski 2022). All of this is very resonant with the pragmatist framework we are trying to envision here, and as Landowski himself has pointed out, his work – and the overall framework that places sense and significance in between the extreme insignificance of routine and the extreme

senselessness of chance (a quintessentially pragmatist frame if there is any: Atkins 2008; Colapietro 2011, 2013; Testa 2017a) – is actually in full continuity with that of his teacher Greimas, especially in his last works (Landowski 2018; Bertrand 2009). The issue has never been whether or not semiology should have such an expansive, encompassing scope – that is, a philosophical scope –, but rather whether or not it should explicitly enter into its basic theoretical formulations rather constitute a residual background, and – if it has to be theorized – how it should be articulated it. As we have said, a whole range of implicit or explicit approaches is available already, and in fact it is one of these – possibly the most theoretically dense among them – that first sparked our own interest and involvement in this matter: Paolucci’s (2010) bridging of the Peirce-inspired line of Eco’s interpretative semiology and the Saussure-inspired lineage of structuralist semiology. If we have not straightforwardly followed Paolucci’s steps – which have now become all but invisible, after the cutting out of the intermediate part of the thesis –, it is not because they have not been influential, but rather the exact opposite of that: his book has worked so well in diverting us towards the Peircian side that we have simply gone in too deep to manage to come back from the pragmatist tunnel in time for finishing our own little reconstructions; the impact was so strong that we exceeded our previous orbits and were flung out far into space, eventually landing on a much more Deweyan form of pragmatism (which also explains why we had to find our own way: if Eco’s career is marked by the “slow and respectful convergence” towards Peirce’s philosophy, culminating in his major legacy of encyclopedism, it was also marked by a puzzling distancing from Dewey’s “trail” – which is at bottom aesthetic: Matteucci 2021 –, despite Eco’s own mention of the of reading Dewey’s *Art as Experience*, in his intellectual autobiography, as a crucial turning point in his formation: Eco 2017; Proni 2015, Innis 2018).

The composite, centrifugal and famously “platypus-like” nature of the semiological tradition (Paolucci 2010: 165-172) inherently bends it towards transdisciplinarity, with a particularly heightened self-awareness – which crises, real or perceived, always revitalize – around its interstitial place between empirical analysis (or even production) of materials (drawing out “object-languages” from texts or discourses of all kinds to describe them) and philosophical reflection on the very conditions of such analysis, whether within semiology itself or in other social sciences (thereby placing itself at a

distance from – and too often a meta-level above, despite the fact that it is a betrayal of transdisciplinarity – the latter, as indeed more methodologically-epistemologically conscious: Mattozzi 2019, Demaria 2019). By virtue of this no doubt uncomfortable and yet also strategic position, semiology is always particularly able – and motivated – to draw from other disciplines and traditions for tools, from anthropology to phenomenology. The problem with this capacity, as is so often the case in inquiry, is that it works fine: what signs cannot easily do by themselves, narrative structures can do in their place, remedying to their shortcomings and limitations but also often bypassing the theoretical question of then precisely relating the new tool to the old frame, narration to signification, the latter left on the whole unchallenged and simply shielded by its supplementations. The self-understanding of semiology as a mixed “toolbox” (Volli 2019) assists in this avoidance, whether or not it is paired with a demarcation of semiology’s purview to the domain of texts and discourses, much easier and safer than experience to objectify and handle through more analytical tools (Volli 2007). Again, this works and is fruitful – our intention is not even slightly that of slighting the very discipline in which we were trained –, but nonetheless it also relieves semiology from the need of articulating a theoretical framework capable of both determining its specificity (in a plurality of manifestations with their different emphases) and relating it to what nonetheless exceeds it, both in the institutional sense and in the philosophical sense of both experience and culture being irreducibly more than pure signs, no matter how much these are scaled up in their scope. Our conviction, of course, is that – if more fully engaged with than they have been up to now, especially the latter (which remains virtually ignored in semiology) – Peirce’s and Dewey’s pragmatist philosophies may be of much help in more explicitly weaving together at the theoretical level what already is implicitly tied up in semiology’s historical trajectories. Of all the tools remediated in its tradition, those of narratology have probably been the most successful, and the “narrative turn” this marked has also arguably been a pragmatic turn in disguise: narrativity may be said to have worked as a sort of semiological surrogate for dealing with the inherent pragmatic underpinnings of semiosis (and even its broader experiential grounds, insofar as narratives presuppose the construction of encompassing “possible worlds”, more or less parasitic on commonsensical experience of our actual world). This, at any rate, is how narratology has played out in our own formation, encountering semiology for the first time at Guido Ferraro’s classes at the University of Turin. Ferraro’s approach to the discipline has al-

ways been very pragmatic not only in the ordinary sense of the word – attuned to what empirically works or not, what practically coalesces in a fertile and fruitful way –, but also to some extent in the special philosophical sense, precisely because there has always been a more pragmatist outlook hidden – in plain sight – within narrativity as a more fundamental, or rather inclusive, meaning-making process than strict signification. In Ferraro’s reconstruction of semiology’s theories of narration, he insists – also on the empirical grounds of child psycho-semiotic development – that narration is the original “transmodal semiotic system” that runs deeper than language or even communication do, at least if these are primarily understood, as he does, as in the main bent towards structural classification rather than processual concatenation (Ferraro 2015: 145-154). This, per se, risks maintaining the gap – rather than the tension – between signification and narration, between sign and practice or experience, which is what a pragmatist account of the former would in our view overcome, but the centring of narrativity nonetheless affords a de facto pragmatist background that largely neutralizes that risk (again, our point is that narrativity – like other tools – works well enough overall not to make full-out theoretical reconciliations impelling). Through the extension of narrativity to all kinds of textual or discursive phenomena, semiology can handle, for example, the modalities of the virtual, the actual and the realized without thereby having to necessarily relate them to its theory of sign and semiosis; and this on the one hand is often good enough to introduce a dialectical thrust in its outlook, while on the other hand it leaves it vulnerable to degenerate dialectics into dyadic contrasts (between an indefinite, chaotic, chance-ridden universe of experience and a definite, cosmically and causally ordered universe of narration, for example: 15-38). Any sensible, experienced semiologist is able to largely avoid in practice this risk in his or her analyses, while gaining all that structuralist signs appear to exclude – the place of desires and lack as a fundamental engine of meaning-making, for example, along with the emotional side of value (221-234), or an expansive breadth and depth of scope that can come to entertain, without too much embarrassment (though also without admitting that one is here entering philosophical terrain), reflections on the “meaning of life” as narratively grounded (Ferraro 2019: 240-244). The narrative turn has enabled semiology to recuperate along the way much of what its basic and strictly semiotic theories could not fully admit and follow through. This is because narration is in an extremely privileged position for the job, being placed mid-way between a concrete experiential grounding and the more or less ab-

stract discursive communication of language (or in our framework, as we will shortly see, between the aesthetic and the logical critical dimensions, that is, in the ethical dimension). It is this intermediate position that makes it amenable to serve at once, as it does in Landowski (2007), both the “unity of sense” and the (still dualistic, as we have observed) “plurality of regimes”: narrative literary examples are put forward to exemplify both of the two contrary pairs of allied regimes in Landowski’s original proposal (programming with manipulation vs. adjustment with assent), and this on the one hand shows that narration is capable to elastically stretch to cover the whole field of sense – experience at large –, while on the other hand it does not stop Landowski from aligning narration with the linguistic rather than experiential side of signification anyway. A dialectic, wherein a narrative can both determine a course of intentional actions – with objects made significant to a subject defined by that course (or identified with it) – and yet also undermine it and therefore re-open it again as indeterminate, is degenerated into a dualism at least at the theoretical level. This is, at root, what makes us believe that a pragmatist reconstruction of semiology would be possible and fruitful: not just that pragmatist philosophy would offer semiology – as all sorts of disciplines have – what it lacks, filling up this or that gap in the toolbox, but rather that it would better bring out and bring explicitly into focus what it has already had within itself for a long time. The advantage would go both ways, of course: if narrativity has a pragmatic character, the reverse is also true, and the pragmatist philosopher might just as much use the semiologist’s sustained, in-depth attention to narratives, for example, with its underlying ambition to develop formal schemes to aid it (which, in turn, would be fruitfully restructured – so we think – by a confrontation with the pragmatist critical framework we are going to outline in this first theoretical part).

Semiology’s narratology is shot through with such more or less disavowed dialectics, as are the relation between prospective subjectivity and retrospective objectivity and/or destination (Ferraro 2015: 56-71), or that between generality and specificity, standard and deviation, recognition and knowledge and so on (15-38), which point at the “elementary semiotic relation” – one lying at the core of our work – between topic and focus, indeterminate background and foregrounded determination (Ferraro 2019: 57-91). Narratives are elastic, as we have pointed out, so they can take different shapes or “architectures” – as Ferraro calls them – which clearly stretch strict narration towards

what it is not: by the end of our theoretical outline, it will hopefully be clear that the “alpha”, “beta” and “gamma” narrative architectures (93-137) can be respectively linked to the intermediate ethical-practical, the grounding aesthetic and the culminating logical dimensions of experience, as the alpha architecture covers narratives in their most focal sense of courses of intentional actions (as in traditional narratology), while on the one hand the beta architecture – from cosmological myths to sci-fi novels – highlights the (possible-)world-making background of narration (down to a point in which action is but a pretext for descriptive exploration of a world, as in travel books), and on the other the gamma architecture – typified by detective stories, but perhaps apt to include narrative accounts of a researcher’s scientific work – foregrounds inquiry as another thread holding narration together (here down to the point in which all action has already happened from the start, and what is at stake with further action is only clarification and truth about it, obtained by means of investigation). Semiology, we think – though not necessarily semiologists, which is another matter –, has yet to overcome the dualistic philosophical tendencies that make it difficult for it to handle these dialectical grounds of meaning in all their complexity. The problem has always been there from the start, also affecting the way narration is understood, analysed into a stratified hierarchy of levels of “depth” which has abstraction at its core rather than the other way around (Ferraro 2015: 101-108): it is the problem of the relation of “structure” to “sensibility”, which in Greimas already was overwritten with the dualistic oppositions of a superficial, evident “veil” of appearances and a deep, hidden “web” of being, or a “manifest” as against a “latent” meaning, or everyday commonsensical language – with all its creative metaphorical “symptoms”, again superficial – and language as scientifically described, and so on (Bertrand 2009). How profound, pervasive and problematic is the influence of this fundamental(ist) philosophical dualism of appearance and reality – and common sense and critique – is something that our thesis will abundantly illustrate, even though we have not managed to go all the way into doing our part in pulling semiology away from it (as others are doing in their own ways: beside of course Paolucci’s 2010 theoretical proposal and, more generally, the already pragmatist-informed line of interpretive semiology, we can see that a need to move “away from the deep space” of hierarchical levels is being acknowledged – though, in our view, not achieved, since vertical stratification is merely rotated into horizontal stratification – also from within structuralist narratology: Ferraro 2017). It is easy to interpret a lifestyle as a life-sign of

something else lying beyond “mere” appearances, and this is precisely what we will see everyone – critics as much as promoters and practitioners – do with regard to the minimalist lifestyle, without ever being able to reconstruct it and redirect it away from its numerous, evident problems. In this sense, our whole work in this thesis is an invitation – unfortunately, for now, mostly an invitation – to detach once and for all semiology from this and related philosophical dualisms, rather embracing the complexity and contradictions of what rightly goes together – and must be distinguished, but not divided – in the notion of “sense” (Bertrand 2009): the qualitative-reactive ground of sensations, the purposive orientation of sense as concrete direction, the critical dimension of ethical-practical good sense – and its emergence from, and coalescing back into, the background of common sense –, the communicability and thus intelligibility of signification, all of these are interwoven in such thick ways that preclude dualistic oppositions such as that between appearance and reality; all such dualisms stem from the irreducible complexity of sense, wherein sensibility at once indicates the passive capacity for being sensed that is proper to even material inanimate things and the active capacity of living beings for sensing – and also sentimentalizing – them in fact. Greimas’ career, with its specular emphases at its two ends, does already exhibit a de facto struggle with dualism, because he has never really just endorsed it once and for all and left it at that, but has rather kept a “stretched thread between structure and sensibility”, without erasing its tensions. Our view is that this can be done best, and most explicitly, through engagement with a pragmatist philosophical framework.

It should be clear, at this point, that all of this neither comes as a criticism or even dismissal of semiologists nor of semiology as a discipline. It is not the former because, as personal experience with our colleagues has taught us more than any book could, more often than not semiologists are in fact all too aware of both the limitations and exaggerations of their discipline, and yet the work they carry out can be just interesting and illuminating, skilfully merging by experience the numerous resources and approaches at their disposal, while conversing and cooperating with other researchers in a reciprocal and really all but “imperialistic” way. It is not the latter – a criticism of semiology – because that would of course take much more than these broad generalizations. If we state here at the start what our stance is with regard to semiology, it is only to better position our present work in relation to it, because it was supposed to be – and,

in our view, it still remains despite not employing its tools directly – a semiological study, one that simply had the ambitious but also naïve aspiration to first undertake a reconstruction of semiology in a pragmatist key, with all the theoretical in-depth explorations and musings that demands, and only then employ its tools for our analytical purposes; this proved to be far too much for one thesis (though overshooting, while risky, also has its upsides: if we had not been this naïve, we would not have gathered the ideas we have, no matter how limited their expression ended up being in this written product of our inquiries). The point is that it was tensions internal to the semiological tradition that pushed us to the point of problematizing it – even if originally intending to have a return trip to it as well! –, and this already by way of making it conceivable and acceptable for a researcher to attempt a semiological analysis of a phenomenon such as a “lifestyle”: as we have put it at the start of this preamble, the problem of a stylized life (or vivified style) was closely interwoven, in our research path, with that of the life of signs. Sociologically understood, lifestyle are sets of interrelated practices and choices – with more of an individual(ist) focus by contrast to subcultures – often expressed in and through (even when against) consumption of some kind, with some degree of coherence in and between ethical-practical preferences (“life”) and aesthetic tastes (“style”) bringing individuals together, knowingly or not (Berzano & Genova 2015). Studying a lifestyle semiologically thus incurs in the very same problems that the study of practices already does for a text-oriented discipline as semiology is, with three different options having been advanced in response (Boero 2017: 19-25): at one extreme, practices are rejected as objects of study for semiology because they are too different from texts, insofar as they do not come pre-demarcated in a closed, coherent and consistent way nor, more generally, necessarily textualize themselves; on an middle-ground view, practices can be studied *sub specie textis* as if they were texts, because they do articulate a meaning insofar as they express meaningful choices constituting a “significant totality” that resembles texts (while, vice versa, texts are in turn always embedded into practices), though this approach can then take a more textualist stance and maintain that – at least for the semiologist – practices can only be studied indirectly as they have been narrated within texts; finally, at the other extreme, practices are outright deemed apt for semiological study as themselves inherently texts of a kind – no matter if generally less closed, coherent and consistent – through narratological tools, as semiology is understood as an expanded study of sense as such, whether it manifests itself in texts, dis-

courses, practices, experiences or anything else, and whatever the nature of this manifestation, in which case the problem of practice is but a “false problem” that can and should be dissolved.

Needless to say, we both agree and disagree with all of these positions. The first one is right in stressing that practices do not necessarily come pre-demarcated and pre-textualized, and that they can thereby be more of a constructed object of study than texts in the strict sense are, but beside the obvious reply that all objects of study are constructed, including texts (which may be studied in isolation just as much as in relation to their author’s life or historical context, to an expansive intertextual web of other texts externally bound by genre, theme or anything else, to an unfolding discourse wherein texts internally respond to one another and to the same problem, and so on), practices are in fact often picked out, determined, differentiated and developed by all sorts of texts and discourses, no matter how far these go in securing closure, coherence and consistency for them. What the other extreme vice versa misses, in our view, is the tension between practices and texts – life and signs – that the first extreme congeals into a mere gap: here it is done away with as a “false problem” on the grounds of the (narratologically understood) unity of “sense”, losing sight both of the specific roles that discourses and texts play in forming, informing and reforming cultural practices and experiences, and of the irreducible complexity and contradictoriness that inherently belied and belong to – as we will try to show – meaning or “sense”, whose logical, ethical-practical and aesthetic dimensions are often at odds with each other, and cannot at any rate be reduced to one overarching narratological account (especially with semiology’s traditional narratology). In our view, then, tension between practices and texts – or, more broadly, experiences and discourses – must not be dissolved either in a dualistic separation of the two poles, or in a monistic collapse of their distinctions and differences: on the one hand, texts and discourses of all kinds do directly or indirectly partake in the articulation and negotiation of both literal and fictional practices, and some of them – most obviously, manuals of any sort – just cannot be understood without reference to practices; on the other hand, no unitary sense can overwrite their tensions, because they are indeed tensions inherent to sense itself (which is not a simple unity but a dialectical unity-in-diversity, as we will see), so that indeed there is a risk of de facto taking practices as if they were texts and reading into them a much clearer and clear-cut meaning than they

possess. The middle-ground position is closer to our view, but it is indeed an intermediate rather than remediating position insofar as it too assumes that semiology already has all that it needs for studying practices, which means that it just exposes itself to both risks: texts are not necessarily trustworthy, accurate, exhaustive or influential sources for – and accounts of – practices (and nothing demonstrates it more than our case study will, with a discourse that works to underdetermine and almost undermine rather than develop the lifestyle it is about), while the less textualist take of directly studying practices as if they were texts can amount to just studying them as texts, so long as narratology is not seen to be working precisely by virtue of a pragmatic dimension of meaning that is broader than it is, and which is in fact its implicit ground – one does not (primarily) partake in a certain practice in order to express some more or less abstract content to bystanders, nor in order to later tell oneself or others stories about it, and there is also a difference between a narrative modelling of a practice and an outright normative and perhaps prescriptive account of it in practical texts. In fact, Boero takes the practice-as-text position to be the currently favoured one in semiology overall, also defended in terms agreeable to the intermediate position by retaining “text” as a technical semiological term for anything that is analytically carved out and perhaps recorded to be studied by a semiologist in any way, from videotapes to sociological interviews or ethnographical notes of and/or about the examined practice. Though understandable in light of the nature of semiology as a discipline – which we will briefly clarify in a note within our pragmatist framework –, this reconciliation comes at the cost of emptying the notion of “text” of all meaning, to the point of making it nothing but an arbitrary “semiological” double to the very idea of an object of study at all, a double that allows semiology to be its own discipline and expand everywhere, without calling into question the nature and adequacy of its concepts along the way (Paolucci 2010: 175-211). From our point of view, studying practices as meaningful is simply studying them full stop, studying them for the sort of phenomenon they are, not at all something distinctive of semiology as opposed to sociology, anthropology or anything else (all of which are the source of the proposed tools for textualizing practices, after all). As a tradition, semiology surely includes many tools that may contribute to a study of practices, first among them those of narratology, but it is a mistake – as we have insisted above – to take them as already adequate to account for meaning in all its forms. In fact, just like “texts” are more than generic “objects” defined only by being demarcated and registered in any way whatsoever,

but they are on the contrary best left in contact with the ordinary commonsensical understanding of the word in its specificity, so narration does not coincide with (ethical-)practical meaning-making at large: first of all, narration itself is a specific set of social practices of communication, but even if we abstract it from those practices it cannot at any rate be pushed too far beyond its specificity within the ethical-practical dimension – narration emphasizes the retrospective context of justification of what has already been done or happened, it is tied to the production of an account to respond to others one is responsible or otherwise bound to, in view of their questions and expectations (Jedlowski 2007), and it thus presupposes that some critical distance from the practice beyond its habitualness has already been taken by those involved with it, if only out of being asked about it by a semiologist or anyone else. This is all the more true if we further move from practices to experiences, which get at an even broader aesthetic dimension of meaning that is irreducible to the ethical-practical one and the narratological take on it. As we have suggested, that is already evident, after all, in Landowski's ambiguous project of unifying sense on the one hand but also pluralizing it into contrasting regimes on the other, though his attempt too is entirely predicated on the assumption that the (semio)logical and narratological concepts of the discipline are enough for carrying on this task and accounting for all the regimes equally (so that the dualistic subject-object distinction is for example decried when it comes to the clearly aesthetic regime of adjustment, yet nothing substantial is advanced in its place, and the regime is rather (un)defined by negative contrast to the dualism).

We have no problem at all with semiologists endeavouring to study practices or experiences; what we would object to, however, is conceiving of such a study as clearly distinct and autonomous from a sociological study of them: a semiological study should not just be a sort of surrogate sociological study that is separately carried out by a semiologist as such, but rather as a – perhaps directly cooperative – contribution to the latter with a special emphasis on certain aspects of the practice; if a semiologist does work all by himself or herself on the analysis of a practice, then he or she will also be working as a sociologist, and it is important that the work is understood as such, rather than being overwritten as “semiological” by virtue of speaking of texts and narratives beyond the bounds of these concepts. As will hopefully be clarified by our pragmatist framework, the composite nature of semiology enables it to ambiguously occupy a nowhere land, in

which on the one hand it appears as the most general among all social or human sciences by virtue of its philosophical underpinnings, while on the other hand it still presents itself as a science, rather than a philosophical endeavour, by virtue of its studying social phenomena of all kinds. This, in our view, is problematic only to the extent that the tension is suppressed one way or the other. Our present thesis comprises a first theoretical part in which we intend to (minimally) outline a pragmatist account of the ethical-practical and aesthetic dimensions of critical experience that lies the more strictly semi-otic logical dimension, and then – having set aside our attempts at reconstructing semiology already in this limited work – a second thematic part in which we analyse not a practice nor a lifestyle as such, but rather a discourse, even while – in line with the theoretical framework – doing so by keeping in mind that it is practical texts we are dealing with, which must be understood in ethical-practical and aesthetic terms. In other words, we will be studying the way in which a lifestyle – the minimalist lifestyle – is constructed in and through its discourses regardless of how it is actually practiced, and yet understand these discourses as irreducibly aesthetic and ethical-practical in nature; in fact, we will find that the minimalist lifestyle is constructed by the discourse in such a way – a thoroughly vague, indeterminate, contradictory way – that it allows the discourse to endlessly reproduce itself as it is without changing or growing, so that it is not at all clear whether the discourse serves the construction of the lifestyle or, vice versa, it is the lifestyle and its practices that serve the discourse by inscribing people in its orbit (perhaps literally subscribing them to a YouTube channel, a Reddit forum, a coaching program and so on). Our case study is perfect for the job of highlighting the difference between the straightforward study of a practice and the study of a discourse around and about it, because, as we will see in due time, the practices gathered together under the label of “minimalism”, which are also contradictory in many ways, actually predated the discourse about it, and the discourse does not add anything at all to them except for its ambiguously bringing and holding them together as parts of a (supposedly) distinctive, integral lifestyle. What the minimalist discourse does is constructing a consensus, though precarious and ultimately amounting to almost nothing – to the minimal possible, as we will put it –, on what a minimalist lifestyle is supposed to be, and it does so by playing against each other its various components and their related dimensions, in particular – of course – the aesthetic style against the ethical-practical life. Therefore, it is still the rhetorical workings of a discourse that we are interested in as semiologists,

even though we take it to be necessary for such rhetorical analysis that all the dimensions of experience – and sense – be understood in their own right, united in their diversity within a complex, contradictory framework, rather than reduced to one or the other. While semiology has usually identified itself with Peirce’s pragmatist semiotics – the preliminary moment of logic –, its focus on communication through socially circulating texts, discourses and so on is rather akin to Peirce’s rhetoric, which is the culminating third moment of logic but thereby also of the whole of the three dimensions taken together: in fact, its description by Peirce as the most “living” branch of logic reminds us of the semiological project of studying the life of signs, and of its ambiguity (Colapietro 2013, 2022b). A semiology reconstructed in a pragmatist key, which unfortunately will have to wait, would not be less contradictory than current structuralist or interpretative versions of it; it would just perhaps be (even) more willing and capable of acknowledging, understanding and navigating its inherent tensions and contradictions, its composite nature – focusing on a discourse’s signs without losing sight of the life in, through but also behind them, exceeding them (especially when the discourse itself conceals and confounds that life, rather than clarifying it).

Being rhetorical in nature, semiological analysis as we understand it is inherently critical: its ultimate concern is with whether or not certain discourses aid or hurt the growth of meaning in any form; whether or not they do determine, further differentiate and/or develop their objects or, as does the minimalist discourse, they leave or return those objects to the indeterminacy of common sense; whether or not they critique and clarify, rather than conflate and confound. As secular heirs to religion (Berzano 2019), lifestyles often come – as is surely the case of minimalism – with the promise of a more meaningful life, a remedy not only to some particular problem but also to some overarching problem of insignificance, usually presented also as a critical attack on aspects of contemporary society. Insofar as they contribute to rhetorically construct lifestyles, discourses especially take on from them the task of at least promising, and partly delivering themselves already, the prospect of a more significant and perhaps more critical life. Lifestyles and the discourses around and about them set themselves up against the background of a pervasive insignificance, one that discourses ideally should help illuminate but, as minimalism’s case will show, can just as well be left as obscure in the last instance as they were at the start, or even more. Even before taking the pragmatist

trajectory we have not managed to return from, with its emphasis on criticality, we had already picked up interest on the ways in which discourses address crises of insignificance – and fail and fall back into it – by reading, at the very start of our research path, Leone’s (2019) essays on insignificance, in which he maintains that semiologists should pay just as much attention to the different ways in which significance is continually lost, eroded, disturbed, betrayed and so on (6-21). In fact, a couple of essays in the collection address some ways in which discourses can get lost into vicious circles that we might term “anti-rhetorical”, since they completely override any critical horizon in order to instead reproduce themselves: it is the case of online trolling, wherein – by contrast to provocation, which can be an useful and legitimate part of a rhetorical strategy – an interlocutor just aims at spurring from others immediate, uncontrolled reactions that are as unreasonable as his or her own discourse (22-32); it is also the case of a polarized, accelerated and proliferating public sphere such as that of contemporary hyper-mediated societies, wherein opinions are largely formed by way of reactive, again unreasonable differentiations from other opinions somehow perceived as being too widespread, without real reference to the issue at hand (35-55). Our study of the minimalist discourse can perhaps be added to the very same pile, insofar as what we highlight in it is the discourse’s incapacity of growing past similarly unreasonable wholesale reactions – against aestheticization, materialism, consumerism and so on – that it rather prefers to exploit in order to reproduce itself as it is, abandoning the rhetorical project of trying to construct some shared idea of a minimalist lifestyle beyond the vague, contradictory commonsensical associations sparked by its name. Moreover, in the second half of the collection Leone also singles out as problematic an anti-materialist tendency in contemporary societies which manifests at once in the form of individualized spiritualist practices – commodified both indirectly and through the direct production of “spiritual gadgets” – and of digital dematerialization, both central to the minimalist discourse (83-94; Leone 2014). While we do not believe that retrieving an aesthetic of materiality and singularity (Leone 2019: 56-82) is sufficient, since on its own it can always end up feeding the production of digitally simulated materiality and singularity, perhaps also risking to fall prey to the rhetoric of authenticity that backs up individualization (not incompatible with a generic aesthetic, as minimalism will illustrate most clearly), we do think that such “fake re-enchantments” (95-115) need to be critically addressed as they too engendering insignificance in their own ways, no less in their proposed solutions –

usually commodified – than in their account of the problem. The minimalist lifestyle is probably the quintessential fake re-enchantment, one so evidently fake that the discourse promoting it is itself entirely predicated, as we will see, on repudiating it as fake, even though it uses such repudiations to project by contrast a more authentic minimalism – one that however merely revives again and again the same indeterminate promise, without actually pushing any further the rhetorical project of determining, differentiating and/or developing it. This is what got us interested in the discourse around the minimalist lifestyle: it is stuck between the aesthetic dimension of style and the ethical-practical dimension of life, but being unable to critically acknowledge and reflect upon their interrelations – despite these literally making up a “lifestyle” as such –, the discourse is instead constantly at odds with itself, “critically” rejecting in vain one or the other of its dimensions or components despite depending on them and thus retaining them. It should be clear, even with no reference to the pragmatist framework we are going to outline, that a rhetorical critique of this phenomenon depends on having a better account of those interrelations between the ethical-practical and the aesthetic, both in their continuity and in their contradictoriness. That is what this first theoretical part is for: framing the rhetorical – though only implicitly semiological – analysis of the minimalist discourse in the thematic part, so that its struggles and moves will be easier to understand in-depth, rather than just dismiss outright. If the failure of the minimalist discourse largely lies in not addressing but rather denying – and yet retaining, reproducing and exploiting – its own contradictions, the remedy must in great part consist in highlighting the inherent contradictions of aesthetic, ethical-practical and logical experience. The discourse’s promise of a more meaningful life – a rhetorical life-sign with its own label, an aesthetic-ethical life-style with its imagery and its practices and habits – is, as we will see, a promise of sheer positivity beyond all crises, even while it also presents itself as a starkly negative critique of society that will make one more critical. This is the paradox at its core: a life that aspires at once to be more critical and yet free of crisis. The ambiguities of the minimalist discourse, down to its aesthetic common sense, have their roots in this paradox, and the oscillation from one pole to the other and back is part of what keeps it alive.

Unless crisis or – rhetorically – insignificance, in its many forms and degrees, is acknowledged and accounted for, it is doubtful whether practical and experiential di-

mensions have been really included in one's analysis of a text, discourse or anything else; it is through crisis that meaning grows, especially if it is to be critical in some way. The ordinary course of everyday life is always to some extent problematic, and signs participate in both determining what the problem is and struggling to solve it; this includes, of course, the signs read in a minimalist book or on a minimalist blog, vlog or forum. When problems grow deep and broad enough, their immediate practical-empirical character shifts into a more heightened aesthetic, ethical-practical and logical one. Insignificance, when perceived at all, is part of such a problem that still lacks further determination; even when it is not perceived, but a problem is still there – at least as seen from a bystander, but also from oneself at a different time in the future –, insignificance is still there as well, and it may thus come to be perceived, or perceived in less of a dull way. Signs, texts and discourses – though some genres more than others, of course – partake in this social negotiation of insignificance and its reversal (at least the promise of it). This is why it would not be enough, in order to put semiosis back within its encompassing practical and experiential background, to widen one's scope to include a more immediate phenomenological or even perceptual dimension either severed from all purposiveness and thus all criticality, or confined to any set of purposes – even programs – of action that are understood as unproblematic by default, predetermined and demarcated with no space for the stumble and struggle of experience. It is in this critical horizon that signification and communication processes should be understood in order to study their multifarious contributions – negative or positive – to what lies beyond discourses, to practices and experiences, to socio-cultural communities of all kinds – including that rhetorically gathered around a “lifestyle” – or even forms of life and their environments at large. We have come to believe that an explicit critical theory, or at the very least an implicit but still deep familiarity with the whole philosophical landscape of critique – in its aesthetic, ethical-practical and logical dimensions (and their respective symbiotic, political and rhetorical culminations) –, is necessary for leading to further fruition semiology's original project of studying the social life of signs (beside, of course, being helpful in any other sort of inquiry or reflection, as philosophy is). Our bets have long been set on pragmatist philosophy on this regard, and four years after placing them we must say that we are only more convinced of its power and of the fact that seriously engaging it, at the very least, is something that could profoundly renew semiology – not as some extrinsic salvation from outside, but as a reconstructive reme-

diation that would, on the contrary, also highlight the multitude of ways in which semiology has on the whole always moved in a similar direction, and still does. The semiological tradition from its very inception has had a strong critical orientation – otherwise, we would in fact not even have conceived of our project to begin with –, which can be clearly seen in many of its authors – past and present – whose key or lateral work is very often linked to an anti-ideological effort at defusing and demystifying all kinds of calcified and calcifying rhetorical strategies, exposing everything from particular myths to more general problematic trends in this or that medium as a whole (Demuru 2017; Lorusso 2010: 96-103, 2022: Ch. 7; Traini 2013: Ch. 4; Landowski 2022). At the theoretical level, however, even though a critical theory can be lucidly seen at work in these authors’ work – especially Eco, whose interpretative tradition is of course closest to our own approach for obvious reasons (Desogus 2012) –, it is usually one (understandably) focused on communication and, at most, the ethical or political underpinnings of its processes and practices (as in the project of a “semioethics”: Petrilli 2014), with little consideration for the more comprehensive scope of ethics and especially aesthetics: one rarely comes across semiologists discussing the differences between a deontological and an utilitarian or a virtue ethics (despite having everything to do with the narratological relationship between the subject and the “destinant”), or between artwork-centred aesthetics and everyday aesthetics (despite again having everything to do with semiology’s own re-evaluation of everyday cultural phenomena beyond any dualism between high and low culture). The theoretical gaps might be filled each time in practice, but we believe that an explicit and thorough formulation of a critical framework would be of much help in defending semiology’s critical orientation, and also – in fact especially – in making it less disorienting than it is at times, when it is not understood in its inherent link to both signification and communication. Pragmatism offers, as we hope to (begin to) show, a fallibilist, flexible and experimental critical theory that inherently includes semiosis as a purposeful and thus potentially critical process, already in its model of the sign: not a floating dyadic union of signifier and signified, but the triadic interpretative response to an object through a sign with reference to a contextualized purpose of some kind, a response that can be cognitional as much as practical, empirical or emotional (Short 2007, Bergman 2008). Although we ourselves have only found this out at a quite late stage of our research, Dewey’s pragmatism is particularly helpful and most likely indispensable for the task at hand, because his most explicit, uncompromising emphasis

on experience as well as in-depth theoretical articulation of both an ethical and aesthetic theory are crucial complements – and often correctives – to Peirce’s obvious idealist and logical focus; in fact, this might partly explain the unexplainable fact that Dewey is virtually ignored in semiology, while Peirce’s semiotic theory too is easily detached from his whole philosophy and even dismembered in a handful of isolated concepts or pairs of concepts (such as the type-token distinction or the decontextualized triad of icon, index and symbol). As pointed out earlier, even Eco soon completely lost Dewey’s “trail” in his career, despite the fact that by contrast to Peirce, Dewey was a politically engaged intellectual who took pragmatism’s radical empiricism to its critical anti-authoritarian, democratic conclusions (Pappas 2008, 2019). At any rate, even at the risk of making one wrong from two rights, our pragmatist critical theory will draw from and combine the ideas of both Peirce and Dewey, although within an overall Peircian, and thus formal, framework – taking its classification of the sciences as an useful map, in fact far more useful than usually acknowledged, to orient ourselves in our self-understanding as researchers in general and as semiologists in particular. Through a slightly edited account of Peirce’s classification, we hope to illustrate the most basic features and commitments of his philosophy, and the place and nature of its critical dimension. After that, we will sketch Peirce’s critical theory – what he termed “normative science”, and what we will rename “critics” – in its two less well-known phases, that is, ethics and aesthetics: following Liszka’s (2021a) lead, we will mainly try to sketch a triadic “grammar” for these critical dimensions – which we will characterize as “pragmatics” and “dialectics” – that would correspond to logic’s “speculative grammar”, that is, semiotics (Bellucci 2018b). Needless to say, we will be drawing from Dewey especially with regard to our sketch of dialectics as grammar for aesthetics, which will highlight the inherent complexity and contradictoriness of experience and thus also its meaning, its sense. Our attempts will of course remain woefully embryonic, though just like an embryo, they hopefully hold in themselves some real power of growth, as symbols – and indeed whole hypotheses – are meant to do in Peirce’s semiotics (Short 2007: 263-288). Other than that, having postponed a direct contribution to a reconstruction of semiology, we will be content if, moving on to the thematic part of this thesis, our brief sketch of a pragmatist critical-theoretical framework – with all the internal tensions and subtleties it acknowledges, however well we will have represented them here – will shed some light on the unending difficulties – in this sense quite understandable – that

the popular discourse on a “minimalist lifestyle” hits against, illuminating by contrast the critical inadequacy of its navigation of the rough seas of critique, especially around the nowhere land that lies between aesthetic and ethical ideals. If our own efforts in over four years of research – and of curious, confused wandering in those same rough seas – have no doubt achieved nothing but the minimum possible in all their aims, our hope is that this minimum nonetheless amounts to more than the totally vague “minimum possible” which minimalism, as we will find out, on the whole resigns itself to be.

1. A Minimal Sketch of a Pragmatist Critics

1.1 – Critics Among the Sciences

In its most developed, post-1903 form – which we will take up without going into genealogical details –, Peirce’s classification of the sciences (Midtgarden 2020; Short 2007: 60-66; Bergman 2008: 48-52; Liszka 2021a: 182-185) proceeds by first singling out different kinds of scientific research altogether, and then moving on to the internal recursive partition of these according to various basic criteria. On the first, “vertical” axis, science on the whole is classified according to its leading purposes, thereby distinguishing three branches: (i) practical science, that is, science as directed to gaining knowledge of the world insofar as that knowledge is part of – and contributes to – acting in and upon the world within some other social practice, including anything from artistic expressions to technological applications, or from the ordinary affairs of individuals and groups to the most wide-ranging of governmental issues; (ii) theoretical – and heuristic – science, that is, science as directed to the systematic expansion of knowledge of the world pursued for its own sake, regardless of – or at least beyond – any other particular practice and purpose; and (iii) synthetic science, that is, science as rather directed to the expansive systematization of knowledge of the world in both senses – for its own sake as well as for its contributions to social life –, incorporating the results of the other

branches and mediating between them (Topa 2019). We thus have, as shapes and shades of science in general, a range of activities – which we will of course take synechistically, that is, as continuous with one another – that includes practical arts such as gardening, theoretical sciences such as botany and synthetic endeavours such as the publishing of an illustrated catalogue of the main native plant species one can catch sight of within a certain geographical area, consequently aiding further practical or theoretical studies.

On a second and “horizontal” axis, instead, each of these three main scientific branches is recursively divided in further, more determinate sub-branches that are to be organized in such a way as to highlight critical differences or relations of dependence among them; and since it is one of the tasks of science itself – within its synthetic branch – to determine these organizing differences and relations through inquiry, assuming them as both discoverable and improvable aspects of the sciences themselves understood as real “natural kinds”, that is, living processes (Ambrosio 2016, Short 2020), this classification like any classification is an open-ended, on-going and fallible result, not at all foundationalist but rather “foundherentist” (that is, based – like all science – on both experience and reasoning, both the support of direct evidence for a piece of knowledge and that of a more indirect hanging together of knowledge into integrated, coherent and consistent wholes; Haack 1993, 1998: 85-86). If it is true that synthetic science has to mediate between the practical and theoretical-heuristic sciences, the criteria employed in the horizontal classification should share in both their nature, and thus make the sciences both more intelligible and more fertile as frameworks for the advancement of practical and theoretical purposes; it might accordingly be better not to speak of the synthetic sciences as merely retrospective, because their more descriptive organization of past science is at the same time a normative – and thus prospective – organization of future science within the dialectical “meantime” of the present (which is why Peirce could forecast that a science named “semiotics” had to be developed: Bergman 2009: 41). In the theoretical-heuristic branch which Peirce mostly focused on – as we will have to do as well –, the sciences are basically classified according to the various kinds and degrees of empirical observation that they ultimately must rely on and appeal to, which corresponds more or less to the level of generality and abstraction of their objects from concrete, singular, actual experience of things and events in the world: if the objects of the sciences – at whatever level – are only carved out from the

world through the shared ideas of the community pursuing them, these ideas enter into and participate as much as anything else to empirical observation, characterizing it (Short 2015). Hence we find a series that goes from (i) mathematics to (ii) the special sciences – both physical and psychical, that is, both studying the more efficient mechanical forces and the more finalistic organic influences that are operative in the world – passing through (iii) philosophy, with the special sciences being then further divided according to the generality of their objects (from laws to classes and from there to particular and individual cases). This ordering seems to be mirrored in the synthetic sciences as well (Topa 2019), as suits their partly retrospective nature: although there is both room and reason to rethink them in depth for our very different times, in a world where the review of even a scientific book can take the form of a popular video on YouTube as much as that of an academic article, it might still be a good idea to classify the synthetic sciences according to their manifestation of their own main practices – that is, writing down, selecting and gathering together the results of other sciences in reviewing and revising them –, reversing the order of the heuristic classification and thus ranging from the small-scale synthesis of other scientific results in reports, reviews, handbooks etc. etc. to the large-scale synthesis – both in a synchronic and diachronic sense – of science as a whole in some form of *philosophia ultima* (which would mirror the theoretical-heuristic *philosophia prima*, where our critical theory is to be located); the crucial difference between the two classifications, one based on levels of generality and abstraction in observation and the other based on the scale of integration in reviewing, is that while the levels correspond somewhat to the scales, the latter do not necessarily nor ultimately lose in concrete singularity when widening their scope. As for the practical sciences, a horizontal classification is a whole other matter altogether, because it would amount to a more or less unified classification of all human practical purposes, and these – much more than even the most controversial of scientific fields – are inherently enmeshed in all kinds of ethical and political debates; it surely goes well beyond our purposes to even attempt at laying out some basic options, like Peirce at times tried to do (Kasser 2016). What this difficulty makes clear, though, besides the indeed unfinished character of any possible mapping of the sciences, is that such a project is itself rooted in the critical dimensions we will try to specify – the aesthetic and ethical dimensions as much as the logical one. As with every other inquiry, the synthetic classification of the sciences has to mark out differences that actually make a difference, which is

the essence of all critique; but the practical-experiential differences of aesthetics and ethics can also count as such significant difference (Short 2015, da Costa e Silva 2017).

The pragmatist character of this whole way of classifying the sciences is indeed the first feature that must be emphasized, as it also brings to light – by bringing them together – its other basic characters, that is, its empiricism and triadic processualism (Short 2015, 2020; Ambrosio 2016; Gustafsson 2015). Despite the vertical tripartition into practical, theoretical-heuristic and synthetic sciences, Peirce’s classification lends itself as we have said to a synechistic reading that stresses the continuity and complementarity among these branches, because they are as clearly distinguished as they are recognizable as different activities that one and the same researcher or inquirer might nonetheless carry on at different times or places; they are thus different aspects of what could in fact be one integral science. In fact, Peirce’s idea of science is one that sees it as first and foremost a set of interrelated social practices that human beings have historically – that is, neither out of mere necessity nor out of mere contingency (Colapietro 2020) – come more and more to be engaged and embedded in, developing communities around certain shared abstract or concrete ideas and certain other educational and technological conditions of their particular observations or experimentations. All inquirers – whether “scientists” or not – observe phenomena in some kind of experience or experiment to find out new qualities, facts, classes and laws of reality to at least deal with, if not theorize about; they all collect, read, review and revise, compare, distinguish, select, merge and generalize other inquirers’ work past and present, thereby integrating science – locally or globally – both in a diachronic sense as an organic historical process, and in a synchronic sense as an organized encyclopaedic system; finally, they all apply whatever knowledge they possess to the furthering of other social practices – at the very least, those they need to sustain their own and their community’s life –, while also gaining concrete and complex feedbacks with fresh data and insights from doing so. These are not activities that can be so easily disentangled in every case. Whatever purpose is one’s main or leading purpose for inquiring, research will nonetheless usually include some version of each one of these paradigmatic practices of science combined in a particular way. Moreover, if it is a pragmatist synechism (Haack 1996, 2005, 2018) that characterizes this vertical classification of the sciences as different and yet continuous, and if the same can be said of the horizontal one – which also has clear philosophical

roots in Peirce's categories and their modal expression (Herdy 2014) –, then we might say that the continuity of science is also implicit in philosophy and mathematics as common ground for all specializations – whether theoretical, practical or synthetic –, even while being itself an irreducible result of synthetic science. Instead of unilaterally tying mathematics and philosophy to the theoretical sciences, as Peirce does, we might then take them to precede both the differentiation into the three vertical branches and the subsequent reintegration at the other philosophic end of science, which again might be distinguished from the rest of the synthetic sciences. This overall structure itself seems to correspond to the categorical criterion in the aesthetic key we will propose later, going further in integrating the sciences. As general sciences that all other special sciences can draw upon for their principles and conceptual tools, mathematics and philosophy would then be the places of an increasing convergence – though never yet coincidence – of science as a whole. It is within philosophy that the pragmatist, empiricist and processualist approach to inquiry – roughly or vaguely corresponding with the peculiar emphases of the practical, theoretical-heuristic and synthetic sciences – is forged, to be then foregrounded in an explicit way by the synthetic science of classifying the sciences themselves.

It is crucial to understand this continuity of the sciences as in fact continuity, and not an a priori – or at any rate already accomplished – foundational unity: continuity is contradictory, it is unity in diversity and futurity (and vice versa). We should by now certainly move beyond Peirce's infamous opposition of theory to practice in his 1898 lecture on "Philosophy and the Conduct of Life", a lecture whose ironic exaggerations and contextual contingencies have been addressed (Short 2018), but we cannot simply reverse that position and conflate philosophy as a theoretical-heuristic science with philosophy undertaken with any one set of practical ends in view, thereby completely erasing what is nonetheless an important distinction (indeed indispensable for logical pragmatism not to collapse onto ethical instrumentalism; Liszka 2021a: 7); even less, of course, can we superimpose first onto last philosophy or vice versa. Rather, we have to maintain not just the continuity but also its contradictory controversy, its problematic nature, therefore both affirming and negating the unity of theory, practice and synthesis. Only in its hypothetical full expression philosophy would be the coherently and consistently valid foundation for theoretical-heuristic, practical and synthetic purposes and

practices alike; until the day that expression is reached – if such a day is ever to come –, philosophy will remain the ambiguous contested field it is still today, a terrain of confrontation which already makes it much more difficult to tell practical from theoretical philosophy – apart from academic self-isolation – than it is to distinguish physics from its practical application to the building of a palace. What we do know is that we thus cannot approach philosophy – or disciplines with a philosophical bent – as a clear-cut, secluded meta-level which can be dealt with entirely on its own and then merely applied to the extraneous world of practical concerns, even for the sake of theory itself, besides all worries about the large but still widening gap between our technical capacities and critical sensibilities as human beings, communities and societies. There is no doubt much that is still valid in Peirce’s preoccupation with the intrusion and influence of practice on theory – and vice versa, since he also recognized the dangers of taking any theoretical-philosophical system as a unified, complete whole and subscribing to it immediately, allowing it to shape one’s whole conduct of life even against all common sense –, but we should not forget that too definite a separation between them also comes with its own risks, which can be – especially within philosophy, and most of all within its critical phase – just as dangerous and misleading, or at the very least misleading: this, after all, is the lesson of Peirce’s own “critical commonsensism” – with its implicit “marriage” of science and religion (Anderson 2004) –, also picked up by Dewey (Gautier 2017, Poggiani 2017). For one, theoretical and academic reflection is not at all necessarily made less vulnerable by its apparent segregation, since in fact that segregation is bound to a very privileged position in society to begin with, and subject to all sorts of influences, or – at the very least – to the negative influences of inattention, inertia and impasse. However a researcher understands his or her own role and self to be situated on this theory-practice continuum, a self-critical awareness of some indelible problematic tension between the two is probably for the best in any scenario. Peirce’s very logic approaches theory as heuristic, that is, as truth-seeking inquiry (Short 2007: 326-347), to be understood as a case of inquiry in general that is taken to its extreme consequences, to its rather utopian limit of endless experience and reasoning as a boundless community; and this limit does not shatter the continuity with the rest of inquiry, even though – as any genuine limit does – it surely modifies its nature in more or less irreducible ways (the “gross weight” of evidence might for example be more important in theoretical science than its “net weight”, that is, its weight adjusted by trimming down

according to various practical criteria such as salience to particular purposes, practical accessibility or facility and so on; Kasser 2016). For this reason, even though our goal here is to provide a basic sketch of a pragmatist critical theory and thus – as a theory – a primarily meta-normative account of critique, it is important not to deny nor lose sight of both its various normative implications and – more generally – its problematic ties to the practical, ethical and political life that no researcher can fully bracket and suspend at will without some degree of self-delusion. All kinds of either normal or normative aspects of the social world we inhabit would be found deeply inconsistent with the theory we will advance: even when its positive content is kept to a minimum, any formal meta-normative framework will still by implication suggest – more or less forcefully – all sorts of normative transformations to what is subjected to it, if it does not reject it at all. The continuity among degrees of normativity that will characterize our critical theory will then go together with a similar continuity in its supposed levels (meta-normative, normative and prescriptive, for examples).

The continuity between theory and practice, science in its strict sense and art, also characterizes the relation of both to synthesis – in fact, they are one and the same continuity, because the synthetic sciences also have, besides their main task, that of making theoretical and practical sciences fruitfully communicate with each other. A full recognition of the vital importance of synthetic science is by itself a philosophical point still far, perhaps, from being common sense, and its precise tasks still in need of examination and exploration: synthetic research can often be undervalued as second-rate compared to “original” research, its historical value reduced to antiquarian curiosity, or divulgation can be soaked into the depreciative sense of vulgarization, reinforcing and reproducing instead of weakening and challenging the social divide between individualized academic expertise and generalized public (Topa 2019); appeals to all kinds of “x-disciplinary” approaches can also coexist with an uncritically fierce defence of one’s own discipline and both unawareness of and indifference toward any overall view of science (Pietarinen 2006), the ways in which its ever unfinished integration can be critically furthered, including of course classificatory frameworks themselves, but also for example the material-textual basis of various kinds of shared archives, their formal organization, or their social significance and thus their ethical-political implications, usually reduced to narrow legalistic and bureaucratic concerns; and so on. There might of

course be studies that do tackle such thorny issues directly or indirectly, but academic common sense hardly seems to have been receptive to the basic fact that these issues constitute interrelated, fundamental scientific problems. The nature of a discipline and of the overall division of scientific work, the relation of research to education and divulgation, the range of textual genres viable for scientific communication of various kinds, the pros and cons of formal standardization in this or that field, the critical implications of the expansion of the scientific community to a global community, its similar expansion in depth more than in breadth within a certain community through “citizen science” and the reduction or elimination of technological and socio-economic barriers to actual participation – these are not at all mere side issues to a more “real” science (Colapietro 2011): they are an integral part of science, and they weave through various kinds of synthesis the very fabric of its continuity as an aspirationally boundless communal endeavour. As we noted earlier, then, even if retrospective – a trait that does distinguish it from theoretical-heuristic science understood here with the emphasis on “heuristic”, that is, as above all striving to expand knowledge – synthetic science also prospectively tries to get the most out of whatever already accomplished results of inquiry it feeds on, and it does so with a view to the further integration of science as a single relational process, though complex and still very much vague in many respects. This marks synthetic science as a third branch even in categorical terms, that is, as a mediating science on all levels: it mediates among many researchers and their results within the scope of a certain science or discipline, it mediates among the sciences and disciplines themselves – whatever the kinds and degrees of inter-/trans-/multi-disciplinarity employed –, and it also finally mediates on the whole between theoretical and practical science and their respective communities or audiences, ultimately aiming at an ever developing synchronic classification of the sciences, a diachronic history of science itself and a philosophical reconstruction of common sense on their basis, if not a full-out Peircian “welding into the universal continuum” (Atkins 2014, 2016: ch. 4; Gilmore 2006). Admittedly, as we said, researchers in whatever field are of course always already engaged in the practices of all three of these main strands of science, including those most pertaining to synthetic science, because you cannot do any research at all without relying on previous results and provide at least some brief account of whatever you are relying on, often engaging with and contrasting or comparing to available alternatives. However, the difference lies again in the leading purposes of inquiry:

one can synthesize previous knowledge principally to make it available in practice – which can be said to be the practical vector of the synthetic sciences, also recognized by Peirce –, thus producing for example a handbook that is of aid in taking part in a certain practice, but one can also do a similar thing in order to more immediately apply the knowledge to practice by oneself, in which case the overarching leading purpose would clearly be practical; by the same coin, one can – besides doing so for its own sake, of course – either synthesize previous knowledge principally in order to help other researchers with their own theoretical-heuristic endeavours, which would be the theoretical vector of synthetic science, or do so from within – and in service of – that very endeavour itself, subordinating synthesis to theoretical discovery. As fundamentally unity-in-diversity, continuity is then not an excuse for confusion as a vague relief and compensation to fragmentation, but rather a philosophical condition for clarity in making much more sensible and significant distinctions than those coming from dualistic premises, as is the purpose of the pragmatist maxim to stress (Colapietro 2009, Short 2017).

Our present sketch, at any rate, will deal with the more theoretical side of philosophy in its critical phase, more immediately concerned with the meta-normative framework. If synthetic science is where the fruits of science hang – in the last instance the ideal fruits of *philosophia ultima* –, mathematics and first philosophy, if seen – as we propose to do – as preceding and implicitly establishing any meaningful distinction between theory and practice (made explicit in synthesis), must be the sciences where the empirical seeds of all science – as opposed to its alleged foundational roots – are to be located. As empirical, what distinguishes them from both the theoretical and practical sciences is the kinds and degrees of observation they ultimately have to engage in, not in the fact of engaging in observation at all (Short 2015). Hence the horizontal classification of the theoretical sciences can be expressed in modal terms as applied to observation, though they can be further traced back to Peirce's categories, which indeed operate recursively at the various level of the classification. The special sciences, both theoretical and – for the most part – practical ones, deal in the main with the real actual world, either to know it or to act within it and upon it; while this is also true of first philosophy, which already counts for Peirce as a positive science – contrary to mathematics, which instead contents itself with purely hypothetical knowledge, though studied in the most rigorous way –, the special sciences are for Peirce idioscopic, that is, they are based on

more or less specialized and more or less experimental observations of actual, particular, concrete events (which usually require distinctive training and instruments, thereby often individuating – in the long run – a sub-community of researchers that is especially concerned with that kind of events, whether at a more descriptive, more classificatory or more nomological level). On the contrary, philosophy is cenoscopic in that it is based on more or less generalized, still experiential yet less experimental and on the whole (critically) commonsensical observations of everyday experience itself, ideally available to anyone without any peculiar support needed in terms of formation or instrumentation beyond whatever ordinary education is shared by most people in one's society (even though this makes dialogue with other researchers – past and present – all the more important, since no progress is ever made where no opposition is encountered by one's ideas). In fact, as Dewey more than anyone else insisted, philosophy has to both start with and return to ordinary experience of life in its wholeness, its continuity as inclusively pervaded with quality in the phenomenal as well as critical sense, that is, in the comprehensive practical sphere of doing and undergoing, using and enjoying – or suffering – in the world. While reflective even up to the highest levels of generality and abstraction, its fundamental task of critiquing common sense for all the prejudices by which it is just as much permeated must ultimately come down to a renewal of common sense experiences as widened, deepened, directed, refined and enriched by such reflection, without them losing their qualitative particularity and concreteness; and if this does not mean reducing philosophy to an instrument of any one's practical or even political purposes, it is because within common sense itself there is the ground for a potential that goes well beyond any actual purpose, any actual determination of what such an enhanced experience might be, which also lies at the core of the logical-theoretical ideal of truth as an ultimate belief which would be independent of any particular inquirer's subjectivity (but not of inquiry as such). In other words, it is only through experience that commonsensical experience is finally critiqued, corrected and developed – and in its more practical side, philosophy would be closely involved with the countless forms that such a reworking of experience in practice demands; theoretically, it must at the very least constitute a standing challenge and invitation to all the special and thus possibly specious sciences – practical or theoretical – to always return in the last instance to experience, aiding them in such a complex, delicate task (Colapietro 2008, 2018). The philosophical dimension of synthetic science also contributes in a fundamental way to

this critical endeavour, because it pushes practice and theory one towards the other and always beyond their current particular or general boundaries; in fact, we may follow a recent suggestion and characterize synthetic science as “stereoscopic” (Paine 2022), that is, engaged in both the idioscopic and the cenoscopic in order to mediate between them in a fruitful way, both horizontally and vertically (another term would perhaps have to be coined to characterize specifically mathematical observation). As philosophical in the more theoretical sense, our critical framework will also have to facilitate such return to commonsensical experience by way of its most general articulation, serving as map and compass to navigate the seas that exceed any one subjectivity and objectivity. Renewed sensibility and significance will be its ultimate – though endless – empirical test.

Faithful to the experience of change and growth within an open-ended, still unfolding universe, pragmatist philosophy does not confine the real to the – practically or theoretically – actual world, a world that is already more or less predetermined so as to allow for effective action within it and representation of it (Short 2015). In reminding the special arts and sciences of experience, philosophy reminds them first and foremost of the full range of modalities that the real as experienced nature includes, articulating them. The real actual world of “what is” – including what has been and what will be – is not a foundational a priori of thoroughly predetermined things and events, but rather a limited part of the whole picture which is in fact arrived at through the other modalities of experience, thereby making science itself experientially intelligible at its roots. In fact, from such a modal point of view, philosophy can be said to mediate between the real actual world on the one hand and the merely-possible-yet-necessary world of mathematics – the world of “what must be” within the hypothetical world of “what might be” (de Waal 2005) – on the other. In doing so, it traces a full modal path that ends with that real actual world in its metaphysical foundation upon the inclusive real, and begins with the apparent – but still thoroughly real – world of “what seems”, of qualitative experience as abstracted from both its actual occurrence and its real conditions, a world Peirce assigned to what he mainly called “phaneroscopy” and today is usually referred to as phenomenology (Atkins 2018), though we will rename it – for the sake of (perhaps excessive?) aesthetic consistency in our terminology – “phenomenics” (marking it out as cenoscopic, not bound to any idioscopic “x-logy”).

Philosophy is therefore divided into three main branches, though by now the arboreal metaphor will probably feel inadequate, the branches being perhaps better imagined as a series of matryoshka dolls each implicitly including subsequent ones as its further determinations, up to the phenomenal and mathematical domains that are open-ended in their dealing with possibilities. These three phases of philosophy cover the modal spectrum: at one end we find phenomenics, which studies – as we have just said – the apparent world of “what seems” as such, that is, of whatever might possibly be present in any way whatsoever to any mind whatsoever as an immediate qualitative phenomenon in experience (but crucially including the appearance of what goes beyond appearances, such as reactions and mediations); on the opposite end we find metaphysics, which already studies the same actual world of “what is” that is studied by the special arts and sciences, but at its most comprehensive and general and abstract, mediating between philosophy and those arts and sciences which then go on to differentiate the real actual world into more and more actual domains; finally, between phenomenics and metaphysics, we find Peirce’s normative sciences or critics – as I will call it again for the sake of terminological consistency –, which rather mediates between the apparent and the actual world by studying the living, evolving world of “what ought to be”, thereby recognizing the actual world as an *actualized* world – that is, a still incomplete and thus ongoing, open-ended unfolding of processes (which of course also includes human beings as well as researchers: in fact a concept is true of any real object to the extent that such concept was shaped by – and ever stands up to – the living processes of inquiry to which Peirce devoted most of his work to, while appearance in its all-too-common negative sense must be understood with Dewey as being that which fails and therefore disrupts those living processes and others ethical or aesthetic in nature: Colapietro 2013b). Through the critical lens of philosophy, then, the real actual world comes to be seen as something that has to be arrived at, never a fully given – or taken for that matter – world. In other words, what actually is – or has been, or will be (these three amounting to varieties of the very same temporality, that of the past) – is the result of a real and yet more-than-actual process which also includes an irreducibly ideal dimension of value, of further evolution and development, or at least further change (since evolution and development also depend on the reality of contingency, accidentality and instability that both Peirce and Dewey acknowledged as fundamental: Colapietro 2018, 2020). Hence the horizontal classification is based on the idea that one cannot directly derive any

knowledge of the real world in all its modalities by exclusive reference to any one set of actual experiences turned into more or less rarefied, idioscopic facts: these facts are themselves intelligible only through the modalities as they are given and observable already in the processes of integral, ordinary experience; thus special arts and sciences can provide all sorts of interesting or unsettling data to philosophy, but the philosophical work will never be exhausted by indication of such data as if it self-evidently led to – instead of already relying upon, and only partially supporting – a certain philosophical outlook (which is why for Peirce logic – as part of critical philosophy – could not in principle be reduced to psychology, as if all the varieties, possibilities, potentialities, necessities etc. of reasoning and inquiry as such were already fully manifested by actual human minds; the idioscopic psychological study of the latter can of course be very helpful and insightful for philosophy, since after all we are human beings and can only pass through our human experience to get anywhere else, but – contrary to cognitivist tendencies even in pragmatist philosophical circles – philosophy must still critically re-work whatever material it takes from other sciences in light of commonsensical experience as a whole, appealing to it – reconstructed in the course of such endeavour – as its ultimate source of explanation and justification: Short 2007: 246-248, Bergman 2009: 44, Stjernfelt 2013).

Philosophy, like all inquiry, is omnivorous – it might indeed use specialized observations of all kinds, both theoretical and even more practical, especially through synthetic accounts; it just cannot explain and justify its own theories and practices by simply pointing to these sources as supposedly transparent, necessary and sufficient evidence, without also providing an account which, being laid out in terms of commonsensical experience, is made available to all for indirect verification through the clarified renewal of such experience in both its practical and theoretical declinations. This is also in line with Dewey's association of democracy to experience and experimentalism (Pappas 2008, 2019; Viola 2013), which has anti-authoritarian implications in its succeeding – though not entirely substituting – authority as an inadequate method to fix beliefs: philosophy must ultimately make its claims experientially apparent to whoever, initiated or not, it speaks to or – in a better scenario – converses with, without appealing to anyone's authority the way an expert in some practical art or theoretical science might do at least when the situational conditions and circumstances do not allow for that

return to common experience (as when a global pandemic strikes and some things must be done even before they are understood by everyone in a common way, though of course it can easily be argued that authority does not fare much better when it is built not on real trust but on salt and sand, and that its recoils and shortcomings can often be as disquieting as a pandemic). At any rate, if the vertical classification highlights the pragmatist aspect of Peirce's philosophy, the horizontal classification underlines his empiricism, which is "expanded" in that it takes up – like Dewey's empirical naturalism (Pappas 2016) – experience as a continuous whole, in all its qualitative and modal richness plus its critical potential for further developments (Short 2015). Experience is the seed of the sciences, of real actual knowledge as opposed to appearances not dualistically as phenomenon to noumenon, but rather synechistically as an outgrowth – an appearing outgrowth – of the other as its first hint, as its first sign. Critique must develop, not degrade appearances. As the 1903 version of Peirce's pragmatic maxim makes more explicit, there is a sensible and perceptual "gate" as well as a pragmatic one through which any concept must pass to enter into critical thought, and while they might otherwise often work independently – as when a first degree of clarity, recognition, is enough to get by – the pragmatic gate, as indeed an exit gate, must presuppose the other and is no less empirical than it is (Short 2017)

Accordingly, Peirce's philosophy is metaphysically realist – beside, of course, realist in the historicist sense (Viola 2020b: 219-226) – about all the modalities insofar as it is phenomenally possible to clarify them, by way of common experiences, in such a way as to bring different people fruitfully into accord about them (Lane 2017). By appealing to formal logic within mathematics – the only science that precedes it – for an insight into the reciprocally irreducible nature of monadic, dyadic and triadic relations only, Peirce's phenomenics discerns the famous ordinal categories of firstness, secondness and thirdness as the most basic orientations for observing commonsensical experience (our brief account is based, of course, on Atkins 2018). These categories identify vaguely – yet not at all obscurely – any phenomenon's main dimensions: firstness – the category characterizing phenomenics itself – corresponds to the qualitative dimension of experience, that is, what seems to be as such without any reference to anything else at all, like a monad; secondness corresponds instead to the reactive dimension of experience, that is, what seems to be with regard to something else that in some way opposes

it, like a dyad; and thirdness corresponds to the mediating dimension of experience, that is, what seems to be with regard to at least two other things that it combines together, like a triad. Now, what sets the empiricism based on these three categories apart from other varieties as an expanded empiricism is, as we have seen more than once, its synchistic assumption of continuity, which in this case makes it so that the categories are not cut off from each other, perhaps to then force them to correspond to similarly isolated mental faculties or entities altogether – sensation and reason, subject and object and so on – that only externally, subordinately and mysteriously manage somehow to cooperate in human beings. It is because of its synechism that phenomenics can be in itself a study of firstness and yet at the same time identify and clarify the other categories: in fact, secondness and thirdness – reaction and mediation – both have a qualitatively felt, immediate and thus “first” dimension to them, besides various degrees of degeneracy through which they can always fold back into firstness in a continuous manner. When we conjure in our imagination Peirce’s usual example for secondness, the irreducibly dyadic relation of struggle in pushing a door that does open and yet simultaneously still opposes us by resisting us, what we are experiencing – unless we actually go and open a door – is a degenerate case of the genuine experience alluded to, preserving its core quality though losing much of its reactive vividness: we can easily feel the struggle since we are so used to it in our everyday life, but it is still a much more attenuated feeling than the actual one, just like an imagined colour is never as vivid as an actually perceived one; and after all, we can vary at will the degree of this imaginary struggle with a fictional door, making it a heavy door that will be moved only by the mightiest of efforts on our part, or a light one that will move at the mere push of a finger. The same goes for thirdness, whose qualitative folding back is perhaps clearest in the case of words that gain – despite their arbitrariness (though often overstated and misunderstood) – a symbolic aura that makes them somewhat feel like whatever they refer to, especially if intense experiences are involved whether in euphoric or dysphoric ways, as it might happen with magical and ritual words on the one hand or with vulgar, “dirty” words on the other (both of which can then serve as metaphors to lend their qualities to other expressions). Although neither is reducible to the qualitative dimension, both secondness and thirdness clearly have a feel to them. This is also how, for example, we can immediately tell perception from action, the former being a struggle in which we are passively overwhelmed – even as what we perceive is of course also actively shaped

by the structure of our human bodies and brains (plus our cultural habits and tools of all kinds) – to the point that we usually forget the struggle altogether and mistake perception for purely immediate qualitative presentation (whether by reception from the external world or by projection from the internal world, according to one’s philosophical leanings). In the same way, this is how we can live so much at ease with a multitude of signs without necessarily stopping and thinking of them as such, unless we stumble upon some particular problem: our semiotic world folds back into a phenomenal world (Colapietro 2013b).

It is vital, then, to get a feel for this categorical continuity of experience as qualitative, immediate even in its mediations (which is how we should conceive of Peirce’s immediate interpretant of a sign: a suggestive, usually vague continuum of possible – and possibly conflicting – interpretations of the sign as submerged in the integral qualitative situation, working as a basis and starting point of any further interpretation). Let us imagine that we are resting in the park one afternoon and notice a little red spot in our field of vision: at first we vaguely take it to be a rose, but we soon realize that it is not, both because it has too regular a shape – it is flat and perfectly round – and because it seems to move together with our head while displaying no reaction at all to what seems to surround it, always remaining in its relative place within our field of vision; we might thus feel – as the reader can only try and verify by him or herself – that the spot cannot be part of the “external” world, but must rather belong to some “internal” one which is actually a projection we made into the world; and yet it will not stop also feeling irredeemably external to us, because we nonetheless cannot fully control it and move or transform or remove it in any way, so that we eventually feel it as simultaneously internal and external, stuck in a contradictory way between the two worlds (which might be a source of profound disturbance, like an earworm stuck in our head to repeat itself endlessly, and also a sign of an underlying problematic condition to be solved). This feeling has its reverse side in the phantasmal experience of something that is in the world but not of the world – in fact, it would perhaps be enough, to make a ghost out of it, for the little red spot not to move in perfect synchrony and accordance with our head movements, but rather stay or linger just a bit longer in its place relative not to the “internal” but to the “external” world: it will then neither fully react to our body nor to things, and yet – like those external things – it will still be resisting our control, even

more than in the first scenario. What then is a sharp opposition to dualistic eyes, in this case the foundational isolation of the “internal” from the “external” world, is but a continuum – and thus at times and in places a contradiction – to synechistic eyes; and this crucially makes sensible and flexible discernment of different cases – such as the ones just illustrated – not at all harder and messier but rather much easier and clearer than the alternative. Even when we imagine things in an intentional, self-controlled way – as we just did –, there is, as we will see later, a variegated element of external secondness in our imagination, which makes it possible for it to be a site of no doubt degenerate and hazardous but still potentially valid and very useful and malleable thought experiments: we can contemplate the possibility of a glass bottle falling on asphalt from a balcony on the third floor of an apartment building and coming out of the impact unscathed, but even then we still could not help but feel that it would be a miracle, while nothing of the sort is felt in imagining the same scenario with the same bottle exploding into a thousand pieces. There is no purely and absolutely “internal” world. Again, the same goes for thirdness, which also has its shades: a teddy bear fulfils its semiotic function for the child exactly by its ambiguous self-negation as a sign and substitute of his or her mother, so that the teddy bear feels in some way and to some degree as the mother herself does, not as a sign of the mother – such as the very word “mother” – would feel (though of course to a poet, to a singer or to an old enough Nintendo gamer that word might actually have a similar effect). But most fundamentally, what must be stressed is above all that this continuity of experience – including practice – is inherently processual in nature. Any phenomenic theory will already be led astray from the start if it axiomatically assumes and insists on experience as made up not only of discrete parts – or even domains –, but also of discrete, fully determined instants (if not of one and only one of such instants at all) Peirce as much as Dewey could be said to be “radically temporalist” (respectively: Schmidt 2022, Colapietro 2023b). Rather, experience unfolds over space, time and all sorts of relations: within a single instant – if such an experience can actually be imagined – there would be no way to tell the difference between our little red spot and the green grass surrounding it, since we could not move our head to begin with, just like no child could ever get immediately affectionate to his or her teddy bear (which is the basic error – only alluded to above – behind the usual overstatement of arbitrariness and conventionality in language, as if words could really arise into the world instantaneously by either individual or social decree, instead of growing together with the

people that grew with them: again, it is not at all easy and effortless for us to say “dinosaur” and think instead of a pen – and especially of a pen only –, even after having explicitly agreed beforehand with ourselves or with others to do so for some purpose). Our critics will then be more fundamentally processualist as well as pragmatist and empiricist, on synechistic grounds (themselves not foundationally given a priori, but fallibly proven as more fertile and fruitful within phenomenics). It is continuity – as also evidenced by the classification of the sciences – that allows for the marking of distinctions that hopefully make some difference within experience itself; and that is precisely what critiquing in general is all about. Philosophical pre-commitments of all stripes – metaphysical, critical or phenomenical –, as moving from and then back to common sense, are not something one can simply suppress, suspend or bypass at will; they must be made explicit and be tested by their fruits against alternatives. This is what we will try to do with regard to critics in this pragmatist framework.

1.1.1 – The Character of a Pragmatist Critics

This phenomenal richness whose surface we have just scratched is important for critical theory because it grants the proper place, within experience, to what is either less or – in a sense and with all due cautions – more than actually real, that is, to what is modally possible, potential or ideal. As we have seen, the role of critics within theoretical philosophy is to lead from the inclusive and indeterminate world of appearances to that of an actual reality made up of more or less exclusive, determinate objects; and this gap it fills through the continuity of some kind of processuality. But processes are constituted by various modalities, and can only be understood by reference to them: there can be no critique that does not refer to – at the very least – some implicit standard of value for what is critiqued, that is, some ideal, just like there can be no real critique toward anything which is either absolutely necessary or absolutely impossible. Phenomenal experience must therefore include a qualitative feel for both possibility and ideality beyond actuality, and we can see it does: we do ordinarily perceive a chair as something on which we may sit if we wish – though we do not have to –, and if it is a seat in a cinema and there is a number on it corresponding to the one written on our ticket, we also perceive it as something that we should – ideally at least – obediently sit on. Of course, it is just as clearly the case that most of the time our processual-critical experience is largely implicit, as long as it is not problematized by our often faulty, tentative correspondence

with reality; but when it does get problematic, it does so in such a way as to bring to light within the very process the awareness that something was in fact vaguely implicit all along: if I try to lift my usual glass of water but I fail – it feels so heavy that it appears to be glued to the table –, then I will know explicitly, perhaps for the first time, that I have always been expecting glasses to be easily liftable (a more than reasonable expectation that one negative experience will not dismiss, of course, if anything pushing one to first look for the peculiar conditions and circumstances that make this case rather an exception than a new or modified rule). The same can be said for ideals or for desires more generally, whose messy opacity and obstinacy and plurality to our very eyes is actually one of the central concerns of critics, especially in its ethical dimension: we do experience a pull, a call for action – or at least reaction –, from things we value, but we can then be proven just as wrong about values – and feel just as surprised by ourselves – as about the truth of any merely factual statement, again problematizing experience and perhaps making explicit something that was implicit already; it is what happens when we get what we desired but feel disappointed or even disgusted by it, and by way of inquiry and reflection eventually come to see that what we really but implicitly desired all along was recognition from a certain group of people whose desires we never shared, but rather have unsuccessfully tried to assimilate. The ways, kinds and degrees of such problematization are among the main features of critics, and they can also get quite tangled up. When we tiredly scroll through the huge film catalogue of some online streaming service with no idea as to what to watch, we may both perceive a paralyzing excess of “objective” possibilities and a frustrating lack of clarity on our part about our “subjective” desires, which could otherwise exclude many of those possibilities to focus on a limited set of more manageable alternatives. Critics thus partly consists in clarifying and developing our experience of modality – on phenomenical grounds – and the language surrounding it, especially but not exclusively as it directly concerns critical reflection. There is indeed no moral sensibility without modal sensibility (Short 2015).

Now, if critics is to mediate between the apparent and the actually real – the latter being, again, not a separate domain but a development of the former into a reliable object for practical or theoretical purposes –, and if this comes about through a modal spectrum that includes the possible, the actual and the ideal (though these are perhaps best left to metaphysics; Lane 2018), then critics cannot be a matter of wholesale nor-

mativity as opposed to either “subjective” experience or “objective” reality: normativity, or criticality in general – since the normative already inflects critique in a certain direction as primarily if not exclusively concerned with “norms” –, must be seen as emerging from, culminating and then perhaps again dissolving into experience, again in a continuous way (Colapietro 2011, 2013). In other words, critics cannot be wholly and evenly critical as if it stood in isolation from and opposition to phenomenics and metaphysics. Its force cannot be as totally, definitely, immediately and monotonously intense as a set of theological commandments, categorical imperatives, social laws, utilitarian rules or hedonistic impulses can often be, each in its own partisan way. Moreover, not only the degree but also the very modes of criticality cannot be univocal, if it has to accommodate in its continuum the plurality of ethical approaches we have just alluded to, which are indeed tied to genuine sources and aspects of our critical experience, even though they are in tension with each other and can lead to contradictory, reciprocally irreducible ideals. We will follow Dewey in not rejecting a priori the internal conflicts and tensions of experience, but rather trying to clarify them by articulating the critical sources in both their irreducibility and their interrelatedness within the continuum of experience, as he tried to do by approaching the good, the right and the virtuous as independent and potentially conflicting factors of morality (Fesmire 2021). Our framework is, on the whole, clearly Peircian in character, as stated already: we see limitations – though often fruitful ones for his own philosophical development – in Dewey’s anti-systematicity, his sometimes overstated contextualism and particularism and thus hypersensitivity for the actual as opposed to other modalities, which are thus forced to operate less explicitly – together with the whole dialectical nature of his thought at large, obscured by his (understandable) need to distance himself from whatever dead end the Hegelian or classical versions lead to (Colapietro 1996) –, and therefore also in his somewhat exaggerated, wholesale suspicion for the speculative and the universal (Colapietro 2000) and symmetrical faith in the scientific particulars as philosophically significant, grounded on the lack of an explicit distinction between cenoscopy and idioscopy as part of a comprehensive classification of science. However, if our explicit theoretical framework is Peircian, what lies within the frame is as Peircian as it is Deweyan, one side hopefully working as a creative counterweight as well as corrective to the other (though we will have to leave such confrontation in the background, since addressing it openly at all its specific problematic junctures would require a whole thesis

in its own right). In fact, this approach might be the best fit for a critical theory which acknowledges different modes and degrees of critique, different levels and sources and ideals, contradictory while continuous with each other: Peirce's more logical and theoretical bent – though not at all without ethical and aesthetic dimensions or roots – contrasts with Dewey's more aesthetic, ethical and practical inclinations in a way that corresponds somewhat to the internal divisions and tensions of critics itself. In our view, at any rate, Dewey's thought itself already goes beyond, in the actual work it carries out, limitations such as those just pointed out, which might rather be bound to the need for a rhetorically definite attack against traditional, "unmodern" understandings of philosophy (Hickman 2013).

As for our framework, the place and further tripartition of critics within Peirce's classification of philosophy, as seen through the lens of the three categories, seems to lend support to our reading with respect to its internally complex, continuous and contradictory character. Although it has been argued that Peirce moved on from a view of his normative sciences as a philosophical phase of genuine secondness – that is, genuine opposition, struggle, discrimination – to a view that instead binds it to the processuality of genuine thirdness and at most to its degenerate degrees, these views are not necessarily incompatible, even while clearly being in tension with each other (Herdy 2014). In fact, it is our position that both of them are needed to get a full sense of the character of critics: critics can be thought of on the whole – that is, before its further analysis – as that phase of first philosophy which is centred on secondness, on the dyadic experience of a forceful discrimination of right from wrong in all its varieties – classically the triad of beauty, goodness and truth –, even while recognizing that such an experience cannot be entirely reduced to pure secondness, as if "right" and "wrong" were actual features of things externally, unilaterally imposed and impressed on us without our participation, or conversely expressed and imposed by us on an indifferent world, but must rather be understood as a genuine, irreducible but not exhaustive component of an encompassing experience which is, as processual, triadic in nature. The dyadic experience of one's new pair of shoes as bad because painfully tight, to the point of having to stop from time to time in order to rest one's feet, is genuinely second in nature even while intelligible only with reference to an encompassing triadic process and practice of walking, and depending on it. In other words, the secondness that characterizes critical discrimi-

nation is both the secondness of degenerate thirdness – that is, a dyadic differentiation as generated by or otherwise related to a process – and genuine secondness full stop, continuous with other cases, down to the most mechanical physical interactions, of such genuine secondness (and after all originating from and at any rate still bound to those other cases: it is first of all the forceful perception of one's own shoes as actually painful that critically problematizes one's experience). As we have seen, this is already true of phenomenics: although it focuses on the firstness of experience, it is also indirectly or implicitly concerned with whatever else presents itself as firstness, as qualitative, including the reactions and mediations without which no quality could ever be actually, explicitly experienced as such, so that it is already within phenomenics that all three of Peirce's basic categories arise. This is then how we should look at Peirce's eventual tripartition of critics in aesthetics, ethics and logic, even though he does not seem to have fully and consistently thought of them as displaying different modes and degrees of normativity (besides indirect clues, such as his struggles with the justification of one aesthetic ideal over any other, or his distinction between interpretants that are practically certain and useful enough to be actualized for the time being and the final logical interpretant that one can only approximate in the long run as an ideal, and only insofar as he or she ultimately joins forces with a ideal unlimited community of inquirers: Liszka 2021a: 186-197, Short 2007: 182-183, 190). Each of the internal phases of critics can be associated on the one hand to certain characteristic modes and degrees of genuine secondness – in a continuous way, of course –, and on the other hand to one of the components of processual thirdness along with the respective genuine form of each. Hence our general approach is to think of aesthetics as the section which focuses on the firstness of critique, its qualitative dimension as continuous with qualities at large that fade and fold back into phenomenics, and the section which, even though inclusive of the subsequent ones – or rather precisely for that reason –, presents lower degrees of secondness or criticality overall; ethics would then focus on the reactive secondness of critique and accordingly exhibit higher degrees of secondness and criticality, while logic would finally focus on the thirdness of critique – its mediatic dimension – and show the highest degree of secondness, but not perhaps of criticality as a whole since, in virtue of the very intensity of its demands, it might be offset or superseded on ethical grounds. Ethics, as the second branch of the philosophy of secondness, will then be the pragmatic barycentre of our critics, extending left and right to what is otherwise only

implicit in it – an aesthetic ideal being implicit in the ethical pursuit of ends, and logical truth being implicit in the ethical peruse and use of means to reach them. This way the mediation between what appears at first and what is actually real in a latter instance – both practically and theoretically, that is, both in action and in expectation – can happen without any explicitly or implicitly dualistic denigration of, or insistence on, appearances as opposed to reality in one of many such perennial holy wars.

The three phases of critics may also be expressed in the form of general questions highlighting their practical dimension. In Peirce's view, logic inquired into what and how we should think, as an extension of the ethical inquiry into what we should do and how we should act, which in turn could be taken to be an extension of the aesthetic inquiry into what and how we should feel at all. The exact formulation of such background questions is still unsettled, and there would probably have to be many versions anyway, depending on what aspect of each phase of critics one wants to stress: logic, for example, can and must also be framed in the heuristic terms of inquiry, but is also more allied to the theoretical side of science in being concerned with expectation, that is, with what would happen to and through its objects regardless of one's own subjective feelings, actions and thoughts; and yet the two aspects and their related interrogations ultimately come together, since among other things we should expect our very expectations to fail at some point and thus push us to inquire, while such inquiry nonetheless shows us that the bulk of our expectations are good enough to go by in practical affairs, and thus probably true – at least in the general aspects of reality they do grasp – even in theoretical terms. Moreover, while being primarily prospective in a pragmatist framework, the leading questions of each phase of critics would also have to be formulated in retrospective ways concerned with the intelligibility and justifiability of past feelings, actions and thoughts; it goes without saying that these two directions can enter into tension and conflict in all sorts of ways, the recognition of a past fault in one's own conduct leading for example to a traumatic paralysis inhibiting further action instead of directing it and developing it prospectively. Aesthetics, ethics and logic may each display a different typical combination and articulation of prospective and retrospective reflection, and thus a different relationship to temporality; we will touch on this later. What all of this seems to confirm is the need for a pluralist, synechist approach. The overall degrees of criticality suggested earlier also appear to accord with the main objects of

critique as identified by practical questions: our actions may indeed be the one thing we have the most direct control over, while feelings we can often control only after they have already aroused by reaction, making their transformation an uphill struggle full of indirect attacks on ourselves, and thoughts we can fully control as such only to the extent we can rely on a community of inquirers and access all kinds of resources, instruments and techniques in the long run and the large range of inquiry. These objects can get misaligned as well as entangled in ways that can lead as much to their coordination as to their contradiction.

Besides their ties to the phenomenical categories, the modes and degrees of criticality, the prospective or retrospective temporality and their practical translations, the three phases of critics will also be found to operate in the main at different levels of subjectivity. Even in the already subjective because practical terms just employed – feelings, actions and thoughts –, a feeling as reactive can be said to belong to both subject and object in the overall unique situation they are continuous parts of, in which they correspond – that is, respond together and to each other –, while thought aims at well-defined objects which are independent as much as possible from any particular subject (though this is then also made possible by the expansion and multiplication of subjects in a communal inquiry). This seems to point to aesthetics and logic as respectively pre-subjective and post-subjective in their main scopes, the one operating at the level of the inclusive qualitative unity from which subjectivity and objectivity emerge, the other operating at the level of objectivity when detached from its original ties to some particular subjectivity; ethics would then be the phase of critics most directly concerned with subjectivity in all its shapes and shades, emerging from aesthetic continuity on the one hand and giving in turn rise to logical objectivity on the other (while, again, potentially conflicting with them). The categorical analysis bears out this reading: aesthetics, as we have said, is associated with the qualitative firstness and thus unity – no matter how infinitely differentiable – of all experience, while ethics is tied to the reactive secondness that first distinguishes a subject from its objects through the resistance of the latter to the action of the former, and finally logic is allied to the mediatic thirdness that doubly separates those objects from subjectivity in discerning them from signs on the one hand, and from interpretants on the other. As arising from phenomenics, critics has no fixed boundary, no inherent a priori level of subjectivity that does not also have something ei-

ther wider or narrower operating besides it. Hence the subjectivities it has to account for can take many different forms, not necessarily human ones. After all, the scope of Peirce's phaneroscopy – as philosophical, not psychological – is not limited to specifically human experience but rather includes any possible experience with no exclusion whatsoever, even though as human beings we can of course only deal directly with and access our own experience, and any other experience only through the mediations of our own native endowment (Atkins 2018). Such an endowment, though, includes the potentiality for its own cultural reshaping that can lead to new forms of experience. In fact, humanity is always already post-human: we can conceive of profoundly altering or reconstructing our very embodiment by way of technical intervention, and this would impact our very sensibility down to its bodily roots, making it not at all a total impossibility that we might one day come to share more directly even in the way a bat feels. There is thus strictly speaking, especially in theory, no a priori limitation of the philosophical common sense to the commonsensical experience of human beings (and even less, of course, that of actual human beings as they presently are), even though de facto it is limited – in an explicitly “anthropomorphic” way – to our current humanity, especially insofar as it best represents the very capacity to critically learn from experience (Bergman 2009: 88-92). We can define “human” as precisely the form of life that can critically exceed and extend its boundaries in various ways and degrees even up to the point of transforming its very body, taking up other forms of life and experience and thereby indeed come to conceive of this otherwise mere possibility of a phenomenal common sense. If we took this road, however, we would have to make sure to leave explicitly open the possibility of very different forms of humanity with different animal embodiments – something that human cultures has always been fond of probing and exploring (Remotti 2013), as imaginatively expressed in anything from myths to comic books, but that still remains today little more than a possibility. To avoid all too easy misunderstandings, though, it may still be wiser not to generalize “humanity” in such a way as to identify it with critical subjectivity as such, and rather speak of different kinds and degrees of subjectivity in various forms of life, and at various levels of complexity. The same goes of course for spatiotemporal boundaries: phenomenal study is not theoretically limited to what can be currently experienced by us here on Earth, though it is indeed practically limited to this as far as immediate experience goes. What this means is that it is within the mediation of critics that a distinct subjectivity – along with objectivi-

ty as its correlate and also as irreducible to being such a particular correlate – gradually emerges (then again culminating, and perhaps dissolving, with criticality itself), setting the scene for the distinction between “psychical” and “physical” objects – and sciences – within metaphysics (Short 2007: 60-66). This can already be read into Peirce’s idea of subjectivity as rooted in critical agency – not vice versa –, his idea of the self as essentially tied to the capacity of living beings for self-correction, self-control and self-critique (of which an excellent account still remains Colapietro 1989). Humanity is distinctive in that it is especially self-critical and therefore no doubt peculiarly subjective, but there is of course continuity with all forms of life, the simplest of them already being a self-maintaining and self-reproductive form of an evolving, developing order that individuates itself in a bounded body within the environment it has to correspond to, where it also individuates – by way of its very activity – some range of meaningful and more or less distinct objects to correspond with (Nurse 2021, Johnson & Schulkin 2020). Critics should thus be inclusive, along with all modes or degrees of criticality, also of all kinds and degrees of subjectivity as emerging within the continuity – and against the otherness – of the world, even while recognizing that it is only from the paradigmatic vantage point of critical subjectivity in its fuller sense that other kinds and degrees of subjectivity can be properly understood as such. The three phases of critics more specifically take us away from the world and then back to it, aesthetics and logic being, as we noted, respectively less and more than subjective in their pointing beyond to the world as an evolving order to participate in from within in the one case, and (as if) from without in the other. Peirce’s ideal of the scientific spirit – not without Christian overtones – as not only self-critical but also self-sacrificing, because dedicated to a communal and intergenerational endeavour whose ultimate result and meaning lie so far off in the future of the “long run” that no present inquirer will still be around to fully witness and enjoy them, clearly illustrates both logical post-subjectivity and its hyper-critical character (Nubiola 2005).

If this pluralized continuum of critics we have just sketched is to be preserved as such, without reducing the various phases and factors and aspects to any one of them, each critical phase must include its own independent version of the critical framework, though connected to the others (whether in a coordinating or contradicting way). This is what semiotics was in Peirce’s view: a preliminary – and thus in itself pre-critical –

“grammar” for logic, built around the core processual relation of semiosis as a triadic mediation between an interpretant and an object through the sign (Liszka 2021a: 70-91). Again, categorical analysis repeats itself recursively, so that if we further subdivide each critical phase into three parts, the first one – that containing the “grammar” for that phase – will be associated with the unique quality or firstness of its peculiar kind and degree of critique; critique being a triadic process itself, its three grammars will then revolve around a triadic relation of mediation such as the logical one of semiosis, each one continuously blending with the others. What we will try to do here is precisely to provide a basic sketch and sense of what these grammars might be in the cases of aesthetics and ethics, following Liszka (2021a) both in its account of a Peircian grammar for ethics, and in the very idea of attempting an extension by analogy of logic’s tripartition to the other critical dimensions. The triadic form of these critical grammars also points to an extension of the idea of “mediation” beyond and behind the strictly semiotic: a medium can be the means of action, or the milieu and material of existence and experience; ethical and aesthetic forms of mediation thus inherently support or sustain the logical form of semiosis in our framework. Of course, just like the semiotic triad does not by itself constitute a complete semiotics and can also be complicated further beyond its core triadicity, our sketch of two other critical triads is not meant to be taken as more than just that, a basic and unfinished sketch. Our purpose, here, is merely that of outlining what merely amounts to a (hopefully) promising line of further research. Insofar as our thematic case study – the discourse around a “minimalist lifestyle” – is concerned, in fact, a sketch will no doubt be far more than enough to illustrate the complexity of critical experience which, as we will see, that discourse seems incapable of handling.

1.1.2 – A Note on Semiology

As part of synthetic science, a classification of the sciences has many uses for sciences on the whole practical-theoretical spectrum, which after all can be kept together in the works and interests of one and the same researcher. An overview of the comprehensive scope and depth of science as continuous with practical or poietic arts and everyday commonsensical experience may counterbalance the repercussions and shortcomings of an excessive division if not fragmentation of labour, with all the intellectual myopia that comes with that, or disciplinary sectarianisms of various stripes. In a similar way, such a map of the sciences may foster communication and cooperation among different fields,

whether technical, scientific or philosophical, always pushing towards critical integration, in practice as well as in theory. On the other hand, even while striving for integration, the map can also aid in opening up – even at the cost of some more differentiation – new hypothetical spaces for further inquiry (which is how Peirce thought of semiotics: Bergman 2009: 47), besides clarifying and challenging existing distinctions and differences in academic disciplines. All of this may then lead to all sorts of transformations even in educational approaches, curricula and so on, as well as in divulgation practices of all kinds, and more generally the archival work of the organization and distribution of recorded empirical or experimental data and all forms of knowledge, however textualized. From such transformations within schools or other educational settings to those demanded by social problems of all kinds is but a small step, as Dewey’s education-based philosophy is premised on (Zamora 2021), though a developmental trajectory is of course also implicit in Peirce’s philosophy as well (Cashmere 2018). The classification of the sciences can thus be a critical catalyst for disciplines to reflect upon what it is they are actually doing with their research, what they are looking and waiting for. They do not necessarily have to coincide with any one science, finding a singular lot in the classification to claim as their own, because a discipline is first and foremost an academic institution, so that its criteria – a varying blend of practical and theoretical factors – are different from those characterizing the sciences in the classification: a discipline has etymologically to do with learning, with acquiring a more or less set way of doing things as crystalized in a traditional canon of past authors and their works, in a surrounding constellation of more didactic materials to be taught and divulged, in all sorts of historical and social conditions and circumstances of the academic institutions sustaining them, and so on. Hence, if synthetic criteria had to be recommended for a specific classification of disciplines – not as they actually are, but as they would be given enough thought to their organization –, they would be primarily pedagogic in character, having in fact much more to do with what makes sense to teach and learn together as part of a certain curriculum than with the overarching objects which more or less unify practical and theoretical inquiries. Of course, this is a bit of an exaggeration, because the two sets of criteria are intimately bound together: all kinds of scientific research presuppose education in general and in particular alike, while education in turn cannot be understood as a mere transmission of information apart from critical formation in how to go about reflecting and inquiring on one’s own. Still, the gap is there at least in prin-

principle, and there is no reason to force its closure one way or the other, since there is nothing inherently wrong in a discipline aggregating what on a classification of the sciences appear as distinct or distant fields and factors, at least as long as it clearly, reflectively acknowledges and accepts the aggregation as such with all its challenges, its internal tensions and contradictions, which – despite the discomfort of doubt – can be part and parcel of what goes into making a discipline fertile or useful in its own way. The classification of the sciences is not an external and complete perfect order to be superimposed upon scientific communities in such a way as to make researchers exclusively work on one coherent and consistent inquiry only, but rather indeed a map which can help them navigate the rough seas of inquiry (and of critique at large), whatever and however complex their intended trajectory. It is a fallible, unfinished map derived from the historical development of modern sciences as based on various kinds of communities of inquirers, yet it is no mere description of such communities, because it aims at their further determination, differentiation and development. A particular inquiry might be said to belong to this or that science overall, but a community at whatever level also has its practical dimensions, since it needs to sustain itself – first of all educating and initiating individuals into itself –, and also necessarily engages the natural and social environment that it does not only study but first of all inhabit; and practical synthesis of inquiry may differ and conflict with theoretical synthesis.

As put forth at the outset – though it is of course no news to semiologists –, we take semiology to be a particularly heterogeneous discipline. It does contain, both in its Peircian and Saussurian lineages – whose basic tenets we see as on the whole incompatible (agreeing, from this point of view, with Short 2007: 16-18) –, its philosophical theories of sign and semiosis (even though it often does not think of these theories as philosophical in nature, of course), and thus it does also operate at the level of “semiotics” in Peirce’s sense, even within a broadly critical context – at least in its origin –, but there is also much more and much else than that, even if we set aside its deep ties to linguistics. On the whole, semiology has progressively established itself as an idioscopic – that is, strictly “scientific” – study of all kinds of sociocultural phenomena insofar as they are forms of communication embodied in certain media, consistently expanding its scope to cover every corner of culture – literature, cinema and the arts, religion, food, fashion, games and videogames, and yes, also lifestyles –, with the corresponding ex-

plosion of its sign theory: the sign has been progressively displaced by the text, and this in turn has been superseded by whole cultures and discourses on the one hand, and by experiences and practices on the other (all of this being vaguely held together as a study of all phenomena of meaning-making, of “sense” and semiosis). Although its claims to scientific status vary in accord with the sensibilities as well as rhetorical strategies of each community and researcher, in this form semiology can indeed be said to be scientific in the idioscopic sense of our classification, because its leading purpose is usually that of studying – often in competition with other disciplines in the social or human sciences – those actual sociocultural phenomena it indeed studies, since they are more than case studies engaged with an eye to developing the philosophical theory as such. By itself, the ambivalence of semiology with regard to theory is not surprising, because every discipline relies on a theoretical background which has to be more or less unquestioningly employed in the inquires as well as taught in the formation of new inquirers: this, by itself, does not make it any less idioscopic in character; what does make it ambiguous is the fact that its strong theoretical roots push it to position itself as a meta-discipline for other, less theoretically oriented ones, in order to provide them with principles and “tools” in the way more basic sciences do with respect to less basic ones in Peirce’s classification of the sciences (Short 2007: 60-66). Hence we can find semiological research on the whole philosophical-scientific spectrum: philosophical and theoretical reflections, philosophical assistance to the scientific researches of other disciplines (although usually unasked for), and its own scientific researches; this is where the risk of either taking its philosophical theory as sufficient unto itself or of pursuing inquiries which are but surrogates of those of others – for example, sociological and anthropological inquires simply redressed in semiological terms – comes from (which is why we would favour the intermediate positioning, openly acknowledging and pushing further the hybrid nature of semiology, with its contradictions and all, in order of aiding both philosophical and scientific inquiries that exceed it). In addition to this, it goes without saying, there is also the technical application of semiological theories to practical activities related to communication in marketing, web design or design tout court, commercial data analysis and so on. But, more importantly, we might even say that semiology can also be found across the heuristic-synthetic spectrum, as its philosophical and socio-anthropological origins combined have pushed it to study the forms of culture as such – a study which may be included in the synthetic sciences. In fact, the one-sided theoretic-

cal bent of Peirce's synthetic science, which to some extent abdicates its mediating role, might be offset and remedied in an extremely fruitful way by a complementary alternative offered by the semiology of culture in the wake of Eco's theoretical legacy of rhizomatic encyclopedism (Lorusso 2010: 96-126; Violi 2017), which – like Peirce's architectonic ideal as *philosophia ultima* – has something of a cosmic ambition baked into it (Vinci 2015). That would make synthetic science much more attentive, for example, to all the ins and outs of all kinds of archives and texts or any other sort of recording, as well as to the practical as well as theoretical sides of their organization, maintenance, expansion, diversification and so on.

Observed through the prism of Peirce's classification of the sciences, semiology's heterogeneity is thus clarified in a way that, we believe, could be very helpful in mediating both among semiologists of different stripes, lineages and interests, and between semiologists and other researchers in both natural and social sciences. Semiology's diversity is a strength insofar as it does not become a source of confusion, but is instead critically, consciously embraced and handled. A crucial condition of this embrace is a radical acceptance of semiology's inherent insufficiency – though this is true of any science or discipline in some way and degree –, because that is but the other side of the coin: if semiology must work as the transdisciplinary “platypus” that it often prides itself as being, then on the one side it will have to acknowledge its need for deeper philosophical roots – especially aesthetics and ethics –, while on the other side it will also have to recognize that its study of socio-cultural phenomena does not differ in nature from that of sociology, anthropology and so on, and will therefore have as much to draw from them as they will, in turn, enjoy its surely useful assistance; moreover, setting aside practical applications – with regard to which the most we can say is that, like every application of research, it will do well to be as self-critical as possible –, semiology will have to be at least aware of its synthetic import, especially when it studies still living (sub)cultures as more or less coherent wholes, because any such study is at least weakly and potentially an intervention in the constitution of those cultural wholes, even when it strives and manages to only make explicit the implicit coherence that lies within them. As we have admitted already, our thesis is evidently such a platypus, consisting of a philosophical framework in this theoretical part, and then a rhetorical analysis of an actual discourse in the thematic part – which is mostly an idioscopic endeavour, and yet

is primarily concerned with the ways in which its object, the “minimalist lifestyle”, manages or not to rhetorically form a cultural whole, in this case indeed a distinctive, integral lifestyle (as we have already revealed, it only minimally and problematically achieves wholeness). Of course, much more than a good exemplar to imitate, our work is an example of the weight and difficulty of this task, of the risks of trying to hold together the pieces of the platypus, since we have in many ways failed to walk the road to its (momentary) end. This implicit lesson and warning should be just as useful, but at any rate we do hope that there is in our work some positive indication and inspiration for semiology as well, some promising line of inquiry to be pursued further, even though mostly left implicit. The most important such indication, preliminary to the sort of reconstruction we had wished to carry out, is precisely the need for a critical self-examination of the discipline in light of the pragmatist account of inquiry – strictly scientific or not – as also expressed by Peirce’s classification, rooted as it is in his whole philosophy. As the title of our thesis indicates – though it was our intention to develop this point fully –, one of the threads that has gone through all of our research has been that of common sense: on the one hand, being “philosophical” in the Peircian sense of cenoscopic inquiry, this theoretical part is an articulation of a critical common sense, one whose aim is to clarify the different dimensions of commonsensical experience more or less available – though always fallibly so, of course – to any mature human being; on the other hand, the thematic part will precisely demonstrate how the wholesale “critical” rejection of common sense – like that which puts minimalism at odds with itself – fails to offer such a critical articulation, and paradoxically circles one back to that very common sense that had been vainly rejected. It is most of all a re-evaluation of common sense in its full scope that, in our view, is the needed keystone for that self-examination of semiology we have just auspicated. As for everything else, in this case too much good work is being done already, and though we have not (yet) managed to directly contribute to this very hard task, we believe that a deeper engagement with pragmatist philosophy would be vital for that. Eco’s own implicit but quite tangible critical commonsensism has been rightly singled out, and has led to what amounts to much more than a first step on the way towards an explicit re-evaluation of common sense (Lorusso 2019, 2022). The need – foregrounded in philosophy as cenoscopic – of getting at some experiential common ground in order to communicate, including everyday literal or fictional examples, and the public, social dimension of experience of an always

– at least potentially – common world, with all the crises, critiques and their regulative criteria that this entails, are central to both Eco’s theory and his praxis in doing semiology, and they are all facets of common sense. However, we do believe that it is possible and necessary to go even further than this. For one thing, understanding that semiology’s philosophical theories are, as such, part of a broader explicit articulation of a critical common sense – one that goes all the way down to ethical-practical and aesthetic roots – would already turn common sense into something more than either a rhetorical-philosophical device or a presupposition of signification and communication: it would turn it into an ideal, as much as that of the encyclopaedia is, and – in our view – necessarily coordinate with it in a dialectical way, neither one subsuming the other (which is likely the main risk of semiological accounts of common sense: the reductive subordination of it to the encyclopaedia as merely one discrete component of it, that having to do with the statistically median, normalized level: Violi 2017). More than has been done until now, it is necessary to conceive of common sense as a dialectical partner, on par, for the encyclopaedia – two poles of cultural synthesis, we might say –, relating them in a processual way that will be similar to that in which, within critics, aesthetics is related to logic⁴ (the ethical-practical middle ground being identifiable, instead, with good

⁴ Such matryoshka effects are a fundamental feature of Peirce’s classification of the sciences insofar as it is based on the phenomenic categories, and it allows each region and element on the map to shed light on others in illuminating ways, though that is always to be decided by trial and error and not by mere a priori formalization of the map. Common sense is first to the thirdness of encyclopaedia, even though – as the critical articulation of it highlights, with a whole continuum of different forms of thirdness or mediation – this does not mean that it is purely immediate or qualitatively sensible in a dualistic way, and vice versa for the mediatic, cognitive nature of the encyclopaedia: they are, as we have said, continuous, and because of that also complex and contradictory in their own way. The categorical matryoshka could indeed also be pushed further down one more level, from the dialectic of the three critical dimensions of experience to the more basic dialectic that will constitute, in our sketch, the grammar of aesthetics: the Deweyan dialectic between impulse and habit (with “crisis” as our added element of secondness). With regard to this dialectic, common sense would be primarily tied to impulse while the encyclopaedia would be associated to habit, despite the fact that both are aesthetic categories in our account, thus both closer to common sense than encyclopaedia’s rhizomatic webs of signs – both living and dead – are. This is made possible by the fact that, as we will see, impulse and habit are both contradictory and thus dialectically related: though habit marks the direction of the process, there is a positive role for impulse to play as well, so that on the one hand there are intelligent or at least flexible habits (as opposed to rigid routines), while on the other there are also sensible, pliable impulses for them to mediate and remediate (as opposed to abrupt caprices). Just like habit can never simply exhaust impulse – nor logic supersede aesthetics –, so the encyclopaedia cannot exhaust common sense, nor is it its task after all: while not at all coincident, the ideal of common sense and the ideal of the encyclopaedia largely overlap, dialectically depending on one another. From this point of view, at any rate, a rethinking of the encyclopaedia in light of common sense seems to be one with a dialectical rethinking of habit in light of impulse (and crisis): while the pragmatist idea of habit has been incorporated from Peirce into interpretative semiology (Lorusso 2015), the dialectical spin that Dewey has given to it has been missed so far, together with habits’ place within the critical landscape, in relation to ethical-practical intentionality and logical intelligence (and aesthetic interest). Far from being identical with mere regularities – collective or not –, habits both span all sorts of degrees

sense – the more or less critical, intentional subjectivity that is caught between the mainly pre-subjective background of common sense and the overall post-subjective network of the encyclopaedia). Of course, being dialectic rather than dualistic, this relation is predicated on the continuity between common sense and the encyclopaedia, each complex and contradictory in its own right and thereby each in need of the other.

As this last example shows, not only the heterogeneity of semiology does not constitute per se a problem, but its results also contain valid and interesting insights, resources and so on, even for the development of pragmatist philosophy. Our purpose here, though, is not that of identifying such offerings on its part, which would demand a work in its own right – as we have found out by trying it out anyway –, but rather that of making again explicit the relationship of our work to the semiological background and environment that it grew out from. We think that a synthetic framework such as that of the classification of the sciences could be of help in clarifying the various components of the semiological tradition and their reciprocal relations, but as we noted that would not mean necessarily making it any less heterogeneous and refreshingly pluralistic than it is at present, much less separating each component in such a neat way as to give each individual semiologist his or her own definite, isolated, stable and thus reassuring lot by default, neglecting the rest of the tradition. We also think that more clarity on the theoretical fundamentals of semiology would help as well, and yet we do not see a discipline's constitutional problems as being solely or mainly theoretical, nor the problems of researchers committed to it (who, by experience, are usually able to make quite good use of whatever theories and tools the discipline puts at their disposal at any one time – were it not so, the need for a theoretical reconstruction would already prove impelling by itself, without anyone having to try making some compelling case for it). Our view is that whatever state of crisis a discipline like semiology perceives itself to be in, it is of a piece with wider social conditions and contradictions of academic research at large and of education at every level, especially when it comes to the social or human sciences. These problems cut deeper than any theoretical concern could, but they are perhaps better ignored than mistaken for the crisis of a discipline, which can lead to a self-questioning of the kind that does not foster growth, as it has always already decided in favour of the discipline's value or even necessity, which it cannot genuinely doubt and

of flexibility or rigidity and underwrite the possibility of there being critical intentionality and intelligence that goes beyond them (though returning to them).

thus must eventually reassert (not unlike the way the minimalist discourse always reinstates itself). While such questioning is often fake or misguided and superficial, the time, effort and even nerve so often spent on it is all too real a waste. We will thus very candidly move away from all concern with the status of semiology as a discipline and proceed by assembling our own version of the platypus. We have stated what makes our project still a semiological project to our eyes, that is, apart from our background and environment, the fact that it is originally a critical-rhetorical study of a certain actual discourse; that is enough for us. In the course of research, the problematic character of the object – a “lifestyle” stuck between its aesthetic and ethical-practical dimensions, and between common sense and its discursive determination, differentiation and development (though constantly aborted) – has pushed more and more towards the philosophical-theoretical side of the semiological spectrum, and also centrifugally towards an (overly long) exploration of many alternative frameworks to draw from. A minimal part of the condensed result is this first theoretical part of our thesis.

1.2 – A Pragmatist Grammar for Ethics

Our starting point will be ethics, since it is here that – as we have noted – the core of any pragmatist critics is to be found: not only ethics is the second phase of the philosophy of secondness, but it also overflows into – by mediating between – the other phases, aesthetics and logic, in virtue of its continuity with them. In 1906 the ambiguity of ethics still pushed Peirce, in its last attempt to bring into focus the relationship of ethics to aesthetics, to suggest a further subdivision, that of ethics into an ethics proper (or “pure ethics”, as he called it in 1901-1902), which would study the ends and ideals to be adopted and would therefore be closer – as we will see later – to aesthetics, and an “an-ethics” or “practics” which would rather focus on the conformation of conduct to those ends and ideals; it is not surprising that he ultimately admits that the “lines of separation” between the normative sciences are secondary, since they form a whole (Liszka 2021a: 66-67). We certainly agree with this final emphasis on the ultimate continuity of critics, but we do think that its internal composition can and should be clarified and articulated in much more detail than Peirce ever managed to; in fact, this is of course one of the main motives behind our present sketch. Insofar as Peirce himself made more than one attempt at determining at least in broad terms the sections of critics in their dif-

ferences, our intention is the same as his – continuity, as we said, does not erase but rather sustains and even multiplies distinctions. However, we have already stated our aim as that of providing a pretty basic framework for a pragmatist critics, not a philologically Peircian one, despite borrowing the initial frame itself and as many good ideas and insights as possible from Peirce, one of our main theoretical sources. Hence the distinctions we will trace here are not all nor necessarily those Peirce traced, or would have traced if he had devoted more efforts in that direction. As said, our account for ethics will rely entirely on Liszka’s reconstruction of Peirce’s work on the normative sciences as taken synchronically in their more mature, post-1903 form (Liszka 2021a), though we will leave it at the threshold of aesthetics to give it a more Deweyan spin: while our work heavily leans on Liszka’s, we find that he follows Peirce too much in his discussion of ethics, losing sight of the complexity of the aesthetic dimension and its role as a ground for ethics and critics at large, as appears most glaringly in his total silence on ethics’ aesthetic roots and on the continuity of critics in the book that he published the very same year on a “pragmatist ethics” in general (Liszka 2021b), Our sketch is, of course, still compatible with his, and our approach still very sympathetic to Liszka’s own, whose proposal is – after all – explicitly more oriented to practice than ours. At any rate, here it will not be possible to get into differences and divergences between our results, such as, to cite just one example, the strong emphasis – somewhat safeguarded from its technocratic implications, but perhaps not as much as necessary – on problem-solving over problem-setting or problem-searching (, if not even troublemaking, all of which are essential when it comes to the continuity of ethics and politics – since the latter involves turning the unacknowledged problems of some and most into problems of all –, and which have not by chance their deepest roots in aesthetics.

It goes without saying that we are not concerned here with providing a full-fledged ethical theory, being rather more interested with its theoretical meta-normative skeleton in continuity with the rest of critics, along with its main overall features and workings. Otherwise, we would use Dewey’s mature and way more detailed pragmatist ethics as our basis and point of departure, modifying it or adding to it where needed. Instead, we will take a path that is Peircian in the main, As we said, although there are indeed a few important differences – none of which insurmountable, we think – between Peirce’s philosophy and Dewey’s, and although the ethical thought of Peirce is of course not as ex-

explicitly fleshed out as that of Dewey, we take their approaches and ideas to be quite compatible in both respects (and in fact, Dewey's mature philosophy clearly takes a strong though implicit turn towards Peirce: Prawat 2022). Dewey's independent factors of morality – aspiration for goods, obligation by duties and approbation of virtues (Fesmire 2021) –, for example, point to irreducible internal tensions of critical reflection as much as does the less than implicit acknowledgment, on Peirce's part, of the irreducibility of logic's ideal of truth to that of practical or ethical goodness understood as mere usefulness, and in turn of the ideal of goodness to that of aesthetic pleasurableness or even admirableness (Liszka 2021a: 1-14). Both take sociality as constitutive of the individual (Colapietro 1989, Levine 2021), and both take subjectivity as a correlative of agency, a self being a relational process whose character can only be understood through its conduct and vice versa, as Dewey puts it (Pappas 2008: 129-145). Both thus see through the modern moral philosophical bedrock of the dualistic opposition of self to other, egoism to altruism (MacIntyre 2016: 115-138), never losing sight of the continuity that allows for such opposition to ensue in the first place – whether in a genuine or deluded sense –, nor of the fact that any desire or self-interest must still be an interest in the world, realized through its materials (Levine 2021). Again, both take critique to be a matter of correcting or controlling the whole course of experience as it first gives itself commonsensically, impulsively and thus largely uncritically, through instincts and habits which are fine on the whole insofar as problems such as doubts do not arise within experience itself (Pappas 2014). Both take not only experience but also the imagination to play a fundamental role in all reasoning, including moral reasoning (Pappas 2016, Campos 2015), and with it – whether implicitly or explicitly – the qualitative situational richness that lies in the background, also filled up with all sorts of contingent, spontaneous, arbitrary, accidental, indeterminate elements (Colapietro 2013b). Moreover, they share not only an evolutionist horizon which pushed them both to recognize the ultimate (meta-)ideal with growth itself (again, Levine 2021, Liszka 2021a: 19-20), but also a profound historical as well as developmental sensibility in full continuity with it – whether under the banner of synechism or cultural naturalism, whether through cosmological musings or pedagogical reflections. We could of course go on for quite a few pages with this list of commonalities, but these should suffice as indications of the fundamental compatibility of Dewey's ethics with Peirce's general critical framework.

1.2.1 – Pragmatics as Ethical Grammar

It is Lszka's strategy we are following in modelling all of Peirce's normative sciences after the one he actually worked the most on – logic –, so that both ethics and aesthetics are internally subdivided by analogy with logic's tripartition into a (speculative) grammar, a critics proper and a (speculative) rhetoric (Lszka 2021a: 70-71). As mentioned earlier, a critical "grammar" in general is the preliminary stage which studies the most basic conditions, the essential elements as well as processual relations involved in the relevant phenomena as such of each critical phase – that is, what is needed for them to even be what they are at all. In the case of logic, such a grammar is semiotics, which studies the conditions for anything to work as a sign, the indispensable elements of any sign-relation along with all the possible classes of signs based on them and their combination, up to the sign-process of developmental growth of meaning from simple terms to propositions and complex arguments. Next, the "critics" proper is the core middle stage which studies the various forms of critical reasoning directed at the relevant value and ideal of each phase, which in the case of logic is truth: it is ultimately in their relations to truth that abduction, deduction and induction are to be distinguished, though not isolated, since they are also found to be – at least potentially in any actual situation – aspects or stages of a whole inferential process within which they cooperate (Bellucci 2018a). Finally, a critical "rhetoric" is the fulfilled – or rather fulfilling – stage which studies, in a more holistic way, the conditions for the whole process of critical reasoning to be sustainable and successful in eventually achieving its aims in the world, with particular regard to its constitution in a community and thus to the common formation of its individual and collective members; in a word, communication in Dewey's inclusive sense as community-making, communing, or in Peirce's sense as making continuous. In the case of logic, perhaps under the name of "methodeutic" – Peirce does not appear to have settled on one label and definition, probably because of the very holistic character of this stage –, rhetoric is tied most closely to communication in its narrow sense, and amounts to the conditions, especially of such a communicative, mediatic nature (but also including all methods of inquiry at large), for a community of inquirers to come together and approximate, as far as possible, that kind of ideal unlimited community which famously would – in long run – dispel doubt and settle belief about any real object (more than the methods of individual tenacity, social authority or a priori rationality by themselves would allow, though they might retain a role even after being surpassed

by the scientific method). Our aim is now to provide the basic outline of the first two stages – grammar and critics – for ethics and aesthetics, in order to then reflect upon them in light of the continuity of critics as the study of “the conditions of truth and falsity, of wise and foolish conduct, of attractive and repulsive ideas” (1906; CP.551). We are thus clearly looking for a meta-normative account mainly concerned with the very meaning of all the dimensions, levels, kinds, degrees and aspects that make up critical reasoning as such, instead of advancing this or that particular view of the true, the good or the ideal. Nevertheless, it must also be kept in mind that it is in fact a particular theory, founded as such on its own set of assumptions and potentially bearing all sorts of practical implications that might make it incompatible with many other views: like all philosophy for Peirce, it is both formal and positive in taking as “a positive fact about the universe” (n.d. CP 7.524) the possibility of reasoning logically at all about it even from within it in search of the truth, of acting ethically in search of the good as well as of experiencing it altogether aesthetically in search of the ideal; and as we have seen, such things as any other can be determined only in a fallibilist way through experience and experiments, in this case ultimately of an everyday, commonsensical character (Liszka 2021a: 68-69).

Overall, Peirce’s ethics – like Dewey’s, notwithstanding his understandable attacks on classical teleology as tied to a fixed hierarchy of predetermined formal essences culminating on one ultimate and superior end for the whole universe – is mainly teleological in kind, as against both deontological and consequentialist ethics (Colapietro 2017: 25-27). A felt imperative sense of duty is surely as important for Peirce as it is for Dewey, who acknowledged it as one independent factor of morality side by side with teleological aspiration: after all, such an imperative sense is what the bare secondness that characterizes and is engendered by all critical reasoning is in itself, a sense of some action or reaction as necessary, akin to – and continuous with – the experience of one’s impulsive instincts or deeply engrained habits; a response is called forth, whether it is a verbal response – as in a retrospective explanation and justification –, or rather a practical or even emotional one, and it is evoked with varying degrees of force but never without any. However, the imperative sense and its secondness are in Peirce’s view not immediately given as such, as either philosophically or theologically a priori – which is essentially the deontological approach to ethics –, because their very intelligibility in

each case still depends on reference to some end within an encompassing, mediating process that is triadic and broadly teleological in nature (as is true even when it comes to natural instincts, whose evolutionary explanation contains reference to some more or less vital function they serve with their forceful activity and reactivity, even though they have formed casually and spontaneously and only fortuitously ended up serving such function, which led, in the long run, to their retention and reinforcement and maybe to further modifications or adaptations). Dewey's "independent factor" of duty might seem at odds with this teleological approach at first, because he takes duty as that which is demanded or enforced by a community as a whole independently, indeed, at least in principle, from any good or bad that may follow from it; and yet, while the possibility of arbitrariness in duty must of course be acknowledged, such duty is unintelligible and irrational to the extent that it is arbitrary in both its contents and context precisely like an instinct is for the animal which may not even know the functions it serves, and might insist on enacting it even when it does not serve any – ultimately, if a duty is to be intelligible, whether or not it is also justifiable, it must be shown to serve a purpose either in its contents (for example, a social prohibition on incest – built upon and around the instinctual biological defence mechanism – as indeed advantageous for individuals as well as the species), or at least in its context (for example, an obligation to dress a certain way only as part of enforcing a hierarchy; a purpose does not have to be everybody's purpose, of course). Hence we will take Dewey's "independence" as indeed pointing to the plurality of sources of moral sense within experience, but taking these sources in a weaker sense as potentially in conflict, even unresolvable conflict, yet reciprocally related in general but definite ways within a primarily teleological framework. Peirce's account of critical reflection is of course as social in orientation as Dewey's, so that it has no problem acknowledging the social origins of its imperative moral sense in the internalized approvals and reproaches of others and the related – spoken or unspoken – rules they impose on the individuals all along their development, largely unreflectively and often independently of their justifiability. In the always possible conflict between the (immediate, apparent) good and the due, it is actually for the (mediate, real) good that duty at first largely overrides goodness, even at the cost of some arbitrariness and authority; and yet it is that further good that lies still, in the last instance, behind duty, even if in an unacknowledged, implicit or indeterminate manner at any one time. At the very least, what even the most arbitrary duties entail is the goodness of sociality itself,

of a certain community kept intact or interpersonal relationship held onto as they currently and inertially are, even at one's own expenses. A primarily teleological framework is one that accepts duty, even arbitrariness, yet insists that only sometimes – and only for the time being – a high price may be worth paying.

As for consequentialism, it is of course the case that consequences are taken into consideration in Peirce's and even more in Dewey's approach to critical reflection, since it is ultimately effects on the existing and experienced world that it is indeed about. The crucial difference lies in how consequences are understood: they are not transparently discrete and even quantifiable results that can be then counted as positive or negative according to fully predetermined criteria, whether based on individual needs and desires or collective requirements, and imputed to isolated actions or general abstractions thereof, carried on by just as isolated agents. The modally rich synechism of a pragmatist framework places actions within a wider underdetermined situation into which many different processual streams, as well as all kinds of contingencies and accidents, flow together in complex interactions whose consequences are ultimately ever on-going or open-ended, often to a large extent uncertain, unstable and uncontrollable, to say nothing of discrete quantifiability. The same modal synechism in its fundamental realism no doubt allows for general, abstract models not about particular situated actions but rather types of actions or lines of conduct, models which work as frames within which a discernment of consequences is facilitated, but – setting aside the fact that the models still would not even then be directly applicable to concrete situations as a simple, univocal set of rules – its understanding of consequences is still at odds with consequentialism in that reflexive repercussions on the agents themselves – transformed by their very actions as well as by the seeds and fruits of those actions in the wider situation – are definitely included, again making it impossible to neatly separate consequences and their value from situational conditions on the hand and the agent's character and conduct on the other: part of the consequences of an action may be a change in the agent's very desires and thus in the criteria of value – in fact, as we will see, this is what inherently happens to at least some extent in all critical reflection. Therefore, if consequences cannot be judged according to a fixed, definite set of commensurable criteria, in turn implicitly bound to a fixed and definite teleological set of ends simply taken for granted and kept beyond critical scrutiny, a primarily teleological framework is

still needed even if needlessly reducing all of ethical critique to consequences. While a reflection on consequences is of course part and parcel of critical reasoning, it is for Peirce and Dewey expanded beyond particular actions or even general lines of conduct, that is habits, practices etc., in such a way as to push beyond any predetermined subjectivity whatsoever and its concomitant limited criteria for an utilitarian accounting of results as good or bad. Whether it is realization of Peirce's ideals or Dewey's forms of life, the scope and depth of the consequences ultimately reaches out to a transformation both of oneself – as in virtue ethics, the more fertile and flexible yet still reductive of the modern ethical frameworks – and of the world one participates in. In this sense, a pragmatist critics is far more consequentialist than modern consequentialism, because in its processual-relational realism – which is after all its synechism – it does away with both fixed objectivities, such as isolated consequences beyond reinterpretation, and fixed subjectivities, such as isolated needs and desires or requirements beyond reconsideration.

Our critical grammar will then be a primarily teleological grammar. Our brief statements about the social nature and origin of duty and the expansive, inclusive, ongoing and open-ended scope of consequences will have made clear already that no predetermined teleology is assumed at all, either in the synchronic form of a hierarchical chain of beings or in the diachronic form of a necessary unfolding of stages, both traditionally associated with teleology as a leftover of classical philosophies. In fact, a predetermined teleology in these forms would be at most a degenerate form of teleology in Peirce's sense, if not a false teleology altogether: finality, in his evolutionist view, needs chance and spontaneity as much as determination and necessity, and is in fact their ever developing outgrowth, which continually mediates between them in the generality of thirdness; a fully preordained definite sequence of events could instead be exhausted – at least in its temporal dimension – by the secondness of a mere linear succession of state after state of things (but it could not then be experienced, of course, if experience is indeed inherently triadic). Peirce's teleology simply assumes that normativity is unintelligible apart from finality, that is, apart from reference to some end that would function critically as something against which to evaluate – positively or negatively – what actually has been done in contrast to what ideally should have been done. Hence he also assumes that there are indeed moral agents that are purposively directed towards various

ends with a certain degree of intentionality, self-control and self-correction in pursuing them (Liszka 2021a: 70-91): there is no norm without an end and no end without the pursuing of it, whether the end consists of a result extrinsic to the action itself or an ideal intrinsic to it. In characterizing intentional action as irreducibly teleological, Peirce opposes the teleological to the mechanical and thus proves to be no determinist in his realism toward final causality: while mechanical action, associated with secondness, is for him obtuse in its always producing the same determined result in the same determined way until all its various causes and conditions just disappear so that it stops, putting an end to the event without it being its end, intentional action – associated with thirdness – is more or less intelligent in that at its core it “does not determine in what particular way [the end] is to be brought about, but only that the result shall have a certain general character” (1902; CP 1.211), so that it only stops as such by itself as soon as it has achieved its own end, and when externally impeded – especially if it comes from a rational being – it will then “act in some utterly different way which will produce the same result” (1902, CP 2.66). Needless to say that Peirce allows for a continuum of intentionality that stretches between mechanical and teleological action through all shades of “teleonomical” action, that is, action that has finality mainly in the degenerate form of a general directionality – perhaps just statistical, yet nonetheless inherent to some level of analysis – based on a more or less rigid evolved pattern of behaviour, with lesser degrees of self-correction, self-control and above all self-conscious critique. Moreover, these forms of action are of course not reciprocally exclusive in any kind of agent, but rather progressively cumulative. In this respect, in contrast to most other animals, human beings are capable of a wider range of kinds and degrees of intentional action on this spectrum, up to the more self-reflective of critical actions, though a lot of it still is – and even has to be, by habituation – broadly teleonomical, even besides all the more or less automatic physiological and psychological processes operating on the background and sustaining our organism. At any rate, we must never forget that Peirce’s critique is not a psychologistic account intrinsically bound to the actual ways in which human beings think, act and feel, but rather a philosophical, meta-critical account whose aim is first of all that of clarifying as far as possible the ways any critical being or form of life – whether human or not, and whatever its embodiment – ought to live, think, act and feel to be considered such. In fact, if the general predicament of our world nowadays is any indication, there might conceivably be way better critical beings than human

beings currently are; and of course, critics and philosophy as a whole also have a practical side to them which consists, as we have seen, in clarifying common sense, thus potentially contributing to its on-going critical reconstruction, deepening or expansion. Still, it might very well be the case – even the philosophical case – that, as our pragmatist framework maintains, critical reflection is indeed inherently a more or less limited reconstruction, from within, of wider immediate and qualitative wholes uncritically had in experience both as given and as taken; or, in other words, that what any such reflection necessarily consists of – in its full arc – is a remaking of impulses into habits which, though distinguishable as such, are still of a piece with them and operate in a similarly uncritical fashion, to use Dewey’s key dialectical terms: habits may be functionally defined as post-critical in relation to impulses, but they can always further become the pre-critical, impulsive material of another round of critical reflection. Returning to experience in the last instance of critique entails eventually circling back to the uncritical, that is, to unreflective reactions – and related dispositions – as the bedrock of any action and thought. Hence the continuum of intentionality might generally map onto the continuum of criticality we suggested earlier for the three phases of critics.

Our “grammar” of ethics, then, consisting first of all – as indeed an “(art of the) letters” – of its basic, quite literally triadic ABC, that is, its key elements and conditions of possibility, will be a teleological and thus process-relational grammar. What the sign-object-interpretant triad is for logic’s grammar, semiotics, another triad must be for ethics’ grammar – which by analogy and terminological consistency may be named “pragmatics” –, such that some preliminary and by itself strictly pre-normative work may be done in view of clarifying the very nature of ethics’ fundamental questions. The central place of ethics within a pragmatist critics, however, also translates to the centrality of its grammar for critics as a whole, so that it is within pragmatic reasoning that the overall theory finds its paradigm as “the heart of rationality” (Colapietro 2017: 15): it is only from its standpoint that we can properly come to understand the more cognitive, theoretical and objective issues of logic on the one hand, and the more emotive, synthetic and subjective ones of aesthetics on the other, the former being a specification and the latter a generalization of such a pragmatic core (though, as mentioned, this does not mean that either one is reducible to it, each phase of critics also having its own ideals, potentially clashing with the others). In a sense, then, pragmatics can also be seen as the

embryonic grammar of all critics, which is partly what marks it as a pragmatist theory. This does not contradict critics' tripartition in the classification, where the whole expanse of aesthetics is found to precede pragmatics: the pre-eminence of pragmatics is to be located at the level of critics as not yet analysed in its phases; moreover, aesthetics corresponds – as we have just noted – to the less intentional, less critical shapes or stages of our theory, being in fact most concerned with the origin as well as destination of all critique in its continuity and conjunction with what is not yet critique, so that it is only with ethics that the nature of critics is in full display. Still, it is crucial to keep in mind, in what follows, that pragmatics and ethics operate within a wider, encompassing aesthetic background, that of a whole environing situation, as Dewey called it. Pragmatic subjectivity, as well as its semiotic correlative of objectivity, are carved out – without ever being cut off – from the continuum of a situation which is woven with limits but devoid of boundaries. And yet critique is first of all about marking distinctions that make a difference and clarifying them, starting from subjectivity.

In Peirce's view, an action can be criticized as such only to the extent that it was an intentional action – and more prospectively, we may add, to the extent that it contributes to some further intentional action. There should be no need by now to reiterate that it is not a dualistic matter of black or white, of mechanical necessity against some teleological free will beyond it, but rather of a continuum which also is, in this case, of an emergent character: intentional action still must operate through more mechanical reactions; it cannot disregard them in block and work itself out by magical interventions (whose promise of definite, assured results would mark them as mechanical anyway, mirroring physical necessity). As we have seen, our pragmatist approach takes criticality to be continuous and thus gradual, and the same can be said of intentionality, which corresponds to it even while not really exhausting it. An action is then subject to critique primarily insofar as it is a subject of it, that is, insofar as it is subjective, because subjectivity is pragmatically tied to intentional agency, a capacity for self-correction, self-control and/or self-consciousness in acting within the environment as well as upon it. In fact, we can define a subject with Dewey as that which suffers and, by suffering, takes on itself portions of both itself and its environment in order to reconstruct them in some way; agency places the emphasis on the active phase of reconstruction, subjectivity on the overall passive phase of suffering, but – as was already implicit in our noting the

aesthetic background of pragmatics and ethics – the two are inherently interwoven. Moreover, the philosophical history of subjectivity has seen it moving ever towards its being thought of as the centre of action and reflection, as that which actively subjects other things to change, so that the two sides of the coin really come together already in subjectivity alone. We can follow Dewey in not discarding but rather relying on this ambiguity of subjectivity as both subject to things and in turn subjecting them, because it is an ambiguity which genuinely and inherently belongs to it, thus not obscuring but clarifying instead its nature: just like ethics mediates between aesthetics and logic, subjectivity mediates between passive suffering of a situation and active transforming of it through its subjected objects (which in turn exhibits a corresponding ambivalence: the object is what a subject can act by, with and upon, but it does have its own nature which makes it resistant to being subjected – as Dewey again notes, it still objects to its subjectation). The secondness that characterizes ethics and critics as a whole is tied first and foremost to subjectivity as suffering, as meeting the forcefulness and reactivity of one's situation or environment in all its frictions, which may encompass anything at all, even up to one's own otherwise "internal" impulses: to the extent that they are problematic, one can feel dyadic opposition and thus subjective separation even from one's very reactions or dispositions, as if they were externally imposed on oneself; in fact, critique always includes such a split, since it determines intentional action and thus self-correction or self-control in a way that would be superfluous if impulses were already frictionless in their unfolding. It is then secondness which establishes any of the versions of the divide between the external and the internal, not vice versa. The subject always lies at its intersection. It is more or less intentionally trying to carry out its own processes, triadic in nature, but always encountering – and having to circumvent or overcome – all kinds of dyadic friction with the environment (and its other inhabitants).

Our pragmatic grammar must prove its worth by first and foremost distinguishing an accidental event from an intentional action of whatever kind and degree, thus providing us with that basic triad which all varieties of secondness can then rub against, even while being necessary to its realization. This core triad of intentional action is perhaps best recapitulated by Peirce himself in the phenomenon of someone aiming something at something else, whose genuinely triadic "relation of aiming" connects "the aimer, the thing aimed, and the object aimed at, in one fact": apart from this irreducibly triadic re-

lation, the very same event of hitting something or someone would be in some way and degree merely accidental, as when something merely slips from one's hands and then casually hits a passer-by (Liszka 2021a: 78-79; 1890, CP 1.366). Reordered after the phenomenological categories, the three elements of the triad can be more generally identified as (i) a desire for an end or good (the object aimed at), (ii) an intention to act upon a certain set of conditions and circumstances (the aimer), and (iii) a belief in the ways and means of action in order to achieve that end (the thing aimed). Such a statement actually weaves together subjective and objective formulations of the triad: desire, intention and belief constitute the encompassing subjective triad which can then be respectively objectified in that of ends, conditions and ways of acting, or – even further – in that of goods, circumstances and means, which are more definitely externalized from the subject (a good, like a means, is some already individuated thing which one can then obtain, not mainly a modification of a subject's activity like ends and ways of acting, while circumstances put the emphasis on the full scope of the situation the subject has to deal with, including all kinds of contingent and accidental features which present as such the additional resistance of not being generalized – or perhaps even generalizable – as conditions are). This of course accords with what has just been said about the nature of subjectivity, its middle place and mediating role between situations and objects, and will allow us to express the full range of its manifestations. Subjectivity being tied to intentional action, however, it is worth underlining that the subjective triad – desire, intention and belief – should be thought of as primarily verbal, as desiring and intending and believing all conjoined into some kind of action or conduct more generally; taken as nouns, desires, intentions and beliefs already are implicitly and inchoately objectified as possibly subject to correction, control and critique, and thus already disowned by the subject to some extent. Desires modify a subject's action by setting up the quality of its conclusions – the ends which are properly its own ends, not just any termination or interruption –, while intentions modify the action primarily in its actual initiations, that is, in the most proximate and thereafter progressive actions to take as soon as certain general conditions and particular circumstances are met with, suffered by the subject, all the way down to the full abstraction of such an occasion that is a specified space and time with no further qualities attached; finally, beliefs bridge the gap between intentions and desires, mediating between them and modifying the action in its ways and means all

along its course. Intention, as that which actually initiates the action, also sums it all up and characterizes the action as a whole.

The irreducibility of this pragmatic triad entails that if we remove any one of its elements, even if only in part, the action progressively loses its intentional character. One may of course take away and thus negate the very intention itself: it is easily conceivable, though hardly credible for the one that has been hit, a situation in which one both desires to hit someone else – let us say one’s boss in the office – and knows many ways to do it, but still does not actually intend to do anything at all, if only out of fear for the consequences, and yet eventually ends up doing it anyway by accident, let us say by losing the grip on the pencil while pretending – in order to get at least a little imaginary taste of release – to throw it at the boss behind his back while he is turned away; it might be very difficult to convince the boss of one’s relative innocence, especially if he is aware of underlying grudges or resentment against him in the office, but such an action would nonetheless count as less than fully intentional in our framework (and a recording of it might provide objective evidence about it, displaying for example a genuinely surprised, frightened look on one’s face immediately after the slipping away of the pencil). Adjusting the same scenario – even at the risk of comedy –, we can also imagine taking away the element of belief instead: one did desire to hit the boss and also did act with the intention to do so at some level, but it was only for show, that is, only insofar as one believed that it was actually quite an improbable or impossible feat to accomplish since the boss was too far away a target, standing as he was at the very opposite side of a large office; this would clearly be even less of a justification – it would require admitting to the already rebellious act of dramatically manifesting one’s dissent –, and also harder to support with evidence beyond the distance itself between the boss and oneself, but even so, if true it would still lessen the intentionality of this action, since one cannot fully intend to do what one believes to be impossible or even very unlikely. A third variation on the theme and we can now remove desire from the triad: one did intend to hit the boss and knew full well how to do it in such a way as to be quite assured of success, and yet such intention did not come out of – and thus bound to – one’s own desire, but rather out of the threats of a very unfriendly colleague who did desire that outcome, and said he or she would disclose a compromising secret to the boss unless the boss was hit by the pencil (a minor offense by comparison); given these premises, the boss might

never find out about the real background of the action, but it would still be – at least insofar as it is defined solely in relation to the end of hitting the boss per se, and not the further end of protecting a secret – a less than fully intentional action in our framework. In all three of these cases, the triadic relation of intentional action still applies – some action with some degree of intentionality is still carried out –, but it does not apply, or at most applies in a weakened sense, to the action we are specifically considering. Still more degenerate forms can of course be imagined, even so far as negating the action itself: without intention to actually carry out the action, one might simply content oneself with privately imagining the action of throwing the pencil without even the gestures of pretending to do so; without belief, one might simply feel – for reasons that will be clearer later – a vague urge to do something, anything, to hurt the boss in some as yet undecided but impactful sort of way; while without desire, one might still contemplate how easy it would be to hit the boss' bald nape with the pencil on one's desk – even if out of mere boredom –, again without actually doing it.

Contrasting intentional action with plainly degenerate cases such as these makes it easier to see it as indeed inherently triadic, irreducible to either the monadic feelings of the subject or the dyadic will of the agent, even though both factors play a part in the process. Moreover, as we already know from Peirce's classifications of signs, the triadic nature of a process does not necessarily preclude at all, but can rather allow for, further expansions, articulations and complications of its basic relation: Peirce's mathematical-phenomenical take on irreducibility is that all relations above the triadic can be reduced to a series of triads, not that they are to be excluded as impossible. What makes my action of moving to another city by plane without taking anything with me intelligible – whether justified or not – as in itself pragmatically intentional is, at the very least, that I carried it out for an end I desired, let us say for the sake of a new job I just got, that I believed that the plane would take me to that city in a satisfactory way – or perhaps even in the best way all things considered – as means of transportation, to the point that it was worth it to take it even while momentarily leaving behind the stuff I owned at home, and finally that I intended to act in this way at just this time and place, planning the flight beforehand as a set of conditions and circumstances were actualized, for example because of being fired from my old job and having broken up with a partner, so that there was nothing left holding me back from change. Needless to say, what would

actually explain – let alone justify – a fairly complex and consequential action such as moving to another city would usually go far beyond this kind of sketchy imaginary accounts, and much of it would probably be unclear, unknown or unspoken to its very subject or agent. The point of the triadic grammar, however, is that whatever further information is added to the account, it contributes to the action being intentional only insofar as it contributes to one or more of these three core interrelated factors of it: for example, an exceptionally good but temporary discount in flight tickets might have been a decisive circumstance that finally set off the intention of leaving, and of doing that with a particular company instead of another. Conversely, any lack in any one or two of the elements of the pragmatic triad would turn this intentional action into a more and more degenerate case of it, if not an unintentional action altogether. Such degeneracy has no intrinsic negative value – the term is neutrally borrowed from geometry –, because most actions and reactions are not fully intentional but are still usually found to be adequate retrospectively, while largely indeterminate actions can still be intentionally, intelligibly and justifiably undertaken as such, and most often are when they are not determined upstream but rather along the way: for example, a desire for moving to another city might be very indeterminate and implicit, as when one does so not for the sake of any definite change in particular, but rather in an attempt to vaguely change anything and everything about one's situation, about one's life; whether it is indeed desirable to live in the new city, or whether it was worth moving to it in comparison to the old one, will then be determined in the course of living there. Intentionality, then, does not require all actions to be so thoroughly, self-consciously intentional as to discard – instead of redirecting or reconstructing – one's previous impulses and habits, inclinations and dispositions, nor does it require the absolute determination in advance of experience, and devoid of any space for chance, accident and spontaneity, of the intentional actions themselves; putting these two observations together, it is especially the case that intentionally corrected, controlled or critiqued conduct – that is, attitudes, habits and practices as opposed to this or that particular action – are for the most part inherently general, which means that they are partly indeterminate even in their proper workings. Still, when determination of an action as more or less intentional is called for – either prospectively or retrospectively –, it must most basically express itself through the elements of the pragmatic grammar and their relations.

In sum, the pragmatic triad defines what a paradigmatic intentional action is in itself: an action is intentional to the extent that it is self-directed – that is, corrected at least and controlled at most – to an end or good by way of some desire as determined and actually concretized into an intention to act on – as well as upon – certain conditions and circumstances, in such ways and by such means as are believed to most likely achieve the end or obtain the good. It is primarily specific actions within specific situations that are most fully intentional, since at its core intentionality is a matter of intelligently confronting the secondness of experience – the insistence, resistance, consistence of things –, but the triad also applies to more or less general forms of conduct such as habits and practices, since they are on the one hand informed as such by previous intentional action – this is what distinguishes habits from impulses in Dewey’s terms –, while on the other informing and partaking in subsequent intentional action: one may once establish what the most convenient road to get to one’s workplace is, and then – assuming that the relevant conditions will roughly remain unchanged – keep taking it by habit without much reflection left, just like one may take up one’s eating habits as problematic in being a pre-eminent factor in one’s worsening physical health and shape, setting out to modify them by way of intentional actions. At the limit leading back to aesthetics, as we will see, ethical reflection may become even more reflective and consider all of conduct – actions, habits, practices etc. – as character, that is, as a more or less historically integrated and enduring set of traits of the subject as an individual self or group, or push still further to question the whole form of life one partakes in. Whatever its scope and depth, though, the critical reflection resulting into intentional actions generally takes up – even if implicitly – past ways of acting, impulsive and habitual, in order to determine them further than they are in one’s situation (which may encompass anything from current circumstances to other recalled or anticipated occasions, or general conditions of all kinds, including inclinations either internal or external). Again, determination has no fixed necessary endpoint: the rebellious employee we imagined earlier might have only desired the end of generically hitting the boss, not his nape in particular nor by the pencil’s sharpened tip, which ended up hurting much more than expected; still, determination must be at least advanced enough to enable actions in accordance to it. While determination is part and parcel of all kinds and degrees of intentional action, and is most often carried on along with the experiencing and acting itself as their reflective side, an action is at the most intentional when it is planned in advance. In fact, in

the wider stretch of planning the nature of pragmatic determination as translating – but also transforming – indeterminate impulses and general habits into singular actions is most visible: intentional action not only confronts the secondness of a situation for the sake of its own triadic processes or practices, but also translates these back into the secondness of actions, thus converting their abstract “logical sequence” into a concrete “mechanical sequence” (Liszka 2021a: 86; 1906, CP 8.320), which a detailed plan displays most fully. By asking how should we act or what should we do, we are then trying to determine a desire that in itself ultimately is, and ordinarily is also often made to be, more or less problematically indeterminate within a certain situation, so that it might actually be pursued in a renewed way beyond its entertainment as the mere quality of feeling of a wish. Desires and beliefs are refined and redefined in intention until they can actually inform conduct – and character through conduct – so as to distinguish good or better and bad or worse ways of acting, and by extension also of feeling and thinking, in one’s general or particular – if not peculiar – situation; in this process, the subject and the environment get to correspond with, and partly also correspond to, one another in reciprocal articulation or transformation.

Desires, like subjectivity as a whole, are not then predetermined and unchanging, but are rather always indeterminate to at least some extent. This is so in all three of Peirce’s kinds of indeterminacy: desires are (i) general, that is, they are always desires for certain kinds of things or events which can be realized in more or less infinite variations, the way a triangle has infinite different instances; they are (ii) vague, that is, they always depend for their realization on conditions and circumstances which give them even further variability, the way a triangle actually drawn freehand with chalk on a blackboard incorporates other qualities – in this case, imperfections – that a triangle more technically drawn on paper would not include; and finally they are (iii) fuzzy, that is, they admit to sparser or denser gradients of satisfaction beneath whatever the optimal locus of an ideal realization is determined to be, the way the imperfect triangle on the blackboard may still be good enough a representation of triangles in general to be successfully used as teaching device in a class. These three forms of indeterminacy also account for the possibility of continuity among desires within intentionality, and thus their influencing one another each as a limiting condition – that is, an external inclination – for the others; a continuity that becomes fully explicit only by way of communication –

with others as one's other selves, or with oneself as another –, which marks the higher degrees of intentionality of a critical subject, allowing for much more variability and flexibility in desires. Consequently, desires are made to combine, conflict and compromise with each other in many ways, introducing further differentiation and individuation (and potential for problematization and reintegration or reconstruction). It is in this sense that desire can be associated to categorical firstness as an indeterminate quality of feeling; it is that firstness of thirdness, that quality of mediation, which aesthetics is more directly concerned with, but which is taken up by ethics – in its mediating role – the way beliefs, associated with the semiotic thirdness of logic, also are. So I might generally desire to eat anything at all so far as it is high in proteins; I might vaguely desire to eat anything that I can already find in the fridge; I might fuzzily desire a chicken salad but be willing to content myself with an ordinary salad with eggs instead; but I might eventually eat the salmon I find in the fridge because there is no need to go out just to buy some, it is still high in proteins, and its expiring date is today. Indeterminacy is what makes desires malleable and thus themselves revisable: critical reflection does not concern the means only for their satisfaction. In fact, if desires already were almost wholly determinate to begin with, all self-control would be more akin to the narrow scope of self-correction, and pretty much reduced to some adjustment to circumstances, as is the case of more telonomical behaviours in simple organisms. This is a crucial point, if not the most important point of all critics in virtue of its recognition of the full range of critical reflection: desires are never entirely given as such a priori, but are rather developed within the very pragmatic process of striving for their realization; their indeterminacy is real, irreducible to mere ignorance of them on the part of a subject. Hence the process of determination is a process of both articulation and of transformation of desires in Deweyan terms (Viola 2013): not only desires “become more specific”, precise and focused “in the pursuit of them”, as Peirce says (1902, CP 1.205), though such an articulation already constitutes a transformation in the overall situation for Dewey; they are also actually transformed by the on-going interaction with the world – inner or outer – that is always already taking place, whether one is reflecting on a future action, a present one that has already begun, or even a past one that is being reviewed.

At the other end of the process, though categorically second, there are intentions: their concrete efficacy as actual, particular and singular dispositions to act in a determined way is what associates them to secondness. When the relevant conditions and circumstances are met with, a subject intending an action will – with more or less of an approximation to the force of mechanical necessity – actually seek to advance that action while opposing, at least at first sight, anything contrary or alternative to it: it is decided already; in fact, the modality behind the future tense of what will be done still is that of actuality, of what is past, a decided and destined future being nothing but an up-ended past. Intention is such a favourable predisposition and preparedness – the former tied to desire, the latter tied to belief – toward a more or less determined line of conduct. It is self-correction or self-control itself. If desires and beliefs can both influence action in their own ways – through qualities and mediations respectively –, intentions are what, by actually implementing and integrating them into the more or less singular embodied centre of action which is the subject, directly correct and control the action in an attempt – a fallible one, of course – to conform it to the subject’s determination in order to successfully correspond with the whole situation the subject is embedded into as its environment. As the second element of the “grammar” of the second phase of a philosophy of secondness, it goes without saying that intention – including of course inhibition of action – lies at the very core of critics. Intention differs from desire in that it is more directly bound to the conditions and circumstances – including inclinations and thus also desires, beliefs and intentions, one’s own and others’ – that action necessarily has to deal with. If I desire to see a certain painting by a famous artist, this desire – though already quite determined in its contents – makes no reference yet to the actual occasion, in terms of time, space and an overall situation, in which I might indeed achieve that end; therefore, as things stand, I cannot do anything at all to get even just closer to achieving it, nor can I intend to do anything if not daydreaming about it: to get closer to an end, I must first get it closer to me, that is, I have first to determine it enough as to know, if not exactly what I will need to do all the way to it, at least what my first and few subsequent steps will be – for example, that the painting is kept in a museum in such or such a city in my country, so that I can buy tickets to get there by train in the weekend. Until it is determined, the initial desire has a weak and merely inchoate or incoherent influence on action, unless it is tied to previously determined and more or less forceful impulses or habits. Of course, determination can both increase and decrease

their influence: if I find out that the painting is actually not only in a different country but even in a different continent altogether, I might very well give up seeing it immediately or perhaps forever, at most preserving the desire in the form of a mere qualitative, indeterminate wish that perhaps one day, who knows, I will be able to see it.

Finally, connected to categorical thirdness and mediating in turn between desires and intentions in their own way, we have beliefs. In a pragmatist perspective, a belief is for Peirce – who relies on Alexander Bain’s insight – “that upon which a man is prepared to act” (Liszka 2021a: 83; 1906, CP 5.12), a preparedness which extends and attaches to more or less determinate objects in reference to which conduct may be consciously corrected, controlled and criticized. Like desires, beliefs are not motivating all by themselves, but only insofar as they are practical beliefs, that is, beliefs conjoined with the actuality of either intentions or at least of impulses and habits; in fact, a practical belief can be defined precisely as a habit rooted in previous intentional reconstruction of impulses through experience, action and reflection. Whether moving backwards to aesthetics or forward to logic, critical reflection progressively moves away from the ethical emphasis on singular activity, to instead highlight the wider domains of inhabited situations and habitual objects tied to subjectivity (though each domain is of course also characterized by its own kinds and degrees of secondness, its own ways of encountering it even down to the actual, particular and singular). To practically believe in the proposition that “the first bus in the morning is scheduled to arrive at 6 AM at the station” means that, if I happen to desire to take that first bus in the morning – and the merely hypothetical status and force of such desire is what really sets beliefs apart from intentions –, then, other interferences and obstacles notwithstanding, I would at least try to get at the station before 6 AM; if I do not even try on a given day, then either I do not have that desire – or the intention to pursue it on this occasion –, or I do not in fact believe the proposition to be true, whether I believe it instead to be false or it is simply uncertain or unknown to me (again excluding any other influence). Hence a belief holds together, in its own hypothetical way – and the more hypothetical the nearer to its logical-theoretical, indicative form –, an implicit desire for some end and an implicit intention to act – or to wait and expect – in determinate though still general ways; such ways are habits, which encompass objects as means through the mediation of signs partaking in the determination of ends and conditions, goods and circumstances, within experi-

ence at large. In other words, a belief is the habitual modification of conduct – at any level – in relation to some more or less defined object, primarily an aspect of the environment but also reflexively an aspect of the subject itself (or other subjects). Being a modification, it cannot be fully understood apart from what it would modify, that is, from the differences it would make in the ways and means of action or expectation; while as habitual, not merely impulsive, a belief is already the outcome of at least some degree of previous critical reflection and reconstruction of experience which modified impulses through learning, though – as mentioned earlier – habits are continuous with impulses and can functionally take their place when understood by subsequent critique as its material, or as its object altogether. This means that belief is strongly tied to the process of determination both as part of its materials and means – influencing desires and intentions as well as conduct more generally – and as its outcome, since what is determined, even if it is only a particular action, can always feed back to a subject's more extensive and enduring set of habits, including beliefs (but beliefs, like all habits, can also be directly reflected upon with a view to their evaluation and reconstruction). However, determination cannot be exhausted by beliefs – and thus by signs –, not only because as we have just noted they are modifications, so that neither desire nor intention by furnishing them with their material is reducible to beliefs, but also because experience encompasses all kinds of actions or reactions – including perception – which play a genuine, in fact fundamental role in its reconstruction: I may believe there is no bus at 6 AM in the station, but if I happen to see one at that time of the day I will probably be – and feel – forced to cast doubt on my belief. Just like habits are nothing without impulses, beliefs are nothing without other habits of action and reaction, without desires or intentions: desires can no doubt be articulated and transformed in a mediated way by beliefs, even as far as getting to what by any standard might look like brand new desires, and yet they can never be created immediately *ex novo*, determination having to start from some real initial indeterminacy (which is potentiality, not nothingness); the same goes for intentions which, inherently tied to conditions, are also of course just as tied – for their trigger of action – to actual perception of those conditions (or at least of an actual, concrete instance of signs of those conditions). Dewey's interrelated distinctions among body, soul, mind and consciousness get across the same point: mind is for him the more or less integrated background of habits – especially those developed through the use of signs and language, such as beliefs – developed from the more inclu-

sive range of impulses of a form of life, or soul, on the one hand, and taken on for some possible further reconstruction in focused consciousness on the other, while body – its necessary material, organic structure – stands for the accumulated and more conservative results of the past; without a living body – embedded in its situation and environment – there is no mind to speak of, nor consciousness. Each of the three elements of our pragmatic triad must then be understood – if it is in fact a triadic relation – as irreducible to the others, each of them contributing in its own way to both the action and the overall motivation to act, against any dualism between a normative desire – or intention – exclusively tied to values and a descriptive belief exclusively tied to facts: if I truly and irremovably believe something to be impossible, I will never try to do it, and I also may never try to do what I doubt that can be done – the opposite of belief is doubt, not incredulity (which is a negative belief) –, and even more I may never try to do what I do not even know I do not know, what I cannot conceive at all; on the contrary, we are generally more inclined to actions that we are prepared to do competently and knowingly. In fact, it is because motivation to act does not directly stem from any singular source that it can be itself corrected, controlled and critiqued through both reasoning and experience as a whole: if motivation were so simple, a subject would simply act – teleonomically, in Peirce’s terms –, and without any gap to fill, any division to mend, it would in fact be no subject at all, as we will see later in considering aesthetics.

Although it extends beyond them into action that is reflective but still primarily and irreducibly action – that is, action which is much more closely interwoven with some on-going reflection about it, the two running parallel with each other –, pragmatics thus definitely includes, through beliefs, a semiotic dimension out of which the semiotic triad unfolds. While continuous with and also partially translatable from and into each other, however, semiotic mediation is still distinct from pragmatic mediation – and from the still more inclusive aesthetic form of mediation which we will see later –, so that it cannot by itself account for the whole scope and depth of meaningful experience; even the semiotic dimension as implicit in ethics and aesthetics is still only a part of the full picture of the respective forms of mediation. This in no way detracts from the crucial importance of signs in critical experience: there is indeed, as Peirce insisted, no thought without signs, no critical reflection which is not “perfused with signs”, since it is in and through signs that we gain both more stable and more malleable active, critical control

of experience; it is just not the whole story, as we have seen, and it is essential not to mistake – as academics of all semiological traditions are of course always tempted to do – a world perfused with signs with a world that is completely filled up with nothing but them, thereby failing to see, to give just one example, that while the impulsive instincts of a cell or an animal may contain an implicit yet evident semiotic dimension which can be expressed as such, its being implicit and in need of our signs for its expression already marks its difference from the semiotic proper, which is – in its distinction between sign and object, mirrored by the distinction between an immediate interpretant and a final one to come only after inquiry – just as much characterized by potential availability for future critique as it is by its actual availability for present control of behaviour. Even at high levels of reflexivity, when one comes to directly question his or her own desires or intentions as well as beliefs, and through signs strives to not only determine means but also ends, a sign for the end would nonetheless be but one means among many others toward its achievement, and the full extent of its role would be as much in its contributing to the determination of that end in one's situation at present as in the possibility it affords of questioning it all over in the future, moving on to another determination. This is, after all, what the generality associated with mediation and thirdness really is: it is neither the indeterminacy of firstness nor the determinateness of secondness, but rather a middle way that both allows for correction and control of determinate, integrated action and for its further critique and growth through indeterminate differentiation; even the most rigorous of general ideas, the mathematical idea of triangle, sets up limits that exclude infinite things to qualify as triangles and yet also allows for infinite actual instances of a triangle as well as numerous different varieties – in turn generalizable as equilateral, isosceles, scalene etc. – of it, and all the fertile combinations among them and with other geometrical forms, and then beyond to the positive world we inhabit and its own forms, and so on. Such an understanding of generality, mostly lacking, overlooked or unacknowledged and thus not taken into account in structuralist semiotics, is fundamental to get the very nature of signs right: pragmatism is necessary to understand signs as signs; it is not a reduction of signs to practices, actions or experience. In fact, Peirce's very idea of sign is teleological, because semiosis is for him by its nature asymptotically pointed towards an ultimate logical interpretant of the sign that would be true to its object, already assuming from the very start the desire to know that object as it really is independently of any one of anyone's practical de-

sires; a theoretical desire which must be understood as at least actively and at best methodically pursued in inquiry through practices that are designed to circumvent or counteract the reduction of objects to particular practical uses and interests: a logical inquirer must actively get himself or herself out of the way in a wide range of ways, if inquiry is to yield results that approximately reflect, and further, a standpoint of relatively external and passive expectation more than action (with “expectation” coming in many varieties that may combine in different ways its etymological link to observation and thus externality, the inhibition and self-restraint of that active passivity which is waiting, as well as the prediction – engaged or not – of future events, thereby articulating different kinds and degrees of belief as preparedness). Moreover, as the definition of belief as preparedness highlights and as Dewey would insist with his logical instrumentalism, semiosis is always practical before being theoretical, so that in Peircian terms any interpretant is unintelligible apart from an implicit desire, even if it is not yet the theoretical desire which is the ideal of logic: one’s response of instantly getting away from a spider in one’s bedroom inextricably testifies just as much to one’s practical belief, admittedly opaque and most likely irrational – more impulsive than habitual –, about large spiders’ capacity and propensity for hurting human beings, as to one’s equally indeterminate desire not to be hurt, which in this case trumps whatever desire one might otherwise have to observe spiders and learn about them theoretically, that is, as they are also apart from one’s life; we can translate, as we noted already, even such impulses into at least embryonic, implicit semiotic relations, simply substituting the ultimate logical interpretant with an ultimate ethical or even aesthetic interpretant respectively bound to the desires a subject does have or might come to share. Therefore, both in its eventual logical-theoretical setting and in the practical and processual forms it takes as the embedded semiotic dimension of ethics and aesthetics, all semiosis inherently presupposes desire and thus life exceeding signs. When we isolate a more theoretical interpretation within a practical one, we are – by making it explicit – both articulating and transforming it; we can of course bracket the practical ingredients, as if the practical belief we have just hypothesized above had some neatly removable core in the detached representation of spiders as dangerous creatures and everything else were but an extraneous addition to it, but that would amount to our critically taking up for logical scrutiny the belief in the place of our frightened imaginary subject (or it would at best; usually such hypothetical core meanings are simply ascribed to others as if they were transparently readable into

the overall interpretations, with very little modal sensibility for indeterminacy). In other words, logical-theoretical semiosis can only grow out of ethical-practical semiosis as a result of an on-going process of externalization of an object as indeed an object, something that in Dewey's reading "objects to" the subject by standing against and resisting its desires, even though it ultimately also includes – in hypothetical form – all conceivable desires it can enter into: the object is set against any particular desire, not desire as such. This is then why the semiotic triad appears to need a fourth element of desire to be made fully intelligible, providing the criterion for the final interpretant, no matter if practical or theoretical (Short 2007: 158): as triadism does not exclude complication of triads into relations of higher valence but only the latter's irreducibility to triads, the fourth element of desire simply indicates that the semiotic triad is nested within the pragmatic one, signs being embedded into a subject's means for ends, though ultimately semiosis pushes beyond and against praxis with the development of the logical ideal of an unsubordinated truth as opposed to a mere subordinate utility.

Semiosis is thus neither unilaterally determined by desires – themselves indeterminate from the start to at least some extent –, nor unilaterally determining them, since it is only through action and experience that impulses and habits can actually be reconstructed and desires turned into intentions. Semiosis rather participates in pragmatic phronesis – even if eventually also working against it – as its most directly and emphatically mediatic phase: it is ultimately concerned with the reconstruction of impulses into habits that are increasingly mediated by signs at various levels, focusing subjective mind into conscious – thus more critically corrigible and controllable – ideas of objects near and far in character, space and time, so that one is more prepared to act and especially expect in accordance to things and events, other subjects and all sorts of relations in the enviroing situation. Originally it is but implicit in impulses that do already mediate – usually within a lesser range – between subject and situation, but only or mainly through signs that are already found in and bound to environments as they are and cannot but be, instead of being actively made by a more or less critical subject's impact on its environment and therefore possibly remade again and again; eventually it is made explicit to the highest degree through language, understood as that active making of signs which more fully and expansively objectifies by way of communication between subjects and then – with reflexivity and retrospection, that is, self-communication – also

within them, because common objects have their inherent resistance as objects further enhanced by the resistance of other subjects experiencing them in overlapping but different ways, and when openly expressed by signs – as opposed to simple actions and reactions – such resistance comes with the implicit promise of integrating these heightened differences and informing accordingly the reconstruction of impulses and habits in all subjects involved. Hence what starts as an implicit, impulsive signification of objects to be used by means in subjective ways that are more rigidly predetermined, just like the ends they serve and the conditions they respond to, continuously moves towards the explicit marking – and thus potential collaborative making and remaking – of common objects through the signs of communicating subjects, which can then more and more also directly signify and thus objectify their very differences as subjects, that is, take aspects of each other as common objects, until by reflexivity and retrospection – emergent outcomes of such inter-subjective communication – a fully critical subject can also do the same in part by itself, taking even its own desires, intentions and beliefs as well as its whole history as objects to discuss with oneself as other to itself but also potentially convincible, corrigible and controllable in its impulses and habits. Language explodes this process of writing signs, in their full form as means to further and further reconstructions, into an environment increasingly turned into a common world of common sense, indefinitely expanding and deepening and refining communication and thus also collaboration and cohabitation across all nature, space and time. A subject can thereby be prepared to act and expect in accordance with objects not only by its own impulses and their relative adjustment through experience, but also through reliance on the relevant preparations of others which can either act in his or her place or provide instructions and education, and this in turn either directly or indirectly through all kinds of recorded signs and their media embedded in the environment. The interwoven process-relational structure of all these kinds and degrees of preparedness – which are recursive mediations in that one can prepare oneself to prepare oneself to prepare oneself etc. – forms mind in Dewey's sense: the habitual, inhabited historical background from which and against which more focal, conscious ideas can emerge and operate in more fully semiotic ways that further reconstruct it as determinations are called for. The logical-theoretical ideal of truth – which as an ideal is actually aesthetic in nature, especially in its classical manifestation as contemplation – pushes preparation towards its limit by maximizing the resistance of objects to any particular purpose of particular subjects, by

accordingly emphasizing expectations over actions (on the part of the inquirer), by aiming for the most stable, secured actual relations among objects, and by systematically producing signs that make them available for further action and experience. To the extent that this world is not fully actual, that it is not done evolving and developing, this formulation of the ideal is bound to be frustrated – one cannot be prepared even for a single object in all conceivable situations –, so that it is an essential part of any preparation through signs, even an ideal preparation, its being also a preparation for further inquiry beyond action and experience, that is, a preparation for the adjustments and reconstruction of its signs as needed; the theoretical ideal remains as the limit that instigates the heuristic ideal of endless inquiry. The blurry distinction between practical-ethical beliefs and logical signs lies, among other things, in the extent to which a previous preparedness to some object is consciously opened up to further rounds and degrees of preparation: there already is, of course, inquiry in practical-ethical reasoning, but at bottom the most distinctive aim of such reasoning – apart from its mediating function between aesthetics and logic within critics as a whole – is to determine intention and action in particular, actual situations, while determination of beliefs, whether old or new, is as such subordinate; any sign consciously recognized as such, as opposed to used in practice or had in experience, is at least a preparation squared, that is, a preparation to prepare oneself to act in relation to some object.

Studying semiosis in its proper logical place thus means above all studying the ways in which subjects – whatever level of subjectivity is involved – prepare themselves to partake in some future common experience through signs which modify, even just by clarifying them, habits of action and expectation in relation to objects (including aspects of themselves as reflective and retrospective objects). Thoroughly familiar signs which already pervade experience, and partake in it – impulsively or habitually – in qualitative and overall unconscious ways past that background which is the mind, only come to be signs in full by being consciously recognized as such and exposed to the possibility of further reconstruction: to consciously recognize wet asphalt in the morning as a sign of it having rained in the night is already to simultaneously entertain, no matter how weakly, faintly or remotely, the possibility of its being mistaken and misleading and thus in need of adjustments and reconstruction, or at least of supplementation by other signs or “collateral” experience (one may, for example, check the weather

app on one's phone); that is why a sign-object gap is essential to the sign, or why semiosis is often rightly defined in terms of the possibility of error or, in its more developed form as communication, in terms of the possibility of lying. Despite such definitions, semiological analyses do not usually concern themselves with studying the ways in which signs are employed in inquiries, even the most everyday sorts of inquiries, and transformed along the way in preparation for actions, practices and experiences with certain common objects found within certain common situations, nor do they openly strive to employ them in such a way in other people's place; on the contrary, the aim is usually that of identifying implicit accomplished signs and ascribing implicit accomplished – and usually generic – meanings to texts, discourses, and even people's practices and experiences, without much care for their inherent indeterminacy, thereby contradicting the very distinctive teleological nature of signs – the movement of determination – and taking them instead as secured, mechanical, predetermined, self-contained dyadic relations of signifiers to signified from start to end. Needless to say, studying the accomplished, already socially operative though implicit mediation of signs – which as given is actually more of an aesthetic nature – is no doubt necessary, but the point is that such mediation properly works as sign-mediation to the extent that it serves its own transformation: understood as primarily concerned with theoretical idioscopic inquiry, or at any rate with providing philosophical clarification to such inquiry as carried out by psychology, sociology or anthropology, semiology might very well be uninterested in actively and directly partaking in such transformation – although it might do indirectly, and it should keep that into account –, but still it is part and parcel, as carried out by other subjects, of its object of study, which is inherently a moving target. Our purpose here, however, is not that of determining what semiology as an academic discipline should be; in fact, the very pragmatist framework we are sketching is predicated upon the continuity and complex interrelation of the aesthetic, the ethical and the logical, so that in this view it is not at all a virtue to confine oneself to the logical, as if signs only were to be found there. The point is rather that, if semiology wants to tackle semiosis in its fullest range starting from its aesthetic roots and putting it in continuity with all mediations, it cannot do so by just applying a logical framework backwards, the inadequacy of its structuralism notwithstanding. Its historical trajectory away from the sign and towards the most indeterminate, theoretically undefined idea of "text" – proudly declaring that anything can be a text (but anything could be a sign already, and of whatever

size really) –, followed by still wider objects such as practices and experiences, is evidence of the felt insufficiency and inadequacy of its basic theory; the increasing reliance on narration as a substitute or supplement to signification already points to a pragmatist direction in reconstructing it.

To recap, within the pragmatic triad of ethics beliefs constitute the mediating element of thirdness as the habitual preparation in modifying action and expectation with respect to more or less determined objects, implicitly linking hypothetical ends to hypothetical conditions; such habits incorporate an implicit semiotic dimension, but fully work as logical signs to the extent in which they are consciously, that is reflectively, singled out as such and taken up to be employed in inquiries which might reconstruct them in further rounds and degrees of more or less general preparation for the future, instead of using signs as means to and among other means in an actual situation. By increasing mediation through signs, conduct – itself objectifiable by signs as character – becomes increasingly critical, though very fallibly so: a most intentional and thus critical action would be one deliberated and even planned in advance through semiotic reflection, and yet its very distance from the actuality of an experienced and practiced situation also constitutes all its weaknesses, exposing it to all kinds of errors – one may be wrong about any of the objects signified at any level, about any of their relations and about one's relationship to them, about one's actual preparedness to effectively respond to them by action, expectation or even intention when faced with them, about the interfering influence of other unclear, unknown or ignored factors as well as all contingent accidents and the countervailing forces of other processes and other subjects' practices, and so on; besides, its very logical nature as a general preparation to the future – and thus partial inhibition of one's current activity – can rub against and even compromise its eventual execution when the time comes to experience and act as a whole in sensible, flexible ways that correspond as closely as possible with the enviroing situation, so much so that what is otherwise asserted as one's explicit belief at a certain time – no matter how clear a belief it actually is – may be easily contradicted by one's actions and reactions when actually faced by some relevant occasion. In other words, too much criticality – at least when understood as too much if not exclusive emphasis on the mediation of signs – can prove as detrimental to critique as too little of it, and ethics, as proxy to the whole critics, is there to strike a balance that is adequate to the actual situation in-

volved at each time, stretching more towards aesthetics or towards logic as called for. As for beliefs, this means that a critical study of them should consider both their more or less conscious expression through signs – and thus, logically, the role of such signs in inquiries, especially in the form of education and discussion among subjects –, and their less conscious translations into conduct, highlighting problematic tensions and perhaps even contradictions between practice and discourse. The three critical grammars of logic, ethics and aesthetics help in navigating these tensions and clarifying them in all the entanglements which come with reflexivity: the object of a belief may be an external thing in the world or an aspect of it, either as a means of action and expectation for some particular end or as an existence to be ideally represented and contemplated in all its possible efficient contributions towards any end, but it may also be objectified shapes, stages or aspects of the subject, including his or her desires and intentions – in continuity with their determination in actual situations –, up to their objectified relations to other subjects and to their community, which precedes them and founds their very reflexivity and subjectivity, and even further to a natural species or to the whole of nature as itself being, at least potentially, a community of subjects; whatever the case, our critical grammar tells us that such objectification through signs does not stand on its own, but is fallibly preparatory to the modifying of subjective actions and situational experiences irreducible to any set whatsoever of discrete objects (which may otherwise be the ideal of logic, if it is isolated from ethics and aesthetics). Hence this very pragmatist critical framework we are sketching is ultimately justified – if it is – only by the way in which it clarifies experience while also clarifying, and hopefully offsetting as far as possible, the contradictions of its own objectivity. It is, after all, itself a long chain and wide web of complex signs, so many steps away from preparation to any actual situation. Its main purpose is that of at least inviting, and at most initiating, reconstruction of commonsensical habits through reconstruction of some of the signs they are woven into, at the same time providing conceptual tools to carry it on further in the cooperative, communicative endeavours of all forms of inquiry and education. Semiological analysis is one such endeavour, understood as a philosophically grounded critical support to inquiries that are primarily sociological in nature (as far as theory goes, at least; but our framework clearly makes it harder to just dismiss any consideration which is not theoretical as extraneous and neatly eradicable).

Each one of the critical triads is processual as well as relational, and the element which is more directly associated with thirdness emphasizes the processual aspect. In the case of ethics, it is belief that emphasizes it by highlighting the fact that the conversion of desires into intentions also entails a process of determination of something which is indeterminate, both articulating and transforming it. This already marks the ongoing, open-ended nature of ethics and all critics: even if desires were all actually predetermined and permanently fixed from the start in any given subject, for them to be intentional and critical they would still have to be, at the very least, indeterminate enough for different means to be determined in accordance to the subject's contingent and changing conditions; desires, even though not questioned in themselves, would still have to be questionable as right or wrong for a subject's conditions, if only because an impossible desire would be useless or wasteful to struggle for (of course, if both the subject and its enviroing situation were predetermined and fixed in such a way that leaves no space at all for contingency and change even in conditions, we would be living in a deterministic universe and there could be no critique whatsoever). But the indeterminacy of desires does in fact go further than that, at least for more critical subjectivities and in more critical situations, making desires more questionable even in themselves: ethics is also open at its bottom, the boundary with aesthetics. This other openness is indeed inherited by logic with its ideal of truth, in that it makes an objective out of the object, that is, it turns knowledge of objects into an end beyond any other subjectively predetermined end (unless they are constituted as objects of a kind precisely by their purpose, as with tools: to know an "umbrella" as such, its purposes must be included as one of its most defining characters, even if historically, geographically or otherwise variable – the name indicates its use as sunshade, but nowadays we most often associate the word with shelter from rain, at least until summer comes and we are reminded of beach umbrellas). For its own ideal, then, logic also must challenge desires – directly or indirectly –, defending the openness of the critical process. In fact, the reason why Peirce eventually felt the need of rooting logic into ethics and aesthetics is to protect his pragmatism from degrading into instrumentalism (Liszka 2021a: 7-8), understood in the non-Deweyan way as the severing of the ends from the purview of critical inquiry and its confining thereby to the determination of means for whatever the end already happens to be, turning all things into such subordinate means: the study of objects as they are – that is, as they operate – beyond any one desire would then become the

study of those objects as they are or operate for whatever desire; and beneath their superficial similarity – in both cases inquirers may claim to be unconcerned with desires, with purposes – there lies a world of a difference. That Dewey's solution of insisting on the recursive, reciprocal processual relations of means to ends is more adequate than Peirce's one-sided solution, whose aim after all was only that of defending logical inquiry from invasions and interferences by other ends besides truth, can be seen from the fact that it also works the other way around: the pursuit of truth can be just as dangerous when it becomes an unquestionable end wholly severed from any other end. In Dewey's view, instead, means in the most adequate sense are already permeated by the quality and value of the ends they foreshadow and contribute to, while ends in turn both cumulatively preserve the quality and value of all the means that lead to them and may also become means in their own right for further ends: the instrumental and the consummatory are discriminated as such in the course of critical reflection, and only relatively so, because they are aspects or stages of more inclusive wholes from start to finish. If desires are necessarily indeterminate, their determination must also be – as we noted – a transformation as well as an articulation, so that in a sense the ends are never determined purely as such, never represented wholly apart from the means to achieve them: if one is intensely but still vaguely hungry, he or she might determine the general desire to eat into an intention to eat a sandwich with ingredients that already happen to be in the fridge, but this sandwich – satisfying as it might be – cannot be taken in isolation as an accurate, exhaustive representation of one's end, one's original desire; even less, of course, can it be taken as the ultimate representation of all desires one might have beyond it, even just with regard to food. The determination of desire by signs objectifies it into ends that are already more allied to the means – especially those available in one's situation – than the original desire was, and potentially subject to critique, correction and control the way all means are. The outcome of this process of determination may very well go as far as interposing an ostensible abyss between ends and means, but this would only amount to some particularly remote means being singled out as only weakly partaking in the value of the ends, while the ends – insofar as they are determined – have actually absorbed those means that are more closely related to the coming about of that value. As long as they are taken as desires, ends encompass both ends and means; in fact, desire at its most inclusive and indeterminate encompasses every more determinate desire, with its ends and means, that a subject may entertain, which is why desires

can also enter into conflict among themselves: in the background of such conflicts, there necessarily is the qualitative sense of a still indeterminate desire that the other more determinate desires appeal to. This does not mean that there really is only one desire, as classical teleological theories – and indeed Peirce’s as well, with his definition of aesthetics as the study of the “*summum bonum*”, the final end – maintain by urging a more or less hierarchical, fixed, total and singular ordering of goods; what it does mean is that there is always one more desire, if only the simple recurrence of an old desire within a new situation. This, however, is already an aesthetic issue, and we will have to leave it for later. What is important to note, here, is just that practical and ethical determination is on-going and open-ended as one phase of an encompassing process which is more indeterminate, and that desires are transformed as well as articulated in its course, continually turning their impulsivity – both natural and cultural – into the intelligence and intelligibility of renewed habitualness through intentional action, without losing their inclusive qualitative value. The pragmatic triad, which after all is in turn only one element of a triad of triads, must both aid us in marking distinctions that make critical difference and in not losing sight of, but rather handling in more sensible and flexible and intelligible ways, the qualitative and evaluative continuum they are carved out from. It is a sign; and like all signs in their proper operations, it is a mediation that modifies further and wider mediations – the ways and means of action, the milieu and materials of experience – without ever breaking them into pieces, but rather clarifying them with a view to, and thus in preparation for, their immanent reconstruction from within. Anything and everything may be a means with respect to furthering such critical reflection and reconstruction; and yet, that it is endless is the exact reason why it is full of ends.

1.2.2 – The Full Scope of Reasoning and Acting

The process of determination may be analysed, by reference to the three indeterminacies of desires, into a specification, a localization and a focalization of the ends which both articulate and transform them, allowing them to partake in the ways and means of action and expectation: as determined, the end which is desired is after all an expectation that, when fulfilled, puts an end to the action, meanwhile directing it as an end-in-view – to use Dewey’s term –, if only by insisting that “this is not yet it, this is not yet it” (a minimal case of teleological influence in which, however, the ends would not have been put into full contact with the means); impulses as well as assimilated past habits may also as

a matter of fact exercise such an influence – in fact they will –, but in a more implicit, immediate and indeterminate manner that distinguishes them from the ways and means of intentional action in the strictest sense, even when they turn out to favour it. Hence the more explicit is the determination of any desire, the more it may be available for – and amenable to – critique, correction and control. As we have seen, this may already be said to happen by way of signs, but usually as components of wider mediations – those characterized by the ethical and aesthetic triads – which cannot be reduced to semiosis: it is one thing to determine one’s desire on the way of subjectively pursuing it, another, and a narrower one, to determine it as an object to be known – such knowledge can of course be put to use, as it is in the most explicit and mediated forms of critical reflection, but its use is nonetheless broader than knowledge, having to do with transformations of the subject and of the whole situation as experienced beyond any one circumscribed object, including that initial desire (which as initially felt it is but an impulse, or at any rate a past inclination). We may then call such pragmatic semiosis, the determination of an intention to act, by the classical name of phronesis, though allowing for the transformation or even critical reconstruction of desires in the process (in the classical sense, desires are rather fixed and merely transmit motivation to the sequence of means needed to actualize them). By such basic phronesis, then, a general, vague and fuzzy desire for food may be (i) specified into a more and more particular kind of food, it may be (ii) localized into more and more accessible foods in whatever sense – primarily but not merely spatial-temporal – within a certain situation (and occasion, stressing the temporal dimension), and finally it may be (iii) focalized into some wider or narrower graduated range of acceptable foods – if not pasta, then pizza, if not pizza, then anything else with lots of carbohydrates, and so on –, all the while similarly determining the series of actions, and the related ways and means, to achieve this determined end, or at least try. Within this process, and especially within localization – which is more closely related to the element of intention and thus of secondness –, this desire may also be brought into contact and perhaps conflict with other desires, at least to the extent that intention requires integration, as it always does to some degree: when localizing a desire for food, one might end up comparing pasta at home to delivery pizza, and in doing this appeal to criteria that are bound to other desires – since they always have some degree of continuity shading into the indeterminacy of desire taken by itself –, so that for example one might eventually opt for pasta on the extrinsic ground of its relative

cheapness. Desires may thus be brought into dialogue with each other, a dialogue which – like all genuine dialogue – may both result in the convergence of integration and in its problematic failures. Insofar as the aim of critical reflection is that of integrating a subject's desires, of course, we are already getting near the aesthetic threshold: if logic centripetally analyses things into objects that are more or less external to the subject – and objecting to it even when they are subjected as means or signs –, within aesthetics we will find a contrary centrifugal synthesis which includes the integration of desires even beyond what is strictly necessary to enact each of them separately, weaving an organized character out of related lines of conduct in the organic way in which any form of life more generally – as a coupling of organism to environment – holds together a whole range of different processes; in the middle, as we said, ethics may move one way or the other to different extents, according to what gets actually problematized in the course of experience, action and reflection.

We can see this full critical spectrum covered in Peirce's model of rational deliberation in *What Makes a Reasoning Sound?* (1903), where he argues for a genuine ethical distinction between good and bad generally in order to support its logical specification into good and bad reasoning, again on the ground of the capacity for self-control: if we cannot fully control whatever we are actually doing in the present – our most immediate impulsive and habitual responses –, we can nonetheless control the future to some extent through our present intentional actions and reflections, which feedback on our habits modifying them. Ethical reflection is presented here as similar to mathematical reasoning in that it constructs, observes and experiments on diagrams as surrogates for future experiences, the difference being the inclusion rather than exclusion of subjective, qualitative and evaluative factors of experience (Campos 2015). The process can be analysed in distinct stages which clearly illustrate the movement from the more indeterminate totality of desire, of an encompassing ideal, to the more determinate particularity of a certain end to be pursued by a subject's particular string of intentional actions and expectations on certain situational and occasional conditions (needless to say that actual practical or ethical reasoning may very well skip, skim or leave inchoate and implicit many of these stages, which are themselves ideal). In the first stage, then, near the aesthetic threshold, we find the more or less indeterminate "ideals of conduct" that any agent already shares simply by way of his or her lifelong formation and growth within a

certain natural and social environment. Peirce's seems to suggest various levels of integration by ideals: he speaks of the overall "esthetic quality" of a whole action or practice, analogous to Dewey's unifying aesthetic quality, but he also mentions the coherence – which appears to us just as aesthetic – among the different ideals of an agent, thereby respectively covering what for Dewey are an agent or subject's conduct and character; yet, similarly again to Dewey, this centrifugal movement also goes indefinitely beyond the subject to the consequences, in the wide world, in the long run and for others as well as oneself, of conduct informed by the ideals. In other words, the ideal in this sense – to which we will return later with aesthetics – is the integration of action into inclusive qualitative wholes, from the agent's character and conduct to his or her history, from communal or social institutions and practices to biologically or ecologically interwoven processes. Since we have followed Dewey in restricting the proper use of the term "idea" to what is consciously taken up in modifying action while being open to adjustments or reconstruction, we may as well speak of an "ideal" in the strict sense – following Peirce's apparent use – as distinct from value at its most indeterminate, implicit, immediate, impulsive and even unconscious levels, at least as long as we do not simply reduce it to whatever set of ideas of it: by its very nature the ideal is always ultimately indeterminate, even when brought into sharper focus by general ideas, because it encompasses qualitative experience as a whole in its movements towards further integrations and differentiations, depending on past ones and also incorporating all sorts of accidents (the way an excellent violin player may inject peculiarities into its interpretation of a piece). Even when they come into conscious reflection, then, as in the first stage of Peirce's model, ideals are as such largely indeterminate at the start, and must be experimented upon in one's imagination as hypothetical starting points to be tentatively articulated and transformed, while evaluating them in terms of their felt aesthetic admirableness. As we saw earlier, Peirce's expanded empiricism includes mediations as qualitatively felt, and values and ideals are no exception: like truth itself – which is after all one form or aspect of the ideal –, an ideal's admirableness, that is, its enduring and extensive value, is therefore something which one can actually find out by inquiring into it. It is no doubt a different inquiry than the logical one, but it also includes aspects of it: while aesthetic inquiry does not rule out change in the very course of carrying it out, resistance to change with further experience and reflection on the part of any ideal may

still be an indication of its value, whether it lasts forever or for the time being, especially if it comes with other factors such as widespread consensus or convergence about it.

At any rate, it is with the second stage that the pragmatic process of determination of an organic and at most general desire for some ideal into a more and more mechanical, singular intention to act starts to take place. We followed Litzka in naming “intention” the central element of the pragmatic triad, which is also the outcome of the process of determination (Litzka 2021a: 89), but Peirce uses the term in another sense for this second stage, in which one simply establishes an intention to more or less consistently and coherently conform one’s whole conduct to the ideal, thereby appropriating it, making it one’s own. We are thus still dealing with quite an indeterminacy here, though the result might be reinforced for Peirce by way of a third – seemingly optional – stage, in which more or less general rules of conduct, like Peirce’s practical maxims or Dewey’s principles, are explicitly formulated in such a way as to make it nonetheless easier for the ideal to inform conduct when some relevant situation or occasion is met with, especially in order to solve certain kinds of related problems: the maxim or principle works like a general heuristic method in mathematics (Campos 2015). These rules seem to be a more determinate expression of the ideal in terms of still very general habits to be tentatively applied at first as rough shortcuts or starting points, whenever a situation calls for it, but without necessarily referring by themselves to any definite occasion. In the fourth stage, intention is then further determined with such reference to some anticipated future occasion, wherever it lies on the spectrum that goes from the most likely to the merely possible: a “resolution” to act in a certain way is thus formed which has for Peirce the iconic and diagrammatic nature of a plan. It is of course still pretty general, but also more and more attached to qualities of feeling as well as reactions of the agent’s impulsive and habitual will; accordingly, the occasion may still actually be an expression of a general type of situations that one may or may not get into, which may turn out in many different ways and recur at different times and places, rather than a singular occasion which is anticipated or scheduled in the strictest sense. Still, at this point we are already getting far from the comprehensive indeterminacy of the ideal. By the fifth stage, we finally get to the bottom of this movement in what Peirce calls “determination” (which again we use to indicate the process as a whole): a real, practical habit of action as well as expectation – in contrast with theoretical ones, more centred

on expectation and observation, such as those of mathematics – is concretely formed, so that it would actually inform one's actions and reactions when a relevant situation or occasion comes (at least to the extent that there is an actual preparation, a capacity for that conduct as well as the necessary means, of course; and even when there are both, many things might still go wrong – the actual situation might overwhelm the subject and override all of his or her decisions, for example). When the occasion rises, and as long as other forces do not disrupt or interrupt his or her attempt, a determined – and prepared – agent will actually be disposed to act in the deliberated ways, which will thus express his or her desires and beliefs in an intention even when the action itself mostly comes about in a mechanical and automatic fashion by habit (since a habit is a more or less critical reconstruction of impulses within experience, incorporating past determinations). It is here that the characteristic secondness of ethics and all critics, the basic contrast of goodness to badness, appears as an experience of compulsion to act in certain ways and/or avoid acting in other ways, as well as the feeling of discomfort or distress which follows upon acting otherwise; and it is such compulsion that distinguishes intentions – as well as impulses and past habits – from desires. In fact, as Peirce points out, the habit is not per se, nor necessarily involves, a conscious qualitative feeling, because over time it is incorporated into one's second nature and is at any rate first and foremost a matter of action and reaction; it is more often felt when it is frustrated or constrained by experience, appearing in its negative form as lack in which some positive though indeterminate need or desire is merely implicit. So far as the enactment of one's impulses and habits flows wholly undisturbed by experience, no critical reflection is indeed necessary or even possible. Despite noting it at this juncture, Peirce's idealized model does not take this into account: why would anyone even begin reflecting upon his or her ideals in the first place, if some difficulty is not already met with? Still, the model is useful to clarify the scope that reasoning can stretch to for whatever reason, and we also have Dewey's more action-oriented model – centred on the primacy of the problematic situation – to correct its limitations, besides Peirce's own remarks elsewhere; but we will get to it later, in the aesthetic section.

There are, however, two more stages following the action itself, which after all may already be said to account for at least one version of that missing starting point of reflection: one reflects upon one's ideals – up to one's life as a whole – after reviewing

some past action with approval or disapproval; the past as it is forcefully experienced already in one's own memory may thus be enough to problematize experience and set off the critical process (though this is no doubt only one source or shape of the secondness of problematized experience). At any rate, a full account of reflection, even in its overall prospective form as deliberation, has to include a more retrospective stage. This is the sixth stage in Peirce's idealized model, in which one reviews and evaluates some past action at any one or more of the levels of determination we have seen, approving or disapproving of it; while retrospective, reviewing is in fact also prospective in that it allows one to learn from past experiences, thus informing further self-correction and self-control in the future (actually, it is for Peirce critical only insofar as it has any bearing on the future). It is interesting to note with Peirce that the resultant sentiment of approval or disapproval towards oneself is typically more intense with regard to intentions and actions, while it is weaker and yet deeper with regard to ideals and one's overall character: this again seems to confirm that the sense of criticality gets to its highest degree in practical-ethical critique, while somewhat fading as it extends into aesthetics (and, it might be added, again attenuating by undermining itself as it extends into logic because of its hypercritical nature, whose requirements are usually too high for practical experience and can actually interfere with it in many ways). Finally, in what may be counted as a seventh stage, we circle back to the aesthetic threshold and the ideals, which are again reflected upon in a different and broader sort of retrospective review, where the continuum of the whole experience of life – which is of course ever on-going and open-ended – is more freely and loosely allowed to enter, a “meditation” that is very much akin to Peirce's idea of musement as found elsewhere. Hence we end up where we started, with the indeterminacy of ideals. In the full scope of determination, exceeding the two thresholds with aesthetics and logic, we might push beyond whatever initial subjectivity was assumed, either to get to more encompassing subjectivities – up to the whole unfolding universe, as in Peirce's ultimate cosmological ideal of agapism, of “welding into the continuum” (Atkins 2016), or more generally the ideal of growth that he shares with Dewey – or to get to more circumscribed objects as they resist us. Although mostly out of logical concerns, Peirce famously favoured an ethics of participation to something which, like science, is larger than oneself and one's own more egotistic desires. This is line with the thought of the other classical pragmatists, James and Dewey, who took the good as something to be ever more expanded and inclusively ex-

tended to others, that is, made common: Dewey's never-ending intelligent reconstruction of existence and experience seems to express, though much more in-depth, the same ideal as Peirce's "concrete reasonableness" (Liszka 2021a: 15-36). Therefore a pragmatist critics can neither be merely objectivist-foundationalist in an authoritarian way, nor merely subjectivist-relativist in an idiosyncratic way, but rather takes a "middle way" that is synechist, experimentalist and fallibilist, actually centred on the problematic experience of error as a sign both of the disconnect and of the underlying continuity of subjects and objects within experience; in fact, prejudices themselves, whether they come in the form of individual capricious intuitions or collective inertial dogmas, are taken to be – like all errors – an integral part of inquiry which can only be continuously corrected in the long run through experiencing and reasoning along with other people (Ibanez 2021).

If the process of determination in its full scope reaches into aesthetics and logic, our pragmatic triad should be understood as continuous with the aesthetic and logical grammars, the former being connected to the element of desire in the pragmatic triad, the latter – the semiotic triad – to the element of belief; each triad is still independent to the extent that it is part of a critical phase characterized by its own ideal, possibly conflicting with the others, yet each is also nonetheless a component of an encompassing relational process apart from which it ultimately makes little sense. Accordingly, the pragmatic triad should also be able to accommodate to and account for all varieties of actions and practices leaning more towards one threshold or the other, which makes it among other things a ground for the very classification of the arts and sciences (ultimately in the synthetic continuation of philosophy). In fact, besides degeneracy of each element in itself, the relations among all three elements of the grammar might also vary a lot, as it should be expected given the huge diversity of activities that one may engage in. Hence we can use the pragmatic grammar to help clarifying not only nor mainly particular actions and habits, but also more or less coherent and consistent practices in general, perhaps crafting a heuristic classification such as Peirce's classification of signs. One of the main ways in which practices may vary is, for example, in the articulation of means to ends. Means can be more immediately constitutive of the practice's end in the case of more autotelic practices, as in ludic or artistic ones: the aim of soccer is not merely scoring goals but doing so by only or mostly using one's legs and feet – anyone

doing otherwise or cheating is not really playing –, while the aim of painting may similarly be, at its most fundamental level, that of expressing something not in any way at all, but rather by way of the potentialities of some material medium and inherited technique; practices such as these are actually aesthetic practices – though they may always have ethical implications –, yet the pragmatic triad should be able to express them by the peculiar forms it has to take in order to also account for them. On the other hand, means can instead be to some extent externally related in other more heterotelic practices such as eating something merely for the sake of feeding oneself, or driving a car merely to get to a certain place; the same action, like eating, may of course simultaneously – and sometimes problematically – fit both descriptions, since they are indeed continuous with each other, but they are still distinguishable and sometimes separated. Dewey's insistence on the reciprocal, recursive interpenetration of means and ends was not, after all, meant to be a negation of the very possibility of their separation, but rather a critique of its widespread actuality in our modern form of life, its common sense, its philosophies and the social roots of both. Besides the means-ends relation, actions, habits and practices may also vary along with the relation between desire and intention, or more objectively between ends and conditions: setting aside degenerate forms we have already seen, such as mere wishes or daydreaming, the end of intentional action may either entail a transformation of initial conditions – including one's own constitution, as in various forms of training and discipline (otherwise it would make little sense to run on a treadmill in the gym) – or rather that of preventing them from changing, maintaining them as they are, or anything in between; in more subjective terms, one may intend to actually suspend the pursuit and even determination of any one of his or her desires – as is vital in aesthetic critique –, though not of desire altogether as far as it is indeterminate, or at the other extreme one's intentions and desires may come to almost coincide (in both cases steering away to some extent and at least at some level from intentionality, since it requires some gap between desire and intention as much as it ultimately needs reciprocal integration of means and ends). Actions, habits and practices may finally vary along with the relations between intention and belief, or again more objectively between conditions and means, so that for example a practice with some predefined set of ways and means – such as a codified ritual or a videogame – may be distinguished from another in which the ways and means are to be discovered much more creatively, either for well-defined ends or not, thus getting into the logical territory of

inquiry. Moreover, all of these varieties may take different configurations when multiple subjects and overlapping subjectivities are taken into account, as they eventually must be if full critical reflection has social as well as biological roots. Our purpose here, however, is not that of pursuing this combinatorial path, whose fruits would have to be assessed, as for Peirce's classification of signs, by the clarification it provides – or not – when applied to commonsensical yet concrete cases. Rather, the point is precisely to highlight the elasticity of the triads and their elements as ideas to be used, and played with, in order to deal with phenomena that are not isolated but continuous. In line with the pragmatist framework itself, the elementary and its “thin” concepts are what is to be employed in confronting the “thick” concepts of more complex situations, starting from the very quality of their framing.

This synechist elasticity and double openness of critical reflection – which also makes it, needless to say, double-edged – entails that no predefined, closed and fixed subjectivity is to be assumed at the start, because any subject emerges from within continuity in virtue of the very contrasts of existence and experience the subject suffers, that is, is subject to, and it is only in relation to such contrasts that it can be defined as subject in the critical sense: it is always a relative subject arising from processes which, whether found later to be “internal” or “external” based upon this or that set of objective criteria, initially encompass it all the same; from within them it may then in turn subject portions of the environing situation – again, whether “internal” or “external” – to some degree of critical correction and control as its own objects, despite – in fact, thanks to – their objections. A subject in the strictest sense is the sliding door of critique, though the fact that such door may be simultaneously or alternatively opened up at many levels, as well as in different modes or to various degrees, means that we can and should still understand its subjectivity as stretched over space, time and portions of the continuum – however divided – with which it is more involved than with others; what is crucially important is that the split is not forgotten, either by erasing it altogether or by reifying it as an absolute, original a priori separation that has always been there. So understood, subjectivity thus reflects the categorical analysis of ethics and all critics: it is both tied to secondness itself and to the role it plays within the thirdness of relations and processes, again within a more encompassing continuity. Because of this, any subject is determined before it has in turn its own chance of perhaps determining things, including – by

reflexivity – aspects of itself in that prior determination as objects; the full scope of determination encompasses both movements in recurrent, recursive and reciprocal ways. Splitting, swinging and steering whatever passes through its doors, reconstructing experience, is what subjectivity does (in a critical sense, of course; it may also “suffer” experience – a term that includes enjoyment or ease as much as pain or discomfort – in a less critical, aesthetic mode). Centrifugally, one may then always ask what the further end of some action – or habit, practice, even an entire form of life, if not the universe itself – may be, striving for ideals that by their nature include but exceed oneself as a particular subject at whatever level. Centripetally, one may always ask what anything may be a further means – or medium – to, striving for signs that would master their objects in any conditions and circumstances and for any end – even if by mere passive expectations without surprises –, signs that again by their very nature presuppose some subject but not this or that particular subject. Hence we start from on-going, open-ended experience and eventually circle back to it, as Dewey insisted. A desire for a certain end can then instantiate itself in the intentions of more than one – unduly pre-individualized – subject, like a team of volleyball players cooperating by overlapping impulses and interwoven habits to win a game; it is the relational process of practice that picks up a subject by splitting it within experience, even though it is only one of many possible splits, and that subject is accordingly composed of many more subjects with both general and particular roles. In fact, strictly speaking the nature of subjectivity is a metaphysical issue, though directly resting on critical and phenomenical grounds: philosophical analyses of selves, persons and the like, by insisting for example on their capacity for reflexivity, already presuppose the critical dimension (Wallace 2019). What ethics and critics must stress is subjectivity as continuously emergent, and as rooted in contrasts and tensions within experience which always give it some degree of actuality and particularity beyond all vague qualities and general mediations. Hence any critical theory should be able to help one follow subjectivity along its determinations, instead of deciding it in advance from outside.

1.2.3 – Conflict as Ethical Problem and Narrative Critics

If ethics is characterized by secondness, its most characteristic form of problematization will be that of conflict. As we have just noted, a conflict can both involve the “external” world – natural and social – and the “internal” world of a subject, since it is conflict it-

self that determines the splits which reciprocally define the internal and the external through their mutual opposition. Whatever is caught up in an experience of conflict, then, will be experienced to at least some extent as external, even if it is one's own impulses or past habits (though of course there is always the possibility of looking at them as more or less "internal" to one's subjectivity at some different level). After all, the "internal" and the "external" in the dualistic and reductionist sense often overlap in synergistic ways: the past, which potentially resists us more than anything else – it is what no one can do anything about –, actually resists us through its inscription in our "internal" memory, lying at the very core of the capacity to learn from experience which critical reflection builds upon. As Dewey insisted, interaction or correspondence – not only nor primarily as correspondence of one thing to another, but rather as reciprocal correspondence with one another – is more fundamental than the distinction of an organism and its environment. Such correspondence is always to some large extent filled with conflicts, some of which may undermine experience by undoing its determination, leading it back to indeterminacy. We already noted how even when our desires are unreflectively predetermined, or we have already come to determine them beforehand by way of critical reflection, the course of experience may still make them indeterminate again by problematizing at least some aspect of the action itself, especially if the ends were focalized in too narrow a way: one may go to the kitchen and find out there is actually no pasta, while it is too late at this point to order pizza – the only alternative that was considered –, so that the problem of what to eat is posed all over again under different, unexpected conditions. Such ordinary practical incongruities perfuse the living universe at least as much as signs do. Even at lower degrees of critical subjectivity, practical reflection never fully stops to merely entrust a whole activity to a blind autopilot, since as we said there are at least circumstantial determinations to be carried on even when desire and belief are impulsively predetermined for the most part. When reflection takes its most explicit self-conscious form, it can also never stop there: reflection is realized only when it circles back to experience in order to inform it, so that it actually continues all the way through the deliberated action, either correcting it – if it is a matter of minor adjustments, such as finding out where one stored the extra packet of pasta he or she had bought – or stopping to start again with another round of more thorough and mediated self-control. This is why Peirce and Dewey both stressed that we only ever reflect to the extent that there is an experienced problem in one's situation: at first sight, such a claim

might sound as if mindful reflection was but some rare isolated event within a life of mindless routine, but the fact is that experience is always problematic to some extent, even in ordinary life; since problems continually arise, affording opportunities for critical reflection, we always swim in a sea of indeterminacy that demands some reflection. Conflict is in turn an irreducible dimension of all problems, as well as one of the modes in which they may be experienced overall, when the opposition to some external thing is foregrounded.

We may distinguish ethical problems from practical ones by the extent to which they problematize experience in more extensive or intensive ways, even though it is not a difference in kind, practical and ethical reasoning always being continuous with one another – only different in degree, not in kind – and the latter in fact always taking up the former within itself. Practical problems' demand for the determination of desires is more tied to the individuation of ways and means to achieve ends which are largely already determined, and more directly bound to one's immediate situation; a core part of such problems is the gaining of necessary information, skills and knowledge for acting effectively and efficiently, which pushes them closer to the logical domain. When both impulses and past habits either fail or are otherwise found to be inapplicable, inadequate or lacking, but some more or less imminent action is still required, reflection will have to be more closely allied with actions and reactions, more directly responsive to the situation, and will therefore be more practical in character than ethical. When conflicts issue instead more from a clash of desires within or without subjects at whatever level, disrupting intention and thus interrupting its processual-relational integration within correspondence to and with the environment, reflection may reach up to a more encompassing ethical level; such conflicts ultimately push towards the aesthetic critique of ideals, but not necessarily so, since even high degrees of subjective incoherence, inconsistency and reciprocal insulation of desires along with their respective practices might be tolerated – even though at some cost, or by some compromise – as long as they are practically compatible in one's natural and social environment (or even encouraged, so far as a social structure may push towards the compartmentalization of subjects into a set of non-communicating roles; MacIntyre 2006). Of course, the social origins and nature of critical subjectivity as well as the even more basic interdependence of all forms of life entail that the more reflection gets to the ethical level, the more it comes to deal

with otherness as its fundamental concern; and yet such otherness is to be understood as a pervasive outcome of all kinds and degrees of conflicts, not merely that of predefined selves against predefined others, as in most modern moral philosophies. Even when it does not directly affect others, or at least not in obvious ways, a decision is still an ethical decision insofar as it responds to problems which invest its subject as the tentative whole it is – in conduct and character –, opening it up to the possibility of a self-reconstruction that goes beyond adjustments; that such self-reconstruction is not only always predicated and dependent upon others, but also bound up with otherness by nature – reflexivity implying looking at one’s own self as another, and speaking to it –, is certainly what any ethical reflection matures into (as the third “rhetorical” stage of each critique highlights, being fundamentally communicative in character), but this is no reason to rigidly demarcate a certain set of phenomena as uniquely and inherently ethical, setting the whole of critique up as a dualistic issue of egotism against altruism. It is best to conceive of ethical problems as the continuation of practical ones in more intensive and extensive forms, and as demanding reconstruction. In fact, that ethics is bound to reconstruction often puts it at odds with morality or legality – inherently more conservative, in Peirce’s view – as received actual deposits of crystalized experience within the tradition of a community in which one was educated: like all habits when thoroughly assimilated, they work like impulses in more or less forceful ways as if through a “moral necessity” that pairs actions to evaluative emotions; so long as they are not open to reconstruction themselves, if only to make clearly intelligible and justified their necessity, they do not by themselves constitute ethical reflection (Liszka 2021a: 37-54). Reconstructions may also entail genuine risks, of course, but so does inertia. Even Peirce’s ideas of individuality as in itself an error and more generally a negation of – but within – continuity, related to the Christian ideal of love (*àgape*) and the Buddhist ideal of not-self (*anatman*), only underwrite an account of the moral development of individuals into critical subjects: an infant internalizes what are initially external social “heterocritisms” of his or her impulses or inertia, but with a growing capacity for more autonomous self-critique and therefore also self-correction and self-control, even beyond and against others; individuality is then socially developed without ceasing to be individual, because the physical and psychical clashes with the world and especially with those others upon which his or her very life immediately depends simultaneously highlight and develop both independence and dependence, individuality and sociality (Colapietro

1989: 61-68; Colapietro 2017). Collective subjects also retain individuality: communities, from small groups to whole societies, are still made up of individuals – no matter how far they are homogenized –, and it is only through individuals and their interactions that all the splits distinguishing them from other communities are actualized, maintained or transformed as such. Individuality and sociality are then different aspects of the same continuity of experience, just like vague impulse, particular action and general habit: ethics should not decide in advance where to draw an a priori line between them, but must rather follow the differences and distinctions that their conflicts give rise to.

There are, of course, as many problems and conflicts as there are possible experiences, but the pragmatic triad may again help bringing into focus different kinds and degrees of problematization, perhaps in connection with a basic classification of practices. A problem may be merely practical in that a fully determined intention informed by desire and beliefs nonetheless cannot be actualized yet because of lack of ways and means to do so: perhaps there is nothing to do but wait, especially if an occasion for acquiring the means of action is expected to come in the future, or perhaps it is rather a matter of skills that one has yet to practice in order to get to the point of competently enacting one's intention. The same problem may, however, rise to the ethical or even political level if one finds out that the reason why the means are lacking is because of intentional interferences by other people or by the community as a whole, implying desires at odds with one's own, and perhaps also related beliefs – as a conflict may for example emerge with one's parents when opting for literary studies, by virtue of their belief that such a career would lead to greater difficulty in finding a job later (which they at least assume is an end shared by both them and their son or daughter). And yet, as we noted, such interferences may also be “internal”, and one's desire to pursue literary studies be hindered by one's own belief in their eventual lesser marketability: this would still be an ethical problem, insofar as one's desire for studying literature was not wholly subordinate to that of finding a job, making its inferior market value closer to a practical problem; the whole direction of one's life is instead called into question. Related desires at different levels of determination – ideals, ends and goods – may also conflict: a professional singer may have a hard time finding some compromise between developing his or her own style – an indeterminate aesthetic ideal – and producing the music that would become more easily popular for a global audience (providing him or

her with stable sustenance; which may however be a merely implicit or unacknowledged factor in the experienced conflict, of course). A conflict among intentions would have more to do with the force exercised by “internal” impulses and past habits as well as “external” inclinations over desires and beliefs that are entertained only in relatively comfortable conditions free of their pressures, for example in one’s imagination, or when one is alone, or – in the classic ethical problem of incontinence – when the stimulus of a temptation is not yet present. This force is of course bound to conditions which may themselves be involved in the conflict: one’s habit of drinking heavily on weekends might become much more of a consequential problem if it ends up spilling over Mondays and forces one go to work sensibly drunk, especially if one’s job involves public relations and thus requires dealing with other people directly and graciously, even at the cost of lying. All problems may also be exacerbated by lacking, inadequate or outright distorted communication – with others as well as with oneself –, tied to all kinds of media which may be similarly involved in problematization.

A vocabulary built upon the elements of the pragmatic triad – desire for ends and goods, belief in ways and means of action, intention to act upon certain conditions, with ideals and signs respectively at the aesthetic and logical threshold of ethics – may therefore be of help in framing the wider work of the second part or stage of ethics, that is, its critics proper: just like logical critics classifies and explains different paths of covering the gap that lies between its characteristic problem – confusion, or doubt in Peirce’s terms – and its solution in belief through signs, though eventually combining the three of them – abduction, deduction and induction – into one encompassing practice of inquiry (Bellucci 2018a), ethical critics should perhaps do something along those same lines for conflicts, which include but exceed logical confusions. Such an ethical critics of conflicts may be best characterized as narrative at its core, especially when emphasizing its most reflective forms – those most mediated by signs –, though keeping in mind the primacy of action in ethics (which may be better described as dramatic, that is, as enacted narrative). In confronting high levels of problematization through conflicts which tear up to some extent the very fabric of subjectivity, practical-ethical reflection pursues some kind and degree of integration – even if only aiming at compromise – within the determination of action: different lines of conduct, their elements – desires, intentions and beliefs – and the vague or general character they make up are brought to-

gether to be determined again as parts of some more inclusive and integrated conduct, renewing the narrative and dramatic movement within an evolving situation which always precedes it and exceeds it; and this process may be both recurrent, that is, continually adjusted to experienced responses as they come up, and recursive, that is, continuously expanded to more inclusive levels, from the plans of one day to the directions of a life and beyond. If the semiotic grammar grounds a logical-argumentative critics which aims at truths about objects, the pragmatic grammar may similarly be said to ground an ethical-narrative critics which more inclusively aims at goods for subjects – most specifically for particular subjects –, including of course the very good of subjectivity, intentional reconstruction of itself and its own experiences through correction, control and critique. After all, all kinds and degrees of problematization happen within the pre-existing continuum of conduct and character, of habits, practices, experiences, relations and processes which are more or less integrated into a form of life coupled to a natural and social environment, and more or less bound up in evolutionary and developmental histories: it is this continuum that they tear up, even in the most ordinary of ways – the absence of one’s favourite cookies in one’s pantry is actually perceived as a problem, or in fact perceived at all, only because of an underlying habit of having them at breakfast every day, thus expecting to also have them on that particular day; and such habit may be expressed in narrative form, referencing present and past actual situations, as well as in logical and thus more hypothetical, general form. This continuum itself is of course inherited from aesthetics, not original to ethics or to whatever subject it takes up: any fabric of habits is always woven into those of other subjects and the dispositions and inclinations, qualities and interactions, of things and events in the evolving environment at large. What ethics does on pragmatic grounds is bring into sharper focus by some kind of contrast a subjective, organic figure out of the situational and environmental background it corresponds to and with; that is, it individuates a more integrated continuum within a more inclusive one, following it in its struggles (which may of course include struggles against itself, as we noted). This has clear biological foundations, but it is not limited to the biological in any reductive sense – a subject may be social or collective, as long as there is some continuity expressible in the terms of the pragmatic grammar; in fact, critical subjectivity at its higher levels is tied to social continuity, while narration at its most developed weaves together a multiplicity of different, sometimes conflicting and sometimes collaborating, subjectivities.

At their most elementary, narratives are held together as such by some problem that requires for its resolution a transformation in the “internal” or “external” world of a subject, thereby marking to some extent – and integrating – a beginning, a middle and an end within a continuum of experience, from which the story departs and to which it constantly returns. These beginning, middle and end of narratives are not merely temporal in a mechanical sense, since that would make any series of consecutive random events a proper narrative; they are processual, cumulative, each new stage building upon past ones with some kind of direction, if not an end proper. Again, it is already within aesthetics that such processual continuity is to be located, as we will see, but ethics specifies it by framing it in terms of a subject’s intentional action and reflection after its impulsive or habitual interactions have been problematized in some ways and to some degree: some desired end is determined into intention to act from a certain beginning – the condition – up to that end-in-view (as Dewey called it), and through some ways and means in the middle that are believed to lead from one to the other. The abrupt end of an aborted narrative is experienced as such, that is, as interrupted and unfinished, only because the end of a story in its strictest sense is tied to the practical ends of a subject, or at the very least – or we should rather say at its epic most – to aesthetic processual ends of the world which are not actually but may possibly be subjectified. In the narratological strand of semiology, in which the overall approach is still very much that of a logical analysis – we usually talk of topics and focuses, not of problems and solutions –, this more-than-chronological dimension of narratives is accordingly treated as some sort of hidden argumentation underlying narration, but from our pragmatist point of view it is actually the other way around: the chronological order is indeed logical – though wholly propositional –, taking the past as its object, while what exceeds it is first and foremost a practical and processual dimensions ordered on the criteria of action and experience, on “chrono-ethical” and “chrono-aesthetic” criteria; these admit of a multitude of logical-argumentative renderings, just like a situation in turn admits of a multitude of ethical-narrative transformations. This does not mean, of course, that chronology is simply an unfounded logical imposition, because on the contrary there is the genuine experience of events and actions following one another in irreversible sequences which we may be mistaken about – and lie, of course –, but which we cannot just straight out invent: when we remember an event from the past, we may imagine it happening in a very different order, and yet we cannot easily convince even ourselves that the event actually

happened that way – our memories compel us, or they would not be memories. Moreover, this also does not mean that the logical must be limited to the chronological: there is, as we have just said, the possibility of reading a narrative in argumentative terms, as some sort of demonstration of a past inquiry into some doubt that is solved, some topic that is brought into focus, though such operation is still usually only part of the story and a further determination of it into one of many different directions. The point is rather that narratives deal with a wider domain than logical argumentations, marked by a wider range of problems which include but are not limited to confusion about some topic and its clarification in the focus, especially if one takes the whole narrative as some sort of merely rhetorical device to communicate a predefined argumentation in a more persuasive manner. Such wider domain does extend to the logical as well as to the aesthetic, as we have already stressed many times, but it has priority over it, and logical elements may work in more implicit, underdetermined ways so far as they work in the narrative-dramatic domain. We should therefore take seriously Eco's idea – expressed first of all in his literary production – that what one cannot theorize about, one should narrate (Paolucci 2017). After all, it is not like the narratological toolbox of semiology is purely logical: we speak of subjects with objects of value they desire, we speak of lack, competences and performances, we speak of conflicting systems of values and so on; it is just that we frame and handle all such elements as primarily logical, springing forth from “deeper” levels where we can safely install our own argumentative, generalized abstractions as if they were there to being with – which is all the more problematic as soon as we move from literary narratives to lived narratives (the former surely closer to rhetorical devices at times than the latter). Our view is thus that narratological theory should be reconstructed in accordance with a more encompassing critical grammar centred on the pragmatic triad, or at the very least adjusted more generally in light of this practical-ethical nature. Defining subjectivity as a tool for analysis, even if only analysis of literary or artistic narratives, is not an endeavour that can be neatly isolated from that of defining it in a philosophical-ethical sense.

The huge variety of kinds and degrees of narration make it an adequate framework for a critical reflection which emphasizes the continuity as well as genuine plurality of critique, and which finds in ethics its moving – and partial – centre of gravity for modulations that bend towards aesthetics or logic. Different narratological theories often

stress different such modulations: generative narratology, while subordinating everything to logical readings as mentioned before, still tends to underline narration as the unfolding of a series of actions and transformations – its pragmatic dimension, after all –, while possible worlds narratology foregrounds an aesthetic dimension of expressing and experiencing a qualitatively integrated world, perhaps following its instantiations in different media. It is not necessary to draw any rigid line and demarcate narration from everything else – in fact, it would be detrimental –, and this not by fiat, but rather because it should actually be made unnecessary by a theoretical framework that enables one to acknowledge both the pragmatic core of narration – in the strictest sense of the word –, and its diverse modulations as well as phenomenal and aesthetic foundations. In a sense, narratologists who insist on the need for possible worlds are quite right: there is in fact no narrative that does not assume a world, that is, a more or less totalized environment, along with particular situations within it, because even when and where no world is explicitly described, a commonsensical world must still be tacitly assumed; the mistake rather lies in setting this up as the defining aspect of narratives as such, while it is actually a characteristic of all experience. Vice versa, of course, narratologists of a generative bent may seriously understate the qualitative, aesthetic ground of narratives, as if it were a replaceable “superficial” shell for a chain of abstractions, irrelevant to meaning (beyond perhaps contributing to a vague “effect of reality”). In both cases, the flexibility and variability of narration are missed or dismissed. On the contrary, we think it is crucial to stress the continuity of narration with aesthetic imagination on the one hand and logical argumentation on the other, in the proper holistic sense of continuity: not simply a gradualness in passing from one domain to the other, but rather a building upon – in differentiated forms – of one domain on the preceding ones. Narration should then be anchored in its strictest sense to the pragmatic domain of a practical development of more or less subjective actions from – and back into – sequences of events in their factual secondness, which are indeed stressed by narration (usually relying on propositional signs more than full argumentative ones), but do not exhaust it; at the same time, different varieties of narratives should be acknowledged and studied as such, along with the aesthetic grounds and logical offshoots of narration. This should hopefully result in a modally rich approach to narration, one that for example recognizes its ties to the secondness of the past and actual – since that is the source of all problems and subjectivity – while stressing its being perfused with qualitative and indeterminate pos-

sibilities, contingencies and accidents, tendencies etc. which are taken up for some more or less intentional transformation or development into the future and ideal (even if the attempt fails, of course). The subjects of narration do inhabit an aesthetic world and are indeed habituated to logical objects, sometimes caring about the former or the latter more than they do about actions and transformations themselves, but such dimensions stop being misleading only if we understand the ethical as building upon the aesthetic and the logical as building upon the ethical, as Peirce and Dewey did, each in his own way. Narration would then exhibit the mediations of ethics within critics, for example that between the more iconic, aesthetic forms of reflection that we have already seen in Peirce's model of practical deliberation with the more symbolic, logical ones centred on verbal language; or that among different recursive levels of subjectivity, whose reintegration is indeed its overall practical-ethical task. So far as it is kept in mind that critical reflection may be prospective as well as retrospective even in its narrative form – which we tend to associate to the retrospective –, in fact that it is always ultimately prospective and it may be closely allied to action as in dramatic forms of narration, narration seems to be the best candidate for framing ethical critics. But after all, this association of ethics and narration already has had convincing defenders within contemporary ethical philosophies, such as MacIntyre's Neo-Aristotelian ethics (MacIntyre 1981, 2017); what may be relatively new in our proposal is, among other things, the possibility of working out a coherent, systematic narratology in the light of such association, as found within both Peirce's and Dewey's pragmatist philosophies. "The self-controlled agent turns out to be a story-shaped self" (Colapietro 2017).

The range of practices and problems we pointed out earlier could then provide hints to classify narratives as well. The results would perhaps not necessarily and fully apply to the narratives of literary works or other kinds of narrative artworks, since these often have first and foremost aesthetic aims that exceed or even purposefully explode ethical ones, but again, continuity can still be recognized even in this case with respect to more ordinary varieties of narrative reflection. Hence we find narratives that focus on the mismatch between desires and intentions and its outlet in daydreams or other forms of compensatory escape, which might prove increasingly more unsustainable and insufferable against the practical requirements of living with others in the world. Or we find narratives in which are foregrounded the practical intricacies, even organized in a logi-

cal fashion, of surviving on a tropical island in the middle of nowhere after a shipwreck, like an improbable manual in narrative form. We also find narratives that test the boundaries between some item of traditional morality and an autonomous ethical inquiry that challenges it, respectively embodied in the figure of a father and his son. Again, closer to the threshold with logic, we find classical detective stories in which all pertinent action has already taken place and the problem is not to determine further action, nor to challenge legality – the more socially codified counterpart of morality – or anything like that, but rather to determine the past action itself and most of all who was responsible for it; a narrative puzzle focused on the confusion of surprise and doubt and their clarification. Vice versa, closer to the threshold with aesthetics, we may instead find mythical sagas striving to express the very origins or creation of the world, of life and human beings within it, depicting perhaps a golden age that might still work as an ideal for a currently fallen humankind; or we may find the barely narrative depiction of a future dystopian society, or fascinating descriptions of the landscapes of a foreign country by an explorer who went there, only interspersed with narrative episodes beyond the mere moving from one place to the next one. All such narratives, even when given full literary expression as mere artworks with no explicit critical ambition, may then of course feedback into the ordinary narratives that people tell themselves and to others in their everyday practical-ethical reflection, in all sorts of ways; in the long run they may also be enshrined into common sense as myths. Critical reflection thus cannot confine itself to the most explicit argumentations, nor reduce narratives as well as imaginaries to argumentations in disguise, but should rather learn how to deal with them on their own terms, in ways that are rigorous precisely by virtue of their sensibility and flexibility.

1.3. A Pragmatist Grammar for Aesthetics

As we noted in laying out the classification of the sciences along Peircian lines, the place of aesthetics within philosophy seems to entrust it with the important role of being the very first source of normativity, while at the same time not displaying it in its full force as in the case of ethics; it is again a sort of middle ground, a mediating field between the bare qualitative appearances of phenomenics on the one hand, and the strongest reactive demands of ethics on the other. In categorical terms – taking both of

Peirce's analyses as getting to something true at the same time –, aesthetics as a part of critics cannot but be concerned with some form of secondness that splits the continuity of thirdness, even while perhaps focusing more on the firstness of both that split and that continuity. Accordingly, it is clear that, while extending it to normativity in general beyond that more specifically aimed at knowledge as its end, Peirce's aesthetics takes up the same double nature aesthetics has had since its 18th century origins in Baumgarten, as a study not merely of perception but of its value as well as contribution to some kind of knowledge (Da Costa e Silva 2017): on the one hand, Peirce's aesthetics points to those admirable ideals – lovable, attractive ideas capable of exercising an influence on living beings – that ethics and logic must rely on in shaping conduct and thought, but on the other hand it takes as its main object of critique – and thus self-correction or control – the qualitative, perceptive and emotive “habits of feeling” of the subject, which have to be made sensitive to those ideals in order for them to be actually influent. In fact, the very sensitivity to ideals displays this double nature, since one can be insensitive to anything either in not desiring it or in not perceiving it at all (or desiring it and/or perceiving it in some mistaken, misguided way, of course). The ethical determination of desire into an intention, as observed earlier, is clearly founded on this sensitivity: desire is strengthened as it gets sensibly specified, with reference to one's actual conditions and circumstances, in its determination – which, as we have seen, is both an articulation of it and a transformation of it, and thus of oneself in one's very habits of feeling. However, while ethics is more directly concerned with ends, aesthetics aims at the underlying, more inclusive ideals that can integrate within themselves all dimensions of any subjectivity – conduct and thought as well as feeling – in its relationship to the world at large (Da Costa e Silva 2021). Hence, while feelings are the main object of aesthetic critique, the object of these feelings – the ideal – might in turn consist pretty much of anything else. It is in this sense that aesthetics, even while retaining its focus on feelings, is still the most comprehensive dimension of critique, with ethics and logic as its specifications into a critique of conduct and – most specifically – thought. One crucially must transform his or her own habits of feeling to attune them to a certain ideal, but this transformation is of course not itself the whole ideal already, though it is one part of it (and a fundamental one at that, since to be a critical subject at all one has to develop more and more the habit of inquiring and learning, that is, the habit of re-habituating oneself, which is a common thread to all critics: Liszka 2021a: 134-166). Moreover, the

ideal itself – like the end desired in ethics – does not come fully determined in advance, as if it were only a matter of unilaterally discovering and adjusting oneself to it. Because of this, a more subjective aesthetic critique of one’s feelings and desires – also as expressed in one’s actions and thoughts – just cannot be neatly separated from a more objective aesthetic critique of ideals themselves, like utility and pleasure as both parts of Plato’s idea of the admirable, which is one of Peirce’s aesthetic sources (188-189); the two sides go together, because to be objectively an ideal is always already to be something that would at least hypothetically inform and influence the feelings and desires of some subject at whatever scale.

The comprehensive field of aesthetics, which includes but exceeds actions and thoughts, is experience in its full sense, that is, not in its merely qualitative appearance as in phenomenics, but rather in its proper nature of a qualitative but also irreducibly existential, reactive clash between self and other, or between living beings and the beings or things of their environment (Colapietro 2008, Pappas 2014). It is the secondness of this clash with – and within – the world that indeed traces the (blurred) line between aesthetics and phenomenics, making the former the source of the secondness of normativity. Whatever problematic indeterminacy any subject has to determine and solve in such a way that it thereby contrasts good and bad ways to feel, act or think, it has its origin in the clashes of experience; it is always some degree of experienced crisis, then, that constitutes the critical subject. These clashes, though in themselves actual, can cover other modalities as far as they also enter experience – as they already did in phenomenics –, which again accounts for aesthetics’ double nature: one can experience a clash of one’s expectations with the actual world as perceived, but one can vice versa also experience a clash of one’s conditions – including one’s other subjective desires, inclinations etc. as well as beliefs – with the ideal world as desired, problematizing either the actual or the ideal in the process and thus opening them both up to other possibilities. In other words, it is not a matter of insisting on a certain ideal at the cost of dismissing actuality, nor vice versa: neither the actual nor the ideal are determined from the start to the point of not having to undergo any further clash, change or development. Since experience can problematize both the actual and the ideal, the possibilities that are thus creatively unfolded, however much indeterminate at first, can be experienced at all levels of normativity, from mere variations to the actual to broader and broader alterna-

tives as part of some desirable ideal. But there is, of course, no a priori guarantee that anything that is conceived as possible is actually so, either in general or in particular: some possibilities are really, or at least actually, “more possible” than others; they are potentialities, that is, they are closer to their actualization and realization. Hence the double nature of aesthetics is really a triple nature, because it also has to include sensitivity to possibility in all of its range. In fact, potentialities shade continuously into possibilities, and these into actual and perhaps real impossibilities: one perceives a difference between the immediate possibility of drinking a sip of water from the glass on one’s desk and the more mediate one of drinking a glass of soda if there is any in the fridge, or – in the case there is not – if the closest supermarket is still open and so on, just like one can perceive that going to fish out at sea would prove impossible for oneself as long as one does not have at least the most basic relevant tools, knowledge and skills, while squaring the circle would prove impossible forever and for anyone. Since there is no inherent limit to possibilities beyond the actual – whether close to or far away from it –, experience is always somewhat centrifugal, going far beyond both subjectivity and its more or less determinate objective correlates; both of them are transformed in the course of experience, actualizing some possibilities, but such actualization will be irreducible to either one of them. In fact, experience is always to a large extent passive – most fully in perception of the actual world, of course, but also in many other aspects of experience, for example one’s own memory of the past or even one’s very habits or desires, which can be perceived as passively playing out in ways that cannot be readily or easily corrected or controlled. Also, insofar as it is directed by ends and ideals – whether in a more active or passive way – to be actualized in the world, it is always to some similar extent expansive, ahead and around of itself, especially as these ends and ideals merge with one’s other ends and ideals, or those of others. The continuity of the actual and ideal with the possible leads experience out from any rigid and definite boundary; it fades into the inexhaustible infinity of possible experiences that phenomenics deals with (Atkins 2018). In all these ways, experience cannot be confined to any subject as its private possession, but rather precedes, constitutes and challenges both subjectivity and objectivity within the world. If a pragmatist ethics like Peirce’s or Dewey’s goes beyond tenacious subjectivisms or authoritarian objectivisms through a fallibilist approach that is both empirical and communal (Ibanez 2021), its aesthetic roots must lie in the full range of contact with the otherness that experience, as already

common and communal in principle, indeed affords; in a sense, all other methods of fixing beliefs besides the scientific method – tenacity, authority and universality – turn away to some extent from some aspect of experience. It is therefore crucial not to approach aesthetics with either a predetermined subjectivity or objectivity in mind, as one might be tempted to do in associating it with feelings on the one hand and ideals on the other. In fact, the very anti-authoritarian point of aesthetics is precisely that ideals should ideally be felt as such, they should be actively and freely corresponded to – and with –, not merely something to forever conform oneself to. This, as we have said, can only ever come about through the experience of secondness, of struggle, even when it takes the shape of authority – of the authoritative rather than authoritarian kind (Colapietro 2008: 120) –, but it is the very struggle that more or less defines subjects and objects within the continuum of the world, not the other way around, thus at least potentially leading to other forms of further continuity among them.

This is one risk of reading Peirce’s aesthetics along Kantian lines (Atkins 2008), thereby introducing too sharp a dualism within a faculty psychology of imagination and understanding on the one hand, and between already clear-cut subjects and objects on the other. In such a view, aesthetic pleasure is the state of agreement – perceived or not – between imagination and understanding with no regard to objectivity, while the “intellectual pleasure” of admiration results from the teleological judgements that also strive for the objectivity of nature and thus expect that state of agreement to continue, with no more tension arising between particular intuitions and general concepts. This certainly gets to the vital place struggle has for all normativity: the state of quiet is not merely a subjective feeling, but the result of the overcoming of a previous objective struggle within a wider process that also has generality to it; one does not indeed usually perceive that state of quiet as long as it is never betrayed by experience, highlighting what was only implicit. However, the limitations of this approach are just as clear, because it appears to exhaust aesthetics and its ideal of the admirable into the determination of the cognitive ideal of logic, that is, truth: a predetermined subject corresponding to a predetermined object, each severed from the other, through general concepts, while the dimension of feeling – along with all artistic ideals – is discarded as a mere optional “epiphenomenon”, qualities playing no part in the ideal. What is it that carved the object out of nature and fixed it as such, if nature is still very much in the process of evolution?

And if the possibility of the subject agreeing with that objectivity lies in a “*lume naturale*” that is the fruit of the very same process of evolution within that nature and as part of it, how was the subject in turn carved out and fixed? Subjectivity and objectivity are constituted – and reconstructed – through the struggle itself within a world that already includes them; they are not given a priori, and they can thus be present in many ways and degrees and at many levels. When the case is presented of an insane person that feels no struggle at all with reality, wrapped and trapped in his or her own fantasy in such a way that – from an outsider’s perspective – it is transparently a form of insensitivity to struggle that it is operative there, regardless of what might appear to him or her, this might prove so intractable a problem that it would make no sense to expect the insane person to ever recognize that insensitivity as such, but the case is not in principle different from the multitude of tractable ways in which people ordinarily shield themselves from experience and numb their sensitivities to the tensions, doubts, conflicts and contradictions that would otherwise arise from it; which means that sensitivity to struggle, which is necessarily – and not at all trivially – qualitative sensitivity, is itself an integral part of the aesthetic ideal, and struggle something that one should even seek out and strive for, not necessarily an unfortunate external obstacle to the very same state of quiet one began with. The ideal has a creative side to it; otherwise, there would be no point in pitying the insane person for not sensing any struggle, especially so far as there are people caring for him or her in such a way that the struggle will not be damaging or lethal anyway. Therefore, if it is true that aesthetics presents a lower degree of normativity, the reason cannot be that it only concerns itself with an ideal reduced to a final state of quiet: the ideal is not the final; aesthetics is the source of normativity, not of some predestined destination. If ethics and logic respectively work to determine the subject and its objects in a set of more or less stable habits, aesthetics both establishes this endeavour and pushes in the opposite direction, opening back up the subject and the objects. This is no extraordinary event, but the prerequisite of learning and growth: subjectivity and objectivity are never fully and definitely determined, or else there would be no possibility of either of them being developed through critical self-control. Experience can be circumscribed, neutralized or avoided altogether in many different ways, both in general and in particular areas, but that is hardly ideal. Experience can be ceded – even with conscious connivance – to the authority of some others, or it can be negated by one’s own tenacity, and in both ways it can also be reduced to a set of general cogni-

tive meanings for things that are more or less already theoretically “known” instead of practically and experientially “had” in an open-ended, on-going way, even when one does in fact face them; but there is always some risk in doing so, which is why it makes sense to speak of experience as something that should be defended and achieved, an active yielding to its passivity (again, Colapietro 2008): just like we cannot observe a phenomenon in its pure quality without abstracting it from its critical or metaphysical implications, observation in aesthetics also requires a backward move from ethics, and this is never easily and safely done with any kind of guarantees, not even in theory, where it is far too tempting to convince oneself to have filled up all the blanks in advance of experience. There is always further experience to be had.

When it focuses on the ideal dimension, the observation of aesthetics can be termed admiration, following Peirce (Liszka 2021a: 156-157). That we can empirically observe ideality is not any more strange than we can see a perfect ideal triangle behind an imperfectly drawn actual one, and experiment with the former – and about it – through the latter: Peirce’s “expanded empiricism” in fact covers both kinds of ideality, and what distinguishes the more formal one of modality from the finalistic one of normativity is that the formal ideal moves and exercises its influence only in an indirect manner (Short 2015). Admiration is an observation that includes a feeling of being moved in some sense by what is observed. As we said, what is observed can be anything at all, while what is admired can even be contrary to some others feelings one has, two features which subtract Peirce’s aesthetics from consequentialism in both its utilitarian and hedonist forms: the ideal is not the feeling of admiration per se, as if what counts was merely that the ends pursued are actually desired by the subject(s), everything else – including all action and thought – being a mere means to that satisfaction of desire; for the same reason, the admired ideal can be – in fact it usually is – something that requires constraint, correction, control or some other kind of discipline towards one’s actual feelings, just like the advancement in practicing an art form demands refinement of one’s own feelings and admiration for some sensations that are perhaps more subtle, shaded, heightened and so on. Peirce’s own guess at some ultimate ideal – his “concrete reasonableness” – is all but consequentialist: in his post-1900 attempts at a classification of ends – to which, significantly, he was also moved because of the need to preserve truth for truth’s sake as the ideal of science –, Peirce again tried to follow

the lead of the categories in distinguishing more subjective ends that are centred on development of qualities of feeling as such, from on the one hand more objective ends that pertain to supporting the existence of individuals, groups and so on (up to humanity at large, and perhaps beyond), and on the other hand ends that are strictly ideals precisely because they integrate feeling, action and reflection in pursuits that not only include all other ends, but also push forward the endless creative development of new ends (Liszka 2021a: 199-209). Peirce sometimes presented this final end as if it were the highest and thus in competition with others, and in fact there can surely arise a tension among them, but still it is evident that it at least potentially includes, informs, directs and organizes every other end; though often disparaging the pursuit for mere “sensuous beauty”, for example, Peirce himself could on occasion lament the fact that his world was a world with nothing for artists to express, a world where art was reduced to shallowness or luxury (Barrena 2014). Since it is an evolutionary process of growth that is endless despite being full of ends, Peirce’s concrete reasonableness cannot be consequentialist. Still, it can surely be misleading in the opposite way, going clearly too far with the centrifugal movement, at least if one forgets the hypothetical status of Peirce’s ideal, as in his idea of God (Atkins 2016): the ideal identified by Peirce is still an empirical, fallible ideal that must be and can only be taken up in further experience, not a foundationalist ideal. In fact this very ideal, by framing the world as still in the process of further evolution or development and thus indeterminate, implies that – given that the ideal is not necessarily singular, not even when it comes to ultimate ideals (ethical goodness or rightness and logical truth being, for example, coordinate ideals on a par with each other: Short 2015, Herdy 2018) – aesthetics cannot be immediately completed all at once by way of a priori reasoning, because ideals and ends at any scale have to be actually discovered and invented, expressed, explored, developed and refined within experience in the very pursuit of them; they have to be lived through – at least by someone – before they can be reflected upon aesthetically, which means that one cannot centrifugally withdraw into the lofty creative process of evolution at large as if everything else was a means to it rather than a part of it. Aesthetics demands not to be settled yet, whether in the immediate passions of the hedonist or in the mediate speculations of the cosmologist. We might here exploit the Latin etymology of “admiration” to underline its base in wonder, which surely is there even in the admiration of more familiar ideals, but might still push beyond these: it is a “looking towards – and forwards – with wonder” at something which

thereby arrests one, inviting one to pause and linger on it in some way (enacting it or contemplating it, playing with it, reproducing or representing it – with or without variations –, and so on). Since it invites to action and reflection as well as experience – if nothing else, the action or reflection needed to secure its continuance in experiences –, which in turn implies dealing with the otherness of the world it is instantiated in, any ideal is in a sense a penultimate ideal, in that it makes one to stop by, but not to stop altogether. Insofar as it is never realized nor fully determined yet, it is to be admired by expressing it and thus taking actions that aim at furthering it in some way; insofar as it is realized and determined, it is still to be adored by experiencing it in ways that will not impede its continuance, including its growth in and through more experience (even at the risk of transforming it into another ideal). Even agreeing with Peirce’s idea of concrete reasonableness as an ideal – and it is difficult not to, since at least at its core it is indistinguishable from this ambiguous, open-ended meta-normative idea of an ideal in general that we are setting out –, any critical subject, both individual and social, will still have to arrive at it by progressively opening up beyond all particular ends and ideals, so it will still be necessary to recognize every previous phylogenetic and ontogenetic stage as a valid form of the ideal in some way and degree (Da Costa e Silva 2017). Hence the centrifugal vector of experience is not a linear, unilateral progression from the subjective centre to the universal; it is replete with centripetal counter-movements, as these are the concrete shaping of a subject’s feeling, conduct and thought in accord with the ideal. There can be no hurry to be welded into nature’s or God’s continuum, as auspicated by Peirce at times.

All of this points to a profound dialectical character in aesthetics. Whatever the size of the ideal, it must be – like the ethical practices that specify it for a critical subject – a relational process whose admirableness cannot be exhausted in any actual moment but, even at the cost of transforming itself, has to organically unfold and grow in an integrated continuum as something that nonetheless strives to be constant, coherent and shared (Liszka 2021a: 190-198). Peirce’s very classification of the sciences that we have described at the beginning was inspired by the evidently aesthetic ideal of Kant’s architectonic: the various sciences, their branches and all their results constitute parts that, though different and while remaining distinct from each other, progressively form an organic, organized and integrated whole, a dialectical unity-in-diversity; in fact, the

whole endeavour of science is at times difficult to discern from Peirce's ideal of concrete reasonableness, especially if one forgets to include practical science and all its messiness, which renders less credible his 1891 premonition of a world that eventually comes to be perfectly rational and symmetrical. Besides the reconciliation of utility and pleasure, function and form in Plato's classical idea of admirableness or that of imagination and understanding in Kant, another source for the dialectical nature of Peirce's aesthetics is Schiller, who – like Peirce – tried to reconcile sentiment or desire and reason, love and duty, appearance or experience and action or thought: for him, the capacity to feel and desire the good must be developed simultaneously and in reciprocity with the capacity – emphasized by Kant – to reason and act towards the good even despite or against one's own feelings and desires, so that one learns instead to desire and act for the good freely and autonomously, with reason as a living internal element of the action that is experienced and not just a mechanical, external imposition to be enacted; as in Peirce's ideal, reasons – not motivating in themselves – must be made concrete by being thoroughly animated, that is, materially and vitally manifested. Schiller's idea of beauty lies in the free expression and experience of one's own form, but crucially this is not an a priori given that one can get to by merely rejecting external impositions as in some kind of aesthetic negative freedom, but rather the result of a cultivation, of an aesthetic education, through a dialectical interplay of three impulses: a more subjective, sentimental, material and present impulse to sense directed at nature; a more objective, rational, formal and future impulse to form directed at what unifies the variety of experience in general ideas; and, in the middle and thus mediating between them, an impulse to play that balances the other two within a "living form" that is beauty itself (Liszka 2021a: 167-173). The important point is that the dialectic has no predetermined outcome, it is founded – as suggested by the idea of "play" – on the open-ended freedom of remaking the rules, the order and the form of existing things in order to create new ones (and thus perhaps better ones on some regards); and it is because of this openness that it is also possible to ethically and logically reshape one's life, conduct and thought. The ideal can of course concern anything from an artwork to an action, a habit or practice, an individual life or the social life of a group or a whole community at many levels, or even further from an ecosystem up to the whole planet, the universe or God, but since it will have to be alive at any rate, and since aesthetics within critics as a whole still has the primary role of integrating subjectivity beyond actual impulses and circumstances,

we might generally and flexibly refer to the idea of a form of life – and a living form for its products – as the main focalization of the aesthetic critique. In contrast to subjects, forms of life are by definition intrinsically connected to the continuum of a wider process – life itself –, both as particular results of it and as variants of it, because all organisms – upwards from the basic biological unit of a cell – quite literally carve themselves out of a more disordered environment by way of membranes that both separate and connect the two in correspondence with each other; and while this is an expression of their generic potentiality, that potentiality is such only with reference to environmental affordances, and at any rate is itself a particular result of a long, inclusive evolutionary process in which form and matter or finality, chance and necessity creatively play out at different levels, without any dualism between biological “softwares” and “hardwares” entirely internal to the organism, but rather a chemical “wetware” that is both material and formal (Nurse 2021). In fact, if Peirce’s triadic relational logic is a “chemistry of concepts” (Bellucci 2012), and his phenomenics also a “phanerochemistry” (Atkins 2018), then any genuinely triadic relation as something living about it; subjectivity is only a dimension of it, no matter how important it is.

The basis for such a pragmatist aesthetics centred on the organism-environment correspondence within the continuum of the latter should of course be sought in Dewey’s aesthetics (Johnson & Schulkin 2020; Leddy & Puolakka 2021). Dewey’s aesthetics takes very seriously, and in a more consistent way than Peirce – whose expanded empiricism was more evident in practice than in theory (Short 2015) –, the qualitative dimension of experience as both material and sensorial, while advancing nonetheless a relational and processual account of it that in Peirce’s terms cannot but be triadic, as we will see: it is true that an experience in its fullest sense is the integrated whole of various kinds and degrees of creative actions and receptive passions between organism and environment, developing over time from an inchoate state to a consummated one, but qualities are foregrounded as intimately participating to this development at all levels (which is what we meant to underline by keeping the association of aesthetics with all firstness, and not just the firstness of thirdness). Moreover, if it is true that Dewey’s aesthetics tends to be less speculatively centrifugal than Peirce’s in a way, insisting on the continuity of the ordinary flow of experience – more disordered and fragmented, casual, accidental, either loosed or stiffened etc. – with this or that experience as aesthetically

constituted, so that no experience is completely cut out from the total flow as exclusive and transcendent, it does not however limit the scope of aesthetics to the level of an individual organism having individual experiences: Dewey was in fact deeply motivated by the expansion of still very much unfulfilled potentialities of experience rooted in social conditions that nonetheless have to be transcended, though transcended in just as much an immanent, natural and social way. Dewey's famous distinction between the indefinite flow of experience as such and a more definite experience seems to get at the boundary between the merely phenomenic and the aesthetic, bridging experience to the normativity of critics that peaks with ethics. An experience is aesthetic when it is – like the self in the metaphysical model we alluded to earlier (Wallace 2019) – relationally and processually cumulative in such a way that a beginning, a development and a fulfillment can be more or less individuated: synchronically, all parts involved are integrated into a whole even while being thereby brought to definition as different parts, each unintelligible without the others or the whole, while diachronically each phase builds upon those that preceded it in such a way that it is again unintelligible as such without them; within this free flow of experience, experience itself is intensified by the correspondence of “subjective” and “objective” qualities in all their frictions as both negative and positive obstacles to be remedied to. By contrast, anaesthetic experience is temporal without being on the whole processual in this way, perhaps because it is aborted and left inchoate, perhaps because it is porous and lacking something that it needs in order to proceed, or perhaps because it contains too many different elements that do not hang together well or do so only very loosely, producing many new but not cumulative outcomes, or on the contrary because it is monotonous in only including elements that are bound to each other in a directly or indirectly mechanical way. Ordinary experience might then be generally placed somewhere in the middle between these two poles, though most often closer to the anaesthetic one: so far as it is habitual in the routine, customary sense that revolves around practices with more or less predetermined ends, means and conditions generating no particular friction with one's natural and social environment, experience might be anaesthetic even simply for being too easily, speedily and immediately fulfilled; a perfect correspondence to the environment – or vice versa – retards, limits or blocks further dialectical correspondence with it. The “qualitative unity” of the aesthetic form of an experience is immediate both as the qualitative firstness of the thirdness of mediation that it is, and as qualitatively firstness full stop of the mat-

ter – bodily and environmental – that is involved and is organized in related and reacting parts of a whole; in both senses, however, it can only be experienced in and through time and space, as a process that absorbs what has been and adds up to it further transformations beyond some internal tension. The element of tension – that is, the element of secondness – is crucial to it being aesthetic in character, though the dominant vector and degree of secondness can vary all the way from the most passive of experiences – still active in the receptivity it presupposes – up to the most active of expressions; both can be creative and re-creative in an aesthetic way. Needless to say, the tension between organism and environment includes that between self and other – human or not – within all kinds of practical and intellectual activities: a conversation with other people – differences and divergences producing that friction – can be an aesthetic experience, as is obviously testified by the whole literary and philosophical genre of the dialogue.

If expression is the more active form that experience can take as it becomes an experience, that is, an experience that carves itself out of the flow of experience at large, and if criticism is on the whole concerned more with activity as self-critique, correction and control, then we might say that aesthetics will have to focus on expression. However, as we have seen, aesthetics must also account for normativity as it emerges in different kinds and degrees, and subjectivity along with it: though more active, aesthetic expression as such is still more processual than it is practical, because it must be understood as ultimately mundane and situational, beyond any definition of subjects and objects, and thus as crucially including at least an element of passivity to it. Dewey's expression is not to be thought of dualistically as a more or less immediate "pressing out" of a predetermined feeling from one's "interiority" into the external world, like a mere spontaneous discharge of emotion, but rather as more or less mediated by engagement with a medium that is both the environment in general and some this or that material in particular: such media must be selected, gathered, organized, used and transformed again and again in the course of expression, always with close observation of the passive repercussions of certain choices on the unfolding experience, including perhaps the experience of some other subject real or imagined (since any medium is part of a world which is, in principle, a common world capable of being experienced in similar ways by others): within expression, experience is developed simultaneously and reciprocally in its internal and external elements, and recursively at various overlapping levels of such

interiority and exteriority, so that an “impulsion” that is to a large extent indeterminate in its internal and external contents, causes and conditions is determined through struggle with reacting and resisting materials, thus contributing to the definition of forms and flows. This aesthetic mediation, encompassing subjects and objects with reference to the overall medium of a situation beyond subjectivity and to the material-sensorial media within it beyond objectivity, is different from the narrower logical mediation of signs – though signs are always included in it too, of course –, because it is concerned with presenting and evoking experiences instead of representing and conveying more or less objectified meanings external to the expression itself. This also marks expression as a more inclusive and basic kind of communication, one that constitutes communal subjectivities – as we can see for example in ritual practices – at various levels, expanding continuity with others past and present in the social and natural world. Of course, semi-otic communication still also counts as a particular form of expression, since Dewey’s philosophy is thoroughly non-dualistic in refuting all dichotomies between the spiritual, ideal, mental, conceptual, abstract and high on the one hand and the natural, material, bodily, sensorial, concrete and low on the other (though it might use Peirce’s triadicity in clarifying this non-dualism). Similarly, Dewey’s idea of the work of art as irreducible to any particular, definite end, as “serving life” altogether in giving fresh life to experience – both the experience of the artwork itself and some other experience elsewhere –, confirms the impression that normativity is attenuated in aesthetics proper. On the other hand, it is clear from Dewey’s more inclusive model of practical deliberation that the normativity of ethics has aesthetic roots, because it is already centred on situations being themselves problematically indeterminate, whether because of a subject’s mere ignorance or – more often – because of some real indeterminacy to be faced. Dewey’s model in fact unfolds in five stages (Ibanez 2021): (i) reflection starts from the experience of a really indeterminate situation, whatever the reason – “subjective” or “objective” – of that indeterminacy, then (ii) it proceeds to the active and often conflictual determination of one or more problems within it; correlatively, (iii) it projects a solution that is on the whole hypothetical, even while being based in some way and to some degree on facts that are being experienced or otherwise known (from one’s own or others’ previous experience), and at that point (iv) it determines the potential implications of the hypothesis in order to (v) verify its plausibility in practice, that is, in further experience. Compared to Peirce’s model, which also started off with indeterminacy but of ide-

als seemingly beyond experience, and which put much more emphasis on critical reflection as preparatory to some distinct future occasion, Dewey's model presents less of a gap by default between actuality and ideality or between action and reflection – already participatory in a present situation more than preparatory for a future one –, thus highlighting their much closer interplay in the aesthetic dimension proper; both are centrifugal models in that subjectivity is decentred by experience which always has a passive ingredient to it (even in the case of the imagined experience of an ideal in Peirce's model), but Dewey is more explicit in foregrounding the experienced situation beyond the subject as the gravitational centre of the process, and at least in principle he can still cover with that all the range of experience from perception to imagination and their more usual admixture.

By contrast to ethics or logic, aesthetics is always to some extent hypocritical, because in a sense it always comes too late: we are always already actually feeling and experiencing and desiring some way or another, most often in such an immediate because impulsively ingrained way that we cannot directly control it and we can only barely correct it – or at least constrain it –, to the point of perhaps experiencing our own reactions as external impositions on the part of our past self; because of this, changing the way we feel, experience and desire may demand a deeper and wider transformations of ourselves through experience. But a subject being such in correlation with other things and beings within an environment on which its activity turns and depends, even while they in some sense resist their objectification, this transformation of the subject – even if we reduced it to an alteration of its internal states – can only occur in and through a transformation of the situation, and especially of those more general situations that correspond to more inclusive and enduring habits of feeling and action and thought. This bond of dependence to the situation means that there is always involved some risk of failure, especially in the short run, since things might quite literally get in the way. Because of this, it might often be too much to ask oneself “how should I feel?”, especially if not accompanied by the question “how could I feel?”, which is appropriately less normative and also covers the creative exploration of possibilities that is integral to aesthetic experience. Nonetheless this question, like this whole line of reasoning, is clearly too subjectivized: even if we only take ideals into consideration the way Peirce does, the question would rather be “how should/could one feel?”, where the “one” is to

be understood as the on-going and open-ended integration both of subjects and objects and of their coming together into wider and wider situations, more inclusive forms of life. Yet again, as we have said, it is not only a matter of feelings as such but also of feelings as parts of a developing relation and process beyond a tension that is irreducible to feelings, which can have anything as objects in actual experience. All in all, then, the basic question underlying aesthetics might be, “How might one experience it?”, where “it” is just as indeterminate as “one”, and includes both oneself and anything beyond oneself that one might deal with, and thus both passive existence and active expression as different modes, ways and degrees of experience. Within aesthetics, the focus shifts to the world as medium and to all its materials – living or otherwise – as further media: what makes it dialectical, in the post-Hegelian sense of the word, is the fact that it does not confine its processes to any closed, coherent, consistent unity – subjective or objective – safe from the endless unfolding of contradictions (McGowan 2019), and that it thus encompasses both nature and culture as dialectically related “first” and “second” nature (Bookchin 1995; in fact, the aesthetic dimension has been recently described in a Deweyan key – anthropomorphically but not anthropocentrically – as a dimension of “human nature”, in the sense of nature made human within experience: Matteucci 2019). Since the world is far from being corrigible and controllable by any one subject in isolation at whatever level, aesthetics must then indeed be hypocritical. By contrast again to ethics, which centres conflict with its higher criticality, aesthetics should rather be understood as having a contradictory character: contradiction goes beyond any conflict insofar as the opposing parties are recognized as potentially being parts of a common whole beyond their clashes. To the extent that the world is really indeterminate – as both Peirce and Dewey maintain – and thus soaked in the implicit continuum of infinite, indefinite possibilities, it is a contradictory world: possibilities lie outside the scope of the logical principle of non-contradiction, because something might be only in that it might also not be; this in itself is banal – though nonetheless negated or neglected because of its banality –, but its results can of course be all but banal, because that continuum of possibility is indeed a continuum where not all possibilities are equal, yet all are (often confusedly) bound together, so that something might perhaps be or become possible only to the extent that something else is or does, and so on recursively ad infinitum. Accordingly, the relational process that is a form of life is also contradictory in its own way: a form of life always determines itself as a distinct, independ-

ent being only through its continuity with and dependence on other beings and on the environment more generally, which is the contradictory nature of any membrane as both separating and connecting; moreover, a form of life is not only what it is but also always – at least implicitly – what it has been and what it might or would further be (a flower that has never been implicit in a seed would not be a flower). Beyond any single form of life, of course, life itself as an implicit whole is inherently contradictory, because short of a transcendent intervention it can only generate and maintain new and more complex forms of itself by evolution, and thus by death via natural sifting (Nurse 2021); this very evolutionary process is in a sense the ultimate contradiction of critics, since it has in itself no predetermined final end, yet it generates all ends and ideals. The same can be stated from an ecological point of view, since each ecosystem is made up – as itself an implicit form of life – by an intricate web of species, groups and individuals partly opposing each other, partly depending on each other for sustenance. In themselves, these and related contradictions are only implicit in nature, because making them explicit as such demands an experience of nature as a whole that only emerges with human beings. In human beings – or in any form of life that is critical in that it is more deeply in crisis (as there might be many possible such forms different than actual humanity) – contradiction is endemic: as we have seen, a human being always has the other within himself or herself in a myriad of ways and degrees and vice versa, and only in this way is he or she capable of self-reflection as an integrated individual, as this or that social role within relationships or communities, as part of wider and wider social circles framed by historical cultural traditions, or as a member of an animal species or, finally, as form of life in general; hence the conflict of husband and wife always contains the implicit possibility of being recognized as the contradiction of a couple, just like the conflict between some of one's individual desires might be taken to be a contradiction within oneself (most likely resting on corresponding contradictions in one's environment). And of course, the kaleidoscope of cultural forms is equally contradictory when pushed to its limits a an open-ended, on-going encyclopaedic totality (Violi 2017). Normativity as critical reflection and, on that basis, self-correction and self-control on the part of a subject arises with the latter's heightened capacity for contradicting itself at some level or another. Thus, again, aesthetics should be characterized as hypocritical on the whole, because (i) it assumes both natural and cultural backgrounds of contradictions, some of which – like death – might even be invincible for the time being, or at least very diffi-

cult to deal with; (ii) it consequently takes some contradictions as positive insofar as they're inherently constitutive of a form of life and generative of further forms of life which cannot but live together; and (iii) it further recognizes that any particular candidate to subjectivity is not necessarily already in the position to contradict itself by criticizing, correcting or controlling itself within a certain situation, without the help of others who contradict them (over and beyond the resistance of the environment). It is only in the inclusive situations of experience that all kinds of critique come to fruition or fail to, and some passivity is irreducibly a part of the process. Some contradictions can indeed be remedied, often by way of creative remediation into another form – take for example all the games, such as paintball or shooter videogames or even the Olympics, that in some way or another remediate the activity of war –, but other contradictions might concede little more than reconciliation with them, whether forever or for the time being. Aesthetic experience is contradictory even in its artistic form – both on its creative and its receptive poles –, because one does not just impose on experienced materials one's own extrinsically predetermined ends, but rather explores a variety of possible directions that are seen to emerge as implicit already, though indeterminate, in the materials; thus only by contradicting oneself can aesthetic experience be realized. This is peculiarly evident in one historically neglected – from a theoretical point of view only, of course – source of aesthetic experience, that of the “arts of actions” and especially games (Nguyen 2020a, 2020b): the inherent constraints that come with these, whether or not they are formulated in explicit rules, are voluntarily embraced by the player as what makes a game the activity that it is, or in other words as constituting its interest – there are surely more effective, efficient or convenient ways to score a goal in soccer than having to only hit the ball with certain parts of one's body, and yet it just would not be soccer if that constraint were not in place, and the struggle against it is what makes one a soccer player (literally so, since it shapes one's body and embodied habits).

While being set to resolve the conflicts and confusions of problematic situations, ethics and logic still inherit the horizon of contradiction from aesthetics in their own ways, since both action and reflection assume experience as the ultimate context for their operations. Ethics, for example, is contradictory in that one cannot really criticize and attempt transforming oneself without first being formed – and deformed – by others in the course of one's education, which adds up to and modifies what constitution and

impulses one had already received at a biological level; analogously, a political critic still has to live in the very world he or she is criticizing, and is often unknowingly induced or apparently forced to accord to its ways. When a measure of pragmatic autonomy is then acquired by the subject, that autonomy works, as we have just pointed out, as an internalized heteronomy, a capacity of contradicting oneself as a more or less closely-knit internal community (as a “condividual”, in anthropological terms): self-correction and self-control demand a negation of parts of oneself with further development in view. The Aristotelian sense of *akrasia*, that is, incontinence (Lear 1988: 174-186), and thus internal split and strife, is in this perspective to some large extent necessary: no one can be totally virtuous by himself or herself to the point of automatically knowing, doing and feeling whatever is best in any situation as soon as it appears problematic (to a bystander?); even then the best line of conduct may be contradictory, which is actually what the virtue of moderation points to – the golden mean is never a fixed, predetermined compromise between excesses of two vices, but rather the open-ended outcome of a dialectical process in which one contradicts oneself before an intractable and harmful contradiction emerges anyway (for example, one may have to learn how to stop gorging on chocolate much before one’s craving for it disappears, or at the very least before one experiences harmful consequences). We go to experience in order to be contradicted in ways and degrees that will not be harmful but rather fruitful to further our ends and ideals. Similarly logic, as the theory of self-controlled inquiry, rests on this contradictory ground, so much so that it might be seen as again less normative than ethics, though for the opposite reason than aesthetics, that is, as hypercritical instead of hypocritical: in scientific inquiry, the method to fix belief is ultimately that of never fixing it once and for all, let alone by criteria such as caprice, authority or universality, but rather expose and submit belief as much as possible to the test of never-ending further experience; the very scientific spirit envisioned by Peirce – which has of course its own aesthetic dimension as an ideal – is thereby openly contradictory (Nubiola 2005), not just because a researcher must always seek out and face the objections of experience (and those of other researchers too, of course), but also because in order to be a researcher in the fullest sense he or she would have to devote itself to something – science – whose ultimate or even penultimate outcome, as a historical process that generation after generation lives on for the long run, he or she will never be able to personally witness, which makes the practice a sort of sacrifice (and it is, since theoretical re-

search can be much at odds with both individual and social short-term practical goals that might instead be advanced to some extent by all kinds of fake, manipulated, biased or partial research). By the same token, even the most strictly ethical or logical pursuit is the expression of some sort of aesthetic ideal; if logic is argumentative and ethics is narrative in their most distinctive character, they are also nonetheless expressive, as aesthetics is, including the element of passivity that is part of all existence and experience.

1.3.1 – Dialectics as Aesthetic Grammar

While the more subjectively and objectively determined focus of ethics and logic make it a bit easier to handle – though perhaps also easier to get wrong through dualistic stances –, aesthetics seems charged with the task of weaving together many different aspects of experience that also appear to be shot through with tensions and contradictions; it is both broader and irreducibly complex. If our aim with regard to ethics was only to outline its contours by sketching its “grammar” within critics, surely not that of fleshing out a theory, then that is all the more the case with regard to aesthetics; in fact, what we are most interested in – with a view to the thematic part of our thesis, which is mostly concerned with the betrayal of aesthetic complexity – is the very sense that the aesthetic dimension is elusive but cannot be restricted to any of its aspects without losing something. After all, aesthetics is just one step beyond the all-inclusiveness of phenomenics – a step that does mark a distinction, but only within continuity and only by its taking up and pushing forward the qualitative horizon of phenomenics. Aesthetics must first of all account for the emergence of normativity – or criticality – within qualitative experience at large, understood as exceeding any subjective or objective pole, that is, as based on their process-relational interaction within an overall form of life. This concern with the emergence of criticality also makes it necessarily hypocritical on the whole, in the sense that it must cover all ways and degrees of criticality; therefore, it can also be said to have to do with regulation of such criticality. The scope must also vary: if there is no one ideal that integrates all other ends and ideals into itself once and for all – apart from the contradictory ideal of growth, evolution or development, all of which entail the possibility of forming ever new ends and ideals –, then aesthetic integration through ideals will have to operate at all scales, not just nor primarily the ultimate one. This, in turn, would allow for aesthetics to come down to earth – as its root in sensibility clearly demands –, accounting for the affective and active care for material, sensible

things – and other subjects – within a material, sensible environment, rather than any abstract ideal; we are, first of all, involved and interested in certain interactive experiences and practices, and only from there can we expand outward through broader and broader ideals. Aesthetics would then also have to range from the most immediate, passive experience of a phenomenonic appearance to increasingly more mediated and active expressions at all levels, wherein appearances are more and more consciously corrected or controlled in order to project at least images of all sorts, and at most a whole experience through some more complex work of art (both of which can express ideals as well as interests, and can also ground ethical narratives and logical argumentations). None of these aspects can be sacrificed to the others, and that is what makes aesthetics extremely challenging. Taking it as its own critical dimension with its own outlets for critical self-correction and self-control, rather than a mere support for ethics and logic as the only real critical dimensions, adds to the challenge the possibility that while grounding the other two dimensions, the aesthetic one may always point – and must also point – in the opposite direction, contradicting them; otherwise, a final end to be desired and to conform other ends to would be a foundation that can be set out once and for all, the rest of critique being a matter of ethical and logical reasoning.

In our view, in order to be inclusive enough, a basic triadic “grammar” for aesthetics – that we can aptly enough term “dialectics” altogether – would have to steer clear from two extremes: on the one hand, a reduction to the biological process of need, search and satisfaction that is central to Dewey’s organism-environment interaction (Johnson & Schulkin 2023: 71-72, 84-85), but which if unqualified nonetheless risks falling into the trap of taking the organism as a subject with predetermined needs, an aesthetic experience being merely the whole course of getting to their satisfaction; on the other hand, the opposite reduction to expression of a more or less artistic kind, one in which certain materials are engaged with in an experience directed at some culmination and which might also leave behind a certain product – whether a work of art or something less than that – to be perhaps experienced in overlapping ways by other subjects (Matteucci 2021, Leddy & Puolakka 2021), a better candidate that however also risks losing sight of what lies behind and goes beyond that singular experience and act of expression. Though developing this hypothesis would require nothing short of a full thesis of its own, our bet for a most inclusive and versatile aesthetic grammar would ra-

ther fall on Dewey's essential dialectics of impulse and habit (Crick 2010: 48-53; Testa 2017a; Johnson & Schulkin 2023: 133-142), with "crisis" as the element of secondness to be added to their respective firstness and thirdness. The organism's experiential interaction with its environment is first and foremost a continuous process of adjustment to the ever-changing conditions of each situation and occasion, which are always unique to some extent, and this comes about in and through the mediation of ingrained habits (whether they are natural-evolutionary or cultural-developmental endowments). The element of crisis indicates, at its barest, the continuous falling out of step with the environment with a gap that habits have to constantly fill back up again and again. However, what makes this process dialectical and genuinely triadic is the indispensable role that impulses also play in it, which also illuminates the breadth and depth of the nature of habits. Even though interaction is primary with respect to any subject and object – and in fact, because of this constitutive primacy –, its destabilization through changing conditions encompasses subjective responses as well, and this is captured by the dialectical pole of impulse: what is unique about any situation may include genuinely novel, erratic responses on the part of the organism, and in fact it must do so to some extent, since habits are only general mediations whose determination in actual actions is partly contingent; even intentional action and reflection – and thus the ethical and logical critical dimensions – are indeed filled up with and guided by the unique qualities of experience, in Dewey's radical empiricism (Pappas 2016). In other words, each experienced interaction and its subsequent adjustments always go on within a qualitatively unique situation whose chances and changes are merged with the organism's impulsive reactions; every development – whether aesthetic, ethical and/or logical – will be a development of this inclusive material and sensible horizon. Of course, this horizon fades into the distinctly phenomenic to the extent in which crisis and its habitual remediation are absent (or rather abstracted away, since all experience has at least some minimal crisis to it): if interaction is merely impulsive, then it amounts to mere reaction – phenomenic secondness – whose very qualitative and mediatic traits would be merely implicit. Impulse differs from reaction precisely because, contrary to the way it is usually thought of – as if it were synonym of some rigid, predetermined instinct –, it encompasses the inclusive indeterminacy provoked by a crisis, while for the very same reason crisis is vice versa distinct from reaction – despite both being forms of secondness – in that it is a reaction that

provokes indeterminacy and opens up the possibility of not only determining it but also remediating it – that is, developing it – in habitual interaction.

This is, then, the quite permeable boundary between the phenomenal and critical dimensions of experience. If the triad of impulse, crisis and habit is likely to be the most fruitful way of tracing it, that is – in our view – because there is a reciprocity in the relation of impulse to habit, and thus also a capacity for dialectical inversion, that can easily be missed in alternatives that too emphatically foreground the development of a singular experience as such, bordering on ethics' teleological character: while it may be maintained that satisfaction can lead to further – and perhaps different, more developed – needs, or that the expressive culmination of an experience – with or without some definite leftover or product – can lead to further experiences of this sort (such as the experience of fruition of a work of art), this feedback route is far less evident and explicit in these views, and that risks restricting too much both the impulsive and the habitual centrifugal horizon of experience. On the contrary, impulse also encompasses already acquired habits – including the most rigid, reactive and thus determinate ones – insofar as they merge into the overall immediate, indeterminate, inchoate and perhaps incoherent response to the environment; vice versa, in remediating them, habits can and must also retain the flexibility of impulses, their sensitivity to the unique qualitative situation, affording the margin for adjustment and also opening up the possibility of creative, critical or “intelligent” habits (Testa 2017a). Outside of their dialectic, triggered by the crisis of struggling with the environment – and with all subjects and objects within it –, both impulse and habit risk decaying in what is reducible to mere reaction, though in specular ways: on the one hand, impulse may degenerate into the aimlessness of pure caprice and chance, wherein experience is not cumulative – neither culminating in an experience, nor in the experiential growth of habits that comes with it –, while on the other hand habit may also degenerate into the restrictiveness of pure routine and fate, wherein any accumulation and culmination of experience is marginal, predetermined and overwritten by rigid, reactive habits (which, incidentally, can also be seen at work in the methods of fixation of belief criticized by Peirce – holding on tenaciously to one's belief, accepting another's belief out of sheer force of authority, or hardening any belief into something that is universally, eternally and naturally given a priori). The more experience is broadened and deepened beyond that available to the most basic

forms of life, the more the dialectic – and the range of criticality – will be heightened, but it is nonetheless already true at the level of biological organization (which never stops being operative, of course, underneath human and sociological organization; Johnson & Schulkin 2023: 178) that the extremes of caprice and routine are dangerous and degenerative, the former threatening the organization altogether, while the latter making it inflexible and thus vulnerable to changing conditions. Therefore, at all levels experience is dialectically impulsive and habitual, and where it is not, it increasingly runs risks, whether for its very organic sustenance or for its further value as experience. That being said, the triad does maintain a process-relational directionality towards habit as triadic, as in fact – apart from its being explicitly the result of past habituation – the extreme of routine can be said to actually be, as much as caprice, a reduction of immediate impulse to reaction, while habit inherently underlines a more or less active process of habituation: even a creative use of impulse as such, in all of its contingency, will have to be effected in and through habits. Accordingly, it is habits – including flexible ones (Johnson & Schulkin 2023: 140-142) – that constitute an organism as well as any (inter)subjective self (225), and it is in habit that the root of all meaning must be located (44-45), not only in adjusting to new conditions (76-77), but also for criticality: by contrast to one's immediate and thus overall impulsive “valuing” – in Dewey's terms – of certain qualities of experience, critical “valuation” of them requires the remediation of value beyond some crisis (200-206), whether it transforms or mostly confirms them, and this mediation is at first and at minimum habitual, remaining so even in the case of more intentional action and reflection, since these must make use – and circle and feed back into – the habits that are not directly destabilized by the crisis. Thus, setting aside the primacy of crisis (since it is what Dewey calls a “problematic situation” that actually sets off the dialectic keeps it going: Point & Vuillerod 2019), the triad is still overall oriented towards the pole of habit, even though by its very nature it can invert the direction (either by chance and force or by the very capacity that habits have for contradicting themselves, opening themselves up). While, if properly understood within their dialectical relationship, both impulse and habit distinguish themselves from reactions precisely by their presupposing a crisis, habit as triadic does so in a more straightforward way: impulse might be discharged in its immediacy, but a genuine habit is something that must experientially unfold through time, whose past, present and future dimensions

it encompasses within its continuity (the “radical temporalist” side of Dewey’s radical empiricism: Colapietro 2023b).

Being the remediation of crisis and presupposing it, habit is thus also the root of criticality. As the etymological tie between the two indicates (Moeller & D’Ambrosio 2022), critique may be generally defined as the remediation – to a habitual, intentional or reflective degree – of a crisis; and perhaps, if pushed to its quite literally logical end, it may also be further defined as the remediation of crisis into criteria – again, same etymology – in the form of signs. The etymological double face of “crisis” is that it expresses at once the difficulty – if not impossibility – of deciding, and yet also the necessity – if not urgency – of doing so: it marks an indeterminate, problematic situation where on the one hand interaction is destabilized and on the other hand it must be re-established; and it is precisely on the way of re-establishing interaction that all the more or less critical “distinctions” that can make a “difference” are made (up to, as we have just suggested, the most explicit of criteria). In going through crisis, the distinctions and differences that are already implicit in habit – which is always biased in its immediate valuing – are experientially renewed by being disrupted and yet (hopefully) remediated, weakened or strengthened, but at any rate determined and developed once again. In more complex forms of life and especially in our human one, which is more thoroughly cultural and thus intrinsically dependent on a critical capacity to learn and grow, this very process can itself be valued as such within experience, and also be enshrined in some ideal as a result of critical valuation. The latter is the case of Peirce’s ideal of overall growth in concrete reasonableness, of course, but as we have said we cannot go straight to the ultimate and stay there, because that same value of growth pervades experience at any scale, including a singular experience – at both extremes of organic and expressive processes –, which is after all carved out as an experience precisely by its exhibiting a cumulative, culminating growth beyond a crisis. Because of this, the centrifugal ideal is a limit whether it is approached from the aesthetic or the ethical side, and it should be complemented with Dewey’s concept of “interest” (Levine 2021), which is traced back to its etymology to indicate much more generally an affective and active entwinement or involvement – a “being in between” – of the organism with and within its (natural and social) environment, with all that populates it; surely this can expand all the way up to broader and broader ideals, and yet experience can of course al-

ready be interesting – and as such become an experience – at lower scales (in fact it cannot but be, as it is only on their ground that any ideal expansion can really be sustained). Moreover, if the ideal – despite being in the last instance contradictory – emphasizes the open-ended, on-going but coherent integration of ends and other ideals into interwoven habits (especially when it is looked at from an ethical point of view), the interesting rather reverses the emphasis in a way that is more apt to the hypocritical nature of aesthetics, because experience can be made interesting even without moving towards an ideal integration but rather away from it, as when something new is simply tried out and valued already as a refreshing escape from routine (which is integration at its most ossified). Ideals – as ideas, no matter how vague – also stress objectification perhaps more than interests do, that is, they are more readily conceived and wielded as reflective criteria (which does not coincide with nor exhaust their operation as embedded into habits). If complemented with interest, the ideal aspect of the aesthetic dimension can thus serve the purpose of highlighting the possibility of ever expanding the breadth, depth and richness of interest, of both sustaining and furthering integration at any level, and also of coordinating with the heightened criticality of ethics and logic. In fact, on this last point, it could be argued that the interesting is per se the overall ideal of the aesthetic, coordinate with the ethical ideal of intentionality and the logical ideal of intelligence (both of which require, in different ways and degrees, much more integrity and integration than interest by itself does). As the source of criticality, while on the whole hypocritical, aesthetics should at any rate inclusively encompass the whole range of criticality, from that demanded by the mere sustainable survival of an organic form of life to that pushed forward by an unfolding ideal, interest being – like habit, of which it ultimately is but a different facet and name⁵ – a more flexible middle ground.

⁵ While the impulse-crisis-habit triad seems to work well enough if adequately understood, the complexity of the aesthetic dimension entails that it would probably be a good idea to have a whole range of alternative concepts aligned with each element, which would also aid in better differentiating and handling the focus on a singular experience and the bottomless indeterminacy and generality of impulse and habit respectively (just as we found it a good idea to have a subjective-objective spectrum for the pragmatic triad of ethics). If habit is paired with “interest”, for example, stressing in particular an on-going temporal involvement with experience, then impulse can be paired with “origin”, which is always implicit in that (since there is no cumulative culmination if not by contrast to the more indeterminate starting point); and of course, that origin is indeed potentially as bottomless in its indeterminacy as is the ideal generalization of interest: there is no absolute origin to an experience – and even less to experience, of course! –, which is why any narrative account of it may always take a previous time as its point of departure, even though that will naturally affect the (experienced) meaning of that experience. This pair can then be tentatively complemented, in a more spatial key, with the pair of “organization” and “horizon” as allied to habit and impulse respectively. The element of crisis too can be complemented with alternatives that emphasis ei-

Taken together as – so to speak – the centre of gravity of the aesthetic dimension, one which does not exclude but rather holds together all the aspects of it we have singled out, interest and habit allow us to zoom in and out between the singularity of experiences and the both indeterminate and general flow – at its extremes, capricious and routine – of experience at large. Surely the most basic interest of any form of life as such is precisely that of inhabiting the world, meaning by that at once – though in various ways and degrees – adjusting and habituating itself to the environment and, vice versa, adjusting the environment to itself and therefore making to some extent a habitat out of it. As a continuous activity, this inhabitation is always singular with regard to any one particular situation or occasion, even while it is nonetheless shot through with the generality of habituation; therefore, it is not as strange as it might sound that an aesthetic experience in the singular – an interesting experience – is experience on the one hand more fully inhabited, and on the other also habituating one to further experiences (even just trying to repeat – with or without variation – the “same” experience). This is true even of the most evidently singular act of expression: while it cannot be said to be truly repeated in another act (nothing ever is), still a more or less similar act may always in principle be performed, including what of that performance might be repeated in the experience of its product, if there is one (which is, after all, the purpose of works of art – an artist’s expressive endeavour rarely if ever is confined to his or her own individual experience, always having on sight the possibility of others experiencing the work despite not having themselves expressed it). That habit at large – by contrast to this or that habit, which may not be overtly active at some time – is always actively inhabiting the natural and social environment in both singular and general ways seems to confirm that the triad can accommodate both of the other approaches we have mentioned (and in fact, Dewey also speaks of the overall sensible and affective material of an act of expression as an “impulsion” to be shaped: Leddy & Puolakka 2021). This activity of inhabiting can also be complemented with the negative side of “inhibiting” (which is etymologically related), thus accounting for the capacity of habit of contradicting themselves, as is needed for criticality at all levels, from the simple flexibility needed for continually adjusting to environmental conditions and circumstances to the increasingly

ther its temporality (such as “struggle”) or its spatiality (such as “focus”). To what extent this may be done and carried on in useful and fruitful ways would need to much more reflection, of course: just like the phenomenic categories of quality, reactivity and mediacy – or, at their most generic, firstness, secondness and thirdness –, these aesthetic categories must be irreducibly vague to a large extent, as in that also lies their heuristic use.

protracted suspension of action to make it intentional and reflective: inhabiting the world is at times a matter of inhibiting oneself and waiting instead of acting, and at its most critical, waiting becomes predictively expecting something according to signs. It is this conceptual richness that makes habit, together with related terms, versatile enough for the complex, contradictory nature of the aesthetic dimension. Inhabiting pairs with inhibiting precisely because habit is not subjective (nor objective): while it emphasizes the subjective pole if contrasted to the correlative habitat, habit as such is all of a piece in “incorporating” the environment, that is, in making a body out of it – the organism’s body will no doubt be the most organized side and readily available for action (though it too can internally fail), but it is indeed one side of an irreducible process that necessarily has it growing in relation to environmental affordances (which is why the “embodied”, “embedded”, “enactive” and “extended” facets of the contemporary paradigm of cognitive sciences cannot be severed from each other, like the other ones – “emotional”, “evolutionary” and “exhaptive” –, all of them getting at different aspects of an overall “embodied meaning”, that is, aesthetic – and habitual – meaning; Johnson 2018: 53-56). Inhabiting an environment on which nonetheless it depends means, for an organism, not going all the way in incorporating it into a body (which, even were it possible, would ultimately kill it for lack of further resources). Thus inhabiting also requires inhibiting action in accord with an environment that never stops resisting, all the more so since it keeps changing and it is also populated at the same time by a multitude of other forms of life.

This contradictory nature of habit as singular and general, as habit and habitat, and as inhabiting and inhibiting also applies to the individuality and sociality of experience, of course. The habitat can also become a social habitat populated by individuals that, while unique⁶, are entwined within a more or less common web of habits and their related interests, which is also pervaded by inhibitions of all kinds. While the habits of human beings – as animals that put all their bets on the second nature that is culture (Remotti 2011: 3-31) – are eminently social, habit cannot be reduced to sociality, because on the contrary it is rather the case that social entities such as institutions can adequately be understood only by reference to habit as a more primitive notion (as in Dewey’s “social ontology” of habits: Testa 2017b). In this respect, even though a philosoph-

⁶ A further pair of supplements for impulse and habit respectively may be the dialectic of the qualitatively “unique” with the generally “united”, perhaps with “contrast” in the place of crisis.

ical – and thus cenoscopic – account of habit within common experience cannot simply defer to any scientific account of it, the reference to evolved forms of life, organisms and environments is an important counterweight to the temptation of restricting habit to human sociality: before it becomes strictly social, habit is already first and foremost common, continuous, thus indefinitely applying – in different ways and degrees – to all other forms of life, and encompassing rather than eclipsing the singular and individual aspects of experience; which makes “aesthetic sensibility” the commonsensical “common currency” of life at large (Johnson & Schulkin: 2020), one that is inherently ecological in scope (Owen 2016) and is, just like anything else, a result of the evolutionary process (Mandoki 2017; habit itself has recently come to the foreground as a fundamental concept for evolutionary aesthetics: Portera 2020). This is why we find it reductive to conceive of the community of aesthetics – corresponding to the political community of ethics and the rhetorical community of logic – as an “imaginative community” of artists (as is Andrade’s 2022 proposal): the radical, indefinite inclusiveness of aesthetics would rather demand something of a community of forms of life that may be termed “symbiotic” (a word that at once covers its biological-ecological roots and – again etymologically – can expand all the way up to the social necessity of “living together”, of cohabiting the common world). In a sense, insofar as the material world is the material of sensible, living experience, it might also be said to partake as well in its “animacy” from a pragmatist point of view (Colapietro 2019). At any rate, when it comes to aesthetic value within the human form of life, the point is not achieving total social agreement on what is and is not valuable as such, thus progressively eliding individuality: it is rather enough that partly social but also partly individual tastes are reciprocally recognized, corresponded with rather than to, within communities (Lopes et al. 2022: 32-61). This accords with aesthetics’ hypocriticality, because it makes aesthetic value something to “commune” around and about, without necessarily aiming at any full-on stable convergence as in the case of logical truth (Riggle 2022). Needless to say, the same also goes the other way around: individual tastes not only are never purely individual, having a long natural-evolutionary and cultural-developmental history behind, but they are also to a large measure not directly subject to individual self-correction and self-control, in both senses being far from fully conscious and fading instead into an “aesthetic unconscious” (Henning 2022).

If the aesthetic dimension is constitutive of subjectivity – at all levels, natural as well as cultural, individual as well as social – but is irreducibly dialectical, then subjectivity will be dialectical too: no identity can be secured and secluded once and for all, because it will always be intrinsically shot through with the dialectic tension among its present contingency, its past historicity and its future integration in community and continuity with others (Colapietro 2020), as in Dewey’s radical temporalism but also Peirce’s dialectic between actuality and intelligibility (Colapietro 2018). Foregrounding habit in its complexity is a way to keep at bay any subjectivist drift in taking up Dewey’s centring of concrete present experience (a direction that even good overall presentations of his aesthetics and its continuity with ethics, such as Stroud’s 2011 account of the “artful life”, can slip into). Avoiding this error, however, is not only a matter of stressing the dialectical nature of even individual subjectivity, but also – and crucially – one of not discounting its no less complex involvements with all kinds of more or less objectified material, sensible elements. Habit again emphasizes the subjective formation of a certain character consisting of general dispositions – whether sensible, practical or intellectual and discursive (Fesmire 2015: 117, 145-147, 151) – that are largely a result of education (which should be tightly associated to the aesthetic dimension, being in fact just as dialectic, especially insofar as it is democratic: Jackson 2012), but its etymological link to clothes also highlights that its bodily nature is not at all to be limited, of course, to a mere support for such dispositions and their expression in action and experience: one’s body and all it incorporates is not only something that materially senses the environment by experiencing and expressing it, but also and first of all one more thing within it to be materially sensed by others, as exposed to them. Like built and thus more clearly demarked cultural habitations within the overall habitat, habits as clothes and all other possible objective ornaments mark a sort of middle ground between incorporation as literal formation of a bounded body and incorporation as the set of its correlated environmental affordances, pointing at an intermediate grey zone of incorporation relative to others. This is in principle valid all across the board, because to be embodied is already to be exposed, whether one is aware of it or not, but of course it becomes increasingly more important and impactful the more a form of life becomes communal and social, and thus habitually bound to and interestingly involved with others. Exposure highlights the passive, pre-subjective, pre-critical and thus ultimately unavoidable nature of expression – at its limit even just existing, without experiencing anything –,

while expression on the contrary stresses the more or less active, subjective and critical undertaking of exposure. A work of art is inherently tied in this way to its artist as an expression that is exposed to others, despite the fact that it can always of course be – or end up being – detached from him or her: such detachments do not necessarily impede the experience of the work of art, even as it was actually intended by the artist (who is usually well aware that the artwork must to a large extent stand on its own), but still they may affect it, just like they may affect the artist (who might depend in many ways – from the socio-economic to the psychological – on his or her identification with a certain corpus of artworks – again a body, etymologically – which taken as a whole expresses a certain style, a developmental career, a further trajectory and so on). As we have pointed out, all narratives – whether discursive or dramatic, episodic or covering the whole arc of a life – and arguments are also expressions, thus also forms of exposure (increasingly critical ones): in a sense, we also “wear” them to shape our identities as much as we wear clothes; we are involved with them, and they are no doubt crucial in their pressing forward the ideal as well as critical expansion, deepening and enrichment of our habits and interests. That, however, should once again not lead us to hastily leave behind the qualitative, material and sensible aspects of the aesthetic dimension in their full scope, even at their most immediate: it is also in and through literal ornaments, in and through our own and others’ appearance and images – from our bodies’ surface to whatever is attached to it or even surrounds it –, that we also both expose and express dialectically all our subjective identifications with objective elements, including one’s interests and ideals; this is why we care about them and actively take care of them. Of all the difficulties with holding together the complexity of the aesthetic, the unease if not hostility with regard to appearances and images – dismissed as superficial – is by far the most widespread and deeply-rooted one. It is precisely a refusal of this sort, which sweeps away in one blow the aesthetic as a whole – in all its complexity – to reject its aspect related to appearances and images, that the whole thematic part of this thesis will be concerned with: the discourse we will examine attempts to construct a “minimalist lifestyle” that, as the very concept of “lifestyle” indicates (and as fits at any rate ideals), remains stuck in a peculiarly evident way between an aesthetic and ethical dimension, both of which it cannot really renounce without dissolving itself; and yet, rather than acknowledging and thus critically handling the grounding of the lifestyle in a certain aesthetic common sense, the discourse constantly disavows it through the discharging of

its internal contradictions, even at the cost of making itself so indeterminate as to amount to almost nothing (which also, paradoxically, allows it to keep on relying on that very aesthetic common sense as commonsensical, rather than critically examining it). For this reason, it is worth stressing that any adequate account of the aesthetic dimension as part of a broader, irreducibly contradictory and dialectical critical experience, will have first and foremost to deal with this obstacle: the persistent power of an anti-aesthetic rhetoric – and underlying philosophy – of authenticity. In order to do this, as some of the most recent critiques of authenticity show, the most essential point to be firmly maintained and worked out in depth is that an isolation or exclusion from the aesthetic dimension – or at least from its critically worthy manifestations – of “mere” appearances (Carnevali 2020: 75-91) and their curation as sources of identity, especially in the increasingly mediated form of “profiles” (Moeller & D’Ambrosio 2021), only compounds whatever problems the exponentially growing circulation of images may be causing. Developing such a critique of authenticity goes far beyond our very limited theoretical outline, but there is no doubt that the pragmatist philosophy is best situated to tackle this all-important issue, particularly in Dewey’s version of it: its project, after all, is one that by accepting an “ontology of becoming” radically replaces the dualistic opposition between inauthentic “appearance” and true “reality” with a dialectic between experienced “events” and the critical “objects” that mapped or model them in order to (re)mediate them (Crick 2010: 22-26, 36-41). It is, in fact, in this exact direction that we would take Peirce’s overall philosophical project, understanding phenomenics and metaphysics not as their own separate domains, respectively dealing with appearance and reality – or even existence and essence –, but rather as interrelated phases of one comprehensive philosophy, understood as the articulation of a synechist-dialectical, rather than dualistic, “critical common sense” (Haack 1996, 2005; Gautier 2017; Poggiani 2017). Our unfinished sketch of a pragmatist critics, which would have the literally central task of bridging phenomenics to metaphysics (the way in which aesthetics also bridges phenomenics to ethics), is hopefully enough to at least suggest a non-reductive way of doing so through a thread – rather than a monolithic bridge – of triadic relations and processes.

With its complexity of aspects, its expansive inclusiveness at spatial-temporal and relational scales, its own dialectical contradictoriness as well as its equally irreduci-

ble tensions with the ethical and logical dimensions (despite grounding them), the aesthetic dimension is quintessentially contested and problematic. By anchoring it to a triadic process-relational “grammar” – dialectics – that is however in full continuity with those of the other critical dimensions (as it is aesthetic crisis only that can kick off the criticality of intentional action and reflection, projecting an indeterminate desire to be determined and pursued), one that moreover is not at all meant to exclude any of its aspects and scales (as it should, on the contrary, encompass them without eclipsing them through the constellation of terms related to “habit”, and perhaps also through alternative, complementary names for the elements of the triad), our critical framework is evidently not built on the premise that the aesthetic dimension should be forcibly made less problematic than it is, especially not at the cost of repressing some part if not most of it. In our view, what a proper pragmatist account – that is, one that is less sketchy than our literal triadic skeletons – would have to aim to is not trying to solve the aesthetic as if it were some definite problem, but rather developing the heuristic tools that are needed in order to make contradictions and problems more rather than less perspicuous, so that they may be better handled critically (with critique coming in different ways and degrees, of course, without entirely sacrificing the interesting, the intentional or the intelligent to any of the others). The line of research that lies closest to our approach, that which goes by the name of “everyday aesthetics”, is instructive in its vulnerability to turning inherent tensions into splits: on the one hand, a “weak formulation” of it (as most explicitly advanced by Leddy 2012 from its very programmatic title, which emphasizes “the extraordinary in the ordinary”) mainly extends the aesthetic attention once reserved to the fine arts also to the everyday world, on the ground that by appreciating anything – even just within one’s theoretical reflections – one will inevitably make it somewhat extraordinary, unusual and exceptional against the background of the everyday, and that must therefore be accepted; on the other hand, a “strong formulation” of it (for example, Saito 2007) takes everyday aesthetic experiences as paradigmatic already on their own, at the specular cost of not putting forward much of substance to clarify and justify what makes anything any more worthy of appreciation – and theoretical attention – than anything else, insofar as everything is equally ordinary in its already pre-established everydayness (Forsey 2015). If a sharp discontinuity between art and the everyday, as separate domains with separate aesthetics, is generally ruled out, their continuity is on the one hand conceived as “everydayness of the aesthetic” still based on the

whole on the paradigm of the arts, leading to an aestheticist stance which takes everyday life as a work of art to be made more or less exceptional, while on the other hand it is conceived as an “aesthetic of the everyday” which takes upon itself the task of putting forth a different paradigm (Matteucci 2015). This is a tension that is immanent to the very historical process of proliferation of aesthetic phenomena in social life beyond art (through design, fashion, tourism, gastronomy and much more, all flowing into “lifestyles”), because the first approach risks being aligned with the “hyper-aesthetic” tendency of this process of aestheticization, while the second one leans towards the “hypo-aesthetic” while nonetheless having to deal with that expansion and the related erosion of the distinction between a “high” and “low” culture (9-14). The former position risks falling back into a traditional, critical but often elitist and extemporaneous art-based aesthetics; the latter, on the contrary, risks largely doing away with criticality to cast the same worth onto any phenomenon at all, being thus especially prone to the “Pangloss syndrome” of only seeing the aesthetic in a rosy light and picking up innocuous or self-evidently positive phenomena (Mandoki 2007: 37-38, 83-84), forgetting that there can just as easily be a negative side to the dialectic, an “aesthetic deformation” as well as formation (Mandoki 2019).

The problem with taking what in our view is a dialectic as rather an opposition between alternatives is, beside running the risk of making each position more extreme than it would otherwise be – with the twin dangers of associating the aesthetic to the capricious or the routine –, is that the solution is then likely to be sought in a middle way that can be no less exclusive. Forsey’s (2015) proposal for an intermediate position is one such solution: on the one hand the aesthetic is seen as a “thread” that is woven into other sorts of judgments, actions and values in everyday life, but on the other it takes the concept of “functionality” in use – around which she has built an aesthetics of design along the strict lines of Kantian judgments (Forsey 2013) – as the main category for appreciation of everyday objects, cutting it off from interpretation and communication to avoid investing the everyday with “artistic or existential depth” (Forsey 2015: 84-87). These two sorts of undue depths are associated, of course, to the two opposing “formulations” of everyday aesthetics, and in particular to Leddy’s approach (whose contribution to the same volume indeed exemplifies well his emphasis on the aesthetic remediation of the everyday through artistic practices, in this case amateur photography:

Leddy 2015) and to Haapala's (2005) reflection on the "meaning of place", which attempts to highlight the "familiarity" of a place – the habitualness of inhabiting it – as such, without thereby making it more "strange" because of this very act of highlighting. But if Leddy and Haapala risk losing sight of the valuable points the other raises, Forsey's middle way risks losing sight of both: her centring of the aesthetic judgment of objects, mainly based on functional adequacy or excellence, clearly emphasizes the passive side of aesthetics – even if the judgment is made while actively using the object, such as a moka pot –, and the habits involved with those objects, up to the whole historical-cultural backgrounds which underwrite them, are reduced to mere necessary conditions that remain external to the aesthetic judgment per se (which is, after all, another way of insisting on passivity: habits and their backgrounds can be critiqued and challenged on other grounds, but aesthetic judgment per se simply takes them up as they are, as a point of departure which it is not its business to prospectively change). We agree with Matteucci (2015) in his maintaining the "permeability" – rather than some definite middle point – between the two positions, even while accepting the task of a "Copernican revolution" that reverses the relation of dependence between the artistic and the everyday, taking the former to be an intensification of the latter as more basic: in fact, this is what we ourselves have stressed even more by basing our aesthetic "grammar" not on Dewey's explicitly aesthetic theory of singular experience and expression – as Matteucci does –, but rather on his much broader dialectic of impulse and habit, which is also much better suited to handle the continuity between the aesthetic dimension and the ethical and logical ones. Of course, Matteucci is actually right in defending Dewey's aesthetic theory from the accusations that it would still be based too much on the fine arts, since in fact Dewey does not at all make distinctions in terms of artistic or everyday "contents" – whether subjectively or objectively determined –, and he is also right that the risk is there in the "hypo-aesthetic" position of making everything equally "aesthetic" in a presumably descriptive rather than normative stance, without articulating criteria (and thus abandoning de facto the task of putting together an alternative theoretical paradigm); in fact, it is precisely in order to keep the criticality of aesthetics on sight that he accepts Dewey's account as paradigmatic. However, we would push such criticality much further even while characterizing aesthetics on the whole as hypocritical (for its very role as source of criticality, and its pluralistic complexity and contradictoriness): in our view, aesthetics should also be able to indefinitely stretch to a higher

criticality and to deeper levels and broader scopes, also accounting for the aesthetic dimension that is always implicit in the other critical dimensions of experience. While no doubt entirely relevant as well as interesting, reflections such as that of Naukkarinen (2015) on “tact” and even Saito’s (2021) broader view on aesthetic “world-making” are limited if not restrictive insofar as they understand the critical import of aesthetics as mainly a matter of sensible interactions with people and things (as again emphasized most recently by Saito’s 2022 turn to “care” as a core everyday aesthetic concept), missing other ethical-practical and even political roles such as that of expressing ideals and identities (no doubt a crucial part of “world-making”, in our view). From this point of view, if the overall problem that contemporary aesthetics must deal with is the increasing gap between an art-based traditional aesthetic philosophy which still dominates the “common sense about the aesthetic” on the one hand, and on the other an “aesthetic common sense” that is by now so thoroughly invaded or pervaded by aesthetic(ized) phenomena as to make them at this point normal and banal (Matteucci 2015: 17-18), we would situate this task firmly within a more encompassing task of developing a critical common sense at large – which is philosophy’s main task in our pragmatist view –, one that articulates and clarifies the thick relations and reciprocities among nonetheless irreducible and also contradictory dimensions. In fact, both Saito’s (2017: 9-51) and Leddy’s (2017, 2021) more recent stances are on the whole quite conciliatory, not at all that extreme – if they ever were, which is arguable –, which means that common ground upon the strictly aesthetic side would not be so hard to achieve (and for doing that, we agree with Leddy and also with Puolakka that Dewey’s aesthetic philosophy is indispensable in order not to leave everyday aesthetics still fragmented, even if not dualistically divided, and in order not to restrict the crucial concept of “habit” to full-out routine: Puolakka 2015, 2018). The much harder task, beside the theoretical articulation of criteria, is achieving common ground on how criticality and normativity at large are to be understood, and how aesthetics should be linked to its other dimensions. That, as our case study of the “minimalist lifestyle” will abundantly illustrate, is just as important for critically addressing everyday aesthetic phenomena, and overcoming an outdated, reductive common sense around the aesthetic. In that common sense, an aestheticized “sterilized pleasure of gratuitous interest” is dualistically opposed to an anaestheticized “pragmatic functionality to be obtained at the lowest possible cost”, as Matteucci (2015: 10) puts it; as we will see, this maps exactly onto the starkly dualistic, reductive and yet

mixed up criteria on which the minimalist discourse is based, wherein things either “spark joy” or must effectively, efficiently provide a generic use value.

If a gap exists between a common sense about the aesthetic and an aesthetic common sense, then a crucial part of that gap has actually to do with an anti-aesthetic specular side to aestheticization, one that is founded on a wholesale dismissal of the aesthetic backed up by ethical-practical and political concerns as dualistically severed from their aesthetic ground. This moralistic dismissal is absolutely vital to the perpetuation of the gap which everyday aesthetics is supposed to address: insofar as an adequately complex critical account of aesthetics is put out of the question – or at least put off –, the already overwhelming and still exponentially growing hyper-aestheticization will go on as it has, largely unchallenged, while at the same time all the multiple positive roles that aesthetic *de facto* plays – and may potentially play much better – within critical experience, action and reflection will also be either missed or mishandled, misunderstood in their full breadth and depth. The minimalist discourse, which as we will see is a perfect encapsulation of this gap, demonstrates that aestheticization cannot simply coincide with the hyper-aesthetic, as if it were a matter of degree: the “weak formulation” of everyday aesthetics is right about the importance of active, singular expressions – which could also potentially be inclusively critical expressions –, because the gap is in fact predicated on the rejection of the very aesthetic phenomena it supports as somehow “too” (evidently) aesthetic. On the contrary, aestheticization must be understood as the whole gap, in both its positive and negative manifestations: it is one and the same explosive exaggeration and the concomitant trivialization of the aesthetic that governs both its uncritical, enthusiastic acceptance and its no less uncritical, reactive rejection; aestheticization, as minimalism will show us, is neither aesthetic nor anti-aesthetic alone, but rather (anti-)aesthetic – they are two faces of the same ambiguous, indeterminate coin that the minimalist discourse has endlessly kept spinning in the last twenty years, even while exhibiting its contradictions in the most obvious way (so obvious that it is, however, too easily dismissed itself outright, as if minimalism by itself was the problem). At its heart, the gap of aestheticization – and its mirror image, which reverses its emphases to stress the negative side – is the endless pursuit of authenticity. As we have said, an adequate aesthetic critical theory would have to also be a critical theory of authenticity, that exploits both aesthetics’ own contradictions and those that tie it to eth-

ics – in particular around the issue of subjective identity – to pit the critical dimensions against each other, at best merely oscillating from one extreme to the other again and again. The discourse around a “minimalist lifestyle” – stuck, as lifestyles literally are, between an ethics of life and an aesthetics of style – will prove that such an internal civil war of critique is futile, because it is able to endlessly reproduce itself: by rhetorically appealing at one time to certain aspects and at other times to others, the discourse is able to simply discharge its contradictions and move on, with even the crucial added benefit of regulating its own criticality to fit whatever emphasis is rhetorically needed (since aesthetics is indeed the source of criticality). In a sense, with its attempt to rhetorically weave together the aesthetic into the ethical and vice versa, minimalism can be seen as a sign that a new aesthetic paradigm is as needed as ever; and yet, with its failure to undertake the task and its disavowal of it through the rhetoric of authenticity, minimalism is also the unfortunate confirmation of how distant that goal still is. In the last instance, as we are now going to see in the thematic part of this thesis, the minimalist discourse prefers to circle back to and hold fast to that aesthetic common sense as it is, in its indeterminacy, whose ambiguity is emblematically reflected in its own distinctive, though vague, modernist aesthetic common sense; or at least it is thoroughly unable to do any better than that. Therefore, rather than actually endeavouring on the rhetorical task of articulating a minimalist lifestyle in all its internal tensions – since it gathers together phenomena which are by themselves both distinct and conflicting, and which pre-existed as such –, the discourse ends up contenting itself with “minimalism” being just as vague a term as it has found it, and as the most commonsensical readings of it – from which we will start our examinations – would already have it: the “minimum possible” that a lifestyle can be.

2. Minimalism on the Other Side of Common Sense

2.1 – Minimum Possible. Minimalism Lifestylized

If it is commonsensical for a semiologist to look for some piece of common sense – as deposited in ordinary language – in the layered definitions of a dictionary, taking them as a point of departure for his or her inquiries, it appears more likely that any other sort of person would nowadays start elsewhere: a quick search on Google. Dictionary definitions may then also come up, but only as a component of a broader, centrifugal and multimodal encyclopaedic knot. This is how we will frame our introduction to the discourse surrounding “minimalism”, pretending for a moment not to know anything much about it in advance, except for a vague impression that it is something that some people live their lives by. In order to make our search closer to the one that a model speaker would perform by looking up a certain word on the dictionary, we too will standardize our search and thus hopefully avoid at least the customizing sort of bias in algorithms. A depersonalized Google search located in the United States of just the keyword “minimalism” will then present us with a mix of results that reflects from the very first moment the multiplicity of its associations, as well as a sort of hierarchy among them. The screen offers us an automatically highlighted definition of “minimalism” derived from a website whose name also immediately personifies it (FIG. 1): “minimalism” is “a tool to rid yourself of life’s excess in favor of focusing on what’s important”, thereby lead

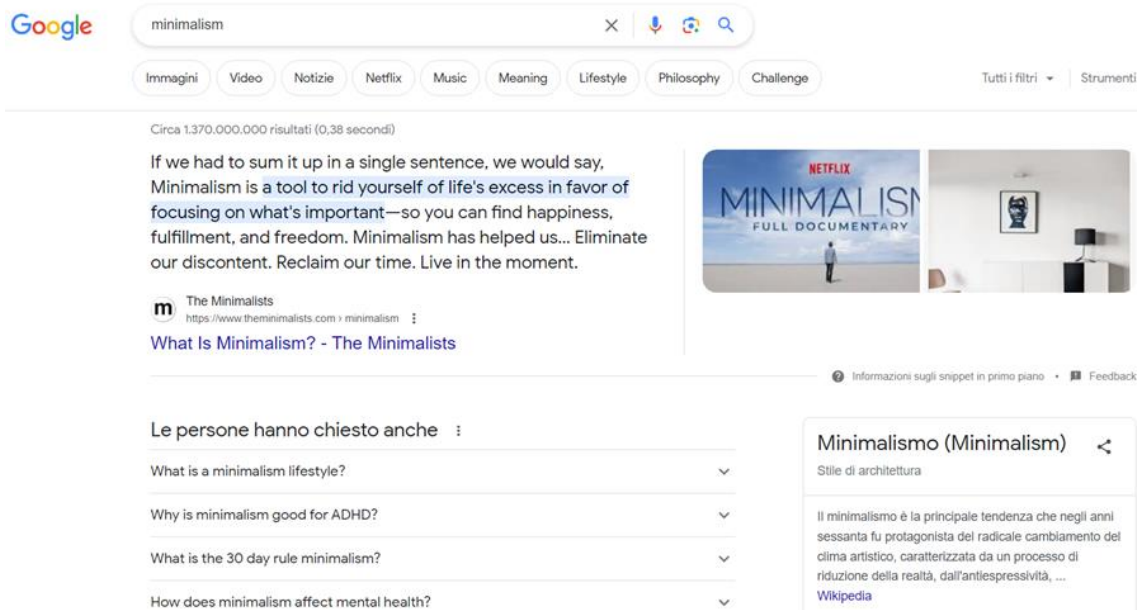


FIG. 1 – The screen with the first results of our search, encompassing a lifestyle, the arts and interior design.

ing people to “happiness, fulfillment, and freedom” in place of “discontent”, and one can evidently be a “minimalist” in this sense, as the website’s name implies⁷. It comes easy then to bind this definition to the “lifestyle” and perhaps “philosophy” alluded to both in the suggested additional keywords and the list of frequently asked questions that follows the first result. On the same screen, however, with no need to even scroll down, we find other results that seem to point in a different direction: setting aside the reference to a Netflix documentary – we are not sure yet from just an image what it may be about –, we find an image of some domestic interior with a stark black and white overall palette and very little ornamentation, and also a Wikipedia definition of “minimalism” as instead an art current back in the ’60s based on a “process of reduction” and surely other features that we cannot see without consulting the webpage. Are all these things related? The listed FAQs do not seem to allude to the arts, only to lifestyle and mental health, and yet it cannot be excluded that “minimalism” is some kind of therapy by artistic means. By clicking on the questions, we find extracts from other websites offering more hints on – and praise for – the lifestyle: minimalism is defined as “intentionally living with fewer possessions – focusing only on the ones you need”, as “living with less” in response to “feeling overwhelmed with clutter” and “looking for fewer distrac-

⁷ The Minimalists, “What Is Minimalism?”, Dic. 2014, <https://www.theminimalists.com/minimalism> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

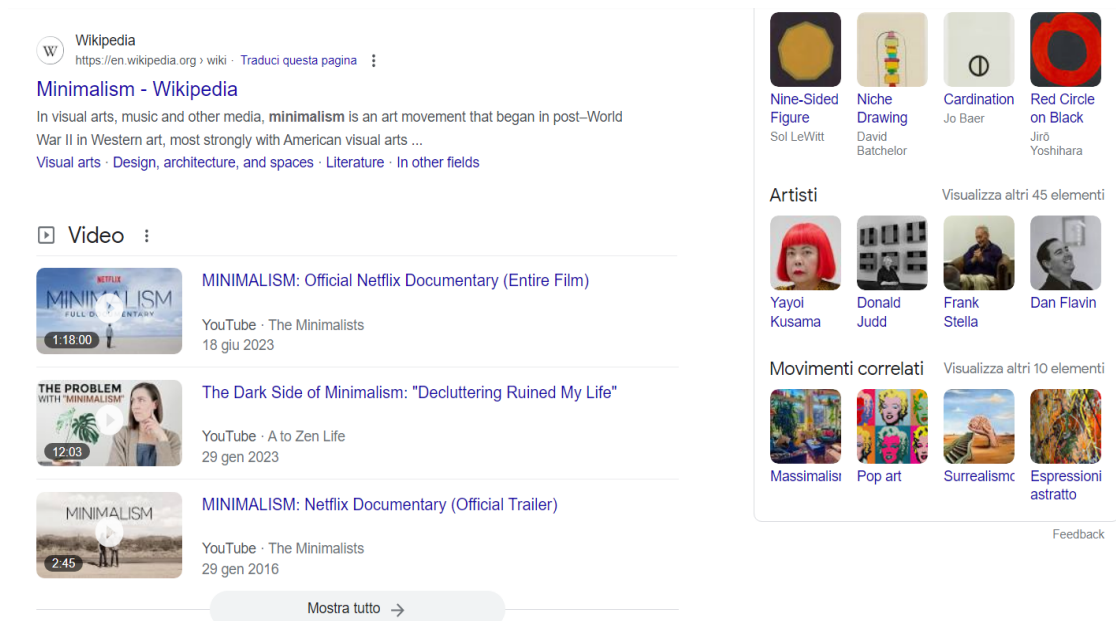


FIG. 2 – View of the screen after first scrolling down, again with references both to art and to “life.”

tions” also “to cut back on spending” (which is significant, as this definition is extracted from what appears to be the website of a bank)⁸, and this is also deemed helpful for “increase[ing] self-esteem and foster a greater sense of control over one’s life” with “a more organized environment”⁹, again leading to all-around “higher life satisfaction and fulfillment, positive functioning, and fewer negative emotions” plus “numerous well-being benefits related to autonomy, competence, mental space, awareness, and positive emotions.”¹⁰ These references to “fewer possessions” and less “clutter” for an “organized environment” no doubt resonate with the image of the interior we have just seen, bridging the possible gap between the arts and the lifestyle we might have assumed.

If we begin scrolling down, we see again the Wikipedia page mentioning an “art movement” involving “visual arts, music and other media”, and we also see some examples of artworks – just a few abstract paintings –, of artists and of related movements. At the same time, however, we stumble again on the documentary and its trailer, along with a YouTube vlogger speaking of a “dark side of minimalism” – here seemingly

⁸ Chase.com, “What is minimalism? 4 ways to adopt a minimalistic lifestyle”, Oct. 2022, <https://www.chase.com/personal/credit-cards/education/basics/minimalism-tips> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

⁹ Nomad Veronica, “How to Become a Minimalist with ADHD”, Mar. 2023, <https://veronicahanson.com/how-to-become-a-minimalist-with-adhd> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

¹⁰ Modern Minimalism, “15 Science-Backed Benefits of Minimalism”, Dic. 2022, <https://modernminimalism.com/science-backed-benefits-of-minimalism> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

identified with “decluttering” – that has “ruined” her life (FIG. 2). Further results keep on alternating, and sometimes meshing, these same elements of lifestyle, design and art. A website ties the “minimalist lifestyle”, which it offers a “practical guide” to, explicitly to design and art as a “style in which the simplest and fewest elements are used to create the maximum effect”, claiming this as its original meaning underlying the lifestyle¹¹. By contrast, we find a page in the website of the Tate galleries about “minimalism” which appears to be solely concerned with the arts¹², while another page speaks exclusively of a “simple lifestyle” and presents minimalism – in the definition as well as again in the very name of the website – as something that one can “become”: in this sense, “being a minimalist means intentionally promoting the things we most value and removing everything that distracts us from it.”¹³ A critical article in *The New Yorker* about the “pitfalls” as well as the “potential” of the “New Minimalism” lets us know that “the new literature of minimalism is full of stressful advice” about “possessions”¹⁴, while a couple more websites – evidently two personal blogs, judging from the names – inform us that “minimalism isn’t just ‘owning less stuff’” but rather “a state of mind that’s to be inhabited”¹⁵, and that it is “focusing on and committing to the fundamentals, instead of wasting time, money, or energy on details.”¹⁶ That this minimalist “state of mind” is something to be “inhabited” is telling, yet there does seem to be an oscillation in the extent to which these search results tie minimalism as a lifestyle to “stuff” and thereby possibly to that image of a sparse domestic interior we have seen. As soon as Google’s invitation to explore other images related to “minimalism” makes its appearance, that tie suddenly becomes more convincing: the first results as previewed on the screen are all quite similar to one another – white walls, wooden or again white pavements, overall neutral palette with more or less sparse decorations, a lot of natural lighting and what seem to be pieces of modern design –, and that is true not only of the pictures of domestic interiors, but also of the cover for the documentary seen before, a quote about mini-

¹¹ Break The Twitch, “What Is Minimalism? A Practical Guide to a Minimalist Lifestyle”, Aug. 2019, <https://www.breakthetwitch.com/minimalism> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

¹² Tate, “Minimalism”, n.d., <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/m/minimalism> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

¹³ Becoming Minimalist, “Minimalism: 8 Essential Principles of a Simple Lifestyle”, Nov. 2019, <https://www.becomingminimalist.com/what-is-minimalism> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

¹⁴ *The New Yorker*, “The Pitfalls and the Potential of the New Minimalism”, Jan. 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/02/03/the-pitfalls-and-the-potential-of-the-new-minimalism> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

¹⁵ Mark Manson, “Minimalism”, Jul. 2013, <https://markmanson.net/minimalism> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

¹⁶ James Clear, “Minimalism”, Feb. 2011, <https://jamesclear.com/minimalism> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

malism as a lifestyle and what seems to be a minimalist sculpture (though quite different from the paintings shown above). We resist, for the time being, diving into the image results or clicking on any of the links we have encountered, instead gliding over the surface of the search results with their encyclopaedic clues. We keep on scrolling. After the same page found earlier under the heading of the first of the FAQs, and a link to the documentary's website – described in the subtitle as “a documentary about the important things” –, we find the definitions by the online websites for the Encyclopaedia Britannica and the Merriam-Webster dictionaries, both apparently centred on the arts only. Further on, the oscillation continues in the search results among lifestyle, arts and design, with other pictures as well as life tips, and from time to time some critical article about it. A website defines minimalism as “a simpler life with less” and adds a potential dimension of ethical-sustainable consumption to it (“[minimalism] can also be about supporting ethical brands with sustainability at their core (less but better)”¹⁷); a second one offers to explain “everything you need to know about minimalist design”, claiming that “it’s impossible to deny the serenity and simple beauty when confronted with a resolved minimalist interior”¹⁸; a third one, on Oprah Daily, appears to bind the two together in the way in which it proposes to expound the “benefits of living a minimalist lifestyle” and accompanies them with one of the pictures of minimalist interior design we have seen earlier¹⁹. The documentary makes another appearance along with other related films such as *The Social Dilemma*, *Cowspiracy* and *What the Health* – all suggesting a critical tone towards some phenomenon (social media, animal agriculture, pharmaceuticals –, but also including what seems to be a sequel to it, again a Netflix production by the name of “The Minimalists: Less is Now” (most likely referring to the same “minimalists” behind the first definition we met with and the documentary, since the same male duo appears in the poster for both films). We are again in the territory of art history with a webpage for the historical minimalist art movement²⁰, but faced with this

¹⁷ Minimalism.com, “Using minimalism to craft a simpler life with less”, n. d., <https://minimalism.com> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

¹⁸ Elle Decor, “Everything You Need to Know About Minimalist Design”, May 2019, <https://www.elledecor.com/design-decorate/interior-designers/a27471472/minimalist-interior-design-tips> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

¹⁹ Oprah Daily, “What Is Minimalism? Benefits of Living a Minimalist Lifestyle”, Jan. 2020, <https://www.oprahdaily.com/life/a30530266/what-is-a-minimalist-lifestyle> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

²⁰ The Art Story, “Minimalism Movement Overview”, Mar. 2015, <https://www.theartstory.org/movement/minimalism> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

unresolved oscillation we finally decide it is time to stop somewhere and consult some of the search results.

The dedicated page on the Encyclopaedia Britannica²¹ does not mention at all “minimalism” as a lifestyle or even design style, but only presents it as a “chiefly American movement in the visual arts and music originating in New York City in the late 1960s and characterized by extreme simplicity of form and a literal, objective approach”, with a very brief summary of its manifestations in painting, sculptures and music as a “the culmination of reductionist tendencies in modern art” since at least Malevich’s famous monochrome black square on a white background. It seems hard – to say the least – to reconcile the few glimpses we have had about the “minimalist lifestyle” with the work of painters who “adopted the point of view that a work of art should not refer to anything other than itself” and “attempted to rid their works of any extra-visual association”, or sculptors who “attempted to make their works totally objective, unexpressive, and non-referential”; these do not appear to be related to anything like a lifestyle. The Merriam-Webster definition of “minimalism”²² as simply “a style or technique (as in music, literature, or design) that is characterized by extreme sparseness and simplicity”, followed by a direct reference to “minimal art” in the stricter sense, includes design but again does not mention any sort of lifestyle. If we turn to Wikipedia²³, once again “minimalism” is mainly defined in terms of art and design, though with much more emphasis on the latter and architecture – including traditional Japanese aesthetics –, followed by shorter sections on music, literature and cinema. As one of a number of “other fields”, however, “minimalist lifestyle” is listed and briefly described – with a sign of involvement in the use of the first person plural – as “the usage of only essential products in that niche into our lives”, or “an effort to use materials which are most essential and in quantities that do not exceed certain limits imposed by the user themselves”, mentioning applications of the term such as “minimalist decors, minimalist skincare, minimalist style, minimalist accessories”; such a lifestyle is then tied to benefits such as again “focus[ing] on things that are important in one’s life”, “sav[ing]

²¹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Minimalism”, Sep. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Minimalism> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

²² Merriam-Webster.com, “Minimalism”, Sep. 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/minimalism> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

²³ Wikipedia, “Minimalism”, Sep. 2023, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minimalism> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

resources from going waste”, “sav[ing] the time of acquiring the excess materials”, and on the whole “enjoy[ing] life with simple things that are available” while having “less clutter in living spaces.” Both the reference to decluttered “living spaces” and the general examples provided for “minimalist” products clearly suggest a concern with aesthetic “niches” of life, not unlike the preceding section on the “capsule wardrobe” as “an example of minimalism in fashion” – a basic wardrobe “constructed of only a few staple pieces that do not go out of style, and generally dominated by only one or two colors” (but the Wikipedia page linked to does not mention “minimalism” at all). Still, the lifestyle is depicted as geared towards a beneficial impact on life that does not seem to be confined to any preference for certain styles, at least insofar as this is interpreted as irrelevant to the “products” and “materials” being “essential”; but the point is exactly this, is it in fact irrelevant?

In the disambiguation page listing the main pages having explicitly to do with some form or other of “minimalism”, almost all of them are specific usages which are obviously unrelated to minimalism as either an art current, a design style or a lifestyle – from the philosophical minimalist theory of truth to “Judicial” or “Biblical” minimalism –, and in fact we have seen no reference to them in our search results. At the very end of the list, however, there is also included “simple living”, introduced as “voluntary practices to simplify one’s lifestyle by reducing one’s possessions.” Its own Wikipedia page²⁴ mentions many more practices such as reducing “consumption” and “work time” as well as possessions, “spending less money”, “depending less on technology and services” as well as “increasing self-sufficiency” by growing one’s own food and through other DIY projects, but also “simplifying diet” and “consum[ing] food mindfully and gratefully”, and so on. The page, which is currently flagged as possibly “lack[ing] focus”, indeed presents “simple living” as a phenomenon encompassing all kinds of motivations – personal or political – and spanning all sorts of movements – spiritual or secular –, thus casually traversing human history: from the Buddha’s indictment of desire in favour of detachment to Jesus’ disdain for riches and commerce, from Lao Tzu’s praise for a more spontaneous and natural living to the actual communal life of the Amish, but also from Epicurus’ embrace of pleasure in moderation to Thoreau’s famous experiment in solitary life immersed in nature, a “simple life” appears to have been equally promot-

²⁴ Wikipedia, “Simple living”, Sep. 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simple_living (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

ed by quite a long line of great historical figures (also including for example Confucius, Rousseau, Gandhi and Tolstoy). Various sources for the explicit discourse around both “simple living” and “voluntary simplicity” in times closer to ours are also mentioned. Where does “minimalism” fit in this picture? It fits in a single line at the margin as a more recent “similar movement” and a few more very brief references regarding the “mindset”: according to minimalists – and to *The Minimalists* –, there should be a preference for “quality over quantity” by “valu[ing] things that make us happy and are essential to us, rather than value the idea of just having things to have”, and “beauty and joy”, for minimalist author Leo Babauta, should be found in “less”; beyond this, there is just one more reference to another minimalist author – Joshua Becker – as “suggest[ing] that people who desire to simplify their lives begin by simplifying their homes.” While the allusion to “beauty” and to one’s home may be a hint of minimalism’s ties to art and design, neither is explicitly addressed in the article, and Becker’s “suggestion” is again added at the end of a paragraph on the “tiny house movement”, wherein one opts to live in “small, mortgage-free, low-impact dwellings, such as log cabins or beach huts”: what matters here seems to rather be the size of one’s home, not its interior (though “decluttering” of one’s things is indeed mentioned). Among the “personal reasons” for simple living – from “spirituality” and “health” to “frugality” and “reducing stress”, from “work-life balance” to “environmental sustainability” –, a role for “personal taste” is present but not specified in any way.

The link associated to the word “minimalism” circles us back to the other Wikipedia page on the arts and design, leaving us puzzled: in both pages, “minimalism” seems to be on the margin, and though as a “lifestyle” it surely appears to come closer to something like “simple living” – which is no surprise, being so loosely defined –, it does retain emphases of its own on the home and reducing one’s possessions, which in turn clearly resonate with the “style” of images that it has called up as a keyword in our search. Is this a mere coincidence? As the Wiktionary pages on “minimalism” and “minimalist” further show²⁵, the overlap might be due to nothing but a more generic use of a word: while the dictionary too registers “minimalism” as “style of art or music” without mentioning a lifestyle of any kind, “minimalist” is more broadly defined as “be-

²⁵ Wiktionary, “Minimalism”, Mar. 2023, <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/minimalism> (last accessed: 14/11/2023.). Wiktionary, “Minimalist”, Jul. 2023, <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/minimalist> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

lieving in or seeking a minimal state, seeking to minimize or reduce to a minimum”; yet it is significant that the example offered precisely relates a style to a certain attitude towards things (“I am sure such a minimalist style of furniture would never fit well with my packrat nature”). In other words, even if “minimalism” were just another more recent term for “simple living”, it is a term that even by itself already pushes for a peculiar iteration of it: it frames simple living in a distinct way even by a commonsensical reading of the term in a generic sense – some “minimum” must be sought –, and it also clearly associates it to certain aesthetic concerns and even to recognizable styles of design and/or art. Could someone say just as easily that the Buddha and Jesus were “minimalist” as that they encouraged a “simple life”? The topic of this last thematic part of our thesis, as we will see, in a way amounts precisely to a question regarding the difference that even the mere change or choice of a label can make, by virtue of all the influences and interferences of both its commonsensical and encyclopaedic associations. This is the point of our rhetorical start with a naïve search on Google: as a matter of fact, “minimalism” seems to call forth at once discourses surrounding art and design as well as a lifestyle, and while these are usually very easy to discern on any one occasion, oftentimes obviously ignoring one another, still a background of possible or actual contaminations remains operative. What can be encyclopaedically distinguished may still be commonsensically conflated, and this is clearly the case of “minimalism” in the arts and especially in design with regard to the lifestyle, since at the very least the distinction is not as definite here as it is with the other technical senses of the word. Attributing the overlap to a generic shared trait of the search for some minimum, implicit in the commonsensical reading of the word, only underscores that it is indeed a matter of common sense, wherein evidently art and design have quite different bearings than a tendency on biblical scholarship or a judicial philosophy.

If we finally go back to the search results for “minimalism” in the form of images to expand them, we can see – again, naively and commonsensically – how strong its associations can be, both from the results themselves and by contrast to results for “simple living” and “voluntary simplicity” in the same way (FIG. 3). For example, we can see at a glance that results for “minimalism” are far more compact and homogeneous than those obtained through the other keywords, and very different especially for “voluntary simplicity” (while “simple living” does in part return similar images). The

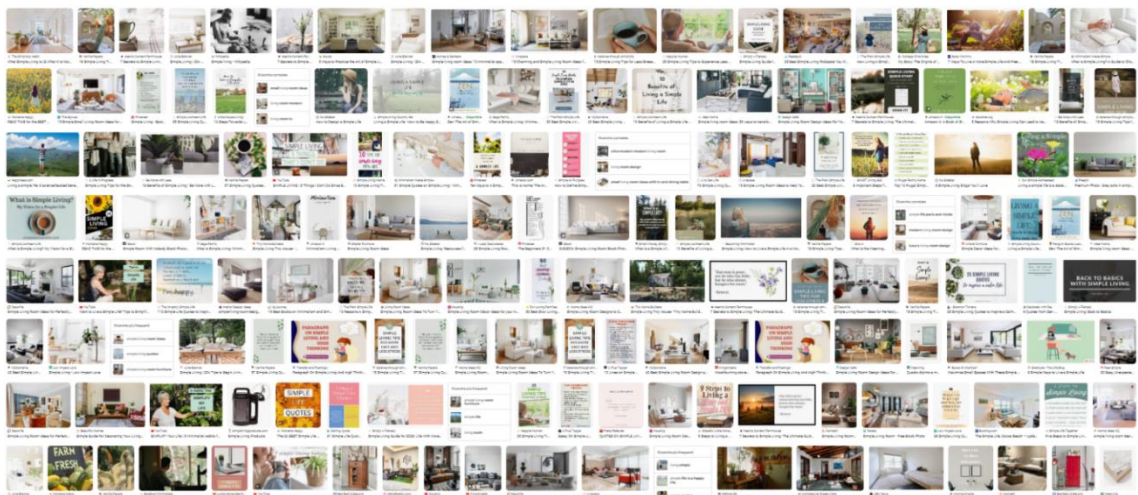
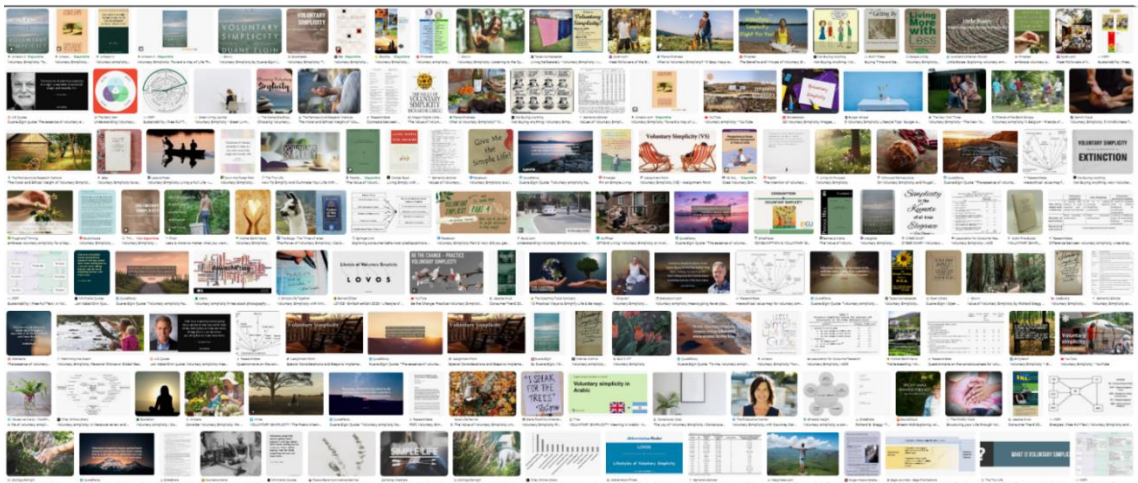
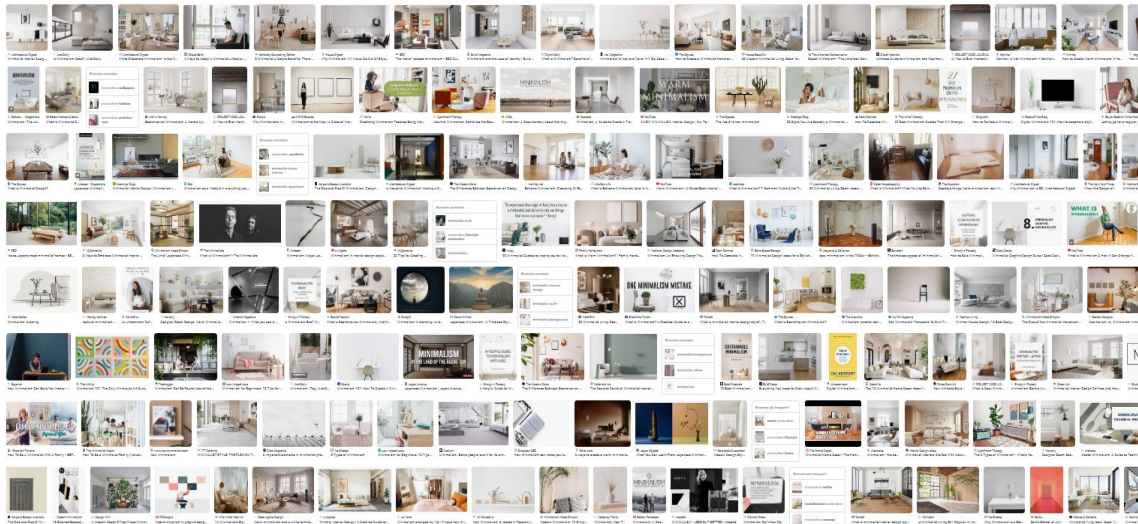


FIG. 3 – General overviews of image results for “minimalism”, “simple living” and “voluntary simplicity” respectively (from the top).

same sort of aesthetic seen earlier significantly appears both in pictures of domestic interiors and in images tied to blogs and vlogs offering contents not only on design, but also other “tips”, “rules”, “quotes”, “ways to practice” and “before and after” about a minimalist lifestyle. That most of these images depict domestic interiors, with or without people – mostly alone, perhaps cleaning up or in one case meditating, sometimes smiling or laughing with their partner or family –, also confirms the focus on the home in the discourse. Besides the two deserted landscapes of the documentary poster, outdoor images are limited to a Buddhist statue to generically indicate “Japanese minimalism” (as, however, do other pictures such as that of a plant in a vase and that of a traditional Japanese porch, again domestic items and spaces), a black and white picture of a seagull coming from a page explicitly about minimalist photography, and again a generic picture of the sea with a definition of artistic minimalism on it. There are indeed gardens and other forms of green scenery, but only as seen from the inside of the home through a window or glass wall. More frequent are close-up pictures of often semi-empty shelves and desks, as well as more or less isolated domestic items (pillows, plants, teapots, home fragrances and so on), but not as much as whole spacious living rooms with sofas, armchairs and design chairs. Some of the pictures and/or the related texts allude to different variations on this aesthetic theme: a “warm minimalism” contrasting the stark and luminous white with a more shady air and wooden accents, a “Scandinavian minimalism” that on the contrary looks even starker than that, a “Japanese minimalism” that clearly blends modern elements with some general features of its traditional aesthetic – including again more wood –, and a “textural minimalism” which employs patterns rather than leaving walls and pavements flatly white; there is even a “white chocolate minimalism”, suggested – together with the warm and Japanese varieties – as a possible further keyword for searching other images. On the whole, however, these differences are subtle enough not to impair the impression of overall visual cohesion of this sea of images. Apart from a picture of a van where a “minimalist vegan” lives – and even here we find the same neutral colour palette –, the pictures of domestic interiors show us well-ordered, sparse and very spacious – even luxurious – places dominated by white and muted neutral colours, which applies – as we have noted – also to materials clearly related to a minimalist lifestyle. The few images that really stand out are, curiously enough, a couple of minimalist artworks by Frank Stella and Dan Flavin – one vivid and colourful, the other bright red –, as well as the yellow cover of a book

about “digital minimalism” (to which we will return later); there are a few other artworks as well as book covers, but they merge well with the rest. Beyond these, there are a couple of images of still more decidedly sparse spaces, such as a white futon on wooden pavement, a single chair in the middle of an empty darker room with all-white walls and pavement, and also some kind of warehouse – again with just one white chair and a small table. Finally, among the various minimalist words of wisdom – such as “you don’t need everything you want”, “strive to only use things that serve a purpose”, “less is more” and “be more with less” –, we also find again some hints of critique or negativity, which will be at the centre of our analyses of the minimalist discourse (such as, “KonMari is not minimalism”, “is minimalism dead?”, “minimalism is not, and never will be, dead”, “minimalism defined: it’s not what you may think”, “minimalism is boring”, “is minimalism bad?”, and “one minimalism mistake”).

This is, then, our starting point with minimalism. While the results for “simple living” show us that the same sort of aesthetic common sense has been to some extent generalized, we can nonetheless see more outdoor and colourful images on the one hand, and on the other more textual material (tips, quotes and so on): contrary to that of “minimalism”, a commonsensical reading of “simple living” is explicit in its picking out something like a lifestyle, one whose simplicity – as evidenced in the Wikipedia page – is associated to the past of pre-modern and/or less urbanized times or spaces. This appears to be even more the case for “voluntary simplicity”, whose results show almost no trace of the aesthetic associated to minimalism, but rather exclusively outdoor images in more natural environments – also with clear references to agricultural practices –, with more of a presence of people; those meditating on a beach or in the corner of a hut provide a clear contrast with the “minimalist” meditator in his white modern home. What also strikes us, however, is that here the quotes, tips and other such textual material – loosely related to inspiration, advice and so on – are replaced with a wide array of evidently academic texts, from graphs and diagrams to tables and word clouds or book covers, suggesting that it captures a more intellectualized and circumscribed discourse, as it indeed appeared to be in the Wikipedia page: if “simple living” was stretched millennia back in history, “voluntary simplicity” was used to indicate discourses and practices emerging only in the last century. From this point of view, “simple living” does in fact work in a way more similar to “minimalism” – and surely overlapping with it, as the

partly shared aesthetic imagery shows –, in that it is more indeterminate and commonsensical insofar as it is used to cover and gather all sorts of historical figures, cultures and practices. Indeterminate and commonsensical itself, “minimalism” appears however to shift simple living’s common sense through its associations to modern and urban art and design and to the aesthetic dimension in general. At least from these first impressions, then, we end up with a sort of spectrum that has supposedly definite forms of art and design on the one hand and supposedly definite lifestyle practices on the other – the historical forms of “minimalism” and “voluntary simplicity” respectively –, with “minimalism” as lifestyle and “simple living” placed somewhere between them, in this order. At this point, of course, first impressions will not be enough for us anymore, nor can we get very much further into them without betraying their role as first impression by overly determining them, though it goes without saying that it may be possible to expand on our rhetorical start without necessarily betraying it (for example with the assistance of a quantitative analysis of much larger visual corpora related to each keyword and qualified by both frequency and immediacy of access, without however reducing them to sets of determinate features). Nevertheless, starting from such first impressions was actually crucial for setting up the stage for the kind of study of “minimalism” we will carry on in this thematic part of our thesis, because what it takes interest in is fundamentally this: is “minimalism” anything more than this common sense it gathers around itself, which makes it somehow and somewhat distinguishable from “simple living” and other related labels and discourses (and practices), and at the same time also from the arts and design it is associated to? What difference does this mere common sense make, and what else does it gather? Above all, how is it in turn maintained as such, despite by now a couple decades of discourse about it? It is after all easy, as we have said, to trace a definite dividing line between the arts, design and lifestyle, and yet the latter – as we will shortly see in more detail – remains clearly associated to the former, especially to design, at the very least for its focus on domestic space. In fact, this tie to the aesthetic dimension seems to make of minimalism even more literally a “lifestyle” than any other: it is a life and a style, or a style of life and a life of style, or a stylized life, or a vivified style. Paradoxically, as we will show, it manages to remain such – a confused mix of life and style – precisely by disavowing its aesthetic dimension, along with common sense.

Before proceeding with our main analyses, we will familiarize with the minimalist discourse firsthand and probe its actual relations to the aesthetic dimension of style, art and design on the one hand, and to what we can take as an ethical-practical dimension of (simple) life on the other. In order to do so, we will offer a brief overview of the main textual reference points of the discourse: the documentary we have already stumbled upon, some of the most popular books about it, and also the original blogs from which the discourse first emerged. After that, having shown how far – and how problematically – life and style are indeed meshed up, we will take a step back to consider the critical literature – both scholarly and journalistic – around “minimalism”, thereby also placing our own study in relation to it, and introducing our critical approach through similar ones in other theoretical frameworks. Finally, we will close this first introductory section by summing up our approach and the specific aspect of the minimalist discourse we are interested in, presenting our textual corpus as well as our (non-)methodologically qualitative analyses of it, and outlining our main argument with its development in subsequent sections. Hopefully, by the end of the introduction, it will be clearer why it has also been something more than circumstances that led us to do, ourselves, only the “minimum possible” in our analysis of minimalism.

2.1.1 – More Than Just Less. Simple Living With Simple Style

A reader who had never come across “minimalism” as a lifestyle before, not even heard of it, would surely now know very little more than she or he did at the start. This, as we have said, was actually on purpose; in fact, as we will see, there is a sense in which our whole critical study of minimalism will leave us wondering – going out from the other end of the tunnel – if we will have indeed learnt anything more about it through all our efforts. However, while we do aim at minimalism in its relation to – and maintenance as – common sense, the way to get there is by demanding the opposite of the discourse about it, that is, demanding that it clearly determine what “minimalism” is. To at least some extent, an offer of such determination is of course always implicit in certain discourses, especially those which promote minimalism as a lifestyle: were it not something distinguishable, minimalism could not be promoted as such, and neither would it need to. This is the basic tension we are going to probe in our study – the tension between the maintenance of minimalism as common sense and the continuance of the discourse about it, and thus between indeterminacy and determination; a tension close to

the dialectic of common sense and encyclopaedia, but falling short of it precisely in that what the minimalist discourse most exhibits is an unwillingness or incapacity of taking stock of itself in any sort of critical, comprehensive way. For the time being, however, we have done our naive Google search and are going to take the next commonsensical steps in trying to grasp what this “minimalist lifestyle” is all about: we will look where most people would start looking from, that is, in the most popular texts that expound and advocate the lifestyle in one way or another. This will at the same time serve as a more proper introduction to the discourse than our purposely vague one, at the end of which – as just noted – we might have but a faint idea of minimalism as a lifestyle having to do with a variously beneficial scaling down of things in one’s home. Beside their popularity – as can be readily gauged by online lists, reviews and rankings on websites such as Goodreads²⁶ –, and thus beside their status as reference points for the discourse as a whole, the texts we have picked up were also selected for their exemplarity with regard to the relations between minimalism, lifestyle, a gesture of “decluttering” and discarding things, and the aesthetic and extreme commonsensical connotations of the label, which are the main coordinates we are interested in as far as our engagement with the discourse goes. Taken together, these texts indeed offer us a basic view of the range of possible articulations among them, which will constitute a helpful background to subsequent analyses. At the same time, similarities among them will also be highlighted, hinting at other features of minimalism’s common sense and discourse. Needless to say, we will not do anything like a full-blown, exhaustive analysis of these materials, but rather limit ourselves to a preliminary exploration pointing out a few highlights – and critical issues – in order to familiarize with the discourse.

Our first text will be the documentary that came up from the very start in our search results, quite simply titled *Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things* (D’Avella 2015)²⁷. It is co-produced by the two bloggers at The Minimalists, Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus, along with director Matt D’Avella (who also has his own minimalist YouTube channel, which will be part of our main corpus). Next to Marie Kondo, these are no doubt the most popular figures in all of the minimalist discourse; in particular, Millburn and Nicodemus have been active bloggers since

²⁶ Goodreads, “Popular Minimalism Books”, n.d., <https://www.goodreads.com/shelf/show/minimalism> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

²⁷ As seen in our search results, the whole movie is by now freely available on YouTube (<https://youtu.be/J8DGjUv-Vjc?si=tbEFesenwcTIRkie>; last accessed: 14/11/2023).

2010, publishing a few popular books – including *Minimalism: Live a Meaningful Life* (Millburn & Nicodemus 2011), which we will also examine – and running a podcast and a YouTube channel. A follow-up Netflix documentary was also released in 2021 by the title *The Minimalists: Less is Now* (D’Avella 2021), but we will exclude it both because we are rather interested here in long-time reference points for the minimalist discourse, and because it is really for the most part a stylized repetition of the first movie (though an unwittingly more honest one at that: the new title makes it clearer that the movies are actually about the two bloggers themselves). After considering the documentary and the minimalist duo’s first book, which tie a generic anti-consumerist and anti-materialist rhetoric to their proposal of an integral lifestyle beyond “stuff”, we will move on to two books somewhat presenting mirror images of minimalism in their approaches, both focused exclusively on decluttering: “organizing consultant” Marie Kondo’s *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing* (2014) and blogger Fumio Sasaki’s *Goodbye Things: The New Japanese Minimalism* (2015). Kondo’s first book, presenting her “KonMari” method, was an international bestseller and probably still the most popular piece of media tied to “minimalism”, despite the fact that she never actually uses the term at all, and in fact later on – when her success was firmly solidified with her Netflix series *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* (2019) – explicitly distanced herself from the label.²⁸ The reason why we include at least this book in our preliminary exploration is not only that Kondo’s positioning was not as evident at the time of its release, so that the minimalist discourse could still take it as more or less in line with its own message, but also that on the contrary the rhetoric behind the later disclaimer was already there, and paradoxically the same one that the minimalist discourse itself also employs: “minimalism” is summarily rejected by Kondo as too negative and extreme (a connotation that became especially unfitting for her persona after the opening of a pricey item store and the offering of courses and certificates as organizing consultants). Nevertheless, despite this rejection Kondo’s own approach displays the appeal of the extreme in her own way, and is hardly distinguishable from “minimalist” decluttering apart from rhetorical differences and – crucially – a much more consistent focus on decluttering itself instead of a broader “lifestyle” around

²⁸ Konmari.com, “KonMari Is Not Minimalism”, Jan. 2020, <https://konmari.com/konmari-is-not-minimalism> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

it²⁹; indeed, this very fact confirms how the specificity of “minimalism” is a matter of rhetoric more so than of any one thing it advocates. If Kondo’s (non-)minimalism can then be described as an extremely aesthetic one – later taking on more explicit connotations of luxury –, Sasaki’s minimalism rather appears as an aesthetically extreme one, starting off with a gallery of images depicting the homes and/or items of other Japanese minimalist bloggers; and it too focuses exclusively on the practice of decluttering (though with more of a lifestyle orientation that he will later expand upon explicitly). Finally we will take a look at some of the first popular minimalist blogs that are still active today, Joshua Becker’s *Becoming Minimalist* and Leo Babauta’s *Zen Habits and Mnmlist*, respectively created in 2008, 2006 and 2009 (and both featuring in the documentary, as well as being cited in Millburn and Nicodemus’ book as their initial source of inspiration). The blogs are particularly important in that they allow us to demonstrate how an aesthetic dimension, as well as a rhetorical play with the extreme, were actually part of the minimalist discourse from the start, contrary to the claims of many minimalists in our main corpus. Since a proper analysis of such large collections of texts as blogs is unfeasible in the limited space we have at our disposal, we will however pick up and focus on Babauta’s first minimalist book, *The Simple Guide to a Minimalist Life* (2009), which is at any rate but a slightly revised collection of materials from its blogs.

2.1.1.1 – A lifestyle around and beyond stuff: Millburn and Nicodemus

If the fact that a “documentary” is co-produced and directed by people most directly involved in its subject matter is already enough to earn suspicion, *Minimalism* at any rate leaves no doubt about its main function of promotion rather than representation – let alone critical questioning – of minimalism. Across short interview segments wherein a variety of experts blend together contributing to the same overarching discourse – an anti-consumerist, anti-materialist one –, there is one main narrative arc rather revolving around Millburn and Nicodemus’ transformed and transformative lives following their conversion to minimalism: the two turn their back on their previous successful yet hollow, meaningless lives and now, having found their way out, travel around the USA in-

²⁹ A partial exception is her later book, co-authored with Scott Sonenshein, *Joy at Work: Organizing Your Professional Life* (Kondo & Sonenshein 2020), wherein her basic decluttering tips are necessarily merged with Sonenshein’s ones on productivity and other work-related self-improvement advice (which was actually part of the minimalist discourse since the beginning, as we will see with the first popular minimalist blog). Even in this book, however, there is no mention of “minimalism” at all, and the scope is still not that of an integral lifestyle.

viting others to do the same through the book tour for their (then) latest book, *Everything That Remains*. The transformation is stressed to the point that a recurrent trope in the movie is the two offering hugs or describing themselves as “big time huggers” (for example, 10:22, 24:28, 45:03), which is obviously meant to contrast with the selfish and self-centred people they were before. Just as obviously, a rising tide of minimalism – and the duo’s merit in fostering it – is suggested by a contrast between the first talk in the book tour, disappointingly attended by very few and distracted people (9:45), and the last one at the very end and climax of the movie, packed with an attentive – and applauding – audience even standing (1:16:32); the sudden silence and cold indifference of the first scene also clashes with the uplifting music and warmth of the last one, indeed as warm as Millburn’s last words (“love people, use things – because the opposite never works”, later to become the title of yet another book). Many such devices could be pointed out, but of course doing so exceeds our purposes, and they are all just as transparent anyway. One of the central scenes of the movie (26:25-28:53), presenting the turning point of the transformation, has Millburn directly reading out loud a long excerpt from the book in the same deserted landscape we have seen on the movie poster, a white cold beach in cloudy weather whose cold colours are one with those of the light blue shirt worn by the blogger. The constructed nature of the “documentary” is evident enough, and in fact no dissent nor even difference is to be found explicitly among the various minimalists and/or sympathetic experts (and there are no outside voices beyond them). By virtue of this agreement of all voices, assembled together and even literally merged in the final crescendo, “minimalism” is tacitly associated with a variety of phenomena in a way that leaves its boundaries and specificity unclear, as if it coincided with anti-consumerism or anti-materialism as such. This expansiveness, subsuming not only voluntary simplicity and other related phenomena such as “tiny houses” but also self-help practices such as meditation, underwrites the presentation of minimalism as an integral lifestyle. At the same time, however, it also somewhat undermines it by making “minimalism” indeterminate, generic; and this is the rhetorical tension we intend to explore in our work.

The first ten minutes of the movie already encapsulate this very well. The movie starts with a morning view of Times Square and all its screens and signs and busy people, while journalist and newly self-help author Dan Harris starts anticipating on voice-

over what is to come: huge consumer mobs hysterically pushing, fighting and treading over each other at the entrances of large malls or stores, trying to get first at the items on sale before the appearance of the title screen (0:00-1:05). It is against the background of this evidently extreme picture of consumerism that “minimalism” is by contrast rhetorically constructed, and two times over: after the first section, the consumerist euphoria – with an antiphastic carousel music – is at once replaced by silence and the onscreen title’s reference to “minimalism”, and then followed by an introductory scene for Nicodemus (1:06-2:27); after this, the movie shifts back to the initial anti-consumerist discourse to confirm and expand upon it through more expert voices, eventually contrasting again a crescendo of consumerist noise with the sudden onset of minimalist silence (2:28-6:15), leading to Millburn’s – and the book tour’s – introduction (6:16-9:10). As no voice – nor mention – of more ordinary consumers is ever inserted in the movie later, its discourse is rhetorically founded on a stark dualism between consumerism and minimalism, which seems to put the latter into definite relief as indeed a movement of sorts. Yet it is by the very same coin that “minimalism” risks being diluted into indeterminacy, both by being equated with a generic anti-consumerism as such and by circling back into that excluded middle of ordinary consumption: the mere negation of consumerist madness can simply point to a reasonable consumption which may be indistinguishable from the ways people already consume for the most part (especially if not previously successful and/or well-off as most people featured in the movie); if there is a difference, it is never explicitly addressed. Of course, one is ultimately free to call anti-consumerism so understood “minimalism”, but the point of our present work is that this has rhetorical consequences – whether intended or not –, and that by virtue of this it can never be fully done: “minimalism” as a lifestyle must also be its own thing, as the introductions of the literal “minimalists” show. Behind this necessity there is also, of course, the bloggers and authors’ economic ties to – if not dependence upon – a discourse around and about the lifestyle, but we are interested in how this works rhetorically and in the specific case of minimalism, because – as we will see – its case is exemplary or even quintessential as far as the construction of lifestyles go.

On the one hand, therefore, we have consumerism, which is significantly associated first to the mob and then to the media – both collective and massive, excessive, noisy, frantic, pervasive –, while on the other hand we have minimalism, which is in-

stead presented in the silent calmness of a few individuals in sparse environments (just like individual voices will speak for it afterwards, contrary to a voiceless consumerism). Through the collective mob and media, consumerism is depicted as an external imposition on the individual on the part of society, but this imposition is meshed with the individual's own impulsiveness – as an universal trait of any individual –, resulting in a double attack, a double necessity: on the one hand a cultural, external imposition, and on the other a natural and internal one, respectively emphasized by the media and the mob. Merged together they constitute the impulsiveness of any individual's consumption; but while both are collective – as social and as universally human, respectively –, the latter of course is ambiguous and crucially leaves open the way to the individual transformation offered by minimalism. The opening words by Dan Harris – an advocate for meditation who later endorses it as a solution to “living in a daydream”, after a section on the media (53:58-55-56) – foreground from the very start the individual's lack of agency as central to this construction of consumerism, while also giving it an imprint of dull insignificance as lying behind the subsequent mad euphoria³⁰: “So much of our lives is lived in a fog of automatic habitual behaviour. We spend so much time on the hunt, but nothing ever quite does it for us – and we get so wrapped up in the hunt that it kind of makes us miserable.” Habitualness, understood as just as “automatic” as impulsiveness, both merges with and complements the latter, highlighting its lack of meaning lying under the surface; although the emphasis in the movie will mostly fall on the side of impulsiveness, the problem with consumerism is one of routine as well as caprice (and as such is, to anticipate the obvious, the most commonsensical problem in our terms). After this, the invincible “longing for more” despite having now “the best standards of living in history” is explained first, by “neuropsychiatrist” and again popular self-help author Rick Hanson, as “a biologically based delusional craving” (or “auto-craving”) which was evolutionarily adaptive for “really harsh conditions” in the past but not today, making everyone “a puppet whose strings are being pulled by Mother Nature

³⁰ Not coincidentally, the cheerful music and chaotic noise of the subsequent sections – as well as their chromatic variety and saturation – contrasts with the grey, cold, clinical-sounding drone in the background as Dan Harris speaks. As soon as he says that the “hunt” makes us “miserable”, we step into the euphoria safely, bringing with us the echo of that “miserable” as a framing for what we are about to see. In this way, consumerism is pre-emptively shown as if from the outside, as something to detach oneself from. The same is done by other means in the other sections: the mob is often seen not only from the outside but also from above.

and evolution.” This then becomes, in the words of entrepreneur Jesse Jacobs³¹, an “addiction” tied on the one hand again to the fact that “as humans we’re wired to become dissatisfied”, while on the other hand to the fact that “we are encouraged to maintain the addiction through technology and information”, leading into the more external, cultural imposition that follows. “Sustainable-apparel consultant” Shannon Whitehead goes on to characterize “American culture” as blinded by the “illusion of what our lives should look like” or “that our lives should be perfect” because of the media, of “advertising” or “your Instagram or Facebook feed.” Neuroscientist, philosopher and once again popular self-help author Sam Harris confirms that we take others’ lives and especially these mediatic “confections” of “very sexy and glamorous lives” as “yardsticks” to chase, causing “an immense amount of dissatisfaction” (and “many of us see no alternative but to live that way” – a gap that the movie is meant to fill, of course). Sociologist and economist Juliet Schor, tied to the voluntary simplicity discourse, adds that advertising has now thoroughly “polluted and infiltrated culture”, from movies and television to books and all sorts of spaces such as taxi cabs, and even relations with others (“The person who you think you’re having an idle chat with [in the bar] could be placed there by an alcohol company”). Finally, as the gloomy background music is overlaid with the first crescendo of mediatic noise (such as an old black-and-white ad with a man reading a newspaper and exclaiming, “Now that’s what I call a good-looking car!”), self-help author Patrick Rhone blames it all on “those who want to make a whole lot of money”, a generic social “they” for all those who “want us to believe that you really need these things”, and director and photographer Yarrow Kraner accompanies the crescendo saying that “every year that passes there’s more stimuli, there’s more pressure, there’s more options, there’s more media, there’s more noise, always noise”, until silence suddenly ensues and he first offers the minimalist solution: the “wake-up call” of “streamlining and simplifying and just letting people know that they have the option.”

This is the crucial background we have to keep in mind in our study of how “minimalism” is rhetorically constructed. The succession of these merging anti-consumerist takes is significant, as it anticipates that the solution will be an individual one: it starts and ends with an individual impulse, a craving that is midway dysphorical-

³¹ Jacobs’ examples give away very clearly whose non-harsh conditions and “miserableness” the movie’s discourse appears to assume: the “addiction” is said to explain “why lottery winners are miserable” and “why homeowners have three-car garages.”

ly painted as an external imposition – whether by the hands of Mother Nature or money-makers – only to circle back to its being internal and manageable by every individual as soon as they see that they already have “alternatives” and “options”, and that they actually already have enough of what they “really need” (as per “the best standards of living in history”). While individual (and individualist, that is, mainly aimed at personal well-being or happiness), minimalism is of course thereby presented as an attack on an oppressive consumerist status quo, and yet, as we have observed earlier, this by itself could make it quite indeterminate, as a mere popping up of an extreme impulsiveness and delusiveness that the anti-consumerist rhetoric itself constructs, and which may simply lead back to the way many or most people already consume to begin with (or how they can afford to consume). At one point, in a scene where Millburn and Nicodemus reply to a person in the audience who – of course – compliments them for their radical message, but also raises the question as to whether it is escapist, the two sides of the coin appear together (44:01-44:56):

[Q:] “You’re dedicated, you’re creative, you’re innovative, you have a sincere desire for mankind – the very people who the wolves of Wall Street fear. And to me, you’re removing yourself from the war. If you’re really talking about minimalism, the ultimate minimalist is a hermit, a recluse or a monk; and to me that’s not gonna change the world. You know what I’m saying? You’re the only threat to that system.”

[Millburn:] “You’re right, there are two sides of the spectrum. I think, you know, we’re ideally somewhere in the middle of that, right? ‘Cause I don’t think there’s anything wrong with consumption. The problem was compulsory consumption – buying stuff because that’s what you’re supposed to do, that’s what advertising tells you to do, or that’s what this magic template is for happiness, and then when you get it you realize that it doesn’t make you as happy as you thought it would.”

The exchange significantly ends with the black man again insisting in the backstage that “we’re trying to destroy those wolves of Wall Street”, that he is “serious”, and with Millburn not replying but instead offering him one of the aforementioned hugs. On the one hand, minimalism is charged by its anti-consumerist rhetoric with a criticality which would make it a more or less definite alternative to consumerism (and capitalism?). On the other hand, however, by equating consumerism with the extreme, mindless and “compulsory” consumption of impulsive individuals, minimalism also ends up being positioned in an indefinite “somewhere in the middle.” We see here for the first time the way in which a commonsensical reading of “minimalism” as related to a “search for a minimum” functions as a rhetorical stepping stone to actually distance minimalism from, making it unclear what in fact distinguishes minimalist consumption from ordinary consumption. Of course, as far as the dualistic discourse of the movie

goes, “ordinary consumption” just is “compulsory consumption”, there is no other “middle” (or it has been lost). Still, it is clear that the movie’s construction of “minimalism” is rhetorically very different from the construction of a rediscovered ordinary consumption, as the former nonetheless suggests some special way of consuming and perhaps of living. Apparently, this special character is not its being “minimal” as the label may lead one to think, but there must be something that makes it more definite than anti-consumerism and ordinary consumption.

What then is minimalism? Our first encounter with it in the movie is in the two introductory sections for Nicodemus and Millburn, which we know for sure to be “minimalists.” Here we see the focus on the individual’s life we have noted, framed by the contrast between the noisy, crowded and artificial city and the quieter, sparser, greener suburbs. In Nicodemus’ case, the problem is presented as a personal problem of feeling indeed “miserable”, echoing and individualizing the anti-consumerist sections that precede and follow it: the mob’s “hunt” we have just witnessed is aligned to his own materialist pursuit of “stuff”, while the media’s influence is anticipated in his being described as “successful” by others even though he “really” was “miserable.” It is thus confirmed what “minimalism” is not, that is, “living for stuff”, with the difference being that it is now an individual that has come to realize he has been living this way (and to the very end of it, being “successful” at it):

I had everything I ever wanted. I had everything I was supposed to have. Everyone around me said, “You’re successful”; but really I was miserable. There was this gaping void in my life, so I tried to fill that void the same way that many people do – with stuff; lots of stuff. I was filling the void with consumer purchases. I was spending money faster than I was earning it, attempting to buy my way to happiness. I thought I’d get there one day; eventually, I mean, happiness had to be somewhere just around the corner. I was living pay check to pay check, living for a pay check, living for stuff, but I wasn’t living at all.

What one had desired is immediately turned into what one was supposed to have in others’ eyes, so that “living for stuff” is in a way living for others instead of oneself. This leads to a consumerist vicious circle of doubling down again and again on the pursuit of stuff as a “way to happiness”, working and earning more but without any gain in “living” full stop; a life built around stuff must therefore be pushed beyond it and returned to being life as such (the title’s “important things”). When the time comes for the minimalist solution in Millburn’s introductory section – framed as we have seen as an individual’s gesture of “streamlining and simplifying” –, we do not see that life beyond stuff, but rather again a life around it; similarly, others’ judgments regarding stuff are



FIG. 4 – Some of the shots of Millburn’s home. Significantly, the top-left view appears at the very moment that the “minimalist” life comes up, followed by the top-right view when “joy” is mentioned.

not just left behind, but rather replaced with one’s own no less stuff-based judgements. At first we see again Nicodemus recalling the day in which he saw Millburn “happy for the first time in a really long time, like truly happy, ecstatic” despite having both climbed the same “corporate ladder” being “miserable”: asking him why, he is told about “this thing called ‘minimalism’” by his friend, obviously positioning it as the solution to the problems depicted earlier. However, we are not told what Millburn precisely said to Nicodemus about “minimalism”; what we get, instead, is Millburn’s description of his life before and after becoming “minimalist”, accompanied first by generic pictures of heaps of “stuff” and then by his home and reduced possessions:

Before I discovered minimalism, I think my life looked like pretty much everyone else’s: I had a lot of stuff. Hundreds, thousands of books, DVDs and VHSs, closets full of expensive clothes – all of these things that I brought into my life without questioning. But when I started letting go, I started feeling freer and happier and lighter, and now as a minimalist every possession serves a purpose or brings me joy. I have a bed and a chair and a radio, and I have some furniture in my dining room, in my kitchen I have appliances; I don’t have any excess stuff. Everything that I look around at I have to be able to justify to myself – not to anyone else, but just justify to myself: does this add value to my life? And if not, I have to be willing to let go.

Whatever else it may be, then, here is what minimalism surely entails, to the point of being the very first thing we are told about it: a “questioning” of the things one already owns as to their “value” for life – whether it is an instrumental “purpose” or an emotional “joy” –, resulting in the discarding of all the “excess stuff” that one cannot justify in these terms. This gesture will, already by itself, start bringing about that same indi-

vidual “happiness” that consumerism falsely promised, and will break one “free” of that impulsive/imposed compulsion: “living more deliberately with less” is the minimalist message that the duo is devoted to spreading, as it is defined at the end of the section. In other words, it is not enough to just live – and consume – more deliberately, it is also necessary to live “with less”, to reduce one’s overall stuff until no excess is left; one cannot just move on to what lies beyond stuff from the get go, without first staying around it a bit longer to reduce it. Why this may be useful or necessary is not explained, yet this clearly gets to the difference with anti-consumerism in its more generic scope as well as its tie to the acts of purchasing and consuming: one might surely start buying less stuff without first going through reducing stuff already owned, but then one will be anti-consumerist without being “minimalist”, or so it seems. By offering an exemplar, Millburn’s home – somewhat resembling the images we have found earlier – implicitly confirms and reinforces this necessity of reduction for minimalism, because in fact we see very few things (though in a large home), so much so that one cannot but think of the label’s commonsensical reading as the pursuit of a more or less extreme minimum (FIG.4). This is crucial, because there is nothing in Millburn’s description per se that explicitly says that by reducing one’s things one will end up with a certain minimal amount of them, nor does it follow from the generic criteria of “value” or “purpose” and “joy”, as it is not necessarily the case that these must only apply to very few things. In fact, later on Nicodemus addresses a common pushback by people who love books or have collections of other things, replying that they can keep them since they clearly “add value” to their lives (23:54-24:22); and yet neither he nor Millburn seem to have collections, nor many valuable things. On the contrary, we are told that Millburn’s previous consumerist life “looked like pretty much everyone else’s”, which implies that his current minimalist life does not, and thus – of course – that a minimalist life must look in a certain way that is recognizable. Could a minimalist own a lot of things if he or she values them all? Could he or she even add some more if a thing is somehow sure to add value? The answer here sounds like a yes, but looks like a no. What is clear is that reducing one’s material possessions is at the core of minimalism as a necessary part of it, in line with the commonsensical associations of its label that we have briefly surveyed earlier.

As submitting to others' or society's idea of "success" is deemed a part – or even the essential drive – of the consumerist life, it is easy to see why the necessity of reduction cannot be simply endorsed in any strong and straightforward manner, yet it is there. Beside the conflation of minimalism with a more indeterminate anti-consumerism and its circling back to the middle ground of ordinary consumption, the criticality behind that necessity is also played down by the opposition of self-judgment and judgment by – and of – others, wherein the former appears as indeed less judgmental: it is to only himself that Millburn must justify his every possession, not anyone else; and similarly, he and Nicodemus are not, of course, judging others (as when they say they are just "sharing a recipe" and not trying to "proselytize" or "convert" anyone to minimalism; 22:10-22:29). However, any judgement of oneself is an implicit judgment of others, just as any justification of oneself is an implicit justification to others, and this is all the more the case insofar as the movie's audience is clearly supposed to identify with the two minimalists: when they repudiate their former lives and selves, the audience is invited to follow suit. As we have seen, far from being non-judgmental the movie is quite moralistic in its starkly dualistic, one-sided portrayal of consumerism as extreme and irrational, impulsive and imposed, all throughout the movie. This is pushed to the point of pathologization, as when "compulsive-hoarding expert" Gail Steketee claims that attachment to people "spills over" at times to objects "as if they were as important as people" (thus mirroring Millburn's last words at the end of the movie): as soon as she (non-judgmentally?) says that she is "not so sure that we have such a great relationship with things", the movie immediately turns to another scene of consumerist rush, with people literally jumping on things and falling and fighting each other for products (30:15-30:54). References to trauma come up various times in the movie, including Millburn and Nicodemus' own past, which we are invited to emotionally empathize with by way of close-ups on old pictures or moved eyes, as well as pained face expressions (10:36-12:26): Nicodemus' mother left her husband and lost herself in drugs – which she sold too –, Millburn's left the husband too and instead became an alcoholic, and both were poor and always preoccupied with money, leading their sons to their workaholic and consumerist lives attached to money and stuff; from biological drives to advertising, from money-makers to poor addicted mothers, every road appears to lead to such lives, and it is a destination which does not seem to have anything about it to be redeemed. It makes little difference, on these foundations, if the movie's final – and as quintessen-

tially moral as commonsensical – message of “love people, use things” is preceded and framed again not by explicit judgment of other consumerist people, but rather by Millburn and Nicodemus again recalling what bad people they were in the past: Millburn admits again that his past idea of success was “making more money”, to the point of “pay[ing] no attention to the people closest to [him]” like his mother, while Nicodemus confesses that he has “literally used people to sell cellphones” or “get bigger and better clients”, all while we see on screen the two now spending time with their friends, or affectionately hugging one person after another from the audience in their last and most successful event (1:14:10-1:15:07). If “the whole point” behind the minimalist duo’s message is, as Nicodemus says, “to help people curb their appetite for more things, because it’s such a destructive path to go down”, how is no judgment involved in that? Also, if their lives are now “genuine” and free of “manipulation” of others (and by others), since their “appetite” for new things is now curbed, how exactly has getting rid of their old things helped with that? We are never really told; its necessity, the necessity of judging and justifying one’s things and discarding all that seems to hold no (more) value for oneself, remains both unquestioned and indirectly supported by the movie’s broader anti-consumerist discourse. The latter’s society-wide scope and concerns are transmuted into material for individual responsibility and even guilt (contradicting the insistence on biological instincts and/or sociological impositions): it is with dramatic regret that Millburn recalls, by reading directly from the book in that cold deserted landscape, how he first neglected his mother and then reacted in the consumerist way even to her death and to his own divorce, buying all sorts of items to furnish and decorate his new home; the audience too is supposed to wonder along with him at the end of the section, “Hell, what else do I need?”, before he symbolically turns its back on consumerism and walks away mortified (24:43- 28:54).

At one point, framing an anti-consumerist section on fast fashion and the environmental unsustainability of consumerist society, Schor observes that while such society is “too materialistic in the everyday sense of the word”, in another sense we are “not at all materialistic enough in the true sense of the word”, meaning by this “true materialism” the actual care for “the materiality of goods” rather than “the symbolic meaning” of material goods as advertised status symbols (31:15-31:43). It is, again, the other face of consumerism in the discourse – the face of the other, of the media, of the artificially

imposed ideal of “success”, of “perfection”, of the “American dream”, even of “normality” and so on. It is its aesthetic rather than materialistic side, the one that Millburn clearly dismisses in his going over the home furniture and décor items he had bought and rhetorically asking if this or that item’s style truly expressed the kind of person he was (interestingly, the items shown on screen mostly exhibit the sort of modern aesthetic we have seen associated to minimalism). This other half of the anti-consumerist rhetoric never takes over the anti-materialist one, despite the fact that it contradicts it: right before Schor, Steketee had pointed to our mistaken attachment to material things in that scene mentioned above, while still before that Sam Harris had said that “we’re confused about what’s gonna make us happy”, that we look for it in “material possessions” by mistakenly believing that “gratifying each desire as it arises will somehow summate into a satisfying life”, none of which makes reference to the merely aesthetic or symbolic nature of these desires (again, the mob and the media do not coincide, just like the internal, biological, instinctual take on impulse and the external, social, imposing take). As for “minimalism” in particular, it is clear that the necessity of discarding one’s belongings heavily rests upon the anti-materialist rhetoric against “stuff”, even while couched in some anti-aesthetic rhetoric against symbolically conforming to others’ vision of success through it. The contradiction is evident when Schor points out that “almost everything in the home now becomes an object of fashionability”, and that the very “concept of fashion” is precisely “the idea that you can throw things away not when they’re no longer usable, but when they no longer have social value or they’re no longer fashionable” (32:49-34:02): is it okay – is it even that different –, instead, if one throws things away because they do not have personal value? It is not surprising that Schor’s gesture towards the revaluation of the material does not recur in the movie, exhausting its rhetorical function with the underscoring of the wastefulness of consumerism. Her anti-consumerist comments on fashion are followed by minimalist blogger Leo Babauta returning the discourse to the individual level, claiming like Nicodemus did before that “people buy because they’re trying to fulfil this void inside of them [...], but no matter how much stuff we buy and how many different fads that we try, we don’t become a more whole person – we keep looking, this hunger never gets fulfilled”; and this view is immediately echoed by Hanson, who says that “you can never get enough of what you don’t really want” – that is, “more goodies, more toys, more cars” – in place of that “feel[ing] whole” and “feel[ing] content” everyone “really” desires (34:03-

34:41). The individual is then tied to the environmental in self-help author Colin Beavan's words, since the "mindless consumption" is said to be at once "not making us happy" and "causing the degradation of our habitat", and tiny-house designer Jay Austin brings the section to its close and focus by making it explicit that "we are not going to ever be able to achieve the environmental gains that we're seeking while still expecting our lives to be the same": "We're going to give up a lot", he says, as the umpteenth crescendo of noisy consumerist scenes plays on screen, again ending in sudden silence and a supposedly minimalist punch line not to end with a tone of sacrifice ("The secret's that a lot of that we're not actually going to miss"; 35:16-35:38). Sacrifice or not, that "giving up" which in the anti-consumerist discourse is tied to the purchase and consumption of new things gets tacitly shifted to the minimalist "giving away" of old things, of things already owned: minimalist blogger Colin Wright tells the story of how he got rid of most of his things, renounced his career – with its focus on mere "money", "prestige" and "success" but no happiness – and became a digital nomad blogger traveling the world as he had always wanted, "both successful and just incredibly happy"³² (35:40-38:03).

³² Wright's self-description as "technically homeless" – that is, actually "homeful" in that he just moves from rented home to rented home across countries – could of course be applied to his being, so to speak, stuff-less, as his economic conditions would clearly allow him to buy back or rent anything he needed. The same is true for all (supposedly) minimalist interviewees in the movie, including Millburn and Nicodemus, as all of them are at least homeowners, and mostly not of tiny or even just small houses. Wright is more candid in describing himself as "successful", but again, the same could be said for all voices in the movie, especially for the minimalist duo book tour arc. In other words, despite the rhetorical attacks on "success" and "money-makers", there really are no poor, unsuccessful yet happy minimalists in the movie. Beside the anti-materialist focus on "stuff" as the main consumerist villain, the movie explicitly decentres money in the section after Wright's (38:04-40:08) which decouples it from increase in "happiness" after a certain "threshold" of 70.000 USD a year has been met, again in Hanson's words. Self-help author and tiny house dweller Tammy Strobel goes on to say that "we all need to have our basic needs met: having a house, food on the table, you know, being safe", things which "not everyone has" (and quite significantly a real homeless person is shown at this juncture). This is then implicitly tied to the minimalist act of getting rid of things by Rhone, whose words reveal that it is not just a matter of happiness not increasing with money, but rather of increased income being far from available to everyone: "You think that more money is going to, say, give you security. The problem is that you don't necessarily have control over making more. One thing you do have control over is spending less; what you do have control over is having less, and that by having less you automatically stretch what you do have." Here too this tacit equation of anti-consumerist "spending less" and minimalist "having less" is not explained, nor is it at all obvious (surely one can better "stretch" what one already has by not discarding things). It is thus taken for granted that most people either already have a socioeconomic standing close to the "threshold" of decoupling or of basic needs, or that they can reach it by saving and getting rid of things. The point, at any rate, seems to be a rhetorical emphasis on control which is then extended to working less through "financial freedom" by Austin ("There's more to life than bills and money and work"). After that, we are back to yet another life story of a very successful case of renounced success, this time by "former wall-street broker" Aj Leon and his embrace of a life which is "wildly, flamboyantly [his] life", just like Wright's before him

As we have observed, the movie's overall rhetorical strategy is that of either equating "minimalism" with anti-consumerism or at least leaving their differences quite unclear and implicit. The word itself, either as a noun or as an adjective, only comes up 22 times in the whole movie, most of the time being related to Millburn and Nicodemus (who are portrayed in the movie as either its originators or main popularisers: there is no historical depth to this presentation, nor any hint of the fact that people like Wright, Becker and especially Babauta were already active years before the duo, as they admit in the book). When it does come up, however, it applies almost always to the ownership and discarding of things, as in the case of Wright too (though "minimalism" is not explicitly mentioned here). Courtney Carver's famous "project 333" of limiting one's overall wardrobe to only 33 items of clothing is explicitly "minimalist", and is also introduced by a brief section in which Millburn himself shows the few clothes he has, while saying that "minimalism is not a radical lifestyle" because the clothes he does have are of higher quality and all his "favourite clothes" (46:37-47:51). This is implicitly linked to tiny houses by Strobel who says she too has followed Carver's proposal and got down to a "super tiny wardrobe", but tiny houses are never described as "minimalist", nor is any of the explicit "minimalist" living in a tiny house: the association is very loose and not binding by any means, contrary to minimalism's strong tie to the reduction of one's possessions. In Carver's case, this practice of getting rid of things is even invested of healing power against "stress" and thus against everything else, such as her multiple sclerosis, leaving her in "better health" overall: as Carver's husband affirms with no explanation, "by getting rid of these things in our lives, these material items, and all this excess we used to live in, good things happen" (51:04-52:00). Similar anti-materialist remarks can be found in the other occurrences of "minimalism" for Babauta and Becker, who also exhibit the individual scope of minimalism: Babauta jokingly quips that "there is another word for 'minimalism', it's called 'being a bachelor'" in order to stress – as a "father of six" – that is possible to "move together as a group" towards minimalism (1:06:52-1:08:11), yet Becker is described by his wife as being "on a different level of minimalism" than her³³, as evidenced by a smaller size of the closet,

(40:09-42:34). At one point in the previous section, after all, minimalist blogger Joshua Becker observes that "it would take someone rich and famous to be able to say it's not worth it."

³³ In a scene in which he and Millburn are interviewed by NBC News and asked about what they would do if they fell in love with a "maximalist" person, Nicodemus too says that his girlfriend "wouldn't call herself a 'minimalist'" but that, since they have "similar values", that causes no problem to them (1:00:51-1:00:26). Nothing else is added about "maximalists" in the movie, and Babauta and Becker's

making it clear that “minimalism” is a matter of individual ownership and attachment to things (the same opposition had just been made by Becker himself between his son, immediately ready to discard some of his toys, and his daughter, who instead “collects and holds onto” anything she can find; 1:08:31-1:10:06). There can be no doubt that the rhetorical centre of gravity for “minimalism” lies in the necessity of individually discarding things on anti-materialist grounds, whatever else may be added or blended to it. The anti-aesthetic side is addressed not through a “true materialism”, but again through individual solutions such as practicing meditation or simply disconnecting from the media and its external influences: as Rhone puts it, “when it comes to the overwhelm, the easiest way to solve that is just to turn it off” (53:30-53:52); and later on, Schor’s critique of the “junk” content addressed at children – “food that’s bad for them, crappy toys that are gendered and violent” – mentions the “political power of advertising [that] keeps us from doing something about it”, but that “something” is left undefined and followed by the section on Babauta and Becker, making it again a matter of discarding things (1:06:04-1:06:50).

In the movie, the minimalist lifestyle beyond stuff thus appears to be built around stuff after all. Even notwithstanding the numerous contradictions in the movie, the anti-aesthetic refusal of status symbols of success remains meshed in the anti-materialist refusal of stuff as such. Apart from its unexplained invitation to get rid of things, there is in fact little difference between the “minimalist” message and president Jimmy Carter’s moralist speech preceding the last section, and accompanied once again by images of irrational consumerists, now with the exact opposite of the cheerful soundtrack at the beginning (1:10:07-1:11:33):

Good evening. It’s clear that the true problems of our Nation are much deeper, deeper than gasoline lines or energy shortages, deeper even than inflation or recession. In a Nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does but by what one owns. But we’ve discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We’ve learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose. This is not a message of happiness or reassurance, but it is the truth, and it is a warning.

As in references to “feeling whole”, “purpose”, “connection” and so on in the movie, here too there is also “human identity” at stake, and here too it is partly subsumed by

families are presented as overall minimalist already. While conciliatory, Nicodemus’ reply of course presupposes once again that “minimalist” does indicate something at least more definite than certain general values other may share. As far as we can see, that something is having got through the discarding of one’s no longer valued belongings.



FIG. 5 – Shots of four among the home interiors displayed in the movie, with “tiny houses” on the left and “minimalist” homes on the right (if they are indeed to be distinguished).

the anti-materialist rhetoric, but there is of course no suggestion that the way to go about solving the problem entails getting rid of what one already owns. The movie’s ending, like the movie at large, does not explicitly insist on the fact that minimalism does entail this, but rather shows us that Millburn and Nicodemus are now “genuine” and enjoy great relationships to their friends and fans; yet this was attained not simply by some generic shift in their values, but supposedly by adopting a “minimalist lifestyle” – whatever it is – and at the very least by discarding most of their things. This practice of discarding is sometimes vaguely if not naively said to reduce stress, to save one money or to allow one to move and go travelling as soon as one wishes, but it is never fully or explicitly addressed, described, endorsed or explained as such. In the midst of the anti-consumerist discourse, “minimalism” and its main practice end up being, in the finale, as indeterminate as a “life of less” opposed not just to stuff but to an entire “chaotic world”, opposing the “deliberate life” to the consumerist impulsive “madness” through the voices of the movie’s interviewees – people who are, like Millburn and Nicodemus, “inspired in creating massive social change and impact” (1:15:13-1:16:56). Nicodemus’ words generalize “minimalism” to every decision regardless of whether it questions one’s material possessions or anything else (not just purchases, even relationships): “That’s really what minimalism is about, it’s about living deliberately. So every choice that I make, every relationship, every item, every dollar I spend –

I'm not perfect obviously, but I do constantly ask the question: is this adding value?, am I being deliberate with this decision?" (1:13:48-1:14:02). Millburn's last words push it even further, as noted earlier, by making it a matter of "loving people" and "using things." It could hardly get more commonsensical and more indeterminate than this, and yet here the link to the practice of discarding all the things that do not "add value" to one's life is even less clear.

If a minimalist's life does not look like everyone else's, what does it look like? The movie is of course never explicit about it, while the aesthetic comes up only negatively in Millburn's disdain towards his past consumerist search for "style" in interior décor items, as well as in remarks on fast fashion and the vain pursuit for status symbols and mediatic ideals. Judging from this movie's discourse, minimalism does not have anything to do with the aesthetic dimension or a certain style, and even more surely with a historical art current; it is just a lifestyle. However, the movie is still in fact a movie, so it cannot avoid showing us something, just as it does with Millburn's home. Thus we do find a couple homes besides Millburn's that resemble the images we have found in our initial search on Google, that of the explicitly "minimalist" Becker and that of David Friedlander and his illustrator-designer wife Jacqueline Schmidt (not explicitly "minimalist", but tied to the minimalist-leaning blog *Lifedit*), both of which contrast with the interiors of the two tiny houses in the movie (FIG. 5). The lack of almost anything on sight in the minimalist homes is again striking, even though the tiny houses too do not display that many things, the difference rather lying more in the overall aesthetic, for example in the plain white walls of minimalist homes. Beside this, we can notice that explicitly "minimalist" people in the movie – and also Friedlander and Schmidt – are most often if not always shown wearing monochrome, neutral casual t-shirts, or – in the case of Wright and sometimes Millburn – simple grey or light-blue shirts. As we have mentioned earlier, however, even when Millburn and Carver display their clothes and talk about them they do not address "style" at all, they only say that they are limited – respectively – to only "favourite" items or needed and useful items. And yet, as we

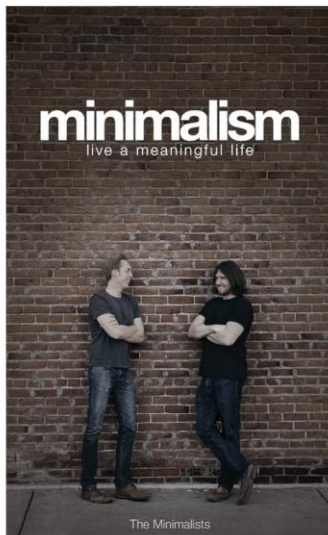


FIG. 6 – The book cover of *Minimalism* (2011) and a screenshot from the blog’s interface, featuring the duo plus the more recent podcast co-host all dressed in black. It is perhaps worth noting that the introductory text on the blog implicitly equates “minimalism” with “simple living”, but also goes on to say that what the three minimalists do is “help[ing] millions of people eliminate clutter and live meaningfully with less.”

now very briefly turn to Millburn and Nicodemus’ book by a similar title – with just a “meaningful life” in the place of the movie’s “important things” for the subtitle – and published four years before the movie in 2011, its cover does include the minimalist duo in that plain casual look; in fact, anyone who is acquainted with them beyond the movie would know that that is the way they always present themselves online (on both the blog and YouTube channel; FIG. 6). For all that, the aesthetic was already absent – unsurprisingly – in the book. Actually, the whole “minimalism” as we have seen it constructed in the movie is barely there, whether one agrees to equate it with the more generic “anti-consumerism” or not.

From both its structure and its foreword, it is clear that this book is indeed about the “meaningful life”; is this the same as the “minimalist” life? The book is divided in seven chapters, the first and last of which offer an introduction and conclusion (“Our Arrival”, “Confluence”), while the five other chapters each deal with one “dimension” of such life (“Health”, “Relationships”, “Passions”, “Growth”, “Contribution”). Already in the foreword we find pretty much the same anti-consumerist mix of anti-materialist and anti-aesthetic rhetoric seen in the movie, together with a far more explicit internalization and individualization of the problem, that is, of the “pressure” of society:

Conformity is the drug with which many people self-medicate. Not happy? Buy this. Buy that. Buy something. Keep up with the Joneses, the Trumps, the Kardashians. After all, you can be just like them, right? Clearly this is blatantly wrong, we all know this, and yet we continue to try. Day in, day out, we try. We try to keep up, try to measure up, try to live up to societal expectations, placing immense pressure on ourselves to be something – or someone – we are not. Consequently, people are more stressed than ever. We have more pressure put on us than any other time in history. You see it on your TV, the toothpick models and rugged “sexiest men alive” occupying the screen. *This* is what you’re *supposed* to look like. You hear it on your radio, the solipsistic over-indulgence of Hummer-driving rap stars and champagne-guzzling pop stars promulgating irresponsible living. *This* is how you’re *supposed* to consume. You notice it at work, the co-worker gossip about him and her and, god forbid, *you*. *This* is how you’re *supposed* to behave. To have the tallest building in town, you must tear down everyone else’s. Suffice it to say, the pressure is all around us. Or is it? The truth is that nearly all the pressure we feel is completely internal. Sure, this pressure is influenced by external factors, but the that doesn’t mean we have to take the bait. We needn’t succumb to these influences. Because even if you could be a Kardashian or a Trump or a Jones, it wouldn’t make you happy. Happiness comes from within, from inside yourself, from living a meaningful life. And that is what this book aims to help you discover. (Millburn & Nicodemus 2011: “Foreword”)

The two minimalists go on to introduce themselves as once “happy young professionals” who “had great six-figure jobs, nice cars, big houses, plenty of toys, and an abundance of stuff” but nevertheless were not “*truly* happy”, because “working 70-80 hours a week and buying more stuff didn’t fill the void”; only through the “principles of minimalism” have they managed to take back “control” of their lives. We are also told that “the most interesting part” of that “initial journey” to minimalism is Nicodemus’ “packing party”: he packed away everything he had and unpacked only what he needed in the next 21 days, thereby finding that “80% of his material possessions were still boxed and unused, all of which possessions he then sold, donated, or trashed at the end of his experiment.” Both the act of not buying and the practice of discarding “stuff” are thus included in this short preview of the book. The anti-materialist rhetoric underlying them is clearly meshed with and reinforced by the anti-aesthetic rhetoric targeting all sorts of media, mediatic figures and even just generic others such as co-workers as all-powerful sources of pressure, externally imposing their ideals (which are firstly characterized as aesthetic ideals of “what you’re supposed to look like”, and then as materialist ideals of “how you’re supposed to consume” – to which the more generalized, moralist ideals of “how you’re supposed to behave are then added). Just like in the movie, the consumerist world and life is presented in extreme and dualistic ways: it is a conformist, competitive world of both idealized and materialized fantasies, of mediatic and material excess, of “irresponsible” and “over-indulgent” living and consuming. Such a world promises everyone “happiness” but only delivers “stress” through its external pressures “to be something – or someone – we are not”, an endless pursuit to “measure up” that one must continually “keep up” with. Again like in the movie, the picture of external impositions as

pervasive and all-powerful is then contradicted by the turn to the individual as the exclusive locus and focus of the solution to what also remains an individualist problem (that is, a matter of one's "happiness"³⁴). The external pressure is internalized, thus becoming an impulse that can be immediately controlled and managed by the individual. Similarly, the external happiness promised by consumerism must be replaced with a true happiness which "comes from within", one causing no stress and not demanding that one become someone else; and that promised by Millburn and Nicodemus is of course of the latter kind, despite being offered in the quite mediatic form of a self-help book. Accordingly, even though this book too "is written to make you do some work and introspection so you can step away from your old life and journey into a new life filled with meaning" (a metaphor which betrays the externality and otherness of the goal), it identifies the better person that one is going to strive for and become as the internal "real you": "You can change, you can re-select who you're going to be, you can become the best person you're capable of becoming – the real you, the passionate, loving, compassionate, happy you." As to how it is possible that Millburn and Nicodemus know everyone's "real" self, that is revealed at the end of the foreword: "Although we are all different, we are all looking for the same thing: how to live with more meaning in our lives." Since the minimalist duo has personally found out that mere "stuff" and status symbols – supposedly pursued by most people, including the audience – cannot generate more "meaning", and yet have managed to become happy in other ways, they surely must know what does bring meaning in (any) life.

Beyond this rhetorical anti-consumerist backdrop to Millburn and Nicodemus' authority for offering everyone life advice – as people who have come back alive from the hell of a wealthy, successful life –, what is the role of "minimalism" in the meaningful life? Significantly, this is a question that the two bloggers also ask themselves at the end of the book, after not having mentioned at all "minimalism" since the introductory chapter (Ch. 7, "The Role of Minimalism"). This is telling, as it does already give us

³⁴ The first paragraph of the introductory chapter betrays the quite ill-concealed aspirational and individualist nature of the proposal: both "real happiness" and "discontentment" are again internalized from the very start as solely the result of oneself as an individual, and one turns towards the former and away from the latter by "living intentionally and meaningfully" by contrast to "the average person's life", which is "not happy" (Ch. 1, "Who Are You"). Other people's "mediocre" lives, like those routinized lives at the beginning of the movie – and like their impulsive consumerist counterparts –, have nothing to do with one's own and its transformation: "Just because most people are unhappy doesn't mean you have to be. You don't have to settle for a mediocre life just because the people around you have settled."

every reason to think that it is quite literally a rhetorical background only, a framing device to better introduce the reader to something else. The introductory chapter confirms this by only getting at “minimalism” at the end, unclear on the part it played in Millburn and Nicodemus’ transformation: from the discursive sequence, it appears as though they had already discarded at least some of their possessions before stumbling on “minimalism” via other bloggers. After a preliminary reinstatement of the anti-materialist, anti-aesthetic message – “the material possessions you accumulate are not going to make you happy”, because “real happiness comes from within” –, a message whose actual commonsensical nature is even somewhat admitted (“We all know this”; Ch. 1, “Who Are You?”), the chapter tells the life story of the duo, starting from the height of both their success and their “discontent” in 2009: they lived the “American Dream” and “enjoyed all the perks of a lifestyle most people envied” thanks to their “six figures” and “well respected” corporate jobs, but they increasingly grew dependant on the ephemeral happiness of “promotions”, “awards”, “fancy trips” and “nuggets of praise”, working more and more to achieve more and thus get “feelings of self-worth and significance”; addicted to the “cocaine high” of all this “praise”, they felt more and more discontented and acted like “most Americans”, trying to “purchase happiness” through “luxury cars, large houses, big-screen TVs, fancy furniture, expensive vacations, and everything else our heavily-mediated consumer-culture told [them] would make [them] happy”, which of course did not work (Ch. 1, “Finding Discontent”). Like the movie, the subsequent section traces back the discontent to their traumatic childhood living with addicted poor single mothers, noting how they already were “overweight, uncool, and utterly unhappy” at 12 years old and tried “escaping” in a materialist way through the “instant gratification” of food; later on, Nicodemus started “experimenting with alcohol, marijuana, and harder drugs” at various junctures, while Millburn stopped eating and developed obsessive-compulsive disorder (Ch. 1, “It Started When We Were Young”). In this way, literal addictions and compulsions are tied, respectively, to the accumulation of “stuff” and the absorption into work to which both eventually fall prey through success – first Millburn, then Nicodemus (who was hired in the same telecommunication company by Millburn). The “never-ending cycle” of making more and more money by working more and spending it on stuff was finally interrupted by the death of Millburn’s mother, whose cancer “seemed to be a metaphor for Joshua [Millburn]’s life as well”: “While things looked good on the surface – the marriage, the fancy job, the cars, the material

possessions – there was something seriously wrong on the inside” (Ch. 1, “Back to the Future”). After this existential crisis (“We only have a finite amount of time on this earth”), the duo “decided to take inventory” of their lives by identifying their major and minor “anchors”, that is, what was making them “feel stuck” and what was “holding [them] back from living happy, fulfilled lives” (Ch. 1, “Anchors”). Since “getting what [they] wanted” in life had not worked in making them happy, they now rather opted for “getting rid of” what was preventing them to be happy.

This is where minimalism gets smuggled in unannounced, apparently before the duo had ever even heard of it. Millburn and Nicodemus’ “major anchors”, that is, “the most obvious examples of things that were keeping [them] from feeling free and content”, included the mortgage payments for their large houses – together with “car payments and other large bills” and “major debts” –, certain “unhealthy, pernicious relationships that didn’t add value to [their] lives”, and also their careers along with “anything else that took an appreciable amount of [their] time without returning value to [their] lives.” Basically, their main problems were too much debt and too much work, plus bad relationships that also were at least a waste of time. As for the “minor anchors”, these are again significantly related to debt (“cable bills, Internet bills, other bills, smaller debts”) and wasted time (“certain unproductive or unhealthy periphery relationships, daily drive time [...] and other small things that took small amounts of our time attention, and focus”, such as “nighttime college classes”), yet in the midst of these surely intelligible concerns there also pop up, without no explanation, “unused clothes”, “unused household items” and “household clutter.” What may have pushed them to think of and include these as “anchors” – no matter how minor – during an existential crisis? It is just presupposed and taken for granted that this makes sense (as it probably would to the book’s main audience, most likely already exposed to the minimalist and/or The Minimalists’ discourse). Getting rid of debt is placed side by side, and thus associated, with getting rid of things, both examples of getting rid of “anchors”: “We eventually jettisoned many of our possessions, eliminating the excess in favor of things we liked and enjoyed – things we actually used in our daily lives. Over the course of two years, our anchors of old were no longer weighing us down.” However, discarding things is not just a negligible minor anchor among others, as in fact the chapter goes on to single it out in preparation for the appearance of “minimalism” in its explicit form.

After just a brief paragraph on Millburn's divorce from his wife (a case of the "major anchor" of relationships not adding value?), there is no mention of what he and Nico-demus were thinking of doing about the last major anchor, that is, their careers: in fact, they will only quit their jobs two years later, after the success of their minimalist blog (Ch.1, "Creating 'The Minimalists'"). What we get, instead, is Millburn dealing with all the possessions hoarded by his mother, hesitating at first but eventually donating all of them:

Joshua was faced with the dilemma of what to do with his mother's stuff after her death – those sentimental items we tend to hold on to in perpetuity. [...] It was a small, one-bedroom place, but it was packed wall-to-wall with her belongings. His mother had great taste – she could have been an interior designer – and none of her stuff was junk in the Hoarders sense of the word. Nevertheless, there was a lot of stuff in her home, likely three or four apartments worth of stuff in her tiny one-bedroom apartment. His mom was always shopping, always accumulating more stuff. She had antique furniture throughout her apartment, a stunning oak canopybed that consumed almost her entire bedroom, two closets jam packed with clothes, picture frames standing on every flat surface, original artwork hanging on the walls, and tasteful creative decorations in every nook and cranny and crevasse. There was 64 years of accumulation in her apartment. [...] At first, Joshua didn't want to let go of anything. [...] That way he knew that Mom's stuff was there if he ever wanted it, if he ever needed access to it for some incomprehensible reason. He even planned to put a few pieces of her furniture in his home as subtle reminders of her. [...] And then he looked under her bed. Among the organized chaos that comprised the crawlspace beneath her bed, there were four boxes, each labeled with a number. Each numbered box was sealed with packing tape. Joshua cut through the tape and found old papers from his elementary school days from nearly a quarter century earlier. [...] It was evident that she hadn't accessed the sealed boxes in years, and yet she had held on to these things because she was trying to hold on to pieces of her son, pieces of the past, much like Joshua was attempting to hold on to pieces of her and her past now. That's when he realized his retention efforts were futile. He could hold on to her memories without her stuff. [...] And then, over the next twelve days, he donated all her stuff – 100% of it – to places and people who could actually use it. (Ch. 1, "Making Hard Decisions")

Millburn's turning point is coming to see himself in his mother – not a "hoarder", but still someone who "was always shopping, always accumulating more stuff" – and recognizing that he too was attached to "stuff" like she was. Crucially, the problematic attachment is to generic "stuff" in its total mass: his mother's things are described as "tasteful", and there is also no indication that they did not "add value" to her life. Whether this much "stuff" could count as "minimalist" because of that is not addressed, however, because that would interfere with its rhetorical function of illustrating accumulation (and one's liberation from it). That "stuff" is now Millburn's, and none of it apparently "adds value" to his life, so he gets rid of it all. By not addressing his mother's situation explicitly, however, the text clearly suggests that the object of her attachment was not only the few boxes of mementos left unopened under her bed, but rather all of her "stuff", regardless of the value and taste of the items themselves. Therefore,

the scene serves the rhetorical purpose³⁵ – just like addiction before – of turning all “stuff” into a sign of an “incomprehensible” and irrational emotional attachment, as if “sentimental items” were the paradigm of our relationship to things. This gets finally spelled out in an explicit form – though not yet “minimalist” – in the list of lessons that Millburn draws out in the aftermath of this episode, which generalizes emotional attachment through the anti-materialist, anti-aesthetic rhetoric we have seen before: “we are not our stuff” and “more than our possessions”, and “our memories are not under our beds” but rather “within us”, so keeping things just because of that is useless (“an item that is merely sentimental for us can be useful for someone else”, and “old photographs can be scanned”, or “you can take pictures of items you want to remember”³⁶), and in fact it is even harmful (“holding on to things weighs on us mentally and emotionally”, while “letting go is incredibly freeing”). Without any explicit argument, the “minor anchor” of stuff comes to the fore as a crucial problem, as Millburn’s turning point (anecdotally) puts into relief the supposed relief of discarding one’s things.

As soon as it becomes explicit, the necessity of discarding things is preemptively attenuated both at the end of the paragraph and in the first explicit appearance of “minimalism.” Millburn and Nicodemus immediately deny the moral character of their discourse by saying that they “don’t think that sentimental items are bad or evil or that holding on to them is wrong”, but rather believe that “if you want to get rid of an item but the only reason you are holding on to it is for sentimental reasons – if it is weighing on you, if it’s an anchor – then perhaps it’s time to get rid of it, perhaps it is time to free yourself of that weight”, which “doesn’t mean you need to get rid of everything.” This is exactly the kind of rhetorical move we will focus on in our later analyses of the minimalist discourse: by denying that one needs to get rid of “everything”, it is maintained and taken for granted that one does need instead to get rid of something (and

³⁵ The rhetorical constructedness in the book is as transparent as that of the movie, of course. For all we know, much or most of what we are told could even be straight out invented: in the movie’s version of Millburn’s turning point after his mother’s death, there is no mention at all of the stuff she had left behind and the struggle with it, and vice versa there is no mention in this book of Millburn’s interior décor shopping spree to cope with that death. Not surprisingly, this difference aligns very well with the movie’s rhetorical strategy of blending “minimalism” with anti-consumerism at large, thus foregrounding the attack on purchasing and consuming and deemphasizing the practice of discarding one’s possessions.

³⁶ This dematerializing conversion of analog photos into digital ones and of “stuff” into pictures contradicts, of course, the point about memories being “within us” and thus freely and immediately accessible without any external support. What is insisted and should be argued for, on the contrary, is that it is not worth it having actual, concrete things for a mnemonic support, or in other words that pictures always do the job just as well; but that, of course, is never argued for. Instead, the reference to (digital) photos seems to be mostly an attenuating device – one among others – to ease the resistance to discarding things.

perhaps many things still). Here it is simply taken for granted that one would already “want to get rid of an item” to begin with, that one would put things already owned into question, and that the “sentimental reasons” for keeping them with no other justification are but a sign of their pernicious “weight” on one’s life. It is not surprising, then, that the very first thing we are shown about “minimalism” in the next paragraph is that it is not necessarily a lifestyle with indeed a minimal amount of stuff: Millburn and Nicodemus discovered minimalism as everyone did, through minimalist blogs, but they first stumbled on Wright’s blog *Exile Lifestyle* and his more extreme form of minimalism³⁷, and then on Babauta’s and Becker’s blogs with the family-sized minimalism (exactly the roles they all play in the movie, except that there is no admission in it of Millburn and Nicodemus’ learning about “minimalism” from them). The duo did not want to live like Wright, yet they wanted “the freedom that his minimalist lifestyle afforded him”, and “the happiness and passion that accompanied that freedom”; thanks to Babauta and Becker they soon found out that actually “minimalism wasn’t only for single white guys who didn’t want to work a 9-to-5”, that “it was for anyone who was interested in living a simpler, more intentional life” and – with anti-materialist, anti-aesthetic rhetoric – “focus on the important aspects of life, rather than the material possessions that are so heavily linked to success and happiness by our culture” (Ch. 1, “Discovering Minimalism”). As usual, we see a tacit rhetorical back-and-forth from – and thus confusion of – the claim that things are unable to make one happy to the quite distinct claim that things are actively preventing one from being happy, so that not only new things should not be focused on and pursued in consumption, but also old things already owned should be discarded; we still do not have any actual argument for the latter (and only bad, incoherent ones for the former). Instead of arguing for the necessity of getting rid of things, that necessity is rhetorically attenuated by “poking fun at the cynics and skeptics who treat minimalism as a trend or a fad” and inserting the “parodic”, stereotypical definition of minimalism found on their blog: “To be a minimalist you must live with less than 100 things, and you can’t own a car or a home or a TV, and you can’t have a career, and you have to be able to live in exotic places all over the world, and you have to write a blog, and you can’t have any children, and you have to be a young white male

³⁷ Needless to say, there is no discussion of the economic conditions which make such a lifestyle possible for Wright, a lifestyle whose homelessness is – as we have seen – actually “homeful” in his own words, and whose lack of things also could be taken as actually a full access to most of the world’s things as needed through money.

from a privileged background.” This “joke”, which actually sounds like an accurate mesh of these five minimalist bloggers’ lives, is meant to illustrate the absurdity of taking minimalism to have any necessary feature, “restrictions” as to why someone “could never be minimalist”; on the contrary, “minimalism isn’t about any of those things”, because “there are no rules in minimalism” and in fact it is exactly “a tool to help you achieve freedom” (in a negative and purely emotional sense, of course, as “freedom from” all sorts of dysphoric emotions – “fear”, “worry”, “overwhelm”, “guilt”, “depression” –, to which “enslavement” is casually added at the end of the list). And yet if getting rid of some or many things is not necessary, was Millburn’s mother a “minimalist” too, if she did not feel her belongings to be an “anchor” in her life?

Just like us, Millburn and Nicodemus too end up asking themselves “how can [minimalists] all be so different and yet still be minimalists”, and thus finally “what is minimalism” to begin with. There being no “restriction” or “rule”, they had just claimed that a minimalist can of course “own a car or own a house or have children or have a career” (and make money, we can safely add), so the lack of these cannot count as distinctive traits. No other set of traits is offered, however, as the duo defines “minimalism” in a loose way that makes it quite generic, if not universal: “Minimalism is a tool to eliminate life’s excess, focus on the essentials, and find happiness, fulfillment and freedom.” Where has the practice of discarding things disappeared again? If the point of minimalism is “stripping away the unnecessary things in your life so you can focus on what’s important”, is it not a contradiction to first have to go through the effort of questioning and then get rid of one’s possessions, thus still focusing on them? In other words, if minimalism is a lifestyle beyond stuff, why making it centred around stuff? It might be argued that this is not in fact the case, that no discarding of actual things is really necessary, but while the rest of the book would support this view, it is evident that in the entire introduction and in the discussion of previous “minimalists” the ownership and discarding of material possessions is foregrounded, no matter how also rhetorically attenuated it is. Absent any explicit argument for it as (the) one form of the minimalist “tool” for a “meaningful life”, except for reference to relief from a dysphoric emotional attachment to sentimental items, reduced possessions are implicitly presented as a self-evident end-in-itself for aspiring minimalists, in fact a constitutively necessary aspect of the “minimalist lifestyle” – in our terms, already an aesthetic ideal, whether it is tied or

not to that aesthetic common sense we have encountered in the beginning (as it appears to be). This fact is betrayed by Millburn and Nicodemus' grandiose list of minimalism's benefits: side by side with life-sized benefits like "reclaiming our time", "enjoying our lives", "discovering meaning in our lives", "living in the moment", "finding happiness" and so on, as well as the anti-consumerist "creating more, consuming less" (by working less and "pursuing our passions" instead, or even "finding our missions"), we also find "ridding ourselves of excess stuff", which was supposed to be part of the instrumental "tool" and definition of minimalism itself (just like "focusing on what's important", also included in the list of benefits). As to how minimalism helps with all these things, the answer is again that it is by "choos[ing] to get rid of the unnecessary in favor of what's important", and that "the level of specificity is up to you." It is of course up to the individual to "determine what is necessary and what is superfluous" to his or her life, but still – as seen earlier – we all are looking for happiness, so Millburn and Nicodemus can help anyone, without imposing anything as society's media instead do, "to achieve a minimalist lifestyle without having to succumb to some sort of strict code or set of rules." Right after, a "word of warning" nonetheless exhibits the underlying necessity and restriction of the book's minimalist discourse, by informing the reader that "it isn't easy to take the first steps" – though "it gets much easier and more rewarding the further you go" –, as "the first steps into minimalism often take some radical changes in mindset, actions, and habits." Supposedly, getting rid of one's possessions and valuing their reduced if not minimal quantity is one of these.

The rest of the introduction briefly relates the creation and ascent of the blog, near the end of 2010, with the authorizing encouragement of Wright, who is quoted as once saying to Millburn that he and Nicodemus could "make an impact" ("The world needs people like [them] to help them see things more clearly"; Ch. 1, "Creating 'The Minimalists'"). After that, the "meaningful life" with its five dimensions – one for subsequent chapter – is presented, and "minimalism" disappears until the end of the book. Here, the generic definition is simply reasserted in order to claim that since "minimalism is a tool to eliminate life's excess and focus on the essentials [...] this entire book is about minimalism, because this entire book is about focusing on the five essential areas of life" addressed in the book (Ch. 7, "The Role of Minimalism"). Again, one may grant Millburn and Nicodemus the right to that generic definition, and yet in the same para-

graph the reduction of physical items always comes first: the parenthesis exemplifying “other aspects of life” to minimize has “your possessions” first (followed only by “your work, etc.”), while the concluding question to ask oneself has “items” as the first concerning “excess” (“What excess items, tasks, and relationships can you remove from your life so you can focus more of your time and energy on all five dimensions?”). The generic definition appears – also judging from the introductory chapter we have examined – to rhetorically depend upon the gesture of discarding things, rather than making it unnecessary and equal to any other sort of “elimination of life’s excess”: as the paragraph has it, “[minimalism] clears away the clutter so you can focus on living more deliberately”; one’s “household clutter” stands for the lack of deliberateness in one’s life. Moreover, the practice of reducing one’s “stuff” is of course key to linking the proposed “meaningful life” to the two-sided anti-consumerist rhetoric and its criticality. In both ways, that practice is clearly central and necessary to “minimalism”; it cannot be admitted as a mere rhetorical device without seemingly losing all its power. Still, “minimalism” is evidently presented as a rhetorical discovery in Millburn and Nicodemus’ account (wherein, as we have noted, discarding possessions already comes up – first as a “minor anchor”, then as a turning point – before “minimalism” is ever mentioned): the word first appears as a “new term”, with which they were “utterly unfamiliar”, used by Wright to describe himself and a “movement” which “allowed him to focus on the important stuff in his life while shedding the excess crap that got in the way” (needless to say, it was his possessions; Ch. 1, “Discovering Minimalism”). This sounded so “fascinating” to the “minimalist” duo that they compare it to a “lightbulb” being turned on, and later even to “a beacon in the night”, which led them to the discursive “rabbit hole” of “Internet page after Internet page” in order to get “information and guidance and enlightenment” about it (Ch. 1, “Embracing Minimalism”). In the end, it is again not anything in particular but rather the “concepts of minimalism and simplicity” that they “embraced” as “a way of life” (and soon as their mission – and career – through the blog). On this occasion, the concept is glossed as a discovery that “[they] too could be happy, but it wasn’t through owning more stuff, it wasn’t through accumulation”, rather through taking back “control of [their] lives” and “focus on life’s deeper meaning” (which again are the true “bedrock of happiness” as opposed to “stuff”). By now, it is probably redundant to note once again that the anti-consumerist claim of the futility of pursuing happiness through accumulating stuff is not equal, by any means, to the mini-

malist claim of the necessity of discarding stuff as a core part – whether just preliminary or not – of pursuing happiness otherwise. On the contrary, the two sides are somewhat contradictory in that a lifestyle beyond stuff seems to be very ambiguously bound to a lifestyle around stuff.

On the whole, Millburn and Nicodemus' book no doubt attempts to present "minimalism" as a lifestyle ultimately of the former sort, yet precisely as soon as it does so – in the five chapters filling up most of the book – all of a sudden "minimalism" disappears, replaced by a series of generic life advice on the generic "five dimensions" of a "meaningful life" ("health", "relationships", "passions", "growth", "contribution"). If these dimensions are the actual bulk of a "minimalist lifestyle", why is there not even the slightest trace of them in the movie released four years later? Why does it depict it mostly – when it is not just conflated with anti-consumerism or ordinary consumption – in terms of reduced physical possessions? In fact, the last paragraph of the introduction betrays the gap between the "minimalist" and "meaningful" lives: minimalism is said to have "made this discovery [of the 'five dimensions'] possible" because "getting rid of the clutter in [their] lives allowed [them] to rediscover these five key areas", but this is immediately rephrased – what they mean is that "getting rid of [their] stuff was the initial bite at the apple"; "stuff" is indeed the "clutter" spoken of, out of metaphor (Ch. 1, "What It Means to Live a Meaningful Life). The central question therefore is, Is this "initial bite at the apple" necessary for everyone else as well? If so, how so? If not, will one be a "minimalist" even just by following Millburn and Nicodemus' life advice, not discarding one single thing? We find no clear answers to these questions, but at the very least an unclear, implicit presumption remains about the necessity of the "bite" of reducing one's possessions, as also confirmed by the movie. This "minimalism" is a lifestyle that gets beyond stuff only after having got it out of the way, and it is a lifestyle around stuff insofar as it is based on the rhetorical premise – often confused with the anti-consumerist one, but distinct from it – that stuff is indeed in the way. Therefore, we will not get into the small details of the minimalist duo's life advice, as there is nothing particularly "minimalist" about it (and also nothing particularly detailed, actually). The chapter on health, for example, has lists of foods to avoid ("processed and packaged foods", "sugar"), others to "drastically reduce or eliminate" ("gluten, breads, and pastas", "any drink other than water", "dairy" and "meat"), and others still to replace them

with (“water”, “green drinks”, “fresh juices”, “vegetables” and so on); it has brief descriptions of the most well-known diets, such as veganism or the paleo diet; it casts doubt on the usefulness of many medications, and of course questions smoking, drinking alcohol or consuming drugs; and offers basic “exercise principles” (“enjoying exercise”, “exercise relieves stress”, “variety keeps exercise fresh”) plus a basic 18-minute routine of exercise and a note on the importance of sleeping eight to ten hours every night. Of course, there are some echoes of the book’s general rhetorical setting, as for example the (ambiguous) anti-aesthetic opposition of “feeling better” to just “looking better” for “vanity muscles” (which however is nonetheless “essentially guaranteed once you start feeling better”; Ch. 2, “Feeling Better”), or that of physical “nutrition” to mere “entertainment” as the goal of eating food and basis for that feeling better (Ch. 2, “Developing Daily Food Habits”). However, it is hard to see why these quite commonsensical tips would be particularly “minimalist”, and there is not even any clear rhetorical intent to frame them as such: there is reduction of certain negative kinds of food, for example, but no insistence on the positive alternatives being the “essential” constituents of nutritional health; even the reductionist takes on “health” being only a matter of physically feeling and functioning better are not introduced by that route.

What replaces “minimalism” in the main body of the book is thus a more generic scheme for individual self-improvement, just like the movie attempts to collapse it into a more generic push for individual anti-consumerism; it is self-improving anti-consumerism, anti-consumerist self-improvement. Since it is taken to point to an integral “lifestyle”, the label of “minimalism” affords a rhetorical underpinning to a discourse that, as the chapter on health again demonstrates, is bent on offering regulating advice on all areas of life: “The word *health* extends beyond physical health as well [...] because *emotional, mental, spiritual* and *financial health* can be a result of living meaningfully and intentionally” (Ch. 2, “Defining Health”). That is in fact the reason why “health is the best place to start your journey towards a more meaningful life”, taken as it is as a wholly individual matter: one must improve oneself in the most literal sense, which then frames – following the chapters’ progression – one’s relationships to others, to work and again to one’s life as a whole, only at the end arriving at “contribution” to others’ lives. All “dimensions” are said to be just as “essential” as any other in the end, yet “contribution” as the social dimension is sharply isolated from the rest and therefore

postponed. Each of the five middle chapters begins with the same brief imaginary situation – obviously anti-consumerist in its rhetoric – of winning the lottery and having gained everything that the preceding chapters prescribe, but still lacking something; and before we finally get at “contribution” – in an implicitly moralistic manner (“Now what? Bask in your wealth, fortune, and fame at the top of your mound of money, swimming through your cash and coins like Scrooge McDuck?”; Ch. 6, “The Importance of Contribution”) –, the book has again the individual’s perpetual “growth” before that as its precondition. If “growth leads to contribution”, it does so at a later time and as its side effect, because then “you have more of yourself to give”: it is a one-way giving from oneself to others whose reciprocal effect on oneself is only the effect of that giving itself (“The more you help others grow, the more you grow in return”; Ch. 6, “Growth Leads to Contribution”). That relationships are placed on the second step of this ladder does not contradict this, as they too are dealt with in a similarly individualist manner. The questions that immediately come up in “evaluating current relationships” are whether other people “make you happy”, “satisfy you”, are “supportive” towards you and “help you grow”, or in general “contribute to your life in positive, meaningful ways” (Ch. 3, “Evaluating Current Relationships”). This is followed by an exercise in utilitarian moral accounting, with a three-column list of every person one interacts with hierarchically classified by closeness (“primary”, “secondary”, “periphery”) and again by impact on one’s own individual life (“positive”, “negative”, “neutral”), so that one may best “allocate” one’s “most precious commodity”, that is, time: “It is imperative that you dedicate less time to this [peripheral] group and focus your attention towards your primary and secondary tiers (including those people in the periphery whom you want to move into those tiers)”, while secondary relationships “should only receive your time and attention once your commitment to your primary relationships is fulfilled” (Ch. 3, “What to Do with Your Current Relationships”, “The Most Important Relationships”). The individualist nature of this is confirmed by the claim that “the only person you can change is yourself”, that “it is not your responsibility in any relationship to expect someone to change to adhere to your standards, beliefs, or values”, but at most “lead by example” by improving yourself to “the best version of you”; if this fails in making it so that your important relationships constantly grow (as they of course must, since “if your relationships aren’t growing, they’re dying”), then the only way one can change the negative relationship is to unilaterally cut it out or at least cut back on it (Ch.

3, “Change Yourself, Not Others”, “Relationship Growth”). Whether in “seeking new relationships” or “improving your current relationships”, it is entirely by oneself that one pictures the “compelling vision” of those relationships, based on what one “wants from” them – how you want the other person to be – and what instead “must not occur” in them, in order to then determine “what changes you’ll need to make within yourself to attract this kind of person” (Ch. 3, “Seeking & Selecting Future Relationships”). The chapter ends with a list of the “eight fundamentals of great relationships” which are quite commonsensical (“love, understanding, trust, honesty, caring, support, time, and authenticity”), and which arguably are, at any rate, not at all incorporated and demonstrated by the advice offered in the chapter (Ch. 3, “Eight Fundamentals of Great Relationships”).

The fact that the exclusive emphasis on the self-improving individual has its other side in the negation – the exclusion, indeed – of the other within the relationship does suggest that the generalized “minimalism” of the book, as the “elimination of life’s excess” and “focus on the essentials”, is mainly working here as a rhetorical rephrasing or reinforcement for individualist self-improvement. Just like with relationships, “if whatever you’re doing doesn’t improve at least one of the five areas of your life – directly or indirectly – then it’s important to find a way to drastically reduce or eliminate that action from daily life”, with “obvious examples” of such “tedious, banal tasks” being seen in “smoking”, “overeating” and “gossip” (Ch. 7, “Balancing All Five Dimensions”). Just like physical items, it seems, one must always question everything one does to check if it is improving at least one of these quite abstract “dimensions”, with a clear rhetorical thrust towards a negative gesture of reduction or elimination: while it is acknowledged that “not everything you do is as black and white as smoking and gossip” (in their view, at least...), it is also clearly assumed that they cannot remain that way, that they should be led out of the grey zone of complexity or indifference towards either a black or white status (“If you can’t think of a way to turn one of your questionable items into something that impacts one of the five dimensions, then you should most probably remove (or drastically reduce) that item from your life”; Ch. 7, “A More Meaningful Life”). Everything must be turned into a “questionable item” by one’s asking oneself if it positively serves self-improvement, as seen of course through the lens of Millburn and Nicodemus’ life advice (which may be commonsensical but is not at all

neutral, nor warranted by any explicit expertise): “spending time on the Internet, social media, shopping, daily drive time to and from work, sleeping in too late in the morning, and staying awake too late at night” are all offered as examples of “questionable items”, and the proposed positive alternative to “watching TV” by oneself is either watching it together with other people, so that one is never “stuck in the state of perpetual channel surfing that can consume large amounts of time without adding any value to [one’s] life”, or watching it “while you spend an hour on a treadmill or elliptical machine”, in which case that “stuck” state of mind is suddenly okay because “you are improving your physical health.” At the very end of the book, the magic formula for “success” – of the good kind, of course – is offered as the sum of “happiness” and “constant improvement”, so that the individual is always in control of it: even if one is currently unhappy about something, one can constantly work at improving oneself, and that already will make one “successful” in Millburn and Nicodemus’ eyes (Ch. 7, “How Do You Know?”). This is what they have done by applying the never-explicated “principles of minimalism” to their lives, which again appear immediately tied to “stuff” and only later generalized to all the rest: “We used the principles of minimalism to eliminate the excess stuff in our lives so we could focus on the five important aspects of our lives every day. Over the course of two years, everything changed for us. We got rid of the superfluous in favor of the essential, in favor of a more meaningful life.” One last time, the lifestyle beyond stuff is tied back to a lifestyle around (getting rid of) stuff.

While neither the book nor the movie (explicitly) promote a “minimum” to be pursued, there is nonetheless a lot of pursuing to be done in Millburn and Nicodemus’ vision for the “minimalist” and/or “meaningful” life, and therefore much work, much effort. As they go on to say, mirroring the initial “word of warning” in the first chapter, “none of this was easy”, because “it takes daily focus and commitment to constant improvement in all five areas of life.” How is this different, then, from society’s externally imposed and misery-inducing ideals of “success”, which supposedly put one on the endless impulsive pursuit of “more” instead of contentment with “less” or “enough”? Supposedly, it lies in the fact that Millburn and Nicodemus have rejected those ideals and are only proposing an universal frame for each and every person to individually come to their own ideal. This is indeed what “minimalism” appears to do here, as we have seen in the claim that while “minimalists” are all individually different, they all are looking

for “happiness” or a “meaningful life”, which is evidently taken to be describable in universal terms. Is then “minimalist” just another way of saying “universal” with regard to an ideal of meaningful life equally applicable to everyone? While being presented as the “essential” areas of life, the “five dimensions” are indeed so abstract that they actually encompass all of it, subjecting it to constant improvement with no leftovers. Both the link to the anti-consumerist rhetoric and the necessity of the practice of getting rid of “stuff” – with its bent towards the negative gesture of reducing and rejecting – suggest that there is more to “minimalism”, but indeed it may turn out to be only minimally more than that. As we have seen especially in the movie, the anti-consumerist rhetoric revolves around an (imposed) impulse to individually restrain, and the discarding of one’s possessions is depicted – though not explained – as one such form of restraint of oneself, of taking back control. Reduction, rejection and restraint seem to merge in “minimalism” as it is constructed in these texts. Despite the attenuations, such as the denial that there are any “rules” or “restrictions” in a “minimalist lifestyle”, necessity and restraint often surface in obvious ways in the book, most clearly – not surprisingly – at the end of the chapter on health: here Millburn and Nicodemus explicitly say that they “strongly believe in turning your *shoulds* in *musts*”, because “when you want to change a habit – be it diet, exercise, or anything else – this is the tipping point” wherein “something you put off becomes urgent, necessary, vital”, so that “change becomes a *must*” (Ch. 2, “The Musts of Health”). One *must* – not merely *should* – “eat a nutritional diet”, “exercise regularly” or “drastically reduce or eliminate consumption of harmful substances”; and if the reader is then “encouraged” to somehow create his or her own list, it is still a list of such “musts”, with the necessity of endless individual self-improvement at its core. Is this “minimalism” then?

2.1.1.2 – An (aesthetically) extreme lifestyle: Sasaki

The first impact with Fumio Sasaki’s *Goodbye Things* is quite different than that of either the movie or the book by Millburn and Nicodemus, as this time we are immediately offered – in a sort of prologue to the actual book – clear, blunt images of “minimalism” as involving minimized possessions, as also made explicit in the text. The prologue consists of a gallery of five “cases” of “minimalists” – all Japanese bloggers, like Sasaki – with pictures of their homes and things and brief observations or captions by Sasaki. Even before that, however, we find a few pictures highlighting Sasaki’s transition to

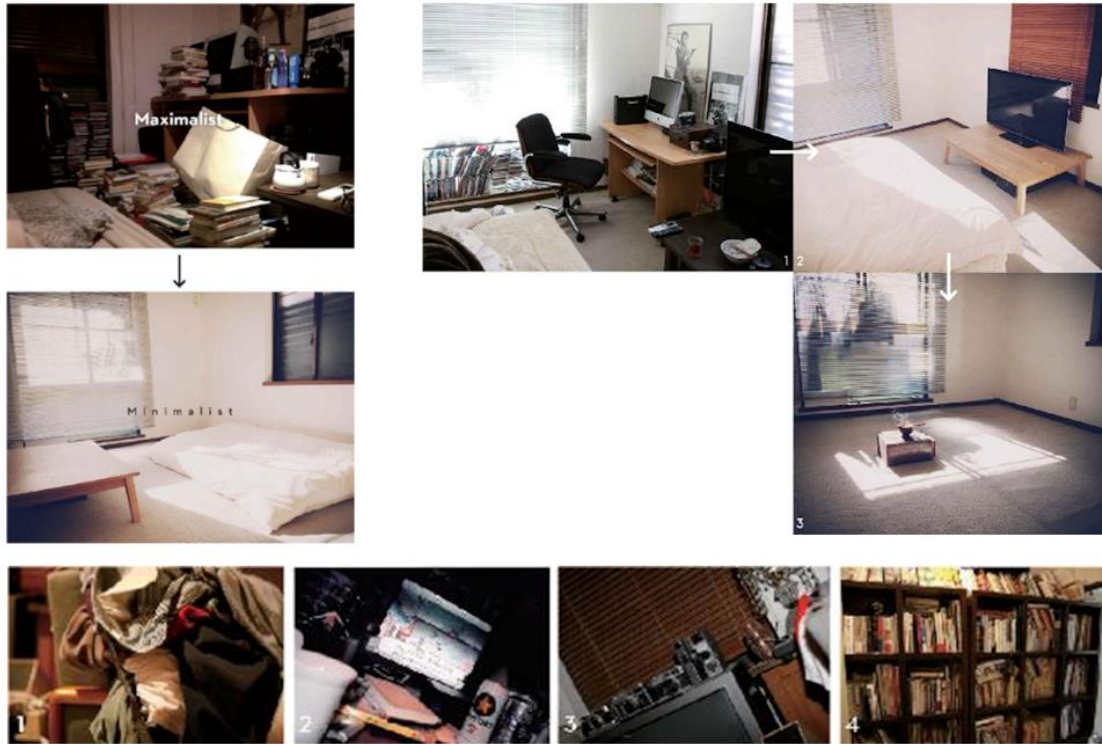


FIG. 7 – Pictures of Sasaki’s old “maximalism” and newly found “minimalism”, with a before/after shot (top-left), a three-steps transition (top-right), and highlights of his past home/life (bottom).

minimalism by contrasting his current “minimalist” home to its “maximalist” past (FIG. 7). As in the movie, the naïve rhetorical constructedness of these pictures is really transparent: not only are the “maximalist” pictures dark, at times crooked and in all likelihood staged (who would take a close-up picture of one’s used clothes messily thrown over a chair?), but also the “minimalist” ones are obviously edited and filtered for an aestheticized patina. Apparently, this patina comes into play when one gets to “simple living”, because the second step in the three-steps transition – after a mere tidying up that is nameless and filter-less – is identified as such by contrast to “minimalist living”, which Sasaki got to when he got rid of his mattress, table and TV, like “a Zen monk in training.” In this abrupt first encounter with minimalism, we find its “concept” described by Sasaki as “reducing your belongings to just the minimal essentials”, which of course makes it appear as an extreme form of simple living. The “life” in the lifestyle also comes up from the start, of course: by “saying goodbye to almost all [his] things”, Sasaki found out that he had “changed [himself] in the process”, so it must not be just a matter of a tidy room (though he writes that this has happened “to [his] surprise”, which would mean that he has not intentionally discarded his things to transform himself, as he

will instead advise the reader to do). In what positive ways Sasaki has changed thanks to minimalism is not stated yet, but some negative aspects of his past self are instead literally linked to the pictures of his past “messy maximalist” things: “I used to leave my clothes lying around”, “I drank beer at my messy table, munched on snacks, and played video games. I gained weight of course. Minimalism helped with that as well!”, “I used to enjoy buying antique cameras and strange lamps at online auctions”, and “I collected as many CDs and DVDs as I could, but in the end I didn’t really cherish any of them.” Overall, Sasaki’s life “had stopped moving forward”, and he has managed to restart it and transform it through a “minimalism” that is now unambiguously tied to reduced possessions.

As we get to the first case in the gallery, which – as the title puts it – is Sasaki’s own “model apartment for a minimalist” (or, as specified in the text, “for single minimalist living”), the aesthetic dimension of his minimalism quickly surfaces in the text as well as in further images. The latter depict Sasaki’s small studio through the same filter and patina, the all-white walls and parquet flooded with natural light; white is also his “airy mattress” and his bathroom – almost empty like the apartment as a whole –, and his sparse kitchenware displays the same neutral palette of his limited wardrobe, with nothing else in sight except for his glasses, his watch and his wallet and keys (FIG. 8). If it looks perhaps too bare and vacant compared to the aesthetic common sense called up in our initial search, Sasaki’s apartment surely appears to fit quite well into it. The captions’ text confirms that it is first and foremost homes and things that “minimalism” is about, in a clearly aesthetic key: Sasaki writes he is “trying to leave [the studio] in its clean state” as a “model apartment”, and points to the pleasing experience of waking up with “sunlight pour[ing] in through the windows”, or the ease and speed of cleaning; but he also observes that the kitchenware’s designs “are also minimalist”, that the few items of clothing he has “match in a simple style”, and that he is in fact “aiming to create [his] own uniform with a signature style like Steve Jobs had” (“Case 1”). The text is purely descriptive in that there is no explanation as to why Sasaki or anyone else would want to only use one kind of liquid soap for both body and hair, or keep one’s tableware “to a minimum” and so on, nor yet any exhortation to do so. This does not mean, of course, that it is not normative: this description is clearly the allusive presentation of an ideal, with brief pointers to qualities of lived experience (the freedom of this ideal, for



FIG. 8 – Pictures of Sasaki’s own “case” and “model” of minimalist home and life, with an aesthetic quality clearly in line with that of the aesthetic common sense tied to “minimalism.”

example: “I just put this wallet and my iPhone in my pocket and head out whenever and wherever the mood strikes”). Moreover, references to some branded products – the iPhone, the wallet from abrAsus and the “airy mattress” from Iris Ohyama (which is even described as “a must-have for Japanese minimalists”!) – already call for suspicion that the normativity of this “model” is going to be put in the service of some kind of promotion if not explicit advertisement. As far as the prologue is concerned, that suspicion appears to be warranted: not only is Sasaki’s gallery of “minimalists” entirely occupied by other bloggers (not unlike Millburn and Nicodemus’ book or movie), but it is also filled with further appreciative references to – and pictures of – branded products, one with the text’s overall aesthetic tone. Thus all sorts of clear contradictions ensue before we even get the proper text of the book, which – by contrast to the prologue – will contain no further images nor references to brands and products (with the main exception of Steve Job’s Apple). Should we therefore read the prologue as its own thing, as a sort of advertising section merely attached to the book? Apart from its paratextual placement, there is nothing in the text itself that singles out the prologue as an explicitly promotional text, as opposed to the gallery of exemplary “minimalists” it is presented as. The

contradictions nonetheless remain, and are highly instructive as to that ambiguous nature of minimalism as a lifestyle “beyond stuff” and yet also built “around stuff.” The darker, cooler but still equally white-walled and empty home of Hiji, “one of the first minimalist bloggers in Japan”, is for example lauded by Sasaki as a “simple Zen-like apartment [which] is home to some of the latest gadgets”, such as again that “airy mattress” that “became a necessity for minimalists after Hiji first mentioned it”, or the Microsoft Surface Pro, or “a Sony head-mounted viewer”; he may be “a hardcore minimalist who leave nothing lying around”, but Sasaki’s focus nonetheless falls on the things he does own (“Case 2”). Similarly, the emptiness of Hiji’s home is praised for affording he and his friends “plenty of room” to enjoy board games, but only his favourite one is named and displayed; yet are not actual board games as necessary to “enjoy board games” as the free room to play them? Moreover, it is not clear what the replacement of a TV with a head-mounted viewer has to do with reducing one’s things, yet it is presented as such by implicitly dividing replacement into subtracting and adding a thing as separate moments (“[Hiji] got rid of his TV but can still watch his favorite shows”).

The remaining “cases” show minimalism in couple-size or family-size (“Case 3”, “Case 4”) and finally in its digital nomad version (“Case 5”). In the former cases, the focus is even more resolutely and explicitly aesthetic; in fact, the couple and family homes are very similar to Sasaki’s with regard to white walls, wooden pavements and furniture, neutral palette and Japanese touches – such as tatami floors –, but they are larger and slightly more furnished and decorated. The couple, for example, is defined by Sasaki as a “minimalist couple living in comfort” and “maintaining a minimalist way of life”, but we are not told anything about that life: we only know that they “threw away a hundred and thirty kilograms’ worth of possessions” after moving to a smaller house, and that they “awakened to minimalism just as they were about to build a house”, but the meaning of this is very unclear since it is revealed that they are renting the space – a (branded) “handmade scroll” is shown and praised for both “add[ing] flavor” and “add[ing] a sense of ownership to their rental.” If things are massively reduced despite their personalizing addition of flavour and ownership, the only plausible reason – so far as the prologue’s text goes – seems to be an aesthetic criterion: gifts, for example, are “kept minimal” but “displayed with care” in the “fine balance [...] between being too sparse and too busy”, while the (branded) blue decorative hand towel and a simple wall

clock in the living room make its white wall “cute” while “creat[ing] a Zen garden-like sense of space.” The same also goes in the family case, where the minimalist – but still larger – home is praised as “clean throughout and an ideal home for relaxing” with a “beautiful and relaxing atmosphere”: explicit reference is made to “color minimalism” as only using “hues that are easy on the eyes”, that is, that same neutral palette we have actually seen in all other cases, and which again is shown both in the home interiors and items and in the casual wardrobe, which “consists of eight items in minimalist colors” (no shoes or other accessories are shown, nor jackets). Apart from a TV and a PC, no items nor other traces of life – even less family life, or the life of other family members beside the “minimalist supermom” – are visible; a completely empty “multi-function room” is shown and appreciatively captioned as the result of emptying out the family’s library, yet no function among that multitude is openly suggested. The walls, like the home at large, are back to the total absence of decoration, but again this does not seem to take anything from the aesthetic focus of Sasaki’s appraisal and of the life of these exemplary minimalists (of the closet in the bedroom – whose content is, however, not shown – Sasaki notes that everything is “so white that it’s not distracting even when opened up”). By contrast to all the others, the last case does not contain any picture of home interiors, as it is the case of a “minimalist adventurer who travels the globe with his trusted MacBook Pro and creates music wherever he goes”, owning only one backpack with “all he needs to live”, just like Colin Wright. Neither we are shown, however, pictures of that digital nomad life; in its stead, we find a list of (mostly branded) personal belongings of his – from a portable water filtration system to many digital gadgets such as the iPhone, a Sony digital camera and an Amazon Kindle –, again with pictures and appreciative captions. By the end of the prologue, which is pretty short in terms of its text, we have encountered about thirty branded products of all kinds, from survival to decorative items and electronic devices, oftentimes with enthusiastic appraisal (even as necessities: “The multifunctional iPhone is indispensable”³⁸). In four out of five cases,

³⁸ As alluded to earlier, Apple plays a role even in the main text of the book, because minimalists’ “fondness” for Apple products – which “always avoided excess” in design and buttons, wires, ports and so on – is taken to indicate the “importing back” of “minimalism” in Japanese culture, which was originally “minimalist” in Sasaki’s view (for such spurious unrelated things as the fact that people only owned a couple kimonos, the fact that “they packed light, their legs were strong, and they could walk wherever they needed to go”, or the fact that “homes were simple structures that could quickly be rebuilt”; Ch. 1, “The Japanese used to be minimalists”, “Minimalism imported back to Japan”). Steve Jobs’ involvement with Japanese Zen practice is read as a sign that he was a minimalist, because Japanese Zen “teaches minimalism”, and he is later deemed “one example of a perfect minimalist” by Sasaki, again juxtaposed in

things are highlighted against a more or less vacant background that in turn is heightened by them, while in the last case – there being no such home background (or rather, as in Wright’s case, too many of them) – things get to occupy the stage all by themselves. Either way, there is no sign yet of a minimalist lifestyle beyond stuff.

When we get to the book’s main text, the definitions of “minimalism” offered by Sasaki are indeed straightforward – especially by contrast with Millburn and Nicodemus – in tying it to the reduction of one’s possessions as its primary if not exclusive concern, and it is now explicitly a reduction to the extreme of a “minimum” before it is the negative move away from a (presupposed) “excess” in all of life: “I’ve defined minimalism as (1) reducing our necessary items to a minimum, and (2) doing away with excess so we can focus on the things that are truly important to us” (“Introduction”). The “minimal version of the message” is also offered by Sasaki as the idea that “there’s happiness in having less” and that “that’s why it’s time to say goodbye to all our extra things.” The two halves of Sasaki’s initial definition are quite significant, because they clearly point in two different and opposed directions with regard to minimalism’s “minimum”: on the one hand a more objective, perhaps universal minimum to be pursued; on the other, a more subjective and individual minimum whose correlative excess is an excess in just what is of no value to the individual himself or herself. Other iterations of the definition lean towards one or the other reading, so that in the next page minimalism has already become “a lifestyle in which you reduce your possessions to the absolute minimum you need”, while later on a minimalist is defined as “a person who knows what is truly essential for him or herself, who reduces the number of possessions that they have for the sake of things that are really important to them” (Ch. 1, “The definition of a minimalist”). This fundamental ambiguity and tension was already recognizable in Millburn and Nicodemus’ movie’s depiction of empty homes as “minimalist”, but their discourse was far more indirect about the necessity of discarding things, also by rhetorically rejecting minimalism’s commonsensical tie to the pursuit of a minimum; if the suggestion of a minimum and of the necessity of reduction was surely there, their rhetorical emphasis would clearly fit the more subjectivist reading. By contrast, Sasaki’s minimalism is

ahistorical fashion to past figures of the likes of Mother Teresa, Gandhi and even Diogenes (Ch. 1, “Who is the ultimate minimalist?”). Here the indeterminacy of “minimalism” is again evident, with a nonchalant mixture of product design from “the biggest company in the world” and simple living’s appeal to the contented scarcity of the past, conflating without hesitation the richest and poorest people in history. This indeterminacy, of course, is precisely what we are trying to understand better in the minimalist discourse.

more openly an (aesthetically) extreme lifestyle which demands massive reduction in moving towards an objective minimum: in the very first words of the first chapter, he points out that “everyone started out a minimalist” since “there isn’t a single person who was born in this world holding some material possession in their hands” (Ch. 1, “Everyone started out as a minimalist”). Right after this quite literal image of a bare minimum, the paragraph goes on to swiftly encapsulate in three sentences the three rhetorical components – two anti-consumerist ones and a more specifically “minimalist” one – that we have seen earlier: the anti-aesthetic rhetoric against things as status symbols (“Our worth is not the sum of our belongings”), the anti-materialist rhetoric against acquisition of new things as the way to become happy (“Possessions can make us happy only for brief periods”), and finally the distinct anti-materialist rhetoric against already owned things as not only failing to generate happiness but even actively diminishing or obstructing it (“Unnecessary material objects suck up our time, our energy, and our freedom”). Sasaki is more explicit in foregrounding the latter component, while the anti-consumerist ones initially appear to be subordinate to it, insofar as the problem with them is the very excess of things they lead to (“With our desire to have more, we find ourselves spending more and more time and energy to manage and maintain everything we have”). In other words, there is no room for doubt, here, that minimalism involves and requires reduction of what one already owns.

Despite this much more straightforward endorsement of discarding things, the concrete ways in which things supposedly diminish and obstruct happiness are not explained as straightforwardly. In support of that idea, Sasaki rather appeals to the reader’s imagination, claiming that “anyone can imagine the invigorating feeling that comes with de-cluttering and minimizing” even before putting it into practice, through the experience of “something like it” in one’s life. To illustrate this, Sasaki chooses the experience of “going away on a trip” and the “sense of freedom” it affords, outlining an opposition between a “minimalist state” and a “maximalist state”:

It’s time to go. You give up, get up, lock the door behind you, and start rolling your suitcase along the pavement – with a strange sense of freedom. You think then that yes, you can manage to live for a while with this one suitcase. Maybe you’ve forgotten to bring something along, but hey, you can always get whatever you need wherever you’re going. You arrive at your destination and lie down on the freshly made bed – or the tatami mat if it happens to be a Japanese-style inn. It feels good. The room is clean and uncluttered. You aren’t surrounded by all the things that usually distract you, the stuff that takes up so much of your attention. That’s why travel accommodations often feel so comfortable. You set down your bag and step out for a walk around the neighborhood. You feel light on your feet, like you could keep walking forever. You have the freedom to go wherever you want. Time is on your side, and you don’t have the usual chores or work responsi-

bilities weighing you down. This is a minimalist state, and most of us have experienced it at one time or another. The reverse is true, too, however.

Imagine your return flight. Though your belongings were packed neatly in your suitcase before you started your trip, everything has now been squeezed inside in a mess. The souvenirs you bought don't fit in your suitcase, so you're also carrying a couple of big paper bags. The admission tickets and receipts from the tourist sites you visited – you're going to sort through those later, right? That's why they're still stuffed in your pockets. You're standing in the security line and the time has come to pull out your boarding pass. Uh-oh, where have you put it? You start looking everywhere but you can't seem to find it. You're getting closer to the head of the line and your frustration mounts. You can sense the icy glares of the other people who are standing in the long line behind you, like your back is being pierced by pins and needles. This is a maximalist state. These stressful situations tend to happen when you're saddled with more objects than you can handle. You aren't able to separate out what's really important.

Rather than demonstrating how exactly it is that “stuff” distracts and takes up attention, Sasaki just asserts that this is so through the implicit claim that the absence of stuff is the reason why travelling is freeing or comfortable (at least so far as you travel to places where “you can always get whatever you need” but have left home, and can of course afford to buy it ad hoc). That, however, seems very reductive to say the least, and in fact clearly relies on the conflating of the “usual chores” – presumably household maintenance – with “work responsibilities”, as if they had equal weight in making it so that within everyday life most people are not free, or do not feel free, to go out for a walk whenever they wish. Yet even that, if made explicit, would be a different claim than the implicit one that has things as such actively holding one back, which is conveyed again – as in the prologue – by way of aesthetic reference to the “freshly made bed” in a “clean and uncluttered” comfortable room (that is such through other people's chores, of course). As for the “maximalist state”, the negative contribution of “stuff” to “stressful situations” is hardly made any clearer by the example, because on the contrary it is evident that it is the practically stressful situation itself that makes excess stuff problematic, just like the overall situation of travelling: it is quite understandable that one might want to carry around as few things as possible in a practical situation wherein doing so is necessary, but that is pretty much the opposite of what keeping them in one's house calls for. What would the equivalent limitations be in the latter case, making “the things that were supposed to help us end up ruling us” or – with a quote from *Fight Club* – making “the things you own end up owning you”? As these ascriptions of negative, externally imposing agency to inanimate things betray, no answer is provided, because Sasaki's example is meant to illustrate an universal and thus decontextualized power of things as such over people's selves or lives, like the one they appear to have as objects of impulsive desire in the more anti-consumerist sort of anti-materialism. That it is not just about practical limitations, after all, seems to be required by Sasaki's claim that

“minimalism” can transform one’s whole life, as is made explicit by his expansion of the lifestyle’s benefits beyond mere “superficial benefits like the pleasure of a tidy room or the simple ease of cleaning”, two candidates – one more aesthetic and the other more practical – for a relevant context to the limitations posed by one’s stuff at home; minimalism must rather lead to a “more fundamental shift”, an “exercise in thinking about true happiness” and not just an “exercise in tidying up” (“Introduction”). While better distinguishable in the text, ultimately the three rhetorical components are meshed together as in Millburn and Nicodemus’ book and movie: the unfulfilled consumerist promise of happiness through acquiring stuff is turned into the minimalist promise of happiness by (first and foremost) getting rid of it, because “everyone wants to be happy” – we are just “lost when it comes to true happiness.”

Sasaki’s explicit aim thus still remains that of “think[ing] about the ways that ordinary people like you and me can find the real pleasures in life”; but while its rhetoric underpinnings are quite the same, the proposal is different from Millburn and Nicodemus’, because no life advice is actually given in the book beyond discarding one’s things. In fact, Sasaki presents his transition to minimalism more as a matter of self-acceptance than of self-improvement, counting himself as one of “those whose lives spiral out of control because of the effects of their material belongings” rather than other people “who are filthy rich but have remained unhappy no matter how many things they accumulated” (a description that would fit Millburn and Nicodemus; Ch. 1, “Why I became a minimalist”). Already in the introduction, he had summarized his past life and admitted – replying to the plausible objection that all he did was throwing things away – that he has not “accomplished much yet”, that “there’s nothing that [he] can really be proud of”; all he is certain of is that “by having fewer things around” he has begun “feeling happier each day”, without any other clear change or improvement in his life: just by discarding things, he has already become “a new person” (“Introduction”). The minimalist “new person” that Sasaki has become is a person that is now “perfectly happy” with himself as he already is, even if not successful by others’ standards: “Some of you may think that I’m a loser: an unmarried adult with not much money to speak of. The old me would have been way too embarrassed to admit all this. I was filled with useless pride. But I honestly don’t care about things like that anymore. The reason is very simple: I’m perfectly happy just as I am.” As usual, however, how the transfor-

mation is achieved simply by discarding one's possessions is not explained, but the text rather falls back on the broader anti-consumerist rhetoric to lend it appeal and plausibility. The first thing Sasaki recollects about his "maximalist" days is that he "used to buy a lot of things, believing that all those possessions would increase [his] self-worth and lead to a happier life", and the reason why he – as a "natural hoarder" – "loved collecting a lot of useless stuff" and "couldn't throw anything away" is that he thought things made him an "interesting person." He was "always comparing [himself] with other people who had more or better things" and was "miserable" for that, but knowing not how to get better he "couldn't focus on anything" and he "was always wasting time" or finding "escape" in alcohol, romantic affairs with women he "didn't treat fairly", watching TV, playing games on the smartphone and so on. Just like his life, his room was "horribly messy" and filled with unread books, unworn clothes once his favourite, items from hobbies he had gotten tired of, because "there was actually never anything [he] wanted to do at home." The passion for his job was replaced by "the mind-set that in the end, it's all about the money", and he would envy the glamorous "posh condo" with "glitzy entrance and stylish Scandinavian furniture and tableware" of a college friend, or his success at work for a big company, his good salary, his marriage with a "gorgeous girlfriend" whom he already had a "beautiful baby" with, "all dressed up in fashionable baby wear." Somehow, discarding things has put an end to all of this and led Sasaki to "true happiness", as opposed to that consumerist, aestheticized and materialist happiness he chased in his old days (and never reached in conventional terms, by contrast to Millburn and Nicodemus).

Getting rid of things is necessary, but nothing else is. No subsequent work on oneself seems to be needed here, because discarding possessions is again and again reaffirmed as indeed all Sasaki has done to transform himself and his life, and it is the only practical advice in the book. The fusion and confusion of the anti-consumerist rhetoric and the minimalist one is evident in a description of the "vicious circle of self-loathing" in which he was stuck, and from which he "started to break out" only "by getting rid of [his] things":

As my belongings started to take up more and more room, I began to be overwhelmed by them, spending all my energy on my objects while still hating myself for not being able to make good use of them all. Yet no matter how much I accumulated, my attention was still focused on the things I didn't have. I became jealous of other people. Even then, I couldn't throw anything away, and so I was stuck going around and around in a vicious circle of self-loathing. But by getting rid of my things, I've finally started to break out of that situation. If you're anything like I was – dis-

satisfied with your life, insecure, unhappy – try reducing your belongings. You'll start to change. Unhappiness isn't just the result of genetics or past trauma or career trouble. I think that some of our unhappiness is simply due to the burden of all our things. (Ch. 1, "Why I became a minimalist")

These words exhibit the back-and-forth between the minimalist worry that one's already owned belongings are sapping all of one's "energy" and the anti-consumerist worry that it is instead a pursuit of ever new possessions that monopolizes one's "attention"; which, as already noted, are neither the same nor are linked in any clear way by the texts we have examined – in fact they are contradictory, especially insofar as each in turn is presented in an extreme, totalizing manner (if one were entirely absorbed by one's objects of desire, there would be no energy and attention to devote to the already present objects one owns, and vice versa). As in Millburn and Nicodemus' case, the anti-consumerist rhetoric serves the purpose of setting up a negative way of life to be presumably discarded along with one's things, even though it is not clear how this would happen exactly. It is crucial in making "minimalism" a lifestyle instead of just a style, an exercise in happiness instead of just in tidying up one's home: the "burden of all our things" is turned into a source of unhappiness, and tackling it can thus be an universally valid advice to offer to anyone who is "dissatisfied with [one's] life, insecure, unhappy" (that is, almost anyone at all). Yet the presence of things already works as a source of unhappiness of a different kind, one that has to do with the hoarder's attachment to things, rather than the consumerist's pursuit of them. Why did Sasaki hate himself for not managing to use all he had? And why did his inability to throw things away trouble him so much? In the same paragraph he had just recalled how he could "come up with justifications for all of [his possessions]" in his "palace of clutter", such as wanting to take and keep many pictures as memories, holding on to books as "part of [him]", sharing his favourite movies and music with friends, not wanting to waste things that had been expensive by discarding them and so on. But why would these be invalid justifications? At one point, Sasaki explicitly takes up the case of his past bookshelf as an example of how he tied his own "self-worth" to the display of certain material things, in this case "books that looked challenging" or "masterpieces of the twentieth century" that he had never finished reading and that he knew he was never going to read: they were only there to "communicate one message" – that he had read a lot of books, that he had "diverse interests", that he was "very inquisitive" and that "inside" he was "filled with all this incredible knowledge" despite looking like a "ordinary guy" (Ch. 2, "I be-

lieved that my bookshelves were a showcase of who I was”). The same is said to be true for all sorts of stuff, “CDs and DVDs”, “antique pieces”, “stylish photographs” on the walls, even his “tableware”; everything that he had “hardly ever used” was something he must have held onto just for show. This is the anti-aesthetic rhetoric again, supplying a negative underlying motivation for attachment to things, just as it did for the pursuit of more stuff: in one stroke, all “justifications” are swept aside as equally false or invalid compared to this motivation – the seeking of social status and/or self-worth through material things and their aesthetic exhibition. In this way, a suspicion is again cast on any and every possession as such, especially insofar as they are not presently and regularly used. That things may also be – perhaps mostly are – held onto by sheer inertia, absent any particular problem with doing so, is not even an option for Sasaki, because he already assumes from the start that all things owned must be called into question and be justified (even though he implicitly rejects all justifications as covering the actual motives of seeking happiness and self-worth in acquisition and exhibition of stuff). It is thus quite telling and ironic that part of Sasaki’s “cycle of self-loathing” had to do with his inability and unwillingness to discard things, as that is what the minimalist discourse demands: does that mean that the reader also must begin loathing himself or herself for things owned but left unused or underused, dismissing all justifications for keeping them? That does seem to be the case, and it does seem to keep “self-worth” tied to things and their exhibition, though in the negative fashion of lack of them. After all, as we have seen, the book starts off with a gallery of aestheticized pictures of Sasaki’s minimalist home, and he also admits to having written this book in part “to prove to [him]self that there’s some kind of value to [his] existence” (in a book which is however aimed at an audience and thus nonetheless hands on this task to the reader as well, like Millburn’s insistence that he must be able to justify his every possession only to himself, not others; Ch. 2, “Our self-worth drives our behaviour”). What if the lamented “burden of things” is partly constituted by the burden of the minimalist discourse about them, along with the broader anti-consumerist rhetoric it appeals to?

As soon as one notices, as we have done, that the minimalist and anti-consumerist claims do not coincide nor unequivocally support each other, Sasaki’s minimalist discourse seems to present a chicken-and-egg problem with regard to their relation. At times, as seen earlier, Sasaki insists that it is things as such that weigh on one’s

life and lead to unhappiness (or hold back from happiness), in which case the problem with the consumerist, materialist and aesthetic pursuit of stuff is that it adds on the inherent weight of one's already owned possessions. At other times, however, the weight appears to rather come from that consumerist life as such, as itself the problem that must somehow be solved by way of discarding one's things. If in the former case the minimalist rhetorical component is of course primary, in the latter case it is strictly speaking secondary, because there might be other and better ways to stop leading a consumerist life – starting from consuming or purchasing less new things – than discarding one's present possessions, especially as it is not clear how doing so would even help with that (notwithstanding the effort it requires and its apparent contribution to the “circle of self-loathing”, together with its clear compatibility with material and aesthetic exhibition of oneself and one's home, things or even branded products in the prologue). Still, since no doubt is entertained about the efficacy of the minimalist discarding of things in putting an end to the consumerist life, and since the minimalist rhetoric is mixed up with the anti-consumerist one anyway, “minimalism” comes out positively affirmed and foregrounded in both cases. But if we ask ourselves why no doubt is entertained, the matryoshka and the chicken-and-egg problem it poses is revealed: no doubt is entertained about the efficacy of discarding things in overcoming consumerist life because things are deemed to be inherently weighing on one's self and life; and yet this inherent weight of things to which one is attached is also in its turn explained away largely as the weight of that materialist, aestheticized life of consumerism. The reason why this knot cannot be untied, of course, lies in the fact that when all is said and done, the necessity of discarding things as the distinguishing trait of “minimalism” as a lifestyle cannot be renounced, which is what untying the knot risks doing. If the consumerist life is the central problem, the minimalist discarding of things gets decentred and may not exactly appear as the most obvious and promising solution for that; thus, in order to bridge the gap, things themselves must be centred as inherently problematic, and discarding them as the solution to this problem, and secondarily to that of the consumerist life; finally, however, this problematization of things as an inherent weight is rhetorically achieved by ultimately referring it back to consumerist life, making it not inherent at all and bringing us back to the start. The same result is obtained if one takes the inherent weight of things as the starting point, in which case what is at stake is not the practice of discarding things – that would be the obvious solution – but its constituting a

“minimalist lifestyle” beyond any immediate benefit: if such a lifestyle must not be reduced to practical benefits like having less to clean, or aesthetic ones like living in a tidier home (with or without a certain style), the anti-consumerist rhetoric has to be invoked in order to posit a negative way of life for the minimalist lifestyle to define itself against. In other words, minimalist discarding seems defensible as efficacious only insofar as things owned constitute as such a crucial part of the problem, but minimalist living seems defensible as desirable only insofar as they do not, that is, only insofar as their apparent problem is reduced to the real problem of a consumerist, materialist and aestheticized lifestyle (for which in turn minimalist discarding does not appear efficacious in any obvious way). One might then give up the practice of discarding things, but that would be no less a threat to a minimalist lifestyle as indeed a specifically “minimalist” alternative to consumerism. Alternatively, the case should be actually made for living with a minimum of things without resorting to anti-consumerism, at the risk of making a minimalist lifestyle banal or superficial as far as a “lifestyle” goes. What Sasaki’s book does, instead, is mixing together or alternating minimalist and anti-consumerist rhetoric to insist on both discarding things and the lifestyle around it as necessary, even while at bottom left unexplained: discarding things is inexplicably efficacious in transforming one’s whole life, and living with a minimum of things is inexplicably desirable as itself sign of this entirely transformed life. One inexplicable claim appears to explain the other and vice versa. The necessity of discarding possessions is at any rate always returned to, maintained and foregrounded as the key to everything. At the end of the second chapter, which as mentioned explains both consumerist accumulation of stuff and maximalist attachment to it as a misguided pursuit of “self-worth” by displaying things, Sasaki concludes that “tools become our masters”, that “things eventually turn on us” and that “we become slaves to our belongings, forced to spend time and energy caring for them”; he then recognizes for a moment the “these objects themselves have no power”, that in fact “we’re the ones who have raised their status to become our equals or even greater”, that “they don’t symbolize us and they aren’t our masters”, yet the conclusion remains that we should consider “hanging on to just the things that we really need”, “say[ing] goodbye to all those things that have been holding [us] back” (Ch. 2, “When our tools become our masters). The “burden of things” is turned into a symptom of consumerist life and the individual’s own subjective ascription of power to

them, yet the solution is again discarding those things as if they had indeed power over us.

The two sides to Sasaki's definition of "minimalism" confirm the ambiguity, as it refers both to an objective "absolute minimum" and to a subjective "essential for oneself": the former pushes it towards a bare minimum of basic needs, aligning well with the minimalist rhetoric of things having power over us; the latter pushes towards a vague minimum of individual needs, aligned instead with the anti-consumerist rhetoric – as appropriated and inflected by the minimalist one – of things having that power only insofar as they are held onto because of materialist and aesthetic attachment. As the inclusion of both Steve Jobs and Diogenes as "minimalists" already shows, Sasaki is as resolute as Millburn and Nicodemus in insisting at times that "there are no set rules" for counting as a "minimalist" or not: "It's not like you're disqualified if you own a TV or have more than a hundred possessions, or that you would then become a minimalist if you just got rid of those items. You're not even necessarily a minimalist just because everything you own can be stuffed into a single suitcase" (Ch. 2, "The definition of a minimalist"). Not surprisingly, the proposed definition of "minimalism" at this point is of the subjective type and explicitly anti-aesthetic (even though the other side is also evoked through reference to the "necessary"): "My feeling is that minimalists are people who know what's truly necessary for them versus what they may want for the sake of appearance, and they're not afraid to cut down on everything in the second category." Again unsurprisingly, this disclaimer that there is no "single correct answer to the question of what makes a person a minimalist" is complemented with the claim that minimalism – that is, "reducing the number of your possessions" (that is out of the question) – is not "a goal unto itself", but is rather "a method for individuals to find the things that are genuinely important to them": a method that is then generalized into the "reduc[tion of] the things that aren't essential so we can appreciate the things that really are precious to us", applicable to "every facet of our lives" beyond "objects" (Ch. 2, "Minimalism is not a goal"). It is curious, however, that Sasaki – like Millburn and Nicodemus in the movie – appears to possess almost nothing at all (as do the other minimalist bloggers in the prologue): is there nothing "genuinely important" to him, nothing he appreciates? Moreover, the references to "minimalism" as more extreme than "simple living", along with the more objective appeals to the "absolute minimum", remain just as much a part

of the book's rhetoric, much more so – or more explicitly – than in the case of Millburn and Nicodemus' book or movie. If we add to this the obvious aestheticization behind this construction of the lifestyle as extreme, the reversal is complete: here “minimalism” does seem to be an (aesthetically) extreme lifestyle which pursues an objective minimum of things in one's home not as merely a tool for self-improvement, a means to the separate end of discovering or transforming oneself, but rather as indeed a “goal unto itself” – an inherent, integral feature of an ideal. Whether this minimalist ideal is just “for show” or “for the sake of appearances” is a question we will have to ask later, but it clearly is aesthetic in our terms, and it would be hard to argue that the gallery of cases in the prologue is loftily unconcerned with appearances; on the contrary, it is replete with aesthetic appreciations. The aesthetic is implicit as a criterion in Sasaki's advice to discard anything “you can't discuss with passion”, as “an item chosen with passion represents perfection to us” and will thus offer enduring satisfaction: “We're bound to be less satisfied with all those other things we've unconsciously accumulated. I think our lives are better when our belongings stir our passions. As long as we stick to owning things that we really love, we aren't likely to want more” (Ch. 3, §33). Later on, when Sasaki explains minimalism's benefit of wasting less time shopping thanks to clearer criteria, “which narrow down your choices so you can arrive at quick decisions” (even beyond shopping), it is first and foremost aesthetic criteria that Sasaki lists as his own: “a minimalist type of shape”, ease of cleaning, a colour which “isn't too loud”, a “simple structure”, “lightweight and compact” – only durability and multi-functionality do not seem concerned with appearances (Ch. 4, “Less time spent shopping”). All in all, the two sides of Sasaki's definition of “minimalism” appear to correspond to the minimalist rhetoric of things owned as actively causing unhappiness, which entails they must be discarded, and the anti-consumerist rhetoric of things pursued as not leading to happiness, which on its own would not seem to entail a need to reduce one's possessions: on the one hand, references to the extreme of an absolute minimum – together with its aesthetic rendition – underpin the necessity of discarding things as the core of a minimalist lifestyle; on the other hand, reference to the essential for oneself underpins the appeal of the minimalist lifestyle as indeed a lifestyle (with the discarding of things as its supposedly efficacious “tool”).

As we have noted, compared to Millburn and Nicodemus' construction of "minimalism", the emphasis in Sasaki's is much more squarely and explicitly on the core practice of discarding things; accordingly, Sasaki also insists more on an absolute minimum and on the aesthetic ideal based on it. If Millburn and Nicodemus jumped swiftly – at least in the book – from the lifestyle around stuff to the lifestyle beyond it, directly described and prescribed without any more reference to the discarding of things, Sasaki's (aesthetically) extreme lifestyle rather stays with the former: if his minimalist lifestyle goes beyond stuff, it mostly does so as a by-product of discarding things and living with a minimum of them. However, even if Sasaki does not straightforwardly offer life advice beyond tips on discarding things, he does clearly take for granted and implicitly affirm certain ways of living as better than others, just like Millburn and Nicodemus still relied on discarding things as the frame for their "minimalist" life advice. We have already seen some hints of this from the very start, but there are two consecutive sections of the book in which he describes his life before and after "becoming a minimalist", which might just as well be about someone's life before and after applying Millburn's and Nicodemus life advice:

Back when I used to have a lot of possessions, a typical day in my life used to go like this: I'd come home from work, haphazardly take off my clothes, and leave them lying around wherever I happened to be. Then I'd take a shower, always noticing the crack in the bathroom sink that needed to be repaired. I'd sit in front of the TV to catch up on the shows I'd taped or maybe watch one of the movies I'd rented, and crack open a can of beer. Wine was my drink of choice for later in the evening [...] I wanted to forget about how miserable I was, if only for a brief moment. I'd get up the next morning feeling cranky and reluctant to get out of bed. I would hit the snooze button on my alarm clock every ten minutes. [...] Sitting on the toilet, I'd pinch the fat around my abdomen as I took care of business. Then I'd open the clothes dryer and pull out the crumpled Uniqlo shirt I threw in there last night, put it on with a quick glance at the clothes that had yet to be washed, and step out the door. [...] I'd leave the office at the end of the day, not because I had finished everything that I was supposed to finish but simply because it was time to go home. [...] Back in my preminimalist days, I was full of excuses. I couldn't get up in the morning because I'd been working late. I'm fat because it's in my genes. I could get right down to work if I had a better living environment. There's no room to put anything away in my home, though, so how can I help it if it happens to be a mess? I only rent it – it isn't like I own it – so what's the use in trying to clean it up? [...] The excuses were endless, the thoughts running through my mind all negative. I was stuck in that mind-set and yet because of my useless sense of pride, I was too afraid of failing to take any action to change things. (Ch. 1, "A day in my life before I became a minimalist")

Since I minimized my possessions, a drastic change has occurred in my daily life. I come home from work and take a bath. I always leave the tub sparkling clean. I finish my bath and change into a favorite outfit for relaxing at home. Since I got rid of my TV, I read a book or write instead. I no longer drink alone. I go to bed after taking my time doing some stretching exercises, using the space that used to be filled with all my stuff. I now get up as the sun rises, and I no longer have to rely on my alarm clock. With my material objects gone, the shining rays of the morning sun are reflected against the white wallpaper and brighten up the apartment. The mere act of getting up in the morning, which had been a tough thing for me to do in the past, has now become a pleasant routine. I put away my futon pad. I take time to enjoy my breakfast and savor the espresso I make on my Macchinetta, always cleaning up the breakfast dishes right after my meal. I sit down and meditate to help clear my mind. I vacuum my apartment every day. I do the laundry if the weather is nice. I put on clothes that have been neatly folded and leave the apartment feeling good. I now enjoy taking the same route to work every day – it allows me to appreciate the changes of the four

seasons. I can't believe how my life has changed. I got rid of my possessions, and I'm now truly happy. (Ch. 1, "A day in my life as a minimalist")

The old Sasaki was messy, whiny, undisciplined, unproductive, negative, fat, addicted to alcohol as well as to media, and of course miserable; the new, "minimalist" Sasaki, by contrast, is always tidy and clean, relaxed, clear-minded, healthily exercising and doing meditation, aesthetically savouring books, sunlight or coffee – or creating by writing – instead of consuming other (bad) media such as TV programs, and routinely enjoying every day in a positive way. At every turn, this transformation is exclusively attributed to having got things down to a minimum – there is no mention of other "actions to change things" he implemented –, and its aesthetic dimension is obvious (there is also again the reference to waking up to "the shining rays of the morning sun", as in the prologue's edited and light-inundated pictures of Sasaki's home). However, one may wonder whether it is possible to be a "minimalist" and yet be any of those things Sasaki was: if one discards his or her possessions but is still fat, still likes alcohol and TV, and still does not like to clean, tidy up or organize, will it then be necessary for him or her to strive for these things? Sasaki could no doubt reply that "there are no set rules" for what counts as "minimalist" under this respect too, but it would again be curious that he describes the minimalist life in this way, just like it is curious that he depicts it as owning little more than nothing (and in line with a certain aesthetic common sense). It is also curious that his description and depiction align and overlap so well, of course, as if indeed parts of a single ideal.

The lifestyle beyond stuff that one gets to by discarding stuff is again described by Sasaki in the fourth chapter, wherein he lists the ways in which he has changed: he has more time, enjoys life more, has more freedom, no longer compares himself with others, stopped worrying about how others see him, is more engaged with the world around him, can concentrate better (on being himself), saves money and cares more about the environment, he is healthier, safer, has deeper relationships and savours the present moment, he feels true gratitude and feels happy. We cannot follow him into his descriptions of all these remarkable benefits of minimalism, but neither do we need to, as overall we would be faced with the same rhetorical fluctuations again and again: on the one hand there is a conflation of the specifically minimalist rhetoric – centred on discarding things to live with a minimum – with a distinct anti-consumerist rhetoric, and on the other hand an overlapping conflation of both with regard to a rhetoric of individ-

ualist self-improvement; these three are constantly confused. For example, the section on time starts with – and focuses on – a consumerist pursuit of new things as an illustration of “how possessions take your time”, and it does so with the usual anti-materialist and anti-aesthetic rhetoric: to Sasaki, “it’s a shame to waste [life] because of some material objects” that we do not “need” but merely “want”, as our wanting them is only the effect of the media “bombardment” we are hit by every day; but “when we practice minimalism, we’ll spend less time being distracted by the media or by advertisements because we become aware that we already have everything we need”, and “we can easily ignore most of these messages that cry out to us” (Ch. 4, “I have more time”). However, even if “minimalism is built around the idea that there’s nothing that you’re lacking” – as it does assume by default that everyone’s needs are already met from the start (rightly or not) –, that is only part of the story, as what is specifically “minimalist” is the idea that there is in fact an excess of things to get rid of, under which one’s basic and/or “essential” needs are somehow buried and waiting: the latter idea is what should be justified in terms of saved time. Similarly, it is not clear what connection there is between discarding things and needing less time doing shopping: Sasaki here mentions his now clearer criteria for what to buy among the innumerable options on offer, and adds that one may save time by “continu[ing] to buy the same product you like” or “repairing it as needed” without “glancing at other new models”, but these hardly look like by-products of reducing one’s possessions, unless those aesthetic criteria are indeed part and parcel of a minimalist lifestyle (though even then they do not seem at all sufficient to bypass the need for reflection when choosing a product). The points that are actually related to reduced possessions have to do with less time spent on housework, on looking for things and on moving to another home. Beside the fact that these all presuppose that one has indeed discarded quite a lot, the first two are also ambiguous: it is evidently a feature of the minimalist aesthetic itself – as presented in the prologue – that one’s home be perfectly tidy and clean and organized, so it can be argued that it is minimalism itself which demands that much time be spent on housework and being “aware of every single one of [one’s] possessions” by always storing them “in the same location.” Contradictions abound: no time is wasted on looking for what that one does not own to begin with, but if one does need that item, then it will be necessary to go outside and buy or borrow it, which will take time; similarly, saving time cannot really be the reason to repair one’s old things instead of buying new ones, as repairing things is usually (at

least) equally time-expensive. Since moving to a new place is not a frequent, recurrent task, all in all the case for reduced possessions saving time seems very weak. The section, however, goes back to the anti-consumerist rhetoric with the anti-materialist claim that it is not things but “quality time” – the “luxury of time” for relaxation – that leads to happiness, which again is used to support the practice of discarding things:

Whether we're rich or poor, we all get twenty-four hours in a day. Finding time to relax is the ultimate luxury. [...] But that doesn't mean you need to take a vacation to a tropical island and lie on a beach chair under an umbrella. There actually isn't much emotional difference between the everyday happiness within your grasp right now and the happiness you'll find at that beach. [...] Happiness is actually all around us. We just need time to find it. By reducing the number of material possessions you have, you can take back the time that your belongings have been stealing from you. That time is precious. It's a shame to waste away what is allocated equally to all of us – only twenty-four hours a day – on material belongings. Instead, devote that time to the pursuit of everyday happiness.

Everyone has the same abstract and quantified amount of time, and “happiness is actually all around us” regardless of conditions or situations, yet time is a “luxury” that must be “found” and devoted to “the pursuit of everyday happiness.” Here the effect of the minimalist rhetoric, backed up by the anti-materialist one, is evident: despite the unclear and most likely negligible impact of possessions on one's free time, they are blamed for “stealing” that time while no mention is even made of work and its conditions, which are all but the same for the rich and the poor; a quite literal case of reification. In fact, in the section about the ways in which minimalism provides “freedom”, Sasaki has to advocate for calculating and lowering one's “minimum living costs” – that is, one's living standards – in order to find a job that is not “terrible” and in which one does not “work oneself to death”, again as part of what “minimalism” is (and why it can be “liberating”): through anti-aesthetic rhetoric, Sasaki claims that once “needless pride” in comparing to others is gone, there is no need for refusing to take a certain job, for not wanting to look poor or for desiring a beautiful home (Ch. 4, “I have more freedom”). This is again eventually associated to “having less” with no explanation, even though it actually demonstrates how free time is indeed a luxury that mostly depends on working conditions.

To the extent that discarding one's things fails to deliver the many wide-ranging benefits associated to it, which go to make up “minimalism” as a lifestyle beyond stuff, one will either have to give up on those benefits or work to get them through other means. Sasaki's approach differs from Millburn and Nicodemus' mainly in that he does not directly offer, for the most part, the alternative means in the form of life advice – to

the point of almost making reduction of things disappear –, but rather presents them as automatic and thus effortless beneficial impacts of discarding things; which he can do because of the confusion between “minimalism” and anti-consumerism and/or individualist self-improvement. The section on “freedom” presents the benefit of owning less as again a freedom “to move whenever the mood strikes” (significantly, the exact same expression used in the prologue for Sasaki’s home and everyday life), as well as “to choose a new lifestyle” and live in small or tiny houses. That reference is made to lower rent or mortgages for the latter benefit suggests that it is actually part of the lowering of one’s standards of living which follows it, rather than a benefit in its own right (though Sasaki goes so far as to even write that “it would be lovely to live in a place of about twelve square meters”). As for the freedom to move, that is again not necessarily an everyday issue for most people, and it is also assumed that moving is merely a matter of individuals literally moving their personal property from one place to the next, without any relationship of any kind having a hold on them, only stuff (just like with work above). Again a weak case, and again the section returns to the anti-consumerist rhetoric by claiming that minimalism liberates from one’s “personas” and from “greed”, an anti-aesthetic and anti-materialist claim respectively. Here things loved “start to feel like they’re a part of you” and then “assemble themselves into a persona that you have to maintain”, so that discarding them is instead taken to entail freeing oneself “from that particular consciousness”; but it is far from clear why it should have been necessary – or effective at all – for Sasaki to throw away all his DVDs in order to stop “showing off” as “film enthusiast” when talking to others. In the same way, the necessity and efficacy of discarding one’s things in order to become invulnerable to all “materialist messages” – ads, celebrities, “fancy windows display” and so on – as if “none of it has anything to do with you” is asserted but left unexplained, as we have already noted before. Reference to “particularity” in both cases are quite telling: Sasaki is not any “particular consciousness” and “there’s nothing in particular [he] really want[s]”, as his (particularly) empty home had already suggested to us. Yet this comes as a “fantastic feeling” to him. It is exactly this resigned yet “happy” tone that sets rhetorically apart Sasaki’s “minimalism” from Millburn and Nicodemus’: the minimalist duo openly endorsed and emphasized the aspirational pursuit of endless individualist self-improvement, while Sasaki is reluctant, indirect and ambivalent about it. At one time, therefore, he blames media for pushing the message that we are not good enough but must “become slim”, “be

more stylish”, “live in a nice house” or “build our savings” (Ch. 4, “I have more time”); then at other times he claims that “minimalists are slim” (Ch. 4, “I’m healthier and safer”), he displays and explicitly praises minimalist homes (as in the prologue), and maintains that minimalism not only saves money but will somehow also “lead to more efficiency and a higher income” at work (Ch. 4, “I save money”). This was also part of Millburn and Nicodemus’ overall rhetoric, but when it came to their life advice they decidedly shifted to a straightforward aspirational tone, while Sasaki does not.

Beside putting into better relief the rhetorical components of the minimalist discourse and illuminating their conflation, Sasaki’s book thus also shows that through its rhetorical mix it can regulate the push for individualist self-improvement (which appears to be present in all cases as necessary to a “minimalist lifestyle” not reducible to the immediate practical or aesthetic benefits of discarding things). The section on “enjoying life more” is the best encapsulation of Sasaki’s more low-intensity minimalist lifestyle, and it reveals once again the role that the aesthetic ideal established in the prologue plays in supporting it. Judging from the contents of the section, the way that Sasaki enjoys life more as a minimalist is simply by cleaning his home, as that – and housework in general – is all he writes about here, in explicit contrast, at the end, with “the pressure to build a ‘successful’ future” and “become something else”:

Having parted with most of my belongings, one thing that I can honestly say now is that there isn’t really a need to accomplish something or build an ambitious future. We can begin to be content with ourselves and feel plenty of happiness by simply going about our daily lives, appreciating the present moment. When I finish my simple cleaning tasks in my new apartment and take a stroll around the neighborhood, I realize there isn’t anything more that I need or want. I go to the park and watch the ducks in the pond as they fluff their feathers. I see how relaxed they look – when all they’re doing is fluffing their feathers. They aren’t filled with tension trying to become something else. They aren’t frantically attempting to build their careers, and they aren’t sucking up to the other ducks. All they seem to be doing is enjoying the water, fluffing their feathers, and living their lives. When it comes right down to it, isn’t that all we really need in our lives, too? Having parted with the bulk of my belongings, I feel true contentment with my day-to-day life. The very act of living brings me joy. (Ch. 4, “I enjoy life more”)

Why does this message of immediate appreciation of “living” as such in the “present moment” only come up at end of the section, wholly devoted to making cleaning a habit (after, of course, discarding one’s things)? Despite having included “less time spent cleaning” as a benefit, Sasaki here turns cleaning – and putting back things – into something that is easy but also and above all pleasing and transforming, just like its aesthetic results (“A spotless room is a welcoming sight for anyone”). The “rewards” for cleaning are described as “a sense of accomplishment and calmness” when one is finished doing

it, but also “the self-confidence we gain when we’ve overcome all those excuses for not tidying up”: cleaning the house is likened to “polishing yourself” and clearing the “dust and grime” of those “past selves” that had allowed literal dust and grime (and stuff) to accumulate in the home. In this way, “simply by living an organized life”, one becomes “more invigorated, more confident, and like [oneself] better” compared to the messy, undisciplined past self one was. Before one gets to “the very act of living”, then, one does have to go through the work of “becoming something else”, even if not “accomplishing something”: things have to be discarded, the home has to be cleaned, tidied up and organized – just like in the prologue’s pictures. The necessity of this step, that is, of the lifestyle around stuff before it ever gets beyond stuff, thereby appears again as central to “minimalism” in its specificity against either anti-consumerism or self-improvement taken by themselves. In Millburn and Nicodemus’ more aspirational approach, the practice of discarding things afforded a framing for their self-improvement life advice as anti-consumerist, anti-materialist and anti-aesthetic. In Sasaki’s more acquiescent approach, it also affords – on the same rhetorical grounds – a framing for self-improvement as almost unnecessary, whether because it is supposed to come of itself from discarding things – as in the list of the ways Sasaki has changed –, or because the discipline and “sense of accomplishment” are instead found in the practice of discarding itself (along with cleaning, tidying up and organizing the home), without having to accomplish anything else: either way, the practice appears easier and less demanding by contrast to straightforward life advice. A spectrum therefore seems to be forming for the minimalist discourse, with at one end discarding things as a minimalist – and (vaguely) anti-consumerist – background to self-improvement, and at the other end life advice as a self-improvement and again anti-consumerist background to minimalism.

Sasaki’s more pressing insistence on discarding things and the (aesthetic) extreme of the absolute minimum may perhaps make him sound more “minimalist” than Millburn and Nicodemus; in a sense this is true, as he foregrounds what for now seems to be most specific for “minimalism”, but the deep rhetorical similarities in these texts, with the presence at any rate of the same components, make it clear that it is indeed only a difference of emphasis between two mirror images. After all, in Millburn and Nicodemus’ movie there is little trace of their life advice: individual self-improvement is as implicit there – in the many featured self-help authors, for example – as is the necessity

of discarding things, if not more, while the anti-consumerist component is dominant; moreover, their blog and podcast leave no room for doubt about discarding one's things being indispensable as minimalism's core practice (which in fact is most likely part of the reason why it can be taken for granted in the book or the movie). Vice versa, as we have seen, Sasaki disingenuously betrays at every turn an aspirational need for individual self-improvement, and he offers no clear explanation as to why discarding things should effectively and effortlessly lead to it – which means that if discarding fails, it will have to be pursued in other ways. In both cases, the practice of discarding clearly anchors these texts to work to be done on oneself, as much as it links them to the anti-consumerist rhetoric. This is evident in the last chapter of Sasaki's book, which promotes “feeling happy” as opposed to “becoming happy” with the usual doses of contradictions. Referencing positive psychology, Sasaki claims that – contrary to social standards – happiness is determined mostly from genetics at its base “level” tied to personality (50%), and then from one's own actions (40%), while environmental factors have no impact beyond the “minimal standards” of basic needs (10%): whatever one's conditions or circumstances – and Sasaki alludes, of course, to money, house propriety and winning the lottery (just like Millburn and Nicodemus) –, one will get used to any “variance” or “stimulus” and return to his or her base level of happiness with no gain (Ch. 5, “‘Feeling’ happy instead of ‘becoming’ happy”). In this way, of course, happiness is thoroughly individualized, not only because it is an individual's happiness – that is simply taken for granted –, but also because 90% of it is accounted by individual factors both controllable and not, while the environmental “minimal standards” are deemed already satisfied for most if not all people (who already have everything they need and even more). However, the individual “actions” that make up the decisive factor for happiness – the only one that is both possible to control and worth controlling – are not actions at all in Sasaki's description, because that would imply that one has to strive to “become happy” by achieving something objective, that is, by changing one's environmental conditions and circumstances: this would not work, as we have seen, because one will get used to the change. In place of that, Sasaki's actions consist in the very re-interpretation of “happiness” such that it is seen not as “something outside you” but rather “within you”, “always in your heart” regardless of your situation: “A person might be in a difficult situation that looks rough to others, but if they feel that they're happy, if they're grateful for their conditions, then that person is happy [...] Happiness isn't a

state that we win by accomplishing certain criteria. Happiness is something that can only be felt in this moment.” This “feeling happy” by fiat somehow escapes the fate of fading away by getting used to it, and since it’s entirely internal to each individual regardless of any external factor, “it’s possible for us to always feel happy” (even within a lifestyle of routines like Sasaki’s). The crucial point to note here is that while opposed to it as more immediate and internal, the “feeling” way to happiness obviously doubles down on the isolated individual as wholly in control of his or her own happiness, as in the “becoming” way of self-improvement. As a consequence, the internal “sense of accomplishment” that is set against the external “accomplishing something” must itself be accomplished, through discarding things and doing housework; from there, one may then just as well slip into trying to accomplish something else and more beyond it. It seems that the specific crux of the minimalist discourse lies precisely in this, that on the one hand it minimizes life down to the individual’s lifestyle beyond stuff – becoming or feeling happy in a supposedly immaterial and internal way –, while on the other it insists that one must first and foremost, or even (almost) exclusively, minimize one’s stuff at home: “minimalism” must in the end remain a lifestyle around stuff. Sasaki’s rhetorical questions towards the end of the chapter and the book are a revelatory summary of the confusion of “minimalism” both with anti-consumerist rhetoric (if stuff does not makes us happy, that does not mean that instead it actively makes us unhappy and must be discarded) and with the rhetoric of individualist self-improvement (if environing conditions do not make us happy, that does not mean that reducing or changing them instead will – in fact, the two are even more flatly contradictory ideas, of course): “If our environment can only affect our happiness by 10 percent, why spend time accumulating a lot of material possessions? Why not live in a minimalist apartment and free yourself to change your actions, which are 40 percent of your happiness, by saying goodbye to your things?”

Given all this, it will not come as a surprise that *Goodbye, Things* has a sequel by the significantly related title of *Hello, Habits. A Minimalist’s Guide to a Better Life* (Sasaki 2021), and that it reads as a wholly ordinary self-help book about taking up good habits and thus individually improving one’s life, just like the central bulk of Millburn and Nicodemus’ book. As in the latter, reference to “minimalism” is here reduced to a bare minimum; in fact, Sasaki writes that “every aspiring minimalist’s goal is

to stop being conscious of the fact that they're practicing minimalism [...] reaching a state where minimalism is present in your actions without your being aware of it" (Step 41, "The goal is to stop being conscious of it"): this is justified as being similar to what happens with habits, but it has the effect at any rate of leaving "minimalism" mostly undefined with respect to the book's advice for self-improvement. In the few places where the word comes up, Sasaki explicitly says that he now realizes that "becoming minimalist" is not a process that ever comes to an end, wherein one can claim to be "free from [one's] concern over [one's] things", but rather one as endless – by continuous discarding of what one inevitably accumulates – as that of acquiring and developing desired habits (Step 50). It is clear that "minimalism" remains bound to the core practice of discarding, and that in this sense it is its own separate "theme" and a quite optional preliminary with regard to self-improvement through habits: Sasaki refers to its positive role in his past life as that of a "safety net" from "depression" due to a "connection between the state of your mind and the state of your home", but as we have noted, it is mostly absent from this book (Ch. 1, "A safety net called minimalism"). The very same section, however, betrays both Sasaki's sense of affinity between "minimalism" and self-improvement, and the necessity of the latter as a component of the former to begin with, otherwise bound to fail: Sasaki writes that he feels "a strong sense of fate" in picking up the topic of habits after writing about minimalism, because otherwise he "might have gone back to [his] sloppy pre-minimalist days", and he also admits that he had been missing "a sense of achievement in [his] everyday life", "a sense of self-development." In other words, far from being enough to transform oneself and one's life and/or "always feel happy" without having to accomplish anything, it seems that the happiness of minimalism too wears off: one may continue discarding things and "feel the joy of letting go", as in Sasaki's case, but that will neither be enough nor something that comes to an end; in which case one might as well pick up another endless pursuit and try the path of becoming happy by improving oneself – in fact, one must do so or risk returning to the "sloppy pre-minimalist days." This is later confirmed by Sasaki's further praise of his minimalist cleaning as the "keystone habit" in his life, the habit that "led to the development of other habits – like a domino effect": it "initially prompted [his] interest in habits" as something that is "easy to do and offer rewards", and he explicitly recommends "reducing your belongings" as first step "if you're unsure about where you should begin with acquiring good habits", since "it lowers the hurdle for

starting to work on all your other new habits” (Step 9, “Minimalism will lower the hurdle for developing other habits”). The minimalism of acquiescence, of being and wanting nothing in particular, appears here retrospectively as the preliminary reset for embarking on individualist self-improvement – whether it counts as “minimalism” or not. This shift is possible because the aspirational was already “minimalism” to begin with. At one point, “minimalist” is redoubled in an adjective for Sasaki and for “identity”, and the latter is pushed back against as another thing that can hold one back, precisely because of the contentedness that the other book had praised it for: “Now, as a minimalist, if I were to hold back from getting the things that I really want because of that minimalist identity, I would be getting my priorities backwards. Our present identities shouldn’t constrain our future actions.” This minimalist self-negation of “minimalism” anticipates the rhetorical move that we will focus on in our later analysis. What we must stress here, however, is that the practice of reducing one’s possessions is never really doubted at all as effective and necessary to “minimalism” as a lifestyle, not even in this second book. In the first book, the central chapter’s list of “tips” for discarding things is for the greatest part made up of Sasaki’s pre-emptive rebuttals of the reader’s resistances and reasons for not discarding something, evidently understood as nothing more than excuses: “discarding things can be wasteful, but the guilt that keeps you from minimizing is the true waste” (#54), “you gain more than you lose” (#3), “there isn’t a single item you’ll regret throwing away” (#8), “our homes aren’t museums, they don’t need collections” (#39), “let go of the idea of getting your money’s worth” (#24), “if it’s not a ‘hell, yes!’ it’s a ‘no’” (#51), “let go of the idea of ‘someday’” (#20), “take photos of the items that are tough to part with” (#14), “discarding memorabilia is not the same as discarding memories” (#37), “keep the gratitude” (#53), and on and on. These tips, and the brief texts that come with them, clearly suggest that discarding things is necessary and lies beyond any objection on the part of the aspiring – or acquiesced, for that matter – minimalist, as indeed a pursuit of some kind of “minimum.” Absent this, one may still say “hello” to habits, but he or she will not be “minimalist” for that.

2.1.1.3 – An (extremely) aesthetic lifestyle: Kondo

Sasaki credits Marie Kondo’s international bestseller, already published back in 2010 in Japan, as a “smash hit” that was a major factor in the emergence of minimalism: she had popularized “the art of de-cluttering, discarding, and parting with our possessions”,

which came together with the concepts of the “simple life” and of “working and thinking like a nomad” to make up the culture of “modern minimalism” (Sasaki 2015: Ch. 1, “Danshari and the rise of modern minimalism”). This mix of ideas indeed contains and confirms the main contradictions in Sasaki’s construal of “minimalism”: it is a lifestyle around stuff to be decluttered as much as – and even more than – a lifestyle beyond stuff characterised by simplicity, and similarly it is concerned with the home and its things in an evidently aesthetic manner, even while pursuing the extreme of a minimum of things on par with that of the homeless/homeful digital nomads. The fact that the prologue only includes one nomad among many home-dwellers, that even in that case the emphasis is exclusively on possessions, and that the book is entirely centred on the practices of discarding and cleaning is surely a strong indication of the relative power and priority of the lifestyle around stuff over the lifestyle beyond it, but the tension remains, and it can – as we have just seen – lead to a reversal of emphasis. The contradiction is visible also in Sasaki’s takes on the underlying background to the rise of minimalism: beside the contingent role of the 2011 Tohoku earthquake (which had transformed things into “deadly weapons”), Sasaki points to the “information and material overload” engendered by globalization and the dematerializing convergence of functions, texts and things afforded by new technologies such as the smartphone – which are, however, precisely the door through which the mediatic overload invades life. This is a good illustration of the relation between the anti-aesthetic and the distinctively minimalist rhetoric in the discourse through anti-materialism, because the media are first blamed for a consumerist accumulation of stuff that serves to problematize things already owned, but then they reappear as part of a solution found exclusively in getting rid of such problematized things; for example, the necessity of discarding is softened but maintained by insisting that sentimental items and mementos can be converted into digital pictures and then discarded without loss (a concession that contradicts the alternative insistence on memories being safely stored inside one’s mind as opposed to one’s things). Contrary to the recourse to anti-consumerist rhetoric, the minimalist sort of anti-materialism seems at bottom to problematize “stuff” as such and as present, beyond any definite link to either the consumerist or the self-improved life. Even as just owned, things are ultimately accorded by the discourse an intrinsic negative power over people’s selves and lives, so that they must be discarded. Insofar as this power – this weight – is thus taken to be inherent to stuff, its problematization seems to curiously corre-

spond to a certain aesthetic ideal, one that is also in line with that common sense evidenced at the start of our explorations. Kondo's book takes us even further in this direction.

Strictly speaking, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* (Kondo 2014) is not about “minimalism”, but rather about Kondo's method for “tidying up” or “decluttering” one's home. It is telling that what is probably the single most popular book among minimalists and the public at large does not explicitly address “minimalism” at all, but because of that it surely opens up a window into the rhetorical difference that the label can make. What is interesting, however, is that such a difference is in fact one that the minimalist discourse itself encompasses: as we will find out in the book and as has been later made explicit by Kondo on her website³⁹, her signature “KonMari method” is different from “minimalism”, in that the latter has a negative focus on discarding instead of a positive one on keeping, and “advocates living with less” and “surround[ing] yourself with the bare essentials” instead of “living among items you truly cherish”, however many; but the very same opposition we have already found in Sasaki's two-headed definition of “minimalism”, as well as in the gap between all the empty homes of minimalists in Millburn and Nicodemus' movie and their disclaimers – in both the book and the movie – that one need only discard whatever is not “essential” for oneself, without any set rules or amount. Vice versa, Kondo's book in turn explicitly foregrounds discarding things as the first necessary step in her method, with its own chapter coming before the one about organizing (and aptly titled “Finish discarding first”). Moreover, as the famous book's title already suggests, her method does promise to be “life-changing”, just as it is in Sasaki's first book, wherein all it takes for transforming oneself or one's life is getting rid of things and cleaning one's home. If Sasaki's minimalism can be seen as a sort of mirror image of Millburn and Nicodemus' with regard to self-improvement, Kondo's proposal – whether we label it or not as “minimalist” – will appear as a further mirror image of Sasaki's minimalism with regard to the aesthetic, and to the more positive rhetorical bent that goes with it. As the lifestyle around stuff moves further and increasingly away from the lifestyle beyond stuff, the (aesthetically) extreme lifestyle is reversed into an (extremely) aesthetic lifestyle. Needless to say, this continuum we are constructing is not meant to suggest a historical process in either direction – Kondo's

³⁹ Konmari.com, “KonMari Is Not Minimalism”, Jan. 2020, <https://konmari.com/konmari-is-not-minimalism> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

book is roughly contemporaneous with Millburn and Nicodemus' –, but rather to highlight a play of rhetorical emphases within the minimalist discourse which will be key to our later analyses. As we will see, “minimalism” is not to be found at any one point of this continuum, because it rather lies in the complexity of its rhetorical components, and necessarily relies on their conflation. In fact, if there is no mention of “minimalism” in Kondo's book, we have also seen how the term also disappears almost entirely from the otherwise explicitly “minimalist” discourses found at the opposite end, both in the bulk of Millburn and Nicodemus' book and in Sasaki's second book. It is one continuum presenting generally similar rhetorical components; what seems to bind it together is the necessary practice of discarding things.

The aesthetic emphasis of Kondo's book is as evident as was that of Sasaki's prologue, even though we find no pictures in this case. Of course, even a cursory look at Kondo's website reveals a strong affinity with the aesthetic common sense associated to “minimalism” – usually with a Japanese accent, of course –, and in fact the very page in which she disassociates her method from “minimalism” contains a picture of her in a domestic interior that would have no problem fitting in those initial search results about



FIG. 9 – Marie Kondo posing in a domestic interior which, given the page's context, is supposedly non-minimalist because of not being reduced to the bare minimum (as perhaps the many pillows demonstrate), even though it does seem to be generally aligned with a certain minimalist aesthetic common sense.

it (FIG. 9): it may be less sparse or spartan than Sasaki's apartment, but it is still an all-white on neutral palette, naturally lighted interior with wooden furniture and not a lot of decorations. This, however, is beside the point for our current concern with the book itself, which is enough to demonstrate an aesthetic emphasis regardless of images: if the texts we have seen up to now all stressed, in their explicit discourses, an anti-consumerist concern with how things were accumulated (as in the title of the second chapter in Sasaki's book, "Why did we accumulate so much in the first place?"), in Kondo's case the focus is squarely on the home from the start ("Why can't I keep my house in order?", she rhetorically asks in the title of the very first chapter). In fact, there is an explicit insistence on Kondo's part about the crucial importance of "visualizing your destination" from the outset, wherein life and style are inextricably tied together: before even starting to discard things, the first step in Kondo's method is "identifying your goal" by "visualizing the ideal lifestyle you dream of", which must be done "in concrete terms so that you can vividly picture what it would be like to live in a clutter-free space" (Ch. 2, "Before you start, visualize your destination"). An aesthetic ideal is here openly identified with an ideal for living, so much so that Kondo advises to "try looking in interior decorating magazines" and "visiting model homes" if one has difficulty visualizing such an ideal for oneself. Activities and interests, such as "post-bath aromatherapy" and "classical music" in the "feminine lifestyle" aspired to by one of Kondo's past clients, are merged from the start into an aesthetic ideal. Along with their immediacy, the finality of aesthetic ideals is also called forth by Kondo to identify the final end beyond all ends with the individual's own "happiness" (just like in the explicitly "minimalist" discourse, though here in expressly aesthetic terms):

Now that you can picture the lifestyle you dream of, is it time to move on to discarding? No, not yet. I can understand your impatience, but to prevent rebound you need to move ahead properly, step by step, as you launch into this once-in-a-lifetime event. Your next step is to identify why you want to live like that. Look back over your notes about the kind of lifestyle you want, and think again. Why do you want to do aromatherapy before bed? Why do you want to listen to classical music while doing yoga? If the answers are "because I want to relax before bed," and "I want to do yoga to lose weight," ask yourself why you want to relax and why you want to lose weight. Maybe your answers will be "I don't want to be tired when I go to work the next day," and "I want to lose weight so that I can be more svelte." Ask yourself "Why?" again, for each answer. Repeat this process three to five times for every item. As you continue to explore the reasons behind your ideal lifestyle, you will come to a simple realization. The whole point in both discarding and keeping things is to be happy. It may seem obvious, but it is important to experience this realization for yourself and let it sink into your heart. Before you start tidying, look at the lifestyle you aspire to and ask yourself, "Why do I want to tidy?" When you find the answer, you are ready to move on to the next step: examining what you own.

Through the recursive chain of “whys” that leads from specific end to specific end, one is supposed to ultimately get at an underlying, all-encompassing end of being happy that must “sink into [one’s] heart” and guide the whole process of discarding and organizing one’s things. Through this visualization practice, decluttering is euphorically charged both with the immediate appeal of a concretely imagined life and style – otherwise, “living clutter-free” would be “too broad” and thus weak a goal for Kondo –, and with the finalistic appeal of happiness; the latter would again be abstract and also as broad as it gets if taken on its own, but via the former it is identified with the positive feelings offered by one’s aesthetic ideal for the home. Is this the same thing that Sasaki’s prologue was meant to push for, though a bit more implicitly (and paratextually), by displaying minimalist homes?

Although the book contains no images and does not prescribe a specific aesthetic ideal, it is clear that Kondo’s proposal is far from aesthetically neutral, and not just in the sense that it emphasizes the aesthetic with such intensity to begin with. It is true that the visualization of one’s ideal is a task that precedes the actual discarding in KonMari’s method, but it does not precede – and in fact it follows – the insistence on the necessity of discarding and decluttering at large: the previous section briefly summarizes Kondo’s approach of “tidying efficiently all at once, as quickly as possible, to make the perfect clutter-free environment” with a change so “sudden” that it “deeply affects your mind and inspires a strong aversion to reverting to your previously cluttered state”, because you get to experience “what it’s like to be perfectly tidy” (Ch. 2, “Start by discarding, all at once, intensely and completely”). Kondo’s client is quoted as envisioning her “feminine lifestyle” as “clear of clutter” and “as tidy as a hotel suite with nothing obstructing the line of sight”, with “a feeling of unhurried spaciousness” at the end of the day, by contrast to the “messy” and cluttered room she lived in. In other words, in no case is a reader’s visualization of his or her individual aesthetic ideal supposed to call into question the necessity of decluttering, of discarding and organizing things; on the contrary, the visualization is by default a visualization of “a clutter-free space”, and thus a confirmation of its value by immediate appeal and the finalistic identification of the latter with happiness itself. It is quite understandable, of course, that a book on decluttering would take it for granted that the reader will already be interested in a decluttered home, but this at any rate means that the scope of visualization will be

uncritically constrained: it must confirm the reader's previous interest in decluttering, reinforcing it through the reader's appropriation of it as his or her own. If nothing else, the aesthetic ideal underlying Kondo's book will then be one of reduced belongings, of perfect order and cleanliness and organization, of stylistic coherence and consistency – it is one ideal, after all –, and of euphoric feelings. This, of course, pre-emptively rises the bar for what to keep among one's things, on the whole also supporting any more explicit insistence by Kondo on the necessity of discarding. It is easy to spot more definite aesthetic judgments throughout the book: keeping usable but underappreciated clothes as "loungewear" is deemed "taboo" by Kondo except for cotton t-shirts, and a woman should "try wearing something elegant as nightwear" instead of "a sloppy sweat suit", because otherwise she will then "end up looking like [she] belong[s] in them, which is not very attractive" (Ch. 3, "Downgrading to 'loungewear' is taboo"); socks should never be "balled up" and thrown into the drawer, but rather be folded in such a way as to make everything visible at once (Ch. 3, "Treat your socks and stockings with respect"); clothes in the closet should be arranged from heavy to light "so that they rise to the right", which "makes you feel lighter" and "energizes" the wardrobe (an "exciting magic" for which the reader should trust Kondo, and not "waste time" by "question[ing] whether paying attention to such details can possibly cause such a change"; Ch. 3, "The secret to energizing your closet"); even when a place is uncluttered and organized, one should remove product seals or labels, clothes tags and all other "excess visual information" – especially words – which "creates commotion in your mind" and make one's home "noisy", like "static that fills the air" or even "as if someone were muttering constantly in your ear", keeping the place from being "peaceful and comfortable" (Ch. 4, "Don't underestimate the 'noise' of written information"). It is hard to say that the advice in the book would serve any reader's aesthetic ideal, even an already interested model reader of it, because Kondo pushes – with a starkly normative approach that does not have much consideration for alternatives – both towards an intensification of aesthetic care for one's home, and towards definite solutions that are clearly built upon a certain euphoric, luxurious "feminine" taste, one that exceeds the more generic traits of sparseness, cleanliness and organization (which we may concede, by hypothesis, to be already shared by the reader). The home should therefore be "a sacred space", with a quite literal "personal altar"; it should be "a power spot filled with pure energy", a "comfortable environment" that "feels good to be in" and "where you can relax", which

means not “one that resembles a storage shed” (Ch. 4, “Make the top shelf of the bookcase your personal shrine”). All of this is of course compatible with – and further determined by – the aesthetic of the website and the homeware and fashion products sold in its store. After the latter was launched near the end of 2019, the year Kondo’s Netflix series was released, it is of course harder to visualize a different ideal.

If Kondo’s ideal lifestyle could count as “minimalist”, then her minimalism would clearly be an extremely aesthetic one, but it is not the only way in which it is extreme. Like Sasaki, who takes his inspiration from her after all, Kondo describes her method as a sudden, one-time event that will forever change one’s home, one’s life and oneself in a permanent way, aiming straight – as we have seen – at some state of perfection. Kondo’s “ultimate secret of success” is that “if you tidy up in one shot, rather than little by little, you can dramatically change your mindset”, swiftly arriving at one’s ideal and never regressing (Ch. 1, “Tidy a little a day and you’ll be tidying forever”); she dismisses advice such as “don’t aim at perfection” as mere “lovely words to ease the hearts of those who lack confidence in their ability to tidy” (Ch. 1, “Why you should aim for perfection”), and she generally contrasts her method not only to gradualist approaches but also to those which proceed by room instead of category: “tidying up by location is a fatal mistake”, because one cannot see at once all that is owned within a certain category, and thus fails to acknowledge the excess in the “overall volume” of stuff (Ch. 1, “Sort by category, not by location”). If “tidying ought to be the act of restoring balance among people, their possessions, and the house they live in”, as Kondo claims in a later section about greeting the home in order to “hear” its voice and “quickly hone your sense of what you need and where things belong” (Ch. 5, “Do you greet your house?”), it is clearly a balance that requires a steering just as extreme in the opposite direction of the “excess” (which is again taken for granted). In this kind of shock-therapy approach, it is assumed that reduction of one’s belongings will indeed be “dramatic”, provoking a corresponding “exhilaration” and finally the “satisfaction” of reaching a specific, fixed, perfect “just-right click point” of things for oneself, all things “that inspire joy”:

Sort by category, in the correct order, and keep only those things that inspire joy. Do this thoroughly and quickly, all in one go. If you follow this advice, you will dramatically reduce the volume of things you own, experience an exhilaration you have never known before, and gain confidence in your life. What is the perfect amount of possessions? I think that most people don’t know. If you have lived in Japan or the United States all your life, you have almost certainly been surrounded by far more than you need. This makes it hard for many people to imagine how much

they need to live comfortably. As you reduce your belongings through the process of tidying, you will come to a point where you suddenly know how much is just right for you. You will feel it as clearly as if something has clicked inside your head and said, “Ah! This is just the amount I need to live comfortably. This is all I need to be happy. I don’t need anything more.” The satisfaction that envelops your whole being at that point is palpable. I call this the “just right click point.” Interestingly, once you have passed this point, you’ll find that the amount you own never increases. And that is precisely why you will never rebound. The click point differs from one person to another. For a shoe lover, it might be one hundred pairs of shoes, while a book lover might not need anything but books. [...] As you put your house in order and decrease your possessions, you’ll see what your true values are, what is really important to you in your life. (Ch. 3, “Reduce until you reach the point where something clicks”)

While there is no explicit talk of either a “minimum” or “essentials”, Kondo’s “click point” may be seen as indeed somewhat of a reversal of emphasis between these two sides in Sasaki’s definition of “minimalism”: it is, after all, an amount of things that is by default much less than what is owned at the start – the “excess” –, that is perfect and thus permanently fixed, and that is quite definite – even predefined – with regard to each individual’s “needs” for “being happy”, his or her subjective “true values”; so it is de facto a minimum of the “essential for oneself” variety. Kondo’s reference to “living comfortably” and to the possibility that a shoe lover might have a “click point” of “one hundred pairs of shoes” does not contradict this, because we have seen how similar claims are maintained by Sasaki and especially by Millburn and Nicodemus, whose explicit references to the minimum in the book are in fact much weaker than those of either Japanese author – even Kondo can be said to rely implicitly on the absolute minimum, due to her extreme approach (and it is doubtful that she would actually not push a client owning one hundred shoes to discard many of them). Since the discarding of things is not at all an optional step in Kondo’s method, and since there is no mention of addition of things – in fact, one will be so happy that nothing more will ever be desired –, there is indeed an objective minimum to be pursued at least insofar as one’s subjective aesthetic ideal, or one’s “click point”, could never actually excuse one from “dramatically reducing” one’s possessions. Moreover, the subjective click point and its demands are often clearly objectified or even naturalized, as in the house itself speaking to its owner or to Kondo, or socks being “unhappy” if balled up, or the state of only owning what is loved and needed being declared the most natural state “in accordance with the rules of nature” (like in feng shui): “The true purpose of tidying is, I believe, to live in the most natural state possible. Don’t you think it is unnatural for us to possess things that don’t bring us joy or things that we don’t really need?” (Ch. 5, “Is it true that tidying increases good fortune?”). As mentioned before, even a home that is tidy and organized will not be enough if things are stored that are unloved and unused, “creat[ing] the

illusion that the clutter problem has been solved” (Ch. 1, “Storage experts are hoarders”). Discarding things is necessary.

Just like Sasaki, Kondo promises that not only one will never regress and thus never need to declutter again, but that on the one hand maintenance of the result will be very easy, and on the other that this will affect oneself and one’s life aligning it somehow to one’s ideal lifestyle (understood as subjective and thus unnamed, contrary to “minimalism”):

By successfully concluding this once-in-a-lifetime task, you will gain the lifestyle you aspire to and enjoy a clean and orderly space of your choosing. Can you place your hand on your heart and swear that you are happy when surrounded by so much stuff that you don’t even remember what’s there? Most people desperately need to put their house in order [...] Until you have completed the once-in-a-lifetime event of putting your house in order, any attempt to tidy on a daily basis is doomed to failure. Conversely, once you have put your house in order, tidying will be reduced to the very simple task of putting things back where they belong. In fact, this becomes an unconscious habit. [...] Perhaps you shop a lot and imagine that your possessions will just pile up again. I realize that it’s hard to believe if you have never tried it, but once you have completed this dramatic cleanup, you will have no difficulty whatsoever in putting things back where they belong or in deciding where to keep new things. Unbelievable as it may sound, you only have to experience a state of perfect order once to be able to maintain it. [...] This drastic change in self-perception, the belief that you can do anything if you set your mind to it, transforms behavior and lifestyles. This is precisely why my students never experience rebound. [...] Unlike work, studies, or sports, there is no need to compare your performance to that of anyone else. You are the standard. Better yet, the one thing that everyone finds hardest to do – continuing – is totally unnecessary. You only have to decide where to put things once. (Ch. 1, “Make tidying a special event, not a daily chore”)

Is the enjoyment of one’s decluttered home itself the lifestyle aspired to, or itself happiness? And is continuous tidying for maintenance itself part of that enjoyment? Kondo’s book is as ambivalent as Sasaki’s on these matters (or rather the other way around, again). In this same section, for example, she describes her lifestyle and happiness solely in terms of enjoying her home and her things:

The many days I spent tidying without seeing permanent results now seem hard to believe. In contrast, I feel happy and content. I have time to experience bliss in my quiet space, where even the air feels fresh and clean; time to sit and sip herbal tea while I reflect on my day. As I look around, my glance falls on a painting that I particularly love, purchased overseas, and a vase of fresh flowers in one corner. Although not large, the space I live in is graced only with those things that speak to my heart. My lifestyle brings me joy. Wouldn’t you like to live this way, too? It’s easy, once you know how to truly put your home in order.

Far from setting “the standard” for himself or herself without “comparison”, the reader is invited to identify again his or her aesthetic ideal and lifestyle with Kondo’s own, and it is one that appears to revolve around stuff once again. Similarly, while this section claims that cleaning will be easier and further decluttering unnecessary, elsewhere Kondo compares the latter to “meditation” as “conversing with [herself] through the medium of [her] possessions”, and since “the clear, refreshed feeling gained after standing

under a waterfall can be addictive”, here she claims that “when you finish putting your space in order, you will be overcome with the urge to do it again” (Ch. 2, “Tidying is a dialogue with one’s self”). The very last two sections of the book showcase this ambivalence, because Kondo first praises “being surrounded by things that spark joy” by writing that she can think of “no greater happiness in life” than that, but then goes back to saying that “tidying is not actually necessary”, that it is of course not “the purpose of life” and can be done once and for all in order to move on to one’s “real life” (a life somehow transformed): “The only ones who need to spend their lives, year in and year out, thinking about tidying are people like me who find joy in it and who are passionate about using tidying to make the world a better place. As for you, pour your time and passion into what brings you the most joy, your mission in life. I am convinced that putting your house in order will help you find the mission that speaks to your heart. Life truly begins after you have put your house in order” (Ch. 5, “Your real life begins after putting your house in order”). This last sentence of Kondo’s book is, of course, quite fitting for with what we have seen in the explicitly “minimalist” texts: a lifestyle beyond stuff comes after – and somehow by virtue of – the lifestyle around stuff which is necessarily based on discarding a lot of things already owned. In fact, the last chapter is about all the many “life transforming” benefits – or “magical effects” – of decluttering: knowing ourselves through the things “we really like” (which “do not change over time”); having more “confidence in [our] decision-making capacity” or trust that we “will be all right” (thanks to the “unconditional love” received by one’s things and home); overcoming “attachment to the past” or “fear for the future”, which affect all areas of life; “know[ing] contentment” and having decreased “worldly desires”; even “a detox effect on our bodies” parallel to the “detoxing” of one’s home (Ch. 5). Kondo’s maxim that “the question of what you want to own is actually the question of how you want to live your life” could have easily been proclaimed by Sasaki, Millburn or Nicodemus as a “minimalist” maxim (Ch. 5, “An attachment to the past or anxiety about the future”).

Despite the differences, Kondo’s claims in support of the “life-changing magic” of decluttering and its leading to an integral “ideal lifestyle” – though an unnamed one – are generally aligned with the “minimalist” ones we have found in previous texts; in fact, it could also be argued that they are rendered more specifically “minimalist” by not

being as strongly tied to anti-consumerist rhetoric, as is still largely the case in Sasaki's book. If anything, at any rate, while at the opposite ends of our tentative continuum, Kondo's book appears again as unashamedly aspirational in its rhetoric as is Millburn and Nicodemus', the former taking self-improvement to come about "magically" just by way of discarding things, the latter rather taking discarding as the necessary preliminary or turning point for embarking more directly on self-improvement. In between these two, we find Sasaki's far more gloomy, accepting if not resigned first book – except, not coincidentally, for the aesthetic and euphoric gallery of "minimalist cases" in the prologue, whose tone leans much more towards that of Kondo. Of course, beyond their differences in emphasis and their dominant rhetoric, these books all present more or less a similar set of rhetorical components, as well as the ambiguities and contradictions that come with conflating them. Just like Millburn and Nicodemus could not simply offer their life advice without first maintaining that discarding things would be as life-changing for the reader as it supposedly was for them, so Kondo must turn decluttering into something that affects all of life in ways that perhaps should be pursued on their own right by the reader when he or she is done with decluttering (especially if it ends up not working). In all three cases, discarding things that actively obstruct one's individual happiness is necessary, whether or not it is also sufficient: one cannot start either appreciating or transforming one's life – or one's home and leftover things – until those negative things are gone. What sets Kondo apart, in line with the absence of explicit reference to a minimum or to the essential, is the intense positive bent of her rhetoric, which is reflected in her method and main criterion for discarding things: one must only keep what "sparks joy" (or, in a more literal translation of the Japanese *tokimeku*, what "gives a thrill of pleasure", which underlines its corporeal dimension; Ch. 3, "Storing books"). This now famous criterion is introduced in the book precisely by contrast to previous decluttering "standards" which have a negative orientation on discarding, just like "minimalism" in Kondo's later disclaimer:

What standard do you use to decide what to get rid of? There are several common patterns when it comes to discarding. One is to discard things when they cease being functional – for example, when something breaks down beyond repair or when part of a set is broken. Another is to discard things that are out of date, such as clothes that are no longer in fashion or things related to an event that has passed. It's easy to get rid of things when there is an obvious reason for doing so. It's much more difficult when there is no compelling reason. Various experts have proposed yardsticks for discarding things people find hard to part with. These include such rules as "discard anything you haven't used for a year," and "if you can't decide, pack those items away in a box and look at them again six months later." However, the moment you start focusing on *how* to choose what to throw away, you have actually veered significantly off course. In this state, it is extremely risky to continue tidying. [...] I applied every criteria suggested by the various books I read on

reducing. I tried getting rid of clothes that I hadn't worn for two years, discarding another item every time I bought something new, and throwing away anything I wasn't sure of. I threw out thirty bags of garbage in one month. But no matter how much I discarded, not a single room in my house felt any tidier. In fact, I found myself going shopping just to relieve the stress and so failed miserably to reduce the total volume of my possessions. At home, I was always uptight, constantly on the lookout for superfluous things that could be discarded. When I found something not in use, I would pounce on it vengefully and throw it in the garbage. Not surprisingly, I became increasingly irritable and tense and found it impossible to relax even in my own home. (Ch. 2, "Selection criterion: does it spark joy?")

The "rules" alluded to by Kondo are indeed quite widespread in the minimalist discourse, as shown by Nicodemus' "packing party"⁴⁰ or the later minimalist duo's bolstered "1-in-10-out rule"⁴¹, but so is the claim that "there are no set rules in minimalism": opposition to rules does not necessarily disqualify Kondo from the discourse she later distances her method from. What she objects to in these rules, after all, is specifically their explicit negative emphasis on discarding, which leads one to look out endlessly for more things that could be discarded; on the contrary, "we should be choosing what we want to keep, not what we want to get rid of." Kondo's depiction of an obsessive, stressful discarding that never gets to the endpoint of one's home "feeling tidier" – and oneself "relaxing" – can be correlated to the "vicious circle of tidying" one falls into by trying to put away and organize one's things before one is done discarding, or without discarding at all: gradualist approaches by location or tidying up methods limited to better storing things away will also put one in an obsessive, stressful path of infinite tidying up (Ch. 1, "Sort by category, not by location"). As we have seen, Kondo promises instead that her method will be a one-time permanent solution, putting an end to both discarding and organizing beyond simplified daily chores (and also incidentally ending the push to acquire and accumulate things back). This solution is a positive solution – aesthetic and euphoric.

As mentioned, even before getting to discarding and its main criterion, Kondo quite literally puts an end to the process by stressing the need to first visualize one's ideal home and lifestyle as a "goal" and "why" for decluttering: both in concrete terms of a certain aesthetic and in the more abstract ones of an euphoric feeling of "happiness" behind all definite ends, an immediate final end to the process is posited from the start, grounding the method's positivity. The need for visualization is in fact explicitly justified as a necessary safeguard against the endless, inefficient "negative spiral of clutter"

⁴⁰ The Minimalists, "Packing Party: Unpack a Simpler Life", Dic. 2014, <https://www.theminimalists.com/packing> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

⁴¹ The Minimalists, "1-in-10-out Rule", Sep. 2018, <https://www.theminimalists.com/in> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

(Ch. 2, “Before you start, visualize your destination”). After Kondo reveals – and is mystically revealed by a voice – that “not only the simplest but also the most accurate yardstick by which to judge” is “to take each item in one’s hand and ask: ‘Does this spark joy?’”, this positive criterion is referred back to that preliminary visualization and “the point” it grants to tidying:

After all, what is the point in tidying? If it’s not so that our space and the things in it can bring us happiness, then I think there is no point at all. Therefore, the best criterion for choosing what to keep and what to discard is whether keeping it will make you happy, whether it will bring you joy. Are you happy wearing clothes that don’t give you pleasure? Do you feel joy when surrounded by piles of unread books that don’t touch your heart? Do you think that owning accessories you know you’ll never use will ever bring you happiness? The answer to these questions should be no. Now imagine yourself living in a space that contains only things that spark joy. Isn’t this the lifestyle you dream of? Keep only those things that speak to your heart. Then take the plunge and discard all the rest. By doing this, you can reset your life and embark on a new lifestyle. (Ch. 2, “Selection criterion: does it spark joy?”)

The “voice” that had put Kondo on the right track underlines the aesthetic dimension of the criterion of “spark joy”, because it had advised her to “look more closely at what is there”: from this, she not only came to the conclusion that “focusing solely on throwing things away can only bring unhappiness”, that it had made her “neurotic” and had got her nowhere, by making her forget to “cherish the things [she] loved” and thus “wanted to keep” (the euphoric side of positivity); she also concluded that “the trick is to handle each item” physically and one at a time, because “when you touch a piece of clothing, your body reacts” to it (the aesthetic side of positivity). If visualization foregrounds the view of the home as a whole – with its implication for at least aesthetic cohesiveness –, the criterion must be applied instead to single items one owns, but both are aesthetically grounded as well as euphorically oriented in their positivity. However, something is clearly lost – or rather submerged – in the transition from one to the other, and this loss betrays the circularity of Kondo’s whole discourse, as well as the negativity underlying her positive rhetoric. While in the section on visualization Kondo had initially insisted that one’s ideal must be pictured in concrete terms, after that – and already in its rephrasing as the final “why” of “happiness” – no reference is ever made to that concreteness, and “the lifestyle you dream of” is limited to the abstract “living in a space that contains only things that spark joy”: does Kondo’s criterion only take concreteness for granted, retaining and relying on it implicitly, or does it rather eclipse and replace it? The answer is not clear, but it is probably both. As we have seen, the necessity of discarding things is affirmed even before visualization comes into play, and the latter is in fact an explicit response to the risk that discarding might spiral out of control. Visuali-

zation is used to pave the ground for the criterion, but does not itself necessarily enter in it as an explicit factor; on the contrary, Kondo's method is to judge each thing by individual contact with it as stripped from its context of use and even from the other things one owns, except for their sheer quantitative amount (and it is, needless to say, an entirely individual endeavour: Kondo openly advises against involving other people, even just letting family members see the process: Ch. 2, "Don't let your family see"). In other words, if one's aesthetic ideal is to guide the selection of what to keep, it must do so at best implicitly in one's immediate reaction to each thing – which means, of course, that it operates behind the scenes by unilateral influence on selection, safe from the possibility of being itself called into question or even just revised. If on the other hand the ideal is lost in its concreteness, replaced by the "spark joy" criterion for single things, it will still underlie and ground it more abstractly: the promise of a whole improved lifestyle and of happiness, the promise of a perfected and thus permanent final state, the identification of both with the discarding of all things that do not make one happy – once again reversed into their making one unhappy –, the positive spin afforded to discarding by the emphasis on the immediate, aesthetic and euphoric reaction of appreciation of things kept – each supposedly a taste of ideal of living surrounded only by things loved –, all these aspects are supported by that initial visualization. Moreover, the submerged aesthetic ideal also probably works to raise the bar for keeping things, as it does press for a home that is aesthetically enjoyed, cohesive and consistent, perfectly tidy and clean and organized, and quite sparse, whatever more concrete qualities it takes on. In fact, if concreteness is not addressed, this might also make it easier to pick up features of the aesthetic common sense associated to "minimalism", which certainly checks all those boxes. Therefore, the move from visualization to the "spark joy" criterion can be understood as accomplishing – or reinforcing – the identification of the reader's aesthetic ideal with Kondo's own: the concrete lifestyle imagined by the reader is abstracted into a pursuit of happiness, then this pursuit is used to back up the discarding of things for a lifestyle based on being surrounded by "only things that spark joy." Along the way, euphoria remains explicit, while the aesthetic shifts from the definiteness of the visual to the indefiniteness of contact and emotional response. After the identification is achieved, visualization can be scaled back or left behind.

At bottom, the point is once again that discarding things – “dramatically” many things – is a non-negotiable necessity for Kondo, just like for the explicit “minimalists.” Both for that impactful, mindset-changing “exhilaration” of the extreme decluttering itself and the permanent, life-changing “satisfaction” of its outcome – a perfectly tidy, clean, organized home with nothing on sight but the things one loves, plus at least some aesthetic cohesiveness –, getting rid of much “excess stuff” is a step that cannot be skipped or even softened. The reason for this cannot just be that it is a condition for a tidy home, even an aesthetically ideal one: as we have mentioned, Kondo rejects the idea that a tidy home is enough, if that tidiness is achieved by storing away things that should be discarded because they do not “spark joy”; this is, after all, what differentiates her method (just like reference to a “minimum”, and perhaps to an aesthetic, differentiates “minimalism”). Being surrounded only by relatively few things that are loved is an inherent, integral aspect of Kondo’s aesthetic ideal, and the reader must appropriate it. Kondo’s positive rhetoric conceals the circularity and negativity behind her insistence that it is necessary, and that therefore discarding is also necessary. While she claims at times that it is a condition for a home that is decluttered once and for all, it is nonetheless evident that she usually presents it rather as what a really decluttered home is at all, regardless of whether it lasts as such; it is just one with the ideal to be achieved. The circularity lies in the fact that this ideal is not straightforwardly endorsed and proposed as such, but is rather affirmed as a necessary condition at first and then tacitly circled back to as an ideal that was always already shared by Kondo and the reader. As we have noted, it is quite plausible indeed that the reader who picks up this book will already be interested in tidying up and even discarding things, yet this does not mean that he or she already shares Kondo’s extremely aesthetic ideal, as Kondo instead implies in the last section of the book (again through reference to a change of lifestyle and happiness): “You won’t die if your house isn’t tidy, and there are many people in the world who really don’t care if they can’t put their house in order. Such people, however, would never pick up this book. You, on the other hand, have been led by fate to read it, and that means you probably have a strong desire to change your current situation, to reset your life, to improve your lifestyle, to gain happiness, to shine” (Ch. 5, “Your real life begins after putting your house in order”). Whatever desire a reader comes to the book with, Kondo does tacitly steer it in the direction of her own ideal, without clearly acknowledging it. This was already evidenced by her advice to search for one’s ideal among the

pictures of domestic interiors that can be found in magazines, in case imagination failed – that is, in case the reader’s desire was, after all, not as determined as Kondo’s ideal, or not in the same way. The reader’s desire may be “strong” but as indeterminate as “tidying up”, “improving one’s lifestyle” and “gaining happiness” are. Kondo determines it by conflating these – as the minimalist discourse does – and insisting that one must reduce down to the perfect “click point” in which only loved things remain. She does this circularly insofar as she takes this determined ideal to have been the reader’s own all along (as she says, “Isn’t this the lifestyle you dream of?”).

Since a drastic reduction is deemed necessary, Kondo’s decluttering is indeed extreme over and beyond its being extremely aesthetic, which makes it a mirror image of Sasaki’s “minimalism” even without much talk of a minimum or of essentials. The negativity she ascribes to the latter must therefore still be there, right beneath the positivity of her rhetoric, to the very extent that some reader might not in fact quite share the ideal already, and instead resist it. Beside obscuring the circularity, Kondo’s positive rhetoric also covers up the negativity of insisting – against any resistance – that discarding things and its (minimalist?) ideal are necessary. This is already the case in the two quotes above from the section introducing the “spark joy” criterion. While lamenting obsessive discarding, Kondo does not take issue with the source from which the rules fostering it spring, that is, the problem that “it’s much more difficult [to discard things] when there is no compelling reason” to do so, such as broken or out-dated things (including “clothes that are no longer in fashion”, just as “obvious” an item to get rid of as any in Kondo’s view). In her personal story, the problem was not at all having discarded too much, but rather not reaching an endpoint – a “click-point”, a minimum – that she could forever rest on (despite praising elsewhere the meditative but “addictive” urge to tidying again, as we have seen): obsessive discarding was stressful, its negativity made her “uptight”, “irritable” and “vengeful”, and her home did not feel “any tidier”, but in addition to that she had “failed miserably to reduce the total volume of [her] possessions”, not failed by discarding too much. Then, when the criterion of “spark joy” is offered as a solution, its positivity is in fact immediately applied not to things to be kept but again to those to be discarded: she rhetorically asks if one will be happy by “wearing clothes that don’t give you pleasure”, by being “surrounded by piles of unread books”, or by “owning accessories you know you’ll never use”, and she unhesitatingly

maintains that the answer “should be no.” In other words, the seemingly positive act of “keep[ing] only those things that speak to your heart” is still functional to the negative act of “tak[ing] the plunge and discard all the rest”, the difference being mostly one of rhetoric. Just like the minimalists, Kondo takes things that do not make one happy as instead making one unhappy, that is, as active obstacles to happiness. By contrast to the minimalists, she does not resort as much to anti-consumerist rhetoric in order to (ambiguously) claim that all things as such, as “stuff”, obstruct happiness: she is indeed genuinely more positive at least to some extent, in that she maintains that some of our things do make us happy, that being aesthetically surrounded by such euphoric things is itself already (a form of?) happiness. Still, she is no less adamant about the fact that “to truly cherish the things that are important to you, you must first discard those that have outlived their purpose” (Ch. 2, “What to do when you can’t throw something away”): the good things cannot just be enjoyed in the midst of other things that are not as good; the latter must be opposed to the former as indeed a standard, which thereby turns things that one has no “compelling reason” to discard into bad things to absolutely get rid of. Kondo’s pressure to discard more things surfaces all throughout the book, as in the episode in which a “prize student” of hers, who had already discarded “fifty garbage bags of belongings”, proudly showed her the final results in the drawers and closet, saying that there was nothing more to discard: Kondo picked out a jacket and a blouse from all the rest and asked the client if those “really” brought her joy, which led the client to doubt them too (Ch. 5, “How to identify what is truly precious”). Kondo explicitly says that those two items “looked no different from the rest of the clothes”, that she “had never seen how [the client] treated these items” in the process of decluttering, and that she knew nothing about “the circumstances surrounding their purchase”: she just observed the clothes themselves, and somehow saw “at a glance” the “aura” of the owner’s care, because “things that are cherished shine.” In other words, by direct contact alone, Kondo may know whether an item “sparks joy” or not better than its owner himself or herself does. Whatever one may think of such mystical power, it does not seem to ever push Kondo to question a client the other way around, asking him or her to reconsider whether some discarded item might actually spark joy after all; one can be mistaken only for keeping something. The book’s reader, of course, will not literally have a Kondo around insisting that this or that item should in fact be discarded, but may still recursively spell doubts on his or her own decisions: even if something sparks joy,

it is still possible and advisable to ask if something *really* sparks joy. This is, after all, “how to identify what is truly precious”, as the section’s title puts it.

The gap between the “spark joy” and the “really spark joy” criteria, the fact that another person – like Kondo, with all her authority of expertise – can open up that gap in one’s place, and finally the fact that the gap only ever invests and questions those things that are kept, all reveal together the negativity underlying the positive aesthetic ideal: there is something of an objective minimum in the subjective “click point”, so that things must be discarded (and still more things too, because one can always be mistaken). Not surprisingly, like the minimalist Sasaki after her, Kondo distrusts and preemptively rejects the reasons one may come up with for not discarding something. As we have just seen, her “spark joy” criterion in fact works to undercut any other criteria, because one can spot the things to be discarded in an entirely decontextualized manner, without taking into consideration the “circumstances”, and in fact not even the specific qualities of the item. Other criteria beside the one favoured by Kondo are mentioned in her justification of the order for categories of things to be decluttered, but they exhaust their function in setting up the order: the “functional”, “informational” and “emotional” factors – along with “rarity”, the difficulty of obtaining and replacing something – are said to “add value to our belongings”, yet they are not to be used as criteria together with “spark joy”; on the contrary, they are just the backdrop to Kondo’s idea of dealing with categories by difficulty (Ch. 2, “Starting with mementos spells certain failure”). There is a significant ambiguity in the “difficulty” posed by these factors, because it is at once a difficulty “to make a decision about” and “to part with” something, which betrays the fact that the default decision that is expected is a decision to discard. Kondo claims that by following this order one will “sharpen [one’s] intuitive sense of what items spark joy” and thus “dramatically accelerate” decisions, but she does not explain why this should be so; it seems more plausible that discarding easy things first will bias one towards discarding in harder categories (culminating in one’s emotional photographs and “mementos”, the kind of items one would think the criterion of “spark joy” would be most relevant to). But in the last section of the chapter, about “what to do when you can’t throw something away” as something that “it is human nature to resist”, Kondo explicitly opposes “intuitive” judgment – as in her criterion – to the “rational” one, claiming it is the latter that “causes trouble”: “Although intuitively we know that

an object has no attraction for us, our reason raises all kinds of arguments for not discarding it, such as ‘I might need it later’ or ‘It’s a waste to get rid of it’” (Ch. 2, “What to do when you can’t throw something away”). She then goes on to say that it is not wrong to hesitate and that not all decisions can be made “on intuition alone”, but then she doubles down on intuition by somehow drawing the conclusion that “we need to consider each object with care and not be distracted by thoughts of being wasteful”, which of course amounts to insisting that “waste” is just not a criterion to consider at all (like those “factors”). Ironically, in the attempt to offer an alternative line of reasoning for “when you come across something that’s hard to discard” – which is, it is worth noting, the “no compelling reasons” scenario that discarding rules addressed badly –, Kondo ends up with reasons which are far more obviously rationalizations for discarding things than “it’s a waste” is for not doing so: her advice is to just ask oneself whether the problematic item has “already fulfilled” its “true purpose” or “role” in one’s life, discarding it “with gratitude” if it has (more positivity), but her example shows how easy it is to come up with such purposes – she suggests that a purchased outfit might have “fulfilled the function of giving you a thrill when you bought it”, or revealing “what doesn’t suit you.” Just like with the home’s “voice”, here we are told that “if things had feelings, they would certainly not be happy” in being kept while “no longer need[ed]”, and the way to make them happy is not to use them but rather, as always, to discard and “free” them. This is again a quite literal objective insistence on the necessity of discarding, one that in the end crucially has to resort to “need”: just like in “minimalism”, a need is posited to discard things as unneeded – down to some minimum.

At the end of the third chapter, right after the section about the “just-right click point”, Kondo again advises her reader to just “follow intuition”, and again defends her “vague criteria” (Ch. 3, “Follow your intuition and all will be well”). This section already gets to the heart of the sort of rhetorical moves we will focus on later. Here, the indeterminacy of the “spark joy” criterion and of the “click point” goal is presented as the guarantee of definitive success, because – again by contrast to the rules’ “clearly defined numerical goals” – it affords free reign to the individual’s subjectivity, in line with the emphasis on aesthetic-emotional immediacy:

Even if these methods [with rules] temporarily result in a tidy space, automatically following criteria proposed by others and based on their “know-how” will have no lasting effect – unless their criteria happens to match your own standards of what feels right. Only you can know what kind of environment makes you feel happy. The act of picking up and choosing objects is extremely

personal. To avoid rebound, you need to create your own tidying method with your own standards. This is precisely why it is so important to identify how you feel about each item you own. (Ch. 3, “Follow your intuition and all will be well”)

After writing this, however, Kondo goes on to write – in bold text – that “the fact that you possess a surplus of things that you can’t bring yourself to discard doesn’t mean you are taking good care of them”: however indeterminate and subjective the criteria, it is just a “fact” that there is a “surplus of things” that encompasses all the things one does not “take good care of” (again, just like in Sasaki’s self-effacing expressions of guilt for not using certain things). Then, returning to subjectivity, Kondo successively denies and affirms its relation to things, on the one hand claiming that “just because you dispose of something does not mean you give up past experiences or your identity”, on the other promising that “through the process of selecting only those things that inspire joy, you can identify precisely what you love and what you need.” One after another, we see in this section an extreme objectivity followed by an extreme subjectivity to which another objective frame – actually no less extreme – is implicitly applied, one that passes as subjective by emphasizing individual feelings and care for things to identify with, but is objective insofar as these must necessarily be denied to many or most things one owns (even those one is uncertain or indifferent about, those for which no “compelling reason” comes up for discarding them). This contradictory mixture of the indeterminacy of a subjective criterion with the laser-like definiteness of an objective minimum to be pursued, by way of discarding things necessarily, seems to fit the “minimalist” texts we have considered as much as Kondo’s book, and will be seen at work in the broader minimalist discourse in our later analyses. It is clear that, just like the house and the items themselves, one’s “intuition” is never supposed to say that discarding is not necessary at all, or not as much. After all, it is curious that Kondo paraphrases her idea of the “click point” precisely as a response to the fear of discarding too much: “Don’t worry about throwing away too much. There will come a moment when you know what is just right.” If only the individual himself or herself knows “what environment makes [him or her] feel happy”, as was also implied – and then forgotten – by the concrete visualization required at the start, how come that the same individual must proceed blindly until he or she just stumbles upon the perfect amount of things? What guards this method from the obsessive discarding for which the negative rules were blamed? Is there a chance that no “click point” is found, or that it does not last forever? Kondo surely does not seem to think so, and despite her claim that each one should in-

vent his or her own method, standard or criterion to choose in an “extremely personal” way what to keep, this is immediately reduced to “identify[ing] how you feel about each item you own” – that is, precisely to the criterion proposed by her on the basis of her “know-how”, just like the rules she dismisses. The “click point” is thus out of the question, whether or not it is a minimum, as is the “spark joy” criterion and its disregard for any consideration beyond one’s aesthetic and euphoric immediate felt reaction to things. This might not be “minimalism”, but it is at least an (extremely) aesthetic lifestyle around stuff with a promised transformative impact beyond it, and aligned to a “minimalist” aesthetic common sense. And whether it is appreciating one’s favourite things in an improved home or appreciating the “important things” in one’s improved life, discarding comes first, and it is necessary across the board.

2.1.1.4 – One vague ideal from the start (i): Becker

Probably the most crucial point revealed by these analyses of the most popular texts in the minimalist discourse – or closely associated to it, in the case of Kondo – is that explicit reference to “minimalism” fades away, or is absent from the start, as one reaches the opposite ends of a continuum: on the one hand, there seems to be no strict need for it when it comes to life advice concerning individualist self-improvement, as shown by Millburn and Nicodemus’ book and by Sasaki’s second book; on the other hand, it also appears superfluous if not even problematic when it comes to decluttering advice primarily focused on the home, as in Kondo’s book. Sasaki’s first book, with its ambiguities and contradictions – especially the stark contrast between the prologue and the rest of the book –, is to be situated somewhere in the middle of the continuum, partly a bridge of sorts between the opposite ends, partly a demonstration of the continuity that nonetheless underlies them: Kondo’s decluttering also ambiguously promises to be “life-changing” and to get rid once and for all of the need to tidy up, so that one can move on to the “real life” beyond stuff, while Millburn and Nicodemus still build their “minimalist lifestyle” – just as ambiguously – around “stuff”, insofar as one must first of all discard it. Finally, the movie by Millburn and Nicodemus can also be placed in a middle ground, though of course closer to their book than to Kondo’s, since many of the voices it features are from more generic self-help authors neither explicitly tied to “minimalism” nor to decluttering. Together with Sasaki’s book, the movie highlights the centrality of anti-consumerist rhetoric in the explicitly “minimalist” discourse, despite

the fact that its own anti-materialism – directed at the things one already owns as actively obstructing happiness – is not so clearly related to the anti-consumerist one. On this issue, Kondo’s book strongly suggests that such specifically “minimalist” anti-materialism, which ascribes an imposing oppressive power to physical things (evidently conflated with external imposition and impulsiveness by a consumerist society and/or human nature), is of an aesthetic sort: a certain aesthetic ideal of sparseness and cohesion as well as tidiness, cleanliness and organization is closely tied with the pursuit of a minimum amount of stuff comprised of only things that are used, loved and/or needed. Here then we come to the fundamental knot: the anti-consumerist rhetoric also includes an anti-aesthetic component that attacks, along with the media, any sort of status-symbol as a mere appearance mediated by one’s displayed material things, fuelling a blind pursuit of the latter in endless consumption that never enduringly satisfies; and this rhetorical component lies perhaps at the root of the overall lack, in the explicitly “minimalist” books, of a characterization of both “minimalism” and the negative power of stuff as aesthetic in nature, by contrast to Kondo’s decluttering. Vice versa, Kondo’s book does not strongly nor straightforwardly appeal to anti-consumerist rhetoric, as was made especially clear later on with the launch of her online store (and the explicit disassociation from “minimalism”). Even so, the knot does appear to be one that ties together a single set of overlapping threads, wherein the contrasts look very much like plays of mirrors, as we have put it before. Kondo’s positive rhetoric may stress much more the aesthetic, euphoric relation to one’s belongings, but she too must resort – in order to maintain discarding as necessary – to negative claims about things that border on the anti-consumerist: she insists, for example, that identity and memory are not tied to one’s things, that attachment to things is a sign of attachment to the past or the future, that wanting more things than the “just right click point” amount of what one “needs” to be “happy” is something undesirable that decluttering will luckily put an end to – just like it will end the obsessive, stressful need and effort to discard and tidy up –, and doing so she contradicts her main identification of happiness with being surrounded by the things that one loves within a home that reflects one’s aesthetic ideal. Similarly, the minimalists’ negative rhetoric may make – through its reference to the extreme of an absolute bare minimum, as well as to anti-consumerism – more sweeping rejections and dismissals of all “stuff” as such, of all things as mere things, but it cannot quite justify the necessity of discarding them except by imbuing them with some negative power and posit-

ing – just like Kondo – a final state in which only things used, loved and/or needed remain; in both regards, it seems that the same aesthetic and euphoric dimension of Kondo’s decluttering is at play here.

Given all this, it seems hard to identify “minimalism” with any one component isolated from the rest, or with any one of the texts or authors we have examined. It rather appears as though what the label designates always remains elusive and variable, shifting from one component to another at different times depending on one’s emphasis and rhetorical strategy, but ultimately needing them all for their mutual support and justification (whether actually sound – or even clear – or not). After all, this was already evident in the contrast between Millburn and Nicodemus’ book and their movie, as the latter was built in such a way as to almost entirely conflate minimalism with anti-consumerism, while in the former anti-consumerist rhetoric only occupied the first chapter (and the cliché scenario of winning the lottery at the beginning of the main chapters). One way to double-check our analysis with regard to the minimalist discourse is to have a look at its earliest manifestations to see whether the rhetorical components were already there or not, with the main candidate for the potential divide on the continuum being the relevance of the aesthetic to the anti-consumerist or self-improving side. We can turn for our purposes to two blogs which Millburn and Nicodemus count among their initial source of inspiration, Becker’s *Becoming Minimalist* (2008) and especially Babauta’s *Zen Habits* (2006), both popular and still on-going; moreover, we will complement the latter with a second blog by Babauta, *Mnmlist* (2009), which was properly active for a couple of years and was last posted on in 2017. Becker too refers to Babauta as the one who has been more influential for his “quest to become minimalist” than “any other internet author”, and specifically with regard to “living simply in more ways than just physical possessions”⁴²: this makes sense since Becker was promoting one of Babauta’s self-help ebooks on productivity, *The Essential Motivation Handbook* (Babauta & Hamm 2009), but it also indicates already the difference in emphasis between the two, one more focused on decluttering and the other more focused on self-improvement. All roads thus lead to Babauta’s blog, which is no doubt one of the earliest, and the only one that still lives on: all other minimalist blogs mentioned in his first book on minimalism – which we will set aside, as it is derived from his blog – are no

⁴² *Becoming Minimalist*, “the essential motivation handbook”, Jul. 2009, <https://www.becomingminimalist.com/the-essential-motivation-handbook> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

longer active except from Becker's certainly later one (Babauta 2009: 102). This means that minimalism was from the very beginning enmeshed in a broader discourse on self-improvement, as was later the case of Millburn and Nicodemus' presentation of it; and yet, a brief examination of these blogs will show that discarding things and the aesthetic practice of decluttering that surrounds it were nonetheless fundamental aspects of the discourse from the start. Needless to say, we will also find that anti-consumerist rhetoric already functioned as a mediating bridge between the two ends of this continuum, between the lifestyle around stuff and the lifestyle beyond it, justifying decluttering as part of self-improvement and self-improving as a (metaphorical) sort of decluttering; and the same goes for the distinct but related play of mirrors between the aesthetic and the extreme.

Becker's first post on his blog⁴³ already confirms both the aesthetic and the rhetorical nature of "minimalism", as indicating something that one can indeed "become" by discarding one's "stuff" as unneeded and somehow harmful. Just like Millburn and Nicodemus, Becker presents his encounter with "minimalism" as indeed an encounter with the word, a label that he immediately found "attractive" and "freeing" for no explicit reason, but clearly by contrast with the garage full of "stuff" he was trying to clean with his family:

Nearly three hours later, we were still working on the garage and the neighbors were still outside working on their home. My neighbor turned to me and said sarcastically, "Ahh, the joys of home ownership." I responded by saying, "The more stuff you own, the more your stuff owns you." Her next sentence struck a chord with my soul. Her response was, "That's why my daughter is a minimalist. She keeps telling me that I don't need all this stuff!" "A minimalist?" I thought. "How attractive, how freeing – I want that in my life." Call me uneducated, naive, whatever you want – but I had never heard the term before. Yet, it seemed to be the one word that defined my deepest desires. I went inside to tell my wife about the conversation and her response was the same as mine, "That's what I want too." And thus, the journey begins. The journey of becoming a minimalist.

Becker's story, again like Millburn and Nicodemus', presents him as already possessing the sort of anti-materialist idea behind the minimalist discourse, which turns "stuff" into something that actively enslaves one and puts one to hard work (his own cleaning of the garage, the neighbour's care for her "two-level" home's garden). He does not hear anything at all from his neighbour about what the term "minimalism" is supposed to mean beyond that, not even that it entails discarding things (even though it is implicit); what the label suggests to him is rather, first and foremost, something that he could become

⁴³ Becoming Minimalist, "The Journey Begins", May 2008, <https://www.becomingminimalist.com/the-journey-begins> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

in order to transform his whole life – an ideal, “the one word that defined [his] deepest desires.” No reference to Babauta’s blog and its influence is to be found until a year later in the post cited above, turning minimalism into a personal realization from the actual weight of caring for one’s owned stuff (which, it is worth remembering, does not exhaust “minimalism” for any of these authors: the definite benefit of having less to clean is only part of their promises, and one that seems – by their own admission – too trivial on its own, as well as one that could be dealt with more simply – but contradicting minimalism’s aesthetic ideal and common sense – by cleaning less in the first place). This rhetorical appeal of “minimalism” as a label for an (aesthetic) ideal to identify with and to work towards, as a more or less aspirational lifestyle on offer, is what sets it apart from Kondo’s decluttering and its unnamed “ideal lifestyle”: a name already implies that there is something objectively shared and agreed upon with regard to the lifestyle, that it is something more definite than the expression “ideal lifestyle” would otherwise convey. Such implication, together with its betrayal, is at the core of our later analysis of the minimalist discourse. Here the label is referred to without any further determination of it, perhaps out of the assumption that the audience would have been already familiar enough with it from other blogs of the time. Still, Becker sets out to document his family’s transition to minimalism and thus prove that “if this typical family can make it real in their life”, so can the reader (which is Becker’s assigned role in Millburn and Nicodemus’ later book and movie). Setting aside the obviously problematic assumption that a family owning a home with a garage is a “typical family”, this stated mission of course relies upon the idea that “minimalism” has to do with some perhaps extreme minimum to be pursued in discarding one’s things. This is all we get to know about it in this first post, which is evidently supposed to be enough information for a reader to be as inspired by the label as Becker was upon just hearing it.

The second post in the blog starts a series on minimalism’s numerous benefits which is later gathered in one place as a list of 21 benefits⁴⁴. Here minimalism is praised as “countercultural” and “contrary to every advertisement”, and in fact the first benefit mentioned on the blog – and later also on the list – is the benefit of “spending less” and thus saving money and gaining “financial freedom”, immediately allying minimalism to an anti-consumerist restraint on the accumulation of new things. After that, Becker

⁴⁴ Becoming Minimalist, “Benefits of Minimalism: 21 Benefits of Owning Less”, Dec. 2012, <https://www.becomingminimalist.com/minimalism-benefits> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

points to the benefit of a “minimalist home” as inherently “less stressful”, so that the aesthetic already makes its appearance:

A minimalist home is less stressful. Clutter is a form of visual distraction as everything in our vision subtly pulls at our attention. The less clutter, the less visual stress we experience. A minimalist home has a calming feel. I have found this to be true and you will too with a simple experiment. Compare two counter tops: one that is clear (minimal) and one that is cluttered. Look at each of them separately and gauge your internal response. What exactly is your emotional and mental response? Notice how the clear countertop brings about a calming effect and the cluttered one brings emotions of distraction or anxiety. Now, magnify this emotional response throughout your entire home. A minimalist home is significantly less stressful. I have found this to be entirely true. And so will you.⁴⁵

This post is even more explicit than Kondo’s book about the fact that the negative impact attributed to things and stuff as “clutter” is actually first and foremost an aesthetic impact, one that is taken to be an universal, immediate emotional reaction to things even upon merely seeing them. Vice versa, it is aesthetically that minimalism has a “calming effect” on oneself. Becker says that this is what he has “found” to be true, but not even a month had passed since his “journey” began, so it is probably the case that he found it the way he asks the reader to find it, that is, by imagination, and thus appeal to common sense, of one case then generalized to one’s whole home and life: a minimalist lifestyle will be as stress-free as a “clear (minimal)” countertop, because stuff is taken to have overall – and over time – the same negative impact that it appears to have in the contrast between a cluttered and an uncluttered countertop. This benefit clearly underwrites the following one of making it “easier to clean”, because the latter is of course predicated upon the ideal of a thoroughly clean and tidy home to begin with: ironically, it is by “removing the decorations” – another aesthetic task that is just taken for granted here as part of minimalism – that Becker “was surprised at the amount of dust found on the shelves”⁴⁶, evidently a sign of failure in his view despite going unnoticed until then. We have already encountered this tension in minimalist texts between the promise of perfect cleanliness and the promise of not having to clean anymore, or not with as much effort, respectively tied to the ideal of a lifestyle around stuff and of one beyond it. Becker soon hits upon the contradictory realization that minimalism itself is “hard work”: “it takes time and energy to sort possessions” and “to decide what we truly value” or whether something “is necessary to keep or can be removed”, and “it takes time to sort,

⁴⁵ Becoming Minimalist, “Less Stress”, Jun. 2008, <https://www.becomingminimalist.com/benefit-less-stress> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

⁴⁶ Becoming Minimalist, “Easier to Clean”, Jun. 2008, <https://www.becomingminimalist.com/benefit-easier-to-clean> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

sell, recycle, or discard” things, or to “reorganize” the home by “find[ing] ‘homes’ for every belonging” that is left⁴⁷. Is it worth it? This would depend on whether the “minimalist home” is indeed one that is easier to maintain than others despite its perfectionist standards, and whether its other benefits do in fact stem from its achievement. Another contradictory realization in the blog is, for example, that in fact, even if one does not purchase physical things, “many of the things that we use to fill our free time (whether it be a holiday, vacation, or weekend) cost money”, so that to save money one must be cautious with one’s “idle time” and opt for free activities instead⁴⁸: this is what leads Becker to conclude that “while deciding to become minimalist has financial benefits, it won’t automatically fix your financial problems”, because “you’ll just find different things to spend [money] on”, so that it is necessary to actively control and restrain spending⁴⁹. This means that even if it is granted that by discarding things down to a minimum one will somehow be inclined to spend less on “stuff”, restraint on spending will no less be needed (as cleaning probably will too). However, in no way are these contradictions noted and used to reflect upon whether “minimalism” – so far clearly identified with owning less things and with pursuing a certain aesthetic ideal – may not be worth it, especially relative to the alternatives, such as just restraining consumption or just cleaning less to begin with. On the contrary, in fact, it can be argued that Becker’s initial promise of “financial freedom” through minimalism sets one upon the path of pursuing it instead by other means like restraint of spending, precisely because of minimalism’s failure to actually address the problem – just like in Sasaki’s case with regard to self-improvement, first rejected and then written a book about.

Becker’s takes on the benefits of minimalism demonstrate how on the one hand it is grounded on an aesthetic ideal, while on the other it relies upon conflation with distinctly anti-consumerist rhetoric for support of its life-changing impact regardless of contradictions. Thus the fourth benefit on the list is “more freedom”, but this freedom is identified with a “feeling of freedom” Becker had after finishing “minimizing” his of-

⁴⁷ Becoming Minimalist, “harder work than i imagined”, Sep. 2008, <https://www.becomingminimalist.com/harder-work-than-i-imagined> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

⁴⁸ Becoming Minimalist, “idle time = money spent”, Sep. 2008, <https://www.becomingminimalist.com/idle-time-money-spent> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

⁴⁹ Becoming Minimalist, “control your spending”, Nov. 2008, <https://www.becomingminimalist.com/control-your-spending> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

fice into a “new, simple” one⁵⁰: it is more like a relief, on the one hand coming from the contrast between the cluttered and uncluttered office, on the other hand from the end of the very effort to declutter; and minimalism’s basic move is to take it as something “more than a feeling”, as “a reality that can define your life” in Becker’s words. The aesthetic ideal is rooted in the minimalist discourse to the point of being employed by Becker as a frame even in claiming that minimalism is beneficial for the environment:

Assume for just a moment you have one of those mothers that does all the work around the house for you. Every morning when you wake up she makes your bed and the kitchen is spotless no matter what the family ate for dinner the night before. If that was the case, how would you show the most respect and honor to your mother? Would you best bring her honor by pulling out every toy and making as large a mess as possible for her to clean? Or would you bring her honor by keeping things clean, by putting your own toys away, and keeping the room as close to perfection as possible? The second one of course. You would bring honor to her by sustaining the perfection that she desires for you as much as possible. That’s how I look at the environment. If it started in a state of perfection, we would most honor it by taking as much care of the environment as we can. The less we consume, the less damage we do to the environment. And that benefits everyone⁵¹.

Here keeping things clean and keeping one’s room as close to perfection as possible work as frames for environmental concern, thereby also ending up conflated with reduced consumption. Is minimalism beneficial for the environment because of the aesthetic framing it affords through care for one’s domestic environment, or is it because it involves or leads to anti-consumption anyway? The post is not clear about this, and this is the point: discarding things in order to declutter one’s home acquires a significance that seems to go beyond the aesthetic, and which aids rhetorical conflation. In fact, it was already made explicit in the blog that minimalism had become a “spiritual journey” for Becker, that in the beginning “it was just about deliberating[,] getting organized and choosing a new design style for [his] home”, but then – even though a mere month had passed – it came to be “about living a life that is honoring to the God who created [him]”, which “ups the ante” of it all⁵². This is unsurprising given that Becker had been a Christian pastor for years already, but it is no less revelatory of how the minimalist discourse works, because the question about how to live – whether it is honouring God or going beyond stuff – gets immediately absorbed back into the question of how to shape one’s home by discarding things: Becker starts from “how would Jesus live” in

⁵⁰ Becoming Minimalist, “Freedom”, Jun. 2008, <https://www.becomingminimalist.com/benefit-freedom> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

⁵¹ Becoming Minimalist, “Good for the Environment”, Jul. 2008, <https://www.becomingminimalist.com/benefit-good-for-the-environment> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

⁵² Becoming Minimalist, “a spiritual journey”, Jun. 2008, <https://www.becomingminimalist.com/a-spiritual-journey> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

his place, but “with that in mind, [he] look[s] around and wonder[s], ‘is this what Jesus’s house would look like?’”, and “would his closet look this full?”, and yet still “would he have spent as much on home furnishings and decorations?” – all answered in the negative, of course. The aesthetic ideal becomes a moral or even spiritual ideal, which is what allows it to mesh with anti-consumerism (and self-improvement), beside – in this specific case – the Christian creationist idea of nature’s initial “perfect state” before human intervention. Becker’s wholesale dismissal of “home furnishings and decorations” is in line with the anti-aesthetic component of anti-consumerist rhetoric, which explains why he shifts at this exact juncture from wondering how the home would “look like” in Jesus’ hands – an aesthetic question – to whether he would have spent money purchasing such superfluous things (which, as by now it should have been repeated enough times, does not necessarily justify getting rid of them as owned items instead of items yet to be purchased). This contradictory mixture, we contend, is what characterizes “minimalism” best as opposed to decluttering as such, or for that matter any one of its other rhetorical components (anti-consumerism and self-improvement). Our main analyses will show how it works out in the later and larger minimalist discourse online, but the early blogs are important because they demonstrate – usually in a candid, even naïve way – that the mixture was there from the start. This is why Becker can both hold a grudge against decorations and list “visual appeal” as one of minimalism’s benefits, asking the reader to think of “photos of homes that are cluttered” and then of “photos of minimalist homes”, that is, “the ones with almost nothing in them except some beautiful furniture, some nice artwork, and a very few pretty decorations”, which feel “both calm and elegant” and include all the most valued things “proudly on display”: the latter is deemed most appealing to most people, not most disdainful of worthless decorations (which are featured here in a positive light, as is “beautiful furniture”).

The same ambiguity towards the aesthetic is brought out by juxtaposing two other benefits of minimalism, “freedom from the comparison game” and “display[ing] what you value most.” The post about the former is of course steeped in the anti-consumerist rhetoric we have already familiarized with, which Becker quite succinctly recapitulates: on the one hand the “cultural” pressure from advertisements to purchase and “own more”, on the other the “natural tendencies” and “built-in desire” to “compare

our lives with those around us” and “impress others by owning as much as possible”, and so “we end up wishing we had more” of all sorts of “stuff” – from the latest technology to “trendy clothes” – instead of being “content” with what we have⁵³. In this case, the aesthetic is to be rejected as a source of endless competitive struggle through materialist accumulation of stuff. Becker’s lesson here is that “we spend so much mental energy thinking about what we don’t own, we fail to appreciate the things that we do own”, which already reveals the aesthetic nature of the minimalist solution to the problem – not just consuming less and renouncing the materialist-aesthetic struggle, but first and foremost discarding one’s things. The post about the second benefit, which was actually published earlier, takes it as a good thing to “visibly declare what is important to you” just by means of the things one owns and displays in the home:

People often define minimalism as *removing all material possessions from your life*. They ask me, “How do you live life as a minimalist? It sounds so boring.” But their definition is founded on an incorrect assumption. Minimalism isn’t just the removal of all physical possessions. It is also *the intentional promotion of the things I value most*. It is about deciding what is most important in your life and removing the things that distract you from it. Which bring me back to my friend’s bookcase. As I look at her bookcase, I ask myself, “What is it that she values most?” I can’t tell by looking her at bookcase – it’s too crowded with things that are less important. One benefit of minimalism is that you are able to visibly declare what is most important to you. Look around your living room. What does it communicate about you? If a total stranger walked in, what would they identify is most important? Is it? Or has the most important things in your life become crowded out by less important things?⁵⁴

This shift to a positive rhetoric reminds us of Kondo’s aesthetic ideal of only owning things that are loved, which covered the negativity of necessarily having first to go through discarding all other unloved – or even indifferent – things, down to some objective minimum. Thus appreciating the things that one already owns is not something one does immediately, as suggested by its anti-consumerist contrast to the struggle to acquire new things in order to impress, but rather something that first requires the struggle to discard a large part of one’s old things, just like in Kondo’s extremely aesthetic decluttering. Somehow, despite the claim that minimalist homes are “visually appealing” to people, such a minimalist display of stuff is not dismissed as an attempt to “impress others”, but rather hailed as accurately communicating what is most important about oneself. Becker, of course, never distinguishes anti-consumerism from “minimalism”, just like the other authors we have considered, so that minimalism’s aesthetic ideal –

⁵³ Becoming Minimalist, “Freedom From the Comparison Game”, Mar. 2010, <https://www.becoming-minimalist.com/benefit-freedom-from-comparison> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

⁵⁴ Becoming Minimalist, “Display What You Value Most”, Jul. 2009, <https://www.becomingminimalist.com/benefit-display-what-you-value-most> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

one that demands “hard work” – is at once posited as the end to the consumerist struggle and charged, vice versa, with anti-consumerism’s benefits (despite the fact that they must actually be worked on independently with yet more effort, as in spending control and restraint). Becker’s listed benefits of having more time for what matters, of thus “being productive” and also have “more opportunity to rest”, of “doing work you love” thanks to lowered expenses and thereby less need for a high income, keep being attributed to minimalism in its specific practice of discarding things (“Own less stuff. Choose work you love.”⁵⁵), as if that was a sufficient and necessary factor – or at any rate a crucially important one – for securing those benefits. The plausibility of this would depend, as we have noted, on whether the achievement of the aesthetic ideal of a minimalist home would really enable one to finally appreciate one’s owned things once and for all, thus supposedly leading to less desire for new things and drastically reducing consumption. This, as unwittingly admitted by Becker himself, does not seem to be nearly enough anyway, but it could at least count as an aid. However, minimalism’s stark heightening of one’s aesthetic standards can just as well lead one to “purchase higher quality things”, which is included as another benefit by Becker in his list: here it counts as a bad thing if one owns “mediocre shirts” he or she does not “truly love” or even that he or she just “kinda like[s]”, but since “more is not better” and yet “better is better” in Becker’s view, buying less things but with higher quality and cost is no problem for a minimalist⁵⁶. All in all, whether with regard to anti-consumerist reasons or frugal ones, the case might be just like that of self-improvement, wherein minimalism promises – on aesthetic grounds – that by discarding things and decluttering one’s home something will be achieved that will, in fact, require work independent from such practices; work that could have been done instead to begin with.

The original emphases in the post quoted above already contain Becker’s standard definition of “minimalism” as “the intentional promotion of the things we most value and the removal of everything that distracts us from it”, which he also characterizes as a “rational minimalism” by contrast to the more negative “extreme minimalism” one might immediately think of (“Some people I speak with get nervous when they hear the term *minimalist*. For them, it conjures up images of destitution, barren walls, and empty

⁵⁵ Becoming Minimalist, “Do Work You Love”, Jul. 2008, <https://www.becomingminimalist.com/benefit-love-your-work> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

⁵⁶ Becoming Minimalist, “Own Higher Quality Things”, Jun. 2008, <https://www.becomingminimalist.com/benefit-own-quality> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

cupboards [...] *extreme minimalism* is no way to enjoy life”⁵⁷). As pointed out a few times already, this rhetorical move is precisely what we will focus on in the later analyses, a move that affirms minimalism as entirely positive and subjective, free of external models or rules, free of some minimum to be objectively pursued, and in fact almost thoroughly indeterminate. That such move has first come up in a post about the visual display of one’s valued things, equated there with the “intentional promotion” of such things – supposedly within one’s life at large –, shows that in fact minimalism’s aesthetic dimension goes hand in hand with its indeterminacy, which allows for all these confluences that the minimalist discourse rhetorically rests upon (all contradictions notwithstanding). If this is so, then it cannot be objected that anti-consumerist or self-improvement practices – and the additional work they demand – are themselves “minimalist”, because the aesthetic ideal still lies in the background, and the necessity of discarding things is left there at its core, untouched. In a list of principles to define “minimalism” that was last updated in 2019⁵⁸, after all, Becker’s first “elevator-pitch answer” to the issue of “what is minimalism?” is that “minimalism is owning fewer possessions”, thus “removing the distraction of excess possessions”; once again, it is far from being just a practice on par with others. Not only do Becker’s appeals to the rhetoric of anti-consumerism or self-improvement come second, but they are also indeed quite rhetorical in nature, because there is no mention of any other concrete practice in line with them: judging from the post, it would again seem as though one will achieve “freedom from the passion to possess” and “freedom from modern mania” simply by discarding things (which of course fits well Becker’s last point that minimalism is “completely achievable” for anyone: no other concrete conditions but discarding enter this picture). As in Millburn and Nicodemus’ movie, the anti-consumerist rhetoric serves the purpose of presenting minimalism as “counter-cultural”, so that its self-improvement advice – even when it reduces to home-improvement in practice – is not counted as another form of “chasing after success, glamour, and fame”, what society and media impose. However, this cannot take the place of its core practice. As we have seen, “minimalism” seems to dissolve if the discourse surrounding it is not grounded in a certain aesthetic ideal and a rhetorical insistence on the necessity of discarding things down to the minimum (even

⁵⁷ Becoming Minimalist, “Find a Rational Minimalism that Works For You”, Feb. 2010, <https://www.becomingminimalist.com/find-a-rational-minimalism-that-works-for-you> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

⁵⁸ Becoming Minimalist, “What Is Minimalism?”, Jun. 2006, <https://www.becomingminimalist.com/what-is-minimalism> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

if presented in positive and subjective terms). This is why in Becker's list the actual discarding of one's material possessions comes before the principle of "intentionality" that is generalized from the practice and justified through it – not the other way around –, just like with Millburn and Nicodemus' a posteriori framing of their life advice as "minimalist" because of its concern with the "essential areas" of (any)one's life. Otherwise, one could start right away by "intentionally promoting" one's most valued "things" not in the sense of selecting, reordering and displaying material possessions, but in the sense of devoting energies to one's interests beyond stuff, whatever they are. Our later analyses will show how "minimalism" is often equated in this way with "intentional life", particularly when rejecting the aesthetic dimension (although this translation demonstrates precisely that it is in fact both aesthetically and rhetorically different and more determined than that). What is worth stressing here is that intentionality is derived from the aesthetic practice of discarding things, not vice versa, and that – like references to "passion to possess" and "modern mania" – it works as a bridge to the anti-consumerist and self-improvement rhetoric: minimalism "forces intentionality upon us", and thereby on the one hand it "forces improvements in almost all aspects of your life", and on the other it also grants one "freedom from duplicity", it constitutes a lifestyle that is "united and consistent", "reliable, dependent and unfluctuating", "honest and transparent", instead of one based on "a certain external image" that depends on one's various relationships and variable circumstances. Along the way from minimalism to intentionality, the aesthetic seems to fade in the background, as Becker maintains that minimalism "is not external, but internal", so that "after the external clutter has been removed, we create the space to address the deepest heart issues that impact our relationships and life." In the FAQs included in the same post, he also responds to the question as to whether minimalism will "automatically make one content" by saying that while "it is a great start" and it frees up time and money, it is actually a "pathway", a "journey of intentional self-improvement, and appreciating what we already have." And yet one cannot just save effort, time or money, embark on that journey or appreciate things already owned. The aesthetic ideal must remain in the background of "intentionality" and all practices that are rhetorically incorporated into the minimalist discourse. This is what backs up its claim to be one "lifestyle", something that is "completely transferrable no matter the situation" to all areas of life, yet remains distinctly "minimalist" nonetheless.

2.1.1.5 – One vague ideal from the start (ii): Babauta

The lifestyle around stuff and the lifestyle beyond stuff, or the positive aesthetic ideal and the negative extreme rhetoric, are once again mixed up into one vague ideal, a single “minimalist lifestyle” continually conflating decluttering, anti-consumerism and self-improvement. If we now turn to Babauta’s even earlier blogs, we can confirm that this was the case from the start. Babauta’s *Zen Habits* is not – overall – as rhetorically invested in “minimalism” as Becker’s blog or Millburn and Nicodemus’ *The Minimalists* are, though it is quite minimalist already in its unadorned, black-on-white aesthetic (taken even further by his later – and focally “minimalist” – *Mnmlist* blog). On both fronts, the influence that this blog had on Millburn and Nicodemus is evident: their own blog has a similarly stripped down presentation, while their book – as we have seen – offers generic life advice without even mentioning for the most part “minimalism” (contrary to their blog and podcast). In Babauta’s case, the last explicit reference to “minimalism” by its name is a post published on the first day of 2019⁵⁹, perhaps not coincidentally the very same day Kondo’s TV series on Netflix was released; the post, however, only speaks of the new year as “a kind of minimalism” for the “minimalist blank slate” it affords, an “empty house” where – after “tossing out everything” – we can now place “what we find most important, and nothing more.” In fact, this metaphorical use of “minimalism” actually goes straight to the heart of the whole rhetorical play of mirrors we have tried hard to follow so far, and it also places Babauta’s blog within its continuum. Although they never go back on the necessity of actually discarding things as a core practice – especially since their blog and podcast are built upon it –, it would be easy to argue that Millburn and Nicodemus rhetorically employ reference to it as a metaphor for self-improvement (as done explicitly in the book) and anti-consumerism (as done implicitly in the movie): in the former case, as in Babauta’s post, “minimalism” is some sort of reset to a minimal state from which self-improvement in all of life’s “essential areas” can begin, while in the latter case it is supposed to be an act of rejection of, and purification from, the evils attributed to the consumerist life. Vice versa, one could equally argue that Kondo’s “life-changing” decluttering – and thus one side of Sasaki’s most contradictory minimalism – results from an application of self-improvement and partly anti-consumerism as rhetorical frames for an otherwise circum-

⁵⁹ Zen Habits, “New Year: The Beautiful Minimalism of a Blank Slate”, Jan. 2019, <https://zenhabits.net/new-slate> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

scribed aesthetic practice: home-improvement thus becomes ipso facto self-improvement, even a form of bodily “detox” in Kondo’s view, and satisfaction with one’s home is extended to a satisfaction with life such that the consumerist pursuit of more stuff and status symbols will just end of itself. The minimalist discourse proper, the discourse that needs and addresses “minimalism” as a lifestyle label, is found in the midst and mixture of these two specular ways of joining its rhetorical components, and this is the “heart” we have just referred to: as shown by the insistence on the necessity of discarding things no matter what, in neither case can the metaphors be explicitly admitted to be just metaphors, because that threatens to dissolve “minimalism” as a lifestyle of its own, irreducible to the different components it incorporates. One important reason why this cannot be allowed to happen, of course, is that it would also threaten the discourse around and about “minimalism”, which authors, bloggers and other online influencers economically profit from or depend upon. We will see this most directly in our later analyses, wherein an “end of minimalism” is declared only to endlessly reaffirm minimalism and the minimalist discourse; such endlessness of minimalism was in fact our main interest and concern in critically studying the discourse. Even a scroll through the archive of Babauta’s blog already exhibits on its own, with its almost two decades of extremely repetitive contents, how maximalist can the minimalist discourse be.

As the cited post shows, Babauta’s minimalism is thoroughly intertwined with self-improvement (along with the usual doses of anti-consumerist rhetoric). The “empty house” of the new year – a “new beginning [...] where we can do anything, imagine possibilities, become a new person” – must be filled, and it will of course be filled with individualist self-improvements projects, such as those suggested by Babauta himself. Significantly, the first suggestion – but only the first – employs in an implicit way the minimalist metaphorical frame of focusing on the essential (“Do you want to fill [the blank slate of this new year] with distractions, or keep only the most important work, relationships, commitments?”), while the second one points to anti-consumerist rhetoric (“Do you want to be constantly checking social media, or would you like to read long-form writing and books, perhaps create something new?”), and from there it is just self-improvement all the way down (one can become “more mindful”, “more compassionate”, “more wholehearted in your relationships”, “more active”, “eat more healthy,

nourishing food”, “get outdoors more”, “be more organized”, “get your finances in order” and so on). Unsurprisingly, this ultimately leads into Babauta’s own “Sea Change habit-changing program” with its monthly challenges on anything from mindfulness to productivity, from exercise to “simplifying life”, as well as his “Fearless Training Program” for “shift[ing] your habitual patterns of procrastination” and, in brief, the resistances one might have to “the uncertainty that comes with meaningful work” on oneself⁶⁰. The post thus brings us back to our conclusions on Millburn and Nicodemus’ book, confirming and clarifying them: if a “minimalist” lifestyle amounts to nothing but a life of self-improvement, what is rhetorically “minimalist” about it seems to be just its basic, paradoxically universalized individualist frame, wherein everything is indeed “tossed out” from sight – conditions, obstacles, environments, interpersonal and social relationships etc. – except for the abstract individual working on himself or herself, just as full of infinite possibilities as is any other such individual. Of course, as we have just observed, this is never actually taken to be enough for one to be a “minimalist”; in this sense, we might say that, even when the main emphasis falls on self-improvement, a proper “minimalist” would still be one who maintains – however obscurely and tacitly – that discarding things is at least a necessary preliminary step for that, if only for the taste of such infinite possibilities it affords (aesthetically too, as in the imagined “empty house”). Babauta’s post does not qualify as “minimalist” from this point of view, because there is no hint of the necessity of discarding or even decluttering, even though it is probably on the background as something a reader of the blog would already associate it to anyway. In fact, when Babauta jumps from the “new year” framing to the claim that those possibilities are actually “available to us in any moment”, that “each new second is a fresh beginning, a new opportunity, a chance to start over, a blank canvas to be filled”, he is arguably trespassing the muddy threshold between self-improvement and “minimalism”, even if taken as a mere metaphor: while the two may eventually reach the same endpoint, it is clear that the minimalist discourse depends on the idea that possibilities are not quite there yet, that they must first be freed up through minimization as a more or less discrete event, like the new year. Babauta’s blog always sits on this fence, which explains why he does not have to rely on “minimalism” as much: after

⁶⁰ At present, these programs seem to have merged into a “Fearless Living Academy”, which promises to help one to “take greater ownership of [one’s] life” in every respect (“exercise, eating, sleeping, and prioritizing self-care”), “build unshakeable confidence”, “stare down huge tasks with fierce determination” and so on (<https://ignite.zenhabits.net/fla-founders>; last accessed: 14/11/2023).

2010, there are very few instances of the label in the posts' titles; even *Mnmlist* has been active mainly up to the first half of 2012, with not many posts after that.

It is vital to note that Babauta's disillusionment with "minimalism" was openly voiced a few times, because it shows how the rhetorical moves we will focus on later were already there from the start, just as much as the aesthetic dimension they usually take aim at; and how minimalism nevertheless comes out unscathed. For this purpose, we can compare one of the last posts implicitly about "minimalism" – though it rather talks of "the Way of Less" –, later in 2019, to one of the last posts back in 2010, just before the near disappearance of the word from the posts' titles. In the latter, Babauta laments that with its recent growth "the minimalism trend has had certain elements that leave some readers with a bad taste in their mouths", among which he includes "hype and salesmanship", "obsession", "one-upsmanship", "a focus on aesthetics" and "a focus on possessions to the point of obsession"; he also admits to be as "guilty" of these as any other⁶¹. The contradictions we have been pointing out along the way come here to the fore, from Kondo's hyped claim that tidying up will be "life-changing" to Sasaki's aestheticized gallery of minimalist homes and many branded products in his book's prologue, or to Millburn's declared need to justify to himself any and every thing that he owned as either useful or loved. Of course, Babauta does not really refer to anyone specifically, and he certainly had no problem with featuring in Millburn and Nicodemus' movie, yet it would be hard to deny that our analyses of the most popular minimalist texts highlight these faults in their rhetoric. Even the contradiction between a lifestyle around stuff and a lifestyle beyond it seems to be recognized by Babauta, when he writes that "when we obsess over what (few) possessions we have, it has a hold on us just as much as if we were hoarders." However, this talk of "obsession" and the related equivalence of obsessed minimalists with "hoarders" already reveal that, by Babauta's lights, on the one hand the problem is conceived in the same terms that the minimalist discourse conceives it, and on the other the solution is just one of dialling back on one's investment in "minimalism": his "minimalism rethink" is just an individual act of "letting go" of those tendencies in the discourse and instead "embrace the moment", "be content", "just share [one's situation] and encourage", and so on. But this means that one should refrain from showing off "how little we have" or "how cool our setup" in the

⁶¹ Zen Habits, "minimalism, rethink", Apr. 2010, <https://zenhabits.net/minimalism-rethink> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

same way as one is supposed to do, within the minimalist discourse but through the anti-consumerist rhetoric, with regard to one's stuff, not to be taken as a status symbol to be pursued and projected. In other words, the same anti-consumerist rhetoric incorporated in the discourse, down to the attack against impulsiveness that is implicit in "obsession", is here retorted against minimalism. By contrast to the attack on consumerism, however, the one levelled against minimalism is not supposed to call it into question altogether, as is the case with stuff and status symbols; at the bottom of the post, we find links to the latest posts on the other blog, *Mnmlist*. It appears as though Babauta is again attacking consumerism in its materialism and aestheticism, as if these had crept into minimalism – which is often supposed to (almost) coincide with anti-consumerism – from without. If we recall that the minimalist rhetoric is in fact distinct and different from the anti-consumerist one, this is not an obvious move to make anymore: the discourse appeals to anti-consumerism in order to justify the necessity of discarding things (conflating two different sorts of anti-materialism), but if this is just as susceptible to the assumed problems of consumerism, to the point that one must restrain oneself, what is the use and even necessity of discarding things to begin with? As usual, cannot one just control oneself from the start? Babauta does not say, because he does not even question discarding; he was, and still is, at least that much "minimalist", even if on the fence, and even if bothered by the rapidly growing discourse (Millburn and Nicodemus were just about to launch their blog).

Nine years later, Babauta speaks of "the Way of Less" instead of "minimalism", and yet he does so two days after announcing on the blog the launch of a new edition of his "Sea Change" program, with the first monthly challenge being decluttering and with "content from [his] favorite minimalists" Becker, Millburn and Carver⁶². In fact, the post on "the Way of Less" reads just like Millburn and Nicodemus' framing of self-improvement as itself "minimalist", if anything formulating it in a more explicit, coherent and comprehensive way, from the very preamble: Babauta starts off by saying that "our lives naturally get filled with clutter", but in this "clutter" he includes not only our "possessions", but also the media that "we are constantly watching and responding" to, and receive "messages" from; as the "possessions" too are in fact those that constantly "pour in" after we easily order them online, once again minimalism merges here with

⁶² Zen Habits, "The Launch of Sea Change 2.0 (and November's Declutter Challenge)", Nov. 2019, <https://zenhabits.net/sea-change-2> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

anti-consumerism, depicting a “modern world” that is “one of more, more and still more”⁶³. The proposed solution to this all-encompassing problem of “more”, of course, cannot but be “to declutter our lives and live with less”, respectively highlighting the metaphorical application of “decluttering” to all life and alluding to the fact that, at any rate, discarding things and owning less are necessarily part of that. In this sense, the post seems to put Babauta’s concern with the minimalist obsession with discarding into perspective: discarding should lead to and accompany, not overshadow, the broader self-improvement project it rhetorically supports, and it should do so in a moderate way that does not end up undermining this very support. As we have said, Babauta is on the fence: the first kind of “less” he lists is “less clutter, fewer possessions, just the essentials”, but below that he reverses the order and speaks first of “what matters most” and secondly of “possessions”; significantly, he does so after upturning the negative rhetoric into a positive rhetoric (“The Way of Less is not really about saying no to everything or tossing everything out or doing nothing. [...] It’s about saying yes to what really matters.”). All the other items in the list of “less” are rather related to anti-consumerism and/or self-improvement, with the second one visibly merging them with minimalism: once following “the Way of Less”, one has “no need to reach for the comfort of buying things or holding onto things, because [one has] learned to take care of [one’s] stress without things.” But if a minimalist obsession with discarding is possible, then it is clear that one can in fact just as well reach for the comfort of discarding things, and take care of his or her stress not just “without things” (lifestyle beyond stuff), but by their removal and the (aesthetic) relief of their absence (lifestyle around stuff). If so, what is the actual use of discarding things or making “a list of essential possessions” (where “the essential” is the minimum in a subjective key)? Babauta does not offer an answer, because the various forms of “less” are collapsed into one just as much as are the forms of “more”, almost as if addressing one will amount to addressing all of them, or will at least help with that. Will discarding physical possessions aid in achieving “less doing and busy-ness” by “sa[ying] no to more things”, “less distractedness” by “checking on things less”, and “less on your to-read list” – or any other list – by “let[ting] go of the need to read and watch and do everything that looks interesting”? It might, but no argument as to how it would work can be found, either here or in the other minimalist texts. It is not clear if, after the list, Babauta is referring to discarding things when he

⁶³ Zen Habits, “The Way of Less”, Nov. 2019, <https://zenhabits.net/way-less> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

writes that “by reducing down to less, you learn to become content with little”, you gain “space in your life” and you can thus “breathe”, “focus on what matters most to you” and “find joy in the simple things.” It is one whole package of “less”, one lifestyle, one vague ideal.

When the package is eventually unpacked and laid down as a linear path, the preliminary nature of discarding things is made clear. The first step is “identify[ing] the essentials”, which as noted before include “what matters most” (like Millburn and Nicodemus’ “essential areas of life”), the physical possessions and then also one’s “projects” and one’s “digital essentials”; in other words, an exercise in prioritization applied to one’s whole life. That Babauta’s own list for what matters most to him includes “an active, healthy, mindful life”, which he himself admits to be “like a cheat” as “it includes meditation but could include walking, hikes, sports, lifting weights, yoga, cycling, swimming, surfing or more”, exhibits the same contradiction we have seen in the “essential areas of life”, namely that they are in fact so abstract and generic that they encompass all of (any)one’s life: rather than prioritizing anything, what they seem to do is applying the universalized frame of individualist, self-improving life (which is “essential”, or minimal, only in that it cuts out of the frame everything and everyone but the individual and his or her abstracted life). Because of this it is implicit, in prioritizing the activities and media one is involved with, that one does so as an individual and for one’s own individual life. Just like with Millburn and Nicodemus, discarding things can be understood as a rhetorical support for the frame: the minimum (or essential) in minimalism is of an individual, and pursued individually by discarding things that one owns – and thus has unilateral, unlimited control over (which, needless to say, is not as true of one’s other “areas” of life). The second step is thus to “start decluttering the rest”, that which is not in the essentials, including one’s possessions (with no explicit justification, as we have observed). Babauta’s rhetorical approach, in this regard, is significant for its evident contrast with Kondo’s: as the step’s formulation stresses (one just has to “start”), he advises to discard things, activities, “digital distractions” and so on “just a little bit at a time”, as “otherwise it can get overwhelming”; the exact opposite of Kondo’s insistence on getting discarding done first (which, rather than overwhelming, she found “exhilarating”). This seems to fit Babauta’s distancing from “minimalism” as a label, his rhetorical preference for a relative “less” over an absolute “minimum”, despite

the latter being still present as the “essential.” Beyond that, however, it fits the preliminary place of discarding things with regard to, and in service of, a broader self-improvement project predicated upon anti-consumerist rhetoric. In other words, there is no point insisting on getting first to the minimum or the essential, if that is not an endpoint – as it is in Kondo (and Sasaki’s first book) – but rather the beginning of more work to do. After starting with decluttering, there is still need to “learn to cope (and thrive) without buying and overdoing” (the third step), a “lifetime practice” which in turn “starts with meditation” but does not even end there: as Babauta writes, it is what is trained in his “Fearless Training Program” (to which the post links). This is basically restated in the fifth step, that is, “saying no to the rest more often” instead of “let[ting] things creep back in”, even adopting this as a “general rule” towards what lies outside of one’s essentials. Was not reduction itself supposed to teach one to be “content with little”? On the contrary, it is something that must be worked on independently once again, and precisely in order to maintain whatever reduction one has made, to defend it against ongoing if not unending assaults (seen as external to the individual within the self-improvement framing we have mentioned, just like things not owned are external to one’s home). Even the positive fourth and sixth steps, which were likely intended to compensate the negativity and work of the third and fifth ones, actually betray the insufficiency of selecting the essentials and discarding everything else. It is again “a lifetime practice” to “start finding the joy in the things that you’ve kept” (fourth step), despite these being “the things that most matter to you”: it is thus necessary to actively “stop looking for happiness and comfort in everything else”, and “find joy in very little.” Moreover, one can exceed even within the boundaries of the essentials, so it is also necessary to just “enjoy the space” (sixth step), to “just notice” or “just breath” or “relax into it”, rather than “fill[ing] everything up with reading, watching, doing, responding, talking, moving, acting”, even if one “finds joy” in such activities. In both cases, contentment is something to be striven for, protected and practiced, not a result of reduction to the essential per se. Given this, why discard things? Cannot one simply practice joy or contentment to begin with? In fact, is it not out of discontent that one is led to discarding? Is it not its very aim that of being filled up, since everything that is negative or indifferent must be rejected and ejected as extraneous?

We have been posing this sort of questions around the necessity of discarding all throughout our explorations of popular minimalist texts, but we have never really found an explicit answer. The closest we have got to an explanation has rather been some sort of literal or imaginative illustration, from the empty homes of Millburn and Nicodemus' movie to Sasaki's gallery in the prologue or his example of staying in a hotel room, from Kondo's visualization – pre-emptively tied to discarding – to Becker's contrasts between cluttered and uncluttered countertops. This evidently points to an aesthetic dimension to the core practice of discarding things, yet one whose ideal is always extended in some way and degree – with recognizably different emphases – to all of life, making it a lifestyle⁶⁴. Accordingly, the two poles of the continuum presuppose each other and are mutually reinforcing, as Kondo's decluttering takes on the “life-changing” scope of self-improvement while Babauta's self-improvement is charged with – and framed by – the home-transforming appeal of decluttering (both also linked to and by anti-consumerist rhetoric). The insistence on the necessity of discarding things amounts, either way, to the insistence that this expansion of the aesthetic ideal is not merely rhetorical: decluttering really is life-changing by itself (especially for Kondo, Sasaki and Becker), and the life it creates – or at least contributes to – really is a distinctive, integral “minimalist” lifestyle of anti-consumerism and self-improvement, organized around the features or feelings of the ideal (especially for Millburn, Nicodemus and Babauta). In fact, however, this continuum is shot through with all sorts of contradictions

⁶⁴ Babauta's first book on minimalism, which is a slightly reworked collection of materials from his blogs, confirms this by not only defining the “minimalist life” as “a removal of clutter in all its forms”, but also including in it an embrace of “the beauty of less, the aesthetic of spareness” that is immediately identified with “a life of contentedness in what we need and what makes us truly happy” (Babauta 2009: 6). After “realizing you already have enough” and thus becoming “content with what you have”, the first thing Babauta suggests doing is “start cutting back on clutter and possessions”, because “if you have a home or office full of clutter, you're not minimalist yet”; only then come “simplifying your schedule” and “slowly edit[ing] everything you do” (10-11): as the ordering of the book's contents shows, minimalism expands outward from the aesthetic of “clearing clutter” for a “minimalist home”, a “minimalist workspace” and even a “minimalist computer” to other areas such as travel, food, fitness, finances and relationships (and only at the end, as the mere afterthought it usually is in the discourse, sustainability). Thus Babauta writes that “clutter is poison to a minimalist”, because “stuff weighs you down” and “stresses you out” and “is a reflection of your internal state”, so one must “toss out the unnecessary and be left with sparse beauty” (21). Making one's home “beautiful” and maintaining it as such by habitually cleaning and keeping everything in its fixed “home” (22) is part and parcel of minimalism, which has its own defining features: “minimal furniture” with “clear surfaces”, some “accent decorations” and “quality over quantity” in things owned (30-31). Such a minimalist home is “less stressful” and “more appealing” (“The [homes] with almost nothing in them except some beautiful furniture, some nice artwork, and a very few pretty decorations, are the ones that appeal to most of us”, 29-30), and it is also supposed to be “easier to clean”, though we have seen how that might be compensated by its demand that everything be always perfectly clean and clear. The discourse then conflates its aesthetic “stress” and relief with those of life at large.

and conflations, starting from the very one that opposes its two poles: one pole emphasizes the efficacy of discarding things and thus tends to affirm that it is sufficient, while the other pole emphasizes its supposed effects and tends to affirm that further and broader work for them is necessary; these put “minimalism” at risk by jeopardizing, respectively, the rhetorical claim that it constitutes a lifestyle and the aesthetic claim that it is life-changing. Such risk is usually kept at bay through recourse to anti-consumerist rhetoric, conflated with the distinctly minimalist one: in this way, discarding things can be said to be life-changing because it is anti-consumerist, rather than because it realizes an aesthetic ideal, and vice versa it constitutes a lifestyle because it fundamentally negates modern society’s consumerist, materialist and aestheticized life. On close inspection, this does not seem very convincing anyway, as the act of “saying no” to one’s already owned things has no necessary relation – within the discourse itself – to that of “saying no” to new things that may be purchased or consumed, which is why the latter must actually be worked on independently, just like with other aspects of self-improvement; and yet their conflation as both anti-materialist seems to be enough for the rhetorical functioning of the minimalist discourse. Similarly, of course, “saying no” to all sorts of things – projects, messages, relationships etc. – as an universalized, individualist general rule is not necessarily related to either of the above, and it is not even quite the same as the anti-aesthetic side of anti-consumerist rhetoric against the media and their external social impositions of impulsive desires, even though it may be again conflated with it. Thus decluttering, anti-consumerism and self-improvement are bound together by their bouncing to one another the hot potato of justifying the urgency of discarding things as the minimalist *sine qua non*, over and above each of these rhetorical components. More than any one thing, this is “minimalism” as it is rhetorically constituted by the discourse we have examined; out of these boundaries in either direction, it dissolves as such. The label’s simultaneous links to an aesthetic common sense and to a rhetoric – itself in fact a commonsensical reading – of the extreme minimum confirm its constitutive ambiguity. Its primary use as the name for a lifestyle point to a centre of gravity perhaps located closer to the second pole, which is what our second round of analyses will draw out more fully: the minimalist uneasiness and ambivalence with regard to its own aesthetic dimension, constituting a discourse at odds with itself.

From this point of view, Babauta's approach differs only by degree from Millburn and Nicodemus' most explicit presentation of "minimalism" – in the book – as almost identical to individualist self-improvement. Babauta literally relativizes the minimum into the "less", but he still speaks of a state to be pursued wherein only "essentials" will be present in one's individualist life: no less than the minimum, such state puts one to work in order to pursue it, and will also keep one working so long as it must be continuously protected from further intrusions of the inessential. The rhetorical frame of discarding things is still operative without explicit emphasis on "minimalism", putting one to work even in the most straightforward sense: to the extent that discarding some things is usually an action that most people can immediately do on their own, it is an apt starting point to give them a taste of self-improvement and embark them on its path, even though it is a path that will demand of them more work still. In fact, actually putting a rhetorical frame into practice enhances it by binding it to certain concrete experiences, from the sense of progress generated by the on-going reduction in one's belongings to the cathartic rejection of social influence or intrusion by removing its supposed visible effects. To say that the minimalist discourse refuses to acknowledge that the rhetorical frame is indeed rhetorical is to say that it relies upon such enhancement. Babauta's avoidance of the label and his softening of the core practice of discarding things, which he presents as very easy, slow and gradual, suggest an use of the rhetorical frame at its most attenuated and thus accommodating level, but one that still requires discarding or decluttering. Moreover, just like with Kondo at the other end of the spectrum, the positivity of Babauta's rhetoric does not cancel its underlying negativity, as we can see in the post's references to living with "very little", which betray the tacit equivalence of the essential and the minimal. Thanks to its very contradictions, the minimalist rhetoric – with the aesthetic behind it – allows Babauta to calibrate the force of his discourse effectively, at times pushing for disciplined work of restraint and contentment with less, while at others projecting the comfort of a life where all needs are met, a few passionate projects are carried on, a few relationships are deepened and so on. It is no surprise, then, that at one time Babauta wrote of the "discipline habit" shortly after writing of the "declutter habit" – again the challenge of that month –, and in the same terms of an order springing out and expanding outwards from a small everyday gesture:

What do you do if your life is a mess, you have no discipline or routines, can't stick to anything, procrastinate, and feel out of control? How do you get started with the discipline habit when you have so much to change? You start by washing your dishes. It's just one small step: when you eat

your cereal, wash your bowl and spoon. When you finish drinking coffee or tea, wash your cup. Don't leave dishes in the sink or counter or table. [...] Once you do this for a few weeks, you can start making sure the sink is clean. Then the counter. Then put your clothes away when you take them off. Then start doing a few pushups. Eat a few vegetables. One of these at a time, you'll start to build the discipline habit and trust yourself to stick to something. But for now, just wash your dishes. Mindfully, with a smile⁶⁵.

In a sense, the gap between the two poles of the minimalist spectrum is there in that “for now”, as it demands that washing dishes be taken as sufficient even if it actually leads to more work on oneself, just like discarding things and decluttering the home: maintaining that these are effective and necessary ways to transform oneself or one's life at large, as in Kondo's framing of them as automatically “life-changing”, aids in temporarily taking them on as sufficient and getting into self-improvement. The self-improvement practices that will follow, however, will be “minimalist” only insofar as this preliminary placement of discarding and decluttering is not explicit nor exhaustive of them, that is, only insofar as they remain rhetorically operative in the background as necessary aspects of the lifestyle: the aesthetic work of home-improvement will have to continue even after granting a taste and a testing ground for the “discipline” of self-improvement, never stopping to inform the latter with a contradictory rhetorical frame, and always keeping one at work or returning to it (since, as Babauta claims at the start of the post on the “declutter habit”⁶⁶, “it's a fact of life that without constant vigilance, clutter creeps up in our lives, accumulating into piles and closets and drawers and shelves so that it can overwhelm us”). By identifying a lifestyle that, as such, must have something distinctive about it, the label of “minimalism” reinforces the rhetorical frame and keeps discarding things from being reduced to just an entryway into self-improvement, especially as it is linked to a recognizable aesthetic and rhetorical common sense; yet even absent the label, as Babauta's blog demonstrates, it is possible for the frame to still work in the same way under some other name, attenuated to what is really its bare minimum of rhetorical presence.

At any rate, Babauta did use the label for years, did contribute a lot to its initial popularization, and does still invite – as we have seen – his “favorite minimalists” to speak in his programs for self-improvement, just like his blog is still aesthetically minimalist and he maintains that discarding things and decluttering homes are key practices

⁶⁵ Zen Habits, “Getting Started with the Discipline Habit”, Mar. 2015, <https://zenhabits.net/start-discipline> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

⁶⁶ Zen Habits, “Pare Down with the Declutter Habit”, Mar. 2015, <https://zenhabits.net/pare> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

worth doing. If we go back to the blog's early days, it is clear that the label was primarily tied to the aesthetic dimension and the practice of decluttering while also being swiftly generalized beyond them. Its first appearance as an adjective is in the first post on decluttering, in which Babauta writes that "a clean, simple home" gives him peace, thereby associating – like Becker – its aesthetic effect to a broader impact on oneself (even to having a "Zen mind"): "When I wake up in the morning and walk out into a living room that has been decluttered, that has a minimalist look, and there isn't junk lying around, there is a calm and joy that enters my heart. When, on the other hand, I walk out into a living room cluttered with toys and books and extra things all over the place, it is chaos and my mind is frenetic"⁶⁷. The post offers the usual advice on how to discard things (including the tip that Millburn and Nicodemus will promote, that of packing things away and discarding them if not unpacked within a certain deadline), taking that gradual approach by location that Kondo will criticize, and the reference to a "minimalist look" makes it entirely clear that discarding things was part of an aesthetic task of decluttering which must have been somewhat commonsensical in its ideal. The numerous links to posts by other bloggers that are given at the bottom all mention "decluttering" only, with no hint of an associated "minimalist" lifestyle; it was yet to be born. Similarly, the very next post in the blog expounds and embraces "living frugal" by way of "eliminating all that is unnecessary" from one's life: Babauta first defines "necessary" as "necessary for a happy life" and not just for survival, then he casts suspicion over all sorts of things for mostly economic reasons, and the links he offer to other blogs again underline the post's emphasis on being "thrifty" and saving money; this is rhetorically quite similar to "minimalism", yet there is no mention of the latter in the post⁶⁸. In a post from the second half of 2007, Babauta writes about the "minimalist home" and praises it as "less stressful" – thanks to less "visual distraction" –, "more appealing" and "easier to clean"⁶⁹, just like Becker, and in the previous post he self-mockingly lists "simplicity" as one of his "annoying fetishes", defines himself as a "minimalist" and then exempli-

⁶⁷ Zen Habits, "Zen Mind: How to Declutter", Jan. 2007, <https://zenhabits.net/zen-mind-how-to-declutter> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

⁶⁸ Zen Habits, "What is truly necessary? A guide to living frugal", Jan. 2007, <https://zenhabits.net/what-is-truly-necessary-guide-to-living> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

⁶⁹ Zen Habits, "A Guide to Creating a Minimalist Home", Aug. 2007, <https://zenhabits.net/a-guide-to-creating-a-minimalist-home> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

fies it with “a plain T-shirt with no logos or slogans”⁷⁰. Then a week later Babauta lists other “odd things” he does that “you might consider minimalist”: these have to do with things he does not carry around anymore (no wallet, no keys, no cell phone), things he does not own anymore (no bed beside just a mattress), digital things he does without (no desktop icons, no hard drive storage), and media too (no mobile internet, no cable TV, no iPod)⁷¹. Here reduction is already broadened beyond things owned, for all sorts of aesthetic impacts: feeling “much lighter” by carrying around less things (like Sasaki in the prologue), enjoying “the minimalist look of having only a mattress”, getting straight to files and programs through keyboard shortcuts – without the “visual clutter” of icons – and accessing them directly from any device through online storage, but then also “the freedom of being away from the Internet” when outside, or “do miraculous things like read, and talk, and go outside” when at home, and finally running with only “thoughts and nature” instead of “the distraction of constant music” in the background. Just a few days later, Babauta goes more in-depth with his computer setup, which he describes as “cyber minimalist”, but the aesthetic pleasure he gets from such setup will be particularly explicit in his later guide on creating the “minimalist computer experience”: “I love a clean desktop, a friction-free interface, and simple tools that help me focus on what I really need to get done: to create, without distractions. And when I gaze lovingly at my icon-less desktop, I sigh with contentment. I really love simplicity”⁷². This is closely tied to the productivity advice that was one of the blog’s main threads from the start; in fact, Babauta’s “Zen to Done”, a “productivity system” that already was presented as “the ultimate simple” version of David Allen’s popular “Getting Things Done” one, was further simplified into a “Minimal ZTD” in the first months of the blog⁷³. In other words, the aesthetic experience of a systematically yet simply organized (office) workflow has intersected with the aesthetic experience of a decluttered home from the start, preparing the ground for “minimalism” as indicating a whole lifestyle. Babauta will go

⁷⁰ Zen Habits, “6 Annoying Fetishes I Talk Too Much About”, Aug. 2007, <https://zenhabits.net/6-annoying-fetishes-i-talk-too-much-about> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

⁷¹ Zen Habits, “10 Odd Little Minimalist Things I Do”, Aug. 2007, <https://zenhabits.net/10-odd-little-minimalist-things-i-do> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

⁷² Zen Habits, “How to Create a Minimalist Computer Experience”, May 2009, <https://zenhabits.net/how-to-create-a-minimalist-computer-experience> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

⁷³ Zen Habits, “Minimal ZTD: The Simplest System Possible”, Apr. 2007, <https://zenhabits.net/minimal-ztd-the-simplest-system-possible> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

on to talk about a “minimalist fitness” as an exercise routine not requiring equipment⁷⁴, or offer “a minimalist’s guide to using Twitter simply, productively, and funly”⁷⁵, in addition to the posts focused on decluttering, all the while still posting about anything from frugal living to weight loss, from contentment, gratitude and positive thinking to being a better parent, from productivity to slow living and on and on. Therefore, the place of “minimalism” in the blog is unclear, because it is embedded in a broader self-improvement discourse that most often does present and promise some sort of simplification, but without linking it back to a “minimalist” lifestyle as a whole, with its necessary core of discarding things: each post is a fragment that does not necessarily add up to one overall picture, though it is clearly taken to do so. What is sure is that there is little to no trace, in Babauta’s blog, of the ethical and environmental concerns with consumption that are conflated with minimalism in Millburn and Nicodemus’ movie, which seems to confirm that anti-consumerism mostly serves a rhetorical purpose in the minimalist discourse. Babauta’s life advice is thoroughly individualist, as we can see from his views on work: what the productive workflow looks like to him is a “mindless” but “stress-free” job of individually “cranking widgets” – that is, small planned tasks that require no thinking – which is made “satisfying” merely by virtue of having “a nice stack of cranked widgets” at the end of the day⁷⁶; it is clearly an office job, from which it is however desirable to “escape” by individually working remotely as a “location-independent professional” (a “freelancer” and “blogger” like him, a “speaker”, a “small business owner”, a “consultant”, a “salesperson” and so on), thus gaining “freedom” from having a workplace with bosses, set hours and etiquette⁷⁷; and better still, one can “simplify [one’s] life” by removing “the ultimate complication” that is a salaried job at all, putting instead one’s income “on autopilot” and then “do[ing] minimal work from then on out to maintain that stream”, individually enjoying the passive income (whether coming from blogging and selling books, DVDs or other “information products” online,

⁷⁴ Zen Habits, “Minimalist Fitness: How to Get In Lean Shape With Little or No Equipment”, Aug. 2008, <https://zenhabits.net/minimalist-fitness-how-to-get-in-lean-shape-with-little-or-no-equipment> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

⁷⁵ Zen Habits, “A Minimalist’s Guide to Using Twitter Simply, Productively, and Funly”, Dec. 2008, <https://zenhabits.net/a-minimalists-guide-to-using-twitter-simply-productively-and-funly> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

⁷⁶ Zen Habits, “Cranking Widgets: Turn Your Work into Stress-free Productivity”, Mar. 2007, <https://zenhabits.net/cranking-widgets-turn-your-work-into> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

⁷⁷ Zen Habits, “Escape Your Location: How to Become Free From the Office”, Nov. 2007, <https://zenhabits.net/escape-your-location-how-to-become-free-from-the-office> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

as in Babauta's own case, or from real estate, retail businesses, affiliate marketing and so on⁷⁸).

What makes this healthy, lean or lightweight, frugal, uncluttered and unmediated, productive yet stress-free – or even work-free – and slowed down, disciplined but contented and grateful life a “minimalist” lifestyle? It is the “minimalist principle” of “omit[ting] needless things” applied to all of the “areas of life”: “possessions” first as usual, then purchases, then one's diet, activities, goals, products and anything else; so far as some reduction is involved, it seems, it can be part of a “minimalist” lifestyle⁷⁹. But as Millburn and Nicodemus' book showed us, this leads to a near dissolution of the lifestyle as such, because it turns it into – at most – a negative preliminary to a positive path of individual self-improvement: if it is “not that you have as little as humanly possible, but that every thing you do have counts”, as Babauta writes here upending minimalism's negativity, then it will not be actually enough to “omit needless food”, for example, but it will also be necessary to subject oneself to a diet of “nutrient-dense, fiber-dense, healthy and filling” food; thus, as we have seen, the minimalist reduction of all sorts of things leads one to further work even while promising the end of it. The aesthetic dimension, centred on the reduction of possessions – which remains the main usage of the label in the blog –, serves to ground the rhetorical “minimalist principle” so that it

⁷⁸ Zen Habits, “Automate Your Income to Simplify Your Life”, Jun. 2007, “Automate Your Income to Simplify Your Life”, <https://zenhabits.net/automate-your-income-to-simplify-your-life> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

⁷⁹ Zen Habits, “The Minimalist Principle: Omit Needless Things”, Aug. 2009, <https://zenhabits.net/the-minimalist-principle-omit-needless-things> (last accessed: 14/11/2023). In one of the last posts on Babauta's other blog, *Mnmlist*, he even defines “minimalism” as “the lean life”, and quite literally so: after contrasting the “prepared traveler” trying to carry everything possibly useful to the “light traveler” that only packs the essentials (a metaphor we have already seen – and critiqued as not really mapping onto things owned at home – in Sasaki's book), the first example offered in the post – even before owning less “possessions” – is that of eating less because “living with a leaner body is easier on the joints, less stressful, and gives you greater freedom” (*Mnmlist*, “minimalism: the lean life”, Aug. 2017, <https://mnmlist.com/lean>; last accessed: 14/11/2023). Here leanness momentarily becomes the main metaphor that supposedly holds the lifestyle together: a “bare room with a mattress, a few books, a notebook, a laptop and a handful of clothes” and “a cushion for meditating, a bowl for eating” thus becomes “leanness” applied to one's home, which leaves one “less bloated and content with less”; and the same somehow goes just as well for restrained spending and even for “creating a lean business” with few employees, few expenses and without “crazy [work] hours” (for its owner, at least). The result is that, just like discarding things, a vague “theme” is here projected “that will extend to any area of your life: leanness leads to greater freedom, flexibility, lightness, and contentment.” In this case, it would perhaps be harder to mistake literal leanness with its generalization as a rhetorical frame for a whole lifestyle, wherein all sorts of practices are taken as ways of “slimming down” life: if nothing else, one has generally less control on one's body than on one's things, and also the concreteness of the former does not lend itself to generalization as much as the abstractness of the latter (anything can be a “thing”). That is, at any rate, what “minimalism” accomplishes, so that one should actually discard his or her physical things to be a “minimalist”, not just do so in the metaphorical ways.

can function to gather and hold together all the life advice into an apparently distinctive, integral lifestyle of “minimalism” (with all the advantages that this conflation affords, as we have already seen). Given that such life advice already existed, just like decluttering and anti-consumerism – either as “simple living” or as “frugal living” –, might this “minimalist principle” itself be a needless thing that could be omitted apart from its rhetorical appeal, especially as it in fact demands – needlessly, it seems – that one go through all the work of discarding things or decluttering one’s home, just to end up with still more work to do – the same amount one would have had to do anyway? In Babauta’s case, the answer seems to be negative despite the fact he later distances himself somewhat from the label, because – as seen above – he still retains the minimalist rhetoric under different names. Of course, the rhetorical appeal of “minimalism” might very well be more than just rhetorical to Babauta’s eyes as well, but this still does not solve the tensions or contradictions that its one vague ideal contains and covers up, those we have explored through all of these popular minimalist texts, including the problems that Babauta himself will raise with regard to the discourse. After launching the *Mnmlist* blog, for example, he publishes a post on *Zen Habits* to differentiate the two blogs by defining “minimalism” as more extreme, as “an extension of simplicity – not only do you take things from complex to simple, but you try to get rid of anything that’s unnecessary”: “Minimalism says that what’s unnecessary is a luxury, and a waste. Why be wasteful when the unnecessary isn’t needed for happiness? When it just gets in the way of happiness, of peace? By eliminating the unnecessary, we make room for the essential, and give ourselves more breathing space”⁸⁰. Right after this contrast of “minimalism” to mere simplicity (also found in Sasaki’s book), Babauta makes sure to say that “exactly what is essential will vary from person to person [...] because the essential is subjective”, and yet “minimalism” clearly remains the pursuit of a minimum from which nothing more can be removed, that is, a perfected state lying one step beyond simplicity. Whatever else it may involve, this is no doubt a more extreme and aesthetic pursuit of a lifestyle around stuff than simple living calls for, the features that Babauta will later attack as pertaining to “obsessive minimalism”: it turns the unnecessary into something to necessarily “omit” and get rid of first, something that is inherently a “luxury” and “waste” (on the extreme side of it, tapping on the anti-consumerist rhetoric of

⁸⁰ Zen Habits, “On minimalism”, Feb. 2010, <https://zenhabits.net/on-minimalism> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

contentment with less against superfluous material and aesthetic desires) but that also actively “gets in the way of happiness” (on the aesthetic side of it, since no other justification for discarding things is ever given); by doing so, it does seem to be vulnerable to the obsession, exaggeration, competition, showing off and so on that Babauta will point out, because it does insist that some things – possibly many or most of them – must objectively be discarded down to some minimum, even if they were indifferent before applying the minimalist principle. Just like Kondo’s shift to a positive rhetoric hardly seems to offer a good guardrail against the obsessive “negative spiral” of discarding, in fact retaining its very same negativity in maintaining the necessity of discarding, so – at the opposite end of the spectrum – Babauta’s minimalism cannot really be distinguished as its own integral lifestyle except for that negativity and necessity, even if it turns out to be causing problems.

Whether it strives for the minimum or for the essential, the minimalist discourse depends on the idea of there being unnecessary things that it can deem necessary to discard, thus putting one to work on one’s home and/or oneself. Not surprisingly, that of necessities is one of the main topics on *Mnmlist*, in fact the topic of the first – after one on Babauta’s “minimalist desktop” – and the last of its posts. A look at the uses of necessity in Babauta’s blog will show us once again how the rhetorical components of the minimalist discourse are conflated into one vague ideal, wherein the necessity of discarding things is retained. In the third-to-last post on the blog, Babauta comes full circle to its beginnings in the “minimalist principle” by insisting that what really matters, for “minimalism”, is just the “minimalist question”: minimalism is not about “hav[ing] almost nothing, fewer than 100 things, or a house that’s empty and white” that can at once “feel oppressive to some, and privileged to others”, and it is also not about “telling people they can’t have clutter, or they should own next to nothing”, in fact “it’s not even about possessions, really”; instead, it is about asking oneself “what is important to you?”, and nothing more⁸¹. Here we find again the attack on minimalism as understood in an extreme and/or aesthetic way – something for the poor or for the rich –, and as founded on the necessity to discard things and declutter one’s home. As we have seen, this was actually inscribed in the “minimalist principle” of “omitting needless things”; has Babauta changed his mind, or is he rather just shifting his emphases? The aim of the

⁸¹ Mnmlist, “the minimalist question is the important thing”, Apr. 2017, <https://mnmlist.com/question> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

post is quite clear, because he ends up turning minimalism into that abstract framework of prioritization for individualist self-improvement that we find on his side of the rhetorical spectrum: the minimalist question thus becomes one of “what you want to focus on in life”, or “who you want in your life”, or “how you want to fill your day”, and answering it is an entirely individual and of course subjective task (“My answers, the answer of other minimalist writers... they don’t really matter”). Even in this case, however, such generalization is not a mere statement that stands on its own merit, but rather something that Babauta arrives at after relying first once again on anti-consumerist and distinctly minimalist rhetoric, so that it is far from clear whether one can actually be a “minimalist” by only and directly dealing with one’s lifestyle beyond stuff, one’s self-improvement. Here, right after formulating the question, two scenarios are depicted in a way that reveals the objective necessity that lies behind its subjective “importance”:

If you don’t have much money, and you need to put food on the table, then it’s obvious the answer to that question is food, rent, utilities and other basic necessities. In that case, asking the question “what is important to you” is a good idea, so you can focus on what’s needed for survival and not let yourself get distracted. I’ve been poor, and I know that distracting myself was something I did often, because I didn’t want to think about poor. I got into deep debt because I spent money on distractions instead of taking care of my basic bills. If you have too much stuff, maybe you don’t need to worry about the survival basics. In fact, maybe your problem is that you don’t have any financial constraints, and can order whatever you want, whenever you want it. In that case, asking the question “what is important to you” is a good idea, because it forces you to understand what’s essential to you. I’ve been in this position too, and it’s easy to get distracted by luxuries, by too many choices, and fritter your life away ordering things and being distracted. Life is too short and precious to waste like this.

Though concealed behind the seeming identity of a single question, it is evident that there is a minimalism for the poor and a minimalism for the rich or well-off, and that in the former case the question is not even a genuine question, because it is just “obvious” that one should concern oneself only with the bare necessity of sustenance. It is significant that this scenario is premised on not having money, while the second one is premised on having “too much stuff”: since “stuff” is the specifically minimalist problem, it seems that in fact only the second scenario is a minimalist scenario. Apart from that shift in the premises, however, both scenarios are actually anti-consumerist ones – though of a more frugal and simple living variety respectively –, because they both have to do with the purchase and consumption of new things, not with discarding old ones, whose only problematization is found, implicit and taken for granted, in that “too much stuff.” On the way to be conflated with self-improvement, minimalism is once again conflated with anti-consumerism. Still, the gap between the two scenarios suggests a plausible function for the minimalist insistence on discarding of things: the problem of

the well-off scenario is precisely that of not having the stark necessities of the poor one, so the minimalist question – which remains anchored to having “too much stuff” – is there to supply an alternative to “financial constraints” to “force” oneself to ultimately do the work of prioritizing. What is economically a luxury in the first scenario, one that distracts oneself from survival itself, is thereby still a luxury in the second scenario, but here it is rather a distraction from “life” itself, from some better life of individual self-improvement not lost in all the stuff and media of materialist, aestheticized consumerism.

The minimalist necessity of getting rid of the unnecessary might thus be meant to replace the bare necessity of economic sustenance in forcibly keeping one away from the consumerist life, embarking instead on the individually self-improving one. As we have pointed out, the core practice of discarding things backs up, both aesthetically and rhetorically, the force behind the generic question of what is important in one’s life, whether it is for the purposes of anti-consumption or – most often it seems – those of self-improvement. Of course, even if it managed to replicate the pressure of bare necessity, discarding things would still be insufficient: the poor in Babauta’s first scenario seems to be perfectly able to disregard some of his or her needs in exchange for “distraction” from precisely those conditions of necessity. That is not a problem anyway, because on the one hand the point of it all is precisely that of leading one to other anti-consumerist and self-improvement practices conflated with the discarding of things, while on the other hand necessity is often explicitly denied and only implicitly retained in small doses. As we have repeatedly seen, the insistence on discarding in the minimalist discourse is often tacit, opaque and far from straightforward, especially in its relations to the various rhetorical components, and accordingly the texts we have examined rarely go all out on its sufficiency and necessity, nor do they bind it unequivocally to the absolute, objective bare necessity for survival. On the contrary, as we also see in this post by Babauta, the “unnecessary” is often turned into the subjectively essential or important, the demand to declutter or discard is dismissed as actually beside the point, and the answers offered by Babauta himself or by other minimalists do not matter at all. It seems to be enough and in fact ideal, for the minimalist discourse, that necessity only operates within it in an implicit, indeterminate and attenuated way, just sufficient for putting one to work on one’s home and/or oneself. If we go through the posts on

Mnmlist that address the issue of needs, we see that in fact Babauta – just like Kondo and the others – does push the bar of necessity down, at all times saying or insinuating that what is needed is actually less than what is now had, so that a need for discarding things is always paradoxically regenerated. In that first post we alluded to, Babauta writes that “one of the basics of minimalism is that you eliminate as many non-necessities as you can” and “learn to be content with what you already have”, but then he goes on to claim that “often things we assume are necessities are not necessarily so”, we only take them as such “because we’re used to them.”⁸² The apparent redundancy in Babauta’s phrasing is significant, because it points to a shift in the meaning of “necessity” from something that is felt to be important in one’s current life to something that one could not do without, that is, something whose absence one could never get used to. The latter reading already assumes that something is questioned, and it does so by keeping bare necessities on the background so that, by contrast, everything else may be suspected as not being “really” necessary: “What’s really needed, beyond food, shelter, basic clothing, and loved ones?” The reference to “basic clothing” is also significant, because “a lot of clothes” is one of Babauta’s examples of needless things here, since “we can buy quality, timeless clothing, with colors and patterns chosen so that all our clothes go with each other.” Despite barely coming up in our first selection of texts, the reduction of one’s clothes in order to form a limited wardrobe is in fact one of the main strands in the minimalist discourse, as promoted for example by Courtney Carver with her “project 333” of using 33 items for three months (also featured in Millburn and Nicodemus’ movie, wherein Millburn himself claimed to only own “favourite” clothes). Babauta’s take betrays the ambiguity of minimalism towards the aesthetic that we have already glimpsed and which we will focus on later, overlapping with the ambiguity towards its roots in decluttering: on the one hand he seems to dismiss aesthetic needs as not “really” necessary, while on the other he maintains that they can be met in a “basic” way once and for all, such a way being clearly informed by something like the minimalist aesthetic common sense we have seen (requiring at least aesthetic cohesiveness with matching colours and patterns, but also higher quality individual pieces and supposedly “timeless” aspects such as neutral palettes, empty surfaces, absence of decorations, geometric

⁸² Mnmlist, “rethinking necessities”, Sep. 2009, <https://mnmlist.com/rethinking-necessities> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

shapes and so on⁸³). Just like Kondo's extremely aesthetic promise was that one can realize an aesthetic ideal for one's home and stay there forever, here Babauta similarly suggests – though with the opposite tone and emphasis – that one can just stick with a limited wardrobe and meet all the aesthetic needs one has, if they are even needs at all. If the bar is set on what is necessary for surviving, then of course most clothes will not pass the test, nor will they if the bar is set on what cannot habitually be done without – they are habitual par excellence, after all. Contrary to the qualification of the “unnecessary” in the minimalist principle as what is not subjectively essential for oneself, or to the even more subjective minimalist question of what is important for oneself, clothes objectively cannot be deemed important or essential even if there is a felt need for them; therefore they should be discarded. That on the background there is also operative another and contradictory bar, the implicit but nonetheless high bar of the aesthetic common sense, is not a problem insofar as it tacitly contributes to making more things look disposable: the aesthetic and the extreme converge at this point, even though they then diverge as soon as the aesthetic leads one to renewed, alternative and higher quality consumption. This goes a long way to illuminate the confusing rhetorical mix that is “minimalism”, whose discourse at once universally addresses the struggling poor and the distracted rich as individuals: from two directions, one usually implicit (the aesthet-

⁸³ The halfway placement of the section on the wardrobe in the contents of Babauta's cited book is also a good sign of the ambiguity towards the aesthetic dimension of life, as worn clothes are more evidently tied to it than things owned or even one's home. In fact, Babauta puts together in the same section one's clothes with all “grooming products” as things that we surely have too much of, which is “overwhelming and a bit wasteful”, and as usual he claims that “you don't need as much as you think you do”, invoking bare necessity: “Consider people who live in Third World countries – many use no grooming products at all, except soap if they're lucky, and have barely any clothing. Now, I'm not suggesting you live like someone in the Third World, but I am saying that what you have is definitely more than you need. It's a matter of finding a balance, so you can live comfortably but not in excess” (Babauta 2009: 60-61). This is essentially the rhetorical move we are interested in, which invokes and then revokes the minimum just to generate the necessity of working one's home and then on oneself – as if removing the unnecessary on the mere assumption that the necessary is buried beneath it will somehow lead one to a life where the necessary is assured. As with Millburn and Nicodemus' supposed anti-consumerism, that dualistically opposed the (rhetorically constructed) extreme of consumerist life only to end up with something indistinguishable from ordinary consumption, Babauta's minimalism vice versa denies “excess” but also always distances itself from bare necessity, ultimately ending in “comfort” (which is also ordinary at least in being taken to be available to all, and thus being indiscriminately promised to the reader regardless of how his or conditions differ from Babauta's). The same goes with the aesthetic, because – as we have just noted – the satisfaction of aesthetic needs is actually presupposed by the discourse: in this section on the wardrobe Babauta thus writes that “it's best to have options that can all go together”, sticking to “a color scheme and a style” which will most likely come with “plain solid colors” and “a classic style that won't be out of fashion in a few months”; and of course, one should pick “high-quality clothes” as well. That this is meant to provide a final solution for aesthetic needs is confirmed by Babauta's criterion for buying clothes: “ALWAYS ask yourself: ‘Am I going to wear this all the time?’ If the answer is ‘No’ or ‘I'm not sure’, don't buy it” (62).

ic) and the other explicit (the extreme), yet both intertwined and often attenuated as we have seen, things are made unnecessary by the discourse, and work to get rid of them thus becomes in turn a necessity – as thereby will the broader work on improving oneself. The necessary shifts from what everyone (supposedly) already has to what instead must be striven for by discarding all that is not “necessarily necessary”, that is, all that appears unnecessary after being already called into question a priori by the discourse’s own aesthetic and rhetoric, no matter how implicitly or obliquely it does so, how it attenuates that necessity.

What this shift in the meaning of “necessity” suggests is that the actual minimalist principle may rather be that of omitting not everything that already is unnecessary, but everything that can be actively made such in whatever way; otherwise, as Kondo unwittingly admitted, one would not discard anything for which there is no obvious reason to do so (even less what one has reasons – or, for Kondo, rationalizations – to hold onto). As usual in the minimalist discourse, Babauta does not supply any clear reason for why clothes – or anything else really – should be discarded, he only asserts that they are not as necessary as we think, and that is enough since he has already defined a “minimalist” as one who gets rid of the unnecessary. At bottom, as Kondo again revealed with the visualization step in her method, there seems to be the immediate appeal of an aesthetic ideal that requires no justification, also encompassing the “exhilarating” process of a mass discarding of things. There too, while ostensibly appealing to the reader’s subjective imagination in determining his or her own aesthetic ideal, Kondo actually had to negatively push for its identification with her own ideal, pre-emptively insisting on the non-negotiable necessity of discarding. In Babauta’s case, as in the other explicitly “minimalist” texts we have examined, we are further removed from the ideal, yet it seems nonetheless to ground and guide – however implicitly – its core practice of discarding things, absent any other clear reason. Here too the ideal encompasses the process itself, including the taste of discipline afforded by its artificial necessity, which may then lead into broader self-improvement practices framed by minimalist – and anti-consumerist – rhetoric. Accordingly, more unnecessary things must be actively discovered and discarded, even without reference to any particular problem caused by them, and in fact even at the cost of keeping the focus of the lifestyle on “stuff” instead of going beyond it as promised. In this post, for example, Babauta justifies giving up meat –

which has actually nothing to do with the minimalist discarding of owned things, of course – as “healthier and better for the environment”, while for clothes, “a big house” and even “a car” he offers no other reason beyond their being not necessarily necessary. Other such posts show how the anti-consumerist rhetoric is exploited to back up his saying “you need less than you think” to his readers (which conflation equates to the unrelated need of having less, so that – as we have seen best with Sasaki – it appears as though discarding is justified not on aesthetic grounds but on the anti-aesthetic ones of anti-consumerism): the habitualness of needs is seen as a sign that they are not real needs but rather what “culture” as externally imposed on people, because “we have been conditioned to believe that luxuries are a necessity, that we need things that most of the world doesn’t even dream of having.”⁸⁴ The standard is again bare necessity – what one could not do without –, here associated to poorer present countries (“Most of the world lives with much less than what you see around you”) or to poorer past generations (“Only a few generations ago, our grandparents and great-grandparents also lived with much less, and were perfectly comfortable and happy”): the “very little” we really need amounts to just “a few changes of clothing at most, a pair of shoes, perhaps a few toiletries (toothpaste, deodorant, soap), some food, a roof over our heads.” The post has again a list of examples from all areas of life, and again some of them offer some quite basic reasons – via anti-consumerist rhetoric – to go without that item (getting rid of television or any other mediatic “gadget” will save money and time for doing something else, and with the car too one will save money, avoid dangers and lessen global warming), while the usual suspects come with no reason attached at all (“Could you wear just a few items?”, “What is the absolute minimum [of furniture] you could get by with, and still live a happy life?”). It is at any rate crucial to stress again, here, that even if an anti-consumerist reason were advanced for the problematic needlessness of clothes – as in Millburn and Nicodemus’ movie, featuring an attack on fast fashion –, that alone would not justify the necessity of discarding those clothes one already owns, nor would it make needlessness as such problematic, as it is instead made by the minimalist principle (and the aesthetic ideal that grounds it).

Thus we see that the minimum of bare necessity is not openly and directly advocated for, yet it clearly remains operative as an objective reference point and source of

⁸⁴ Mnmlist, “you need less than you think”, Apr. 2010, <https://mnmlist.com/need-less> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

leverage for making things appear self-evidently unnecessary by contrast, against any subjective feeling to the contrary: one's felt needs can be dismissed as the mere effect of habit and therefore of the external impositions of a consumerist, materialist and aestheticized culture. The gap between this negative and objective minimum and the more positive, subjective essential that Babauta elsewhere points to – like the rest of the minimalist discourse – surfaces in an almost explicit way in Babauta's preamble to another post of this kind, wherein he again insists that "giving up" things is possible: "I've found that when I talk about simplifying or minimalism in general, people are generally positive... but when you get down to specifics, they're not always so enthusiastic."⁸⁵ Like Kondo's or Sasaki's pre-emptive dismissals of reasons not to discard as mere rationalizations, Babauta's target here is the very phrase "I'd love to be a minimalist, but I could never give up my _____", obviously contradicting all those rhetorical gestures towards the subjective essential for oneself. Babauta lists all the things he thought he could never give up and yet still managed to give up: hamburgers and fried chicken, cable TV, cigarettes, coffee, sweets, packaged food, his car, running shoes and of course most of his clothes; all without an explicit reason. That most of these things are not the possessions targeted by minimalist discarding only confirms that the point is putting one to work on the path of self-improvement, for example by becoming a vegetarian and eating more healthily. Just like new things that one may purchase are not the same as old things one already owns, so owned things are not at all the same as (bad) things habitually consumed such as meat, coffee or TV programs; in conflating these, minimal-

⁸⁵ Mnmlist, "I could never give up", Jun. 2010, <https://mnmlist.com/never-give-up> (last accessed: 14/11/2023). It is worth noting that this post follows one in which Babauta insists that "minimalism isn't just for the affluent" as it might look from "the photos of minimalist houses, desks, and Macs that you see on many minimalist sites", because such expensive things are not "a requirement of minimalism" – in fact "there isn't a requirement for minimalism", one can "invent [one's] own version" insofar as one is "eliminating the unnecessary" (Mnmlist, "minimalism isn't just for the affluent", Jun. 2010, <https://mnmlist.com/not-affluent>; last accessed: 14/11/2023). As in the scenario for the poor minimalist we have seen earlier, however, the "unnecessary" that the poor must eliminate is the frugal anti-consumerist one of (actually) luxurious expenses one cannot afford, which – as noted innumerable times by now – has little to do with the aesthetic endeavour that ultimately grounds the minimalist discarding of things (as confirmed by the reference to those photos, and thus to a minimalist aesthetic common sense). The only point Babauta makes here about discarding actual things is that "eliminating unnecessary possessions also means you'll need a smaller home, which will save on rent and heating/cooling", which is hardly convincing, and at any rate obviously unlike anything that the richer minimalist might be doing in discarding things. Moreover, even if for example we identified minimalism with anti-materialism, thereby granting that "spending time with loved ones or doing things you love" instead of focusing on "stuff" is "minimalist", this not only contradicts the discourse's focus on stuff, but is also not at all – as Becker had soon to admit – a way to "spend less" by itself, as activities and experiences can be even more costly than stuff: one would thus have to restrict oneself to free ones, which makes the anti-materialist shift in focus completely irrelevant. Therefore, what the minimalist discourse does for those in the poor scenario amounts simply to doubling down on the bare necessity they already had to face.

ism rhetorically conflates – as we have seen – decluttering, anti-consumerism and self-improvement, with every tension and contradiction that comes out of it, and with the necessity of discarding nonetheless at its core in order to distinguish its supposedly integral lifestyle from any one of the three. In another post where he non-ironically turns Noam Chomsky’s famous “manufacturing consent” by the media into “manufacturing content”, Babauta openly states that “contentedness comes naturally, in the absence of manufactured desire”, but “getting back to that natural state might take some work” in our consumerist society that does manufacture desires⁸⁶. All desires beyond bare necessities are deemed unnatural, and yet it is revealing that Babauta’s solution here is not only that of “removing yourself from places where advertising is so pervasive”, but also “reach[ing] others to show them how to be content”, that is, “manufacturing content” in the media: he asks us to “imagine a big white billboard in Times Square with the simple message: ‘You already have enough’”, and yet he does not seem to have any problem with such manufacturing, nor does he recognize that even this message manufactures desires that must then be worked for. As we have noted before, far from “having enough” the minimalist discourse is actually built around the premise of “having too much”, the “enough” being buried under that excess as a minimum to be pursued by discarding things, decluttering one’s home and then also improving oneself in further ways. We can see this contradiction at work in Babauta’s “quick method” for becoming a minimalist:

Some of you might have, as one of your goals, the desire to become a minimalist. But the path to becoming a minimalist doesn’t have to be long and arduous. It’s fairly simple, actually. You just do and buy less. It’s a switch that you can flip, in an instant: one moment you’re a resource-hogging, polluting, consumerist materialist capitalist swine (no offense), and the next, you’re a minimalist. It just takes the decision to live with less, and to be content with where you are and what you have and who you are. You can do this, right now. Will all the stuff in your life instantly disappear? No, of course not – you’ll still need to chuck all your stuff. You’ll need to get out of all your commitments, and start simplifying your schedule and to-do list. That’ll all take time and effort, I concede. And there’s more, that’ll take time: changing your buying habits, changing your impulses, gradually letting go of attachments, getting used to having less. But that all comes later. That comes with the territory. For now, you can just flip the switch: start buying less (right now), start doing less (right now), slow down, and find contentment. Right now, right here. Be happy with what you have, with your life, with where you are. Stop focusing on what you don’t have, because godblessit, you have way more than most of the world – even if you gave up your big car, big home, tons of food, and most of your possessions. You have the world, and you need to learn to love it. It takes an instant. It’s harder than hell, but it can happen right now⁸⁷.

⁸⁶ Mnmlist, “manufacturing content”, Apr. 2010, <https://mnmlist.com/manufacturing-content> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

⁸⁷ Mnmlist, “minimalism, the quick method”, Oct. 2009, <https://mnmlist.com/quick-minimalism> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

Here one becomes “minimalist” by just deciding that one already is, but this does not mean that one is excused from going through all the trouble of discarding things and all the rest: anti-consumerist contentment helps flipping the rhetorical “switch” of minimalism, but it is only a starting point, and work will come later (just as productivity posts alternate with slow living posts on *Zen Habits*). The contentment that the minimalist discourse manufactures is a manufactured desire like any other; the conflation of its rhetorical components into one vague ideal simply conceals all such contradictions. The discourse indeed forms a spectrum wherein the same minimum goes from being something that one already has, and can immediately be content with, to something that must be pursued first in the more immediately available and appealing way of the aesthetic discarding of all unnecessary things while decluttering one’s home, and then also by restricting oneself to “necessarily necessary” things in line with anti-consumerist frugality or simplicity and/or with individualist self-improvement. The aesthetic ground which makes discarding things itself already “life-changing” serves to mediate the rhetoric by managing the sense of necessity it relies upon, by helping shift the focus among actually different senses of it.

Needless to say, Babauta does not offer any criterion as to how to discern real, natural needs from manufactured desires, beyond rhetorical gestures towards the minimum of bare necessities that he himself at other times disassociates from minimalism: insofar as one can live without something, it seems, it must actually be unnecessary – but that always risks going too far, of course. Absent criteria, on the one hand everything and anything might be questioned at one time in a piecemeal fashion, while on the other hand the needs that are “fake” end up just coinciding with those that Babauta himself does not like for whatever reason, often justified by the same anti-consumerist rhetoric⁸⁸. In a post, for example, he opposes “living” or “actual life” to “caring about pos-

⁸⁸ We can see pretty much the whole rhetorical trajectory of the minimalist discourse in Babauta’s description of the “minimalist life” in the book, because here such a life is at first identified with Babauta’s own, obviously built upon the usual dualistic and extremist anti-consumerist rhetoric, but then – after Babauta admits that this is only what he personally likes – it turns into the abstract rhetorical framework of what is subjectively essential for one’s own individual happiness, a shorthand for the ideal life to be striven for through self-improvement: “I’m a minimalist, and it’s something that’s deeply satisfying. I wake in the morning in a room that lacks clutter, in the quiet of the early morning, have coffee and read, go out for a run, and then write. Work a little more, spend some time with my family. These are the things that make me happy. Not buying a lot of things. Not traveling all the time, nor going to parties or spending money on expensive entertainment. Not watching a lot of television and being bombarded with ads. Others might find joy in these things, and I’m not criticizing them. I’m just stating what makes me happy. And that’s the key. Figure out what makes you happy. Get rid of the rest, so you have room for those important things.

sessions and status and goals and beautiful things”, then he offers some examples of both sides: the former is “taking long walks, creating things, having conversations with friends, snuggling with [one’s] wife, playing with [one’s] kids, eating simple food, going outside and getting active”; the latter is “shopping, or watching TV, or eating loads of greasy and sweet food not for sustenance but for pleasure, or being on the Internet, or ordering things online, or trying to be popular”, that is, “consumerist pastimes that tend to get us caught up in overconsumption and mindlessness.”⁸⁹ On both fronts, the examples are only listed from common sense, indicated with no explanation, taken for granted as self-evident. Moreover, Babauta not only identifies the “consumerist pastimes” with “fake needs”, but he also identifies (his) “living” with “needing little”, as it apparently “require[s] almost nothing” by contrast: “These days, I need nothing but my loved ones, a text editor, a way to post what I create, a good book, simple plant-based food, a few clothes for warmth, and the outdoors.” Of course, the struggling scenario of the poor minimalist with his or her actual bare necessities, with his or her job most likely demanding more than a text editor and web browser to publish content from home, is nowhere in sight here. Even setting that aside, however, it is clear that some interests are deemed just better than others upon the sole shaky basis of whether they involve “stuff” – and media – or not, as if it constituted a problem in itself. Needing something as such is that problem at its core, which is why it is not a matter of opposing only real needs to mere desires or fake needs, but over and above that also little needs to large needs. From this point of view, the absolute minimum of bare necessities is appealing not only because it is taken to be more natural, but also just because it seems to get as close as possible to not needing anything at all. Thus the last post on *Mnmlist* is not the one with the minimalist question about one’s “important” things, but one about “lowering your life’s requirements” that explicitly attacks needs as such:

It's not a life of nothing, of boringness. It's a life of richness, in less. Your minimalist life will be different than mine. You'll need to figure out what makes you happiest. Plan your ideal day. Then strip your life of the non-essentials, to make room for this ideal day, for the things and people you love. This book is meant to help you find that path” (Babauta 2009: 7). Is this supposed to mean that one can do all those bad “consumerist” or unhealthy things and still be a “minimalist”? If so, how could Babauta’s book be of any help in finding this subjective “path”, and why does he insist at every turn that certain things, media and activities are definitely not really necessary? Despite the disclaimer, Babauta’s own comfortable life – with its aesthetic, rhetoric and all, but also with its lack of work and economic struggle – is what is implicitly promised as a picture of the “minimalist” life, which would otherwise be unrecognizable (and thus undermine Babauta’s own ability to instruct about it). This is the equivalent to Kondo’s identification of her own aesthetic ideal with the reader’s.

⁸⁹ Mnmlist, “live more, need less”, Nov. 2010, <https://mnmlist.com/needless> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

When something becomes a need, a requirement, it locks us in. We have to have it, which means we start structuring our lives around it. [...] There's nothing wrong with any of these things, but soon the requirements for a happy life start piling up [...] you need a travel pillow on an airplane, a soft bed and nice pillow in order to sleep, music in order to run or do a workout, some alcohol in order to socialize. What happens if you can't have these things – does it make you unhappy or stressed out? Is the trip or social occasion or run less enjoyable? What happens when we let go of these needs, and just keep them as a 'nice-to-have' option? [...] The fewer requirements we have, the less of a burden these requirements become. The more often we have the same thing every day, the more likely they are to become a requirement⁹⁰.

A need binds us habitually to things in such a way that, when they are not available, the discomfort of a problem may arise; this, to Babauta, is enough reason to have as few of them as possible, and to treat those one does have as luxuries. He announces that he will do a “no alcohol challenge” for the next month, and that he might also do the same for coffee – as he apparently consumes it every day again – and for “reading things on the Internet”, not for any explicit problem that he has with them, but just “to remove one of [his] daily requirements” (even though it seems unlikely that such things could actually become unavailable to him, apart from the occasional “long line” to get a coffee that he mentions at the start). The point is not getting rid of the unnecessary (even less the unimportant), but rather reducing the necessary down to the point where one has life requirements as “minimal” as Babauta's supposedly and self-declaredly are. Since bare necessity is associated with struggle, that cannot actually be the endpoint, but it serves as a leverage point to cast doubt over any needed thing as probably an unnatural desire and excessive need that one is merely used to, but could actually do without (and thus not risk being uncomfortable if it is somehow unavailable). Such a leverage point – the minimum to be pursued – contradictorily generates the necessity of working on oneself and/or one's home, instead of actually taking one's life to be enough as claimed. If the positive promise in Kondo's decluttering was one of perpetual happiness in being only surrounded by things that spark joy, its negative and “minimalist” mirror image seems then to be the promise of perpetual serenity in being untroubled by the absence of needed and desired things – which however troubles one with getting rid of them, that is, making them absent in advance.

It is very easy to get lost in the midst of all these confluences and contradictions, but we can end our first round of analyses with a post that helps us summarize our main findings and highlight the aesthetic ground of minimalism's generalized rhetorical frame. Here, Babauta observes that “we often create an identity for ourselves using

⁹⁰ Mnmlist, “lowering your life's requirements”, Sep. 2017, <https://mnmlist.com/requirements> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

things” – with his own emphasis – in order to affirm instead, by contrast, “finding yourself in sparseness”:

We have logos or slogans or cute catchphrases on our clothing, and it shows people who we are. We have tattoos or piercings, baseball caps, accessories, smartphones, designer bags, Manolo Blahnik shoes... and these express to others who we are. In our homes, what we have on our walls shows others who we are. What TV shows we watch, what books we read, what celebrities and blogs we follow. What brands we like on Facebook. This is our identity. But what happens when you strip all this away? When you are left with plain clothing, a home that is empty and spare... how will you express yourself? What will you use to forge an identity? You could argue that your identity would now be called “Minimalist”, but let’s go beyond that label. In sparseness, we are confronted by a lack. It is a frightening thing if you aren’t accustomed to it. You must take a close look at that lack, and wonder, “What am I left with?” [...] You start to question whether you are adequate as a person, and then you wonder where this sense of inadequacy comes from. You start to realize that there is nothing more possible than who you already are, that there isn’t anyone who is “more adequate” than you, but only people who are different. If you perceive them to be “better”, that’s only because you are measuring them up to a standard created by someone else. When you remove that arbitrary and meaningless standard, there is no “better”. There is only who you are. There is an empty room, and you. And you are enough. You are all that’s needed in this room, you fill it with your light and the miracle of your being, and you now realize: the *things* you used to express yourself, those were just a crutch. You need none of it. You are enough. In sparseness, you find enough⁹¹.

As usual, minimalism is conflated from the start with anti-consumerism: the anti-consumerist rhetoric against materialist stuff and aestheticizing media is universalized – just like at the start of Millburn and Nicodemus’ movie –, it is pushed beyond the domain of things more or less regularly purchased and consumed, and also beyond that of images ephemerally produced and projected; already owned things in one’s home are swept by the same accusation that indifferently takes aim at designer bags and TV shows, while tattoos are assimilated to logos or slogans on clothes and brands in social media accounts. Such an extensive involvement with one’s things or images would suggest that we are in fact always already, not just “often”, bound to them in our identity and its expressions, so that the anti-consumerist attack would appear at the very least problematic, especially in the dualistic extreme form that we have seen, wherein consumption becomes an entirely irrational, internally impulsive and – in the last instance – externally imposed, endless pursuit of the unnecessary. On the contrary, the all-pervasive presence of this involvement only exacerbates that rhetoric as the sign of the overpowering influence of the consumerist society and culture. As we have just seen, any habitually needed thing can be targeted, by contrast to bare necessity, as a culturally manufactured desire that is only falsely felt to be necessary, since one could actually live – or rather, survive – without it. In this post we see in full display the aesthetic side of that bare necessity, with only “basic clothing” and “a home that is empty and spare”,

⁹¹ Mnmlist, “finding yourself in sparseness”, Dec. 2011, <https://mnmlist.com/finding> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

again bringing out the minimalist focus on discarding owned things and decluttering one's home. As noted earlier, the "basic clothing" invoked by Babauta most likely relies on a minimalist aesthetic common sense – also seen in all the monochrome and neutral t-shirts in Millburn and Nicodemus' movie or Sasaki's prologue – that does include some aesthetic demands beyond mere functionality (such as, at least, a rigorous aesthetic cohesiveness), and that is of course true of the "empty and spare home" as well: again, Sasaki's pictures of minimalist homes, surely at differing levels of extremeness but all quite vacant overall, exhibited quite naively how the absence of things is all but incompatible with the aesthetic – even in the negative sense of "showing off" that the anti-consumerist rhetoric attacks it for. In fact, Babauta himself gets close to admitting this when he writes, after imaginatively stripping all things from one's home, that "you could argue that your identity would now be called 'Minimalist'", but he quickly urges the reader to "go beyond that label" (as we will see the minimalist discourse at large do in our later analyses). As a label for a distinct integral lifestyle, however, we have seen that "minimalism" rhetorically binds together anti-consumerism, self-improvement and decluttering via discarding one's owned things as its core practice – one that is always necessary –, so that in fact "spareness", emptiness and basicness are just as recognizable signs of being a "minimalist" as the logo on a branded pair of shoes would supposedly be of being a "consumerist." It is always already a lifestyle around stuff, whether extremely aesthetic or aesthetically extreme, and it is precisely because of this aesthetic ground that it can rhetorically function as a broader generalized frame in the way it does. After all, Babauta's blogs always relied heavily on a minimalist aesthetic, as well as on the rhetorical label of "minimalism" itself. These are not superfluous embellishments: apart from them, there is no "minimalist" lifestyle, no one "way of less" to walk upon, only this or that component discourse and practice in isolation.

In light of this, the ambiguity of "finding oneself in spareness" becomes apparent, because it is not just a discovery of oneself after having stripped it of everything, but also a transformation that must be pursued; not just an identification within emptiness, but also – perhaps especially – an identification with it. If this finding was merely an anti-consumerist discovery of the fact that one is not identical with his or her things and images, there would be no need for discarding the latter, just like there would be no need to embark on a path of individualist self-improvement if the discovery was about

finding that one is – and has – already “enough” from the start. On the contrary, the “oneself” that is “enough” is something that must be found in aesthetic “spareness” by actually striving for it; it is only “in this room” that one becomes enough. As usual, then, just like the anti-materialist claim that new things do not make us happy is conflated with the claim that they actively make us unhappy, so the anti-aesthetic claim is used to back up the idea that things actively impede our expression, and they must therefore be removed. Nothing is needed because “you are all that’s needed”, and yet there is still a need for nothing which will put – or keep – one at work. It is evident that this aesthetic ideal of needing nothing beyond one’s own individual body within one’s current life as it already is grounds the individualist frame of self-improvement as “minimalist”, despite the obvious contradictions. Just like Sasaki’s supposed acceptance of himself by discarding things and decluttering his home nonetheless eventually led him, as his second book demonstrates, to work on improving himself, so here Babauta’s dismissal of the possibilities to become “better” than one currently is cannot but be one preliminary half of the story, as shown both by his *Zen Habits* blog – concerned with all sorts of self-improvement from the start – and by his various programs. If we just recall that the last declaredly “minimalist” post on *Zen Habits* is one that employs the very same imagery of the empty home to instead suggest that one has available, with the coming new year, a “blank slate” full of infinite possibilities for individual self-improvement – regardless of one’s concrete conditions –, then the uses of the ambiguity in both the aesthetic grounds and rhetorical frame of “minimalism” should be apparent. The aesthetic identification with one’s home or the things left over after discarding and decluttering, whether in Kondo’s positive key or in the more negative one of all the explicitly “minimalist” authors, does not seem to be actually able to extinguish the “lack” blamed on a consumerist society and culture; if anything, it exploits anti-consumerist rhetoric to channel that lack into a path of further “minimalist” self-improvement beyond home-improvement, a lifestyle beyond stuff. Given its ambiguity, that such rhetoric may also lead to further home-improvement through alternative, higher quality consumption perhaps in line with the minimalist aesthetic – via Kondo’s online store, for example – should not be surprising; it just completes the picture with its mirror image at the other end of the minimalist spectrum. In both cases, the pursuit of a minimum – often presented as subjective, yet always at least objective enough to enforce the necessity of discarding and initiate one’s commitment to “minimalism” – puts one to work on

one's home and/or oneself in whatever mix. It is an anti-consumerist rhetoric that usually backs up this pursuit, but it is the aesthetic tied to the decluttering component that specifically grounds it in the discarding of things: anti-consumerist practices may also be undertaken, and most likely will insofar as discarding things actually does little to put one in a better financial position without active restraint of one's consumption or spending control (especially for the minimalists in the poor scenario, of course), but on their own these practices do not mark "minimalism" as much as simple or frugal living.

What would be left if we stripped "minimalism" of its rhetoric? It is in fact a fundamentally ambiguous discourse, replete with contradictions, that remains stuck in some nowhere land between the aesthetic and the ethical-practical by continually conflating, in its pursuit of a minimum, the pre-existing discourses and practices of decluttering, anti-consumerism and self-improvement; the focus keeps shifting, moving back and forth from reducing owned things to reducing things needed or desired – or the needs and desires themselves – up to reducing anything at all, from one's diet to one's relationships, from one's spending to one's (office) workflow and activities. Is this one vague ideal any less of an "arbitrary and meaningless standard" that is "created by someone else"? At times, the discourse – including Babauta, as we have seen – would seem to answer in the affirmative, claiming that there are in fact no standards nor rules in minimalism, that its minimum is subjective and it only amounts to what remains after what is unnecessary for oneself is reduced or eliminated. At other times, the appeal of its aesthetic common sense is pointed to as if it were universal, just like the ethical-practical frame of individualist self-improvement, or the anti-consumerist rhetoric that mediates them. At all times the necessity of discarding things is pressed forward, bare necessity serving as its leverage point to cast doubt on anything and everything as probably unnecessary, and thus ipso facto harmful for a "minimalist." There may be no standards, and yet some vague minimum is endlessly pursued. In another one of that handful of posts on *Mnmlist* before setting it aside again, Babauta "confesses" that he had "often lost [his] minimalist way" in those years: he got caught up in an "obsession" and then was pushed by "impulses" to buy anything from a chess set or chess books to "ultralight hiking/camping equipment", from a Fitbit smartwatch and scale to coffee or tea equipment, and of course, he also somehow ended up having more clothes than before; much of these things he does not use, but he still holds on to them because they

were expensive and he also still hopes to use them sometime (which are, however, “not good reasons to keep a bunch of stuff”)⁹². Babauta writes that he has no “justification” for it, but he does have the usual anti-consumerist explanation, as talk of “obsession” and “impulse” already betrays: he was just “hopeful of having a life that used [those things]”, he had “fantasies” he got “attached” to of “being a good chess player, a long-distance hiker, an ultrarunner, etc.”, and this led him to buy “the things to support that lifestyle.” By contrast, he now reaffirms that he does not need those fantasies, that he does not need to “become anything other than [he is]” and “hoard all that stuff”, that he can “get by with less” and “keep a few things, sell the rest.” But is this not something that he had known and preached for ten years already? If in fact he is “still learning”, as he concludes, what exactly has he learned from this supposed failure of his, and what is the reader in turn supposed to learn from the post? Should he have seen in advance that he would not actually use those things, and if so, how? What did he have to do differently? The lesson cannot be that he should have just refrained from trying to become something else, because it is clear that he would not have a problem with all those things if he did use them. Yet that is the only thing close to a lesson that the post contains. Despite there being no standard for an objective minimum to achieve or maintain, and despite the fact that the minimalist discourse itself promotes self-improvement and home-improvement via higher quality things or activities (which often come with material supplies and equipment, of course), Babauta takes himself to have failed; yet after confessing his supposed mistake he simply recommits to discarding things, and the pursuit of the minimum can begin anew. This is the sort of rhetorical endlessness of “minimalism” that we are interested in, and that we will see again at work in our second round of analyses, directed at the broader minimalist discourse beyond the popular texts that we have examined up to now. Even when it fails, when it crashes under the weight of all its connotations and contradictions, “minimalism” always survives, in great part thanks to the very ambiguities of its aesthetic, ethical-practical and rhetorical amalgam. If Babauta failed, the failure does not thus come from inherent limitations in the minimalist discourse, but rather from a slip back into consumerist ways, as unintelligible as the impulses that the consumerist society externally imposes on all, at one time all-powerful and at another as easy to resist by an individual as discarding things; and so

⁹² Mnmlist, “confessions of a minimalist”, Nov. 2016, <https://mnmlist.com/confessions> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

more “minimalism”, with its one vague ideal hardly more intelligible than that, is always the solution to its own problems.

2.2 – Minimum Longed For. Rhetorical Critique of an Endless Promise

We come out of our first round of analyses of the minimalist discourse with little more than a clearer sense of its deep unclearness. At every point on its spectrum, “minimalism” appears to work as a metaphor that cannot admit to be such, just like the discourse gathering around the label can never acknowledge to be aesthetically grounded and rhetorically oriented. In fact, however, an underlying aesthetic common sense – one of sparseness, cleanness, cohesiveness, organization, neutral colours and so on – is easy to discern on the background of its claims, while its rhetorical bent is evident in the fact that what it actually contributes to the pre-existing discourses that it appropriates is its label. The label affords shifting emphases and circular justification or support among the three main components: “minimalism” is more than just decluttering insofar as its label designates a lifestyle which is supposed to be – or rather get – beyond stuff, but it is also, vice versa, more than just self-improvement in that its common sense remains at least bound to a lifestyle around (the removal of) stuff; in both ways, “minimalism” is also more than the anti-consumerism lying at the middle of its spectrum, whose criticality it blends with its own negativity and necessity. All sorts of tensions and contradictions flow from the rhetorical confluences the minimalist discourse is steeped in, because they really make it something of a quintessential “lifestyle”, a discourse stuck between “style” and “life”, between the more aesthetic concerns of decluttering and the more ethical-practical concerns of self-improvement, both mediated by the further ethical if not political concerns of anti-consumerism. At its most general, we see a mixture, chiasm and push-and-pull between a basic subjectivist individualism and the objectivist universalism behind the pursuit of a minimum, whether “bare” or “essential” in its presentation. Insofar as it insists on the necessity of discarding things, which makes “minimalism” a lifestyle around stuff that should be expressed – or just will – in an objectively recognizable way, the discourse reveals the twin contradictions of an aesthetically extreme lifestyle of bare minimum (the asceticism that is displayed in Sasaki’s empty home) and an extremely aesthetic lifestyle of favourites only (the aestheticism that makes all unloved things a burden in Kondo’s decluttering). Insofar as the discourse maintains instead that what and how much to discard is wholly subjective in that

it must primarily – if not exclusively – benefit the individual in its life at large, making “minimalism” a lifestyle beyond stuff, it lands on the overlapping contradictions of still having to pursue without end the essential – at home and all of life – by negatively getting rid of the inessential (the discipline tied to decluttering in Babauta’s self-improvement) and of assuming as already there, and yet again pursuing as if absent, the comforts of one’s positive well-being, happiness or serenity (the contentment or satisfaction with certain things and better ways of consuming – collections, higher-quality items, pleasurable experiences and so on – in Becker’s rushed praises of minimalism, unwittingly tempered by the passing acknowledgement that what is not “stuff” is no less costly). In these various ways, minimalism presents itself as “more than just less”, so that it cannot be simply equated with anti-consumerism and its anti-materialist and anti-aesthetic rhetorical components, as Millburn and Nicodemus especially do in their movie: anti-consumerist rhetoric is employed, in a starkly dualistic and extreme manner, to back up a practice of discarding already owned things that does not seem to have much to do with it, if it does not outright contradict it (for example, creating more waste out of still usable or reusable things); then, after imbuing the practice with critical intentionality as against the impositions and impulses – the media, the mob – of a consumerist society, the discourse seems to end up with the very form of ordinary consumption it had itself excluded at the outset, somewhat restrained and somewhat indulgent, so that purchasing and consuming is actually fine insofar as it serves one’s individual wellbeing well, or fits one’s private space nicely. The aesthetic, as we have seen and will see again later, is the crux of this matter, because it is employed at times to call forth aspiration and at other times to suggest acceptance, while at still other times it evokes austerity as the good negativity of discipline, but then also the authenticity that is opposed to it when it appears as the bad negativity of deprivation – of poverty and sacrifice. Just like its rhetoric, the aesthetic common sense of the minimalist discourse is therefore a contradictory mixture of aspiration, acceptance, austerity and authenticity. This is why it is also an anti-aesthetic common sense, that is, a common sense about the aesthetic as such which is often explicitly negative towards it – even if in ways no less contradictory: from the point of view of austerity, for example, the aesthetic may look like a superfluous luxury and waste, while from that of authenticity it may rather feel superficial, an extravagant appearance pursued merely to project an external socio-economic and/or

cultural status. It is this “(anti-)aesthetic” mixed nature of the minimalist discourse that we will probe further.

Despite differences in emphasis, the gesture of discarding one’s things is never really called into question as perhaps unnecessary for minimalism, because – together with the minimum that its label rhetorically evokes, and with the aesthetic common sense around it – it is indeed necessary to distinguish a “minimalist” lifestyle as such, even when it ends up being offered as life advice so generic that it would seem to be aimed at some universal individualist subject: “minimalism” grounds and frames such individualism in ways that forbid a mere identification of the two (as we have seen from the label disappearing from the main body of Millburn and Nicodemus’ book and Sasaki’s second one, just like it is absent in Kondo’s). The necessity of discarding things in pursuing a more or less (anti-)aesthetic minimum, which will in all cases yield “more than just less” to the individual, is therefore what holds together the spectrum of this discourse, gathered around the rhetorical label of “minimalism.” This is the closest we can get to a definition of “minimalism” as a lifestyle, and will remain so – as we have already disclosed in advance – even after our second round of analyses. The reason for this is that all the contradictions that lie behind the label can actually be exploited as features instead of bugs of the discourse: through them, one can at times preach self-acceptance and at other times push for self-improvement, one day attack aestheticized status symbols and the next day laud the evidently superior aesthetic value of an uncluttered home, or at once reject consumerist accumulation of stuff and yet accept a capitalist one of money – especially as it is actually needed for having any hope of actually working less and affording “immaterial” experiences –, and on and on. By discarding unnecessary, unutilized and/or unloved things, one is first and foremost inscribed into the minimalist discourse and subject to its contrary pushes and pulls, its aesthetic appeal and its rhetorical ethical-practical appeals. On the one hand, in order to present itself as an alternative lifestyle that is morally critical, minimalism must rely on the extreme negativity associated to its label, while on the other hand it must nonetheless – in order to present itself as an attractive (and accepting) lifestyle – lean onto the aesthetic positivity which greatly pervades its common sense. The negative and the positive respectively anchor the universalist claim that minimalism is a way of living that is objectively good for anyone and the individualist disclaimer that it can only be defined as what sub-

jectively feels good – or enough, or essential – to oneself. As we have noted, these are meshed together to such an extent that the specific aesthetic appeal of an uncluttered home is taken to be pretty much universal, while the ethical-practical appeals of all sorts of generic life advice – on health, frugality, relationships, productivity and so on – are deemed in line with the individual. An abstract universal individuality (as ethical-practical lifestyle beyond stuff) rooted in a concrete individual universality (as (anti-)aesthetic lifestyle around stuff), and vice versa: this seems to be “minimalism”; as such, it can pose as one vague ideal, one solution to all kinds of problems. The necessity that lies at its core can thereby be softened or strengthened according to one’s rhetorical purpose in each situation, but it is always there, and it always manifests as a need to work on one’s home and/or oneself (the former often being, as Sasaki’s case most clearly shows, a preliminary task that draws one into the latter, due to its greater immediacy of appeal and control). A spectrum of this varied sense of necessity can thus be superimposed onto that of the rhetorical components: the minimalist discourse is always predicated upon the idea that everyone already has all that he or she needs, so that one can immediately be content and grateful (acceptance), but this premise actually operates as a promise to be pursued through various sorts of reductions and restrictions, because one still needs to first get rid of all unneeded things in order to appreciate those that are left (aspiration); from here, we move to decluttering as itself immediately life-changing (whether in an aesthetic, austere or authentic reading), and then to anti-consumerist and self-improvement practices as further necessary work to be done in all of one’s life as a consumer, or even just an individual at large. In other words, more and more work is made to be necessary by way of more and more things – physical and otherwise – being somehow exposed as actually unnecessary, and thus ipso facto harmful and wasteful. At least the suspicion of being (dangerously) unnecessary is cast on everything – against all pretexts, and despite the absence of rules or standards – through both the aesthetic and the rhetorical dimensions of the discourse: the aesthetic common sense may make things look out of place in a “minimal” home (raising the bar for what to keep, especially when tied to the comforts or even luxury of higher-quality items), while the label’s rhetoric of a “minimum” to be pursued does take bare necessity – absent anything else – as a reference point that may make things appear renounceable (lowering the bar for what to discard, for example when modern amenities are dismissed as artificial luxuries

by contrast to the “simpler” life of the traditional past and/or the poorer population and countries at present).

As more things need to be discarded, more work needs to be done, and the discourse itself is able to engender – rather than expose – the unnecessary things that must be gotten rid of so that this distinctively “minimalist” lifestyle can be maintained as such. That it does so in contradictory ways does not seem to pose, as we have observed, a threat any more than an aid to the discourse; all components of the two overlapping spectra mediate, transform and support each other (as in decluttering offering a sense of aesthetic immediacy and comfort to the restraint associated to self-improvement or anti-consumerism, or anti-consumerism turning decluttering and self-improvement into practices that are morally good for the environment and for society, or self-improvement reshaping decluttering into something more than an aesthetic home makeover – that is, a lifestyle – and similarly fashioning an identity out of one’s anti-consumerism). On the contrary, what our analyses will highlight – confirming what we have already glimpsed from the most popular texts – is that in fact the minimalist discourse at large actively contradicts itself in order to maintain itself at precisely this imprecise level, that of commonsensical indeterminacy. Especially by disavowing its aesthetic dimension, minimalism is rhetorically reproduced as an indefinite “minimum” to be longed for – a longing that, needless to say, still feeds on the aesthetic common sense, and can thus circle back to it. This minimum longed for is, like the necessity of discarding things as the core practice, what affords identification as “minimalists” to all individuals regardless of differences in what they deem essential (and other irrelevant factors as their socio-economic background, as we have seen), a residual objectivity that those promoting “minimalism” in any way need, of course, in order to at least gather the audience around their discourses and ground their advice (which always does trace implicit distinctions between good and bad – or better and worse – possessions, consumptions, habits at large and everything else in life). If the promise of the “minimum” can be made to carry on endlessly, the discourse of its numerous promoters will as well – even if tirelessly repeating the same brief and bland points as Babauta’s main blog has been doing, by now, for almost twenty years. This endlessness of “minimalism” is what has first and foremost sparked our very interest in the discourse, just as it appeared to continually spark disagreements and discomforts within it: again and again, our engagement with

the discourse has stumbled upon attempts at defining “minimalism” and determining it by breaking it up into different types, or poles set against each other – one of which often dismissed –, without it ever be enough to keep it from reverting into indeterminacy as one vague ideal, or one contradictory common sense. Before we move on to see this at work in our second round of analyses, however, it is best to now shed our eyes of the commonsensical lens we have adopted in directly grappling with the mainstream “minimalist” texts. Accordingly, in the following three sections, we will have a look at a wide range of both scholarly and journalistic critical takes on minimalism, in order to better situate it with regard to its main rhetorical components – self-improvement, anti-consumerism and decluttering. This will show how the minimalist discourse is a paradoxical form of a pursuit of authenticity that operates within all of three components, one that is so obviously inauthentic – as stylized, idealized and/or commodified – that is all too easy to dismiss it wholesale, so much so that the discourse itself can do it and capitalize on it by “squaring” authenticity: as our second round of analyses will show, minimalism can, just like the critics, disavow its aesthetic as mere aestheticization, projecting by contrast a more authentic minimalism (in the same way in which promoters of voluntary simplicity position it as a more authentic simple/frugal living by contrast to minimalism). This suggests that an effective critique – and perhaps remediation and reconstruction – of “minimalism” must go beyond a mere dismissal of it, especially one that takes the form of the very rhetoric of authenticity the discourse feeds on. In fact, we will see that before the minimalist discourse in its strict sense even emerged, its contradictions were already at work in the rhetorical components it merely brings together and conflates, especially the anti-consumerist discourse of voluntary simplicity and the modernist minimalist aesthetic common sense. Since the positive reconstruction of minimalism is beyond the scope of our work, which will only point to what is likely the most crucial obstacle on the way of undertaking it, our conclusions here will actually amount to conclusions for the thesis as a whole, because the second round of analyses – that we will outline at the end – will only illustrate the ways in which the minimalist discourse is continually at odds with itself, and how it manages to endlessly survive its end by squaring authenticity. Something always remains of “minimalism” after it is summarily dismissed: what remains is almost nothing, the “minimum possible” of it – its indeterminate possibility and promise, its plausibility and its appeal –, and yet it is this minimum and its contradictions that enable minimalism in all its varieties and itera-

tions to work as it does, reviving it and keeping it alive regardless of the crises it incurs, or the criticisms it receives. So long as it takes refuge in indeterminacy, minimalism will neither end nor change and develop, and it will be no less able to exploit – through direct or indirect commodification – the associations of its aesthetic common sense in spite of the disavowals, because a contradictory indeterminacy is in fact allied to that common sense, and to common sense in general. Rejecting minimalism only restarts its promise.

2.2.1 – Authenticity Squared (i): Critiquing Minimalism

When a clearly well-intentioned practice gains the status of “commonplace” and thus comes to pervade common sense in an indeterminate form, manifesting everywhere in miscellaneous ways, there can be a tendency in academic studies to take it on at face value, accept its assumptions and do little more than confirm its commonsensical goodness. An example that is very close to that of minimalism is the case of “mindfulness”, which was fashioned out of Buddhist traditions in a process of not only modernist secularization but also a partial strategic positioning as the most “scientific” religion around (McMahan 2008: 89-116; Lopez 2012): along the way, the decontextualization of “mindfulness” as its own self-sufficient, ahistorical, individualized meditation technique was in recent times also pushed forward by more or less scientific researchers who already shared its framing (Heuman 2018: 53-63), and who thereby did not question but rather reinforce it, contributing to its status as a vague panacea for all sorts of evils or problems (since, at its most commodified, this “McMindfulness” can span everything from meditation apps for stress-reduction to specific programs tailored to passive audiences to be managed – employees, students, soldiers –, as if indeed its moving from one social context and use to the next did not affect it in any way; Purser 2008). In its own smaller way, and also thanks to its anti-consumerist rhetoric, “minimalism” too can exert such a commonsensical appeal as a lifestyle or practice that is self-evidently good – or at the very least harmless –, pushing one to either ignore and neglect its indeterminacy, or bypass it by defining it in a way that equates it to one component only. This is in part understandable insofar as one’s focus falls on its actual manifestation as a social practice, because any one self-described “minimalist” may indeed hear and take away from the discourse only what he or she is interested in, whether it is decluttering or anti-consumption or self-improvement, especially since different texts will offer different

emphases (to the point of almost making “minimalism” disappear as its own distinctive lifestyle and practice, as we have seen). However, from our rhetorical point of view, this collapse of minimalism onto its sources would amount to its elision as an object gathering a specific discourse around itself, even if its main or sole specificity were – as is mostly our thesis – its lack of specificity, its indistinctness, its commonsensical indeterminacy. That minimalism rhetorically reproduces itself as commonsensical, and consequently operates both through centrifugal weak associations – to the supposedly simple life of the past, to the elegance of homes in interior design magazines or of the iPhone’s graphic interface, to the digital dematerialization of life and so on – and through an entirely abstract, decontextualized practical core – the gesture of discarding things –, is not an optional feature of it, a mere addition to what it “really” is beneath its discourse. The reason for this is not that a “discourse” is its own little island, an autonomous domain with its own self-contained “constructed” reality, but rather the very opposite of that: the discourse about “minimalism” appears to refuse to construct it in too definite a way – and as we will see, almost everything is too definite for it –, so that all sorts of things, and all sorts of people too, can be said to be “minimalist” and be centrifugally linked or led to one another. In other words, what the minimalist discourse does for the most part is precisely this decontextualizing, free-associating and reframing all that it draws upon; therefore, assigning to it a positive determination in order to study it sociologically only side-steps its rhetorical working. Of course, there is a certain paradox in the claim that to study “minimalism” most specifically one has to study it not in the concrete things people do in its name, but rather in the abstract – and mostly unspecific – things that people and especially its promoters say about it, because one might end up making the opposite mistake and equating it directly with unspecific cultural frames that could be studied through different and more prominent phenomena. Within common sense, “minimalism” cannot be distinguished from “mindfulness” in any sharp way with regard to the unspecific frames – including the frame of the unspecific – they presuppose, reproduce and promote, so that strictly speaking one could argue that there is no need of critically studying the former as well: after all, the self-help discourses about “mindfulness” already illustrate in a very clear way phenomena such as the responsabilization of the individual for his or her life situation – including, covertly, socio-economic backgrounds –, the push for an “optimization of the self” via self-control throughout one’s life, the promise of a full positive “happiness” to any individual re-

ardless of conditions and circumstances, the correlated avoidance of negative emotions and so on, and – as just noted – it does so through decontextualization, so that the very practice of being mindful embodies the Stoic idea that it is one’s individual, interior emotional reactions to events that can and must be changed, not the “external” world (an idea that is itself crucially decontextualized from actual conditions of lack of freedom to affect the world, such as Epictetus’ own status as a slave; Madsen 2015: 74-76). These are all features of the minimalist discourse as well; and yet, “minimalism” still constitutes a different route to reproduce them, a specific way of being unspecific, whose peculiar contradictions in fact illuminate those features from specific angles – for example, betraying the extent to which one’s “interiority” is actually bound to external surroundings, decluttering of the modern domestic “interior” being ambiguously but intimately tied to the “interior” work of improving the self (and this precisely because the private and the public are interwoven in the liminal space of the home: Sparke 2008). It is this kind of tensions that we are concerned with, neither turning “minimalism” into something specific nor yet reducing it to the unspecific as such, cutting it off from the (vaguely) distinctive path it is reached. What we will find out is that the discourse on the whole in fact constructs it in ways that attempt to just have it all: it is said – as we have already had occasions to note – to be subjectively different for everyone, each determining his or her own “minimalism”, yet it is also presented in an indeterminate way so to apparently bring everyone together as objectively “minimalists”; and the gap between these two extremes of its universalist individualism is filled in with commonsensical materials.

If we leave out all the small studies of a narrowly sociological or psychological bent, usually favourably disposed from the start towards minimalism (from Kan et al. 2009 to Lloyd & Pennington 2020 or Martin-Woodhead 2022⁹³), there remain not many

⁹³ Kan, Karasawa and Kitayama were among the first to address “minimalism” as such in a published study, but they limited themselves to a few preliminary qualitative interviews and a main quantitative survey that cannot but find what its broad categories allow and push it to find, even opposing in an orientalist way a collectivist and nihilist Japan to an individualist and positive America, and on this basis proposing a “minimalist” spin to positive psychology’s ideal of happiness (as if the minimalist discourse itself did not contradict its own rhetoric of contentment and gratitude with less). Twelve years later, Lloyd and Pennington too interviewed minimalists and codified – and thus filtered – their responses within a frame that is no less individualist than that of the discourse, and that of course finds out that there is indeed a beneficial correlation between practices of anti-consumption and well-being: their “theory of minimalism” is simply that minimalism satisfies personal but abstract, vague and seemingly eternal or universal psychological needs such as “autonomy”, “competence” and so on, which is enough to grant it a place among the tools of positive psychology (even though the authors themselves admit that there were

scholarly engagements with the minimalist discourse as such: with a few exceptions, the only long-form publications about minimalism are all academic theses of some sort, for the most part quite recent (a sign, at least, that our own interest in the discourse intercepted an on-going cultural relevance of the discourse). As for articles, it is mostly after the boom of minimalism in 2015 – with the international success of Kondo’s book – that specific studies have begun appearing, but they too have especially grown in the last years after the pandemic, which – with its centring of the segregated, locked-down home for good or bad – also motivated some critical journalistic takes on minimalism (such as Mull 2020 and Kornhaber 2020). A good reference point is a PhD thesis at Carleton University that is closest to our study of the discourse, as the emphasis in its title reveals: Erin L. Murphy’s *Less is More Work* (2018), which takes a critical look at the minimalist discourse as one more site for the responsabilization of individuals, and the regimentation of their lives, within a neoliberal culture that discharges government onto the “autonomous” and “authentic” self. Murphy’s work recognizes the contradictory nature of minimalism as a response to the consumerist society which is not only nonetheless focused on consumption, and not only itself commodified – in the form of books, blogs etc., as well as services or products of all kinds –, but also unknowingly reproducing the sort of discourses that keep it in motion to begin with. Indeterminacy goes hand in hand with this contradiction, because it is what grants the cultural notion of “authenticity” its “pervasiveness”, by allowing “people (or culture industries such as marketing and self-help) to mold its meaning to meet their needs”: as the parenthesis immediately suggests, such meaning can just as much come from consumption, as “it could also be argued [...] that in our postindustrial, postmodern age, consumption is actually the best path to cultivating authenticity, because consumer capitalism is the dominant organizing structure of society, making participation in consumerism ‘natural’” (2). Minimalism

some negative shadows to the responses, such as allusion to the obsessive “maximizing” research before purchasing a product, or the emotional vulnerability to clutter as it accumulates back again). As we have pointed out, “minimalism” in these studies is often conflated with anti-consumption in general, and that is also the case of Martin-Woodhead’s article, who – again through interviews with fifteen minimalists – takes minimalism to be one more form of restrained, conscious consumption that can contribute to sustainability regardless of minimalists’ “mixed” motivations, which show much more of a concern for individual well-being than for social or environmental impacts. The idea that an effective alternative lifestyle must pay “double dividend” by allowing people to “live better by consuming less” (Jackson 2005: 25), instead of demanding sacrifices and thus relying on people’s altruistic attitude towards the environment, is indeed a valuable point we will turn to later, and one that can be said to be vindicated by the character of the minimalist discourse as a whole. However, the assumption that people’s motivations and attitudes toward the environment do not and perhaps cannot enter into what “living better” should mean is questionable, as is the economic metaphor of the “dividend” as something that is individually and abstractly received without any direct involvement.

does present itself as anti-consumerist, expressing a widespread discontent with contemporary life, but – as it cannot actually escape a consumerist society which is able to turn anything at all into a commodified and branded product, including apparent alternatives to itself – on the whole it is best described as “alt-consumption”, because “it may in fact be even more consumed by consumerism than the ‘average consumer’” (18-19). Its pursuit of “simplicity” is the pursuit of a simpler authenticity than that seemingly offered by consumerism, but still one that is realized in and through consumption (and “stuff”). From our point of view, Murphy is in fact even more accurate than he realizes in singling out authenticity as minimalism’s underlying and overarching concern. Placing minimalism into the “broader orbit of the voluntary simplicity movement”, he recognizes that while minimalism too “exists on a spectrum spanning from those who are intentional about limiting purchasing to those who live with as few possessions as possible”, its focus still lies in “reduction of [one’s] existing possessions in combination with altering [one’s] consumption habits going forward”, and in fact he ends up defining his object as “decluttering minimalist lifestyle” (16-17): it is the centrality of the gesture of discarding things that characterizes “minimalism” by contrast to other forms of “simple living” (whose practices range from “using a bicycle instead of a car, to living completely off the grid”), even though we would stress – as we have done indeed – that it cannot for all that be reduced to decluttering as such, precisely because the practice is also, if not mainly, an often abstract anchor for the anti-/alt-consumerist discourse of authenticity. Murphy is not so interested in the specificity of the minimalist discourse, which is why on the other hand he also immediately distinguishes minimalism from “the minimalist movements in design, art, fashion, music, and cuisine”, taking the “embrace of these aesthetics” to be optional, despite the fact that decluttering – as opposed to just discarding things – is clearly an aesthetic practice, and clearly relies on a certain aesthetic common sense. In a sense, Murphy’s “decluttering minimalism” is thus located near the middle of the spectrum we have defined, severed from the aesthetic ground and yet distinct somehow both from anti-consumption at large, and from the mere rhetorical frame for self-improvement that is authenticity. While insufficient in our view, this location nonetheless gets at the core – discarding things – that then allows minimalism to operate as it does within common sense. Accordingly, it is neither conflated with any of its rhetorical components nor understood as another name for volun-

tary simplicity⁹⁴, and not even taken to be a real “movement” per se: minimalists are specifically prone to focus on their own individual consumption without actually seeking “sweeping social change”, they are principally motivated by individual “happiness, personal fulfillment, and a sense of freedom” or “being content with what one has”, and their judgments of others is only “implicit in their lifestyle given its counter-cultural nature”, not openly critical (our whole second round of analyses in a way revolves around the attenuation and management of criticality). Minimalism is a way of putting one to work on oneself through discarding things and the discourse surrounding it.

As has been observed before (Chayka 2016a), minimalism’s first boom on the blogosphere coincided with the 2008 crisis and recession, with its repercussions – anti-consumerism or not – on people’s previous and aspirational consumption levels (despite these not being as definitely related to the purchase of material “stuff” as minimalists lament: more things may indeed have been bought but for a decrease in their prices – not necessarily a good thing, if it is a result of unethical or unsustainable production practices –, while more money has probably been spent on dwelling, education and healthcare: Kim 2013). Murphy thus relates the emergence and success of the discourse – to be consolidated later in 2015 – to the parallel social strands of a deterioration of socioeconomic conditions, with worsening inequality with regard to employment, income, wealth and health, and an increasing awareness of the negative environmental impacts of individual consumption and economic growth (in 2008, the First International Conference on Economic Degrowth took place in Paris after Serge Latouche’s revival of a the 1970’s term; Latouche 2009): these strands merged into that basic but deep-seated sense of uncertainty that had already been baptized as “liquid modernity” (Bauman 2000), one whose downside looked much like precariousness, but whose neoliberal upside appeared in the better lights of flexibility (Murphy 2018: 5-9; Rodriguez 2018). Yet

⁹⁴ Despite the fact that his analysis of the discourse ends up focusing heavily on its anti-consumerist rhetoric, Murphy is much more careful, when setting up the scene for his study, in setting minimalism apart from both anti-consumerism and voluntary simplicity. He stresses, for example, how even the mirror image of minimalism, hoarding, can equally be cast in anti-consumerist rhetoric as a caring act of “custodian behaviour” (Cherrier 2010), holding on to things as opposed to complying with the wasteful “throwaway” culture of consumerist societies (Murphy 2018: 66), an attitude in line with that “true materialism” of Schor (2010) we have seen in Millburn and Nicodemus’ movie (whose contradiction with minimalist anti-materialism we have already underlined). Moreover, the minimalist discourse is much more ambivalent with regard to luxury, it has an evident preference for urban settings, and does not usually feature most of the practices – especially those more communal in scope – associated with voluntary simplicity, such as sharing things, living off grid or technologically updating one’s home for sustainability (Murphy 2018: 71-73).

Murphy also notes that in spite of this, the minimalist discourse rarely makes reference to socioeconomic issues (with a partial though significant exception for debt, which can more easily than anything else stand in for an all-encompassing sense of being burdened, obligated and constrained: Graeber 2014): through their anti-consumerist rhetoric, minimalists take their context to be that of a half-a-century old consumerist culture predicated on excess, not a circumscribed time of crisis that imposed lack or demanded austerity, which is why they always presuppose that one's "minimum" is less than what anyone already owns and consumes. Needless to say, part of the decontextualizing work of the minimalist discourse is precisely that of abstracting from all specific social struggles one almost universal struggle which any and every responsible individual has to face for himself or herself, notwithstanding differences in actual conditions. All three of its rhetorical components, which long preceded "minimalism", are each a way to construct this struggle: home organizing gurus who attacked material accumulation as clutter, simple living promoters lamenting the hyper-technological and accelerating modern life exhausted in a meaningless "work-and-spend cycle", as well as a relentlessly growing tide of self-help resources – from books and blogs to TV programs, workshops and coaches – with life advice for all areas of life thus packaged as "lifestyle" (health tips, emotional management, fashion trends, touristic destinations, workout routines and on and on), all shaped a battlefield wherein struggles could be absorbed and reframed, usually in a moral instead of political manner that was very compatible with neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility, private enterprise and free markets (Murphy 2018: 4, 9-15). Murphy aptly quotes Cushman's idea of the "dialectic of acquisitiveness and asceticism", according to which a "greed talk" around "excess acquisition of material wealth, capital, or goods in an environment of scarcity" regularly arises in response to capitalism's crises as a moral critique of it (Cushman 2015: 9). From this point of view, the fact that the minimalist struggle – with its blend of decluttering, anti-consumerism and self-improvement – does not take aim at the accumulation of invisible and thus non-cluttering capital, but only at that of visible stuff or ostentatious status symbols, demonstrates indeed the extent to which it is steeped in the neoliberal orientation (besides its roots in an aesthetic common sense). The struggles against clutter, against consumerism and – ultimately – against all supposedly external constraints or compulsions on one's individual life (not any such limitation in particular, but all at once vaguely), are allied in a call for moral self-control on the part of the individuals themselves, no matter the

emphasis and thus the entry point to the discourse. It is not surprising that, while of course particularly widespread in North America, minimalism is as globalized a phenomenon as is the consumerist culture it tries to reject, with apparently no stark differences in its general discursive manifestations across countries (for example, as noted in Zalewska & Cobel-Tokarska 2016, Polish minimalist bloggers tend to emphasize personal well-being and not insist as much on the moralizing rhetoric of anti-consumption and environmentalism, but that is actually quite in line with the minimalist discourse elsewhere).

The three main aspects of the minimalist discourse that Murphy singles out are the temporal frame contrasting a consumerist past to a minimalist present/future, the negotiation of one's relation to things as opposed to experiences, and the positing of needs against mere wants for each individual; and all three of these are rife with contradictions, as we have amply seen all throughout our first round of analyses. With regard to its temporal frame, which serves the rhetorical purpose of projecting a transformation and transition to be made from consumerism to minimalism in a dualistic fashion, the most crucial contradiction is that on the one hand consumption is presented as an overpowering social imposition from without and/or natural impulse from within, while on the other it is still the individual that is responsabilized – if not outright blamed – for his or her vulnerability, as if, after all, he or she was free to choose to begin with: all sorts of depersonalized forces, from marketing down to one's possessions (by conflation), are all said to constrict, imprison or enslave the individual, calling forth his or her “greed”, and yet backing out of this consumerist “trap” is taken to be as easy as just choosing differently, with more intentionality (Murphy 2018: 145-148, 150-151). Thus it seems that “on the one hand, we are free to participate in consumerism, but on the other hand we are trapped by it”, and “yet, we are also able to free ourselves from its grasp” (157): freedom is the “ultimate goal”, but one that is just evoked by a dualistic contrast without clarifying how it actually relates to the sort and degrees of freedom one enjoys in the consumerist society, instead generating a vague moral “fear” that one may end up being permanently deprived of all agency. The paradox is that any consumerist society is in fact already built upon a freedom to choose, both among different products and among ways and degrees of consuming – including refraining from doing so, even to a large “anti-consumerist” extent –, so much so that the excess of alternatives and choices to

make is one of the minimalist complaints towards consumerism, though conflated as usual with all the others (148). It is thus ever unclear whether the freedom sought by minimalists is a freedom to choose or a freedom not to, two options which can be seen as respectively corresponding to the ends of our spectrum, one pointing to the constant work of self-improving and the other to that immediate, final satisfaction one supposedly gets from either self-acceptance or home-improvement. What is certain is that, since in fact they cannot just stop consuming, and since of course the temporal frame implies that one does have to work on some transformation beyond mere self-acceptance, the two freedoms both amount to a disciplining call for individual self-control, even though the latter is used to soften the former. Such rhetorical softening is, in our view, the very crux of the matter with “minimalism”, in its reliance on an aesthetic common sense that distinguishes it from a generic anti-consumerism. If it is true that minimalism too does, at times, rely on the idealization of a past before consumerism – alluding to anything from the Middle Ages or remote spiritual traditions to the wartime years and their ethos of making do, or to homemade and artisanal local production as opposed to industrialization (158-163) –, this hardly seem to inform its practical prescriptions, especially its core practice of discarding things (which clearly contradicts much of what that past “simple life” is praised for, even though – needless to say – the discourse ignores entirely the ways in which socio-economic and cultural conditions were instead much worse). How is an evidently individualist lifestyle, one that goes so far as to conceive of one’s relationships to others as something that can and should be unilaterally assessed and if need be “decluttered” with anything else for a “relationship minimalism” (Logan 2021), in any way promoting the communal way of life it sometimes summons from the past? What minimalism pursues is not a return to the pre-consumerist past, which is but one way to rhetorically conflate itself with anti-consumerism, but rather the ambiguous present/future state of living within a consumerist society without being affected by it anymore. The ambiguity comes from the fact that the promoters of minimalism speak from such a state not only as their present state – as opposed to their consumerist past –, but also as a state that is more or less already immediately accessible to all individuals, something that is in fact already there from the start and must only be uncovered under the excess; first of all, the aesthetic excess that is clutter. The aesthetic common sense can be said to aid in blurring the line between a promised future and a premised present, that is, between the aspirational – which requires the self-restraint of austerity and the

work on oneself of authenticity – and the acceptance that softens it (and that was supposed to set minimalism apart from consumerism as a society that incessantly pursues idealizations through material stuff and mediatic status symbols). The minimalist discourse presents minimalism as a whole “holistic lifestyle” that promises to pretty much change everything in one’s life: it is a meaningful life, a life of order and serenity, a healthier life where one feels better instead of merely looking better, a life with raised standards, with less of a literal or metaphorical clutter – material stuff, mediatic distractions –, with less stress and discontent altogether, a life free of debt and full of free time, one of passionate, productive or creative (and successful) work, one in which there is more excitement, interesting relationships and contributions to community according only to one’s own individual priorities, a life of endless personal growth, a life that is light and free and happy, and on and on with different emphases in different texts (Murphy 2015: 163-165). By itself, this promised life – whose contradictoriness is quite clear once all its determinations are gathered together in this way – is not at all unique to minimalism, because it is in fact neither different from a life of self-improvement more broadly, nor from the life of consumerist pursuit of idealizations that it poses as an alternative to.⁹⁵ What minimalism seems to contribute in its specificity, we argue, is that blurring of the line between present and future that lends immediacy to the promise, and backs up its presentation as a premise that is already fulfilled – no more conditions required – regardless of each individual’s concrete situation. As we have noted earlier, Murphy does not stress this point, but it is implicit in his whole study that at least the minimalist discourse eases, willingly or not, the pathway towards working on oneself: since its “less” is not really a state but the active project of lessening, it is indeed “more work”, as the title puts it.

⁹⁵ Via Koontz (2010), Murphy observes how authenticity is often constructed in a negative way – just like minimalism – by contrasting to present conditions either an impression of exotic otherness or one of nostalgic tradition, which however also implies that it is only within present conditions (industrial and technological progress, widespread circulation of mediatic images, ready-made products of all kinds such as processed foods etc.) that authenticity can be desired as such, as something that was lost and must be recovered; and the consumerist society is perfectly able to then produce all sorts of commodities that are marked by this recognizable authenticity, for example through some shade of “naturalness” – an association with whatever is raw, primitive, wild, rustic, rough and so on (Murphy 2018: 52-57). In other words, the pre-consumerist past only became “authentic” retrospectively in the consumerist present. The ambiguity of minimalism’s aesthetic common sense, which is overall urban and modernist and at any rate all but traditionalist (except through some degree of exotic otherness, such as that of Japan), betrays the fact that the authenticity which is sought has very little to do with the past.

It has been noted that the “minimalist journey” is presented, by vloggers on YouTube, either as a “hoarder to minimalist” life-changing transformation, or as an “always been minimalist” simple identification, two narratives respectively emphasizing aspiration and acceptance (Zhao 2021). These often come with an explanation of one’s past self – whether as a hoarder or as already (somehow) minimalist – in terms of one’s family and upbringing, respectively referencing a more or less affluent context, spun out of control, and one of poverty which instead already required that control. We have repeatedly seen how the minimalist discourse addresses every individual regardless of the scenario he or she falls in – especially socio-economic conditions –, and its softening, easing rhetorical operation should be cast in this light as well: at once it puts at work softly those whose conditions in fact afford some degree of aspiration, while it softens the work of those whose conditions demand it anyway (conditions that they are openly invited to accept and take responsibility for). This is one of the main lines of criticism that has been levelled against the minimalist discourse (Goodyear 2013, Bernstein 2016, Land 2016, Fagan 2017), and we will return to it later, but it is important to underline that both scenarios and “journeys” put individuals to work – or keep them at it – in response to whatever struggle they feel they are going through: the occasional references to the pre-consumerist past as “simple”, like references to immaterial – and thus unconditional – experiences or to a necessity that is at times “bare” and at other times less so, continually merge the scenarios and allow the minimalist discourse to absorb and re-frame every struggle as its struggle. It is not like there can be admitted no similarity among struggles across classes or strata in modern capitalist and consumerist societies, of course, nor is it an impossible or worthless task that of articulating such commonsensical struggles; the problem is that the minimalist discourse leaves them at this level of common sense as sufficient to back up whatever sort of advice each author, blogger, vlogger or influencer proposes – starting, of course, with discarding things. That a problem is commonsensically shared in an indeterminate form does not mean that responses and solutions to it will have to be the same regardless of conditions, as are minimalism’s. For example, one could follow Rosa (2015) in foregrounding an on-going “social acceleration” resulting from a mix of technological advances, increasing instability or ephemerality of social forms, widespread perceptions of a hurried pace of life or lack of time and so on, as does Ugglå (2019) in her study of minimalist transition narratives, but what the narratives demonstrate is precisely that the proposed solution is more of

the same commonsensical problem, a contradictory mirror of it. She takes up Hsu and Elliott's typology of "selves" (2014) to map the different phases of the transition to minimalism: before the transition, we find a "reinventive self" that is flexibly "caught in an endless stream of changes and new options, making the concept of identity itself disposable", a "detached self" that gets desensitized by all those stimuli and "cultivates a deep sense of indifference", and a "stationary self" that brings the two together into a sense of everything and nothing changing at once, as if on a "frenetic standstill"; after the transition, there comes a "reflexive self" that still pursues "self-construction" but without "passively adapting to the demands of high-speed society", and finally a "decelerating self" that resists them (Uggla 2019: 242). The former set of selves is allied to a "deceived self" as opposed to an "authentic self", but the latter is also a "disciplined self" that always "must maintain its awareness and continuously work on its own improvement", instead of merely slowing down (243-244). Consequently, the "tempo of the "minimalist life" ends up being just "a piacere", on the one hand "rebel[ling] against fast living" and "liv[ing] in the moment", on the other "set[ting] long-term goals and follow[ing] one's passions" (247): even if it is some individual balance between the two, it is unclear how it can be achieved or maintained, or how one can reliably tell in advance if some goal is being posed by the reinventive or the reflexive self, which are actually the mirror image of each other (even Babauta, as we have seen, can easily get it wrong, and then simply insist retrospectively that what he had desired was not what he truly needed or wanted). As we will see, these contradictions between aspiring and accepting, accelerating and slowing down, producing – or creating – and living in the moment, reinventing oneself and reflecting on oneself and so on are not distinctively "minimalist" in any way, just like the anti-consumerist points: they are inherent tensions of a pursuit of authenticity that is at the core of the whole self-improvement discourse. What is more minimalist, once again, is rather the fact that minimalism operates as a "boundary object" (Fox 2011) which is "understandable in more than one setting, that is, plastic enough to be adjusted to different settings and stable enough to retain its identity in these different settings", so that through it "people with somewhat different motives for resisting contemporary norms of high speed and consumption can all be inspired by the core idea of minimalism as a tool to achieve freedom, yet still create their own version of it" (Uggla 2019: 248). This inspiration is what minimalism brings to the table, to the point that – as we will see – it almost annihilates itself in order to bring eve-

ryone and everything under itself. It is just one little step behind direct identification with – and thus reduction to – the authentic life of self-improvement; just enough distinction to make it “stable enough to retain its identity” despite indeterminacy, for example via its insistence on the necessity of discarding things, or – more implicitly – via its aesthetic common sense. Its contradictions are also its strength, because they allow it to manage those of each rhetorical component it draws upon, such as the three mainly anti-consumerist aspects singled out by Murphy.

If the temporal frame underwrites the construction of minimalism as a lifestyle as holistic as life within a consumerist society (supposedly) is – contradictions notwithstanding –, the negotiation and opposition of the value of “things” with regard to “experiences” starts giving it content: it is this second dualism that, conflated with the anti-materialist component of the anti-consumerist rhetoric, affords apparent support for the core practice of discarding one’s things, both by generically devaluing material “stuff” as such and by providing the basis for a strict hierarchy of good and bad things. As we have seen, despite often attacking all “stuff”, the minimalist discourse is ambivalent about it, and in fact very keen on reassuring people that there is no fixed limit as to how much one can own, or rules, standards and criteria as to what to keep and what to discard: under this respect, too, it contents itself with almost total indeterminacy, simply claiming that there is an excess of stuff that each can individually recognize as “unnecessary” or “inessential” (usually the former when the aim is insisting that there is objectively an excess, the latter when the aim is reassuring that it is subjectively determined). Even so, two lines are at once traced between hierarchical levels: on the one hand, that between things and experiences, while on the other that between better and worse things – usually expressed as “quality over quantity” –, so that “there are also times when objects are framed as part of who a person is” (Murphy 2018: 176), insofar as they are of the good kind. Whether “bad” things are those that do not “spark joy” but rather negative emotions, those that are not functionally or aesthetically perfect, those that are not in line with one’s present self and desires, or those that one does not use or enjoy on a regular basis, by devaluing these things – and urging people to discard them – the minimalist discourse at once values other things as authentic, thus both denying and reaffirming the importance of one’s ties to material stuff; otherwise, as we have argued, there would be no point in going through the trouble of decluttering instead of simply

devoting oneself more to experiences, or even just to other anti-consumerist or self-improvement practices. While criteria are left indeterminate as usual – which, however, only means that they can all be applied as need be, compounding their effects –, there is on the whole an implicit push to raise standards and consume higher quality things, as products that are similar or compatible with those remaining after discarding may also be valued as authentically desired and thus worthy of being purchased (since its satisfaction can therefore be seen as similarly enduring, which is of course what consumerism suggests it is in general the case for all the products and services it offers). Such invitation might be directed primarily at those who can afford not only the luxury of discarding things – which is presented as “easy” by the minimalist discourse (185-187), but not necessarily is (Bernstein 2016) –, but also the luxury of buying back something new, and yet we have just seen how the discourse’s vagueness collapses the scenarios and obscures the conditions – and costs – of the lifestyle. On the contrary, one of the main ways in which it attacks “stuff” is by one-sidedly presenting it as inherently a cost (in terms of scarce “resources” such as energy, time, space and money), a source of harm (in terms of stress), and an overall obstacle to getting to know one’s authentic needs and desires (as opposed to desiring too much and/or too many different things – both non-coincidentally incompatible with minimalism’s aesthetic common sense): the simple existence and presence of “stuff” in one’s home is taken as a negative factor for an individual’s life, while the costs of discarding and reacquiring things are never considered (Murphy 2018: 187-191). The very same contradictions also invest “experiences”, as these too are constantly divided by the discourse in better and worse ones (on the basis of how culturally evident is their relationship to consumption: productive and creative labour, artistic hobbies, spiritualistic self-care, old media like books and so on are systematically favoured over more mundane “exciting experiences” that involve, for example, consuming food and beverages; 196): in fact, contrary to their opposition to things in the minimalist discourse, experiences too can be just as commodified for alternative “experiential consumption”, which may then be aesthetically recorded and compared on social media just like stuff (merely making the act of consumption less immediately recognizable in its socio-economic conditions, its social and environmental impact, and its involvement – at any rate – of many material things; 191-195). This is why Murphy takes minimalism to be rather a form of “alt-consumerism”, one that may lead to shifts in consumption towards not only less of it, but also more of a high-quality, ex-

periential and/or markedly ethical or eco-friendly sort. What is included in such better consumption is left, once again, indeterminate, but that only means that it is decided on a commonsensical basis – including its aesthetic side – and via the examples and exhortations of the minimalist promoters or influencers themselves, who often list things they like and bought as minimalists (or despite being minimalists). All in all, then, the discourse on the one hand insists that “we are not what we own”, but on the other it also implicitly maintains both that we are what we do not own – as recognizably “minimalists” –, and that we are what we still own – and still buy – after discarding things and in spite of being minimalists: precisely because a minimalist is supposed to be very selective of each and every thing owned or bought, as they are after all authentic “extensions” of himself or herself (206), he or she can address others as a model consumer⁹⁶ to look up to, draw from and imitate (again, also aesthetically).

⁹⁶ Right after noting that “the tradition of social critique” of consumption – as put and pushed forward by Veblen’s theory of the leisure class, Bourdieu’s concept of social distinction via cultural distinction, and Baudrillard’s triumph of simulacra – has become “increasingly present within consumer practices themselves” (29), such as minimalism, Murphy points that minimalists nevertheless are all too evidently concerned with “consuming what they regard as the right items, in the right way”, and are thereby “no less subject to, and active in reinforcing, the belief that material items are an important part of identity formation, or that our lives are shaped by consumption” (30). That consumption gathers one very important set of “languages” for social communication is even more commonsensical within semiology, of course, as is also the fact that even the most self-evidently communicative practice around consumption – advertising – can (try to) almost negate itself by decentering the product and brand in favour of some socially relevant and critical message (Boero 2017: 67-76). It is interesting to note that such shift away from the evidence of its primary function to ally itself with social critique first happened in the 1960s, as part of a “conquest of cool”, precisely by way of a minimalist aesthetic reduction: “The ads produced by the anarchic figures who led what came to be called the ‘creative revolution’ broke decisively with the stilted, idealized, cliché-ridden style of the 1950s. A clean minimalism replaced complex layouts cluttered with different product claims. Humor, wit, and stylistic elegance returned from the advertising oblivion to which they had been exiled by deadly-serious USP scientism. But the ads of the creative revolution not only differed from those of the gray flannel past: they were openly at war with their predecessors. What distinguished the advertising of the 1960s was its acknowledgment of and even sympathy with the mass society critique. [...] [It] openly admitted that consuming was not the wonder-world it was cracked up to be. It sympathized with people’s fears about conformity and their revulsion from artificiality and packaged pleasure. It pandered to public distrust of advertising and dislike of admen. Comparing one brand to another and finding it lacking was and is a routine advertising technique; in the sixties, advertising actively compared a new, hip consumerism to an older capitalist ideology and left the latter permanently discredited” (Frank 1997: 53). This only became more true, and more minimalist, in the 1980s, with ads that strategically took indirect, connotative and aesthetic routes to deny their nature and tell consumers, “This is not an ad” (Goldman 2005). This strategy cannot be totalized, of course, as it depends on the contrast with more straightforward mediated ads in order to instead appear immediate, not manipulative: the “post-mortise stage of advertising” necessarily includes both. From this point of view, however, it could be argued that the discourse about a “minimalist lifestyle” goes a step further and functions as an even more implicit form of non-advertising, especially of course when a product is directly or indirectly sponsored: only the products that are worthy of being included in an authentically “minimalist” home can be purchased free of guilt. This is true in general of the by now consolidated figure of the “authentic influencer” (Hund 2023), but minimalism is particularly well-placed and even predisposed by its aesthetic common sense and anti-consumerist rhetoric.

In its indeterminacy, this contradictory stance towards things ends up identifying the authentic with the euphoric: we are not what we own insofar as it calls forth or recall any negativity, while we are what we own insofar as the contrary is the case, that is, insofar as things spark joy. The anti-aesthetic component of the anti-consumerist rhetoric, which attacks the media, their flow of images and by extension the use of possessions as status symbols of some sort to be displayed, is not therefore fully endorsed, just like anti-materialism: as demonstrated by the curated presence of so many minimalist influencers on visual platforms like YouTube and social media like Instagram, the same ambivalence invests the aesthetic (and this ambivalence is precisely what we will mainly explore in our later analyses). Is the aesthetic authentic insofar as it is entirely positive, without trace of negativity? The minimalist discourse does not explicitly take a strict functionalist approach to evaluating things, so that their pleasantness – including aesthetic appearances – is not excluded insofar as it is authentically appreciated; but what such authentic appreciation should mean is not made clear within the discourse, rather just evoked again by negative contrast, and by contrast to the negative – the aesthetic is fine, insofar as it stays euphoric. Thus minimalism can be “a piacere” a lifestyle around stuff, an extremely aesthetic – or aesthetically extreme – lifestyle (coming with its mediatic image), and a lifestyle beyond stuff in pursuit of experiences; and in any of these emphases, it can just circle back to consumption as the main site of working on one’s home and/or oneself. How easily this can serve and redress instead of contrasting consumerism is, of course, the most widespread criticism of the minimalist discourse. The most obvious example is the bit of backlash – though she indeed never labelled herself “minimalist”, as she clarified at the end of the year⁹⁷ – against Kondo’s opening of her

⁹⁷ As we have seen, Kondo’s reversal of the negativity of discarding through a positive rhetoric of selecting and keeping is hardly convincing, as the insistence on the necessity of a massive purge of things pervades her original bestseller. This was noted from the start by commenters: again on *The Guardian*, for example, Eva Wiseman gave the method a try only to conclude that “the things Kondo calls clutter, I call my lovely pictures, my funny shoes, my pieces of a life”, recognizing that there is in fact implied in Kondo’s book a definite push for discarding things and for achieving a “minimalist home” as an aesthetic “style choice” (whose “pursuit of cleanliness” in order to “live in that white nothingness” does however reflect, as a “cult of decluttering”, a clear desire for being “able to move so smoothly through our lives that nothing will touch us, soil us”; Wiseman 2015). Her quip near the end that “like dirt, clutter is just matter out of place” violates Kondo’s prioritization of discarding things over simply tidying up and organizing the home per se. Four years later, Wiseman will salute the opening of the store as one more sign of “late-stage capitalism” and “the discomfort and farce of modern life”: “She ushered in the possibility of pure control. While not inherently minimalist

(a trigger word for me, a person who, after half a glass of wine will happily burn down the superiority that comes with a ‘capsule wardrobe’ and expensive asceticism) her teachings leaned heavily towards the ‘stuff is bad; bin all your crap’ school of thought. Still, it should be no surprise that [...] a Kondo shop, selling new crap to those whose homes echo nakedly since she first entered their lives, should open. And

pretty expensive store of aesthetically minimalist products that “spark joy” (McCurry 2019), right after the success of her Netflix series, strategically released on New Year’s day, and after having built up a millionaire “empire” via consultations and sale of official certificates (“The Guardian view on consumerism and Marie Kondo” 2019). Minimalism’s alt-consumerist shift can, however, be more subtle than a “master plan” of “declutter[ing] so you can recluster” (Wiseman 2019)⁹⁸, and as good and common an example as any other is that of minimalist mothers sponsoring – directly or indirectly – all sorts of brands and products for children on their blogs and social media accounts, as a critical study highlights (Duvall 2021): in and through an “Instagram aesthetics” that never “died” so far as minimalist posts on social media are concerned (69-70), this region of the minimalist discourse has played with parental anxiety in order to both urge discarding of toys and other things as damaging children’s healthy development (nonchalantly disregarding their preferences; 76-77), and suggesting supposedly better alternatives – to avoid “depriving” them – listed as good products for “minimalist families” (often with implicitly yet quite clearly aesthetic criteria: old toys can then be replaced by more “natural” – and costly – handmade wooden ones, even if little more than branches one could pick up walking on a park, while branded toys with recognizable characters are summarily but very passionately rejected with no explanation just because they “scream consumerism”; 70-71, 76). Needless to say, even when these influencers do not directly sponsor specific products, they still earn revenue from targeted advertisements, and they still implicitly present themselves as models to be imitated by similarly purchasing the right high-quality, and aesthetically tasteful, products: despite often setting minimalism apart from “perfect parenting” (70), softening the anxiety

right before Christmas, too. [...] She reveals the masterplan, her very own economy, a cycle of buying and binning in search of true happiness. The shop itself is Goop-like in its ambitions of expensive wellness” (Wiseman 2019).

⁹⁸ The risk of minimalism engendering such an endless vicious circle can be correlated to the infinite nature of the pursuit of authenticity in general, when taken to be the discovery of an individual “true self” that both needs and repudiates social recognition as such by others (as in Taylor’s critical reading of the concept after the “slide to subjectivism”, which is precisely the slide we will see reoccur again and again in the minimalist discourse; Taylor 1991: 55-70): the individual must be authentic because authenticity is understood as a shared trait of realized humanity, and yet if this means that he or she must be purely individual, and thus isolated by his or her originality and uniqueness, the task will be continually frustrated, as every time the individual identifies with something “external” – wholly irrespective of whether it is a thing or an experience – that something can be in turn identified, commodified, sold and spread as objectively “authentic”, restarting the pursuit for a more authentic authenticity (Murphy 2018: 50-52). As things come to be seen as inauthentic, then, they can always be decluttered while “recluttering” with those that instead now appear as authentic. This is all the easier when the authentic becomes even indistinguishable from the euphoric, of course, as the slightest hint of negativity can then be a good enough rationale for one more round of the cycle.

(again a rhetoric of acceptance softening aspiration), there is in fact a lot of perfection ever on display in the discourse, which also clashes with its rhetorical references to spiritual contentment and desiring less (“There is little promise to be free of desire in the minimalism posts studied. The desire for wealth, smarter children, and picture-perfect homes fairly sings from the screen, seducing readers as surely as any toy marketing campaign. [...] It is necessary to consider the contradictions in how minimalist advocates extol nature time. [...] The accounts I studied do not typically show children in disarray, dirt, or outdoor activities that would result in messes and mayhem. Instead, they frolic in pristine forests, pose in peaceful meadows, and dip their toes in clear streams”, 77-78). Even if we set aside the possible alt-consumerist endpoint of minimalism, however, the ambiguity of its anti-materialism and anti-aestheticism – as a lifestyle around and only then beyond stuff – can be readily seen by the popularity of vlogs on YouTube in which minimalists declutter their homes, akin to the trend of the “cleanfluencers” doing housework in general (a trend that has been criticized, like minimalism, of turning still gendered housework into “a neoliberal therapeutic promise to ‘clean away’ the instabilities, anxieties and threats of contemporary culture”: Casey & Litter 2022: 489). In her analysis of the most popular minimalist vlogs of this kind, Zappavigna (2019) classifies them in full continuity with other popular formats centred on material things: the “shop with me” videos (“gathering”), the “unboxing” videos (“unveiling”), the “packing” and “what’s in my bag” (“curating”) and so on, ending the cycle with the decluttering videos (“purging”; 3-4). In decluttering vlogs, things are not just discarded but rather revealed, displayed, sifted through or otherwise handled, commented upon and so on (6). The concluding question of this study is very much to the point: “What does it mean when we have accumulated so much that we express ourselves, and bond with others, by filming the process of throwing out our stuff?” (12).⁹⁹

⁹⁹ A similar idea has of course been expressed with regard to the accelerating rate of the cycle of fashion, which makes it necessary for detachment from old items to synchronize and continually keep up with attachment to new ones, thus turning into a “fashionable detachment” – actually a sort of meta-attachment to the experience of detaching oneself, of letting go (Mellander & Petersson McIntyre 2020). Strangely enough, however – though perhaps explained by their phenomenological approach and their working with people already favourably predisposed towards sustainable fashion –, the authors do not seem to take Kondo’s decluttering method to be equally liable to such a vicious circle, even though it is explicitly predicated – as we have seen – upon pursuing an aesthetic ideal of perfection that would then purportedly end or at least curb the arising of further desires and thus consumption, just like the pursuit of the “perfect wardrobe” that is here (rightly) denounced as keeping the cycle of fashion in motion. In the authors’ view, Kondo’s positive rhetoric, together with her related insistence on physical contact with each item and on the more intuitive, emotional evaluation of the “joy” things spark appear as ideas in line with that “new

The third main (anti-consumerist) aspect of the minimalist discourse according to Murphy's analysis – as well as ours – is the contrast between needs and wants, natural necessities and artificial desires, which is interwoven with the other two dualisms: things allegedly give us only an ephemeral, illusory sort of happiness – mere excitement – as opposed to experiences (despite these being literally ephemeral), while the pre-consumerist past and minimalist present/future promise a happiness that is more enduring, integral and stable than that on offer in consumerist societies (Murphy 2018: 209, 214). We have already dwelled at length on minimalism's once again very ambivalent relationship to necessity, expressed through such commonsensical rhetorical gestures as pointing to poorer countries to generate a sense of guilt for one's possessions (210-211), or at any rate invoking grateful contentment with what one owns as already enough from the start, via implicit reference to bare necessity for surviving (212-213), or to physical and mental health as the standard for each and every individual as human (222-230). The function is the same as that of the opposition between things and experiences: a rhetorically stark (and yet actually fuzzy) line is traced between worse and better forms of consumption, and the latter also receive the connotations of bare necessity – not really advocated as such – like its naturalness, its disciplined restraint, its modesty and so on, despite the fact that the minimalist discourse too promises comfortable well-being if not luxury as well as individual happiness, perhaps including aspiration to some kind of success. As we have seen, sometimes the discourse insists on the necessity of discarding by pressing on an objective, universal bare necessity, but at other times it softens the latter by instead talking of the subjective, individual essentials. This means that any want of an individual may be conflated with strict human needs by contrasting both, as “authentic”, to the artificial, materialist and aestheticized needs/wants that are externally imposed as impulses on the individual by the consumerist society: “Basic needs are considered authentic because they are natural and necessary while existential wants are deemed authentic because they relate to fulfilling human potential. Again, consumerism is situated as hindering this process by creating material wants and artificial needs” (208). As we have just observed, this does not seem to be of much help in

materialism” that is needed for consumerist societies to actually come to respect and value material things as such, in their qualitative materiality. While such materialist revival is quite consonant with our own view, we take it to be necessarily an aesthetic revival in equal part: both rhetorical components of anti-consumerism must be revised; we cannot reevaluate matter only to reject and restrain appearances wholesale. Thus, even conceding that Kondo's method is materialist, that takes nothing from its extremely aestheticized approach.

defending and disentangling minimalists from manufactured desires, because in fact it paves the way for a naturalization of some of them (often times in a quite literal sense, as with those natural-looking wooden toys): one's "authentic" desires are understood as something that pre-exists and is predetermined for each individual in a way as ahistorical – and asocial – as the abstraction of any "natural" set of basic needs for the human as such. The push for reducing one's desires to close the gap with bare necessity may therefore always end up doing little more than sanctioning most of them as authentically one's own, unaffected by society and free of guilt. The specifically minimalist gesture of discarding things does just the same, as leftover things – and whatever else is not reduced in one's life – are made authentic in the process and can thus be freely pursued through more work on one's home and/or oneself (and alt-consumption too, if need be). Thus what is "luxury" for some may be just "enough" for others (and vice versa!), and yet – by making it a matter of overall "stuff" and level of consumption, which is generic, abstract and merely quantitative – minimalists associate themselves to one and the same vague "enough"; which has the twin effects of "claim[ing] a moral high ground over those they think cannot control their consumer desires" (the distinction, by way of the interwoven dualisms, of worse from better forms of consumption; 232) and of "flaunting one's wealth or fetishizing others' poverty" through this "symbolic benchmark by which minimalists can feel good about themselves and their reduced accumulation of items" (the indistinctiveness among, for example, minimalists of different socioeconomic conditions; 235). The rhetorical label of "minimalism" for an indeterminate yet somehow distinctive and integral lifestyle, with its commonsensical references to some minimum to be pursued in life and a certain recognizable aesthetic style, can be understood as a way to reproduce and reinforce and regulate these twin effects – arguably a more effective one than direct and explicit appeals to authenticity, especially as it can access and conflate the discourses of decluttering, anti-consumerism and self-improvement as need be, playing with all their tensions and contradictions. At one time minimalists can claim that "electricity" is a need but "cable" is not, thereby "distinguishing minimalist consumption from mainstream consumption" as is crucial to "defining a lifestyle" (232), while at other times they can speak for everyone in insisting that "we already have enough" from the very start, despite not everyone having "six-figure salaries and access to credit" or other privileged conditions (235), and despite the fact that many if not most people do have good reasons to keep things "just in case" and

prepare for the future, having to face all sorts of socio-economic risks (which, as we have seen, are not actually mitigated by the discarding of things in any clear sense; 215-217). It goes without saying that all of this serves, first and foremost, those who depend on the discourse's on-going, in fact never-ending continuance, the minimalist authors and bloggers and influencers: anyone can be addressed as included in their audience, everyone can be put at work by making it necessary to discard all the unnecessary – the core gesture which inscribes one in the discourse as “minimalist” too –, and everyone can be kept or returned to work by being bounced back and forth from one rhetorical component to another, from one contradiction to the next one, while also managing and softening the sense of crisis or criticality involved in this work. In essence, this is our thesis' whole argument.

Murphy's reading of minimalism as one more manifestation of a pursuit of authenticity that is unwittingly in line with the neoliberal responsabilization of the individual is spot on, and in fact it is confirmed by other such critical readings – in the last couple years – of related discourses, such as that promoting tiny houses (Hennigan 2021). However, it does miss the distinctive indistinctiveness of minimalism, as shown by his setting aside of its aesthetic dimension – despite almost identifying minimalism with decluttering – and his focus on the anti-consumerist rhetoric it implements, which keeps him from noting how the minimalist discourse also comes in varieties that are more straightforwardly centred on self-improvement (as was already the case in its first days on Babauta's blogs, and later in Millburn and Nicodemus' book). In our view, of course, this only strengthens, specifies and thus clarifies Murphy's analysis, insofar as it is a study of minimalism in particular – in which case, especially from a rhetorical perspective, it must demand of the minimalist discourse that it say much more definitely what “minimalism” is, not because ambiguity is unacceptable or anything like that (though there are indeed negative social consequences), but because only in this way ambiguity can even be understood as such: the rhetorical problem with a discourse like minimalism's is that it is very much ambiguous on whether it is ambiguous or not, as we will see. In other words, minimalism is no doubt almost like decluttering, almost like frugal and/or sustainable anti-consumption, almost like self-improvement, and the minimum it pursues is almost like authenticity, but reducing it to any one of these components would amount to make it disappear as the rhetorical phenomenon it is, with its

own distinctive discourse reliant on a certain aesthetic common sense (which is discernable and often also made explicit, even in verbal discourses like those we have examined). The minimal is more authentic than the authentic precisely because it better embodies its ambiguities, foremost among these the ambiguity on whether it is ambiguous, indeterminate, or instead crystal clear. From this point of view, minimalism is not a lifestyle but the lifestyle, that is, a lifestyle so ambiguous about its components – an aesthetic style, an ethical-practical life – that it can just as well work as one particular lifestyle (closer to the aesthetic, decluttering end of the spectrum) and as a general push for lifestylization (closer to the other end, that of ethical-practical self-improvement), through the middle land of an anti-consumerist rhetoric that makes it alternatively critical (by stark, dualistic wholesale opposition to consumerist society, with reference to bare necessities) and comfortable (by promising an aspirational ideal that however it presents as immediately accessible and accepting of all). That lifestyles work on the one hand by aesthetic seduction and on the other by moral prescription is how they are constructed in critical readings of the pursuit of “happiness” such as Binkley’s, where “the seduction of consumerism” and “the rationality of governmentality” are merged together as complementary in their engendering work (Murphy 2018: 102-103): “Consumer lifestyles set individuals to work on their own identities through practices that are primarily aesthetic, derived from a seductive culture of images and sensations [while governmental rationalities in turn] set individuals to work on themselves through instrumental imperatives imposed on them by specific programs and managerial strategies that tell people specifically what they ‘ought’ to be and give them ways to become it” (Binkley 2007: 112-113). By presenting itself via anti-consumerist rhetoric as a critical, ethical-practical better life – often coinciding with a life of self-improvement –, yet also rhetorically framing such a life through at least a generalized reference to its aesthetic style, minimalism merges seduction and rationalization in an especially thorough way: it may equally be understood as purely seductive or purely rationalizing, precisely because it is so impurely both at once. As Murphy, who is more interested in its “governmentality” aspect, describes it, the “minimalist subject” is not only “not unlike the neoliberal subject” as “self-responsibilized, freedom-seeking individuals who prioritize their own wellbeing and feel they are acting autonomously” (Murphy 2018: 106), but it almost comes to collapse onto it, onto a generic “enterprising subject” that is always “seeking to maximize its own powers, its own happiness, its own quality of life, through

enhancing its autonomy and then instrumentalizing its autonomous choices in the service of its lifestyle” (Rose 1996: 158). That gap, that “almost”, is what we are interested in. It does not mean “less than” as mere quantitative matter of degree, but rather in the qualitative sense of indeterminacy, which at one and the same time also makes it “more authentic/neoliberal/etc. than” anything else because, seemingly at least, it is “more than authentic/neoliberal/etc.”¹⁰⁰

If “authenticity” is a “floating” term that is only negative and thus indefinite and diluted, because its actual contents cannot avoid constantly changing (Murphy 2018: 46), then “minimalism” is even more “authentic” than that, because it incorporates what authenticity is not but must always rely upon and draw from. Declaring oneself a “minimalist” is to be even more unclear, by comparison to proclaiming oneself “authentic”, about whether one is claiming to be an unique individual or a person of some recognizable kind whose aspects are shared – at least by similarity – by many others, belonging to some virtual community that gathers around the label and its discourse. A lifestyle entails that while there is of course indefinite room for individual variations, there is also a distinctive integrated set of traits – whether of life or style – that to some degree constitute that lifestyle as a common interest, a rhetorical object of consensus for a community bound by discourse. But in the case of “minimalism”, as we have noted, the discourse seems to ambiguously turn its “lifestyle” into something almost identical with the lifestylizing pursuit of authenticity as such – its universalized individualism – without however going all the way through, which would mean losing its character as one

¹⁰⁰ As we have seen, in its original popular manifestations “minimalism” was immersed from the start in the culture of self-improvement, as in Babaut’s *Zen Habits*. If its decluttering component can actually be seen as continuous with the consumerist cycle and its love of things (Zappavigna 2019), its self-improvement component can also be seen as similarly continuous with a broader pursuit of more or less technocratic, entrepreneurial and managerial productivity applied to all of life; to that extent “minimalism” is turned into a facet – and the overall “Zen” face, primarily via the digital aesthetic of Apple devices and Steve Jobs’ own myth – of “systematized living” as such, a form of “hacking stuff” on the way to “hacking life” (Reagle 2020, Ch. 5). As we have stressed, were it not for the insistence on actually discarding things and the existence of texts that reverse the relationship between decluttering and self-improvement, “minimalism” could be reduced to a mere dispensable metaphor for such a neoliberal authentic subject, one that is “masculine, entrepreneurial, well-educated, and white” as well as inclusive of “millionaires”, as Reagle notes; and, especially in its “digital nomad” manifestation, a globalized subject that accepts the framework of neoliberal flexible – or, for the less privileged, precarious – work, just as much as that of capitalist entrepreneurship (Mancinelli 2020). However, the point we want to make is that the minimalist discourse in fact never manages to dispense with its contradictions: it serves that sort of subjectivity all the better by exceeding it and using other components to back it up and manage it, so that at one time aspirational self-improvement is almost identical with minimalism (as in Millburn and Nicodemus’ book), while at another time the contentment of acceptance takes its place (as in Sasaki’s first book).

lifestyle among others, with its own label and discourse (plus common sense). As we will see in our second round of analyses, it often repudiates its distinctive aesthetic common sense through a rhetoric of authenticity, but it also holds on to it both literally – in visual discourses such as vlogs – and by always insisting on the necessity of discarding things: the tie between its aesthetic dimension and thus the particular lifestyle on the one hand, and the ethical-practical dimension with its generic lifestylization on the other, is therefore maintained, holding together the rhetorical spectrum and allowing more or less free movement upon it. The other contradiction we have highlighted above, that between the critical and the comfortable, clearly intersects this one, because it is by way of that free rhetorical movement that the criticality of the discourse is attenuated and managed, as our analyses will also show: minimalism is at times presented as an ethically if not politically critical lifestyle, in such a way that the hard work of discernment and discipline in compliance with necessities is definitely called for, while at other times it appears as an accessibly comfortable or acceptingly contented lifestyle that involves much less work, and perhaps no work beyond the aesthetic. Since they are each genuinely contradictory, the correspondences between these two pairs – the aesthetic and ethical-practical, the critical and the comfortable – can also be reversed: in fact, minimalism’s aesthetic common sense can also suggest critical restraint of an austere or even ascetic sort, while its ethical-practical rhetoric remains centred on the aspiration to individual happiness and well-being, and thus a more comfortable life. Taken together, its contradictions confirm that minimalism is in fact firmly embedded in the consumerist paradox of choice, according to which both the areas and the alternatives themselves wherein decisions must be made by each individual expand without limit, and the individual has thus “no choice but to choose” (Giddens 1991: 80-81), since he or she is “not merely ‘free to choose’, but *obliged to be free*” (Rose 1999: 87): the constraints that the discourse presents, via anti-consumerist rhetoric, as external social impositions of aestheticized standards upon individuals are actually but one side of the coin, because all the mediatic shaping of aspirational ideals – to which self-help discourses partake as much as those of marketing and advertising – is precisely due to and afforded by a widespread sense of disorientation and disease in lacking adequate resources to make all these necessary choices, to meet the (increasingly ethical and political) neoliberal responsibility of taking subjectively authentic, autonomous and yet also objectively good decisions (Murphy 2018: 84-90). Accordingly, the minimalist discourse on the one hand

exalts individual authentic choice one-sidedly as a freedom to choose, despite the fact that the latter is demanded and afforded by consumerism itself as one half of that obligation to choose (well) minimalists reject, while on the other hand it also promises a sort of freedom from having to choose: its aesthetic common sense can not only soften criticality as need be, but also guide choices directly as well as indirectly by sustaining the discourse of minimalist influencers, which offers all sorts of explicit advice or implicit good examples in some mix of the three rhetorical components. In other words, minimalism mediates the ways and degrees of the work to choose – and the choice to work – authentically and autonomously, by virtue of its own confluences and contradictions, its nature as a composite continuum; it can make an influencer’s advised choices appear at once critically authentic – with the aspirational and/or austere sense of individualist ethical-practical discipline – and comfortably accessible and accepting (as recognizably “minimalist” in some aesthetically grounded and rhetorically labelled way), and it can correspondingly both add weight to and lighten up – as need be – each individual’s load of work on his or her home and/or self.

The minimal is thus both almost and the most authentic, because it encompasses within itself the contradictions that authenticity too is rooted in and relies upon: minimization as just a metaphor, a rhetorical framing of the universalist individualism of authenticity and autonomy, is never severed from minimization as a core practice of discarding things and decluttering homes, with its aesthetic common sense (whether with an “extremely aesthetic” emphasis on comfort or an “aesthetically extreme” one on contentment, and whatever the extent to which they appear – as they both can in fact appear – aspirational, accepting or austere); the minimum at its core is, like authenticity, both posited as subjective and yet pursued as nevertheless objective, managing the necessary kind and degree of work to achieve it, but minimalism has the advantage of an aesthetic grounding to its objectivity. What this means is that if one can claim that something stops being “authentic” once it is made – by direct commodification as a product or service on the market, or by indirect commodification as imagery on the media – too recognizably authentic, too generally widespread, so that authenticity must be pursued yet again elsewhere after negating its previous expressions, it would clearly be more difficult to do the same with minimalism: the latter could perhaps reject something as not “really” minimalist, but that something would still be “minimalist” insofar as the rhetor-

ical label remains necessarily tied to its aesthetic ground (since otherwise it would be wholly dissolved into one or the other of its rhetorical components). As we will see, the minimalist discourse does negate again and again its own aesthetic common sense, but – by contrast to authenticity – it cannot really do so without also stepping back, or beyond, and sparing that aesthetic common sense from final excommunication; our second round of analyses will show the aesthetic being evoked, exorcised and yet saved without end, unwittingly making most explicit that authenticity too depends upon it. This is the reason why we have intentionally used – and will keep on using (“minimum possible”, “living within tension”, “‘less is more’ is more” etc.) – ambiguous, playful phrases in order to express minimalism in its distinctive indistinctiveness, which must be highlighted and not expunged as an illusion by any critical study of this discourse. Thus we have also alluded, in the title for the present paragraph’s survey of some such critical takes about it, to an “authenticity squared”, and it is one ambiguous phrase of this kind: on the one hand, minimalism’s authenticity is “authenticity squared” in the sense that it is potentiated by the inclusion of the aesthetic and disclosed in the endless recursive, recurrent exclusion of it as well, thus negating itself (that is, the minimalist discourse rejects its aesthetic common sense and ground as an inauthentic stereotype and standard, while also preserving it – and at times openly defending it – as still authentic precisely insofar as there are no (other) objective standards or rules); on the other hand, minimalism’s authenticity is also “authenticity squared” in the sense that it is authenticity as expressed through that aesthetic common sense of cohesiveness, sparseness and cleanliness, order and organization, neutral colours and regular geometric shapes, few decorations and so on; and finally, bringing the two together, it is “authenticity squared” insofar as the discourse thereby attempts to “square” the (vicious) circle of authenticity (though it does not appear to be able to). But if this is how things stand¹⁰¹, then a proper

¹⁰¹ Needless to say, this squaring of authenticity is itself available as one rhetorical strategy for marketing communication, as in those minimalist “cool” advertisements we have alluded to earlier or other such non-ads. One example that is quite close to the minimalist discourse and its common sense is the case of the sportswear brand Lulemon, whose stores are “staged to emulate spas, with wooden interiors that are vaguely ‘eastern’ in their aesthetic, minimalist décor, soft lighting, and the keyhole entrance in some stores that sequester shoppers from the bustle of the shopping mall” (Lavrence & Lozanski 2014: 86). Lavrence and Lozanski’s critical analysis of the brand’s self-presentation touches upon many of the problems that are also imputed to the minimalist discourse: the neoliberal responsabilization of the individual as voluntarily working on himself or herself through consumption; the middle class preoccupation with both the risk of downward mobility and the chance of an upward one, to be respectively avoided and pursued through discipline; the vague orientalist references to spiritual traditions (in this case, to India’s yoga); and such contradictions as the alternating messages of working on oneself (aspiration) and living in the present (acceptance), of “wanting less” (austerity) and yet “spending more” on fewer but carefully se-

critique of “minimalism” cannot be formulated in the same rhetorical key of an authentic anti-consumerist rejection of materialist and/or aestheticized “minimalist” commodities (and “minimalism” as commodity), because the minimalist discourse itself is permeated by this sort of criticism, and it can thus easily absorb and manage it by its internal shifts of emphasis and rhetorical component. Our later analyses will show the way in which the discourse polarizes its interest into an aesthetic minimalism and a lifestyle minimalism – the latter ambiguously meshing together the anti-consumerist and self-improvement components –, and yet never manages to actually separate the two, mostly returning eventually to one indeterminate minimalism (which can keep on being pervaded by its aesthetic common sense and use it rhetorically). This is something that the critics of authenticity themselves can fall into, as is Giddens’ case in Murphy’s view: “Giddens points to how many of us no longer consume based on use-value or function, but instead consume based on status and what an item telegraphs about us to others (and to ourselves). In this assessment he seems to suggest consuming in this way is inauthentic. [...] Here he can be seen to use the rhetoric of authenticity when he references ‘artificially framed styles of life’, the ‘genuine development of the self’, and when he claims ‘appearance replaces essence’ [in Giddens 1991: 197-198]” (Murphy 2018: 90-91). However, Murphy himself had slipped into this sort of language when he posited, at the end of the introduction, that “the potential exists for [minimalism] to be a critical lifestyle that challenges status quo consumerism and neoliberalism if practitioners so choose”: such “potential” is contrasted to minimalism being “little more than a taste-based lifestyle”, a “consumer trend” that is “incorporated” into the “dominant culture” through “commodification and branding”, thus “los[ing] its critical bent and instead becom[ing] more of a lifestyle aesthetic” (23-24); in fact, the very fact that he pushed aside the aesthetic dimension of the discourse may be read as a hint that while

lected, higher quality and inconspicuous things (authenticity and aestheticism). Beyond these, however, the article ends by noting what was then the most recent shift in the communication of Lulemon, that is, the rhetorical use of self-irony about its messages after the brand’s success on the consumerist market: after having relied so heavily on “earnest advertising motifs that promoted bodily care practices, positioning the citizen as engaged, responsible, effective, ethical, and successful” all at once, Lulemon started parodying its own common sense by, for example, “poking fun at yoga stereotypes” and making “references to Barbie, overly serious or self-absorbed yogis, the juxtaposition of yoga and consumption, and the ambiguous ‘poser’”, thus “appropriat[ing] the language of critique” (90-91). By self-administering it itself, critique of the brand is actually diluted and prevented, because it generates authenticity by exposing its own inauthenticity without doing anything to change it. As we will see, the case of the minimalist discourse is very similar – it immunizes itself by criticizing itself –, the difference being that on the whole it must take itself more seriously, since its overt aim is not selling products or even services but offering home-improvement, anti-consumerist and/or self-improvement advice.

authenticity is deemed problematic and paradoxical if not impossible, its ambiguous but stark dismissals or at least devaluations of the aesthetic are instead accepted to some extent. Of course, it is quite understandable that a sociological study such as Murphy's would not be as concerned as we are with the revaluation of a whole dimension of common sense in analysing a discourse; still, it is a limitation that can lead to missing the mark in assessing both the nature of the minimalist discourse, as distinct from any of its components, and the sorts of critical deconstructions that would therefore be more relevant, urgent and effective in view of a hypothetical reconstruction. Minimalism cannot be reduced to an anti-consumerist frugal and/or ethical life of voluntary simplicity, nor can it be reduced to an alt-consumerist, at times luxurious aesthetic style on sale. Both its life and its style are contradictory – and continuous with each other –, so that rather than taking minimalism as a degeneration of one into the other, it is best seen – and critically exposed – as the best illustration of these contradictions, no matter how incessantly they are concealed again and again by the minimalist discourse. Otherwise, the critique of authenticity always risks morphing into a critique of the inauthentic and only restart that very pursuit; the same goes for minimalism's pursuit of the minimal.

2.2.2 – Authenticity Squared (ii): Critiquing Minimalism's Authenticity

The centrality – even the literal centrality, in the rhetorical spectrum as we have constructed it – of an anti-consumerist rhetoric in and for the minimalist discourse is the reason why it is, in most cases, compared to anti-consumerism at large and the related varieties of “simple living”, or “voluntary simplicity” (as they are usually referred to as a whole). The paradox of the comparison is that on the one hand voluntary simplicity seems to include minimalism as a more recent and particular iteration of itself, while on the other hand it might also rather appear as though it is minimalism that includes voluntary simplicity as one manifestation – though *ante litteram* – of itself, one that cannot exhaust it and limit it. However, what “minimalism” means in the two cases is different: in the former case, “minimalism” indicates a distinctive discourse that emerged – explicitly using the label – roughly in the second half of the 2000s', while in the latter case it rather indicates an indeterminate phenomenon only held together by some very abstract feature (such as discarding things, owning less, pursuing some kind of “minimum” and so on), so that it can be read back into other and even pre-existing phenomena. The problem, as well as the point that our analyses are meant to stress, is that confu-

sion among the two cases – a distinctive and an indeterminate “minimalism” – is built into the discourse itself, because the distinctive discourse relies upon the indeterminacy of its label, and therefore reproduces it (with the support of its aesthetic common sense). From our rhetorical point of view, this is not a superficial issue but rather gets to the core of the discourse, because a label does not merely operate as a means of classification for externally collecting and containing some independently determined phenomena, and surely “minimalism” is no exception on this respect: on the contrary, it is quite clear that it could never work as well as “anti-consumerism” or even “voluntary simplicity” in pointing to a generic collection of phenomena, because it is a distinctive rhetorical label – that is, it is after all used and promoted as a particular lifestyle (as is also necessary for offering advice in its name) – connected to a distinctive aesthetic common sense. We can see this elusiveness of minimalism at work in Dopierała’s (2017) critical overview of minimalism as a possibly new “mode of consumption”: in the idea of minimalism as a “second wave” of voluntary simplicity (Kasperek 2014a, 2014b) she sees both the contention that it is a version that is “more trivialized, mostly by the Internet”, and the impression that “it is difficult to clearly indicate the boundary” between the two things after all, so that “some of its representatives equate these two phenomena and use these terms interchangeably”, while for others voluntary simplicity has “a broader scope of meaning” and “a longer history” (Dopierała 2017: 69-70). A discourse around “voluntary simplicity” was indeed around already in the 1970s, calling people to a simple life that was to be “materially modest, but emotionally, intellectually and spiritually rich”, more or less coupled with a local and environmental outlook, and manifesting in a wide array of ways (Elgin & Mitchell 1977: 4-5). On the contrary, minimalism only “became popular after 2008, as a result of the crisis in the capitalist system”, and was immediately “trivialized due to its frequent inclusion in self-help and quasi-therapeutic literature, as well as by an individualist culture that commands individuals to find an ‘autonomously’ designed mode of fulfilment” (Dopierała 2017: 70), that is, find authenticity. With minimalism there is thus “a distinct lack of deeper diagnoses and complex visions of social change” (76), “too much emphasis is put on the individual and his or her closest circle”, making the lifestyle “not only isolating but also apolitical” (80), and “the constant blurring of the line between the public role and the private role”, or “the universal, common good and the self-realization sphere”, qualifies it as at most a sort of “new social movement” whose efficacy is unclear (81). This is accurate, but blurring

lines is what “minimalism” as a distinctive discourse does rhetorically at large, not only between the public and the private, the universal and the individual, but also – as we have seen – between the past and the present or future, anti-consumerism and alt-consumption, needs and wants, the aesthetic style – which Dopierała significantly ignores – and the ethical-practical life, and so on. It is not like Dopierała does not see that minimalism “is characterized by ambivalence” (81), because that on the contrary is her conclusion. It is rather that this ambivalence is seen as accidental instead of constitutive of the discourse, and in fact even useful as “a multifunctional tool”, despite the problems and confusions it generates, which Dopierała too points out: the rising of standards through “selection of the most effective, functional, aesthetically pleasing, space-saving and lightest items, which usually denotes high priced products of well-known brand” (Skowrońska 2013: 91), so that “money is still spent”, only on higher quality items and experiences as individualistically valued “from the perspective of self-realization”, with a questionable “assumption that we [all] have the resources necessary to realize our goals” (Dopierała 2017: 74); the aestheticization of poverty, akin to “poor chic”, in what is often actually a “luxurious (sublime) minimalism” for “inconspicuous consumption”, in fact a form of “even more pronounced conspicuousness” (75); and in both ways, the obscuration of the fact that for “those in worse material situations” the minimalist life “is not a choice but rather a necessity”, by contrast to “the middle and upper class” with their “established material and professional situation” (76). Should these aspects be reduced to unfortunate collateral damage of that “multifunctional tool”, or degenerations of its true uses? That would be the path of positing a more authentic minimalism – parallel to the pursuit of one’s authentic self –, and it is the path that we intend to discard by seeing how it is actually what keeps minimalism indeterminate, and those problematic aspects in place. If “for some, [minimalism] is a superficial, fleeting fad” that “remains in the realm of consumer logic, with the vector shifting towards high quality goods, experiences and sensations [...] while for others it is a form of distinctive consumer behaviour” that is “a negation of hyper-consumption” (81), we cannot just take the former as not really “minimalist” and the latter as more authentically so, nor can we dismiss one as merely “minimalist” and the other as the more authentic “voluntary simplicity.” It is at once “distinction in the world of excess, but also a strategy for the time of crisis” (Skowrońska 2013: 90).

The fact that “there is no one canonical version or existing definition of minimalism” since “each individual creates his/her unique set of beliefs and actions” (Dopierała 2017: 70) accepts minimalism’s own rhetoric of authenticity, missing the way and degree to which such indeterminacy is ironically a core feature of any definition of “minimalism.” It is surely true that “minimalism can be seen from several points of view”: it may be “an example of an advisory and therapeutic culture”, or “a marketing trend”, or “a new anti-consumerist spirituality”, or “a style of consumption” favouring quality over quantity and experiences over things (71); it may be “combined” with all kinds of other things such as vegetarianism, spiritual practices, or a “zero waste” environmental attitude (69); and under its name may fall any advice – for example, “nutrition (eating habits, diets, meal preparation), travelling and moving, management of things (DIY, locality, seasonality), organization of domestic space (amount and type of furniture, arrangement, souvenirs), owned things, objects (what, which, how many?), hygiene (beauty treatments, the use of natural cosmetics), use of technical equipment, leisure activities, personal development (development of passions, interests, time for oneself)” (74). More than any of these things that it may be, however, it is precisely this very “may be”, coinciding with its rhetorical indeterminacy. In fact, Dopierała’s first remarks point straight to the definition of “minimalism” as indefinite, even though she immediately neutralizes this (non-)definition by reference to individuals (authentically?) deciding for themselves:

Minimalism is a lifestyle that, according to its followers and some researchers, is characterized by an anti-consumerist approach combined with the demand for seeking meaning in life by means other than consumerism-oriented attitudes. Its main principle – “less is more” – is explained as “owning less” in order to achieve more in non-material aspects of life. [...] It is difficult to unambiguously determine the difference between a consumption of ‘proper size’ (moderate?) and excessive consumption – there is no measure that would allow to estimate the exact volumes. It is rather a relative issue, and each individual ‘casts the final vote’ on what, in his or her opinion, is ‘excessive’ (67-68).

While each individual “minimalist” may indeed “cast a vote” with regard to the bar of what should be taken to be “excess”, which is an electoral metaphor quite common in anti-consumerist discourses (each consumer-citizen can and should “vote with his/her dollars” to negatively boycott, or positively “buycott”, certain products, services, companies and so on: Zorell 2019), this is of little use if there are no structures in place for one to cast one’s vote in, or if – as in actual elections – there are predetermined, constitutional assumptions about how to vote, and what can and cannot be voted on. Out of metaphor, the reproduction of the indeterminacy of “minimalism” in the discourse – as

highlighted in our second round of analyses – makes it more difficult for different ideas to actually face and confront each other beyond the confines of one’s own life, affecting the minimalist discourse as a whole, because to that it is preferred an all-submerging unity under a few abstract, vague features such as the motto “less is more”, or “‘owning less’ in order to achieve more in non-material aspects of life” (all implicitly cemented by aesthetic common sense). This is our main thesis, as we have already anticipated a few times. The difference between this rhetorical view and one that simply takes “minimalism” to be a lax term for extrinsically gathering very different phenomena is that the latter misses or dismisses the real work the label’s indeterminacy carries on in the discourse, which is not a means for some sort of detached archival classification, but rather for identification (and, through identification, the inscription of individuals in the discourse and thus in the audience of this or that minimalist figure). As we have seen, the promoters of minimalism all insist on discarding things as necessary – despite offering little or no clear support for their claim that it is beneficial, mostly conflating different rhetorical components –, to the point that they pre-emptively push back against any (equally abstracted) reason for not discarding something as a mere rationalizing pretext to get rid of. In other words, as in the electoral metaphor, individuals cannot “vote” on whether discarding things is necessary and core or not to being a “minimalist”, that is, they cannot question it: it is in minimalism’s rhetorical constitution, so to speak. This might sound rather unproblematic, even self-evident: of course one cannot be “minimalist” without discarding anything, otherwise anyone at all would be a minimalist. But this is exactly the point: demanding that some things be discarded is just one step back from not demanding anything; in this way, on the one hand identification is afforded – and any and every individual is addressed, regardless of conditions –, while on the other hand there is room, in all this indeterminacy, for all sorts of advice (and advertising) to be freely framed as “minimalist” and offered without end to the audience that is thus formed. It is not just that discarding things is required and thus unquestionable, but that by doing so the discourse is also making its whole abstract, quantitative, all-conflating universalist-individualist framework unquestionable as well. It retains an objective leverage point – at least that minimum to discard towards – that cannot be voted upon, and by leaning on that it shapes all the supposedly subjective possibilities that it can frame, heightening or softening criticality as need be. Moreover, while no “exact volume” of stuff is set, it is quite hard to imagine that one could manage to identify as “minimalist”

by only discarding a handful of things, just as it may be harder to do so without taking up some of the more recognizable features of its aesthetic common sense: if this is the case, then fulfilling the minimal requirement would only set one on the path of more discarding, more work on one's home or oneself. In this sense, it is a mistake to equate minimalism's indeterminacy with moderation, as its promoters often do in their circling back from an anti-consumerist rhetorical stance to that middle ground of ordinary consumption that such a stance had simply excluded at the outset (at least in the minimalist discourse's particularly dualistic presentation of it). Dopierała, for example, writes that "what matters here is a search for moderation and balance (reasonable measure) to be found by each of us individually" (69), but this actually clashes with the allusions to a minimum – that is, an extreme – in both the rhetorical label and aesthetic common sense of the minimalist discourse. If a moderate state is to be achieved, it is only met with – if it is ever, and if it is not passed over – on the way to the minimum; before that, it is surely one way indeterminacy is rhetorically wielded within the discourse, but does not at all coincide with it (just like a discourse that indifferently addresses individuals from the low and high classes is not simply identical to one that addresses those from the middle class¹⁰²).

This is why we will talk of "less is more" as being itself "more" for the discourse, that is, on the one hand affording identification while on the other hand allowing for, and covering up, all differences and even contradictions (starting from the very fact that "paradoxically, while minimalists are identified by their attitude to the (lack of) material objects, such objects are all the time present in their life", 72). Only an indefinite definition fits "minimalism" well, as the object of the discourse at large as it has been carried on in the last two decades or so. Of course, we can always bypass this rhetorical work of the label, get straight at what self-ascribed "minimalist" promoters and/or practitioners in fact generally do, and then take the more determined picture that would

¹⁰² In fact, as Cherrier and Lee (2018) have shown, forms of anti-consumption can even emerge as a "tactical response" from poor homeless people that wish to detach themselves from those very institutions that are supposedly helping them by offering food and shelter, but in fact are also simultaneously subjecting them from above to a homogeneous, one-sided, hierarchical, paternalistic and passivized relationship of dependence, which reduces their lives to the base of the mythical "pyramid of needs" – bare necessities for physiological survival – and does little or nothing to address their social conditions. Both in the ways these struggling people can materially afford to refrain from consumption at large, or at least bypass specific kinds of consumption, and in the ways they understand and explain their choices, it is evident that anti-consumption can radically change according to one's socioeconomic and cultural conditions, something that many anti-consumerist discourses – and minimalism most of all, we argue – for the most part obscure.

come out as being – perhaps on a statistical basis – what “minimalism” itself actually is and ever was; from there, one can directly criticize the problems associated to minimalism without considering the ways they are backed up by the discourse. There is nothing wrong with such an approach, insofar as one’s primary aim is to understand the social phenomena that the discourse (contradictorily) caters to and gathers, more than the discourse per se and its correlated claim of constituting a distinctive integral lifestyle. The problem is that, as we have pointed out earlier, this can lead to “square” authenticity and understand minimalism as inauthentic, either as a corrupted version of itself or as the co-opted iteration of voluntary simplicity. The latter route is the one most recently followed by Zavestoski and DeLaure (2023) in their contribution to an edited volume on anti-consumerism that, significantly, contains no other specific references to minimalism, probably by virtue of its being by now mostly disqualified as a credible form of anti-consumerism. The title of the chapter sets the tone: the topic is “the evolution of voluntary simplicity from soulful search for meaning to extreme lifestyle experiment”, and it is of course “minimalism” that is identified with the latter, as tied to a “potentially problematic minimalist and other aesthetics rooted not in consuming less but in consuming differently” (29). Minimalism is both tied to the aesthetic practice of decluttering, including Kondo’s method and its international success in 2014 (when instead “Voluntary Simplicity as a dominant theme, at least in book titles, had virtually vanished”), and to a self-help “‘how to’ orientation focused on the specific steps or courses of action needed to simplify” (31). In this reading, the main factor that led to the success of minimalism as one of a series of individual “lifestyle experiments” is the emergence of new digital media which first made them possible, and soon after made them profitable: in the last three decades, with a steady march from online forums, blogs and traditional websites to YouTube vlogs, Facebook interest groups and Instagram photographic albums, these media have afforded an outlet for non-professional voices to establish an informal, seemingly less mediated contact with an audience, turning their lives – and especially interesting lifestyle experiments (only eating local, avoiding any form of waste, taking up one eco-friendly habit a day, not using money and so on) – into “contents” to be spread as a new sort of quasi-celebrity figure, the “Influencer”; and whatever merit this could have for publicly spreading anti-consumerist ideas without going through “editorial gatekeepers of traditional publishing and broadcast media”, it was soon commodified and swept into the “economics of clicks, engagements, and follow-

ers, the optimization of which could be converted into income through Google AdSense, sponsored vlog content, and product endorsements” (31-32). Influencers, including those promoting minimalism, can “earn handsome incomes simply by living the high life, publicizing their private consumption, and curating themselves as a product to be consumed”, both in an overt way with targeted sponsorships and advertising, and by positioning themselves as somehow holding expertise on a certain topic which could be sold in the form of online courses or coaching. A certain mediatic cycle can be discerned in the way a blog would launch a green living experiment, blog about it, garner media attention, land a book deal, and perhaps become the subject of a documentary film.” This in turn is read as an instance of the cycle of co-optation of social resistance into something that can be sold, bought and (alt-)consumed:

Thanks to Web 2.0 and social media, these New Simplifiers can build larger networks than the Voluntary Simplifiers of the past. At the same time, however, these platforms have also led to increasing loneliness and isolation, as we distractedly chase “likes” and followers and accumulate weak-tie friends, in lieu of pursuing the strong ties of face-to-face relationships, nurtured through old-fashioned conversation. In relying on social media and digital platforms to encourage material decluttering, perhaps the New Simplifiers are paradoxically contributing to digital clutter and even disconnection. [...] In our view, some of the New Simplifiers have redirected consumer disaffection, channeling it into an aesthetic form of minimalism that requires the substitution of one set of goods with a new more refined set of goods. Eventually, these products, and the lifestyles built around them, will lose their meaning and the cycle of disillusionment–resistance–commodification begins again. A slightly less critical view sees minimalism as akin to Voluntary Simplicity in its emphasis on paring down material possessions in order to create more time and space for finding meaning in relationships and community. Yet, as we have attempted to demonstrate, by leveraging social media and other digital platforms to spread their gospel, the New Simplifiers have built an ethos of minimalism on a foundation rooted in technologies that have tended to nurture the isolation and individualism essential to consumer capitalism. The attention economy both muddies and compresses the space between the advertising message and the consumer’s decision to buy. Yet it is precisely in this space where the self-reflexivity essential to questioning the meaning of the good life or the meaning of one’s existence resides (38-39).

The result has been “the appropriation of Voluntary Simplicity so that it could be reconstituted into new consumer-palatable forms called minimalism and decluttering”, which are stripped of “Voluntary Simplicity’s spiritual and ecological dimensions” and cast back into consumption, a “new form of materialism that requires eliminating certain belongings so that new aesthetically pleasing or joy-sparking objects can take their place.” From zero waste blogs selling sustainable containers to Kondo’s expensive “organic meditation floor cushions”, there is indeed “evidence of the cooptation and commodification of anti-consumption by the capitalist system”, and minimalism epitomizes it.

In minimalism’s degeneration of voluntary simplicity, aesthetic commodification goes hand in hand with an equally individualist and mediatized ethical-practical competition, which moralizes the “political and collective project” of anti-consumerism

by reducing it to just a matter of personal choice and responsibility for “single heroic individuals” (which has its counterpart in “conservative stereotypes of environmentalists as holier-than-thou elitists”, 36). By contrast to Dopierala’s conciliatory reading, Zavestoski and DeLaure stress the rhetoric of the extreme that in fact underpins the minimalist discourse, whether it manifests as an aesthetically extreme project (“Extreme rules may also invite competition, one-upmanship, and puritanical judgment of self and others, as we wonder who is most authentically performing green or anti-consumer identities”) or rather as an extremely aesthetic project (“With her online store filled with pricey items and partnership with The Container Store, Kondo’s message does seem to be about shifting consumption, rather than achieving net reduction”). These are indeed genuine problems with the minimalist discourse, as we have pointed out already along the way and as many commentators confirm. When Graham Hill, founder of LifeEdited – a minimalism-adjacent blog and consultation service to “live large in a small home or apartment” via “smart concepts and technology”¹⁰³ –, published an editorial on The New York Times and offered his own life as an exemplar of “living with less” (Hill 2013), many pushed back against the popularity of his piece and highlighted the contradictions of his minimalist discourse. The most obvious of these is, of course, that “a millionaire does not have the standing to tell regular people that money is overrated”, so Hill is not the right “spokesperson” for minimalism (Nolan 2013): he might have downsized his apartment and sold stuff, but he still had all his money, allowing him to always buy things back as needed (like many other minimalist bloggers). His “majestic display of guileless narcissism” was also criticized as a sort of bipartisan “moralizing” myth of overspending on material things that the left blames on “advertising and corporate consumerism” and the right on “individual choices and cultural decline”, while in fact economic precariousness has other sources – in fact, most incomes have stagnated but “stuff has gotten cheaper” because of “exploitative labor practices, giant retail chains and lax environmental standards” (Kim 2013). A presentation of a project for “an apartment building of ‘micro units’” in New York in partnership with LifeEdited revealed the obvious: Hill’s idea of “mov[ing] from ownership to access” is not sharing but renting – not even much less expensively than larger and fully-furnished apartments in the same area –, while of course, “his presentation had multiple slides showing

¹⁰³ LifeEdited, “About”, Mar. 2012, <https://lifeedited.com/about> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

brand-name items (with those brand names clearly visible) that you could purchase as part of the minimalist lifestyle” (Goodyear 2013):

Hill’s avowedly anti-consumption model may, in fact, be better for the environment than traditional consumption. But it is no less aspirational. This is not, as he pointed out, about wearing a hair shirt in order to atone for sins against the planet. If you have the money to fork over up front, you can buy high-quality, very cool things to enable you to live more simply, while getting rid of all of your old, inefficient and unfashionable crap. Hill’s minimalism is not cobbled together, it is curated.

A similar reading was made of decluttering and minimalism after Kondo’s book put them on the radar. For example, Bernstein compared Kondo’s judgmental, disciplinary attitude towards all material things to that of her immigrant parents, whose experiences had such pushed them to store and accumulate anything both out of caution towards an uncertain future, and out of remembrance towards a lost past: by contrast, Kondo’s focus is entirely limited to the present time, to what is immediately and unambiguously and unchangingly positive, discarding usable things and even sentimental mementos to pursue “purity”, the inverse sign of the “privilege of clutter” (Bernstein 2016¹⁰⁴). The minimalist discourse, again including Kondo, has thus been read as a middle class(ist) phenomenon that on the one hand mixes up people who live with less out of choice and those who do so out of necessity, while on the other it is also judgmental – as we have also seen ourselves in Millburn and Nicodemus’ movie, with its depictions of the consumerist mob – towards the forced consumption habits of the latter group, for example condemning its taking advantage of sales, discounts and other offers as evidence of being “slaves to material goods”: it is “just another form of social shaming”, because some people “can’t afford to do with less” (Land 2016). Minimalism is just “another boring product wealthy people can buy”, an aesthetic performance “aping the connotations of simplicity and even, to a degree, asceticism, without actually having to give up those sweet, sweet class signifiers”, with a conflation of “luxury” and “faux-spiritualism” into

¹⁰⁴ When the pandemic hit the world in 2020, some have seen in the forced domesticity of lockdown a revealing denial and defeat of the supposed wisdom of minimalism. The pandemic “made a mockery of minimalism”, a lifestyle entirely dismissed as a “fad”, by demonstrating how, even today and even for those living in cities, having more things readily available from home can be important, and also by exposing the less than human, social-controlling face of its aesthetic of “cleanness” and “sterility” that keeps things and people at a distance (Kornhaber 2020). The class implications are that more and more people have convinced themselves – also via the minimalist discourse and its rejections of reasons as rationalizations – that they could afford to discard “just in case things” and not prepare for the future, as the working class has always done on the one hand to avoid bankruptcy, and on the other to pursue some degree of well-being beyond necessity: the pandemic vindicated clutter – in the form of canned food, old clothes, board games and so on – as a “saviour” instead of a “failure”, and showed that its opposite, a clean and tidy and sparse home that looks like a curated space out of a museum, is in fact a privilege (Mull 2020).

its vague “tapas platter of cultural and spiritual practices without ever fully committing to one”: it is a taste choice at best, one that does not distinguish “forced minimalism” from “the curated ‘simplicity’ of the ultra-rich” that looks “aspirational” for minimalists, which mostly turns it into “privileged posturing” (Fagan 2017). Even when it is accepted as a sincere call for asceticism, minimalism is still deemed a “quasi-religious anti-poor bullshit” because it discharges the responsibilities and huge environmental impacts of higher class people onto ordinary, struggling if not outright poor, and mostly powerless consumers: rather the discipline for the poor, political solutions are needed which redistribute wealth and shift to more sustainable technologies (Wilt 2017). The issues do not stop here, of course. As also noted earlier, the still gendered nature of housework means that any rigid aesthetic standard – as those associated to minimalism – will weigh much more on women than on men, so that the minimalist discourse reinforces that division of labour increasing the load of housework while making it appear as if it were itself liberating, distracting from social problems and demands: thus “extra stuff is a feminist issue”, just like – here Babauta’s “lean life” comes to mind – “fatphobic” standards that again hit women more harshly (Washington 2018). Moreover, as Fagan stresses – but from the opposite angle, addressing the usual anti-aestheticisms¹⁰⁵ –, “it’s really easy to look at a lot of what (mostly) women own as being totally frivolous”: “Makeup, more-elaborate wardrobes, cozy home decor, art, supplies for hobbies, nice home goods – it’s not a coincidence that most of the stuff we’re being told to flush away from our lives happens to be stuff that women mostly accumulate” (Fagan 2017). Finally, the environmental advantages of minimalism have been rejected as well, as in fact it accelerates the cycle of consumption instead of spreading it out and helping items, especially clothes, stay in circulation instead of prematurely ending up in the landfill (Spinks 2016): rather than actively endeavour to make and remake things – as well as demand such (re)making upstream, incorporated in their very design and production – so that they can sustainably remain “things worth keeping” for a long time, against the

¹⁰⁵ Actually, Washington too is careful to discern her feminist criticism of minimalism’s aesthetic standards from a sanction of cluttered spaces as necessarily more feminist just by virtue of rejecting those standards (which after all, as she also notes, have a history of being associated in the past to some degree of emancipation for women): “There’s no glib solution to the thorny, systemic dilemmas patriarchal capitalism sets up” (Washington 2018). Our own work moves in the very same direction, though generalized: the point is not merely that aesthetic work is imposed and exploited for gaining profits or inscribing privileges, but also and mainly that it is at once devalued or dismissed – a denial which, we argue, is inherently part of what allows the aesthetic standards to be reproduced undisturbed, since it obscures their operation by pushing them back into indeterminate common sense.

throwaway culture and its minimalist moralizing aestheticization (Harold 2020: 32-35), the minimalist discourse, with its “high-profile simplicity” and “supermarket spirituality of the rich”, is the very opposite of “recycling for real”, which actually requires the kind of love for things that collectors, collage-makers etc. have, as their “knowing, informed clutter” (York 2022). Beneath her rhetoric, whose positivity merely disguises the negativity of the practices, Kondo’s decluttering actually turns things into waste (though the restriction of one’s focus on the private domestic space conceals this fact), transforming “objects” into “abjects” to be discarded without either guilt or thought as to their origin and fate: far from re-enchanting the relationship to things, as it might seem from the invitation to thank items before discarding or greeting one’s home, the abject’s role is always passive beyond its reified demand that it be discarded and thus “freed”; its “failure to reflect in an image of psychological precision” the individual subject is enough to condemn them at once to the “garbage heap” (Sandlin & Wallin 2022: 100).

All of this is to say that, unsurprisingly, it is quite easy to put forward valid criticisms of the minimalist discourse, whose naiveté we have after all remarked upon ourselves in our own engagement with its main points of reference. What we are concerned with is not the validity of these criticisms, but rather with their nature and with their potential efficacy within the minimalist discourse itself (which has practically ignored or glossed over all these and more critical articles, as far as our survey of it in the second round of analyses goes). In fact, in our view the problem is that criticizing minimalism is too easy, and that this is what ironically allows it to go on unscathed and unmodified: as we have seen in the most mainstream minimalist texts, anti-materialist and anti-aesthetic rhetoric is embedded into the minimalist discourse, drawing from anti-consumerism at large; and as we will see in further minimalist materials – though we have already glimpsed it in those texts’ disclaimers and complaints –, this allows the discourse to criticize itself as commodified through the rhetoric of authenticity, without that however arresting it or changing anything within it. While they do allude to minimalism’s ambiguities and contradictions, its critics – with few exceptions – do not push it to the foreground as the main locus of their criticism, because usually they end up using the same anti-consumerist rhetoric of authenticity against minimalism, which can absorb it into its own; the ambiguity itself, in other words, is dismissed as unambiguously consumerist, materialist, aestheticizing, and minimalists themselves will gladly

agree with such attacks on the most evidently commodified manifestations of “minimalism”, rhetorically distancing themselves from them. Minimalism is (correctly, we repeat) criticized as discharging anti-consumerist responsibility on individuals as well as making them irresponsibly anti-consumerist and wasteful, as imposing aesthetic work and as devaluing aesthetic interests, as another form of obsession with material stuff and as not interested enough in it, as a classist way for well-off people to look austere or as an equally classist way to appear wealthy, and on and on. Minimalism is in fact all of these things and more, but its indeterminacy is precisely what always allows it to play off one of its aspects or components against another, so that in the end criticism is by-passed as only really applying to other (pseudo-)minimalists, or other worse, commodified manifestations of (pseudo-)minimalism. Moreover, the social critiques also do not usually address the very individual experience of the lifestyle that minimalists are explicitly interested in, more than they are actually concerned with social or environmental issues. Like Murphy in his thesis, the critics on the one hand equate minimalism with decluttering, neglecting or ignoring altogether the opposite side of the spectrum (that of self-improvement), while on the other hand risk throwing away the aesthetic as such along with decluttering, aligning with the anti-consumerist cornerstone of that same spectrum. But precisely because it is grounded in a certain contradictory aesthetic common sense, minimalism’s pursuit of the minimum as an ideal can easily shift from a more literal aesthetic homework of decluttering to any number of metaphorical expansions into primarily ethical-practical self-work of improvement, passing through the restraint of anti-consumerist frugal or simple living, and each of these three components may always circle one back to the others, apart from their occasional mutual criticisms. Rejecting the aesthetic cannot do much harm to the aesthetic of rejecting that authenticity ultimately is: the latter will only “square” itself, that is, both explicitly disavow its own aesthetic ground and implicitly preserve it in an indeterminate, commonsensical form, that in which “minimalism” is tied to some vague aesthetic and ethical-practical “minimum.” Murphy’s critical insistence on authenticity’s contradictoriness, and first of all its inherent continuity with consumerist culture, clearly points in the right direction, but misses one crucial aspect of the problem by reducing minimalism to discarding things: it is not just that authenticity recurrently divests itself of the particular aesthetic contents through which it is expressed, but also and first of all that it recursively dismisses the aesthetic as such, in general, including itself as necessarily aestheticized. The

difference between these related criticisms is that the former one is more liable to simply turning the authentic into the inauthentic once again, leaving the aesthetic dimension either negated or unaddressed, while the latter contends that critique must positively face that aesthetic dimension, not only exposing it but also reconstructing it. In other words, a vital part of the problem is precisely that the minimalist discourse's authenticist rejection of the aesthetic leaves it unequipped for dealing with it in all its complexity, which includes the metaphorical underpinnings of "style" for a certain ideal of "life" at large (even when the latter purports to be an anti-materialist and anti-aesthetic life, as it did – it bears repeating – from the very start with its paradoxical enthusiasm, not shared by voluntary simplifiers, for the promise of thorough dematerialization in digital media: Jeffries 2011). An heightened, articulate awareness of the aesthetic – in all of its contradictoriness – is needed even if the aim is not reconstructing minimalism, but merely seeing through the ways in which the appeal it exerts manages to also expand the discarding of literal into that of metaphorical things – from unhealthy food to equally intoxicating social media, and even friends and partners (Garland 2019; Logan 2021). While no doubt "first world problems" in many ways, the difficulties individually experienced in relating to the useless and/or wasteful sentimental or decorative items, in reflecting on the environment in which one's children will grow up, or in struggling with a perceived demand of perfection (Ulrist 2017), are indeed really experienced, and dismissing the aesthetic is not of much help in either managing or especially rethinking them. However many distinct problems are conflated by the minimalist discourse in its vague attack on the cultural "excess" of contemporary societies, with all their precarious liquidity and acceleration, their proliferation of mediations, their evident wastefulness and so on, the aesthetic dimension of those problems – including, crucially, their coming together aesthetically in the form of ideals – is something which, if neglected or negated, will always remain opaque, uncritical and thus easily exploitable, whether to sell products and services or to sell lifestyle advice (or anything in between).

One example will suffice to illustrate how, when a critique takes aim at what minimalism as a lifestyle promises to change – individual experience –, the underlying anti-consumerist suspicion towards the aesthetic may lead to proposals and suggestions that are in fact already embedded in the minimalist discourse, a part of its internal contradictions. Already in 2008, before the blogs on minimalism had even gained populari-

ty (strictly speaking, the article addresses decluttering as promoted in the Real Simple online magazine), Oliver Burkeman admonished – on his column in the “Life and Style” section of The Guardian – that actually “minimalism takes effort”, because “this kind of simplicity”, which he contrasted to “the original ‘voluntary simplicity’ movement” as of course aestheticized, ironically “costs money” to achieve:

Mainly it's the photographs: minimalist kitchens, clean-edged storage systems and people in attractively simple clothing gazing at the ocean without a care, because their cares are all neatly filed away in leather-bound personal organisers. [...] Perfectly organised storage systems need to be constantly maintained; spotless kitchens need to be kept spotless. The Real Simple fantasy implies that a light and airy physical space will make it easy to achieve an inner airy lightness, but if you're using lots of energy to keep your environment that way, it's self-defeating. Likewise with so-called “information overload”: I've proclaimed the virtues of an empty email inbox here before, but if digital clutter (or any other kind) doesn't bother you, finding time for purgation will complicate, not simplify, your life. Perhaps a truer simplicity lies in learning to stay calm amid the chaos: not in engineering your environment so that it makes you tranquil, but in reducing the degree to which your tranquillity is dependent on your environment; not keeping the kitchen spotless but learning to tolerate spots; not downshifting to the country, but growing less bothered by the bad aspects of city life? (Burkeman 2008)

Burkeman's subsequent takes on decluttering and minimalism keep the focus on their contradictory vicious circles, fuelled by a rhetoric of the extreme. Including self-described “minimalists” as Colin Wright, he speaks for example of the “cult of less” as a form of bulimia, “a drive to purge, as if consumer culture has binged so thoroughly that it's now obsessed with eradication”: again stressing the paradoxical nature of minimalism – a lifestyle around stuff as much as beyond it, as we put it –, he notes that it “hardly constitutes freedom from concern with stuff, any more than bulimia constitutes freedom from concern with food”, and that “psychologically, if you're fixated on owning less stuff, you're still fixated on stuff” (Burkeman 2010). As in the previous article, there is gesturing towards a solution of detachment as a “truer simplicity” than minimalism's reversal of attachment, by reference to “the tradition the extreme declutterers frequently evoke”, that is, Buddhism – “aversion”, to a Buddhist, is a “close cousin” of attachment, and “someone always struggling to minimise” is more “attached” to things than one “who's fine with what they've got.” A compromise is briefly sought a year later in order to wrestle the practice of decluttering on the one hand from the consumerist “dark joke” that is the “anti-clutter industry”, which sells the solution in terms of products or services (only to then clutter again with new stuff), and on the other hand from the related “slightly overblown rhetoric” that turns it into “a salve to the human spirit”: here decluttering, especially after discarding things without reacquiring them (perhaps a sign of the minimalist discourse growing), can indeed be “a step towards greater sim-

plicity” if it is “approached calmly, incrementally” (Burkeman 2011). In the background there is still, however, the idea behind the invitations to detachment, that is, the idea that in fact “‘clutter’ is inherently subjective, denoting a certain kind of problematic relationship between you and your things, rather than things themselves”, contrary to “whatever the photoshoots in high-end interiors magazines might lead you to believe”; therefore, as “there’s nothing morally superior about the severe lines or vast white spaces of ultra-minimalist apartments”, things should be discarded only “when those things exert a mental drag, or get in the way of living.” After the rise to success of Kondo and the second boom of minimalism, Burkeman returns to detachment and advises his readers to leave alone Kondo and “the other evangelists of a clutter-free life”, because “being ‘zen’, in this context, is really a matter of finding peace of mind whatever your surroundings” (Burkeman 2016). In occasion of Kondo’s Netflix TV show, he again dismisses “obsessive minimalism” as the idea that “the same uplifting atmosphere of order and direction” in a “tidy environment” also “will spread to the rest of your life”, which amounts to “the promise of a sense of control in a world that feels to many as though it’s slipping beyond their grasp”; it is an illusion that “fails to bring the satisfaction” it promises, because extreme perfectionism clashes with the “paradox of control”: the further one gets into decluttering, the harder it becomes as things – and people too – get in the way, any slight deviation immediately stands out as a mark of disorder, and – paradoxically as usual – the lack of something more to declutter can make that sense of control fade away (Burkeman 2019¹⁰⁶). Finally, declaring that “minimalism is dead” as a “lifestyle trend” after the launch of Kondo’s store, Burkeman identifies similar trends that equally retreat to the domestic space and “shut the door” on the world – mainly “cosy”, but surrounded by more exotic buzzwords (the Danish *hygge*, the Swedish *lagom*, the Japanese *ikigai* and so on) –, highlighting the consumerist “trick” they are all based upon: “They may be marketing the message of ‘enoughness’, but really they’re

¹⁰⁶ Burkeman also targets conservative lifestyle guru Jordan Peterson, whose “twelve rules for life” also include – exactly halfway through his list – a rule of decluttering: “Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world” (Peterson 2018: 147). Burkeman applies the same criticism to both Peterson and Kondo, distinguishing them only by reference to their differently gendered audiences (Peterson presents himself as “a champion of the ‘masculine’ forces of order over ‘feminine’ chaos”), but in our view Peterson’s rule is an interesting hint of how far decluttering has entered into common sense and been moralized – as is especially the case in the minimalist discourse –, and also the most explicit confirmation of the neoliberal character of its individual responsabilization: far from constituting a critique of society, decluttering here is just as easily offered as a clear support – though still largely metaphorical, as Peterson meanders as usual through many different topics – to the idea that one should refrain from doing so, or at least wait until one is morally impeccable.

promoting the idea on which all consumerism depends: that what you have right now *isn't* enough, and that something needs buying before you can feel at ease" (Burkeman 2020). On the contrary, Burkeman says, "your living room or bed sheets are fine as they are"; they are enough. What these articles hopefully show is that it is all too easy to point at minimalism's obvious commodification and disqualify the whole aesthetic dimension as inauthentic: voluntary simplicity is alluded to as a more authentic "original"; a "truer simplicity" is presented – by reference to the spiritual tradition of Buddhism – as consisting instead in (anti-)aesthetic disengagement from one's environment – to the point of imperturbability, if not "zen" indifference or insensibility –, paired with emotional detachment from desires that push uncomfortably beyond the present, despite it being really "enough"; the problematic aesthetic experience is reduced to a "subjective" delusion – at most a "mental drag" – that should merely be let go of somehow (even though there is no shortage of flows of images alternative to those "high-end interiors magazines"); and the "spreading" of aesthetic experience and ideals to life, including ethical-practical life (and the spiritual that bridges the two), is dismissed wholesale as an "obsession" and a "trend" which comes in all its forms from marketing (and self-help "evangelists"). These criticisms are neither incorrect nor difficult to understand and sympathize with, but they come with a denial of the aesthetic that is part and parcel of the minimalist discourse itself: that one's sense of "enoughness" is something subjective that can be individually realized regardless of – or rejecting – the aesthetic dimension, in more or less immediate ways along the rhetorical spectrum, is what minimalists claim too; and if they no doubt constantly contradict themselves in this respect, part of the reason is perhaps that the aesthetic is just not something that one can escape, and that the attempt to do so actually makes one more vulnerable to its power. If we see that the aesthetic is always tied to the negativity of crisis and effort, both the aesthetic(ized) idealized images attacked by the anti-consumerist rhetoric of minimalism and the (anti-)aesthetic surrendering of it can be understood as twin attempts at overcoming the aesthetic, two continuous sides of one coin: whether by success or surrender, the problem of the aesthetic is solved; only a self-sufficient positivity remains. The authentic, in its contradictoriness, can indeed advance both promises; the minimal, as authenticity squared, reveals that most clearly and yet refuses to acknowledge it, instead using its contradictions to continually generate and shift work from the home to the self, from the aesthetic to the ethical-practical, and vice versa – all the while wandering freely among

the austere, the accepting and the aspirational¹⁰⁷. Positing a “truer simplicity” that is not aesthetic does little to escape the shifting currents of the minimal and the authentic. The criticisms exposing, beyond minimalism’s commodified nature, its social conditions and consequences may fare better to some extent (though minimalism has in fact never “died” yet), but they leave behind a gap with regard to the aesthetic dimension, and they do not address the self-improvement end of the spectrum which remains implicitly rooted in it. Minimalism would instead also need to be challenged in openly aesthetic terms, and above all with a richer understanding of the aesthetic, one that is indeed continuous with the ethical-practical (and the political). From this point of view, Burkeman’s criticism of minimalism’s peculiar vulnerability to the “paradox of control” (Burkeman 2019) points in a more fruitful direction, as it actually addresses the aesthetic, even though any such critique will be insufficient insofar as only one facet of minimalism’s contradictory aesthetic common sense is critically engaged with: Burkeman is still only targeting the “perfectionist” side of it, because that is the most obviously commodified. A more holistic approach would not only criticize this or that aspect of the minimalist discourse and its aesthetic common sense, but also and most of all illuminate the ways in which minimalism can always bypass the criticism by rhetorically rejecting what is criticized – and the aesthetic as such – to shift its internal emphases (perhaps presenting itself as the “true” minimalism, as we will see). The criticisms we have briefly surveyed already contain some useful hints, of course: for example, Bernstein’s (2016) critique can be read in aesthetic terms as a critique of the minimalist (quite paradoxical!) refusal of ambivalence in the value of things, which manifests in the cutting off of oneself from the inheritance of the past (as also stressed by Harold 2020, also pointing out the loss of

¹⁰⁷ This is true even of the (extremely) aesthetic (non-)minimalism of Kondo. In her feminist critique of Kondo’s method as represented in her Netflix TV series, Ouelette (2019) observes that the homes depicted – and then heavily decluttered – in the show are in fact not aestheticized as those associated to minimalism in the mediatic “lifestyle porn” (including her online store): “Indeed, the episodes have little concern for aesthetics or style; the reveal of an organized closet or silverware drawer lacks the visual pleasure as well as the aspirational consumer desire circulated by most lifestyle porn. The homes Kondo visits are ordinary, and sometimes drab, filled with unremarkable furniture, mass-produced decorations, and of course, piles of papers, boxes and bins” (544). Nonetheless, and perhaps – as we are arguing – precisely by virtue of this, the aesthetic problem of “clutter” is pressed on and replaces all other difficulties of the families involved in the series: work on one’s home – mostly on women’s shoulders – is conjoined with the work on oneself of neoliberal responsabilization of the individual, with its pursuit of a vague and wholly privatized “happiness” (expanding no further than the domestic space and nuclear family). As we have seen in our analysis of her book, even Kondo’s “life-changing magic” is presented as detached from any particular aesthetic ideal – each one must “visualize” and then pursue his or her own –, and just like the explicitly “minimalist” authors and influencers she too intends to sell that magic first and foremost, whether or not people also resort to the products on her store, which just so happen to be aesthetically minimalist.

the horizon of an item's whole lifecycle); and just like hoarders can just as easily support their lifestyles through anti-consumerist rhetoric – since they try not to throw anything away –, so it can be shown that the rhetoric of authenticity is equally available to the “maximalists” whose “clutter” is actually an on-going record of their personal taste, the interests they care about and their past experiences, their unique quirks and fantasies, their do-it-yourself projects and active remaking and remixing of things (Bramley 2018; again in line with another important work by Christine Harold, which explores “culture jamming” as the reappropriation of commodified “MySpaces” into “OurSpace”: Harold 2009). A systematic exploration of such critical pathways into the complexity and contradictoriness of minimalism's aesthetic dimension would probably be more effective, in addressing the multiple problems of this discourse, than Burkeman's invitation to not “bother” (Burkeman 2016); minimalists, or more generally those that are interested and involved in the discourse, are always already bothered, and minimalism is still not dead.

Turning back to Zavestoski and DeLaure's (2023) narrative of the degeneration of the “soulful search for meaning” of voluntary simplicity into the “extreme lifestyle experiment” of minimalism, it is clear that such an account runs the risk of entrenching minimalism's squaring of authenticity instead of challenging it: positing a more authentic “voluntary simplicity” (or “simple living”) is also allowing for a more authentic “minimalism” that will reject aestheticization to instead coincide – or rather almost coincide – with voluntary simplicity, except for its label (which is retained along with its commonsensical associations, including the aesthetic ones, thus circling it back to the start). The authors take for granted that voluntary simplicity was originally good and still is, so that minimalism's problems are understood as external co-optations on the part of consumer capitalism with no indication of weaknesses, shortcomings and blind spots in voluntary simplicity's own discourse. Zavestoski's (2002:149) own definition of “voluntary simplicity” as “a system of beliefs and a practice [that are] centered on the idea that personal satisfaction, fulfillment, and happiness result from a commitment to the nonmaterial aspects of life” is quoted together with others that similarly exhibit the dualisms around which its manifestations “converge”, as in Elgin's that it is a “a way of life that seeks to maintain some balance between the inner and outer growth of the individual” (Elgin 2010; Zavestoski & DeLaure 2023: 30). But the oppositions of the mate-

rial to the immaterial, the exterior to the interior and so on are what also sustains the minimalist discourse itself, as do references to a life of “self-determination and self-sufficiency” as well as “ecological awareness, social responsibility, and spirituality and personal growth”; therefore it is disingenuous to take these ideas as signs of voluntary simplicity’s superiority with respect to minimalism’s commodification (somehow falling back into what was criticized, “authentically performing green or anti-consumer identities”; 36), because on the contrary such commodification reveals those ideas’ limitations, which make them easily exploitable. It is the anti-materialist rhetoric that minimalist authors or influencers use to push for the discarding of things with little regard to materiality, and it is the anti-aesthetic rhetoric that they appeal to in valuing the domestic space of the home interior as against the external forces of society, the media and so on, even if this valuing implies some degree of aesthetic work, and perhaps circles one back to alt-consumerism. Given this, is it really sufficient to just reaffirm those rhetorical components and insist that one should not care about one’s home because it is actually a materialist and aestheticizing concern? If minimalism was a product of a new mediatic landscape, does the solution amount to a negative disengagement from it which does not challenge and affect voluntary simplicity’s own discourse? That, again, is something that the minimalist discourse itself does quite gladly, despite its thorough entanglement from the start with digital media, because – as we have seen – the anti-consumerist, anti-aesthetic attack on media is one of its rhetorical components, one that has also given rise to a “digital minimalism” (Newport 2019): once again a limited practice of “digital detox” is extended into a “lifestyle” on the one hand by tying it to decluttering (it is “digital decluttering” and “the Marie Kondo of technology”; Syvertsen 2020: 86), while on the other hand also making it a matter of self-improvement at large through discipline (but of course, all of this but its name was already present in Babautta’s blog from the beginning). Could Zavestoski and DeLaure’s juxtaposition of “material goods, junk food, drugs and alcohol” with “social media, and other online content” not be equally urged by any minimalist author, just like the worried observation that “our primary connections to the world are via channels that feed us advertisements and endless inducements to buy yet more stuff” (Zavestoski & DeLaure 2023: 28)? In fact, at one point the authors do explicitly suggest some “iterations” of minimalism are “very much in line with the original tenets of Voluntary Simplicity”, and they offer Becker’s version as the good example by contrast to Millburn and Nicodemus’ one, simply on the

grounds of Becker's characterization of it as a "countercultural lifestyle" that implies the "rejection of mainstream values", whereas Millburn and Nicodemus more evidently make it a project of "personal development and pursuit of happiness" (37). Such an assessment is quite paradoxical, not only because – as the authors had also noted in quantifying minimalism's popularity – Becker too had "turned to the minimalism business full time" around the time of the success of Kondo's book (35), but also because his minimalism is in fact closer to the decluttering end of the rhetorical spectrum, while Millburn and Nicodemus' lies opposite to that (and in fact they "don't espouse a particular aesthetic, nor do they have a 'shop' on their website hawking products", though this – we have argued – does not make them any less grounded in the aesthetic common sense; 37). This really demonstrates how ineffective the rhetoric of voluntary simplicity can be in telling apart more from less problematic "evolutions" of itself, and how the assumption that minimalism's problems are only its own leads to largely missing both the contradictions of minimalism as a spectrum (with its internal bouncing back and forth of the emphasis), and the contradictoriness of the voluntary simplicity rhetoric – and the anti-consumerist one at large – that lies at its centre. It illustrates how authenticity can be squared, which only fuels that rhetorical bouncing. A look at any of Becker's vlogs on his popular YouTube channel – for example this one¹⁰⁸, in which he explains, as many others had already done in the same way, why "successful people wear the same thing every day" – makes it incredible that his minimalism might be praised as one more aligned to voluntary simplicity, since he systematically wears a black monochrome t-shirt – just like Millburn and Nicodemus, and like Babauta too – with a white, clean and totally empty modernist interior in the background. If Becker's minimalism can somehow be made more authentic by contrast to Millburn and Nicodemus, then it really embodies "authenticity squared": it squares authenticity while nonetheless retaining the square aesthetic of the minimalist common sense.

It is quite significant that twenty years earlier, with a different co-author, Zaveskoski already had levelled the same criticisms at voluntary simplicity itself, when "minimalism" was still yet to be born (only the adjective appears once, ironically referring to the original voluntary simplicity of the 1970s, which "emerged out of the back-to-the-land movement and emphasized minimalist forms of asceticism and self-sufficiency",

¹⁰⁸ Joshua Becker, "8 Reasons Successful People Wear the Same Thing Every Day", Oct. 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcMz4dL1YJs> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

while on the contrary “today’s VSers are sometimes criticized for failing to truly simplify”, reducing voluntary simplicity to “another lifestyle choice available to depoliticized, separate striving subjects”; Rumbo & Zavestoski 2003: 26). In the last decades, already the voluntary simplicity discourse had gotten more and more into “another mode of self-help” rather than politically insisting on “social and environmental justice” (29), already it was just “a decentred, fragment, and ultimately individualistic affair” of “disembodied and atomized castoffs of consumer society” (30), and thus it was already vulnerable as such to “the colonizing impulses of postmodern capitalism, whose niche-based lifestyle marketers and narrowcasters systematically convert the socially constructed need to express one’s identity through consumption into ‘opportunities’ to consume”: no less than minimalists’ years later, “VSers’ desire to simplify has been greeted with open arms by mass consumer markets, whose attendant goods and services promise to pave a direct path to the realization of inner peace and fulfilment” (31). Given this, one might certainly argue that the advent of “minimalism” constituted a further step downward into thorough commodification, if not even the culmination of such trajectory of degradation, and yet the discourse of voluntary simplicity already posed no great challenge to its forces. In this sense, the minimalist discourse can as much be dismissed wholesale as the final degradation as it can be, in our view more fruitfully, understood as the clearest manifestation of voluntary simplicity and anti-consumerism’s own contradictions, especially – as we have seen with Murphy – the flaws of their underlying rhetoric of authenticity. Zavestoski and Rumbo, after all, concluded that while it was an “arduous task” because of “the hegemonic control that marketers and their corporate clients exert over psychic and cultural spaces”, the need was still there to develop “a collective identity organized around consumer resistance [...] redefining meaning in anti-consumerist terms” (29), but the question that we can pose through all the problems of the minimalist discourse is precisely this: to what extent is this actually possible, if the anti-consumerist rhetoric and its dualisms remain in place? Minimalism’s very aestheticization, rejected and yet retained – as we will see – by the discourse itself, seems rather to prove that we do not need in fact a “redefinition of meaning” as dualistically immaterial, imageless, interior, immediate and so on, but probably the exact opposite of that, just as it shows – by its very popularity, which seems to be undying on the whole – that any “collective identity” will no doubt have to be constructed also in and through digital media. Moreover, and most of all so far as our interests go, it demonstrates how any

such identity that is left so indeterminate as to include almost anyone at all, gathering individuals around some absolutely necessary but quite abstract feature – such as discarding things, however many –, is no better than lacking identity altogether, since the unity it seems to create conceals and obscures all sorts of critical differences. These two points – on the aesthetic and on indeterminacy – are related, because in our view, what makes the minimalist discourse aestheticized is not just that it turns something that (supposedly) was not aesthetic into something aesthetic, but rather that it does so while still presenting itself as non-aesthetic or anti-aesthetic – which also makes it indeterminate, because it actually has nothing else to distinguish it from its rhetorical components (nothing, for example, that sets its life advice apart from any other in the self-help genre, except for the aesthetically grounded metaphor of “minimization” applied to all areas of one’s life). By leaving its aesthetic grounds only implicit, disavowing them again and again via the anti-aesthetic rhetoric of authenticity, minimalism constantly recedes into indeterminacy, while still being identified with and promoted as if it were its own distinct, integral lifestyle. That is the reason why many can treat “minimalism” and “voluntary simplicity” as synonyms in their individualist anti-consumerism (Mendonça et al. 2020), and why “minimalism” can cover all sorts of phenomena from the quite clearly commodified “tiny houses” (as in Mangold & Zschau 2019, whose main title is – again ironically – identical to that of Rumbo & Zavestoski 2003, projecting a “search for the good life”) to a discourse around “lightweight backpacking” that by definition has nothing to do with domestic space (Boutroy 2021).

Anti-consumption has always encompassed different levels, from the resistances of consumers pursuing meaning – as in both “voluntary simplicity” and “minimalism” – to more “frugal” economic adjustments, from more politically oriented movements such as “degrowth” to the clear lifestyle experiments of “no impact”, “zero waste” and “tiny house”, thus spanning both “the construction of a desired identity [...] a self-project perceived as more authentic and congruent to personal values, aspirations, and identity”, and the “political project grounded in a collective wish to make a difference [...] an arena where the social order is challenged, negotiated, and transformed (Cherrier & Lee 2023: 1-3). In a world where “material displays, smartphone connections, or car mobility are embedded in the fabric of social life, [so that] the freedom of (responsible) consumption choices is difficult to enact, not because of lack of moralities, but because al-

ternative consumption can be difficult or even impossible to enact” (especially so when considering many sorts of inequalities in access), the “consumption-driven solutions to crises like global warming, resource depletion, or waste overflow primarily benefit the rich while leaving the vulnerable and underprivileged consumers excluded and somewhat expendable”, which means that in fact any form of “alternative consumption, however ‘creative’ or ‘green’ it might be, can be problematic.” This calls for an ability to critically navigate the concrete, complex diversity – and often times continuity – of both consumption and anti-consumption; if the minimalist and voluntary simplicity discourses are of little help in this task, it is not by virtue of being individualist lifestyle solutions per se, but rather because they either trace too rigid a line between the individual and the social, or – what is the other side of the same dualism after all, aligned with all the other dualisms – because they collapse the two onto each other. An anti-consumerist lifestyle can also have a radical political orientation, as one piece integrated in a mosaic of different “tactical resistances”, even when it remains mostly at the level of the individual and his or her most immediate relationships, as is the case of anarchist anti-consumption (Portwood-Stacer 2012, 2013): a purposeful divergence from a middle class standard of consumption, a culture of directly exchanging or sharing free resources, means and skills in a separate circuit from the market, the “freegan” recuperation of still usable things and expired food destined to be thrown away prematurely, preference for cycling over driving whenever possible and so on, these practices could also perhaps be carried on by voluntary simplifiers, but within an anarchist framework they have a better chance of not erasing the complexities of the broader horizon (that is, the need of mediating personal advantages, moral justice in reciprocal accountability, identification with an ideal to be pursued, active participation in a more or less local community and political pressure, via prefiguration, on a widening scale). By contrast, the discourse of voluntary simplicity tends to blur and obfuscate rather than mediate the differences among its practitioners and the distinctions among its levels, because it tries to cover the whole field of anti-consumption in order to gather it around one identity, and yet it is only able to do so by making such identity indeterminate and anchor it to dualistic oppositions, as is also the case of minimalism. It charges itself with connotations – in no less commonsensical, aesthetic ways than minimalism – by association to vague timeless traditions of “simplicity” like Buddhism, while dualisms such as that between egoism and altruism or materialism and spiritualism often do little or nothing to

aid critical reflection: if in a study of “voluntary simplifiers” one subject is found to have raised his overall standards and upgraded his lifestyle by purchasing “a bigger home, a terrace house, in a secure neighbourhood” that is “really Swedish”, this can still count as a “deflation of material wants” insofar as the latter are conceived as purely individual, while the subject can be said to have been “forced” to choose so and accept it by his family; the “major anomaly” is readily bypassed, explained away (Daoud 2011: 286-287).

We see these rhetorical limits at work in Aidar and Daniels’ (2020) survey of the discourse, and their attempt at delineating a “movement identity” beyond its “definitional inconsistencies” and the diversity of anti-consumerist practices: on the one hand, like minimalism, “voluntary simplicity” must be a distinct, integral “lifestyle” that goes beyond not only “anti-consumption” but also more circumscribed terms such as “downshifting” and “frugality”; on the other hand, however, what that lifestyle is held together by is nothing but an extremely thin reference to “inner growth”, to be pursued individually by religious or “nonreligious practices [which] can include meditation, exercising mindfulness, commitment to quasi-spiritual philosophies (e.g., Confucianism and Taoism), engaging with hobbies (e.g., painting and poetry writing), or any other practice aimed at bringing a greater purpose, meaning and/or balance to life” (3). This notion of “inner growth” was already there in Elgin and Mitchell’s original formulations of “voluntary simplicity” in the 1970s, and it had already enmeshed its “core values” (7) in the dualistic frame (internal vs. external, material vs. spiritual and so on): “[The core values of] material simplicity, self-sufficiency, a more human scale to living and working and an ecological awareness are, in a way, devices to sweep away the impediments to inner growth. The goal, then, is to free oneself of the overwhelming externals so as to provide the space in which to grow – both psychologically and spiritually” (Elgin & Mitchell 1977: 9). While the spiritual is usually tied to the social and ecological in the discourse, its rhetoric actually bends it toward the individual, and always risks making that “ecological awareness” itself a merely individual issue. This tension is quite evident in Aidar and Daniels’ account, wherein an individual is ranked “higher on the VS spectrum” the more his or her motivations are “ethical” – including “living more spiritually and mindfully”! – rather than “self-centred reasons such as increasing personal time, seeking a healthier lifestyle and wanting a less stressful life” (6), and yet “a higher commitment to

social action does not necessarily equate to a higher commitment to voluntary simplicity”, because “committed simplifiers may opt for a quiet and secluded life, comprised of private forms of protests against mainstream discourse and behaviors” (which is why, in fact, “social/political engagement” is “less discussed in the VS academic work”; 7). Consequently, a “higher ranking simplifier” is an individual who maintains “sustainable behavior and consumption” out of “concern for the environment, or for inner/spiritual growth” (again equated), but the scope still remains that of individual motivation: the basic “deliberate choice” or “intent to simplify” without “increase[ing] wealth accumulation and consumption”, which already marks one’s entrance into “low” voluntary simplicity (5), morphs into a “high” commitment that references ethical, ecological and spiritual concerns regardless of whether they make any difference whatsoever in practice (so that “voluntary income reduction” is elevated – much like minimalism’s discarding of things – to a criterion all of its own, as “represent[ing] a true commitment per se”, despite the fact that it is so abstract that it may equally include rich people who reduce their income while still maintaining a “high consumerist lifestyle”; 7). Whatever difference there may be in what voluntary simplifiers and minimalists actually do, the rhetorical workings of their discourses are very similar, so much so that we can take them to be “mirror images” like the others we have seen in minimalism’s rhetorical spectrum: the minimalist discourse emphasizes benefits for each individual’s life, but it still does so by vaguely alluding to some sort of “inner growth” towards a less materialist if not spiritual life motivated by meaningful experiences, relationships and ethical-environmental consumption. Like minimalism, voluntary simplicity turns anti-consumption as a whole into an identity that it is however incapable to articulate, leaving it almost empty of concrete content and indeterminate, commonsensical – which, as minimalism shows, makes it extremely easy to channel back into (alt-)consumption (and individual pursuits of home-/self-improvement). Since “the list of [anti-consumerist] behaviors and attitudes is inconceivably complex” (as also are, we would add, concrete conditions), it is hard to characterize and prescribe an ideal of “simplifier”, so – again like minimalism – voluntary simplicity is left indeterminate, and the burden of that complexity is entirely discharged onto the authentic and autonomous individual: “VS lifestyle are inherently personal and must be chosen for oneself”, without any “manual of simplicity” (5). This, in our view, is the same conjunction of universalism and individualism into indeterminacy that is found in the minimalist discourse,

wherein anyone can be equally “minimalist” regardless of concrete conditions and concerns, because any objective determination of what “minimalism” is supposed to mean – beyond a few abstract traits and their grounds in common sense, which preserve minimalism’s objectivity – are felt to be intolerably normative and judgemental towards the subjectivity of individuals. Minimalism merely makes all these contradictions more evident (although it too constantly denies it): it shows how the “spiritual” is actually allied to the aesthetic in the shaping of an ideal that can integrate one’s life into a lifestyle and/or a worldview; it shows how ambivalent it thus must be towards the material, at one time wastefully rejected by discarding generic “stuff” while at another revelled in through one’s selected and organized things (perhaps higher quality things purchased in alt-consumption); it shows how a pursuit of one’s unqualified “inner growth” can confine one to individualist projects of home-/self-improvement (both conceived as equally “interior” by contrast to society); it shows how the identity’s indeterminacy can mask crucial differences in socio-economic and cultural conditions, throwing together the rich and the poor, or the aspirational and the austere, ultimately promising to all a middle-class comfort that is not, however, accessible to all; and it also shows how, far from being non-prescriptive, a discourse that is based on the rhetoric of authenticity and autonomy is actually endlessly prescriptive, wielding what minimum of abstract objectivity that it retains to back up with necessity the insistence on this or that practice – depending on the author or influencer’s emphasis – while managing and attenuating its criticality by various aesthetic or rhetorical means (including the claim that the minimum is wholly subjective, and that discarding things is actually a way of accepting oneself and be grateful for what one already owns).

Rather than rejecting minimalism to project an authentic voluntary simplicity – a move that, as our second round of analyses will show, can equally project a truer minimalism, squaring authenticity –, a better idea would be studying it closely as the knot which ties together pretty much all of the contradictions of anti-consumerism, especially insofar as it is turned into an encompassing lifestyle identity. As a rhetorically constructed object of discourse, “minimalism” is left – or actively (re)made – indeterminate, while still being talked about as if it were determinate enough to be its own distinct, integral lifestyle irreducible to any of its rhetorical components: this minimal determination is maintained by insistence on the abstracted feature of a core necessary

practice (discarding one's things), by its metaphorical extension into the universalized individualist frame (reducing all sorts of other "things" in life to a "minimum", for one's own well-being), and by recourse to a supposedly critical, but in fact hopelessly dualistic – and thus oscillating between extremism and escapism –, anti-consumerist rhetoric of anti-materialism and anti-aestheticism, with whatever degree of frugal or social-environmental add-ons (pursuing one's spiritual, authentic and autonomous self as a responsible individual). The aesthetic common sense, together with the commonsensical readings of the label, both grounds these actually disparate features and components, merging them together so that the discourse can shift from one to another, and also fills the indeterminacy up with something that – despite its own contradictoriness – is easily recognizable; any further determination is then up to each "minimalist" author or influencer's free emphases on home-improvement, self-improvement and/or anti-consumerism (with the road more or less paved for forms of alt-consumption), with their advice's criticality at any rate softened and managed through the discourse's contradiction. This is, once again but more fully stated, our main thesis on minimalism. Given this rhetorical constitution, which relies on "minimalism" being almost thoroughly indeterminate, rejecting it as aestheticized is no threat to the discourse, because it can square authenticity, disavow – as we will see – its aesthetic grounds (whose operations are mostly implicit and thus tacit anyway), shift its emphases and affirm its ultimate indeterminacy as subjective. On the contrary, precisely a critical acknowledgment of the aesthetic and commonsensical grounds of "minimalism" would bring to light its contradictions, not least the differences in concrete socio-economic or cultural conditions among those who are attracted to the discourse; the contradictions would then have to be faced rather than bypassed, or papered over by a reaffirmation of "minimalism" in all its elusive indeterminacy. The same goes for "voluntary simplicity", because it functions in a similar way from a rhetorical point of view, even though it has a different and yet more indeterminate aesthetic common sense (one that, broadly speaking, appeals to traditional and/or exotic ways of living as more simple, "spiritual" and yet "natural", which of course the minimalist discourse also does to some extent, as we have seen). A survey like Alexander and Ussher's stresses that one must not just be a voluntary simplifier but "feel" connected to other voluntary simplifiers in one's individual efforts, but it is taken as sufficient to this end that the label indicates that other individuals share this vaguest trait of reducing their consumption in whatever way, while unsurprisingly

the only political outlets envisioned for this “Simplicity Movement” are those of “voting with money” and of voting for a hypothetical party focused on the promotion of “simple living” (Alexander & Ussher 2012: 15-16, 20): individuals and their actions are merged into an indeterminate collective, nothing more. The survey manufactures consent in various ways: the contradictions among the different abstracted components, such as “frugality”, “buying locally and ecologically”, and “minimalism” too (here defined as “valuing fewer possessions”), are relegated to the “comment box” wherein respondents point to (what should be) the obvious fact that they are related in complicated ways, so that for example all depends on what the money is spent for, while certain ethically and environmentally friendly solutions are in turn too expensive (11-12); the motivations, ranging from “more time with family” to “environmental concern” and “to save money” (as well as “‘decluttering’ life / minimalism”, which is the fourth highest out of ten options), are offered as a pre-packaged list to check any number of options from, with no ranking of them (13-14); and it goes without saying that the respondents, who already identified themselves with voluntary simplicity, overwhelmingly report that they are happier now because of it, again regardless of all their differences (14-15).

Elsewhere, Alexander had already replied to some “misconceptions” or “criticisms” of voluntary simplicity in a way that strongly reminds us of Babauta’s playing around with “necessity”, as well as the rhetorical moves which we will see later: on the one hand, the “extremism” and “material renunciation” of such “proponents of simplicity” as Diogenes, St. Francis or Gandhi is, of course, unnecessary for the “simple life”, which is “an empowering expression of freedom” and thus “does not mean poverty”, but instead “attaining material *sufficiency* while at the same time creating a life rich in its non-material dimensions” (Alexander 2011a: 3-4); on the other hand, anyone is included, because “the broad-based affluence in the developed world today means that the choice of voluntary simplicity is available *to some degree* to the vast majority of people”, not merely “a privileged few” (10-11); as a result, the line is again blurred, uniting the poor and wealthy under one vague immaterial richness plus material sufficiency, while socio-economic conditions are *de facto* ignored. Even minimalism’s ambivalence towards the aesthetic can be discerned here: on the one hand, “aesthetic experience” is paired with “spiritual experience” as one facet of the “better life” offered by voluntary simplicity (2), and “an aesthetic preference for minimalism and functionality” is even

cited as a “primary attribute” of it (3); on the other hand, the usual anti-aesthetic rhetoric is appealed to when it comes to clothing, disqualified as a wasteful “conspicuous display of wealth and status” in favour of “‘dress[ing]’ down, wearing functional, often second-hand clothing” (with the ambiguity arising once again in presenting this solution as, in fact, “an outward statement of simplicity [...] to express aesthetically one’s opposition to consumer culture”, while a disclaimer for authenticity is also added by saying that it “does not necessarily imply giving up ‘style’ or puritanically denying self-expression through what one wears”, 9). Predictably, when “the symbolic function of consumption” as site for meaning-making and identity formation is acknowledged, it is swiftly dismissed as unfulfilling in the usual anti-consumerist rhetoric: “The ‘extended self’ created through consumption is actually an ‘empty self,’ one that is constantly in need of being ‘filled up’ with consumer artefacts” (11¹⁰⁹). Another article published the same year depicts voluntary simplicity as an “aesthetics of existence”, but this amounts to the metaphor of art as applied to one’s life of individual responsibility and self-improvement (so that it is probably no coincidence that this text lacks reference to the social dimension of voluntary simplicity):

Blurring the distinction between art and life, [Nietzsche’s phrase, ‘Be the poet of your life’] suggests that we should take hold of life, as the poet takes hold of language, and shape it into something new, something worthy, something *beyond consumerism* – to imagine the best, post-consumerist life we can and then set about creating such a life. For are we not each related to our own lives in a way comparable to how the artist is related to his or her own materials? Are we not each charged with the task of creating as an aesthetic project the meaning of our own lives? [...] This approach to existence, as we have seen, is to conceive of life as ‘raw material’ which individuals are responsible for sculpting. From this perspective, we are condemned to be artists of life, with the world condemned to be our canvas (Alexander 2011b: 8).

Needless to say, beyond the artistic metaphor, the material and the aesthetic are not actually revaluated here, nor is any assessment of one’s concrete conditions – one’s “raw materials” of life – facilitated or insisted upon. “Good” hobbies such as playing and instrument or reading books are offered as examples of “non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning”, without making it any clear what makes them “non-materialistic” (the author merely points to the fact that an instrument can be played infi-

¹⁰⁹ It is quite ironic that the reference for the “extended” and “empty” self is an old article by a psychologist who targeted “psychology” no less than “advertisement” as one of “the two professions most responsible for healing the empty self”, equally caught in the “bind” of “treat[ing] a psychological symptom without being able to address its historical causes”, and circumventing it by offering the “life-style solution”: filling the empty self “with the accoutrements, values, and mannerisms of idealized figures”, thus “reproducing the current hierarchy of power and privilege” (Cushman 1990). The article’s subtitle, not included in Alexander’s reference, calls for a “historically situated psychology”; this too seems to be very far from voluntary simplicity’s supposed timelessness.

nite times, and that books may be shared – but this, if anything, would prove that materiality is not at all the problem!; 22). As for the aesthetic, it is actually a source of “status anxiety”, so that “an aesthetics of existence implies cultivating an indifference to social status [so that] it is more important to shape one’s life for the purposes of gaining self-respect than for the purpose of seeking the respect of others” (23); that is, the “aesthetic” unsurprisingly is the “authentic”, just like in minimalism (which only highlights this contradiction). Finally, with regard to concrete conditions, there is an invitation to “acknowledge freedom by imagining hypothetical lives”, that is, “futures that depend merely on an act of will to initiate” (such as “radically changing careers” to devote oneself to a “burning passion”!), so that “we may discover that we are freer than we think we are” (24). Can the supposed gap with minimalism get any thinner? There is responsabilization of the individual for his or her finance by self-restraint (21-22), Stoic practices like “negative visualization” (24-25), wholesale rejection of the media (25-26), and an indeterminate, subjective “enough” that is accompanied, as usual, by the suggestion that objectively “much less is needed”, that again we are all already freer than we think we are, and also that it is better to “need less” anyway, because one will thereby consume and work less (as if working hours were custom-made and debt did not exist; 26-27). There is also the irony, of course, that each must authentically invent the meaning of his or her own life, and yet the first advice given is that of “reading about consumerism and voluntary simplicity” (20-21).

The publication dates of these articles might make us think that voluntary simplicity was, by then, already inflected – or infected – by the minimalist discourse that had emerged in the previous years (although it gained most of its visibility around 2014 with the publication of Kondo’s book, as we have noted). Elgin’s contribution on voluntary simplicity in a 2002 book on Buddhist(-inspired) anti-consumerism¹¹⁰ confirms, on

¹¹⁰ A reviewer described the book’s approach as “minimalist”, though only by reference to waste-reduction: “Since Buddhism calls us to recognize the interdependence of things and avoid doing harm, whether through action or inaction, economics informed by Buddhism means the achievement of appropriate ends through minimal and least destructive means. Thus, a number of these essays show how Buddhism can be relevant to economics and ecology precisely because of its minimalism. It is this minimalism which makes Buddhism such a powerful response to the maximalism that directs contemporary life” (Nelson 2003: 67). This shows that the term was available, if only by its commonsensical reading, to define anti-consumerist reductions; and in fact, to cite just one more example, a French book on environmentally friendly consumption was published in 2000 with the title of *Le minimalisme. Concept et pratiques d'éco-consommation* (Bertolini 2000). While the term mainly or exclusively applies, in these cases, to waste-reduction, it is to see how, both for its aesthetic associations and its rhetorical versatility, the label of “minimalism” can centrifugally expand beyond the scope of reducing economical-ecological means

the contrary, that the rhetorical ingredients were already in place. It was already one of the “tendencies” ascribed to voluntary simplicity that of reducing the “clutter” of things “seldom used” (Elgin 2002: 251), and it already clearly evidenced its metaphorical power to spread out and cover one’s whole life, which is made “unnecessarily complicated” by “the clutter and pretense that weigh upon our lives and make our passage through the world more cumbersome and awkward”: on the whole, “to live more simply is to live more purposefully and with a minimum of needless distraction”, including though exceeding one’s material possessions (245). The ambivalence towards the aesthetic was already apparent here as well, as Elgin pushes back against the idea that the simple life is “a primitive approach to living that advocates a barren plainness” (one of the “misleading stereotypes” that “suggest a life of regress instead of progress”), because is quite clearly the usual “(anti-)aesthetic” of authenticity cast in spiritualist language (and referencing Wright’s modernist aesthetic of “organic simplicity”): “Rather than a denial of beauty, simplicity liberates the aesthetic sense by freeing things from artificial encumbrances. From a transcendental perspective, simplicity removes the obscuring clutter and discloses the spirit that infuses all things” (249). But is it not a “denial of beauty” to sever the aesthetic from its material and mediatic “artifices”, setting it against “the material side of life” and aligning it with the somehow immaterial “psychological, spiritual, cultural [sides]” (258)? Is it a coincidence that most things indicated as ways to “lower [one’s] overall level of personal consumption” are aesthetic items (“less clothing”, “less concern with passing fads, fashions and seasonal styles”, “less jewelry and other forms of personal ornamentation” as well as “fewer cosmetic products”, 251)? What does Elgin mean when he includes “aesthetic” in his criteria for consumption, insisting that one has to pay “more attention to what is functional, durable, aesthetic”? The idea seems to be that the aesthetic is good only when it is also or mainly (and mainly we should add, against the supposed tendency of “alter[ing] male/female roles in favour of nonsexist patterns of relationship”, 252) functional in a strict sense, and even more when it is durable in its purely positive and immediate value; but this is precisely what the appeal of minimalism’s aesthetic common sense promises! Like the minimal-

for consumption – especially from our pragmatist perspective, wherein there is a dialectical reciprocity between means and ends: one can hardly reduce in an isolated, aseptic manner the means employed in society from the “appropriate ends”, taking the latter as somehow already fixed. In fact, we can wonder whether “the maximalism that directs contemporary life” is similarly circumscribed to the means employed by the consumerist society, or if it is rather equally concerned with the ends, interests and forms of life that it promotes. Elgin’s voluntary simplicity, of course, is a critique of the latter kind.

ist, Elgin's voluntary simplifier amounts to an ideal consumer whose consumption is enduringly fulfilling and wants to have it all: his or her preferences are for "products that are durable, easy to repair, non-polluting in their manufacture and use, energy efficient, functional, and aesthetic" (251), which is to say that they are no preferences at all, just good things that any ideal consumer would aim for (with no mention of the actual problem that lies in the conflicts among these and other criteria, such as frugality). This ideal consumer also expands to the responsabilized individual at large: another tendency, for example, is that – which again reminds us of Babauta's healthy lean life – of "shift[in] one's diet away from highly processed foods, meat, and sugar toward foods that are more natural, healthy, simple, and appropriate for sustaining the inhabitants of a small planet", and while a broader social-environmental horizon is evoked, with changes needed at the "personal", "neighbourhood", "national" and "global" level, Elgin points out that "our leaders are bogged down, trying to cope with our faltering institutions [...] enmeshed in crisis management", so that ultimately "each of us is responsible" (equally?) and "the foundation upon which success can be built is the individual and family" (258-259). Elgin is actually explicit in saying that what is needed now is "a more authentic approach to living – one that provides a fulfilling relationship with one's self, with others, with the Earth, and with the universe", tying together "the push of necessity" (for a "sustainable" life) and "the pull of opportunity" (for a both "satisfying" and "soulful" life), and in doing so he too contrasts the extremes of absolute poverty and excessive wealth in such a way that obscures the reality that, in fact, even within the "developed nations" the mix of necessity (not for sustainability but for survival, or at least for a decent standard of living) and opportunity can vary extremely: in other words, it is indeed everywhere true – even for voluntary simplicity! – that "if the world is profoundly divided materially, there is very little hope that it can be united socially, psychologically, and spiritually" (253-258). Therefore, while Elgin's vision undoubtedly appears more broad in its social-environmental horizon, it is clear that its rhetoric is quite similar to that of minimalism, and thus cannot do much to address its problems and untangle its knots; they were, from the start, also voluntary simplicity's knots, at least from a rhetorical point of view. With the commonsensical (anti-)aesthetic and extremist rhetorical connotations of its label, "minimalism" brings the contradictions to the fore and, as we will see, regularly discharges their tensions by denying – with the same rhetoric of authenticity in voluntary simplicity and anti-consumerism at large –

one of its components, thus managing and softening its discourse. In this sense, it is a mirror image of voluntary simplicity¹¹¹, one that – in our view – only a critical acceptance of the aesthetic dimensions in its entirety can challenge. When Elgin attacks the mass media as offering “a shallow, secular, and consumerist view of the world”, he rightly points to the need of “infusing” the (mass) media with “a sacred sense of reality” (256); like any other that sense too, however, is irreducibly aesthetic, and if some kind of aesthetic simplicity is to characterize it (and it is not obvious that I can), then it must be critically articulated in openly aesthetic terms – otherwise, its ambivalent indeterminacy will of course be vulnerable to the (aesthetically) extreme and (extremely) aesthetic alt-consumerist twin outcomes of the minimalist discourse and its common sense. The squaring of authenticity must be interrupted by a revaluation of the aesthetic, as well as the rhetorical power of common sense.

¹¹¹ We could even go through the mirror, like Alice, via other books of those same years that get even closer to what would be the minimalist discourse. In what is almost a minimalist book except for the label and its associations, Lane’s (2001) voluntary simplicity book on “timeless simplicity” presents “home-making” and the beauty of one’s home, for example, as one of the main “sacred arts of life” (89-91, 93-94), all of which are individual, private and domestic, like the focus throughout the book (though allusion to the social-environmental concerns is also made). The insistence on the paramount necessity of “culling the unnecessary” by discarding “stuff” is already found here, as is its metaphorical expansion to all of life (which is taken as the main task, while discarding per se is admitted to be “psychological” in its benefits, since things are “static” and do not actually require that much care) and also its casting into the authenticist rhetoric of discovering one’s true “nature”: “Simplifying a life means one and only one thing: cutting back on the less essential things and activities to allow more time and space for those which give a deeper nourishment and more fulfilling satisfaction. To achieve these ends, allow space for the soul to guide you – to guide you to do what it is calling you to do – not what you have been imprisoned into doing by habit, language, perceptions and prejudice. Do not suppress what your secret nature demands. To find your nature, simplify. Simplify in order to make time to consider what really matters to you. [...] Discard all that you no longer need. Since almost all this stuff is static and requires little attention, the value of the cleansing exercise is more psychological than practical. It helps one to feel simplified, lighter. But the more significant exercise is a purgation of everything in your life – not only objects but habits – which demand unnecessary time and attention” (64-65). The time wasted on the “endless stream” of media such as TV, magazines, newspapers, newsletters, mails and even “the net” is also lamented, as these things are “not important”, and immediately after that self-restraint in “expenditure” follows (65-67). Meanwhile, a marketing book the same year heralded the era of the “New Consumer” characterized by individualist authenticity (and spirituality), inconspicuous – or rather differently conspicuous – consumption, and the blurring of economic lines – attributed to widespread “abundance” – through accessible luxury and “chic cheap”: “Many well-heeled New Consumers, by contrast [to Old Consumers], are eschewing blatant displays of wealth in favor of more subtle demonstrations of financial muscle. [...] These purchases don’t represent the impact of any financial constraints, but rather the quest for authenticity. Indeed, the price tag on a minimalist lifestyle can run far higher than for an ostentatious one” (Lewis & Bridger 2001: 13-14). The “minimalist” aesthetic is only alluded to and thus taken for granted as commonsensical, but it was evidently associated to wealth; and yet, it was but the other side of the same New Consumer coin, which also aestheticized cheapness: “The kind of minimalist surroundings that so attract wealthy New Consumers are far from cheap, [but] the US has also recently witnessed the growing popularity of ‘cheap is chic’, with wealthy shoppers haggling hard to win discounts of just a few dollars” (76). From here, then, we get to the other side of the mirror: the minimalist discourse.

It is probably no accident that the more politically oriented strands of anti-consumerism, like those associated to degrowth (or post-growth), have to a higher extent recognized the need for such a critical task. Already in 2008, Soper's seminal article acknowledged that the anti-consumerist discourse needed a philosophical-rhetorical makeover comprising both an ethical component ("alternative hedonism") and an aesthetic one ("aesthetic revisioning"): rather than presenting itself as some form of renouncement based on the supposed hierarchical opposition of true and false needs, it was vital that it be stressed that in fact the consumerist and capitalist society deprives people, in various interlocking ways, of those very aesthetic pleasures (often "material" and "spiritual" at once) whose unlimitedness on the contrary it promises, for example by maintaining the repressive anaestheticization that is work time for most people, occupying most of their days with the very "ascetic" restraint that the discourse appeals to (Soper 2008: 575, 577-579). The example is quite apt for minimalism, because – as we have more than gleaned in our analyses – from the very start its discourse was immersed, at one and the same time, in self-improvement advice both for productivity at work and for leaving work behind in order to pursue one's passion or mission (or set up passive income, not least by becoming a blogger oneself): together with self-help advice on slowing down, these are all ways to escape the weight of work, whether by further mechanizing it, by compensating it or by (aspiring to, perhaps in vain) shifting to alternatives¹¹². That the discourse, being tied to the insistence on discarding things and to decluttering – with its narrow focus on private, domestic space –, also largely ignores the reality of that weight (beside demanding more work itself), confirms its centrality rather than disproving it. In Soper's view, then, instead of exclusively relying on the ultimate necessity of an ecological transition and risk imposing it in an authoritarian, top-down manner – according to its detractors, at least, or its most naïve promoters –, a compelling case can be made which involves the aspirations of most people to better life conditions instead of denying them, since such desires are in fact already abundant-

¹¹² Again, none of this is peculiar to minimalism, which only endows such advice with its indeterminate, contradictory aesthetic and rhetoric – that is our whole point, so it bears repeating. The advice itself – which is of course contradictory too, so much that we could similarly describe it as "(anti-)work" advice – is central to the whole self-help and self-improvement discourse at large: the development of positive psychology and the "happiness industry" (Davies 2015) in the last three decades accompanied shifts in work-culture like that from more solid long-term "careers" to liquid (that is, flexible or precarious) short-term jobs and "projects" (Cabanas & Illouz 2019), while financial self-help simultaneously promised a "freedom" – an euphemism not to speak too straightforwardly (and greedily) of money – that ultimately was "freedom from work" (Fridman 2017).

ly frustrated (which is also behind, we can add, the minimalist discourse's disavowals of wants and desires; 581-582). The anti-consumerist discourse literally focuses on a negative critique of consumerism that risks withdrawing in a "sublime" absolute refusal of the whole of (its) society as if it were external to itself, not something in which it is inextricably entangled, while positive, concrete alternatives – even at the risk of getting things wrong and trying again – are needed to complement both the critique and the broad utopian demand for a different form of life (576). Most importantly for our purposes, the discourse – and its political struggle – can remain democratic only insofar as it neither falls into the rhetoric of authenticity which takes certain needs and wants as manufactured or manipulated and thus false, nor on the wholesale dismissal of it as itself a result of manufacture and manipulation (which is but a "squaring" of it, in our terms): both of these paths lead to the exclusion of people's own experiences as something to take into account and work with (575). Minimalism is again a perfect case in point: it is clear in its pairings of a negative rhetoric of the minimum – and of even a more starkly dualistic anti-consumerism – and an (ambiguously) positive aesthetic common sense, its innocuous and overall socially pacifying indeterminacy, and its use of a rhetoric of authenticity both in order to more or less subtly insist on the necessity of discarding (more) things regardless of people's experiences (since they might be rationalizing false needs), and in order to – as we will see – disavow, manage and soften its criticality, returning to indeterminacy. However, Soper's hedonist-aesthetic revisioning of anti-consumerism can too lead to neglecting the appeal of something like the minimalist discourse, dismissing it rather than engaging it as the equally perfect case of commodification that in fact it is: after all, such revisioning can be pursued by appealing to other resources, while its emphasis on the need for positive proposals may make it appear superfluous to critique what, like minimalism, is already so easy to criticize (especially if it is contrasted to voluntary simplicity not to illustrate how it highlights its contradictions, but as a more ineffective and problematic iteration of it: for example, Blackburn et al. 2023). The negative aspect of critique is of course present in Soper's approach, but it often seems to aim once again at simply upending the ordinary aesthetic judgments of people, so that "commodities once perceived as enticingly glamorous come gradually instead to be seen as cumbersome and ugly in virtue of their association with unsustainable resource use, noise, toxicity or their legacy of unrecyclable waste" (580). It is no doubt important to incorporate broader ecological traits into aesthetic

judgments, but it would be reductive to understand them as merely replacing whatever judgments had come before, as if the former were indeed simply more real altogether than the latter. While they should be brought to the surface, none of the problems that lie in the backstage of minimalism's aesthetic common sense can entirely account for and discount its appeal. Soper is well aware of this danger, but on the whole she remains pessimistic on whether it is possible or worth the effort: most recently, she has stated in an interview that she thinks that by now "the mindfulness and minimalist trends [...] are fairly locked into the capitalist market and often functioning as lucrative niche markets themselves", even though she does say that she does not want to "get too iffy about them", acknowledging that on the contrary other people defend the attempt to steer them away from the "neoliberal discourses of individual responsibility and conspicuous consumption" (Highmore et al. 2023: 218).

One such author that, from the degrowth perspective, has argued in the last couple years for the possibility of recuperating minimalism is Messiner, and she first did so precisely by reference to Soper's hedonist-aesthetic revisioning, which calls for "disenchantment from" rather than mere "rejection of" capitalist-consumerist society: "[Minimalist narratives] stimulate aesthetic disenchantment with affluence – a 'world of too much' – in work, habitat and commodity culture. In addition, minimalist narratives illustrate the benefits that emerge from reduced consumption and productivity, such as concentration and quality time" (Messiner 2019: 195). This is not for want of rigorous criticisms of the minimalist discourse, of course: its setting the scene for acquisition of "more high-end minimalist commodities" and involvement into "forms of 'creative' labor productivity" (not available to most people), its insistence on discarding while neglecting the concrete methods to do so in sustainable ways by recycling and redistribution, its lack of awareness of the global inequalities underpinning the affordability of "living with less" in the Global North, the related "paradox" according to which "it rejects imperatives of consumption and productivity at the micro-scale, but leaves intact – if not defends – the capitalist growth paradigm at the macro-scale" by detaching accumulation of stuff from accumulation of money, and of course, its exclusive focus on individual responsibility, authentic self-expression and subjective evaluations, at the very best "compensating for the precariousness of an unjust, unstable and environmentally detrimental socio-economic system" – these and other criticisms are all clearly put forward

by Messiner (195-197). Still, a potential is recognized in the discourse insofar as it can be linked to critical theory and discourses such as degrowth to broaden its horizons – especially from anti-consumption to “anti-accumulation”, which addresses capitalist as much as consumerist factors in contemporary living – and aid it in self-critically reflecting on its unwitting complicity with what it rejects (which requires more than the easy disavowals we will analyse). In other words, for Messiner it is possible “direct minimalism against accumulation, rather than individually perceived variations of ‘too much,’ while simultaneously maintaining its capacity to construe anti-accumulative lifestyle as an everyday hedonist benefit” (198). Her emphasis, here, is on the hedonist side, but elsewhere she has also foregrounded the aesthetic side as also amenable to a “cultural politics” of degrowth:

Degrowth activists can use tactics of art, design, and performance in order to disrupt business as usual while at the same time promoting alternative values for wellbeing, such as simplicity and conviviality. What if degrowth activists tapped into and repurposed the aesthetics of lifestyle minimalism for degrowth activism? What if they used images of charming clutter-free homes in order to adabst Black Friday advertising, while at the same time endorsing the degrowth values of simplicity and sufficiency? What if degrowth activist appropriated Marie Kondo's tidying formulae in order to organize convivial workshops for de-cluttering and sharing or redistributing material wealth? In this way, cultural politics of refiguration, popularization and pressure would – to different degrees – coincide (Messiner 2021: 527).

Messiner's point here is that “cultural hegemonies do not change automatically just because a good alternative [like degrowth] is in place”, because in fact “more active and strategic process of *politics as production* is required, which takes stock of existing social forces, movements, conceptions and identities and articulates them into strategic alliances” (528), not disdaining a priori but rather reappropriating even the discourses or cultural features – including aesthetic ones – of more or less privileged influencers and their audiences (all too easy to dismiss as simply “the ‘wrong’ social groups” to appeal to, being mostly “educated middle classes or wealthy elites”; 521-522). Crucially, this approach does not entail simply diluting degrowth's political positions and project into indeterminate, vague or centrist common (sense) denominators (which, in our view, is exactly how a discourse like minimalism already functions), but rather retaining specificity while building a “degrowth-oriented ‘movement of movements’” around it (528). This is confirmed in Messiner's next return to the topic of minimalism, wherein she singles out three key ways in which it should be – together with “mindfulness” – redirected towards a higher engagement: of these, two have to do with the non-reductive reciprocity that is needed between the individual and social levels, which on the one hand

“avoid[s] considering individual-lifestyle and political-institutional change in isolation from each other”, and on the other hand “combine[s] personal experience with political engagement” (bridging “self-care, people-care, and planet-care”, 208-209); the remaining suggestion, instead – which is also the first one –, is not only that of recognizing the actual multiplicity of “minimalisms” and “mindfulnesses”, but also addressing their indeterminacy, because “it happens quite often that minimalist lifestyle advocates give vague or metaphorical titles to the problems that their practice aims to alleviate”, while it is necessary to “specify the issues that [minimalism] seeks to tackle” (207-208). What we would like to suggest, however, is that this indeterminacy in the minimalist discourse is no accident, that it is closely tied to its very individualist-authenticist-subjectivist and yet universalist frame – with its low tolerance for (open, clear) criticality, and thus its rhetorical need to disguise, manage and soften it (through its contradictions) –, and above all that it is fostered by the unease with, and easy dismissals of, its own aesthetic common sense.

From this point of view, by contrast to the previous text, Messiner’s idea of “engaged [minimalist] mindfulness” is lacking, because while it does call attention to a lifestyle’s aesthetic dimension in the form of “personal experience”¹¹³, it misses other aspects of it, particularly those that the discourse itself is keen to reject – the appearances and the mediated images. These are a major part of what distinctively enables “minimalism” to “make having less cool”, “transmut[ing] [living with less] from a necessary evil – a sacrifice consumers have to make for the planet – into a pleasant and voluntary exercise” and “refram[ing] [it] from a sacrifice into a trend” (193-194): the “fashion and interior design” or the curated “Instagram feeds” that “come with it” are not negligible accessories, as Messiner’s turn to mindfulness in this text at least suggests, because on the contrary minimalism seems to show – in spite of itself – that mindfulness is not only aesthetically tied to one’s surroundings in general rather than interior, but also tied to an aesthetic care for them which may encompass the work that goes into curating their appearances and mediations, entangled with a certain imagery. If that side of the aesthetic

¹¹³ Messiner offers Odell’s (2019) popular and yet explicitly radical book on the attention economy as an example of a non-reductive approach to lifestyle reflection in the self-help genre, and indeed the book provides a very good model for that, even though Messiner’s inclusion of it in the minimalist discourse is somewhat questionable: one can certainly get there via Newport’s (2019) book on “digital minimalism” published earlier the same year, but we would argue that precisely the explicit use of the label is requisite to full participation in the discourse, since the point is in part that of constructing the lifestyle as a shared rhetorical object.

dimension is not critically addressed and reconstructed, not only will the appeal of minimalism go largely missing along the way – leaving it to work for alt-consumerist and self-help commodifications just like before –, but the other sides of the aesthetic dimension too will suffer from the discourse’s own anti-aesthetic/ -materialist rhetorical attacks against itself, that will keep on being triggered (and this, in turn, will always reinforce the individualism and subjectivism of the discourse, via the rhetoric of authenticity). In her most recent intervention, Messiner takes up Kondo’s method as represented in the Netflix TV series and the zero waste strands of the minimalist discourse, highlighting the “longing for connection with the material world” and “animist sensitivity” (Messiner 2023:175) that can be evidenced within the discourse and some of its rituals (such as thanking or otherwise addressing things) or fetishes (such as the “trash jar” that keeps track of one’s individual material waste): such “holding objects to show gratitude for the earth” and “feeling terrible when confronting the dead remnants of mass consumption et cetera” shape “practitioners’ sensitivity toward the ecological repercussions of material production, consumption and wasting” in the aesthetic “embodied and affective” way (186). However, here too the aesthetic as imagery plays no role, and Messiner perhaps underestimates too much the deep ambivalence behind minimalism that is rooted within it, and in particular lurking beneath Kondo’s positive rhetoric: if minimalism is indeed more often than not “seeking control rather than resonate with the material world”, insisting on seeing the material world “as a resource or externality” rather than “an actor to respect and resonate with” (186), it is also and perhaps primarily because it projects and rejects (mediated) images even more than it does matter (degrading objects into “abjects”, as noted by Sandlin & Wallin 2022), including its own image. Moreover, so long as this side of the aesthetic dimension is not carefully attended to, it will be quite hard to sustain efforts for the reappropriation that Messiner wishes for, as most other critics will keep on seeing in minimalists’ evident aesthetic concerns – for their homes or for their own selves – nothing but a failure of imagination in the face of the global scale and unfathomable complexity of the ecological crisis, as does Perazzetta (2022) in disqualifying precisely the zero waste trash jar and the rest of the minimalist discourse (even more obsessed with “the aesthetic goal of a tastefully decorated home” and turning at best “eco-consciousness” and its political project into a necessarily individualist “encompassing aesthetic and identitarian pursuit”: 38, 46). In the last instance, therefore, any attempt at distilling this or that aspect of the aesthetic dimension in order

to somehow purify it from its problems and contradictions is self-defeating. Critical reconstruction has to resist the temptation to sever the involvement of interests, the expansive integration of ideals, the affective as well as active care for material things – and people – within a material environment, the equal care for more or less mediated images and related identities, the participation and contribution to a certain common sense, and the handling of crisis and of criticality from the others. All of these are interwoven in the aesthetic dimension, so that while emphasis and focus may fall on this or that aspect, the others too must at least be kept in mind and in the background. Minimalists' indeterminate longing for a minimum touches on all of them, and their discourse pits them against each other without ever actually impacting the ambiguous shape of that longing, the rhetorical spectrum and its mirror images. Whether the minimalist discourse is worth an attempt at reconstruction or not, surely enough that attempt cannot take the same shape and putting the aesthetic at war with itself. This is what our limited analyses in this thesis, coupled with the even more limited theoretical sketch in the other parts (despite research for these having absorbed even more efforts), are meant to show.

2.2.3 – Authenticity Squared (iii): Critiquing Minimalism's Authenticity's Aesthetic

This last point cuts both ways, of course: just like a fuller appreciation of all the complexity of the aesthetic dimension demands from a critical study that it not overlook or underestimate appearances and images, so on the other hand a study focused on the minimalist imagery would have to look at it also in terms of the ways in which it articulates other aspects of the aesthetic; its variety and contradictoriness would then be even more evident, and easier to clarify. For our purposes here, however, it is enough to highlight that the aesthetic common sense of minimalism, in all its contradictory associations, long predated of course the minimalist discourse; which entails that if it can be said that minimalism has indeed (further) aestheticized voluntary simplicity, then it must have done so on the one hand – like the last parenthesis indicates – by leading previous associations to their culmination, and on the other hand precisely by letting the aesthetic operate at an indeterminate, commonsensical level (despite the fact that, as we have seen, the earliest blogs such as Babauta's or Becker's did explicitly praise modernist minimalist homes to make their point). This is already shown well enough in Cullens' (1999) critical assessment of the mediatic explosion of all sorts of shelter publica-

tions, specialized 24-hour TV channels on interior design such as HGTV, home-related lifestyle advice in both magazines and books, and star-designers looked up to as gurus, signalling a growing economic as well as ideological centring of private domestic space, but also evidencing an enduring modernist ambivalence about it. In Cullens' reading, this ambivalence was epitomized – already in the mid of the last century – in Bachelard's (1994) psycho-poetic celebration of the home on the one hand, and in Le Corbusier's functionalistic disciplining of it on the other, each extreme mirroring the other in a way quite similar to the mirror images within the minimalist rhetorical spectrum we have defined:

What Gaston Bachelard referred to in *The Poetics of Space* as "topophilia" remains an affectively powerful, and perhaps oppressively disciplinary, as well as economically lucrative, drive. Bachelard's mid-century poetics of "felicitous space" lent legitimacy to a "topoanalysis" defined as "the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives" (8). In practice, "felicitous space" meant inhabited space, because it is in this space, according to Bachelard, that "the imagination," securely sheltered and granted the solitude for reverie, takes root. Famously asserting that "the unconscious is housed," and moreover that "it is well and happily housed, in the space of its happiness," Bachelard celebrated the primal sense of individual (Well-)Being that reigns "in a sort of earthly paradise of matter, dissolved in the comforts of an adequate matter" (10, 7). [...] While Bachelard's analysis generally ignored, or domesticated, issues of labor, gender, class, and consumerism relevant to the features and maintenance of the individual dwelling, his own reverie on the topic staged the complex imbrication of affect and sensual pleasure he claimed was produced by the domestic site and its objects. "With the house image, we are in possession of a veritable principle of psychological integration" (xxxvi). [...] This poetic mental representation in turn grounds the proprioceptive construction of how the self is fundamentally placed, or "housed," within the world. [...] If nothing else, his celebratory mode counteracted the dismissiveness, or the sheer obliviousness, characterizing the treatment of domestic space, or "interior design," in the scholarly, as opposed to popular, press. [...] While no less an architect than Le Corbusier urged his colleagues that a "motive of professional loyalty obliges us to devote all our care to the interior of the house," that interior is still implicitly identified with the feminized realm of "decoration" and ornament, of the trivial, the mass-produced, or the merely fashionable, rather than with the art and discipline of architecture. [...] [Bachelard's book] at least helped legitimate the analysis of the interior and showed this type of analysis to be an alternative to sociological tabulation, the Culture Industry framework, and/or equally stringent paradigms of commodification and reification. [...] Le Corbusier, articulating an ideology of modernist minimalism intended to place architecture beyond the reach of mere evanescent, fashion-driven consumerism, polemically redefined the modern residence as a "dwelling machine." [...] For the second half of this century, the modern subject produced by the dwelling machine and the possessor of Bachelard's happily housed unconscious have in fact coexisted. In a sense, these two versions of the prototypical twentieth-century inhabitant are doubles who have cooperated to draw attention fastidiously away from the material, consumerist desire attached to a site both imbue with a utopian purity (Cullens 1999: 205-209).

While one appears to eulogize and the other seems to chastise aesthetic involvement in one's home, both figures in fact deny the full breadth and depth of it, because they are ultimately presenting two specular extreme idealizations of domestic space. On the one hand, Bachelard's home is cast in the subjectivist language of the psychological and even spiritual experience of some isolated individual, mostly missing all the material and social relationships that are actually woven into the home as experienced in everyday life. Therefore, just like Kondo (though no doubt with much more expressive

force), he surely “occlude[s] the commodification of domestic space – but [he] do[es] not preclude it”: “Indeed, his fervency functions to auraticize the domestic interior, an auraticization that the reified desire of consumer culture hungers to recuperate. The design and shelter industries live off this attempt; [...] mass audience publications articulate, however superficially, the popular attachment to the domestic aspects of the architectural interior that [...] modernism has constantly attempted to suppress – with the result that the attachment to the domestic resurfaces in the register of anxiety” (208). As the last remark already gives out, on the other hand – and significantly in line with the academic disregard towards the aesthetic – a modernist like Le Corbusier approached the home interior primarily as a functional problem to be solved according to rational and universal principles, but the repression this engendered actually came with an aesthetic ideal in its own right, compensatory of the other but equally subtracted once again from material and social conditions or consequences. That aesthetic ideal was one of a “pure, clean, and/or undivided space” which promised a “renewed sense of ‘life’ but also “the pared-down anonymity of hired lodgings, or the ultimate impersonality of public zones where everyone is so intent on their own far-flung trajectory of transit that even the classic flaneur, the master of the urban exterior, could not make himself at home in them” (a vision which can then be read as either a “nightmare” or a “fantasy”; 210). We have thus two sides of one coin, through which “an industry devoted to the production and purveyance of material goods” that is however “economically dependent on revolving cycles of taste” can also afford “to excoriate the fad-bound slavishness of the ‘victims’ who are its own most faithful clients, and thereby to uphold the timeless, formalist purity of its own standards” (210). Just like, after all, “modernism and postmodernism alike have become just two more of the many available loosely applicable signposts of personal style” (especially since their polarity, as expressed for example in Harvey 1989, is the fruit of the very modern “obsession with what constitutes modernity”; Cullens 1999: 212), so it is exactly by contrast to the vagaries of individualist fashion that the seemingly universal, eternal appeal of modernism is reproduced – and both are quintessentially modern phenomena. The designer embodies this contradictions, because it is a profession “born in the mid-nineteenth-century encounter between commodity culture and high aestheticism”, and takes its mission as being one of “educat[ing] and, when necessary, admonish[ing] the newly prosperous classes to acquire a taste commensurate with their income” (211). This modernist pole of the dialectic, for which “it

is precisely the weight and world of materiality itself that constitutes the encroaching force, the exteriority that threatens to take over and disarrange interior order”, came to prevail once again in the 90s: “What has returned to discipline the inhabitants of the Nineties, after the Sixties’ cheerfully syncretic exoticism, Seventies’ pop and the neo-historicism of the Eighties, is the organization of space around the endlessly invoked principle of ‘editing,’ which is to say, paradoxically, exclusion” (214).

This is the aesthetic commonsensical terrain from which the minimalist discourse will spring years later, of course, and already it contained the association upon which the discourse will play: it already made of “clutter” an enemy, “the late-twentieth century equivalent of dirt for the Victorians, an evil that symbolically condenses the threats of contamination emanating from the disorderly public sphere, and the infectious sleaziness of consumer culture, with those of moral and even spiritual corruption” (214). Importantly, it did so in a way that was not merely reduced to a swinging back to modernism in its strictest forms, but rather “encompass[ed] not merely the more ‘organic’, ‘livable’ pieces of mid-century American or Scandinavian designers such as Eames, Nelson, Risom, and Jacobsen, but also the plastic and Pop of the Sixties and Seventies”, while nonetheless offering on the one hand the “advantage of being relatively safe, generic, and impersonably unobjectionable” (at a time when exactly “the consensus concerning taste [was] more fragmented than ever”), on the other hand the usual appeal of self-restraint (ambiguously aesthetic and ethical at the same time): “Whatever the current fans of interior modernism are desiring, the currently approved of practice is to display (if not necessarily possess) less of it” (215). In a sense, this has drawn the two polarities closer, further hybridizing them in a way that is vital to the rhetoric of the minimalist discourse¹¹⁴, and yet there was still a simultaneous exacerbation of the anti-materialist, anti-aesthetic reactions instigated by the compounding of material excess with an excess of images:

¹¹⁴ Ironically, in fact, contrary to the anti-consumerist rhetoric of minimalism, the softening of modernism – the replacement of its “cause” with its “style” – can be seen as “the story of Modernism making its peace with mass consumerism and mass culture – something seemingly unthinkable in the period between 1920–1960”, coming with “sensuality, domestic comfort and even a certain tolerance for pleasure and the ‘emotions’”: “Neo-Modernism is a case of technological functionalism meeting ‘Pop hedonism’, polished concrete and striking primary colors combining to bring ascetic Modernism into line with the pleasures of mass consumerism. The remarkable thing about Neo-Modernist design is precisely that consumers embrace it. People choose to buy apartments where the interiors are sparse, barren and inhumanely clean. They also flock to bars and restaurants that embrace Neo-Modernist principles” (De La Fuente 2014: 138-140).

What makes the fin-de-siècle recourse to moralized minimalism and the anxieties it caters to substantively different from the felt needs that fed the first wave of early-twentieth-century modernism, or the second, sunnier and more comfortably consumerist generation of mid-century, postwar modernism? What makes the personally inhabited space of the millennium more ominously “messy” than personal space circa 1910? For one thing, the escalation in the sense of how unmasterable the universe of material culture is becoming has intensified because it has been expanded to encompass the supplementary, not, strictly speaking, objectival universes of images, graphics, and virtual traces. The material abundance of (at least late-capitalist Western) consumer culture has obviously reached the point of being perceived as not just an ecological, but a perceptual burden to home, as well as to natural environments. As anyone who has ever spent a day trekking through flea markets or secondhand and vintage stores knows, the reverie-producing pathos and nostalgia of recovered objects celebrated by Bachelard or Susan Stewart, in *On Longing*, can turn instantaneously into a near-nausea occasioned by the sheer, dreary endlessness of the sea of abandoned things in which one suddenly finds oneself wading. This nausea marks the operation of a kind of second-order reification – the point where commodities auraticized by (maybe only a former) desirability fall back into the true, mute rigor mortis of mere “stuff.” How much more numbing if this dead “stuff,” in turn, is floating in an even larger, even more rapidly expanding sea, or alphabet soup, of images, traces, fragments, graphics, ornament and display, visuals and voice-overs – the dematerialized detritus of postmodern hyperspace. And it is in fact the threat of sensory and material overload, not scarcity, that conditions much of the current vocabulary of design. “Design” takes on the dimensions of a salvational force because it promises to control and impose selection criteria on the chaotic plethora (215-216).

Needless to say, the expanding interior design and lifestyle media themselves could not but contribute to this visual inflation of images, even when they only depicted modernist interiors – adding to the ambiguous discomfort, in the minimalist discourse, towards its very aesthetic grounds. This can only have gotten exponentially worse, of course, with the rise of blogging, vlogging and social media. In fact, as Machin (2004) observes in his study of the then emergent “world’s visual language” within such online repositories of digital images as Getty, a modernist-minimalist aesthetic was the dominant feature of that global language, because it was quite generic and thus safe and predictable, easy to reproduce and recognize with regard to all sorts of stock situations or themes, even though it did retain associations to power, privilege or wealth: on the one hand, “generic interiors [that] avoid clutter” and whose style “is the style of the showroom or the interior in the home decoration magazine, which must allow as many people as possible to imagine the space as their own”, while on the other there is, despite the fact that they “might be anywhere in the world”, “a sense of opulence, as in the airport lounge, or the modern designer shoe shop, or restaurant or media office in New York or London: expansive wooden floors, bright modern lighting, minimalist furniture highlighting perhaps one single, exciting colour”, as in “the bright and happy world of ‘positive thinking’ favoured by contemporary corporate ideology” (320-321). If minimalism came to be proposed as a “lifestyle” by its discourse, it is also because of this background of stylization into an aesthetic common sense. Further confirmations are easy to find, like Rosenberg’s (2009) analysis of the success of TV shows of home-restyling as a symp-

tom of an ideology of domestic property that at once disciplines taste to alleviate the weight of aestheticizing withdrawal into the home (fostered by the media themselves), and vice versa detaches individuals from their homes by promoting the sort of “soft modernist” look that is particularly appealing for the property market, depersonalizing homes so that no idiosyncratic element could interfere with a potential future buyer. The starting point of the home before restyling is always displayed and ridiculed as incoherent, dated or in bad taste, and yet these disciplining comments are offset by the “high-pop” safety and softness of “a popularized and democratized version [of modernism], which is less strict in terms of palette and form”: on the one hand, this aesthetic keeps “offer[ing] a sense of status and possible social mobility because of its connections to elite modernism”, while on the other “the affordable, sensible and colour co-ordinated solutions offered by the new experts offer style with minimal aesthetic involvement for a newly risen class who may be uncomfortable about making ‘artistic’ choices” (Palmer 2004: 181, as quoted in Rosenberg 2009: 69-70). Soft modernism promises to solve the aesthetic problem, whether in the aspirational register of social mobility or the accepting register of “minimal aesthetic involvement” (but probably a mix of both). Since other people would immediately feel at home in such space, as in a hotel room, it is but the mirror image of the “tribe of global nomads, moving from one temporary encampment and set of fleeting cohabitational arrangements to the next with their computer equipment” that already Cullens associated to the aesthetic (Cullen 1999: 223). Clutter is all that gets in the way of either an easy attachment or an equally easy detachment, with all their aspirational, accepting or austere connotations, and the related contradictions¹¹⁵.

¹¹⁵ A similar reading is offered by Leslie and Reimer (2003), wherein modernist design is described as at once democratic and yet elitist, as international or universalist in its principles and yet de facto never uniform but rather malleable – in a way that absorbs more local aesthetics –, as anti-aesthetic or anti-fashion in its “timeless” appearance and yet actually thoroughly historical in its appeal – mediated and commodified by interior design magazines –, and thus finally rooted in the gendered opposition between a male functionalism and a female ornamentalism. The authors also note that the return to modernism was not only presented within magazines as a reaction to postmodernist excesses, but also as a response to the “recessionary environment of the 1990s”, as well as “the growth in condominium living and loft living” and “an increased interest by men in furnishing the home” (313); these two elements point in the direction of minimalism, which will first become popular at the time of the 2008 crisis and which will at first be mainly blogged about by men (further stretching it metaphorically towards individualist self-improvement to the point of almost making “minimalism” synonymous with it, as we have seen, leaving the aesthetic ground in the background). At the same time, a tendency is also noted towards a softening of modernism according to “a need for warmth and comfort in the home (as set against the ‘hard’ lines of minimalist design)”, which pairs with what appears as the predecessor of minimalism’s disavowal of the aesthetic common sense: “Consumers often reject a uniform modernism as expressed in retail spaces or in the print media” (313). In a study of the same year based on interviews with middle-class consumers,

In their main manifestations, these contradictions are already pointed out in Cul-
lens' essay, beyond the schism between a sacral identification with the home and a no
less sacral purification of it. On the one hand, for example, one identifies – in an “ec-
static reunion” – with things owned, with the “contents of one’s dwelling, rather than
with the ‘home’ itself”, so that “the space is secondary” – and perhaps “temporary”, de-
tachable – as an empty background meant to highlight things; on the other, however,
things are not only “chosen with the most exhaustive discrimination” in themselves,
“but also deployed to maximize the sense of open, unencumbered, surveyable space”,
here subordinating things to the overall space of the home, the former having to fit the
strict requirements of the latter (217). Taken together, both these contradictory tenden-
cies at any rate clearly exhibit a mix of “control” and the comfort of “intimacy”, the
former being prerequisite for the latter, and in fact it is noted that “with minimalism
there is so much pressure on each singular item in a room to be perfect and exceptional
that the upkeep and maintenance become impractical”, so that overall “it’s fun in a hotel
– to enjoy the fantasy – but to live that way all the time isn’t practical” (which is, as we
have seen, one of the main criticisms that will be made of the minimalist discourse, a
discourse that does in fact literally try to “live that way”; 209). In turn, both the ambigu-
ous identification and the equally ambiguous control limited to private, domestic
things and space indicate the contradictory insistence on the autonomous (and authentic)
individual in the face of all the failures and excesses of the public sphere, that is, “the
last logical application of modernism’s promise of transformation, once that promise is
personally perceived as having reached a dead end or played itself out in the realms of
art, public policy, and politics”: “The conscientious tending-to of the ‘rituals’ of daily
life and of one’s own carefully monitored, aesthetically and materially purified home
environment takes refuge in the model of the home as the last bastion of life-changing
and life-affirming individual transformation, at the same time that it hints at just how
assailed this model is” (220-221). Is not the “minimalist lifestyle” precisely this insist-

Woodward (2003) also showed that the ambiguity of this common sense is tied partly to the ambiguity of
the middle-class itself and partly to that of domestic space, which resists its turning into a pure image of
individual self-expression: consumers are divided between a desire for a “coordinated, idealized style”
that is free from collective ties and distinguishes oneself as an individual (which, despite its contradictory
appeal to universality, is often pursued through an “uncluttered” minimalist home or main room), and a
desire for “comfort” and practicality of use and maintainance, including the possibility of welcoming oth-
ers. Needless to say, the minimalist discourse will come to promise all of it through its “warm” or “cozy”
softening of the aesthetic ground, its landing on “comfort” as neither luxury nor deprivation, and its
claims that minimalist homes are easier to clean.

ence on the viability of individual self-improvement via the literal and metaphorical entry-point and support – though so often disavowed due to anti-consumerist rhetoric – of the aesthetic practices of discarding things and decluttering one’s home (and vice versa)? That the individual, so conceived as cut off from his or her external social, aesthetic and material world, ends up equating authenticity with the most generic of standards and autonomy with universalized advice is a further contradiction, and it is the very one that the minimalist discourse constantly dispels by squaring of authenticity, dismissing its own aesthetic ground – and rhetorical associations at the commonsensical level – despite inherently depending from it. The best illustration of this process is the fact that not only can it happen to brands as much as to people, but that it happens to the most iconic brand of all (that is, Apple) as much as to non-brands (such as MUJI). If it is possible to identify with a brand by virtue of its particularity, its recognizable difference and exclusivity, it is also possible to identify with a (non-)brand by refusing such obvious identifications and opting instead for something that appears universal and inclusive, a mere neutral tool for anyone to create each his or her own individuality wholly unimpeded: this is the case, paradoxically, of Apple, whose brand community is at once a “brandless community” of those who, as authentic autonomous individuals, reject particular identifications and above all its risks (turning themselves into “big kids in the sandbox”, as Puusalu puts it to stress how this “i-ideology” is – as our own idea of authenticity squared underlines – a redoubled alienation rather than liberation, an avoidance of realization and responsibility rather than embrace of it, confirming our idea that minimalism’s main function is that of attenuating and managing criticality; Puusalu 2014¹¹⁶).

The same contradiction of the brandless brand is even more evident, in fact explicit, in MUJI, which literally made a brand out of its brandlessness, a label out of its lack of labels: as observed by a reviewer of the “lavishly illustrated” book that was published, in 2010, to celebrate its thirtieth anniversary (cementing it as in fact a brand), “MUJI’s identity has shifted from a modest, everyday one in Japan – the name was de-

¹¹⁶ It must be noted, incidentally, that Puusalu’s language of “true self-realization” (Puusalu 2014: 205) beyond both particular, branded identification and universal, “brandless” identification can slip all over again into a squaring of authenticity, if severed from the alienations it is meant to criticize. The point of taking the aesthetic seriously is precisely that it is necessary to avoid entrenching authenticity further, with its mere oscillations of emphasis – rather than dialectic, critical mediations –between attachment and detachment, particularity and universality and so on.

rived from *Mujirushi Ryohin*, ‘no-label quality goods’ – to an iconic brand of a global, design-conscious class” (Huppertz 2011: 411). This complements, and completes, the minimalist (anti-)aesthetic with a minimalist (anti-)rhetoric that we will also see in the minimalist discourse, wherein not only its aesthetic common sense but also its rhetorical label is often dismissed by the rhetoric of authenticity – and yet, in this case too, endlessly retained all the same after having made it indeterminate and almost, but only almost, meaningless (with occasional attempts at substituting it with other labels). The review highlights the contradictory way in which MUJI on the one hand openly presents itself as an “empty sign” upon which all sorts of meanings can be projected by every individual – “urban refinement”, “ecology”, “affordable brand”, “Zen ideology” and so on –, while on the other hand it still affirms its educational and thus normative value in influencing people in “the shape their desires take”, to the point of hypothesizing in the last chapter that eventually MUJI could also play a role in “lifestyle education” while expanding to other areas, such as hotels and apartments (because “MUJI is good for you”; 412-413). The contradiction of the minimalist aesthetic is there too, of course: on the one hand the book praises MUJI’s design in the functionalist key of “inevitable form, perfected through professional devotion to making tools for living” whose “shape is determined by its purpose”, but on the other – as the reviewer underlines – such proclamations are accompanied by aestheticized minimalist images of the items that actually decontextualize them thoroughly from their setting in everyday use. These three overlapping contradictions all point to the fact that MUJI is really a brand, with its own label, aesthetic and normative value regardless of their all-catching indeterminacy (and in fact thanks to it, as for the minimalist discourse). Would MUJI be really the same (non-)brand if it were not rooted in a minimalist aesthetic common sense, but instead had all sorts of different aesthetics and just limited itself to not displaying any label (and making the items as functional as possible)? And would it be the same if it did not even have “MUJI” as a moniker to refer to? These questions would perfectly apply to the discourses around “minimalism” as lifestyle, which never really manage to renounce the label and its commonsensical associations, especially as minimalist authors and influencers base their advice upon them. The same associations to anti-consumerism and an overarching “slow life” are found as much in the minimalist discourse as in a MUJI store, on the one hand attacking the aesthetic as a luxury and on the other offering what

is a no less aesthetic and no less luxurious life of “simplicity” and “authenticity” (which depends on the existence and persistence of what it denies):

Muji in particular, but to a lesser extent also Uniqlo, did not sell the latest trends but visions of minimalist, no-logo, Bauhaus functional simplicity and a utopian ambiance where you will complete your shopping and have absolutely everything you need. The subdued color palette of beiges and grays, natural fibers, and obsessively simple design, conspire with the calming repetitive music in the shops and subdued, aproned staff, to whisper to the consumer that the true *slow-life*, where the anxiety of materialism is diminished through a perfection of design, is only a few purchases away. [...] Muji came more from the legacy of the Bauhaus functionalism and from the designs of Dieter Rams at Braun: trying to disentangle essence from attributes: the enunciation of what is central and what peripheral in the form of consumer objects. This in turn was part of the long running anti-ornamentalism of Adolf Loos in Modernism; the idea that ornamentation was a dishonest disguise, a crime against a functional, democratic future. A century ago Loos advocated smooth clear surfaces in contrast to the lavish decoration of fin de siècle Vienna, a sentiment echoed in Muji design’s critique of bubble era opulence. The logic of both is that design is not just design but also a metaphor for whole ways of life. And both desire to replace decadent consumerist styles of life with something more meaningful; replacing the pursuit of evermore decadent luxury and excess with simplicity and authenticity; things true to themselves. In both, luxury is the ornamentation of life, an unnecessary symbolic layer of clutter distracting from the essential. Muji has positioned itself as an antidote to Japanese decadence, the visual disarray of complex urban environments, and to the ever-mounting requirements of luxurious consumption. But it ultimately relies on contemporary disharmony and esthetic incoherence to form its own space of harmony and neutral-toned unity. A world of entirely Muji filled goods would be immediately criticized as too simplistic and uncreative as brands which allude to utopian, all-encompassing simplicity rely on the overly excessive choices within the market to differentiate their appeal (Slade 2020: 12-13).

Just like the generic and universal can actually absorb and eclipse the individual, so this modernism is – as we have noted a few times already – intensely global (and urban too), which makes the occasional anti-consumerist references to traditional or exotic living appear peculiarly implausible. This is surely true of the allusions to Japanese culture in the minimalist discourse: it is indeed possible to speak of a “Japanese minimalism” in this culture’s aesthetic tradition, from the enveloping sense of an empty space which holds things together (*ma*) to that of a humbling patina of everyday imperfection or impermanence (*wabi-sabi*), or from the sense of a subtle, understated but nonetheless poetic and personal elegance (*iki*) to that of a prosaic, anonymous, bitter and modest self-restraint (*shibumi*) (Haimés 2020), but these features hardly seem to play any role in informing either the minimalist lifestyle or its aesthetic common sense, and are very rarely invoked in the discourse. As for MUJI, indeed from the very start in the 80s it has presented itself – after insisting at first on its affordability – as a brand of not only functional but anti-aesthetic products, stripped of superfluous “decorations” just like – in one of the first, black-and-white minimalist advertisements – the bare “love” for a child that is born with no clothes (a metaphor which we have also found in Sasaki; Breidenich et al. 2022: 155); but none of the traditional Japanese aesthetic categories fits this modernist insistence on essential function as dualistically opposed to – despite actually sub-

suming it – superfluous appearance. Of course, the softened modernism of minimalism is much more ambiguous, it does not even affirm so definitively that function overrides appearance, so that Kenya Hara – one of the core designers at MUJI – can publish a book on “white” wherein it is not clear what he means by it, as at times he seems to actually talk about white (as the all-white cover promises, after all) while at other times “the word ‘white’ inspire Hara to discover the beauty of any object”, as it appears metaphorically in certain compounds: “Although simplicity in modern design is often supposed to be a state optimized for a specific purpose, the emptiness that Hara advocates is a kind of blank space that allows the insertion of any kind of interests, expectations, and requirements [...] The company should not have a certain brand image but must accept all kinds of images like an empty vessel that accepts all kinds of contents. [...] That is what a ‘no brand’ company aims for, versatility” (158-159). MUJI does have a quite recognizable brand image (and label), and could hardly go without it, but just like whiteness, which can always shift back and forth from actual, positive whiteness to negative emptiness, it too can shift its meaning as needed, and hold together the diverse associations within its indeterminacy; the same goes for the minimalist lifestyle (in its alt-consumerism too: MUJI does promise “no-label” but “quality goods” after all). The whiteness never really goes away, however, nor its many historical associations to the better life of the affluent “upscale modern family”, to cleanness – if not sterility – and perfect order, or to “corporate strength, leadership, trustworthiness, power, and authenticity” through “a carefully designed and articulated public image” that is neither deceptive nor vulgar, because like minimalism it is a “nothing” that has become “something” (Pracejust et al. 2006: 83-86). Even something as ordinary as greeting cards can be “interpreted as sincere and as avoiding commercialized hype, according to a higher cultural capital logic” if they have a modernist aesthetic, and if they no doubt risk being instead “interpreted as holding back, and failing to find the most expressive and beautiful card for someone you care about” because they are too “cold” (West 2010: 18), minimalism in turn can solve this problem through its softened modernism and – if need be – by shifting to different associations gathered and conflated by its indeterminacy.

Cullens’ essay also points to the mirror images minimalist modernism on the whole evokes, on one extreme appearing glamorously high-end and on the other spiritually high-minded (with the obvious possibility of them overlapping). If the “design in-

dustry” is seemingly put “in the economically unproductive situation of pushing the classic modernist interior philosophy of less is still more (as opposed to the Eighties’ ‘less is a bore’)”, nonetheless the implicit appeal to a better taste – and perhaps higher quality – “give[s] consumers an alibi for not having their cake and eating it too; less is sufficient only if and when it demonstrates the highest standards of selectivity and the possession of a fine-tuned personal sensorium”, with high-end glamour as its horizon (Cullens 1999: 218-219). It is worth repeating that this is true already for the modernist aesthetic per se, even at its most functionalist, because it has unduly universalized as normative – in the way mathematical structures can appear to be universally normative – the historical difficulties or impossibility at first, on the part of industrial production and thus design, of not simplifying its products, to the point of identifying the absence of decorations and their related complications with progress, and vice versa attacking decorations as inherently regressive or primitive: the absence of a characteristic style would itself be the style for modernity, “the very aesthetic paucity that comes with the streamlined goods of industrial production” would itself be its aesthetic (a “geometrical fundamentalism” that could, of course, take racist directions, as in the modernist architect Loos’ idea that tattoos are “criminal and degenerate” for the modern man, being something that fits only primitive people such as the Papuan, or his more general indictment that “ornament is a crime”; Mehaffy & Salingaros 2013: 5-6). Thus the appeal of modernism is no less aesthetic than any other, and not only it has its own problems – from its “poor capacity to wear over time” (as any sort of “dents, streaking, and patinas, which would be acceptable or even complementary to more natural kinds of buildings [...] become horrible forms of disfigurements in modernist buildings”, being tied to “newness, and pristine cleanness”, 14) to its hyper-simplification and segregation (at the urban level, for example, “an indifference (or worse) to walkable streetscapes”, the imposition of “a simplistic visual order onto a complex urban fabric”, or the “machine-like segregations” of districts, blocks and so on, 15) –, but it is also incapable to actually repress the full scope of the aesthetic, and in fact it is itself just as vulnerable to fashion: “Ironically, one of the key fundamentalist arguments is that the universality of Modernism would serve to avoid the vagaries of fashion, and thus be more durable. Of course history has shown quite the opposite, as the quest for novelty is by definition insatiable. So we have seen an endless cycle of briefly novel stylistic permutations: once-exciting new modernist buildings torn down only a few decades later, widely regarded by then as

hated eyesores” (16). Both from a philosophical and mathematical point of view, we should know by now that there is irreducible complexity in the world – the living world above all –, which makes it just “not reducible to a minimalist schema” (6), but aesthetically and also commonsensically that appeal still operates; and in part this must be because modernism deflects critical attention from the aesthetic by (ostensibly) rejecting it altogether. That minimalist modernism is not an absence of expression but the expression of an absence – by contrast to post-modernism – was a criticism already circulating before the 90s in discussions of design, including its associations to a certain “morality of ‘Less is more’” and, on the other hand – less mixed than they will later be –, to a “lifestyle” (though a superficial one that “hardly involves existential connotations”): “Minimalism celebrates geometry as expressive medium and at the same time as aesthetic calculation. Such a combination of abstraction and expression, which deliberately renounces individual artistic gestures, best suits the cool attitudes of career-minded yuppies, for whom aesthetic engagement is a component of 'lifestyle', and hardly involves existential connotations” (Fischer 1989: 101). This aesthetic dimension of what presents itself as anti-aesthetic is also evident in the ironic inversion of functionalist design into “one style among many others [...] of the total palette of expressive possibilities”, not at all “the one and only way to meet all human needs for form and design”:

Such verdicts [as Dieter Rams’ idea that items should merely be useful and ‘recede into the background’ when unused in order to ‘give man room to create his own individual, self-determined and vital environment’, being ‘neither work of art nor cult object, neither status symbol nor background decoration’,] are especially problematic in the light of more recent schools of thought. Is it not important for the vitality of an environment that people should surround themselves with objects of daily use? What actually is the objection to a chair or a lamp being also a status symbol or a work of art? In the face of such categoric denial of the cultic power of household objects, it is a rather ironic symptom of changing attitudes that it should be the early Braun products that have become cult objects for collectors. They are now a part of the cultural heritage – status symbols and works of art, in fact. (129).

A sense of one’s aesthetic interests and ideals as tempered by its having not only to co-exist but rather to live with the rest of the “total palette” is necessary for their reconstruction, and this requires in turn a much richer picture of the complexities and contradictions of the aesthetic dimension, one that avoids mistaking selective emphasis with wholesale rejection of this or that aspect. Otherwise, the attempt will ultimately be on the whole apologetic in character (as, most recently, Parsons’ 2016 proposal not for “a” but rather “the philosophy of design” on modernist lines: initially he rightly observes that the profession of the designer was born as a sort of internal remedy to the speciali-

zation and automation of industrial production, halfway between an artist and an artisan, and at the end he still wonders whether this mission is today plausible or not – and that is because his approach does not get that far from modernist functionalism, since it takes the expressive-aesthetic, the ethical and the mediatic dimensions of designs as possibly following already by themselves from the idea of the functionality of objects, with insufficient attention to conflicts and contradictions).

The expressive aesthetic dimension of even an anti-aesthetic functionalism can then slip into high-end glamour, because the glamorous person is always an isolated individual that does have an aesthetic aura – irreducible to socio-economic status by exhibition of luxury –, but one that is contrasted with “celebrity” precisely in its denying itself to the attention of others instead of seeking it out (Wilson 2007). Minimalist modernism is particularly apt for this aura, because a glamorous person does need to have a style which is aesthetically cohesive, curated and above all clean, while at the same time he or she needs to keep certain aspects of the aesthetic at a tasteful distance – even to the point of offering “a displaced search for perfection” from the spiritual domain, which maintains its basis on self-restraint, castigation and devotion (98-99). In the 90s, a minimalist “blankness” was the main aesthetic expression of glamour in high-end fashion stores, of course on the background of the typical urban experience of a wide variety of stores each with different aesthetic and brand identity, each relieving the consumer from the excesses of the others (Borden 2000). In fact, the relation of such glamorous spaces as luxury boutiques at the end of the 80s and all throughout the 90s (from Marino’s Barneys, Chanel, Louis Vuitton and Dior to Pawson’s explicitly minimalist Calvin Klein, and so on) has been recently analysed as an extension of the “crisis aesthetic” of “detox” already in minimalist art at large, one that pursued a form of intimist depuration of an interior space – whether domestic or commercial – from external surroundings perceived as environmentally and/or socially toxic: the literally polluted and also chaotic, multicultural and multi-class urban setting is expelled not only through the supposed ahistorical universality of the modernist style (geometrical lines and shapes that are immediately readable as regular and very simple, all-encompassing structure and order, framing, isolation and highlighting – also through literal illumination – of few elements that are relevant upon a blank background, preponderance of white or neutral colours, aseptic cleanness and so on), but also through a concrete visual-acoustic

insulation of the interior from the exterior (Dango 2022: 100-105). The irony, once again, is that minimalism here flawlessly serves the purposes of fashion and commerce in the most evident way, producing “the space of sanitized luxury in which an alternate fantasy of class subtracted from polluted urban worlds can be cultivated” (101), and in which the equally minimal design of the products themselves faces the consumer as at once intimate – thus available to identification, and inviting a purchase – and yet removed, like glamour¹¹⁷. Pawson himself could therefore already dismiss in an article – before the minimalist discourse we are concerned with had emerged – the misunderstandings of the minimalist aesthetic as a “manifesto for spartan living”, as “the architectural equivalent of the hair shirt”, and to spiritual movements based on forms of renunciation such as “Zen Buddhism, the Cistercian monks or the Shakers”: “Minimalism is not an architecture of self-denial, deprivation or absence: it is defined not by what is not there but by the rightness of what is there and by the richness with which this is what is not there, but by the rightness of what is there and by the richness with which this is experienced. I have been accused of practising a kind of inverted luxury – but what could be more sensuous or more tactile than an expanse of honey-coloured limestone?” (Pawson & Orta 2004). His minimalism is not “inverted luxury”; it is straightforwardly luxurious, even though it achieves this quality through reduction. Of course, just like the functionalist can slip into the glamorous, so the possibility of moving the other way around cannot simply be done away with by dismissals or similar disclaimers, without working through the ambiguous ties to the spiritual or the ethical, because in that case the rhetoric will keep on evoking those ties: Pawson centres his minimalism on the luxurious aesthetic experience of ordinary life (without any mention of the socio-economic conditions behind this luxury, of course), but he does speak – as lifestyle minimalists will speak – of “things that matter in life” and “paring back the accretions of

¹¹⁷ Beside fashion, this aesthetic of glamorous “detox” is even more entrenched – and in a more literal sense still – in the domain of wellness and health, as is the case of luxury brand Goop, which makes use both of the minimalist aesthetic common sense and its appeals to decluttering, ascetic restraint, reducing consumption and so on (Logan 2017). This association to the self-care of wellness and health might be a much more important factor than it seems in the way the commonsensical image of “minimalism” is understood. A whole section of our thesis, which we unfortunately had to cut off for lack of time and space to complete it, highlighted this aspect by analysing the way in which minimalism is described as an “internet aesthetic” – itself an interesting growing phenomenon to study (Tiffany 2021) – on the dedicated online wiki that is Aesthetics Wiki (aesthetic.fandom.com): here a continuous line leads one from minimalism – with all its different emphases, from the “comfy/cozy” to the “pastel” or the “chic modernist”, from the “indie” or the Japanese “matcha” to the “corporate Memphis” – to the aesthetic but also ethical-practically connoted ideals of the “clean girl” on the one hand, and of the popular “that girl” on the other, which have self-care at their core.

surface and behaviour to what is essential”, of a “comfort” that comes with “a state of total clarity where the eye, the mind and the physical body are at ease, where nothing jars or distracts”, of the luxurious experience as “profound” as well as “pleasurable”, of “the desire for a present [as opposed to the future] that satisfies us” via “perpetually interesting forms that exist outside the forces of time and fashion”, and yet – contradicting this clearly universalist, ahistorical appeal – also of the individual as “always at its heart”, all expressions that do point to some life beyond style in ethical and spiritual terms quite aligned to what minimalists will pursue, not just strictly aesthetic ones. Both pathways are open to minimalist modernism’s aesthetic common sense in its indeterminacy. This can already be seen in the second modernist wave of the post-war period: in the 50s, the modernist aesthetic and its “bold lines and slick minimalism” already expressed in the United States – by contrast to the “‘homely’ cosiness of suburbia” – a masculine, urban “hip nonconformity” that circulated in such images as those depicting bachelor pads on *Playboy*, furnished with commodified technological “gadgets” and signalling a quite positive attitude towards consumption (at an aspirational level that, of course, was accessible only to very few, the rest of them having to make do with identifying with the images themselves as illustrating the way they “would have lived” if they could afford it; Osgerby 2005); on the other hand, during the process of gentrification in London between the 50s and 60s, a modernist aesthetic had already acquired a connotation of ethical consumption, as the middle class adopted – by both contact and contrast to the working class, increasingly admitted to participation in mass consumption – an “urban lifestyle” of “conspicuous thrift” which manifested itself in domestic interiors with white walls, unrefined pavements and so on (and this taste in turn was caught by the market in the 60s with the Habitat store, that further moved this “urban minimalism” towards a “pastoral chic” or “cosy countrified living” that afforded detachment from the many downsides and discomforts of living in the city; Moran 2007). How could any of the rhetorical anti-consumerist oppositions – at once dualistic and ambiguous – that we have seen at work in the minimalist discourse be sustained in front of this abundance of historical slips? Is it of any help to contrast the past to the present/future, the thing to the experience, or the need to the want?

Finally, the spiritual mirror image of the glamorous is also picked up by Cullens, who significantly binds it in particular to “the New Age cult of daily life mindfulness”

and to “Zen”, an obvious antecedent to “minimalism” as an extremely vague – and obviously commodified – label which gathers very similar associations (after all, it was the word chosen by Babauta for his first blog), and that similarly allows for “the supreme luxury of an apparently anticonsumerist consumerism”:

The current ideology of shelter overlaps with the New Age cult of daily life mindfulness, which also encourages making home, garden, table, and body alike a temple consecrated to the simple pleasures of moment-by-moment experience. [...] If designers are looked to now as gurus, then it is in large part because their discipline is also associated with the promise of inward purification and visionary renewal. Sometimes the spiritual element is overt. Titles that can now be found in bookstore interior design and architecture sections include *A Home for the Soul*, *The Temple in the House*, and *In a Spiritual Style: The Home as Sanctuary*. More generally, the spiritual vector gets invoked in assumptions about the sensory intensification and heightened domestic awareness to be achieved through creating an environment whose pared-down austerity enforces extensive contemplation and appreciation of every single select, rigorously chosen element in it. The current byword for this trend in the industry is Zen, represented in combinations like *Simply Zen*, *Zen Style*, or, as one leading designer recently defined it, “Zen luxury – the best but less.” Zen luxury allows the contemporary consumer the supreme luxury of an apparently anticonsumerist consumerism (Cullens 1999: 219).

Just like Zen, modernist minimalism has connotations of disciplined self-restraint that tied it to the morality of Stoicism (Spector 2006) or to the very tradition of Japanese Zen Buddhism, to which an interior design magazine in New Zealand for example could already rhetorically allude for obvious commercial purposes, even using “minimal”, “modernist”, “monastic” and “Zen-like” interchangeably (Archer 2005: 3-5). By now, it should go without saying that such associations are problematic, often contradictory: the traditional Japanese Buddhist ethos, for example, was of course one centred on frugality and the *mottainai* motto (“what a waste!”), one which resisted discarding things to instead invite to find ways of using, reusing, recycling them and so on; the main “waste” for a minimalist is the waste of his or her own individual physical or mental energies, or various private “resources” such as time, money and attention, without taking much into account the waste of the work that already went into producing things to begin with, and this precisely because it rhetorically identifies detachment with discarding; and on the whole, minimalism presents itself as an abstract panacea to all modern evils, insists on contentment with little regard to its socially oppressing potential, and even had a role as an aesthetic in making “Zen” an indeterminate, commodified “floating signifier” in the construction of modernist Buddhism, by stripping it of all its exotic “stuff” and its traditional and mythological objects, as mere inessential cultural baggage (Gould 2022; McMahan 2008: 42-57). The criticisms of minimalism often point to its cult-like aura of spirituality that however reveals itself to be empty, because by returning to almost total indeterminacy beyond the mere gesture of discarding things – and whatever other ad-

vice one receives with “motivational talks, courses, and merchandise” – it is ultimately but “praxis with no philosophy”: “prescription without a grand moral universe and community support is religion at its least nurturing”, and its criteria are no less exclusionary just because they are usually implicit, so that a traditional Indian dress or most other ethnic garments would not for example fit it (Kini 2020). Thus if minimalism can also be interpreted as a sort of “implicit religion” – the “downshifers’ religion” largely strung together at first by Babauta precisely by reference to to “simplicity” and “mindfulness” (Kasperek 2021) –, the primary stress in the phrase should be put on the side of the “implicit” more than that of “religion”; like spirituality in general as indeed the outcome of a “fourth secularisation” which shifted religion towards ever more de-institutionalized and aestheticized “individual lifestyles” and practices (Berzano 2019), minimalism – which ultimately is almost identical to lifestylization per se – is a religion of the implicit that commonsensically merges together within itself isolated individuals. Minimalist blogs allude to asceticism and spirituality often interchangeably when they have to emphasize, respectively, the negative ethical-practical side of autonomous self-restraint or the positive aesthetic side of an authentic experience of life, despite their contradictions or – for that matter – the contradictions between the circular temporality of routines after the “rite of passage” that is transition to minimalism by decluttering on the one hand, and the linear temporality of self-improvement on the other (Reeve 2020); at its most paradoxical, it can be said that minimalism returns in a circular manner to the circularity its linear self-improvement negates, while in turn its linearity is one that does not seem to ever take one anywhere far, as if on a circular tapis roulant (and if nothing else, this is undoubtedly true for what we are concerned with, that is, its discourse, because it has kept repeating itself endlessly for almost two decades by now without any sign of growing past its many problems and rhetorical limitations). In quite the same way in which minimalism’s myopic domestic horizon has been criticized from an ecological point of view, a theological critique has been even advanced that attacks the narcissistic, one-sided aesthetic reflection of oneself into one’s home and things in the pursuit of one’s authentic “true self” in a “timeless”, immediate and individualized space: a “theological” imagination would in fact be ecologically and historically oriented insofar as it would place individuals in the world at large, entangled in an infinite web of relationships with others or narratively bound to both the past and the future at once; rather than trying to select things that “spark joy” as “the new spiritual discipline of declutter-

ing” demands, thereby only favouring – and fixating in the lifestyle “conversion” – the “shame” horn of the consumerist dilemma while relieving the “guilt” one (the shame of holding on to things while not using them, the guilt of discarding them before making full use of them), the joy sparked within actual social relationships should rather be reflected upon (without fleeing from the criticality and negativity that they also spark, which is what the minimalist discourse as a whole instead consistently does: it offers excuses, it dismisses resistances as pretexts, it raises standards up to the requirement of total aesthetic-emotional positivity, it projects an automatic beneficial effect of things discarded on other people, it covers waste up with symbolic expressions of positive gratitude, it insists that confession after relapse is sufficient to repeat mistakes and so on, all in order to make oneself feel pure; Lang Hearlson 2021).

In the end, Cullens does acknowledge that nothing can just avoid commodification, because ultimately “the market can evacuate the affective content of any term and transmute the blandly benevolent resonances of daily mindfulness, ‘attentiveness,’ and ‘awareness’ into values as empty and as open to arbitrary colonization as ‘distinction,’ ‘taste,’ or any other denominator of cultural mastery [...] next year the designated signifiers of superior domestic sensibility will have shifted” (Cullens 1999: 223). With a play of words, the “impression” is formulated that there is in fact an underlying “wariness, not to say weariness, about the wares” of domestic space that comes with a demand for “not the available multiplicity of wares but the nurturance of multisensorial awareness”, and yet it remains “a bivalent affect, at once appreciative and defensive, meditative and edgy” (with a certain prevalence of the latter over the former, and thus a fixation on “ostensibly having less in order to enjoy having more”; 224). The minimalist discourse is the culmination of this ambiguous aesthetic common sense, and its very attempt at rhetorically constructing a “lifestyle” – despite continually emptying it out all over again – comes from it, as “this industry [of shelter publications] has played a key role in promoting the whole nebulously auratic concept of the ‘lifestyle,’ or life as – an ultimately buyable – style [that,] however apparently nonstylized or austere a look it may produce, always disciplines and organizes its adherent as consumers”; in fact, right here Cullens also notes that overall “what is striking about the present shelter industry fixation is that the ‘disciplining’ aspect of the currently dominant look is absolutely manifest and on the surface [...] not so much an antimaterialist, as it is an antiaccumulation, or antidis-

play message” (218). Is this not “minimalism” already? Many more clues to minimalism’s aesthetic common sense could be added, of course. A year before Cullens, Radner (1998) highlighted – from a feminist point of view – the way in which fashion had come to express a veritable “ethics of style”, one in which aesthetic practices like building up a personal wardrobe meant remaking oneself not only as bodies but also as subjects, towards a style that on the one hand is presented as authentically personal and thus “emancipating, non-normative, and non-hierarchical”, while on the other hand is also autonomously responsible; all of this “minimalist consumerism” is already evidenced in a book published all the way back to 1975:

Cheap Chic begins with a statement that posits fashion as emancipating, non-normative, and non-hierarchical: ‘Personal style is what this book is all about. Fashion as a dictatorship of the elite is dead’ (Milinaire and Troy, 1975, p. 9). Thus, the volume promotes the idea that to use fashion in a bid for authority is to misunderstand its fundamental nature in contemporary culture. It cautions against the dangers of consumer culture: ‘Surrounded by mass manufacturing and mass marketing, we stuff our closets with masses of mistakes’. Against the superfluous excesses of consumerism, the volume invokes a regime, a principle of asceticism in which the ‘wardrobe’ stands for a way of life. ‘Paring down your wardrobe is going to simplify your life’. This way of life revolves around the precept that ‘Looking good makes you feel good’. [...] Though *Cheap Chic* ultimately advocates ‘gratification of wants and desires’ in Campbell’s terms quoted above, it does so by advocating a regime of restraint, a minimalist consumerism that emphasizes the aesthetic as discipline rather than as pleasure. [...] *Cheap Chic* (which is not in fact ‘cheap’ at all in the sense of restricting women’s investment in fashion) locates fashion as a socially defined set of ‘practices’ (technologies) in which ‘desires and wants’ are submitted to a certain discipline. [...] Variations on this particular system have fuelled the publication of a seemingly endless series of popular books: *Living a Beautiful Life*, *Simplify Your Life* and the *Chic Simple* series (*Chic Simple Clothes*, *Chic Simple Home*, *Chic Simple Face*, *Chic Simple Body*, etc.) (Radner 1998: 348-349).

One book mentioned here by Radner, *Simplify Your Life* (St. James 1994), has not only become one of the most popular books on voluntary simplicity, but was also “one of the biggest inspirations” for Babauta’s life and his *Zen Habits*, its author being “one of [his] muses” (right along with productivity gurus such as David Allen!), as he himself put it in the first months of his blog¹¹⁸. That the rhetoric of simplification of one’s whole life – with its various connotations and emphases – was in line with its more literal aesthetic stylization, which made the same vague promises (just more explicitly and firmly grounded on a certain aesthetic common sense, as is best exemplified by the *Chic Simple Clothes* volume: Gros et. al 1993), was recognizably the case before “minimalism”

¹¹⁸ Zen Habits, “Book review: Simplify Your Life”, Jul. 2007, <https://zenhabits.net/book-review-simplify-your-life> (last accessed: 14/11/2023). Incidentally, Babauta’s very brief summary of St. James’ life exhibits once again the total obliviousness to socio-economic conditions in the minimalist discourse: she “ran a successful real estate business” and decide to simplify her life because “she had a fat planner that contained her entire life, a large house she shared with her husband, and basically all the complications we all have in our lives”; the latter might even be true to some extent, and yet sure enough most people neither own a large house nor a successful real estate business! The career path of leaving one’s successful job or even business to write and become “a best-selling author and a leader of the simplicity movement” is evidently not a minimalist invention, but rather an element of full continuity with voluntary simplicity.

as the rhetorical object of a discourse indicating a “lifestyle” had emerged (and gone further into self-improvement). The simple life of voluntary simplicity was already interwoven with the simple style; what minimalism has done is mainly bringing all these associations and their contradictions and problems to fruition and to the fore, and the former cannot be disentangled nor the latter addressed merely by rejecting minimalism as aestheticized and getting rid of a whole aspect of the aesthetic dimension with it.

By rejecting its own aesthetic common sense – and having it rejected by others, which is but the other side of the coin –, the minimalist discourse ultimately shuts minimalism off from its history, thus endlessly replicating its indeterminacy and enacting its many contradictions, bouncing back and forth and shifting emphases as needed. By making it possible to still pursue authenticity in the face of the inauthentic – or non-authentic altogether –, minimalism “squares” authenticity, suggesting that the authentic is the aesthetically minimal – whatever its shade within the aesthetic common sense – while also disavowing at each turn this suggestion (from which, however, it cannot help but depend, since otherwise “minimalism” would be reduced to self-improvement or, as minimalists in fact often do, to a generic ethical-practical “intentional living”). In other words, minimalism – after having itself been lifestylized for a long time, associated as a style to ideals and values of life – lifestylizes lives through commonsensical references to actual styles that it is unwilling to acknowledge fully (and thus also critically address and adjust). Its imagery can evoke “peace and silence”, “safety”, “autonomy”, “time”, “freedom”, “environmental friendliness”, “space”, “comfort” and so on, as needed in one’s rhetorical situation, and it promises all of that at once as if these things never could clash with one another, and as if they were equally available to all and not largely “elite values” that clearly depend on the right socio-economic conditions (Gudkova 2014; Gudkova & Gudkov 2016); these and all other problems are sidestepped or confounded by the disavowal of the aesthetic. Since this aesthetic common sense mainly circulates in the form of digital images on blogs, vlogs and social media, the lack of critical reflection also invests the specific conditions, nature and consequences of the media the minimalist discourse has always depended from, once again discredited via anti-aesthetic rhetoric despite such evident dependence; if this can work, as we will see, it is because for any one minimalist blogger, vlogger or influencer it is enough that he or she comes to be seen as the rare authentic exception to the rule of inauthenticity. Unsur-

prisingly, the minimalist discourse is fully aligned with the discourse promoting “digital detox” (and vice versa), wherein the issue of digital media is not how to remedy and remediate their use, much less how to reconstruct them, but – once again – just how to reduce them, restrain them, refrain from them. This is the other side of the same coin: wholesale dismissal of images as mere appearances on the one hand, and wholesale dismissal of images as mere mediations on the other; in both cases, the result is that critical engagement stops short by contenting itself with a facile rejection, critical potential for remediation and reconstruction is missed, and eventually uncritical common sense is circled back to as the only available guidance. In her analysis of the discourses on digital detox, Syverstein (2020) situated resistance to the media side by side with minimalism as in fact one of the main faces – along with the more spiritual one of mindfulness, both associated to slow living – of today’s whole culture of self-optimization, productivity and the neoliberal responsabilization of autonomous and authentic individuals (directly or indirectly) working on themselves – all of this within, of course, the self-help genre that commodifies moral guidance (7-8, 75-77, 80-82). Just like minimalism – and in fact even less, given that its label clearly refers to a circumscribed practice instead of a (supposedly) integral lifestyle (by contrast to “digital minimalism”) –, digital detox cannot be considered an actual social movement, because it is dispersed into a myriad of contradictory individualized responses of resistance, domestication, and often even just negative self-identification by merely discursive attacks on digital media, all superficial gestures with regard to the root conditions of the problems they react to (8). Except for privacy, the other two key preoccupations singled out by Syverstein within the digital detox discourse are very much in line with minimalism’s pursuit of authenticity: on the one hand there is “presence”, in the sense of more direct relationships with others that are threatened by distractions, the interference of some habits (such as compulsive checking of devices out of “FOMO”, the “fear of missing out”), and of course the perceived artificiality – and thus inauthenticity – of one’s own and others’ mediatic expressions (15-17); on the other hand there is “productivity”, which – despite all the time or efforts saved by digital media and the flexibility they afford (for work that makes use of them, it goes without saying) – is again threatened by time wasted on social media and other online services or on offline apps and games, by related distractions and procrastinations, by impoverishment of the quality or quantity of sleep and so on, all perceived as assaults on one’s autonomy (17-19); and in fact, even privacy concerns can be shaped

by a rhetoric of authenticity into an objection to, for example, “being on display” and “living [one’s] life in a ‘global aquarium’”, wherein one always risks losing control on one’s information and also images and being exposed to the world (19). Restrictions upon the use of media, especially digital media, are not coincidentally something that pretty much all minimalists include in their mix of advice, regardless of emphasis. Whatever solution an individual might manage to come up with, on the whole the rhetoric of digital detox is problematic and vulnerable like that of the minimalist discourse, equally subject to a mixture of pessimist determinism – of a technological kind of course, in the case of digital detox – and discharge of responsibility on individuals, to a dualistic and extreme moralistic framework, and to easy co-optation and commodification (so that, just like decluttering decades earlier, digital detox itself has become another business full of services and products for sale, capitalizing on the cultural trend as tied to the buzzword within the very social media it attacks as a hashtag; 21-23). As the very reference to “detox” implies, the discourse of digital detox is tied, more directly than minimalism (which compensates with its problematic relationships to women, to the poor or to the aesthetics of other cultures), to a pathologizing frame of addiction for behaviours that are mostly held by young people, particularly those living in worse socio-economic and cultural conditions, which ultimately makes it harder to understand them and help them, including helping them understand themselves instead of immediately self-diagnosing and thus fixating their supposed addiction (which is especially doubtful when considering that, in the last century, the frame of addiction has been regularly applied to all sorts of things and media, from shopping to gambling, from exercise to videogames, from sex to “binge watching” TV series, and on and on; 11-14). The impact of digital media is hardly affected in the end, especially since the way they work is not by explicit normativity but by implicit normalization (as with the “like” button having been generalized to all of the internet beyond its specific origins in certain social media; 43); and the rejections of those practicing some form of digital detox leave such processes of normalization at work and for the most part invisible and critically unaddressed, which means that they can be unwittingly circled back to in other ways, just like minimalism’s rejection of its aesthetic common sense reinforces it rather than challenging it in the last instance.

That a fascination with the minimum remains beyond – and partly because of – the dismissal of its inauthentic images, as an aesthetic ideal possibly encompassing all of life, is shown by one of the prominent journalistic critics of the minimalist discourse, Kyle Chayka. In 2016, again after the international success of Kondo’s book had put “minimalism” on the map, Chayka attacked the minimalist discourse as an “oppressive gospel” that expresses a “can-do optimism” but is “tyrannical”, and as “an ostentatious ritual of consumerist self-sacrifice” – on the part of “people who have it all [that] now seem to prefer having nothing at all” – in which “talking about the material purge is just as important as actually doing it” (Chayka 2016a). Setting aside the usual social critiques we are by now familiar with (for example, that minimalism takes “social capital, a safety net and access to the internet”, or that behind the “minimalist” technologies it celebrates there is “a vast infrastructure of grim, air-conditioned server farms and even grimmer Chinese factories”), Chayka points to two facets of minimalism that are in tension, though he does not realize it: on the one hand, “‘minimalism’ has been popping up everywhere lately [...] from tiny houses to microapartments to monochromatic clothing to interior-decorating trends”, so that “the word can be applied to just about anything [...] so long as it’s stylishly austere” (it forms a “minimalism glut”, it is itself an overwhelming excess); on the other hand, it is “visually oppressive” since “it comes with an inherent pressure to conform to its precepts”, such as that whiteness is good and “mess, heterogeneity is bad”, which makes it “anxiety-inducing in a manner indistinguishable from other forms of consumerism, not revolutionary at all.” The tension between these two facets is that between minimalism’s simultaneous indeterminacy and overdetermination, and Chayka largely misses it because he reduces indeterminacy more or less to the indefinite range of application of a certain “stylish austerity” which is instead definite; in this way, he attributes to minimalism the overall meaning of a display of discipline (“fetishized austerity and performative asceticism”, consumerist “trends” mistaken as “symbols of capitalist absolutism”), underestimating the extent to which it works precisely by rhetorically rejecting austerity – as needed – to project acceptance and/or aspiration (and vice versa). Chayka does see that minimalism, as “part pop philosophy and part aesthetic” (also “conflated with self-optimization”) and as a “cure-all for a certain sense of capitalist overindulgence”, is an “excess of less” that is “not really minimal at all”, and that this has to do with its indeterminacy is implicit in the comparison he makes of it to Soylent, which is a “minimalist food” insofar as “it looks like

nothing, but inspires thoughts of everything else.” However, his own criticism of minimalism takes aim for the most part at determinate and obviously problematic aspects of it, aspects that the discourse itself is able to disavow, precisely by virtue of its thorough indeterminacy (to which the over-determined aspects are subordinate, since they are put and pushed forward mainly in a tacit, implicit manner, via aesthetic common sense). In other words, Chayka’s critique still reads as a rejection of the inauthentic, even though from the opposite side with respect to that of voluntary simplicity (but they are mirror images once again, since – as we have seen – advocates of voluntary simplicity also praise the aesthetic insofar as it is linked to supposedly immaterial if not outright spiritual experience): his strategy, already in this article, is that of contrasting the minimalist discourse to minimalist art, where the latter is presented as “a way artists shocked viewers”, freeing them “to experience the work in any way they wished” or “see the world without preconceptions”; the former, being based on the “delimited and consumable” style of minimalism and its “defanged” label with just “a veneer of provocation” (“no longer a critical insult and no longer a viable strategy within art”, but rather a mere “class signifier”), clearly comes out as an inauthentic degeneration of the true minimalism of the arts, just like it appears to others as a degeneration of true voluntary simplicity in life. Again, the problem is not at all that it is unwarranted criticism that is untrue to what minimalism seems to be in most cases, with cultural problems piled upon social ones: it is surely a valid concern, for example, that expressed by Chayka in another article shortly after the first one, where the global hegemony of a generic minimal aesthetic in AirBnB apartments, bars, pubs and other such spaces – even those that present themselves as nonconformist touristic attractions, but actually have only a sprinkle of localness, diversity etc. – is criticized as an “anesthetized aesthetic” that homogenizes and depersonalizes taste and experiences, in exchange of the ease of transition of “non-places” and an equally easy pleasantness or comfort (Chayka 2016b). Still, there is actually a genuine aesthetic contradiction and tension in the fact that “desirable places should be both specific enough to be interesting and generic enough to be as convenient as possible, consumed quickly and easily”, so even if minimalism’s “sterile aesthetic” is indeed a solution of being “equal parts authentic and expendable”, simply pointing to its inauthenticity will not be enough to challenge it and address its global commonsensical proliferation. This is all the more true for the minimalist discourse which turns it into the ground for a lifestyle: a shift of rhetorical emphasis will be enough to disassociate

that lifestyle from this aesthetic of the safely generic, the former authentic while the latter rather a degeneration of true minimalism.

In the following years, Chayka returned a couple of times to critically comment on minimalism. Taking up Millburn and Nicodemus' minimalism during one of their book tours, he recognized that already before Kondo "the country was already in the midst of a quite cleaning binge", whether one calls it "minimalism, intentionalism, or just simple living" – since it is not just a "cleaning method", but rather a form of "anti-materialist moralism" (Chayka 2017). Here too the indeterminacy of their universalist-individualist message, where a generic "stuff" is everyone's enemy and pathology, is underlined: "Part of their success can be explained in their lack of any ideology that might prove divisive. They are firmly middlebrow, de-emphasizing political beliefs, spirituality, and even class. [...] You can be a millionaire CEO and still be a minimalist, according to the [minimalist] pair. [...] Like religious novitiates, everyone is on their own minimalist 'journey' toward total clutter absolutism." Needless to say, Chayka's take is that this "is presented as a solution when perhaps it's more of a stopgap", because "the mania over clutter seems like a symptom of a larger alienation", and after all Millburn and Nicodemus' message might appear positive but has a "tacit pessimism" built in, as it leaves one stuck in the "mindset of austerity." His assessment of Kondo, when her TV show on Netflix was released in 2019 and her online store was launched, is the opposite of that insofar as her message is instead one of pursuing "something as close to perfect consumption as possible" wherein "each object must feel like it is an ineffable part of you", and thus "still relies on material goods to form the basis of an identity": "The idea that things don't matter is anathema to KonMari" (Chayka 2019). In fact, in the show Kondo appears "trim and bright, outfitted in antiseptic white tops, with a wide smile optimistic enough to irradiate clutter – an emissary from a better, cleaner universe." And yet, Chayka notices that by contrast to other shows which are actually focused on home renovation, here "there isn't much of a satisfying reveal at the climax of these episodes", because "more than a clean house, Kondo gives her subjects a new sense of themselves": "The subjects are generally enthused at their new, joy-sparked lives, but it is a minimalist process of refinement rather than renovation. Progress is abstract, which is one reason the episodes could have been half as long." In both Millburn and Nicodemus' minimalism and Kondo's decluttering the aesthetic is actually decen-

tred, displaced, and that is – in our view – what makes them aestheticized, which in turn lends support to the rhetorical power of their discourses (mirroring each other). Accordingly, if a minimalist aesthetic is one that makes spaces look uniformly generic with just a sprinkle of difference, then the other shows that Chayka considers would be more minimalist in this sense, since they “emphasise getting rid of personal effects in order to make the domestic space as generic as possible, the better to profitably enter it into the sharing economy, in which strangers will have to feel like it is their home as well” (which, as we have seen, is nothing new as a drive behind the modernist minimalist aesthetic); on the contrary, “Kondo wants you to throw out everything that doesn’t feel personal” – that is, everything inauthentic –, but does that make her less of a minimalist? Despite the different emphasis on the aesthetic rather than ethical-practical dimension and the positive rhetorical tone, it is hard not to see Kondo as the mirror image of Millburn and Nicodemus and vice versa (in fact, she even always wears white while Millburn and Nicodemus always wear black), engaged in the same pursuit of authenticity in the form of a minimum, only illuminating it from different angles of its contradictions. What minimalism illustrates is the possibility of coincidence and confusion between perfect authenticity and perfect inauthenticity, precisely when a rhetoric of authenticity is employed and the aesthetic is rejected in block, leaving one actually unprepared to deal with its appeals (whether generic or not, though the aesthetic common sense does push in the former direction). To see this, its mirror images must not be severed from each other, as if Millburn and Nicodemus’s minimalism had either nothing to do with the aesthetic – being an ethical-practical message – or was really all about it, and vice versa for Kondo. Its commonsensical indeterminacy and contradictoriness is primary, and only by addressing it as such, without first determining it into something that is easy to criticize, can it be challenged effectively. Minimalism is hard to critique because it is so easy to criticize that even the minimalist discourse itself can, for all its naivety, do it in such a way that keeps its promise alive.

The promise has indeed remained alive for Chayka too, who eventually published himself a book about “the longing for less” and “living with minimalism”, as its title and subtitle respectively state; and yet, the minimalist discourse and the practices in which it manifests itself disappear quite soon from sight, to the point that most of the actual – but dismissive – engagement with it is limited to the first introductory chapter

and easily fitted, in the form of an excerpt, an article on “the empty promises of Marie Kondo and the craze for minimalism” (Chayka 2020a: Ch.1, I-VIII; 2020b). The various criticisms of this “moral message combined with a particularly austere visual style” as “displayed primarily on Instagram and Pinterest”, offering “a brand to identify with as much as a way of coping with mess”, should be all but familiar by now: beside enforced adjustment to worsening socio-economic conditions, Chayka points to the “illusion of choice” that Kondo promises, where one decides what to keep but “she tells you exactly how it should be folded, stored and displayed”, or to the way in which “the literature of the minimalist lifestyle is an exercise in banality”, with “saccharine and pre-digested”, repetitive and quite vague contents, from the “easy structure of epiphany and aftermath” in the author’s life to the lists of minimalism’s many benefits – all packed with “a shared design of visual serenity”; the aesthetic of “minimalist cleanliness”, with “moral purity” associated to it, becomes “the state of acceptable normalcy that everyone must adhere to, no matter how boring it looks”, and behind it the “maximalist assemblage” of “unsustainable excess” is hidden from sight. The vague banality of the discourse is paired with the convenient easiness of its advice, which made Chayka’s “gut reaction” towards it distrustful, as it looked as if it was enough to “just sort through your house or listen to a podcast, and happiness, satisfaction and peace of mind could all be yours”, “a blanket solution so vague that it could be applied to anyone and anything”, from one’s closet to one’s social media accounts or even partner, all the while clearly manifesting “a form of individualism” where one prioritizes oneself, one’s desires and beliefs. All of this is accurate, as we have seen both ourselves and via many other critics of minimalism. What is more interesting for us is the way in which Chayka ends up saving minimalism, reverting it into an indeterminate promise that emerges throughout history but is in itself an “universal feeling” of dissatisfaction with society’s inauthentic excesses and of thus “longing for less”:

Dissatisfaction with materialism and the usual rewards of society is not new, but minimalism is not an idea with a straightforward chronological history. It is more like a feeling that repeats in different times and places around the world. It is defined by the sense that the surrounding civilisation is excessive, and has thus lost some kind of original authenticity, which must be regained. The material world holds less meaning in these moments, and so accumulating more stuff loses its appeal. I began thinking of this universal feeling as the longing for less. It is an abstract, almost nostalgic desire – a pull toward a different, simpler world. Not past or future, neither utopian nor dystopian, this more authentic world is always just beyond our current existence, in a place we can never quite reach. Perhaps the longing for less is the constant shadow of humanity’s self-doubt: what if we were better off without everything we have gained in modern society? If the trappings of civilisation leave us so dissatisfied, then maybe their absence is preferable and we should abandon them in order to seek some deeper truth. The longing for less is neither an illness nor a cure. Minimalism is just one way of thinking about what makes a good life.

Here minimalism designates an elusive frame in which critical reflection can be cast, of both a personal (“just one way of thinking about what makes a good life”) and social kind (“constant shadow of humanity’s self-doubt”), revolving around authenticity. In this abstract form, it has some history but exceeds and eclipses it, and accordingly it is a desire that remains centred on the present despite having connotations of “nostalgia” for some past and “longing” for some future. As such, to Chayka it is “neither an illness nor a cure”, neither negative nor positive, and yet it must be something worth exploring at the very least, as that is what he sets out to do in the book. The article, however, returns to what is instead but “the facade of minimalism”, the superficial “brand of visual appearance” as it circulates within and without the minimalist discourse, ending with its clear commodification: “You can now buy minimalist coffee tables, water carafes, headphones, sneakers, wristwatches, speakers, scissors and bookends, each in the same monochromatic, severe style familiar from Instagram, and often with pricetags in the hundreds, if not thousands. What they all seem to offer is a kind of mythical just-rightness, the promise that if you just consume this one perfect thing, then you won’t need to buy anything else in the future – at least until the old thing is upgraded and some new level of possible perfection is found.” Behind the “facade” and by contrast to it, there is for Chayka “the unhappiness at the root of it all, caused by a society that tells you more is always better”, and the longing for less is an expression of this unhappiness. But Chayka’s book never really goes on to address either the minimalist discourse and practices, tracing them to their past history and thinking on how they may be remediated or reconstructed in less problematic if not at all fruitful forms, or the social suffering that he takes them to have stemmed from, to which too he is content to allude in occasional digs. What he does, instead, is putting together a gallery of minimalist and other reductive artists, reporting on his personal experience with this or that artwork and – beside the digs – mostly leaving it at that, without even tentatively translating such experiences in terms of everyday life, or employing them to specifically challenge the minimalist discourse. In this way, the longing for less rhetorically imbues Chayka’s book with its vague appeal no less than it does the books of the minimalists, and – as the rejection of a superficial and visual “facade” betrays – it does through the same rhetoric of authenticity: the “deeper truth” sought by those longing for less he does understand as aesthetic, but a more authentic aesthetic dimension that is located in artistic pursuits and artists’ lives (people “who work hard against orthodoxy, against setting or follow-

ing strict rules in favor of charting their own path, however meandering it may be”, and who “don’t purport to know how others should live or the best way to organize a closet”; Chayka 2020a: Ch. 1, VIII). In fact, he is explicit about his intention of “bypassing” the superficial minimalism to get to a deeper one:

My goal with this book is to seek a bypass around the superficial minimalist style, the careful blankness of the cavalcade of design products. I want to find the fundamental, essential quality that imbues the Eames house with life: the appreciation of things for and in themselves, and the removal of barriers between the self and the world. Such is my working definition of a deeper minimalism (Ch. 1, VII).

The “fundamental, essential quality” of this more authentic minimalism is not something that minimalists would really object to, since they too ultimately speak of appreciating things more and experiencing the world with less mediations. Moreover, they too leave the definition of “minimalism” equally vague, so that for them too it comes at times to coincide with immediate – and more or less unmediated – aesthetic appreciation per se, rather than a certain aesthetic; lifestylization per se, not a certain lifestyle. At the end of Chayka’s book, which has no concluding chapter to wrap up and tie together the quite different figures he gets into (from Agnes Martin to Donald Judd, from John Cage to Jun'ichirō Tanizaki), the longing is still the indeterminate longing it was at the start, and its meaning for “living with minimalism” is left entirely unexplored: the actual concerns – aesthetic and ethical-practical at once, never severed – of minimalists with their things and homes, the media, their consumption, their identities or their lives at large are swept away with the same gesture dismissing the “superficial” minimalism that is too obviously bound to style, images, media and consumption; the same gesture, unfortunately, that the minimalist discourse recurs to in order to square authenticity within itself, and keeps its promise – its longing for less, or the minimum – endlessly alive. There is, of course, value in turning to artists and artworks for articulating an aesthetic of minimization or reduction in all their inevitable complexity and variety, and yet, beside the fact that Chayka does not actually try articulating such aesthetic beyond the vague longing, this is not enough to challenge the minimalist discourse, insofar as it rejects and ignores what the discourse already rejects and ignores, especially images and the media as aspects of the aesthetic dimension¹¹⁹.

¹¹⁹ One of the advance praise for Chayka’s book – and included in it – is from Odell, who states that “More than just a story of an abiding cultural preoccupation, *The Longing For Less* peels back the commodified husk of minimalism to reveal something surprising and thoroughly alive.” This is true to some extent, but the peeling back is more of a cutting off that leaves out most of what would be relevant for a

When asked about five books to recommend on minimalism¹²⁰, Chayka picked four of them up from the aesthetic-artistic domain (Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows*, two collections of writings by Judd and Cage, plus a book about Martin's life and work), with Sasaki's *Goodbye Things* thrown literally in the middle as the third book. Here again Chayka dismisses "the lifestyle of minimalism" wholesale as merely a "commodified philosophy, or a commodified principle of life" that is used to sell books, services and products, while he is interested in minimalism as a "philosophy" based on a "cyclical idea" across all of history, the "instinctual response to being overwhelmed" that manifests in "thinking that if only we threw out everything extraneous and lived more simply, then we would be happier", and "narrowing your reference frame down to what you can control and what's immediately around you" (which he opposes to "building a communal politics", despite the fact that that is as much outside of his artists' concerns as any average lifestyle minimalist's). Sasaki is included in the list only to be mocked as a "funny example" of the minimalist discourse at its extreme, where the "very sad answer" of "exist[ing] on as small a scale as possible" and "reduc[ing] expectations to nothing" is given to solve all problems, coming with "a single aesthetic" and extreme attachment to things on the one hand ("So you've essentially achieved this Nirvana of consumerism. [...] You've found the perfect things. If you were using more, you'd just be wasting your time and energy"), and a "morally pure way of living" and extreme detachment from things on the other ("It does have this moral quality: it not only promises that you can be in control of what's around you, but it also promises that you are doing the right thing [and] living the right way [...] because you're disconnecting from the earthly things and instead focusing upon the ineffable"). In becoming "an extreme pursuit" of this sort, "minimalism sometimes undermines minimalism itself", because discarding things can on the one hand lead to "be really obsessed with your remaining possessions", or on the other hand "focus on asceticism to such an extent that it

critique of minimalism beyond the all-too-easy – though, once again, surely not ungrounded – dismissal of it. In fact, from this point of view a comparison with Odell's own (2019) book on "resisting the attention economy" would be very instructive, as – in our view at least – her approach resists being moulded by the self-help genre it alludes to without, however, altogether disregarding the concrete concerns, problems and questions that genre responds to. It is not perhaps a coincidence that it also pays much more attention – and a more radical and theoretically informed one – to the broader horizon of social problems in which individuals' own are embedded, whether they are artists or not. A remediation and reconstruction – as opposed to rejection – of the self-help genre cannot but accompany a remediation and reconstruction of this or that discourse.

¹²⁰ Five Books, "The Best Books on Minimalism", Apr. 2020, <https://fivebooks.com/best-books/minimalism-kyle-chayka> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

becomes its own obsession or fetish.” However, while of course they had entirely different concerns (but this is part of the problem, as just suggested), the artists cited by Chayka and praised as “question[ing] the world around them and find[ing] meaning in unexpected place rather than like, seek[ing] a perfect solution” are then described in ways that in fact are not that far from the minimalist discourse (beside the obvious commodification of the latter, of course – but is that really untrue of artists and aestheticians, if the minimalist tendency in art had to do precisely with a specular reaction and rejection of the commodification highlighted, more or less at the same time, by pop art?; Doss 2002: 154-159, 163-168). The rhetoric of authenticity is all but evident in the way he speaks of today’s superficial minimalism as a stylized imitation of Judd’s way of life, auspicing instead a real return to his self-made intentional life:

By moving to the desert and creating this life for himself, [Judd] enshrined Minimalism as a way of living, a holistic approach to life, rather than just an aesthetic decision. [...] Judd’s minimalism is really about expressing your personal taste and making a very intentional decision about everything that’s around you, everything that you own or make for yourself. But later versions of minimalism have just adopted what Judd chose for himself as the ideal. I want to get back to minimalism as a way of making your own decisions, of forcing yourself to be more aware of how things in your life fit together, and what your taste is. Instead, I think often minimalism encourages us to just take the shortcut. It’s like, oh, I can just buy it and have the perfect stuff.

Is not the minimalist discourse all about expanding an aesthetic into a “way of living”, authentically expressing oneself and/or autonomously deciding on everything in one’s life? Does it not reject, as we will see, its own commonsensical image as stylized, idealized and/or commodified? It is easy to see how Chayka’s proposal may end up being one and the same with minimalism’s own squaring of authenticity, though relative to art rather than voluntary simplicity. The same can be said for his picture of Martin, whose perfectionist, impossible and thus endless pursuit of “the ineffable” – the very same thing that minimalists are, in Chayka’s view, mistakenly finding in discarding things – is here appreciated if not romanticized, including its spiritualist associations:

[Martin] takes the money from a Guggenheim grant, and buys a van, and just starts traveling around the United States. [...] She chooses to live in her own way. This is not the move of an artist who is still searching for success, who is not selling for tons of money. She’s just pursuing, literally, what the voices in her head are telling her to do, and telling her to make. [...] She has this really great connection between minimalism and spirituality, because she was always searching for the ineffable. She connected her paintings to the Zen idea of a universal spirit, and she titled quite a few of the early works after plants or natural phenomena like the ocean. So you see her seeking out the sense of peace that she knows exists, but that she can never quite reach. And in Martin’s Writings you can see as she grasps for this thing that does not exist. [...] She’s grasping toward the universal spirituality that she knows exists, but that she cannot find except in a few moments. I think minimalism is always drawing toward that impossible goal. The perfect match between form and content, or ends in means. But it’s never quite getting there.

What makes Martin's pursuit of the ineffable and even the spiritual more authentic than that of minimalists? Is it merely the fact that she seeks it through art, instead of everyday aesthetic expressions more directly and obviously entangled with consumption? Is it that she is not working on a mediatic image – literal or metaphorical – of herself (as she was much less compelled to do, relatively to our hyper-mediated digital age)? Chayka is right that philosophy is what part of what is needed (also for supplying a “coherent cultural production” to social movements, as he puts it), but while not being a philosopher perhaps excuses him from his book's evident lack and inadequacy on this front, what is less excusable in our view – but it is, after all, part of the needed philosophical change – is the paradoxical contempt with which the minimalist discourse is dismissed wholesale on the very ground of the same pursuit for authenticity it is rooted in. The clues for a different approach are indeed there, but Chayka does not make use of them to specifically call the discourse into question. For example, Tanizaki's aesthetic of shadows, with its focus on ambiguity, could be useful in precisely illuminating the very elusive appeal of minimalism itself and its contradictions (including the fact that there is, in its aesthetic common sense, a “warm”, “cosy” or “soft” version that is centred on shadows and dim natural lights). Instead, Chayka points to Tanizaki's traditionalist wish to “retreat” to an “older sensibility” that is not obsessed with the “light” of progress, his idea that we should be “living with what's already around us and adapting to the ephemerality of life”, and sees in this a “desire to live more in the shadows”, “live more quietly and softly”, finding “a less greedy way of living” and “being more in harmony with the world around you, being content with the shadow and the darkness”; why is this contentment not “a very sad answer” to today's problems to Chayka, who explicitly says he finds it “appealing”? Indeed, Chayka could himself have used Cage's all-accepting silent framing of everyday noises as “part of the composition”, reflecting on how to reframe the everyday aesthetic or ethical-practical concerns of the minimalists instead of mentioning them only to imbue his musings with their longing. Actually, contrary to Chayka's reading (which explicitly conflates these figures into that “longing for less” as an extremely vague “tendency to be drawn toward absence”), this rejection is exactly what sets apart the reductive gesture of minimalists – including the artists – as a “crisis aesthetic” of obsessive “detox” in Dango's reading, the very opposite of previous reductions like that of Cage, predicated on total openness to the environment (Dango 2022: 47-54). There is nothing more minimalist, in other words, than rejecting minimalism –

as a style and/or a label –, and that is of course what Judd also does with his appeal to artworks as “specific objects”, where it is not a matter of “information, or narrative, or the attempt to communicate deep feeling, whatever”, as Chayka puts it, but just to make something that has “visual interest”; thus for Judd “there was no movement”, because there was “no coherent, Minimalist idea”, and the artists “were not identifying with each other.” And yet if there is no “minimalist idea”, what does it mean that we should instead “talk about how these different artists have approached the idea of minimalism” (especially as some of the figures included have never even grappled with this label one way or another)? This amounts, in our view, to keeping alive the indeterminate possibility – both promised and longed for – of that all-inclusive minimalist idea, without however trying to push it forward by both diversifying it and developing it, working through its contradictions. This is why the minimum can be the mirror image of the authentic, even more authentic – as authenticity squared – for its inauthenticity: it gives an air of plausibility – and appeal – to the impossible task of making individual authenticity and autonomy into the sole basis of (a certain) community (since one can at least ask what “minimalists” may have in common), an air which it reproduces by rejecting its inauthenticity and projecting a truer, deeper, more authentic minimalism. If today’s minimalists are interested in it as a “brand” to identify themselves with, as Chayka says, then the indeterminacy of that longing for less is much more central to the brand than the stylized, idealized and/or commodified minimalism, or its moralistic counterpart: both of these depend on that longing above all else.

When, in another interview, Chayka said that for him “minimalism should be a radical idea” which “should help you kind of start from scratch and look at reality around you without preconceptions or something” (an idea that sounds suspiciously like mindfulness, vagueness included), the interviewer rhetorically wondered whether he could in fact “change the meaning of the 21st century’s most misunderstood word”, the all-purposes “Swiss Army knife” that is “minimalism” (Been 2020). However, he can hardly do so as long as its very elusiveness, its commonsensical indeterminacy, is simply set aside together with the discourse: the minimalism that Chayka “wanted to challenge”, as he again states here, is the (aesthetically) extreme one of “a kind of mania for living with nothing or living with as few objects as possible, and embracing empty space” (which makes him “uncomfortable”), or the related (extremely) aesthetic one of

“kind of presum[ing] that everything should look the same, that everything should have this very blank, empty aesthetic”; and yet both of these all too easy targets function in the discourse precisely by virtue of their being rejected via a (squared) rhetoric of authenticity and thereby kept in the background of the discourse, beyond or behind critique. When Chayka is asked whether he considers himself a minimalist or not, he replies that he is in his own terms, but these are just “trying to enjoy everything [he] do[es] have and think about when [he] add[s] something to [his] collection of stuff, that it kind of makes sense with everything else and fits into [his] life” – hardly something “radical”, hardly something informed by his artistic musings, and hardly something that any run-of-the-mill minimalist would remotely disagree with. While his book does show to some extent the “diversity of aesthetics and viewpoints” associated to forms of reduction or minimization, it fails to put them to the use of turning “minimalism” into the promised – but once again undelivered, undeveloped – “deeper idea” that “could change the way you fundamentally see the world, and that goes way beyond organizing your sock drawer.” The idea is entirely left at the indeterminate commonsensical state that it was to begin with, which enables the very commodification and aesthetic homogenization that Chayka and other critics lament, or the association to individualist self-improvement which feeds both on it and its authenticist rejection (here supported by Chayka, who speaks of an aesthetic wherein everything is “created and curated very intentionally to an individualist taste, rather than catering to the general tastes of the world”). Is it not a crucial part of the discourse already that it is “a populist thing” that “should be accessible to everyone” as something that in fact “you can’t buy”, because “it’s not about your possessions” but “about how you see the world”? At the end of the interview, Chayka even presents the book’s structure as “a process of deconstructing minimalism” that “start[s] with mostly superficially apparent stuff like the style and the products and everything like that”, and ends with what he admits to be his “ideal version of minimalism”, the Japanese traditionalist aesthetic of Tanizaki, from which he extracts the “nice lesson” that “humanity isn’t the endpoint of the world”, that “everything is fleeting” and “your possessions don’t matter quite that much”, and that “what you can or should be doing is looking for moments of beauty in the passing world”; again vague – and not that radical – ideas that are present in the indeterminate melting pot of the minimalist discourse already, where they merely nourish the accepting, comfortable, slow-living rhetorical counterpart to the criticality variously entailed by the as-

pirational, austere and/or autonomous conflicting aspects of the same pursuit of authenticity. How does this wisdom square with Chayka's previous praise for curating an individualist taste? That is, how does the experiential aspect of the aesthetic dimension relate to the expressive aspect of mediatic images? Chayka oscillates between contradictory stances no less than minimalists, and is no less unaware of it after all. It is unsurprising that his book has been welcomed with reference to voluntary simplicity as the original search for a simple life at the collective no less than individual level, pointing to "the path to something stranger and more profound: a mode of living that strips away protective barriers and heightens the miracle of human presence" (Tolentino 2020). The book promises "a more meaningful form of minimalism" that "resists co-option or appropriation", like Odell's attempt at delineating a "different pattern of attention" (Okun 2020); unfortunately, it is even truer than it seems that such reconstruction is "a prerequisite for minimalism to have any real meaning at all", and it is hard to see how Chayka's minimalism has any more meaning – in terms of determinacy, and capacity of further determination, differentiation and development – than that of self-help authors, bloggers and influencers of all kinds. It is not like there is no "potential"; the problem is that there is only potential, only that indeterminate longing, unaffected by the diversity of all its manifestations. Of course, Chayka's book is more than enough to criticize or attack again minimalism's obvious problems (for example, Steinhauer 2020), but these are indeed obvious, already made (in vain) many times before.

One reviewer at least finds this attempt "disappointing, and at times intellectually muddled", because "what begins, promisingly, as a wide-ranging synthesis of a fascinating and perplexing impulse becomes an exercise in taste, a guide to distinguishing between 'good' minimalism – the giant concrete rectangles Judd installed in the desert landscape around Marfa, Texas – and 'bad' minimalism – not just Kondo's advice to throw away everything that doesn't 'spark joy,' also Philip Johnson's Glass House in Connecticut, a transparent box Chayka regards as controlling and narcissistic (not to mention easily vulgarized by Brooklyn real estate developers)" (Miller 2020). Instead of actually engaging with it, "the popular version of the movement soon drops out of the book" entirely, while "the following chapters, often broken into fragments, ruminate on the most culturally exalted manifestations of minimalism" in the arts. In fact, if "the fresher subject of contemporary lifestyle minimalism and its relationship to this high-art

goes largely unexplored” after being promised, perhaps we might go so far as to suggest that Chayka himself is making use of its indeterminate appeal to channel it into his own book. At any rate, his attempt clearly amounts to a one-sided exclusion of the everyday aesthetic domain for the culturally elevated one of the arts and artists: “Chayka seems to disdain popular minimalism as a mere trend or affectation despite having people, like the woman with the \$20 travel mug, who have found it as revelatory as he finds the spare-but-homey interior of the six-story cast-iron building Judd bought in SoHo in 1968. [...] The only objects Chayka lavishes this quality of attention on are bona fide artworks; for lesser minimalist commodities he seems to have nothing but contempt *because* they are so frankly commodified.” Some of the artworld’s own “fair share of absurdities” are also pointed out, such as the contradiction of taking minimalist art as the rejection of the abstract expressionist heroic view of the artist, while “nothing screams the lone-heroic-artist archetype so much as the enshrinement of the sites where Judd installed his work” and the (also commodified) value of his art to viewers resides in “the knowledge that Donald Judd made it” (“Regardless of how prefab and industrialized the materials Judd used, a giant concrete rectangle made by him would be worth more than an identical rectangle made by, say, me”). This points to the crucial need for reciprocity in using artworks and artists to criticize everyday aesthetic phenomena, a reciprocity that is nowhere to be found in Chayka’s book, and that is also behind the fact that, far from being radical, “Chayka too often fails to fully explore [minimalism as a class phenomenon] – perhaps because the minimalism he does admire is itself a form of luxury, produced by affluent artists for rich clients, displayed in places it takes disposable income” (as he himself does by travelling to see the artworks in person, which makes up the “good deal of been-there-done-that” in the book). Ultimately, the very appeal of the globalized aesthetic style dismissed by Chayka, with its associated longing “not just for less stuff, but for less self, the rough edges smoothed off to create the ideal, generic, frictionless fit”, is itself not made any clearer by this book: “Why do so many people want this, I found myself wondering as I read about Chayka’s excursions to Texas and Kyoto. By the end of *The Longing for Less*, I was still wondering.” The minimalist modernist aesthetic has successfully tied itself to so many interpretive associations precisely because it has conflated them through indeterminacy, through common sense, exemplified by its “less is more” motto (Stevanovic 2013). It has presented itself as “timeless”, collapsing a history that is made of different moments and heterogeneous phe-

nomena – such as the traditional Japanese aesthetic, the first constructivist manifestation of modernism and its most recent strictly minimalist one, itself varied – as if they did not each articulate a unique sort of “emptiness”, on aspect of its overall “potential” (so that, for example, it is far easier for a thing to be out of place in a minimalist modernist interior than in a Japanese “minimalist” one; Verhetsel et al. 2013). The minimalist discourse – that is, the discourse that constructs a “lifestyle” from this aesthetic – is but the correlative mirror image of this potential, this promise of an encompassing ideal of the minimum. Though it is a difficult task, it might indeed be constructed, but only at the cost of putting the promise to the risk of breaking up or even exploding in the course of being critically worked out. That risk is one that the interior design magazines and brands and the self-help authors or influencers turn their back to, but that Chayka or the voluntary simplifiers also avoid, if nothing else because they are not really equipped to deal with it instead of taking the easier road of attacking minimalism’s stylized, idealized and/or commodified “superficial” face. Rejecting the face of the aesthetic – the image, its mediations and remediations – only revives the promise.

Our thesis too, regrettably, will do no better than illustrating the reproduction of this promise – and its common sense, both aesthetic and ethical-practical – as it manifests within the minimalist discourse as well, through the rhetoric of (squared) authenticity. Although this limitation has mostly to do, in our case, with the brute fact that time was up before our critical theoretical framework was completed, before it had a chance of being applied to semiology in order to reconstruct first of all its promise and its common sense, and without at any rate leaving enough time to delve deeper into the study of minimalism and other reductive aesthetics in the arts and in design, it must also be said that going any further than this limitation would have meant parting ways with an academic study of the minimalist discourse, if understood as the study of something as it actually was and is, and nothing more. Any study that attempted a critical reconstruction of the minimalist discourse beyond what it has been up to now – surely one far more interesting than our own – would very soon grow past the discourse, even if it wholly refrained from simply dismissing it but rather engaged it in depth. Since “minimalism” remains but a promise, which is only minimally a rhetorically shared object (meaning not an object that is perfectly the same for everyone, of course, but one whose tensions or contradictions once emerged are capable of being discussed to determine,

differentiate and develop the object further), a serious attempt at reconstructing it would, in a sense, end up being untrue as a representation of what the discourse is; it would indeed be constructive, creative prospective work (and might take poetic and practical forms as well, of course). From this point of view, our study is adequate to the discourse and its object, though that is a prize too easy to win when they amount to almost nothing, as in this case: minimalism is only minimally different from any of its components – decluttering, anti-consumerist simple or frugal living, and self-improvement (or self-help at large) –, because it is the minimal difference that is generated by (further) connecting and conflating them through its rhetorical label, with its commonsensical aesthetic and ethical-practical associations. The advice offered by minimalists is nothing remotely unique to them, beside the promise of them somehow adding up to a distinctive, integral lifestyle, stuck between the aesthetic and the ethical-practical dimension. This is what we mean by the phrase “minimum possible”, which we have used in the title both of this first half of the second, thematic part of our thesis, and of the thesis as a whole. Just like other expressions we have used or will use, it is meant to highlight through its own ambiguity the contradictoriness of the object – in this case “minimalism” as rhetorically constructed in the discourse. In a first, most commonsensical reading, the minimum possible is simply what minimalism appears to aim at, that is, a minimum to be pursued – usually defined in terms of things owned, and combining a downward push towards necessity (which underwrites the objectivity of the minimum defined in this way, and also of course the insistence on the abstract necessity of discarding things) with an upward pull towards comfort (which overwrites the minimum as merely subjective, and affords discarding its promising appeal); through this push and pull, the negativity of “less” and the positivity of “more” – tied together in the “less is more” principle – are handled in the discourse according to rhetorical need, managing and attenuating its criticality (and thus, of course, the normativity of each minimalist author or influencer’s discourse, each with its own specific emphases and mix of topics). That minimalists long for a minimum, rather than for “less”, is important: the commonsensical reading of the label as referring to such a pursuit of minimization foregrounds it as negative and extreme in the main, not relative as “less” is; this in turn is needed on the one hand to ground the objectivity of “minimalism” as a distinctive, integral lifestyle that can be adopted and shared (and taught about in books, blogs, vlogs and so on), and on the other hand to set into motion the contrary pull, pre-

cisely by disavowing this objectivity, negativity and extremeness as merely commonsensical. The same goes for the minimum understood as an aesthetic style – whatever the variation or iteration –, which is similarly disavowed as commonsensical and yet retained as a ground for the discourse (usually in the quite literal sense of being positively visible in the background, but in some cases as negatively marking by contrast an otherwise ordinary background as authentically “minimalist”).

Now, the search for this minimum possible is endless, because it is inherently contradictory and yet mostly unaware of it; moreover, many other contradictions among its rhetorical components are also attached to it, such as that between a “lifestyle around stuff” and a “lifestyle beyond stuff”, between home-improvement and self-improvement, between the immediacy of self-acceptance and the work of austere self-restraint or aspirational self-remaking, between the circular safety of daily routines and the linear risks of long-term projects, or among the many conflicting criteria that go into anti-/alt-consumption, which minimalism does not actually order (should one prioritize frugality or ethical and environmental friendliness, bare functionality for use or aesthetic-emotional appreciation for enjoyment?). These and other contradictions “spark crises” – to play with Kondo’s phrase –in the discourse, but the crises are dissolved by reinstating and reaffirming the indeterminacy of the minimum and of minimalism: they are merely subjective and relative, after all (and yet will be held onto and talked about all over again as if they were not). Thus this minimum possible hovers as not only a spectrum but rather a spectre over the discourse: the spectre, we might say, of “least is most”, which – by being evoked and then exorcised – keeps the “less is more” principle in its indeterminacy, as the commonsensical promise it is. In a second sense, the emphasis of the phrase can be shifted to indicate a “minimum *possible*”, that is, the fact that “minimalism” actually remains to be constructed: it is a mere promise, a mere possibility (though perhaps it is even impossible insofar as the objective and constructing one univocal minimalism, instead of multiple though interrelated ones). The goal of our thesis has been to show that this is the case, and illustrate how “minimalism” is kept in this state by the reciprocal play of its contradictions, while always suggesting that it is a lifestyle through its rhetorical label and its aesthetic common sense. In a third sense, the phrase may instead be read as “*minimum possible*”, that is, as that minimum of possibility which it pursues in pursuing authenticity: the authentic self is mostly taken to be a

self that is already there, fully actual and waiting to be discovered – it is one’s “true” self, after all –, and the life of that self is one where the centrifugal sense of both future and past possibilities, together with the most evident and invasive ones that are implicit in the present alterity of others on display in the media, must be detoxed, discarded with all their negative criticality, leaving a present that is pure indeterminate possibility, and thus a more minimal form of possibility (the possibility of a better, authentic and autonomous “intentional life”, to which all sorts of “benefits” can be attached, conflated and thus promised by the discourse). In other words, the promise of the minimum as a possibility (second sense) is held onto as such, not developed, as the promise of a minimum of possibility beyond – perhaps always further beyond? – one’s authentic actuality (third sense). This practically means that authenticity is around the corner, and that it will feel life-changing without necessarily changing – and critically challenging – much in one’s life (such as one’s socio-economic standing, of course); moreover, once achieved it will also endure, whether because no more possibilities will indeed need to be pursued or because one will have gotten used to incremental home-/self-improvement. At any rate, criticality and its possibilities will be tamed; there will be no more profound crises. Finally, in a fourth sense, the phrase can again be taken up in its entirety as the project of constructing “minimalism” as lifestyle only to a minimal extent, that is, as just noted, only to the point of suggesting that is something more – both distinctive and integrated – than any of its components, even though the suggestion is not followed upon and in fact minimalism as such ends up amounting to almost nothing: it is the “minimum possible” of consensus on a commonsensical basis that promises to hold together, as an indeterminate least common denominator, all “minimalists” as such regardless of their evident differences (and socio-economic divisions). In this, it is much like the universalist individualist framework of self-improvement, that is, much like authenticity – as can be seen from how minimalism is often defined as “living with intention” altogether –, but of course it can never actually be reduced to it without losing its appeal as its own lifestyle; therefore its consensus, though indeed minimal, is minimally less so than the consensus around the universalized authentic, autonomous individual: through its common sense, “minimalism” has the twin advantages of incorporating what it must negate (aestheticization, extremism and their obsessions, luxury or deprivation, alt-consumerism and so on, thus squaring authenticity), and of nonetheless having something positive to fall back onto, or circle back to, to ground the discourse and the

plausibility and appeal of its promises (shifting the rhetorical emphases as needed to manoeuvre the discourse among its contradictions, managing its criticality in registers of aspiration, austerity and acceptance).

This is, in sum, our whole argument and what we intend to highlight in the rest of this thesis: minimalism is the possibility, ever returned to the inchoate state of almost thorough indeterminacy, of holding and weaving together certain practices – generally drawn from the three key components of decluttering, anti-consumerist simple/frugal living, and self-improvement – to fashion a lifestyle that is distinctive, integral and irreducible to any one of them, based on the vague pursuit – in literal and metaphorical forms of reduction and restraint – of some minimum (a “less” that is however endowed with the promise of “more”, the abstract possibility of liberation from concrete possibilities in their criticality, negativity, alterity and so on, in addition to all sorts of benefits). Since it cannot really admit and rest content with being a rhetorical device, a metaphor for authenticity and its universalized individualist framework – as the discourse attempts to do when it equates “minimalism” with “intentional living” –, minimalism always oscillates between relying positively and negatively on its common sense, in both cases gaining its minimum possible of difference from that framework (which would ironically be too minimal to effectively promise a shared lifestyle). These oscillations are what we will explore, from now on, as they play out in the minimalist discourse. The title of this thematic part of the thesis, which alludes to an “other side of common sense”, should now be clearer: by disavowing its own common sense, particularly its aesthetic(ized) common sense, in the ways that we will examine, minimalism does not – as the discourse maintains, with its promise of authentic and autonomous individual intentionality – break free from common sense, but rather binds itself even more thoroughly to it; far from facilitating critical reflection, including reflection on common sense and its dimensions (especially the aesthetic, of course), minimalism goes round and round the starting point it has in common sense – because there is no other side to common sense, no outside. What makes minimalism ambiguously (anti-)aesthetic, (anti-)materialist and (anti-)consumerist, also makes it uncritically commonsensical: any success it may achieve will largely be due to the ordinary good sense that its dualistic rhetoric had simply excluded from view at the outset, or if not that, to the good fortune in conditions and circumstances; it can hardly be attributed to the inde-

terminate, abstract and contradictory “tools” that the minimalist discourse promotes. To show this, we will resume our analyses of the discourse itself with a second round focused on different, and more recent, minimalist texts. We will first examine more than twenty discussion threads gathered from the main minimalist subreddit in Reddit (r/minimalism) through a set of keywords involving the aesthetic and extreme nature of minimalism (“aesthetic”, “art”, “design”, “style”, “maximalism”, “extreme”, “ascetic”, “too far”, “essential” and so on) or debating its definition, and selected for their comprehensiveness as well as user engagement: through these polyphonic materials, we will highlight how the minimalist discourse – even at its more bottom-up level, unfolding among ordinary individuals that are interested in it – polarizes and depolarizes itself around the issue of minimalism’s commonsensical association to the aesthetic and the extreme; its contradictions “spark crises” that, however, are ultimately evoked – as spectra – only to be exorcised, making “minimalism” again so indeterminate and subjective that anyone can be “still minimalist” (that is, minimalist regardless of their concrete conditions and circumstances). The same sparking of crises will then be identified in a broader corpus of minimalist vlogs collected from a wide range of YouTube channels, differing for their rhetorical emphases, their aesthetic presentations, their mixes of topics and their popularity (Matt D’Avella, Nate O’Brien, CKSPACE, Ronald L. Banks, A to Zen Life, Simple Happy Zen, Jenny Mustard, Benita Larrison, Abundantly Minimal, Messy Minimalist, Samurai Matcha, Ecofriend Lia, and Ana Goldberg): we will first consider some vlogs that around the same time addressed a possible “end of minimalism”, all of which however reaffirm that – of course – minimalism is not “really” dead, because “real” minimalism is not a mere passing trend (thus paradoxically making a trend out of anti-trend vlogs); after that, we will take up other examples – from the multitude we have encountered – of minimalist vlogs that similarly problematize minimalism’s common sense only to project a more authentic one behind and beyond it, whose authenticity of course imbues the channel’s host himself or herself (which paradoxically happens across all channels, regardless of their differences: they all somehow manage to be authentic in the end). The endless, indeterminate possibility and promise of “minimalism” beyond its crises and contradictions, which are instead exploited to reinstate and reinforce through the rhetoric of (squared) authenticity, does not however solve or dissolve those crises, and in fact it does not even actually call into question the discourse’s positive and negative reliance on its aesthetic and rhetorical

common sense, so that each and every channel always comes out unscathed, unmodified from all this criticism: each gets to keep its usual aesthetic presentation, which in most cases is also foregrounded by vlogs that offer a tour of the host's home or wardrobe; exactly these vlogs we will focus on first in the next section, where the on-going workings of contradictions in the minimalist discourse at large will expose its "living with intention" as actually a "living within tension" (which would be nothing strange – all living is living within tension – were it not for the fact that the discourse does not acknowledge it, since it promises authentic, autonomous intentionality but also the end of tension, of struggle). While it might be argued that all the different aesthetic "shades" of minimalism on offer in our YouTube channels prove that the discourse merely evidences aesthetic plurality, navigating this plurality remains entirely up to each individual minimalist and his or her good sense, precisely because each host's discourse ambiguously disavows and only tacitly retains its aesthetic grounding without critically engaging it in any depth, which in our view turns the shades of aesthetic in shades of aesthetization: the latter indicates not that something that was not aesthetic is made such, but rather that something that was aesthetic to begin with is denied critical, explicit recognition and reconstruction of its aesthetic dimension, contradictions included; from the high-end glamour to the low-end frugal – mirror images of each other, both denying and affirming the aesthetic in specular ways –, each channel gets to be aesthetically authentic or authentically aesthetic, aesthetically extreme or extremely aesthetic, precisely because these are just two sides of the same promise of doing away with some aspects of the aesthetic dimension once and for all. This will only bring us back to where we have started from, that is, to minimalism's commonsensical indeterminacy, which we will observe at its most obvious first in ranked lists of "minimalist habits", where rules – which is what these "habits" amount to – are disavowed and deemphasized in contradictory ways generally in favour of the most vague principles, and then – in conclusion – in lists of readings of the "less is more" principle, which will turn out to be itself "more" precisely because of its contradictory indeterminacy and thus multiplicity: each time it applies to different aspects of experience – means or ways of action, ends to be desired or not, impulses or habits, crises, media and so on –, in line with shifts in rhetorical emphasis among the aspirational, the austere and the accepting, the aesthetic and the authentic, the autonomous and the automatic; and minimalism promises all of this at once, without being of much help – since it denies them – in critically clarifying and articulat-

ing the contradictions of its common sense, and of critical-commonsensical experience at large. In spite of its length, by the end of this second round of analyses we will know nothing much more than we currently do about “minimalism” as a lifestyle, because that is what minimalism is: a promise, a possibility, that amounts to almost nothing – the minimum possible.

2.3 – Sparking Crisis. Minimalism Negated and Negotiated

Despite the central role that clearly aesthetic practices occupy in the lifestyle, and despite its ties to the reductive but seductive aesthetic of modernist design, the internal discourse of minimalism also offers no shortage of signs of uneasiness about its aesthetic component. Just like the latter, the uneasiness can range from a discomfort with the particular aesthetic associated to minimalism all the way to a more general denial of the aesthetic dimension and its relevance as such; either way, there is a deep-seated ambivalence towards the sensible expression of the lifestyle, the style of it. In fact, it could be said – and it will be said – that minimalism refuses, overall, to fully take on and develop the at least more explicit integration of aesthetic and ethical-practical concerns that seems nonetheless to constitute it as a distinct lifestyle, especially with regard to earlier manifestations of voluntary simplicity. Probing, highlighting and clarifying this contradiction, which will later be explored in terms of the inherent paradoxes of authenticity and autonomy – the prevailing rhetorical strategies of the minimalist discourse –, is our main task and interest in providing a critical analysis that pushes to the foreground the rhetorical articulation, and oftentimes attenuation or at least management, of the criticality of discourses itself (especially, of course, that of discourses which are supposed to be translated into actual practices and thus judgments and evaluations). The contradictoriness depends, of course, from our twin assumptions that a more or less coherent lifestyle can be described by the label of “minimalism”, and that the bridging or merging of aesthetic “style” and ethical-practical “life” – in other words, the very stylization of life and vivification of style that characterize all lifestyles – is the most salient aspect of it. Without these assumptions, the contradiction is easily degraded and dismissed as a mere conflict in disguise between actually unrelated phenomena, and this, as we will see shortly, is in fact one of the main rhetorical solutions favoured by minimalists in dealing with the above-mentioned uneasiness: a distinction is marked, and an opposition often

insisted, between an “aesthetic minimalism” and the “minimalist lifestyle” proper, assimilated to the supposedly non-aesthetic simple living. It is important to stress that this is not necessarily an invalid solution per se so far as the uneasiness of any one minimalist practitioner with the aesthetic is concerned, or even for the whole minimalist discourse if it could unambiguously discern its components and opt for one over the other, precisely because “minimalism” – like any other lifestyle, and perhaps more than most others – must not only always be negotiated, but is also yet to be constructed despite almost two decades of discourse surrounding it, whatever direction the construction may take: whatever their origin and no matter how much they are disavowed, the aesthetic associations of minimalism remain – and are continually renewed by part of the overall discourse – within common sense, which in its indeterminate inclusiveness mostly accepts whatever material is fed into it even without – or despite – its rhetorical determination and development, which would in fact be an uphill struggle even if it amounted to something more than the prevalently subjectivist dismissals of the aesthetic within most of the minimalist discourse. As explained at the start, our approach is that of taking common sense as seriously as its encyclopaedic counterpart, and thereby facing the problematic nature of minimalism as still merely “possible” without taking shortcuts or emergency exits, though neither wholly foreclosing their viability in any single case. If the frequent recurrence of this uneasiness with the aesthetic in the discourse is any indication, after all, it can at least be assumed both that the problem is constantly reproduced and that the subjectivist rhetorical fix is not enough to deal with it beyond such singular cases. In fact, we will see that the opposite is probably true, that is, that the subjectivism actually depends on the reproduction of the problem. As the more compact denial of minimalism’s commonsensical association to some extreme form of asceticism shows, beside and behind the uneasiness with the aesthetic lies a more general uneasiness with the normative, whether internal or external to minimalism: rhetorically expressed and thus at least objectified in all kinds of texts and discourses which are openly and publicly shared if not promoted, any lifestyle is involved with its own normality and/or normativity and permeated by its own internal crises – many of which are unavoidable –, and some form of subjectivism is a common route to their alleviation; such successful alleviation may in turn sustain subjectivism more generally in all other domains. By claiming that there is a different minimalism for any one individual – with or without the aesthetic expression –, the minimalist discourse too

takes sides, in a way, for a minimalism which is yet to be constructed, which is merely possible, but in wholly and immediately attributing this task to the individual it actually denies that very possibility as a common rhetorical project, never moving it forward and continually falling back, precisely because of that, into the vagueness of its own common sense, always evoked and always exorcised.

In what follows, we will first try to see the contradiction at work in that part of the minimalist discourse which is closer to the actual practitioners who otherwise form the audience of the minimalist books, blogs, podcasts, vlogs and so on, both underlining the regular recurrence of the problem and the range of mostly subjectivist but nonetheless diverse responses given to it, with the subsequent rhetorical negotiation of “minimalism” – as a lifestyle and as a label – between its polarization and its evacuation. Next we will turn to our main – and more mainstream – corpus of minimalist vlogs on YouTube, in order to show how the crisis sparked within the minimalist common sense is not only dealt with in a similar way, but also exploited to reproduce and reinforce the subjectivist baseline of minimalism which allows an indeed minimal and negative form of explicit identification beyond that afforded by common sense itself. Finally we will try to draw out, synthesize and critically assess the overall implications for the minimalist discourse taken as a whole in preparation for subsequent analyses.

2.3.1 – Minimalism Polarized and Depolarized on Reddit

2.3.1.1 – *Against aesthetic(ized) minimalism*

Let us start by examining some recent threads posted on the main minimalist subreddit (r/minimalism) which focus on and often question the lifestyle’s relationship to aesthetic expression. As a forum with relatively minor emphasis on single users’ profiled identities and mostly text-based discussions, often related to some doubt or difficulty faced by the original poster – including of course those provoked by the very discourse in the subreddit itself –, Reddit usually provides an apt environment for less restrained expressions of all kinds of controversies, as well as – from our point of view – an endless textual repository for studying them, which is the main role we assigned them in our corpus. While, not surprisingly, the internal crises we are interested in also emerge symptomatically in all sorts of threads which are otherwise concerned with more circumscribed topics, there are also recurrent threads which more directly and explicitly ad-

dress them; we will focus on these, with special regard for the more popular and thus participated ones, for obvious reasons of convenience related to their condensing in singular texts – though usually very long – diverse responses that are elsewhere more scattered around many shorter and perhaps one-sided threads (for which a quantitative and cumulative analysis would be more suitable). Moreover, in order to keep repetitions at bay – since our aim, here, is not at all that of precisely evaluating the relative weight of some type of response over others, beyond taking note of the general trends –, we will quote the original post in full and then highlight various responses by other users without of course reproducing the whole thread, which would take up too much space and time with little gain in return (to resort to minimalist-like calculations). Reddit discussions, on minimalism just like on many other popular discourses, would no doubt be worth studying fully on their own – that was in fact our plan at first –, but for our purposes it will be enough to even have just a taste of the tensions that always swirl beneath the surface of even seemingly straightforward discourses such as that around minimalism: as soon as discussion goes meta and the rhetorical quest for the clarified construction of minimalism – or minimalisms, of course – begins, dissent arises and is either congealed in some form of polarization, or liquefied into depolarized assent to some more inclusive because more indeterminate description.

A thread which laments the excess of aesthetization in minimalism is as good a start as any¹²¹, especially one that has later had to be edited by the original poster to insert apologies for its “presumptuous tone”, and assuring that there was no intent of “cancelling anyone”:

I’ve to stumble upon a YouTuber from Siberia, and for the first time, I felt represented. No pretty furniture, no Apple products, no lofi background music while i see someone’s feet or preparing coffee, no bamboo baskets, no Ikea accessories and the likes, no designers plain clothing, and so on. Just one ordinary person, having less, for real. Not trying to look cute, not trying to look perfect, not trying to fit in. Someone like me who also can’t let their minimalism to be trendy, or just turn into another form of consumerism.
Some people say ” You’re not a minimalist, you’re just poor”
Wrong. You can be poor and have plenty of shit, plenty of clutter from thrift stores, you can be poor and be a hoarder, accumulate a lot of things because you’re insecure.
And you can also be poor and have a genuine minimalist mindset because that’s part of your values. That’s me. Frugal, poor, and minimalist.
Gosh it felt so real to watch her videos! It was my New Year’s gift, to stumble upon such a kindred spirit.

¹²¹ Deleted user, “There’s too much aesthetic minimalism out there”, Jan. 2022, <https://reddit.com/rttzor> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

The post, which got almost 700 upvotes by the community, explicitly vents a strong frustration with the way in which minimalism is represented online and more specifically – since it mentions a vlogger on YouTube, identified later as “Siberia Inside” (now named “Ana Goldberg”, included in our corpus) – the way it is portrayed in the more visually-oriented social media. Many of the usual accusations towards aesthetization are already alluded here: conformism to stereotypes (“fitting in” through Apple products, background music, Ikea furniture, plain clothing etc.), perfectionism in appearances (“look cute”, “look perfect”), and mere imitation of fashion (“trendy”) which as such is taken to be indistinguishable from just “another form of consumerism.” The commonsensical normality of such expressions of minimalism is clearly understood as a normative exclusion of people who cannot afford it, even by way of its sheer prevalence in the visual discourse. While at first it is but suggested that minimalism comes in different varieties – the title mentions “aesthetic minimalism”, but the post does not identify “frugal” with “minimalist” –, the original poster later identifies as “more of an ‘anti-consumerism’ kind of person” after editing the post, which does hint at distinct emphases within minimalism (“My minimalist ways are tinted of it”). However, minimalism is here presented as mainly having to do with the reduction of physical clutter in one’s home – as opposed to hoarding – without this being understood as itself an aesthetic practice: in order to push back the particularly intense aesthetization of mainstream sources, the aesthetic as a whole becomes unavailable as a frame for understanding minimalist practices. A more inclusive “genuine minimalist mindset” is thus projected, though not determined beyond its very inclusiveness.

As the apologies anticipate, however, although meant to express the poster’s being “overjoyed” with the newly found representation – itself an aesthetic need gone unnoticed –, the post has also sparked the opposite of joy in other users, because with its critique it opened in turn a crisis in the other direction, negatively judging the aesthetic concerns of other minimalists. The polarization is thus depolarized and neutralized by subjectivist appeals. One particularly upvoted response (375 upvotes) and its sub-comments defend aesthetic appreciation as legitimate and dismiss all “rules”, “gate-keeping” and judges within minimalism:

[U1¹²²] Bruuuuuh some people are minimalists and love having aesthetically pleasing households. Its good you found someone you can relate to but minimalism has no “rules” just do what feels right

[U2] Minimalism is such a random thing to gatekeep either way. The whole goal is literally just to not buy/keep stuff you don’t need or appreciate. That’s it.

Some people appreciate a nice environment. Some people appreciate nice tech, or nice clothes, or nice coffee.

If you don’t, or can’t afford it, that’s fine, just try and make sure you have what you need and don’t spend your money on things you don’t, or don’t even appreciate.

Minimalism is the simplest concept, why are we all still trying to stick labels on it and ourselves? Isn’t that the exact thing we’re all trying to get away from here?

[U3, quoting a deleted sub-comments] “*people only care about nice things because marketing companies have figured out to target people’s insecurities.*”

You’re assuming your definition of “nice” is the same as everyone else’s definition of “nice.” To you, maybe “nice” means “expensive/trendy/branded” while to someone else “nice” may mean “quality/long-lasting/pleasant to look at.” You’re also speaking in extreme generalities, as though you can speak for all people and why they care about things, as though you have some special insight rather than an elementary level, black and white, completely lacking in nuance understanding of the human psyche.

“It is actually wholly unnecessary and doesn’t make a difference to your true happiness.”

Lol. Speak for yourself. *Hot take: focus on your own happiness and you’ll feel less compelled to judge and police what makes other people happy.* You want an ugly environment? Great. Your choice.

[U4] Yeah I love watching those people who have like ikea showcase houses when I watch minimalism videos. My parents were lowkey hoarders so it’s always been a dream to have everything not only neat and tidy but to actually match and feel like I choose things with a purpose.

[U5] Right, like an important part of minimalism is being able to enjoy the things that you have. Having an aesthetically pleasing environment is proven to be beneficial to mental health

[U6] Yes. This.

I’m a minimalist to help manage my adhd. I NEED my space to not contribute to the chaos that is going on inside my head. For me, that means I don’t always make do with an item I already have. I need clean lines and for things to match.

[U7] SERIOUSLY. This whole post practically made me retch.

“No pretty furniture, no Apple products, no bamboo baskets, no Ikea accessories Someone like me

And you can also be poor, and have the genuine minimalist mindset because that’s part of your values. That’s me.”

Like who tf hosted an election and designated this dude as the person to determine for everyone else what “the genuine minimalist mindset” is? I mean, congratulations, I’m really glad you’re happy and have found what works for you, but this whole “I’m doing it right, and everyone else is doing it wrong except people who do it like me” is just so adolescent.

So, let me check my notes: furniture MUST NOT be pretty! Minimalism MUST be ugly or boring, or it doesn’t count! You are not allowed to have a visually pleasing environment anymore, or you are a poseur! Bamboo baskets? THE HORROR! Ikea? HOW DARE YOU?! Apple products are NOT OK (though somehow whatever device this person used to post this is surely acceptable, for some reason, based on some mysterious criteria). Says who? Give me a fucking break.

Live and let live, kid.

In these responses, minimalism indeed becomes “the simplest concept”, emptied of all determinate values of its own but the reduction of things kept or bought on the subject-

¹²² In our analyses of Reddit threads, we will mark users with an “U” followed by a number which is only meant to discriminate users within the specific quoted exchange. For our purposes – and, after all, within the mediatic environment of a semi-anonymous forum like Reddit – there is no need to keep track of the identity of users across exchanges (which is at any rate a rare enough occurrence even within the same thread). Of course, whenever relevant, we will nonetheless specify ourselves that the same user is intervening at different points of the thread.

tive grounds of individual needs and tastes – and economic situation as well (“or can’t afford it”)¹²³ – which are unquestionable as such by other people. Any further rhetorical construction is blocked as an attempt at “sticking labels” on oneself beyond such simple concept, whose apparent label of “minimalism” should rather be taken as a non-label in the same way that of “subjectivism” itself could be for its assumed self-evident and self-referential nature. On this indeterminate ground, the aesthetic is then more specifically saved by way of translating its “niceness” from language associated to consumerism and fashion – the ostentation of luxury and brands (“expensive/trendy/branded”) – to that of the quality of the items themselves as used or appreciated (“quality/long-lasting/pleasant to look at”), or that of “mental health” (with specific reference to ADHD, which is not at all infrequent in the subreddit). As another user writes, “Nice things often last longer reducing waste and need for replacement and many things can serve multiple purposes reducing need for multiple items but often cost more and *gasp* look nice”, and a different user adds that “we pay more for a reason”, that “the more expensive stuff is(ideally), the longer it will last, the less child labor was involved, and the more uses it serves.” Even the aspirational aesthetic of the more mainstream minimalist discourse stops being as much of a problem here, even though it goes beyond enjoying the things one already has (and it is significant that the “dream” of an aesthetically curated home environment is inadvertently linked above to this very subjective purposiveness which is strenuously defended, making it more clearly felt: “it’s always been a dream to have everything not only neat and tidy but to actually match and feel like I choose things with a purpose”).

Another user agrees with the original poster’s allusion to minimalism as a “mindset”, but insists on the fact that it can “be expressed in many ways”, including “low stimulus visual environments”; the minimalist aesthetic is just being “coopted in advertising encouraging consumption”, but it is still a valid component of minimalism. Same goes for influencers, as still other users note: “many youtubers have made it seem that minimalism is a concept for the rich”; “in the sphere of influencers, minimalism leans heavily toward the aesthetic side”, because as influencers “they have to make their

¹²³ One user, agreeing with the original poster, tells of how they darned three pairs of socks and is now generally “content with less, doing without, alternatives, recycled items, repurposed items, repaired items, etc.”, while in the past they would have been “wasteful” and thrown those socks out; this, however, is not taken to have critical aesthetic implications for others – economic necessity just as much as ecological commitment is understood to be a merely subjective affair.

lives look good” even though that might pressure some people to “create the perfect IG-worthy life” and “throw everything away and buy all new stuff to qualify [as minimalists]” (turning decluttering into upgrading). The latter comment comes from a self-identified “artist and designer” which takes a balanced approach, both caring “about how stuff looks” yet also not wanting “someone to feel like they didn’t belong if it’s not genuinely a priority for them”, so that again there is “no need to gatekeep in one direction or the other”; the (non-)label of “minimalist” can and should be freely handed to each and every one. Again, as other users stress, “the only common denominator is living better with less stuff”, no matter which of “many paths” is taken, which is why “minimalism” should rhetorically remain just a generic “framework” – the “means to reduce unnecessary clutter, and be mindful of current/future possessions” –, or again a “loose concept” with “no right or wrong way”, that is, no normativity:

No idea why everyone is trying to gatekeep or label anything here all the time. If you enjoy a different aesthetic it’s fine. If people enjoy a clean or sterile way it’s fine. If it’s not “minimalism” it’s fine as well. There’s no right or wrong way there is a loose concept and a common interest. How the end result or way looks might vary greatly.

Because of this, “everyone can create their own minimalism that they feel well by, there is no need for any dogmatism about what ‘real’ minimalism is”, which – as we mentioned – takes the possibility of rhetorically constructing concrete minimalism(s) and abstracts it as the task of the individual alone, to subtract it entirely and immediately from any past determination: no antecedent essence of minimalism can be pinpointed, thus automatically there must be no use for general but more determinate yet differentiated and developed conceptions of it beyond subjectivism. Some take on different labels as a consequence (for example “voluntary poverty”, to emphasize the approach of “ascetic spiritualism” without confusion with minimalism’s aesthetic dimension).

Yet the wondering should perhaps be turned into a genuine question: why is everyone in fact trying to gatekeep and label minimalism, or feel like other people are doing it, if everything is so simple as each sticking to one’s subjective preferences? The aesthetization of minimalism online is surely one very common answer to this question, especially – this was the original poster’s point, though attenuated in front of some users’ reactions – as it looks de facto inaccessible to many people (“[...] sure they look minimal but they live in huge homes! I have a tiny condo and if I had that many things I would look like a hoarder!”); or again, “IMO minimalism is harder for the poor. Getting

rid of things is difficult, should you need it down the line and likely won't have money to re-purchase it. Most hoarders in my experience are economically insecure”):

I actually prefer to see the “poor” version of minimalism myself. Just own very simple things, live modestly, etc. A lot of the minimalist styles are built around having a few pieces of high end furniture and a large, luxurious house to display them in. Most of us will never live in such a place. For the rest of us, I find it more inspiring to see how normal people live with just the things they really need.

However, as for the original poster, here a different representation of minimalism thereby acquires importance for “inspiration”, because as a user writes, “I know it's as simple as having less stuff. But I have trouble visualizing what that looks like in my home because the ‘minimalism aesthetic’ isn't for me and it would frankly look ridiculous in my 100+ year old home.” If a certain aesthetization is a problem, then, that is precisely because the aesthetic does have a role to play – though one that is still difficult to fully acknowledge, thus leading to feeling “constantly conflicted” or “guilty of aesthetic minimalism”, because of the very association of the aesthetic with “appearance”, with “the trap of buying more stuff”, with materialistic “things” instead of relationship, “work” or “life”, and especially with “things used to project status”:

[U1] I agree with this but I'm also constantly conflicted. I want nicer things but when I go to buy the thing I think “what a waste of money, I shouldn't be so consumed by the appearance of the thing itself”. I'm going to check out this YouTube channel you recommended because I think I just need more visual influence for this type of thing and not just reading about it.

[U2] I'll admit that I'm guilty to aesthetic minimalism. I try to do the aesthetic minimalism thing and then fall into a trap of buying more stuff to fit the aesthetic. I really want to get down to bare bones minimalism where I have a bed, a treadmill, a desk and a laptop but it just doesn't seem possible bc I get a small form of joy from the action of decorating. It just becomes clutter eventually though and drives me insane 😞

[U3] Minimalism as a form of advanced consumerism is an issue, and while aesthetically pleasing it does go against the values of some other forms of minimalism.
I am an extremely materialistic person by nature and nurture as I was raised in an environment where things used to project status were everything to those around me.
I am very grateful for the things and money I have but I am not well off.
I am trying to focus on finding meaning in my family, partner, work and life, instead of things.
I can't seem to quell this status anxiety I have, choosing things that don't have any status attached is something I now actively choose.
I don't buy branded shoes, I buy generic chuck taylor clones (not fakes, unbranded ones).
Most of my t shirts are plain colour cotton shirts, black or white.

Other responses more positively affirm this contribution of the aesthetic to the lifestyle by expressing it and maintaining it, though again not without certain ambivalences:

[U1] I like white walls and some coherence of aesthetic, because it keeps me on my path of minimalism. You express minimalism in the things you own, but to admit that you own too much and that your attention is spread too thin, starts from in your mind.

[U2] Actually, I think the aesthetic part plays a huge impact. Color has a massive effect of people's moods and mental health (studies have confirmed). And so owning things that are more neu-

tral colored and not cheap, colorful, plasticity, etc can form a more soothing environment. Same with clothes. Having a basic, neutral selection of clothes helps many people not focus as much on having a trendy style, so they can focus more on themselves/their hobbies.

The aesthetic keeps one on the “path of minimalism”, but this starts from the “mind”, while one of the benefits of a minimalist aesthetic – besides a “soothing environment”, understood as a matter of mental health – is precisely said to be that of not focusing on some aesthetic activities such as pursuing a “trendy style” (which is, as we will see later, the way more or less minimalist wardrobes are endorsed by most vloggers).

Already highlighting the reversal of the critique leveled against the aesthetic which, as mentioned, will be particularly pronounced in the threads about “extreme” minimalism, other responses react to the supposed expulsion of an “aesthetic minimalism” by equally disassociating minimalism from “thriftiness” and “being frugal”: “Minimalism can indeed be nice things that are high quality/aesthetics. Everyone balances how they see fit. It’s about how you fit it into your life” (and a sub-comment makes explicit the crisis of self-doubt as to one’s being a “minimalist” despite making expensive purchases as a very frequent topic of threads in the subreddit, again solving the problem in a subjectivist way as being “not [about] how much you spend” but “about buying what you need”). Someone even notes that “minimalism literally came from the visual arts aka aesthetic side. What you’re describing is /r/frugal or /r/anticonsumption”, thus turning the tables the other way (complemented by another comment saying that “you can be poor/frugal and an ‘aesthetic minimalist’ at the same time. It just takes a little more creativity”). Another user equally quips, “Minimalism started as an aesthetic movement initially. The form of minimalism YOU are talking about branched off of that. Not the other way around.” Although such acknowledgements of minimalism’s past history as an art and/or design style rarely go beyond registering the fact itself in support of the legitimacy of the aesthetic dimension, two longer comments do point out more specifically that “minimalism” as a label of a lifestyle is little more than a decade old while there were all kinds of minimalist currents in the arts and design in the past century, the very motto of “less is more” coming from that history:

[U1] Did anyone ever use the word ‘minimalism’ to describe anything other than art before the last 10 years or so? I’m not sure but I don’t think they did.
Now over the last few years in this sub the original definition has become somewhat taboo (depending on what the most upvoted thread of the week is, but check Top All Time posts compared with Top This Year posts to see the change) and it’s all about owning less and being less discerning. Surely a lifestyle inspired by the original definition would be about owning less but being /more/ discerning?

I'm happy that people can find happiness in whatever they like – but it's worth defending appreciating the beauty of physical things as a part of 'minimalism' worth discussing – there is a difference between plastic and wood, between something that's been thoughtfully designed and something that hasn't and between different styles that do make some people feel a certain way and that's not an invention of the advertising industry. Walk past a concrete block of flats and you'll probably feel different than you do walking past a beautiful church or something. That said I don't consume any content made for 'minimalists' any more because everything I've found is ugly and shallow.

[U2] "Did anyone ever use the word 'minimalism' to describe anything other than art before the last 10 years or so?"

Besides art 60's, poss late 50's), there was also furniture (originating from Bauhaus in the 20's), architecture (extremely popular in the 80's), music (60's onwards), products (again originating from Bauhaus) – all coming from a minimalist "less is more" mindset. Film and books even had their own minimalist subcultures in the 60's onwards. The origin of that 'less is more' phrase is probably from Ludwig Mies van der Rohe who said it sometime during the 20's again, the height of Bauhaus. Minimalism is old.

I totally agree with you in saying that the idea minimalism is of owning less, but far more discerning about the things that we do own. With minimalism as exemplified by the origins above, it's as much the aesthetics of something – there is often beauty in simplicity, or a small splash of colour in a space filled with neutral shades, and so on – as it is just having less. Simple living is a movement that's been around a heck of a long time, and can have some extremely close connections to minimalism owing to the reduced personal possessions, minimalism is more defined by the form and function of what we have too.

I've pretty much stopped watching any minimalist channels now, although I dip in from time to time to see what is going on. I find a lot of it really doesn't add much to my life overall. My minimalist path is different from others. I'll never be the aesthetic minimalist I envision myself based on these channels, nor will I be the simple living types either. I am my own minimalist, who uses it to help manage my life for the improvement of my ADHD.

Minimalism allows me to have less, being focused on a few specifics, and having the space to give each thing I need a clear space of it's own, helping me to rely less on my notoriously unreliable brain. I can put something down and know it is either out of place, or remember where I put it five minutes later.

The aesthetic side of minimalism is here supported on its own merits – though again we also find a reference to ADHD and managing an "unreliable brain" –, without reducing it to aesthetization and thus dismissing it as "an invention of the advertising industry"; in fact, the online aesthetization by minimalist influencers is precisely criticized as "ugly and shallow", that is, on aesthetic grounds, or at least as irrelevant and not adding much to one's life because of aesthetic differences. The crisis of the aesthetic is thus allied to the criticality that the minimalist lifestyle should foster instead of diminishing, making one's judgments "more discerning", not less. Again, a more generic "simple living" is distinguished from minimalism precisely on the basis of involvement with aesthetics, or with the appreciation of the inherent qualities of objects – "form and function" – per se, beyond the mere reduction of them and, along with it, the reduction of the discernment that often goes with "finding happiness in whatever [one] likes." The complaint thus reverses that contained in the original post, or rather it complements it, because it notes how the discourse on the subreddit has increasingly excluded and discredited the aesthetic side, not unlike "practical minimalism" is said to be underemphasized on the part of the minimalist influencers by those agreeing with the original post-

er. In both responses, while recognizing some polarization, minimalism is understood to be inclusive in such a way that one does not become either an “aesthetic minimalist” or “the living types”; this again gets somewhat translated by the second user in a subjectivist language (“My minimalist path is different from others”, “I am my own minimalist”), which as we have seen affords depolarization by leaving “minimalism” as a common project underdetermined and turning it into an individual one, so that it finds in personal integrity the “balance” – as said by another user – between the dimensions of minimalism, yet as the first user writes, “it’s worth defending appreciating the beauty of physical things as a part of ‘minimalism’ worth discussing”, first of all in the subreddit itself. The problematic aspects such a discussion would entail, however – for example, as we have seen through the responses in the thread, the push to upgrading one’s possessions aesthetically, or qualitatively in general, after downsizing, or the perfectionism induced by more or less stereotyped aspirational ideals, especially when economically unrealizable, or the materialistic, exhibitionistic or narcissistic commonsensical ties of the aesthetic in social and mediatic life beyond individuals’ solitary appreciations of things –, are not really mentioned nor addressed.

Can anyone individually possess and practice the criticality of the aesthetic, also discussing it with others, without facing its many crises (or making others face them)? That is, of course, the whole point of divergence, of dissent. The thread shows the full range of common stances the minimalist discourse carves out: some polarize minimalism one way or the other – though it is of course usually the “simple living types” that first single out aesthetic minimalism as its own phenomenon to be more or less discarded –, others immediately depolarize it by making it more indeterminate insofar as it is fully relative to subjective preferences – including the “balance” between its aesthetic and ethical-practical components –, others still admit perhaps reluctantly the import of the aesthetic despite the crises it generates, while a few others defend the “discernment”, that is the criticality, that the aesthetic can afford, instead passing over its crises. Most of the responses agree with the original poster in denouncing the particular – or particularly intense – commodified aesthetization of minimalism in the world of design and/or minimalist influencers, but most also retain the actuality or at least possibility of a “minimalism” that goes beyond that, though for the greater part only a subjectively negotiated one – with or without an aesthetic component, but surely not excluding it for

others at least. As we will see, however, this subjectivism is not only not much of a solution – after all, it offers no positive guidance by itself to the individual subject trying to balance the two sides of the minimalist coin –, but is also both explicitly promoted and performed by the very minimalist influencers it is meant to distance oneself from. One user appears to recognize this in criticizing YouTube influencers not only – as the others did – as “just a trend” with “no real content”, but also alluding to the many subjectivist performances we will shortly examine (“when they don’t even know what else crap to post, they make videos like ‘goodbye minimalism’ ‘is minimalism dead?’ ‘i have gone too far’”). Finally, another response goes even further by even dropping the distinction everyone else is holding on to between an aestheticized minimalism of the influencers and a more authentic one – whether actual or possible – beyond that, rejecting minimalism as a whole – like most critics do – as a “1st world problem”, including the rhetorical project of discussing “what minimalism is”, seen as nothing more than a way to “justify the nice/expensive stuff” (the dismissal of the aesthetic is implicit):

Reading this discussion just makes me think that minimalism is a 1st world problem. Bored with life with too much money to spend on s*it, let’s start minimalism/decluttering/whatever. Then let’s wrap it in capitalism (being minimalist is when you have a \$1100 iPhone ’cause “I need it for work”). Then let’s discuss what minimalism is, in order to justify the nice/expensive stuff. It is apparently as “individual” as the American idea of individualism that led to individual needs over the needs of society/planet/whatever (via consumerism ’cause me me me me me me), that led ultimately to the need for minimalism. It is tiring to just read the struggles ;-). Y’all need to find another hobby. I know! Minimalizing minimalism?

Here we come full circle to the original post, except for its polarizing split of an “aesthetic minimalism” set against its vaguer remainder – frugalism, simple living, voluntary poverty etc., if not lifestyle minimalism itself as subjectively determined –, corresponding to an assumed split between the aestheticized minimalism of influencers and some other minimalism beyond that that is taken to be more authentic, and at the same time – since each one can look after his or her own “minimalism” – more inclusive and less critical (at least towards other “minimalists”). This is exactly what we mean by speaking of a “minimalism” that is only “possible”, that is constantly yet to be rhetorically constructed, always renounced after the crises sparked within common sense push it to the foreground, and thus deflected again and again to the contradictory background of the common sense it emerged from. This possibility is foreclosed, in this last response, as not at all unlike what it is meant to fight against, especially because of its subjectivism – the “individualism” that allows everyone to justify anything whatsoever and still belong to an emptied out “minimalist” virtual community of authentic individ-

uals. That is in fact its root, since the label itself of “minimalism” for a lifestyle emerges as a variation on the theme of the self-help and self-improvement discourse more generally, arranging its emphases in a different way around the practice of decluttering – and shortly after of curating capsule wardrobes – and in connection to the call for intentional consumption within anti-consumerism. However, is not “minimizing minimalism” precisely what the minimalist discourse does by way of evoking and exorcising its aesthetic crises through subjectivism, turning “minimalism” into a non-label with just the bare minimum of determinate content? Or if, as it is more likely, what was meant is a wholesale dismissal of minimalism and not just its “minimization”, would the dismissal ever be in turn enough rhetorically to actually challenge the minimalist discourse – and its common sense – with regard to the problems it at least claims to address, including aesthetic ones? For the most part, the answer would precisely have to do with deciding whether aesthetic problems can be reduced to “1st world problems” or, on the contrary, one of such “1st world problems” is precisely that of being unable to critically acknowledge and thus engage and deal with the aesthetic in its fullest scope, rejecting or repressing it. If another aesthetics is possible, then different minimalisms might also be as well – ones, perhaps, that would not need as much minimizing themselves to survive.

Let us go over, though more briefly of necessity, a few more examples. Almost exactly two years earlier, another popular thread¹²⁴ (415 upvotes) lamented how the label of “minimalism” actually conceals many different interests to the point of appearing all but meaningless to the original poster (“I don’t even think there is such a thing as a ‘minimalist’ anymore”), who eventually decides to stop using it in favour of just more straightforwardly describing what his or her interests are:

This one has been on my mind a lot lately and I think it’s about time to talk about it.
A lot of people talk about minimalism and getting rid of all of their possessions so they can live a better life with less stress and less anxiety. What most people mean is they just need to clean their homes, declutter, and organize what’s left. A clean and tidy space makes you feel much better, this is something on which we can all agree. But just because you cleaned and organized, it doesn’t make you a minimalist. And that’s totally fine.
I don’t even think there is such a thing as a “minimalist” anymore. Everyone has their own definition and there are so many schools of thought out there. I can tell you from my observations since I discovered this lifestyle and movement six years ago, that no two minimalists are the same.
Some are aesthetic minimalists who want white walls, no furniture, and are perfectly fine with five pants and three shirts (all of the same color!!!) they wear every day.
Some are just people who want to be frugal and spend/consume less.

¹²⁴ Deleted user, “I think a lot of people just want to declutter and organize”, Jan. 2020, <https://reddit.com/ej58dc> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

Others only want the fancy items they want and need, such as one minimalist blogger I read about who has the newest iPhone, drives a Tesla, and buys expensive sushi dinners five nights a week because “his time is more valuable than his money.”

Some are people who seem to think running away from a six figure corporate life will fix all their problems. “Yeah, I used to make \$150,000 a year and lived in a three story house and drove a Ferrari. Now I live in a tiny house and make my own herbal soap.”

My point being, this means something different to each of us. And I think the largest percentage are people who grew up in the 80’s/90’s,00’s consumer boom and/or are the children of Baby Boomers, so we were surrounded by possessions, items, and “stuff.” And we want to get rid of that. So, I’m going to end this by making one more statement:

I am not a minimalist. I don’t think owning things makes me a bad or lesser person. I don’t think having clothes that aren’t black jeans with charcoal shirts means I’m doing it wrong. I like to read books and listen to music, so I have bookshelves with books and vinyl records/CD’s. I like the gifts people important to me give. Right now, that Funko Pop of my favorite Star Wars character (Boba Fett!) my wife gave me for Christmas looks great on my desk at work and I like to look at it.

I am just a guy who likes my clean and tidy home and I try to live a frugal life for both my bank account and the environment. And I’m totally fine with that.

Although not explicitly polarizing on a singular axis as in the precedent thread, instead pointing to a variety of different manifestations of minimalism, “aesthetic minimalism” is still the first to come up in the post, and not at all with the sober tone which is reserved in the next line for those who are into minimalism, like the original poster, for frugal reasons: aesthetic minimalism is depicted, like that of both rich people devoting themselves to more experiential forms of consumption and equally rich people instead turning their back on their privileges and downsizing their lives to escape them, with reference to the stereotypical aesthetic of “white walls, no furniture” and monochrome uniform dressing. By contrast to that, after the label of “minimalist” is discarded, “bookshelves with books and vinyl records/CD’s” are mentioned as things enjoyed as well as gifts like the Funko Pop figure the original poster likes “to look at”, which of course assumes that aesthetic minimalists would have a problem with these interests, since they involve owning certain things. In other words, the aesthetic minimalists – which may overlap with the rich ones, because of the association of the minimalist aesthetic with inaccessibly expensive home design – are after all taken to promote a more objectively determinate form of the minimalist lifestyle, and in fact an excessively determinate form since it would exclude those who are uninterested not only in that aesthetic but perhaps also in the aesthetic care of one’s environment as such beyond maintaining a “clean and tidy home”, which again is not so much understood as an aesthetic activity but rather, again, as a form of emotional self-care (“A clean and tidy space makes you feel much better, this is something on which we can all agree”). The more positive common ground among minimalists is thus taken to be decluttering; beyond that, only a negative and thus more indeterminate opposition to “stuff” – interpreted as a

generational shift due to growing up in materially affluent societies (as one commenter in the other thread also did¹²⁵) – can possibly bring together, though in a useless if not actually counterproductive way, the different sorts of minimalists there are. It is clear that the crises of minimalism, its negativity, are associated to its having a label, around which it is thought inevitably to follow judgements, the very normativity of “doing it wrong” which is equally associated with aesthetic minimalism: the original poster is “not a minimalist” and therefore thinks that “owning things doesn’t make [him or her] a bad or lesser person”, just like “having clothes that aren’t black jeans with charcoal shirts” does not, which of course implies that at least commonsensically minimalism does come with such all-out judgements. No need, then, to be a “minimalist”, because as a label it will necessarily push towards more determination than is sustainable, no matter how much a subjectivist reading is pressed upon it – if subjectivism is what is called for, then one might as well be “just a guy” and be actually label-less, instead of insisting on taking a label as a non-label. To an extent this is, of course, sound advice: it is in the nature of signs, subjective labels included, to grow in communally shared meaning which always passes through objective determinations, negotiations and remediations – if not critically, then at least by common sense association and its diffuse dialectics of normalization and cancellation –, so as long as a certain label is used, especially one that is charged as an aspirational ideal impacting one’s whole life, it is to be expected that it will not stay still in its indeterminacy (at least unless it is not actively kept there through the very discourse which would have to determine it). Nonetheless, what was just said for aesthetics also goes for rhetoric: disengaging it may very well solve or alleviate one’s problems, one’s crisis, but it will not address the crisis of the lifestyle as such which goes as much beyond it as aesthetic common sense and a rhetorical name in the encyclopaedia go beyond any one subject involved with it.

Most responses to the thread generally agree with the original poster, only a few taking issue with the negativity the post exhibits both in its ill-concealed aversion to aesthetic minimalism and in its complaint against a label that, as we have seen, is in fact

¹²⁵ In this thread, also, some responses include reference to such generational attitudes towards material things. An user, for example, speaks of the situation at the grandparents’ home as “not far off from a *Hoarders* scene” because of his or her grandmother saving and collecting everything, leaving behind – after her death – “so much junk”, all due to growing up “in a time where there was not a lot of stuff and things could be taken from you quite easily.” The user also presents this as a bad personal influence – through his or her mother – to be overcome (“[my mother] holds onto all of her things so much and unfortunately has rubbed off on me but I’m trying to be better”).

meant to be almost thoroughly subjective by most minimalists: one annoyed user points out that “this sub is 80% just people trying to define minimalism” and takes the original poster to covertly do the same, since otherwise the problem would be already solved by recognizing that there are different minimalisms; three commenters are “not quite sure” or “confused” about the original poster’s purpose and rhetorical target, taking him or her as arguing with nobody else really – “most of the time, we’re our own worst critic” – around a word that is “just a word” and can be simply discarded without making other “types” of minimalism “sound like the wrong type of minimalism or reasons to identify as minimalist”, especially with no “alternative for ‘good’ minimalism” in place. The rhetorical use of a label, much like the pursuit of an aesthetic after all, is taken to be an egocentric affair (“Isn’t it just something to fuel people’s egos to label themselves as ‘real’ minimalist?”), while a different user again locates the issue in the degree of determination – and thus, relative to that, of “perfection” – assigned to the label, also unwittingly in the original post since it took for granted that a label is useful only when it is very much determined: as they explain, it is the “no true Scotsman fallacy”, that is, “nobody is a perfect minimalist therefore there is no minimalism”; which is wrong because “minimalism is not a monolith” and it consequently is “an exercise in futility” to qualify it beyond “the broad scope of living intentionally with less.”¹²⁶ The same “broad scope” of intentional living – a phrase which “minimalism” is in fact very often associated to or rephrased as, even without the qualifier “with less” – is again explicitly indicated as “key” in another response:

I think the key is living with intention. Going through many of what you see on minimalism, whether it’s wanting to declutter so your not stressed over your house looking like a mess. Or like myself, I mainly wear blue jeans and a black t-shirt every day. Not because I think it’s a statement. I do it because I like it and I don’t have to think about what matches what and keep up with the latest trends.

¹²⁶ According to this user, the same goes for “any other social movement (e.g. feminism, veganism, zero-waste)”, and so far as labels per se are concerned, that is not false: any isolated word as such is more or less indeterminate, especially those words which do point to complex and contradictory phenomena. However, besides the different ways labels can rhetorically circulate and be practically used in social and cultural life, their indeterminacy is not all the same, because one label has its own commonsensical and encyclopaedic pathways through which it can be determined further perhaps much more readily, easily and accurately than another. Taken by itself, “feminism” may not be much more determinate than “minimalism” is, yet it has a recorded and still unfolding history of primary, secondary and tertiary texts and discourses of all kinds which often do struggle to cumulatively determine and develop it, also by differentiating it into plural feminisms when necessary, or at least various “waves”, without that detracting from its meaning in the singular (Arruzza & Cirillo 2017). To what extent this is the case with “minimalism”, since it constantly falls back on a certain hybrid aesthetic and ethical-practical common sense with at most different emphases on different media, is what we are trying to ascertain.

No matter how someone thinks minimalism works for them, I think if they are mindful about what they are doing. And do what brings them happiness, not what society necessarily says brings happiness, then I think it hits the mark.
But as you said, many people have different thoughts on what is minimalism. And this is just mine.

Minimalists are “mindful about what they are doing” and neither follow what “society” says, nor do things like dressing to make “a statement” to society (and “keep up with the latest trends”). While it may seem hardly distinguishable from the subjectivist appeals in general, we will see that the appeal to intentionality suggests, in addition to some kind of attentiveness – or “mindfulness” –, a sense of criticality that is not as prominent, of course, where subjectivism works as a way to soften the internal crises among minimalists. Responses like the following one, while not mentioning intentionality per se, underline the on-going work of critical self-reflection that goes with it:

As someone who spent the first 25 years of my life maniacally collecting and buying things, and the last 10 decluttering, minimalism for me is constantly redefining what “need” means. The more I can make use of everything I have, giving or donating or using up the rest, the more I can stretch my resources, make other people happy, save money and time, and feel accomplished rather than suffocated by belongings just for the sake of owning them

Instead of being contrasted to “society” as external to the individual subject, here the intentionality promoted by minimalism is stressed by contrast to one’s own past ways of doing things, before trying out and transitioning to minimalism. No reference is made to the aesthetic, clearly emphasizing the side of minimalism which amounts to a form of voluntary simplicity. Taken together, however, these three responses alluding to “intentionality” as the cornerstone of minimalism beyond its crises do illustrate its ambivalence towards the aesthetic: the first user points to intentionality as a slightly more specific form of subjectivist appeal in order to make minimalism inclusive of the aesthetic (as well as everything else, even luxurious experiential consumption); the second user does pretty much the same, but in the meanwhile also betrays that subjectivism’s at least partially anti-aesthetic bent against “statements” and “trends” – while the “house looking like a mess” becomes a non-aesthetic matter of “stress”; finally, the third user sets aside the aesthetic dimension altogether (though there might again be a hidden hint of anti-aestheticism in the opposition to collecting things).

A reference to the relative novelty of the term “minimalism” as a label for a lifestyle instead of an art movement is found again in this thread: as a response to the original post’s claim that there is no minimalist “anymore”, a commenter maintains that in fact “there never was” a minimalist as a specific lifestyle to begin with – and again, nei-

ther should there be. Together with another user who sub-comments and mostly agrees, they present the term “minimalism” as “just a fancy easy-to-use term invented a couple years ago” around a generic preference “to live [with] less stuff for whatever reason”, a keyword only useful to find “like-minded people” online, because actually using it in describing oneself “sounds too special snowflake” or “is pretty awkward and cringeworthy”:

[U1] “I don’t even think there is such a thing as a ‘minimalist’ anymore”

I think there never was. I think minimalism is just a fancy easy-to-use term invented a couple years ago to describe a lot of different people who prefer to live less stuff for whatever reason. 😊
Or well, the term exists since the 60s but then it was based on just art, not as a lifestyle. People who are unaware of the term minimalism will probably call those people just neat/organised people who only own what they need/love.

For me it’s just easy to find like-minded people under the term minimalism online. I never tell people around me I’m a minimalist, sounds too special snowflake to mention to someone. My way of life doesn’t need a name. (If other people do that, you do you. 👉)

[U2] “I think there never was. I think minimalism is just a fancy easy-to-use term invented a couple years ago to describe a lot of different people who prefer to live less stuff for whatever reason.”

You stated something doesn’t exist then name it and give the definition for its existence. :)

In any case, minimal is a pretty intuitive term and not something that’s abstract or requires explanation (say like Zoroastrianism). I say “minimal” and regardless of the context, anyone who speaks english understands what I’m talking about regardless of whether it’s a lifestyle, art, design choice, or fee.

The act or lifestyle of minimalism is not new Japan has a long history with it as do a lot of religious orders – monks, nuns, priests, etc.

Buddhist monks are probably the embodiment of the term if there ever was one.

To be fair, walking around telling people you’re any “-ist” is pretty awkward and cringeworthy – see Vegans and the hate they get when they do it¹²⁷.

Again, the rhetorical role of a lifestyle label is overall downplayed in a subjectivist way: one’s “way of life doesn’t need a name”, therefore – as the original poster advised to do – everyone is better off directly describing oneself the way “people who are unaware of the term minimalism” would, that is, as “just neat/organised people who only own what they need/love” (but even here, of course, the subjectivism goes meta: if instead other people do want to use the label “minimalist”, they are free to do so). Quoting the first one, the second user does push back a little on the dismissal of the label, and in so doing again identifies it precisely with the indeterminacy which the other user pointed to: that is in fact “the definition for its existence”, not a proof that “there never was” a minimalist, and this of course means that the label does serve a purpose – not merely bringing together in a practical sense as indicated by the other user, but evidently more something like merging together the differences into its indeterminacy, thus still allowing for

¹²⁷ Here again “veganism” is cited as a phenomenon similar in a way to minimalism, but whose criticality – this time external, that is, directed to non-vegans – is taken to be made (more) problematic by the rhetorical recourse to a label, since of course it opens up a crisis between insiders and outsiders.

some form of identification with the label. After all, how can the bringing together not presuppose some degree of merging together? How can there be “like-minded people” without there being in fact enough likeness upstream for their bringing together to be at all possible if not useful? This “likeness”, just like all likenesses, operates mostly and firstly by common sense. The first user pushes the indeterminacy to its utmost limit by simply reading the label of “minimalist” as a vague preference for a reduction in “stuff” one lives with. Others, as we have seen, point to “intentionality” as an additional crucial element of minimalism, which of course also appears to accord very well with its subjectivist indeterminacy. The original poster, and the first user in this last exchange of comments as well, also appeal more directly to common sense by preferring commonsensical and more concrete description such as “tidy”, “neat”, “organized”, or pointing directly to the core practices such as decluttering setting aside their overall coherence within a lifestyle (which evidently is, however, what “minimalism” is rhetorically used to indicate). The second user in the last quote makes the same exact move but claims that it works fine with the label itself once stripped of its substantivisation and retained as the supposedly simpler, “more intuitive” adjective of “minimal”, which can then be determined in each context (“lifestyle” being only one of them, again implicitly distinguished from the aesthetic of “art” and “design choice”). An extension back in history is also made – this time an obviously more problematic one to Japanese and/or Buddhist traditional monasticism, whose aesthetics is in fact somewhat associated to the minimalist discourse, but which also brings in the aura of asceticism that many minimalists want to dispel no less than the aestheticized one as again equally overdetermined in the opposite “frugalist” if not spiritualist direction –, yet while it is acclaimed as the “embodiment of the term if there ever was one”, it is clear that it is not at all suggested that minimalists should adopt that specific way of life either in its aesthetics or in its ethical-practical dimension. If anything, the image of the Japanese Buddhist monk can be said to work precisely as a metaphor of the strong integration of the aesthetic and ethical-practical dimensions of experience which a lifestyle – and even more minimalism, because of its ties to art and design – is meant to encourage, as do ideals in general, especially religious ideals, insofar as they function as wider-range integrative interests. Sub-commenting and quoting again another response, the same user goes further and makes explicit the other main commonsensical glue – the “underlying common

theme” – that makes the subjectivist indeterminacy of minimalism nonetheless appear to stick together:

“My point was that if we call ourselves minimalists, then we’re all likely describing something different.”

Different but I feel like you’re missing the underlying common theme which is more through less. The theme to me is that it’s easier to live your life, be organized, frugal, or even aesthetic through owning less.

The minimal theme is what ties everyone’s ideas together as diverse as they might be.

While you might be after a clean and tidy place one of the ways you do that is by not buying large amount of things and be handing off/discarding/recycling things you no longer use. You save money by being minimal in your purchases.

I agree with you about the anti-holiday posts being a bit rough or coming off as ungrateful.

Minimalists are those that follow the principle of “more through less” – or, as it is usually phrased, “less is more” – in whatever area of their lives, “even” the aesthetic one; this “ties everyone’s ideas together as diverse as they might be”, and it is good that it does: as in the earlier exchange, the user is pushing back against difference being made too visible by wholly giving up on and discarding the label of “minimalism” (whether one does so by making it so indeterminate that the differences may come to the fore, as in the previous case, or by more directly insisting on those differences as in the present case). While the possibility – and desirability – of rhetorically determining and developing a shared “minimalism” any further than this is forsaken, lifestyle integration per se is not: since life is indeed integrative of any area, aspect or activity – if you do not buy as much things, you will have less clutter and save money (and if you save money you may then buy fewer but also “nicer” items, as the line of reasoning behind the upgrade of one’s belongings goes) –, it must be possible to foster such integration through the design motto made lifestyle principle of “less is more”, that is – as we will see – the surprising generation of a surplus of sense through some act of reduction. Along with “intentionality” and the core practice of decluttering and/or reducing material possessions (“owning less”), the “less is more” principle allows inclusion of the aesthetic – because in fact, though this is not at all how the aesthetic is understood in the minimalist discourse, the push towards integration is first and foremost an aesthetic phenomenon: it is what supplies the “style” to the lifestyle (and if not a more or less determined style, than at least the insistence on some degree of stylization). Another user also brings it all together: “There’s no reason to have a strict definition of minimalism. It’s not a cult or a certification. It’s just a philosophical idea that less is more and trying to be mindful about what you include in your life.” What is fundamental, besides subjectivist indeterminacy, is that a tie to lifestyle integration beyond any one area of life – and thus be-

yond either “aesthetic minimalism” or “simple living” – is maintained: as the most upvoted commenter points out, “the sidebar [of the subreddit] says ‘for those who appreciate simplicity in any form’” (a “big umbrella”), but practices like “decluttering” or “cleaning” are by themselves at most “an exercise in minimalism”, since they do not “evolve into the foundation of someone’s worldview/lifestyle.” That this may be rhetorically sustainable without continually sparking crises despite the subjectivism is the principal bet made by the minimalist discourse; and, at least on the whole, it does not seem to hold up so well¹²⁸.

Another more recent prominent thread¹²⁹ (310 upvotes) again ties together in its admonishing post the rhetorical issue of a lifestyle label which can be used to define oneself and the aesthetic one of being captivated by a pre-existing style and impulsively wanting to imitate that:

Minimalism should be integrated into one’s life passively. It’s supposed to ease the burdens unused objects and over-stimulation cause (smart phones, etc.). Obsessing about the aesthetic of minimalism and buying objects to make one “feel” more minimalist are both counterintuitive to minimalism.

I’ve also seen people who started their minimalism journey by being upset at something and taking it out on their belongings by following the 3 Rs: Rid, Replace, Regret.

Maybe the person is stressed about work or a relationship. Maybe a loved one passed. In an effort to gain some control make in their life, they decide to take control of what they own, and say, “I don’t need this or that! And I’ve always wanted to try new outfits so out with the old! Who needs a desk when I can work in bed?!” The journey usually begins in an impulsive manner.

Minimalism, executed well, will not draw any attention to the practicing individual. Don’t worry about the aesthetic sold to you online and in books. Replacing tattered clothing over time is one thing. But rest assured, you look good just as you are.

If you feel something needs to change in your life, and you think minimalism in the next logical step, evaluate other aspects of your life first. Getting rid of things impulsively will lead to regret. Take it slow and evaluate necessities versus excess. Replacing objects can easily become a spending trap.

You will feel better if you take the journey slowly and let it inhabit your life instead of letting it dictate it.

Open to conversation on this.

At least as co-opted and commodified by the mainstream discourse of both books and social media, but more likely in general, the minimalist aesthetic is again cautioned against by the poster as a possibly vicious alt-consumerist cycle of aesthetic upgrade instead of an anti-consumerist one, replacing old things with newer ones in a misguided attempt at thereby replacing also one’s old self with a new “minimalist” self – one which self-consciously if not egocentrically “feels” minimalist, instead of just being

¹²⁸ A self-defined “semi-minimalist” commenter, for example, writes that avoiding the judgmental “attitude” against others as “lesser” or “unenlightened” is why he or she prefers the decluttering subreddit over the minimalist one.

¹²⁹ [1b_tc], “Don’t let minimalism define you”, Aug. 2022, <https://reddit.com/wprmlr> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

minimalist without “draw[ing] any attention to the practicing individual.” The place of reflective – though still clearly subjective and thus undefined – evaluation of one’s “necessities” as opposed to the “excess” is even more emphasized here by contrast to the impulsivity which at least marks one’s first encounter with the minimalist discourse, especially because of its aestheticization, but perhaps also simply because of its aspirational rhetoric. This impulsive minimalism – which for those commenters in the previous thread would probably not count as minimalism at all, since minimalism is for them necessarily intentional – in part is, as just said, merely a different form of consumption¹³⁰, but is problematic per se even if it does not result in minimalist shopping for upgrading one’s possessions: it is an attempt at solving or softening other problems in one’s life in a vicarious way by aesthetically remaking oneself, a breakup haircut of sorts but with one’s belongings cut out instead of one’s hair, and it later leads to “regrets” besides turning into a “spending trap.” As the sarcastic wordplay on the “3Rs” clearly hints at – “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle” being substituted with “Rid, Replace, Regret” –, minimalism is here more or less identified with the anti-consumerism of simple

¹³⁰ Needless to say, this line of anti-consumerist criticism comes up frequently in the discourse around the aesthetic dimension, and other popular threads target commodification of minimalism in a more focused way (failing to note, of course, that minimalism was commodified to begin with, and that what they are facing is not a retrospective project of recuperation and conservation, but rather a prospective one of remediation and construction). One thread (761 upvotes), for example, reminds the subreddit that the “less” of minimalism cannot be bought, and ties this to the determinate aesthetic of “seven white shirts” or “white sheets, Scandinavian design and light grey paint” commonsensically associated to minimalism, which is okay if “it makes you happier”, but does not make you more of a “minimalist”, which is just an idea that “seems to run rampant on social media” ([myphoneisbroke], “You don’t need to buy less.”, Aug. 2020, <https://reddit.com/ighvs0>; last accessed: 14/11/2023). In the original poster’s view, “using what’s already available to you from the get go until it’s either worn out or not making you happy is more minimal”, which of course implicitly identifies minimalism with some kind of frugalism (in turn identified with “lifestyle minimalism” as a whole: “This is the difference”, as a very popular comment – 514 upvotes – glosses, “between minimalest aesthetic and minimalist lifestyle”). At the same time, since there is nothing – minimalist style included – that cannot pass through that subjectivist door of “making you happy”, the point while ambiguous is ultimately a call for indeterminacy, not for frugalism (though some users do push it farther, for example by writing that “Necessary = minimalism”, surely a stronger claim than the common minimalist reference to actual use: aesthetic enjoyment may still fit the utilization criterion, but it is usually – as in this comment – taken to be the very opposite of a “necessity”). Just a month later another thread (294 upvotes) laments the portrayal of minimalism as “an aesthetic and life style for privileged rich people”, especially of the “tech nomad” sort, which pushes everyone else towards a “vicious cycle of constantly updating and upgrading your belongings to maximise the benefits” or to “minimise the number of items” just for the sake of fitting in, always searching for “the perfect item of everything” in a perfectionist, “materialistic” and “capitalistic” way ([hi3lla], “The concept of ‘min-maxing’ your belongings”, Sep. 2020, <https://reddit.com/ivipuc>; last accessed: 14/11/2023). In contrast to this, the original poster’s minimalism is centred on “the idea of being content with my belongings and focus my attentions elsewhere”, and involved eight months of not buying anything, thus leaning once again towards the identification of minimalism with simple living and anti-consumerism. That the criticized principle – the “min-maxing” of one’s possessions, as opposed to reducing and minimizing them full stop (except “when it’s appropriate”, and of course “everyone should do what feels good”) – easily maps onto minimalism’s commonsensical “less is more” principle already makes it evident that, even if it were in fact a problem of commodified co-optation, the minimalist discourse is inherently vulnerable to such capture.

living or other forms of voluntary simplicity, with the diffuse impact on one's own personal quality of life understood again in the emotive terms of well-being instead of aesthetic ones (a "burden" to be "eased", whether it comes from excessive objects such as unused ones or from some other kind of "over-stimulation" such as, of course, that induced by the very digital media the aestheticized mainstream minimalist discourse circulates in). It is not clear whether aesthetic values in general are to be disqualified from the minimalist evaluation of objects as in fact inherently unnecessary and excessive, though at least by example the aesthetic bar is set quite low (it is fine to "replace tattered clothing"). More sensibly, the original poster's call is indeed for a more reflective transition to minimalism as a longer and on-going process to be actively engaged in with regard to one's subjective situation, and thus "passively" integrated into one's life (that is by experience, which has its fundamental passive phase in observing both one's conditions and the feedback of the consequences of one's actions along the "journey").

Intentionality quickly comes up in the responses, and the original poster also endorses it in a sub-comment as the point he or she was making. As one user says, "Being intentional and rational should be the foundation of minimalism. It should lead to sense of well-being. If it's creating anything than peace, we need to go back to the very fundamentals of minimalism"; the emotive objective of "well-being", which of course is taken to be the opposite of "obsessing" over things and aesthetics, is thus also explicitly foregrounded. Interestingly, apart from responses supporting the anti-consumerist take evident in the original post ("I agree with you; minimalism should be about having what you feel you really need vs what corporations and governments make you think you need"), other responses attack not the aesthetic but rather with the ascetic, thereby underlining the excessive getting rid of things implied in the original poster's impulsive minimalism instead of the upgrade of one's things by renewed consumption:

[U1] I was wondering about this too. I see a lot of people conflating minimalism with some kind of asceticism or stoicism. There can be overlap but I don't think cutting all "unnecessary" pleasure from your life and identifying with that is the same thing at all.

[U2] Yes, and that comes up often. And can lead to gate-keeping, like "You can't be a minimalist if you have a TV/car/more than 3 pairs of socks!".
I mean, if that's what floats a person's boat, fine. But they shouldn't try to push anyone else out of their own boats.

As we have already seen earlier with other accusations of "gate-keeping" by criticism of expensive products such as iPhone, the problem goes in the other direction as well, that

is, in the direction of “conflating” minimalism with some form of frugality if not with the self-deprivation of asceticism or even “stoicism”, going too far and renouncing “‘unnecessary’ pleasures” for the sake of defining oneself as minimalist. The fact that the original post was read this way despite attacking the aesthetic confirms the very ambiguous nature of the minimalist aesthetic common sense, which can easily conjure up associations both to refined luxury and to either down-to-earth or depersonalized austerity (that of hospitals if not that of “non-places” such as airports, but also that of less idealized forms of monasticism than that of Japanese Buddhist monks). Yet if one “shouldn’t try to push anyone else out of their own boats”, which once again is an appeal to subjectivism against the perceived criticality of minimalists among themselves, how is that compatible with the original poster’s criticisms of the aesthetic? Is not aesthetic pleasure too one form of perhaps “unnecessary” pleasure that may still be worth not renouncing? For these two commenters, since they are rhetorically trying to stitch up a crisis, the pacifying subjectivist appeal would be enough: even if seemingly “unnecessary”, the more aestheticized practice of minimalism would then be included as valid if one subjectively finds value in it, and that is all. For the original poster, instead, something more is needed, because here it is the opening of a crisis – a critique – that is at play: intentionality beyond subjectivism – which by itself, rhetorically speaking, does not provide any resistance against impulses – must be urged, even if still rooted in broadly subjectivist ground (it is one’s individual needs that form the object of critical reflection, though it must be said that at least the more on-going, processual approach supported by the original poster entails a genuine – that is, really mediated and mediating – empirical inquiry, thus de facto lessening somewhat its own subjectivism).

Just as interestingly, however, another equally esteemed comment (the first comment among the two previous ones has 60 upvotes, while this one got 61 upvotes) once again appears to move in a different direction in its reading of the original post, because it takes the latter to be an accusation of some kind of egocentrism or narcissism directed at those identifying with minimalism – a denial of the rhetorical role of labels we have already encountered –, since the title urges others not to let minimalism “define you”; and here, just like that exasperated user who invited minimalists to “minimize minimalism”, we find the gesture of minimizing metaphorically applied to one’s self (which a second user recognizes – and it is also confirmed by the commenter – as a nod

to the popular author of spiritualist self-help books, Eckhart Tolle): “Minimise on your ego gratification. Whether it is when buying stuff or ditching stuff. The bigger your ego, the more complicated things get imho”; it is here not so much a matter of “stuff” as much as a matter of one’s own “ego”, to be restrained and itself reduced through the minimalist restrictions on one’s belongings and purchases. The asceticism lamented by the other two users can fit minimalism just as well, though of course it is with all likelihood no less subjectivist in its final goal – the point of lessening “ego gratification” precisely being that of making things less “complicated” for oneself, and thus, one might easily say, eventually (better) gratifying oneself through emotional well-being. Obsession with one’s things and obsession with oneself, impulsive pursuit of an aesthetic as well as rhetorically binding of oneself to labels, go hand in hand; and this time they are solved through self-restriction. Another user extends the point to all labels – “parent, Christian, gardener, Harry Potter fan, attorney” – by insisting that one should “never let any single word sum up [one’s] identity”, as “most unhappy people” he or she has known appeared to do: while safe in their proper context, as identifying a person as a whole they can make a person “one-dimensional” in pursuing whatever they entail at the expense of other interests in life. However, what is the proper context of a label such as “minimalist” insofar as it is indeed a lifestyle label and not a mere fancier substitute for any one of its components without the others, something that as we have seen the minimalist discourse often tries to do and just as often refuses to conclude? Taking minimalism to be the mere sum of whatever its more determinate elements may be – decluttering, downsizing, interior design, wardrobe restyling, saving up, opposing consumerism etc., perhaps minimizing one’s ego as well – would be almost equivalent to dissolving it (“almost” because it could still preserve a minimum of meaningfulness by perhaps being distinguished by at least two components being practiced together, for example). It is worth repeating that this would not at all be per se a rhetorically invalid solution, and in fact it would make much more sense than the subjectivist one – it would likely provoke much fewer and lesser crises –, if it could actually prevail at least in some part of the minimalist discourse (since the mainstream discourse of the influencers depends very much on the premise and promise of something more than that). Yet, even on Reddit alone, we have already encountered resistance to such dissolution and disintegration of minimalism’s aesthetic and ethical-practical dimensions, to which it is often preferred a reliance upon a minimalist common sense gathered around – besides subjectiv-

ism – the core practice of reducing one’s physical belongings, the intentionality of one’s decisions and actions, and the “less is more” principle. How far is that rhetorically sustainable?

An user who is more on the sustainability side of anti-consumerism expands on the original poster’s problematization of minimalism as a label for identification by pointing to its exploitability both for (alt-)consumerist marketing purposes and for capitalistic ones, since on the one hand it often entails attachment to the things not discarded – which can easily lead to other purchases, even with eco-friendly minimalists through “green-washed”, second-hand products and the like –, while on the other hand it promotes an unattached lifestyle that makes up for a “movable workforce” with lowered expectations:

Agree that people buy more “feel” more minimalist. It’s also pretty linked to the idea that people should feel a massive attachment to their things, so then people marketing them use that and also usually greenwash products, or resell products that are sold elsewhere.

I honestly think that minimalism and being happy with less is tied to the “digital nomad” and freelance lifestyle which feeds into the idea that you should be basically an easily movable workforce who is expected to thrive anywhere and in the gig economy where workers are much less likely to have the disposable income and be taken advantage of by people unwilling to pay or underpay.

But, I think if you believe in minimalism it should be a part of your lifestyle enough that it does define you in some way, especially when it actually comes to “the doing” and you see that marketing still works [...].

It seems like people tie their personalities so much to minimalism and zero waste that you can never question anything that goes into the behaviour and why we think we need something. like how I was told I was “shaming” people who wore makeup when my point was just that the advertising wasn’t equality and me and someone else were talking about the subs seeming to give makeup a pass.

As the bold text emphasizes, the complaint here – as in a way also in the original post, though here with a clear social instead of individual outlook – is not that the self-identification with minimalism makes one hypercritical of others, but rather that it does not make one critical enough towards those forces of exploitation, and that in fact it shields one from considering the critical questioning which others may provide, immediately dismissed as a form of “shaming”, that is, as being hypercritical in what are supposed to be subjective choices. Once more, an opposite conclusion is reached: subjectivism is the problem of, not the solution to, self-labelling as a “minimalist” and identifying with the lifestyle. Still, here the label is not necessarily given up or even blamed per se. On the contrary, it is urged that some kind of sincerity in one’s commitment to minimalism should be present, that in fact it should inform one’s actions – in an accountable way, as it is implied –, which is of course possible only insofar as “minimalism” is to some extent determinate in a shared way, and that, where it is not determi-

nate, it should be determinable also through critical discussion among minimalists. This is quite in line with the approach we ourselves have taken, which insists on not giving up the rhetorical project, if nothing else to illuminate the ways in which it is in fact given up, or in which it fails or goes astray. However, the commenter clearly identifies minimalism – or at least the minimalism worth constructing – with the pursuit of sustainability through an anti-consumerist lifestyle, with no mention of the aesthetic dimension, which is in fact subordinated to sustainability: the commenter’s criticisms – those that other minimalists shielded themselves from – were directed at hair removal and makeup as wasteful practices. The rhetorical project we are taking seriously, instead, is that of a minimalist lifestyle which holds on to both its aesthetic and ethical-practical dimension.

While interpreting and following up on the original post in different and also contradictory ways, these and others responses basically understand themselves as agreeing with it. After all, even those who defend the aesthetic side of minimalism, whatever their reasons, usually have no problem with criticisms levelled against the more intense aesthetization of the more mainstream minimalist discourse online and in popular books; in fact, opposition to that kind of minimalism can serve as a rhetorical target in contrast to which the possibility of a more genuine minimalism, though indeterminate, can be evoked. However, there is also in this thread one response that is critical towards the original poster, both in general with regard to the implicit normativity towards minimalism – what it “‘should’ and is ‘supposed to’ universally do” (though it can hardly be maintained that the original post had such critical intensity) – and in particular as to the contribution of the aesthetic, its association to impulsivity and to psychological harm:

What you’re describing sounds like your own personal experience, that you’ve mistakenly interpreted as a universal one. We all have the tendency to focus on ourselves and have a bias towards that, but presenting it as objective fact is a bit weird, and certainly not accurate.

There are indeed people who use minimalism as a response to stress or even trauma, or who experience some sort of regret at some point. But it’s a pretty far leap from that to your statements about what minimalism “should” and is “supposed to” universally do. The response also isn’t necessarily a bad thing as you seem to have assumed.

It’s not clear why you think minimalism is “supposed” to be all these things. Why isn’t it supposed to draw attention? Why does it need to be passive or slow? Why is impulsivity a bad thing? Why is an aesthetic a sign of harm? More importantly, which do you think it damages rather than improves psychological health?

This has the potential to be a good opinion essay of sorts, and certainly has some truths for *a subset of people* that have been discussed here periodically, but you need to do a lot more legwork to defend the connection you’re making between these characteristics and a harmful effect, and most importantly explain why using minimalism as a tool to deal with trauma/disorientation is even a

bad thing in the first place. That's a really, really big assumption when there are people using all sorts of different tools and tricks to pull themselves up successfully.

For example, think about the opposite thesis: minimalism is a valuable tool for overcoming trauma and improving one's life if they feel disoriented. That can be pretty well defended too. Minimalism offers a platform upon which to solidify an identity, a form of (sometimes radical) independence, forces reevaluation of habits and relationships, and offers a very strong sense of direction. That sounds like a really good cocktail for a lot of people who are struggling, and minimalism is unique in that it relies on an exported and manipulatable form of identity – physical possessions. This isn't an exercise simply in physically donating a cardigan, but rather what it represents to keep or throw out that cardigan. That can be a good or a bad thing depending on the situation.

The fact that minimalism involves some kind of vicarious, compensative work on something under more direct control – one's physical possessions – to deal with one's life at large, particularly one's mental health and identity, even by way of those aesthetic practices that “draw attention” to oneself, is here admitted but reversed in value: if minimalists do this, perhaps minimalism is in fact a “valuable tool” for psychological self-help and more general self-improvement in one's life (as it is presented by the mainstream minimalist discourse). After all, we have seen that references to “easing” of emotional burdens such as “stress”, or more positively to “well-being”, are usually taken by most to be the goal of a minimalist lifestyle, including the original poster. The difference, here, is that for this last commenter working upon one's aesthetic or one's identity in general – which also evidently encompasses the rhetorical use of a lifestyle label such as “minimalist”, which many others reject – is an integral and valid part, at least for some, of how minimalism works, even if it sometimes goes wrong (some do “experience some sort of regret at some point”, and the original poster's criticisms do apply to “a subset of people that have been discussed here periodically”, yet this does not necessarily preclude the viability of the aesthetic and rhetorical practices and projects). More specifically, identification with minimalism affords one a “platform” through which a “form of (sometimes radical) independence” can be gained with regard to others: it “forces” a reflective reevaluation not only and not so much of things per se, but rather of meaning, through personal identity and relationships with others (“This isn't an exercise simply in physically donating a cardigan, but rather what it represents to keep or throw out that cardigan”). Besides, the practice itself – as an interest, in our terms, in reference to which one can progress – provides a “very strong sense of direction”, something that one can concretely do and see the results of – as in games –, allowing on-going self-transformation to be indeed felt (what was instead criticized by the original poster and other users). As we will see from our analysis of minimalist vlogs on YouTube and their implicit or explicit stress on authenticity and autonomy, these observations about mini-

malism are not off the mark; in fact, in a polite sub-comment, the original poster agrees and restricts the target of the critique by saying it was “focused primarily on the corporate takeover on the subject of minimalism”, the selling of things “under the minimalist moniker” which makes it “exclusive” and a determined “destination” instead of a “journey.” Once more, a genuine minimalism is projected by contrast to the aestheticized and commodified one which is commonsensically taken for granted, even though, as we have just anticipated, the mainstream minimalist discourse itself is characterized by that self-help and self-improvement project the commenter refers to (and even in those cases in which no product or service is directly sold, of course, the commodification is still inherently there in the workings of social media, where attention at the very least is always commodified: Odell 2019). The commenter’s point is that this project may include the aesthetic dimension and surely also what, in our view, is the rhetorical dimension of identity, in both cases the meaningful relationship to things and other people being the proper object dealt with in minimalist practices. And the original poster’s point, while implying that at least some caution is needed in undertaking this project – especially because of its commodification –, is easy to subsume under the very common sense that goes along with it, since its call for intentionality can be assimilated to the “independence” mentioned by the critical commenter, and vice versa. What is at stake, then, is perhaps the nature of this intentionality, what its relationship to the aesthetic and the rhetorical, to impulses and identity, is or may be; and on this issue, the minimalist discourse as a whole is clearly divided along the lines of various fractures, though also resisting the decomposition and dissolution that comes from polarizing the aesthetic against the ethical-practical dimensions of the lifestyle.

Examples could be indefinitely multiplied¹³¹, but it is worth concluding this brief sampling of minimalism’s crisis in front of its aesthetic dimension with one among oth-

¹³¹ For good measure, we may add in passing just a few more examples of threads which are closely related to the perceived tie between the aesthetic and perfectionism. The first one attacks the “toxic side of minimalism” – an interesting phrase given that practices of “digital detox” are also incorporated in minimalism, and one that reflects the issue of “toxic positivity” as the long shadow of self-help’s positive psychology (a wave last ridden by Goodman 2022) – identifying it with comparison to the “picture perfect minimalist content” of YouTube or the “aesthetically pleasing feed of well curated and styled photos” on other social media platforms, as well as with comparison in general, including that around how little one owns: minimalism, as “something ethical” like “zero waste” and again “veganism”, makes you feel “superior” and “better” than others, and at the same time endlessly strive to become “what was visually and socially applauded as a ‘perfect’ minimalist” (deleted user, “toxic side of minimalism; why i kept wanting to give up”, Jun. 2020, <https://reddit.com/gyuvy5>; last accessed: 14/11/2023). In another thread, an user confesses – to save others from doing the same – his or her own mistaking minimalism with “perfection-

er popular threads (338 upvotes) which address more directly and from the very start the minimalist aesthetic as such¹³²:

Just wondering if there are others that feel the same way. Also looking for inspiration.
I absolutely love minimalism in the sense I am attracted to very versatile items and long to own only what I need.
But – I have always had a distaste for the aesthetic. I have an art background and really dislike minimalist art. I don't even know why, if you love it, yay! It just isn't for me. I am in love with little details and ornate objects. In art, I love looking at a piece that I can find a new detail in even years down the line.
Im new to minimalism and trying to mesh these two worlds together. Anyone else have a fascination with the ornate and developed their own aesthetic while still living in a utilitarian manner? I know plenty of cultures have achieved this for centuries, but with all the options in contemporary America, I find myself attracted to so many things Im having a difficult time trying to achieve a cohesive aesthetic. I do believe that doing so would help me feel light and comfortable in my own house, if that makes sense.
As a disclaimer – I have a poverty-hoarding background where I've acquired a bunch of useful items from others for free and now trying to declutter sustainably. I've found my favorite items are all over the board from bohemian/beachy to victorian/gothic.
Id love to hear any advice, inspiration or discussion on the topic!

Minus its aesthetic, minimalism becomes “living in a utilitarian manner”, but while it seems understandable enough how being “attracted to very versatile items” could be fitted into such description, it is harder with the “long[ing] to own only what [one] need[s]”: is this longing an utilitarian longing? Or is there in fact some relationship with the original poster's desire to achieve, despite the excess of “options” on offer, a “cohe-

ism”, again tied to throwing away too much and replacing things to fit one's “minimalist aesthetic”: what was “toxic” in the previous thread is here “stressful” and “bad for your well-being”, but both present the lesson to be learned as being that “minimalism is very different for each individual”, and that only then one is in accord with “the real principles of minimalism” or “of the minimalist concept” ([Pitiful_Baby7310], “When does minimalism become perfectionism”, Apr. 2022, <https://reddit.com/ttmf7w>; last accessed: 14/11/2023). A third thread relates an episode of going “too far” and feeling “existential dread” in not being able to decide whether to keep or not a mere paperclip, and tries to distinguish minimalism again from both “denying yourself happiness because you refuse to buy anything” and “feeling ashamed that your home and your life doesn't look like those of the people online”: “It's okay to consume, just don't overconsume. It's okay to own things you don't use everyday, just not things you never use. It's okay to not fit the idealistic Minimalist aesthetic, minimalism should relieve stress, not create it” ([Unsweetenedlettuce], “The point in which it's too much: The paperclip dilemma”, Jul. 2022, <https://reddit.com/vx5qia>; last accessed: 14/11/2023). Again, a 15-year old minimalist contrasts in another thread the “minimalist aesthetic” of social media with “true minimalism”, stressing how from mere pictures “you don't see” relevant evidence of the lifestyle such as frequency of use, value got from them, commitment in thinking hard before buying something, handpicking of clothes for regular outfits, things actually discarded and so on, while on the other hand “the minimalist aesthetic could be hiding tons of rubbish”; and once again the negativity of minimalism is blamed, so that “[her] minimalism focuses on making room for things [she] love[s], not getting rid of things” ([phoenixavery], “Minimalist aesthetic vs true minimalism”, Jun. 2020, <https://reddit.com/hf2qm0>; last accessed: 14/11/2023). Finally, an user that was “10 minutes new to this sub[reddit]” pushed back against the focus on “decluttering/making things look nice” by taking that to be sign of lacking “acceptance” and copying the visible “fruits of the ideology” but missing the “core philosophy”, which in this case is clearly of an (ambiguously) spiritualistic kind: “getting rid of attachment to material goods” yet “appreciating your possessions” (after all “the Buddha didn't have an artsy house”; [skankhunt42reborn], “The Forgotten Half of Minimalism: Acceptance”, Jul. 2020, <https://reddit.com/hwopvo>; last accessed: 14/11/2023).

¹³² [plantkill3r], “All for the minimalist mentality, but hate the aesthetic”, Jun. 2020, <https://reddit.com/gwc8v1> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

sive aesthetic” – which in fact is thought to be helpful in feeling “light and comfortable” in one’s house? Moreover, can these “two worlds” be meshed even through a different aesthetic than the typical minimalist one (associated here to minimalism in the arts more than with a modernist style in design)? Just like in the other threads, some responses trace a strong distinction between “aesthetic minimalism” and “lifestyle minimalism”, the latter for example being described as a “philosophy” which is “not about looking a certain way, but about owning and using items with intention and respect the natural world which produced them, the person (or people) who created it, and the time it took for [one] to earn the money to buy it”; being associated with appearance (“looking a certain way”), once again the aesthetic dimension cannot of course be recognized as part and parcel of how that very “respect” may be realized, sustained and expressed (Saito 2017: 124-126, 150-186; Naukkarinen 2015). What binds minimalists together, at any rate, is intentionality in one’s relationship to things (and people through things), which should not be equated with the “visual aspect” of minimalism. To mention just one more example that gives a different spin to the polarization of minimalism, one commenter opposes to “aesthetic minimalism” to “functional minimalism” (a juxtaposition itself all too easy to trace back to the longstanding form-function dualism within modernist design and its related aesthetics; Parsons 2016: 103-120), where the latter is quite close indeed to the utilitarianism the original poster alludes to: functional minimalism, immediately identified as “the lifestyle”, is optimization of one’s belonging by evaluating them in terms of hidden or evident costs, so that a functional minimalist like the user may wonder when deciding to own or not an artwork, “Do I want to devote my unpaid time and energy cleaning this thing? Forever?”; after all, “it’s not like you buy a thing and then it just sits there adding to your life”, because “it has a cost” (“time” and “energy” to clean it, move it to clean it behind it and underneath it, “space that could be taken by something functional”, added expenses to move everything and so on). There are of course other such overlapping polarizations – one opposes to the aesthetic the “minimalist mindset” defined once again as simply “being mindful of your consumption and being intentional about what you bring into your life, regardless of what that ends up looking like” (which “doesn’t automatically make you a minimalist”, since you may be owning stuff stored away) –, but they are more similar to those we have already encountered.

Many other responses, however, do not go down the path of polarization – nor that of depolarization since they are responding to the original post, which does not press on its distinction between “aesthetic” and “living” –, but rather loosen up the association of minimalism to a determined aesthetic, and do so in different ways and degrees. This by itself is an indication that when the topic at hand revolves more concretely around discussion of a certain aesthetic – since the original poster refers specifically to his or her preferred aesthetic, instead of attacking the minimalist aesthetic and stopping there – there can emerge, in fact, some more constructive treatment of the aesthetic side of minimalism (which at the very least does seem to be something that a newcomer has to negotiate¹³³). In contrast to the “functional minimalist” claiming that he or she is “not a museum” – which is “too much work” –, another user, while writing that “lifestyle minimalism does not require aesthetic minimalism”, goes on by making an analogy precisely to a “museum” or “gallery” where “each item is visually fascinating, and you are highly selective about what gets added”¹³⁴: what counts, here, seems to be the intentional act of selecting things which are valued, also in an aesthetic sense if need be, so that the opposition with the aesthetic is once again softened as a subjective matter (there is no mention of the resemblance – and thus the particular suitability – of the modernist design of minimalism to the “white cube” aesthetic of the museum apt to frame singular works of art: O’Doherty 1986). In this sense, not even the need for a “cohesive aesthetic” is particularly minimalist. One might at most say, as another com-

¹³³ For example, a young user which is “more on the alternative side (lots of piercings, bright tattoos)” wonders in another thread whether she will “ever feel like [she] can be a minimalist” because of not fitting with the minimalist style, even though she desires “[not] to rely on things to make [her] happy” and “want[s] to feel okay with less” (deleted user, “Not fitting into a “minimalist style”, Jun. 2021, <https://reddit.com/o7ohgn>; last accessed: 14/11/2023). The responses, of course, polarize once again the lifestyle in contrast to the aesthetic, and emphatically advise her to “stay away from Instagram”, to “decide what minimalism is to you”, to “wear what makes you happy and only what makes you happy” because “minimalism should not – ever – stress you out”, and so on. Only one commenter suggests that “for some folk, the idea of minimalism is alluring” while “the actual practice of minimalism does not suit them”, and that that may be the original poster’s case, yet without explicitly addressing the place of the aesthetic in minimalism. None of the responses shows the slightest sign of excluding the original poster from minimalism, or pressing any aesthetic on her. Still, no one seems to have a doubt that the crisis was very real either, nor has any problem relating to it. Even if it were simply a matter of cutting ties with minimalist influencers and pictures on social media and taking up the “real minimalism”, one would at least to this much negotiation with the aesthetic and then maintain it; if, as the quoted user defines it, such real minimalism is “a way of life that allows me to surround myself with things I love, need, use, and appreciate”, then there might be needed some more negotiation than that.

¹³⁴ This is also the solution of another commenter who “marries” minimalism and maximalism by “acquir[ing] the most aesthetically or emotionally pleasing utilitarian items” available, such as “a beautiful embroidered apron that brings back happy memories of Laos”, or “cute strawberry potholders that my Japanese coworker gave me when she moved away”; this way, one’s belongings are “decorative and meaningful at the same time as being functional.”

menter does say, that “you are the one thing that makes your aesthetic cohesive, because all of the things you choose have in common the fact that you chose them.” While it is not exactly that “longing” for only owning what one needs – the measure here is entirely subjective, so it is again rather a matter of only owning what one intentionally values (for whatever reason) –, this comment is significant in its making explicit that intentionality is taken to entail a form of integrity similar to, and in this view prior and superior to, the cohesiveness of an aesthetic. Seen through the lens of our theory, of course, this idea appears to amount to a denial of the excess of the aesthetic in its own way, as well as a reversal of its relation to subjectivity – and it is understandable: since integration is possible without any cohesive (visual) appearance, which is taken to exhaust the aesthetic tout court, it must be something achievable in a wholly subjective way which is non-aesthetic in nature. However, we have already stumbled upon criticisms in other threads of this kind of longed-for integration, where everything one owns is one’s “favourite” thing or at any rate something which is deeply valued and appreciated, as itself involving a kind of hypercritical perfectionism and vulnerability to alt-consumerism and commodification, and as tied again to the aestheticized minimalism of influencers. Whatever the case may be for intentionality as singularly directed at each item in order to subjectively assess its value, the intentionality which aims at “only owning” things valued in this way – that is, grasped as a whole – already trespass in aesthetic territory on both accounts.

Next would then be responses that, while unfastening minimalism from its determinate style as spread by “so many of these minimalist reddit posts or bloggers and instagrammers etc.” – as the original poster writes in a response to the following comment –, have no problem however with trying to achieve a cohesive aesthetic for oneself, which means that it is at least not understood as inherently incompatible with minimalism (though a couple of users do suggest that the original poster might “benefit more from the Konmari genre of minimalism” – the popular decluttering method of Marie Kondo –, which “encourages displaying and keeping items that bring you joy”, thus granting more “freedom in décor choice” than minimalism). Here are two examples:

[U1] There’s nothing wrong with liking an aesthetic that is not what is suggested by minimalism. If you love colours, bohemian/beachy, victorian/gothic, by all means go for it. Minimalism doesn’t need to mean plain, block colours, monochrome, although those are what I like. I’d rather be in a space that is uncluttered but is colourful or has patterns/shapes, etc, than a space that is monochrome in colour but cluttered.

[U2] I find those hyper minimalist spaces on Instagram too sterile for my taste. For me minimalism is more about the quality and quantity of your belongings, not playing in to a specific aesthetic. I play around with colors a lot – my dining room has a bright yellow accent wall that I absolutely love. My bedroom has a moss green ceiling and velvet curtains. My office has a giant wall of cork board. Area rugs are great for bringing color and texture to a room and are functional if you have hardwood/concrete floors. These things can bring a lot of interest into a space without actually accumulating much “stuff”.

For actual objects – If art brings you happiness you should absolutely have it! What’s the point of being so minimal that you don’t even enjoy your space? For myself I have a couple art pieces in each room, a plant or two in each room, and some very limited knick-knacks that have sentimental value and I enjoy looking at. Everything else is a functional piece of furniture or items I use on a regular basis. It feels like a good balance to me. I know exactly everything I own and where it’s at, it’s still easy enough to pack/move with, but there’s some personal touches and I truly enjoy being in my space.

The first commenter – which got 207 upvotes –, while appreciating the minimalist aesthetic, takes it to be optional and indifferently exchangeable with any other, since what counts in the end is that the space be “uncluttered”, which any aesthetic can evidently be made to be. Thus here aesthetic cohesiveness is nothing incompatible with minimalism, nothing particularly problematic, and if there is in fact an aesthetic side to minimalism, then it has to do with absence of clutter per se, whatever the style of one’s choice is. What the exact line may be, if a line is indeed there, between an uncluttered space and an aesthetically cohesive one is not clear – how much aesthetic incoherence can be introduced in a space before it appears cluttered? –, but the emphasis in the former case is clearly on the quantity and ordered, organized arrangement of physical objects – including their storage, which as we have seen can be problematic (one might store away the excess instead of actually getting rid of it) –, while in the latter case quality is more prominent, and of course understood primarily in terms of visual qualities such as colour and texture, though taken in their constituting an overall quality of character for the whole home or each room. The second commenter, who instead dislikes the “sterile” – or, as other users prefer to put it, “barren and boring”, “bland, uninspiring like the cheapest of hotel lobbies” and getting “really dull, really quick” – minimalist aesthetic, implicitly registers the tension between the two in the need for “a good balance” between functional furniture, and other things that one regularly uses, and decorative pieces that make a place “enjoyable” beyond being “minimal”, that bring “interest into a space” yet without too much “stuff.” Besides the aesthetic undertones we have already noted in “owning only” what one actually needs or uses, which here take rather the form of “know[ing] exactly everything [one] own[s] and where it’s at” and being able to move it all readily (as if it were one’s own body), the “personal touches” of artworks and “knick-knacks” are admitted as well as the need to make the space enjoyable also in

the aesthetic sense, despite there being a tension to be worked through (and minimalism standing again at the functional rather than aesthetic pole of the tension). Reference to a tension to be balanced is found again, for example, in the following comment:

This is definitely me – I have two distinct sides to my personality – the minimalist and the magpie – the minimalist is always trying to refine, curate and simplify and the magpie is always collecting, colourful and curious. My whole life is about returning to balance; I see them as a scale and am always trying to return to the minimalist but keep the colourful individuality magpie flourishing.

However, it is very clear that here, despite still pushing towards reduction of objects, the minimalist pole is not understood as merely or primarily concerned with the “functional” – or, as is the case for others, the frugal – evaluation of objects, but as in its turn also aesthetic in character: it comes with “trying to refine, curate and simplify” what the “magpie” curiously collects, seemingly pointing to the two sides of an aesthetic interest or care (etymologically related to both “curate” and “curious”). Another user who “gravitate[s] towards bohemian/Victorian décor” suggests as much by saying that “in order to not go ‘maximalist’ with these styles” it is possible to “curate” or “edit” them (“So, my style would be ‘curated Victorian’ or ‘well-edited bohemian’”), while yet another commenter “recommend[s] looking outside of minimalism for ideas and simplifying them.” Of course, none of these more aesthetically inclined responses claims firmly and explicitly that such aesthetic work is required to practice minimalism as one constitutive dimension of it, at whatever level it is taken; it is unlikely they would make such a claim even if pressed for a clear stance on the matter, because that would in turn appear to exclude those “functional” or “frugal” minimalists that even these other users seem to implicitly accept as definitive in a more basic sense of minimalism as a lifestyle. Yet as long as the problem at hand is that of in fact aesthetically practicing minimalism in a way that negotiates aspects of its modernist style – the unclutteredness, the overall cohesiveness, the highlighting of fewer especially selected and exposed items against a framing background, or more generally the curating care for one’s space (implicit even in the idea that cohesiveness is there even among items that are intentionally chosen just because of that) –, no intransigent objection nor anti-consumerist admonishment against aestheticization as such is put forward, and instead different suggestions are advanced to come to terms with the problem in varying ways and degrees. It is not that minimalism is not polarized here as well, because – as we have seen – it is, but it is polarized as a way of dispelling the perceived and problematic normativity of its aes-

thetic component, as well as in order perhaps to pre-empt its wholesale identification with minimalism and thus prevent exclusion of its ethical-practical component. We see less of the explicit subjectivist depolarization that this already entails in the thread, and in fact some responses – such as that about “functional minimalism”, or one that takes the “minimalist style” to be “totally separate from a minimalist lifestyle” other than for a merely linguistic coincidence (“Language is weird”) – push the polarization pretty far, yet it is clear that the discourse as a whole remains uncomfortably ambivalent towards the aesthetic dimension on – at the very least – subjectivist grounds. The aesthetic is not to be excluded, except for when it becomes in its turn exclusive.

As we have already hinted at, lifestyle integration even in the subjectivist sense which gathers it around one’s more ethical-practical “intentionality” already has some resonances with aesthetic cohesiveness. Another user who insists on the latter, saying that he or she does not “allow” in the apartment “anything that doesn’t fit the aesthetic” (while “despising” those who merely copy minimalist style as a “trend”: “I think minimalism is personalized”), mentions that this may have been in fact the “main contributor” to his or her minimalism, because it already entails being more selective with one’s purchases: “I buy things but buy only the things that I really want (regardless of its prices)”, and after all “the trick is making sure that what you’re buying is purposeful.” Needless to say, minimalists more prone to anti-consumerism as such would most likely have a problem with the parenthesis in the last quote, but we have seen – and will see again in the next section – that such anti-consumerist remarks are no less pushed back against in the minimalist discourse¹³⁵, suggesting “intentionality” – or, as in the quoted

¹³⁵ Since aestheticized minimalism is itself ambiguous and can take on not only depersonalized but also ascetic forms, signs of “anti-anti-consumerist” readings are present here in this thread as well: the assumed normativity of the aesthetic that troubled the original poster is interpreted as a push to give up more than one wants to. The user that dismissed the minimalist aesthetic as “barren and boring”, for example, goes on to say that “minimalism is more a philosophy and mindset than it is about not having personal property”, therefore one is free to decorate as much as one wants, even if it means owning more things. Another user, presenting minimalism as “just about being very purposeful with what you have and what you buy”, claims that this only “lends itself to having fewer items”, while “theoretically you could still have many items as long as you didn’t buy stuff thoughtlessly” and own “items that gather dust” from being unused. Or as a third comment insists, “It’s all about your relationship to your stuff, not necessarily how the stuff itself looks”, with that “relationship” clearly not thought of in aesthetic terms, and the minimalist aesthetic again explicitly conflated with deprivation: “It’s mostly about reducing your pile of stuff to only things you actually use and want and derive real enjoyment from. It doesn’t mean getting rid of everything but what you absolutely need to survive and reducing the decorations of your wall to the simplest thing that could be considered a decoration. If you have a ton of stuff but actually thoroughly use all that stuff then that’s minimalist in my book.” It is an “excess” in subjective though non-aesthetic terms that must go, as another user writes recommending “find[ing] the sweet spot of enough but not too

comment, “purposefulness” – as enough of a defining feature for minimalist purchases. At any rate, there is in fact some kind of overlapping, as well as positive interaction and feedback, between full-on aesthetic cohesiveness and the much praised intentionality of “owning only” and/or “buying only” things that one “really” values. One user suggests that “minimalism has to do with incorporating space with purpose”, therefore the original poster can “make [her] home Victorian themed but still minimalist” (and if there is too much stuff, get rid of what is not used or likely to be used in the future). A similar advice is given by a commenter who also did not like the minimalist aesthetic, but found out an alternative personal cohesive aesthetic in “pastel rainbow”: “Finding something that ties [the original poster’s] different tastes together may be helpful.” And while there is of course one user that insists that “[minimalism is] not an identity”, that “it doesn’t need to incorporate every aspect of your life”, we also find one more commenter who took the opposite path and entered the lifestyle through – and supported by – the aesthetic:

I’m almost the opposite. I became interested in minimalism because of the aesthetic. I enjoy the clean lines, clear surfaces, and overall visual cleanliness. I find clutter with lots of different patterns, textures, and styles to be visually loud and distracting. Simple colors and textures like white, wood, leather and plants to be peaceful and calming. In order to get to the “clean” aesthetic I want, I had to become much more minimalist so I could have empty space and less items that stand out visually.

Along the journey to have a minimal aesthetic at home, I’ve been fortunate to pick up some other areas of minimalism (spending, environmental impact) that I’m also happy about, but those are secondary to me vs the aesthetic.

How wide is in fact the gap between this stance and that of that previously quoted commenter who “loathes” the minimalist aesthetic as “depressing” and looking like the “cheapest of hotel lobbies”, the “waiting room for purgatory”, if the latter’s approach amounts to only owning not only what he or she uses but also “loves”, thereby excluding besides “duplicates” also “ugly things” and “broken things”? By contrast to the more determinate aesthetic of minimalist, the aesthetic character of this minimalism – with “unique, detailed furniture and décor” and “art objects”, but where “the surfaces of things are organized with no clutter” – may perhaps be missed or understated.

much”: “Minimalism is simply having no excess. If you love your 100 strong bottle collection great keep it but get rid of the things you don’t need, use or enjoy. It’s a personal thing. I have a very minimal wardrobe but have a large collection of board games and sewing stuff. They’re edited down to just the things we love and use but to an outsider they might look like clutter.”

We have probably squeezed the thread enough. Other responses provide ideas¹³⁶ that favour in other ways the maintenance of an at least “uncluttered” and “organized” space, such as gathering together in one dedicated place, or more, purely decorative or sentimental items such as “postcards, little prints, plants, whatever”, thus putting them on display so that one has “all the more reason to make sure each thing is something that you get value from, in whatever sense”; moreover, as another commenter adds, in this way if one indeed prefers a “maximalist aesthetic”, even though one has “less stuff than most” it will still not “look like it” because everything is out in the open, “find[ing] the balance of wanting less stuff while still having everything colourful and fun.” For our purposes, however, what is to be especially noted in this whole discussion is the more general possibility of a more mediated, modulated way of dealing with and talking about minimalism’s aesthetic dimension without immediately disposing of it in order to excise its perceived normality and/or normativity. It is not, of course, pushed very far as a possibility, nor is it made explicit and defended as such. Most of all, there is little to no explicit consideration of the possible advantages of the minimalist aesthetic in its most determinate forms – besides implicit hints we have tried to point to, only one comment maintains, without further elaborating, that “the main advantage of minimalist aesthetics is that it’s very easy to re-create” and “to rebuild in case of some disaster”,

¹³⁶ Similar and additional ideas can of course be found in other threads. In a shorter thread, for example, another poster asks for tips on how to combine the “minimalist journey” – an “anti-consumerism, reduced clutter lifestyle” – with a “quirky maximalist” aesthetic, as well as “more relatable” influencers without the “bare bones minimalist design” ([okaeden], “Minimalist journey with a maximalist aesthetic”, Jan. 2022, <https://reddit.com/rutbl6>; last accessed: 14/11/2023). Many responses emphasize that that is perfectly fine and possible, that “it’s mostly intentional coordinating, very little clutter, a lot of light and space all while still using furniture, textures, and tones that fit your style.” After all, the original poster already has clear ideas for a personalized minimalism, as one commenter points out: “You have defined your minimalism goal – anti-consumption, anti-consumerism, reduced clutter lifestyles. You have identified your aesthetic – everything pink and vintage, classic and elegant, princess-y antique furniture. They seem pretty complementary. I imagine your minimalism looks like not buying anything new (anti-consumption, anti-consumerism, reduced clutter) and buying 2nd hand if needed (anti-consumption, anti-consumerism, reduced clutter, vintage, classic, antique). Having a clear idea of your aesthetic, you can also reduce clutter more effectively. Anything not useful, duplicated and not pink and vintage, classic and elegant, princess-y can go.” Here again having a cohesive aesthetic is both compatible and in part helpful in the lifestyle, yet the latter is sharply distinguished from the former. The lifestyle itself would then be not so different from that of another user’s friends, who are “sort of hippies and somewhat maximalist” and into the anti-consumerism of second-hand stores and DIY, yet “wouldn’t brand themselves as minimalist” and live in homes which “might not be the tidiest but are full of things with meaning and history which does give it a very different vibe than just clutter” (does that “vibe” not point to a whole different way to go about decluttering, one that is however clearly distinguishable from minimalism?). On the other hand, as for influencers, Christine Platt is recommended as a case of “minimalism without the ‘minimalist’ aesthetic” – she implements bright colours, more patterns, ethnic elements and so on –, but hers too is still an extremely curated and cohesive aesthetic built upon a modernist basis. There must be a difference, then, between fully identifying one’s minimalism with anti-consumerism and keeping one’s aesthetic as it is and instead working on it in various ways negotiating the minimalist one.

linking the advantages to the Japanese tradition and to the Bauhaus. However, this thread nonetheless illuminates another side of minimalism's discomfort with its own aesthetic, and demonstrates that there is in fact a valued aesthetic component to minimalism which goes beyond the much-hated aestheticized style of the mainstream minimalist discourse. What this might mean, more concretely, is that if the minimalist discourse has nothing much to offer to someone like the commenter that "love[s] color, floral prints, textures like baskets, woven blankets and rugs, etc." as well as "candles everywhere, plants everywhere" and so on, while still "try[ing] to live minimally", then it is to that extent dissoluble into simple living with perhaps an unfortunate because confusing and misleading name. If, on the other hand, the discourse does bring something to the simple-living table, if it does bring some light to the aesthetic or at least bring the aesthetic to light – as something to be cared for as well as be careful about, either in practices which are more directly aesthetic such as decluttering or in other practices –, then its ambivalence towards the aesthetic is more than a linguistic coincidence. Without facing this issue, the rhetorical matter of whether this last user who "do[es] like how other people's house look with the aesthetic" but "could not live in it" ("I need more color and photos to feel happy") should still count as a "minimalist" is difficult to even make sense of, since, as we have pointed out, the rhetorical power of a lifestyle label to integrate subjectivity – which is not its only or main role anyway – already has its roots in the aesthetic, and may itself count as an aesthetic kind of longing. However things stand, the minimalist discourse surely appears to at least bring to the table the ambivalence itself.

To sum up our analysis before we proceed, we can then start by underlining that the way the minimalist discourse problematizes its own aesthetic component, especially as it is determined in a more intensely aestheticized manner elsewhere by minimalist influencers, extends to a problematization of the whole aesthetic dimension as such of minimalism: by ejecting "aesthetic minimalism" from "lifestyle minimalism", the latter variously equated with forms of voluntary simplicity – from the more individual-oriented frugality of simple living to more social-oriented anti-consumerisms –, the aesthetic is often rejected or pushed away along with the aestheticized. A more commonsensical yet distorted minimalism, dismissed as stereotypical out of its commonsensical nature – all are expected to be already familiar with the more mainstream dis-

course –, is then singled out as the source of a wider misunderstanding of minimalism as a superficial aesthetic practice, instead of a more serious and substantial ethical-practical one. While tied to this contrast with an aestheticized minimalism, however, this polarization is in fact rooted in the many frictions and tensions between the aesthetic and the ethical-practical as reciprocally irreducible dimensions of critical experience: after all, the normativity which is perceived within the normality of a more aestheticized minimalism is from the very start heightened if not generated by the expectation that minimalism be ethical, and as such universal in scope – no one can be excluded from its good practices, much less on merely aesthetic grounds. How the ethical-practical dimension is itself understood of course varies a lot, from those who mostly leave it on the fully individual, therapeutic plane of personal “well-being” – most likely the majority – to those fewer ones who push it either in a more ascetic-spiritualist direction (at least rhetorically), or towards social concerns with consumption for ethical or environmental sustainability reasons. In each case the polarization remains, even though the first one leans and thus also leads more readily to its basic subjectivist depolarization. In other words, precisely because it must bring together – as lifestyles generally do, but even more than that – aesthetic and ethical-practical components, the normativity which is already implicit in the aesthetic is foregrounded and becomes less easy to immediately dismiss on the subjectivist principle of the indisputability of tastes (though, as we know and as we have seen, that does not impede but rather foster insistence on such principle, as a clear-cut dividing line between the two dimensions). For it to be, rhetorically speaking, anything more than an alternative but more confusing name for either some form of simple living or the practice of decluttering taken in isolation – both ways of decomposing and dissolving minimalism in its components –, minimalism cannot but depend on the inclusion of both dimensions, even though this sparks crises which pushes its discourse to repudiate one or the other, since it cannot help but move on – or take some portions of itself as problematically trying to move on – from the mere indeterminate inclusion of those dimension to some more determinate and developed integration. This project is most explicitly suspended or rejected when the label itself of “minimalism”, or “minimalist”, is dismissed as inherently problematic and also meaningless – which of course it mostly is, precisely because it is the task of such rhetorical project to try and construct its meaning, mediating and remediating its recurrently emerging internal crises. While each single individual can of course solve these crises by dissolving

them and go straight to define his or her own personal minimalism, there remains dissent and discomfort around them within the minimalist discourse as a whole, which cannot really be dismissed as merely reproduced by the persistence and popularity of the less “genuine” aestheticized minimalist discourse of the influencers (all the more so since “minimalism” as a label for a lifestyle was from the start put forward by the discourse of the bloggers as proto-influencers). As we have seen, the aesthetic is defended both by way of the depolarizing reaction against the polarization itself – which to the minimalists often appears as steeped in criticality and normativity as the aestheticization it denounces, if not more –, and more directly by accepting and appreciating its contribution to the lifestyle, though often attenuated by translation into more therapeutic, emotional language¹³⁷. This keeps, or rather continually pulls back, the minimalist discourse to its impasse. At the same time, of course, it is also what allows it to reproduce itself as it is, on the whole kept alive and favoured in its indeterminacy to the more determinate labels of its components.

Despite the style in the “lifestyle”, we can find in the discourse around a minimalist lifestyle many of the still pervasive, deep-rooted prejudices and suspicions towards the aesthetic. Aesthetic self-expression is associated, in order to attack aestheticization, to the superficiality and ephemerality of fashion, to the commonsensical imposition of normalized more or less determinate stereotypes by the conformist force of society – taken as external and opposed to the individual –, or vice versa to the egocentric

¹³⁷ In one thread, for example, various commenters besides the original poster admit having got into minimalism “for the aesthetic/satisfaction of having a relaxed, decluttered space”, as the title says, with various sorts of explicit contrasts to what lies beyond such domestic space (and its free time, of course): as the original poster says, “work can be quite hectic and theres stuff all over the place all of the time [...]. Thats why its such a relief when I come back to my apartment and the small space that I have is actually much more open and clean than most of the people in the same building, its much more organized and theres never a mess which is a huge difference and helps me relax and destress at the end of the day” ([PPPHHH99], “Have many other people here chosen minimalism for the aesthetic/satisfaction of having a relaxing, decluttered space?”, May 2020, <https://reddit.com/gfktqj>; last accessed: 14/11/2023). The aesthetic is clearly coated and coded into more acceptable emotional terms, as “the relaxing and very freeing aspects of [a minimalist lifestyle]”, and then presented as alternative and complementary to minimalism as practiced for “frugal reasons” – that is, exactly minimalism as simple living minus reference to such personal well-being, here absorbed into the aesthetic. The responses add to the contrast with the workspace and its “hectic day” – seconded by another user – the more generational one with the household one grew up into (“I came from parents who were mild hoarders and it has traumatized me!”). While there is of course someone who finds it “impersonal”, the minimalist aesthetic is said by many others to “improve mood”, “help with anxiety”, “easing the mind”, even provide “joy” through one’s ability of maintaining it – which is made more accessible by owning less things –, and so on. It also “minimizes visual distraction”, which for some is an “enormous mental burden.” Users like the last one take aesthetic minimalism mostly apart from its more ethical-practical anti-consumerist components – they may own a lot but organize and store things away in –, but the thread nonetheless confirms that value is indeed found in the aesthetic component.

or narcissistic exhibition of oneself through one's valuable objects, in turn making a valued object out of one's self; it is tied various forms of waste, luxury or other excesses with collateral ecological, ethical-practical or political side effects, but also, even before that, to the dangerous immediacy and impulsivity of the passions, of the material and sensible world, by which the individual may be seduced and thus made vulnerable to manipulation, especially one that circles back and co-opts minimalism to that commodified world of consumerism it is supposed to leave behind. While all of these criticisms may point to actual problems of an integrated minimalism, perhaps insoluble problems even, the criticisms themselves are made to more or less immediately and entirely exile the aesthetic dimension wholesale as if it were an external, even coincidental, addition to "true minimalism" as a lifestyle; besides failing in such expulsion by contradicting it and depolarizing it, they can also hardly be said to be very helpful in dealing with those very problems, since they wish to avoid them altogether by avoiding the whole aesthetic dimension (as well as the rhetorical one). The externality of the aestheticized minimalist discourse on YouTube and on social media makes it much easier to take the aesthetic dimension as something indeed extraneous to the minimalist practices and lifestyle (so much so, in fact, that it is all too easy for the minimalist influencers to do the same too, as we will see).

2.3.1.2 – Against extreme minimalism

We can now conclude with a few examples of Reddit threads which instead problematize the other main commonsensical determination of minimalism, that is, its association to an "extreme" lifestyle leaning towards asceticism – which is of course taken to be too exclusionary, too normative. At first sight it might appear to be a problem diametrically opposed to that of the aesthetic, much more easily framed as a luxurious concern out of its supposed superfluity, but while many do take it that way, we have already found hints as to its ties to aestheticization that lie beneath the surface. In fact, the approach to the two crises – which already obviously come together into a call for a middle way between owning and/or consuming too much and too little, between luxury and deprivation – is similar enough, in fact quite overlapping, which will make our discussion briefer in this case, so that we can move on to have a look at how the crises are mobilized in the mainstream minimalist discourse. Two recent and popular threads are particularly interesting for our purposes, because they link their negotiations of minimalism

directly to its rhetorical label, but drawing different and opposite implications from it. In the first thread¹³⁸ (253 upvotes), we find “minimalism” as a lifestyle label be unfortunately misinterpreted by unaware or inexperienced people – that is, by and through mere common sense – as indicating more of an extreme lifestyle than it is, and thus confused with something else that the original poster would rather call “essentialism”:

Forgive me father for i have sinned: I am a single person, living alone. I own only one chair, but six forks.
What does that make me? To be honest, I don't care. I don't need a label for the genuine feeling of contentedness in my life. But lets be real, the moment someone walks into your place for the first time, you need a word for what that is going on in your house. Gotta address that elephant in the room, even if the room is empty – literally.
If I tell my visitor “I like life being easy” I get a blank stare. So I have to go into a bit more details. At some point I will have to use the word “Minimalism”. I do think it is a good name for the concept, but in my experience, it doesn't explain very well what it means: As soon as I say “I am a Minimalist” the number of forks or cups or some other random kitchen utensil I own seems to become a vital piece of information. If the number is anything above one: Is the wrong answer.
And then something strange happens: The person, that never even though, living without a TV is even an option, becomes an expert on it – instantly. Lucky me, I only invite good friends over so I don't get called out as the imposter, the wannabe or the hypocrite I clearly am right there and then. What moron needs six forks at a time to eat a salad?
I am not a moron so rest assure: One fork is all I need, but I still chose to have six. Why? Cause I like life being easy. I have six of them cause my mum got me that nice cutlery set when I moved into my very first apartment. The whole set lives in my cutlery draw, everything has its place, nothing overflows. And most important: I never had an identity crises when I had to open it to get that one fork for my salad.
I saw a documentary once about a guy owning only 100 things and I was fascinated by it. If I ever happen to travel the world for an extended period of time, I will downsize to a carry on bag. That by the way, is what I would label an essentialist. And that is also what I would label as a very extreme lifestyle you either need to be reasonably rich or very poor to make it work in reality.
I have grown (or shrunked?) into minimalism. I figured out the “why I am doing it” years before I found out that there is a name for it, let alone a whole movement.
To me, Minimalism is not a goal, it is the default result of a constant process of re-evaluating life choices. It is a conscious decision to make time and space for the people and things that are important to me now and in the future – and a conscious decision to let everything and anyone go that isn't. It is a constant process that requires commitment and work. The kind of commitment and work that doesn't look sexy on Instagram so you don't get to see it very often.
Success is measured by the result. A simple life is my goal and that is what I have. If you measure me by the number of my forks, you missed the point.

This original post already checks all the boxes by itself. Allusion to a perceived excess in criticality is made from the very start through ironic reference to religion, which is of course widely associated to intense forms of moral discourse with strong and stark dualistic opposition between good and bad people, insiders and outsiders, “sinners” and saints (we have already encountered traces of such rhetoric, for example in the claim that minimalism is not a “cult”). The “sin” of the original poster is clearly trivial – owning more than one fork despite living alone –, so much so that one may reasonably have doubts about the episodes having actually occurred, but whatever the case, this nonetheless complements well the irony, the transcendent being replaced by the outlandish

¹³⁸ [Hivenlyn_2_0], “I am a Minimalist, not an essentialist”, Jan. 2022, <https://reddit.com/sfio3n> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

(again, we have seen reference to the obvious irrationality of an absurd case already in a thread mentioned earlier in a footnote: the “paperclip dilemma” of an ex-perfectionist minimalist). An anti-rhetorical gesture is then made against the very need for a label for oneself when one is already experiencing the “genuine feeling of contentedness” firsthand, but its use or necessity is still also admitted when it comes to other people, and thus to explanations and justifications with regard to one’s lifestyle. That these are spontaneously called for implies, interestingly, that the lifestyle in question is, if not aesthetically expressed on purpose, at least sensibly manifested in a way that opens up a crisis with the expectations of visitors, with their commonsensically assumed normality: the absence of stuff evokes the presence of an “elephant in the room”, it provokes a question, a problem. The lifestyle label should work to close this gap, in the original poster’s view – which goes contrary to some suggestions we have found in other threads –, more than any straightforward description, and that is clearly because such a description is sought at the level one’s overall life: “lik[ing] life being easy” in fact too vague even for a minimalist to accept as a good self-description; to that, “minimalism” at least adds implications to the effect that such life is a coherent lifestyle also shared – at least in certain respects – by many other people. This integration entailed by the label, however, immediately becomes problematic because of the combination of once again extraneous connotations of the word within common sense – “minimalism” of course calling up the search for some “minimum”, perhaps an absolute one at that – with the basic rhetorical effect of making something disputable by others, even those who have just learnt a certain word and, lacking knowledge of its use, will try to infer it from experience and common sense (in this case, empty rooms and common uses of the word “minimum”). Far from solving the crisis, then, the lifestyle label once again exacerbates it: six forks for one person cannot possibly be the minimum, can it? That, of course, wholly depends on the criterion for the minimum, which does not have to be necessarily that of individual use at any one single time, as it is taken for granted. Instead of pushing back against this assumption, the criterion is quantitatively slackened up a bit, made more indeterminate, by circular return to the description that was deemed insufficient at the start: the original poster has six forks because he or she “like[s] life being easy” (and because it does not trouble the implicit aesthetic of organized unclutteredness of the home: “everything has its place, nothing overflows”). Overall, then, a life of simple comfort beyond the twin excesses in luxury and deprivation is projected, with the “very

extreme lifestyle” of “essentialism” already covering both – living with only the bare minimum is something for the “reasonably rich” or the “very poor”, not for those in the middle (who, we may fill in, have neither the means to go travelling and buying things back as soon as they are needed, nor have so little they cannot afford extras of anything – or perhaps are homeless). While primarily rhetorical, the criticism also clearly aims at aestheticization, as the quip about the real minimalist practice not “look[ing] sexy on Instagram” shows: visual stereotypes align with other stereotypes about what minimalism is and is not, for example owning only a set number of items (the implicit reference can be traced back to Dave Bruno’s popular book *The 100 Thing Challenge*, in the first wave of the minimalist discourse; Bruno 2010). By contrast, a subjectivist appeal is made in that “intentionalist”, self-reflective yet still individualistic mode we have already seen: minimalism is a “constant process that requires commitment and work” in making the “conscious decision” of, in this rendering, prioritizing certain (subjectively) “important” things and people over others (“less” things and people in one’s life leaving, of course, “more” time and space for the ones that remain: less is more). The crisis, blamed on commonsensical judgements by others – otherwise, the original poster “never had an identity crisis” about what he or she owns – according to abstractly quantified, rigid, fixed and extreme criteria such as “the number of [one’s] forks”, can then be dispelled by opposing to its obvious outlandishness the good sense of the individual subject, very pragmatically measured on results, not on rules. Whether the aesthetic or one’s rhetorical identification as “minimalist” is meant, “minimalism is not a goal”, it is the “default result”, that is, the by-product of such intentional evaluation; the goal, again, is rather “a simple life”, style-less and label-less in itself – simple living saved from the extreme, as well as from the aesthetic (and the rhetorical). One cannot be “a hypocrite” if there is no criterion to begin with.

Commenters all basically agree with the original poster. For example, a subjectivist description of one’s lifestyle is suggested as a better solution than referencing “minimalism”, a label which is “surprisingly loaded” with “incorrect ideas, expectations, and preconceived notions” like the post lamented (though in response to this comment the original poster in turn replies, only half-jokingly, that “dropping the m-bomb is part of the fun”): it is better to “reframe” the justification as “This is all I want to own”, pointing directly to the “spectrum” of ownership of things at the generic “low-

er end” of which one is placed, instead of identifying oneself as a minimalist. In this case, minimalism is clearly assumed to be only about the amount of things one chooses to live with, with no aesthetic component to be mentioned – in fact, if it contributes to the lifestyle label pushing people to inflexible judgments of others so that “rational thought goes out of the windows”, it can hardly be said to have a positive role to play. Some users do fill in the obvious blanks in the original post: there are in fact perfectly understandable reasons why one would have more forks than one can individually use at a time, one of which is “regularly hav[ing] people over to eat”, as two users point out; moreover, while the original poster speaks of not having “identity crises”, “it still seems to bother [him or her] when others have their judgypants on, enough at least, to write this post”, as another user says. But beyond these remarks, the point is fully conceded to. Hyper-determinate criteria are rejected (“Debates about numbers are beside the point”), and subjectivism is insisted on, again by also playing on minimization as a metaphor – here applied not to minimalism, but to others’ judgements: better than “growing into” a minimalist, as the original poster had put it, is to grow into “being a minimalist in regards to caring about other people’s opinions about you and your life”, advises the user that noted the “bothered” tone of the post. This goes, of course, just as well for how social media depict minimalism, so the link with aestheticization is preserved, and the individual privacy of one’s domestic space is contrasted to it (as yet another user writes, “It’s your house and despite every teen on social media telling you how you should be living your life... Do what you want”). One commenter adds that “if you’re comparing what you possess to others, you have already failed”, which is what social media lead to, along with an aesthetic and rhetorical idealization: as opposed to the “cold and often uncomfortable nights dodging the police” of the commenter’s actual life in a van back in college, as privately “broke” and not as a “minimalist” – even the user’s own family was kept in the dark about the situation –, today “people need to label this” as “minimalism” or “vanlife”, posting pictures on their Instagram profiles and “showing the glamour.” While a different commenter jokingly points to the fact that the label “minimalist” does imply that the lifestyle is an intentional choice and not out of necessity (with an imaginary response to “I’m a minimalist” with “Ouuuf... Relief... We thought for a second you were poor”), the whole aesthetic-rhetorical work around the lifestyle is dismissed, minimalism boiling down to “own[ing] what’s necessary” – for oneself and according to oneself, of course. Rejection of aestheticized minimalism thus also enters

into a rejection of luxury, including the paradoxical luxury of taking up ways of life once or elsewhere determined by external necessity, and by this route the aesthetically idealized (pseudo-)asceticism of “extreme minimalism” – or “essentialism” in the original post – is also rejected while still retaining the sense of reduction, of self-restriction, of abiding by necessities or “needs” as opposed to luxuries or “wants”, that is crucial to minimalism. Six forks are more than one fork – the absolute minimum for an individual –, but they still are perceived as being on the “lower end of things”: contrasted to the commonsensical expectations of people that, if not calibrated on luxury, are nonetheless based upon the excessive normalcy of consumerism, minimalism appears self-restrictive in the assumed good sense of not overstepping too much one’s actual necessities, whatever they are; as opposed to its aestheticized form – which is also partly tied to a stereotyped and fetishized asceticism –, it appears instead as rather open to comforts, especially including the very comfort of the subjectivist shield from criticism, which of course suits very well the authenticity also gained by such rebuttal of the aesthetic.

As for the aesthetic, and partly by the same means – dismissal of aestheticization –, there is a rhetorical dance going on here around the ascetic, minimalism’s commonsensical tie to some kind of extreme lifestyle based on total reversal of consumerism. Personal needs, as literally one form of necessity, point in every case to something that lies beyond a subject’s immediate control, even if it is their own “internal” impulsive desires as individuals – and there are no inherent upper bounds to them: our life, in each and every interest, is pervaded in some way and to some degree by necessity, so that for example we may intensely miss something after losing it – or losing regular access to it – even just out of its engrained integration into our everyday habits, whatever that thing may be; that it might be a luxury by some standard does not necessarily take anything much away from its experienced necessity (in fact, it would be at its core a claim that that thing should not and perhaps could not be taken as a necessity). In this sense, one cannot indeed but accept at first – assent to – what is necessary, including one’s needs, even if one then wishes to transform or overcome it. The proposal of “own[ing] what’s necessary”, however, is clearly an acceptance in the last as opposed to first instance: just like one’s broke college life in a van, so it is implied, one must accept and endure whatever one’s needs are just as they are (and vice versa). The intentionality claimed by minimalists, on the other hand, which as we have seen is rhetorically needed

precisely to distinguish it from poverty – a situation of thorough necessity that in these cases is instead often implicitly taken, of course, as possibly a sign of one’s lack of worth –, seems to presuppose on the contrary that the lifestyle is not taken up because of sheer necessity, that it is freely adopted (otherwise one could not have that subjective and supposedly non-aesthetic integration of life through one’s intention that makes minimalism impossible to decompose and dissolve into frugalisms of various sorts). Yet such freedom is rejected in the course of dismissing as a deceptive dissimulation the privileged aestheticized minimalism of influencers and social media at large, just as was the case for the aesthetic as a whole; if it is not necessary, here, it is not really minimalism. How can this circle be squared? Objectified criteria, perhaps some more or less hierarchically ordered scale of goods that went from the basic necessities of survival up to more and more optional luxuries – with perhaps some recognition of “immaterial” factors in the middle –, already are out of the question as the sources of crisis they are, even though the very premise of distinguishing “needs” from “wants” in the minimalist discourse most likely relies on commonsensical cases where it seems very easy to trace a line and subordinate goods to one another: surely no one could ever really “need” an expensive branded bag as much as they need water. The original poster’s problem was precisely the association of minimalism to the bare minimum for surviving or merely getting by. The main solution, once again, is that of either setting aside altogether one’s label as a “minimalist” and the rhetorical project that comes with it, so that one can focus directly on what one subjectively “wants to own” – or what just as subjectively one believes to be “necessary” for himself or herself –, or that of keeping the label indeterminate so as to make sure anyone is included, even just by virtue of having somewhat reduced one’s belongings at all. An user expresses both ways out:

The difficulty a lot of people have with minimalism is its not a specific term or stringent philosophy about how to live life. A lot of people will happily explain what it means to them as if it comes straight from on high, but the truth is it’s a broad term covering a wide spectrum. The person who’s gotten down to 500 things and counts them religiously is just as much practicing minimalism as the person who went through their things and only tossed out stuff that didn’t spark joy (konmari). It’s not a club and there’s no one who can authoritatively judge someone as having gone too far or not far enough. I’m personally not a fan of the term “minimalist” as it starts to become identity (something someone either is or isn’t) and a lot people begin to take it personally. Minimalism is better thought of as a tool to shape the life someone wants to live and not something they want to be.

This response exhibits the ambivalence of any rhetorical project, which as such objectifies subjects: while labels, criteria, key concepts, principles, rules and the language to

express all such things are by themselves instrumental – they are indeed “tools” –, they can degenerate into more rigid ends to be pursued for their own sake as “identities”, with consequent fixed, sharp dualistic boundaries between insiders and outsiders (that is, immediate and irremediable crises). This rhetorical gesture towards the instrumental nature of minimalism in order to defuse its crises is one we will find very often in the mainstream minimalist discourse as well¹³⁹. And in a way, of course, it does indeed gesture towards the possibility of a more adequate framing of the rhetorical project as such, whose task is in fact first and foremost that of building up common language for inquiries both in private reflections and public discussions. What it fails to notice, besides the basic fact – which is after all the object of our current exploration of the discourse – that no amount of reframing will produce a critical rhetoric that does not deal in crises, is that tools not only shape but also enter into and qualitatively characterize both the life one lives and one’s identity, including linguistic tools: while they may start out as means separate from their ends the way a hammer is from the nail, all tools eventually fold back into the kind of instruments that musical instruments are, parts and partakers of an integrated activity or experience as such (as Dewey taught us). However, the commenter does appear to be more on the sceptical side as to the efficacy of maintaining minimalism’s rhetorical status as a tool, separate from the negotiations of identity. The tool is, at any rate, very blunt: “minimalism” is indeterminate, “covering a wide spectrum” that goes all the way from supposedly extreme minimalists to KonMari followers who – absent the commonsensical associations to negativity in the label of “minimalism”, and given instead Kondo’s positive emphasis on things that “spark joy” – are much less bound, if at all, to anti-consumerist considerations. Once again, “it’s not a club” and there is no “judge” or, as a different user puts it, “You decide your own level of involvement.” Beyond these appeals to subjectivism, and to supply them with a minimum of shared content other than the vaguest reduction with respect to whatever subjective starting point one began from, the good sense of intentional on-going reflection on one’s possession is again pointed to, as the original poster also did, by another user: in his or her concrete conditions, owning twenty-four forks or thirty plates instead of six or one is not at all a problem since everything fits fine in the utensil organizer and cupboard of the home, and all are used when many guests come over. While still in the

¹³⁹ It also comes up in another comment, which locates the “heart of the conversation” precisely at this juncture: “Is minimalism something you ‘do’ vs a tool used to live your life how you want[?]”; it does not, however, make an attempt at providing some answer.

“process of learning what I need”, the user claims that most of what he or she owns is either “useful” or “beautiful”, and both cannot evidently be judged but subjectively with reference to one’s actual conditions and preferences (not, in turn, up for discussion). What counts, and what keeps all together, is the intention to reduce as such, however close to necessity one gets or even wishes to get.

A second thread¹⁴⁰ (680 upvotes), as mentioned earlier, presents a similar problematization of the rhetorical workings of “minimalism” – too easily perceived as “extreme”, objectively measurable in determinate ways and thus judgmental –, but puts forward the alternative label of “essentialism” not as a name for the problem, that is, for the extreme and perhaps aestheticized sort of minimalism that must be distanced from a more genuine minimalism, but rather as actually a better label for the latter:

I’ve loved being a minimalist. It’s been especially helpful being an expat for the past 10 years. I got married this year and just started a year-long global backpacking journey with my wife. My wife is not a minimalist. As we started preparing for our trip, I found communicating minimalism somewhat difficult. As we packed, I started asking my wife, “is this essential?” I found that this question opened and personalized minimalist concepts, which also made it easier to understand. At times, I’ve found minimalism to be challenging for others to accept as it can come across as extreme and some can feel judged. However, as I consider what’s essential to each individual, I’ve found a gentle way to move others in a direction that accepts and appreciates their individual needs and preferences. I want to encourage more people to lighten the loads in their lives. I believe this slight label change can open even more conversations while providing a super simple framework to follow. You don’t have to become an Essentialist, but, “is this essential?” is a powerful question you can use.

This time the original poster is “shifting” to essentialism, but the grounds are basically the same as before: consideration of “individual needs and preferences” which are perforce subjective in nature, and an easing, facilitating and opening up of discussions through and about “minimalist concepts”, especially with regard to non-minimalists. By contrast with the idea of the “minimum”, which tends more to an objective register due to its quantitative character – in addition to all the associations we have already seen, such as that to the “bare minimum” –, the idea of the “essential” may more readily summon up the practical situation it operates within, calling up a need for specification as to what – and who – something should be essential for. The original poster does not insist too much on this label change as such, but suggests that it may be at least fruitful as a question to ask oneself as well as others when it comes to “lighten[ing] the loads” of life. Implicit in the question, of course, is the need for intentional self-reflection be-

¹⁴⁰ [elidevious], “After 20 years as a minimalist, I’m shifting to an essentialism.”, Oct. 2022, <https://reddit.com/yc8tzs> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

yond the subjectivist acceptance of “individual need and preferences”, but that is entrusted to the good sense of the individual and/or to the question itself.

As the previous thread already demonstrates, however, “minimal” and “essential” can nonetheless be each interpreted in both ways, so that simply switching one for the other can do very little to solve minimalism’s rhetorical problems. The most upvoted response actually asks what is in fact the difference between minimalism and essentialism, and after a different user tentatively says that “one is objective and one is subjective” – as is later confirmed by the original poster –, that commenter still goes on to ask “which one is which”; and at that point, a third user gets it wrong:

[U1] Pretty sure essentialism is the more objective one. Minimalism can be interpreted minimizing the things that don’t add value to you life, whereas I interpret essentialism as minimizing to the least amount that will satisfy your human needs, though I guess there is still a fair bit of subjectivity around the need for fulfillment.

[OP] I personally, I find minimalism to be more objective, as standardized principals can be applied to everyone.

For instance, how many T-shirts should one own. In minimalism, we might say 3.

With essentialism, we might first ask “what activities are you involved in that require different types of shirts. And what clothing preferences do you have?” It’s a small difference, but someone that works out daily, has business meetings daily, and a personal passion for music band t-shirts might have different essential needs.

[U1] I guess if you have a personal idea of minimalism that is defined by owning the least amount you can get away with, then essentialism would be a more subjective take, but I think at large most people have entirely different ideas of minimalism. One person might say “oh I live in a small house, I’m a minimalist” where another might say “I live in a mansion, but I only have one decorative painting per room so I’m a minimalist” and another that says “I have 10 pairs of the same jeans and 10 of the same shirt so I’m an aesthetic minimalist”. Essentialism is a much more objective standard of minimalism in the broader philosophical sense I guess is what I’m thinking when I consider objectivity in this scenario.

Since the commenter already understood minimalism in a strongly subjectivist manner, being clearly familiar with how the label is basically claimed by all sorts of people with very different economic backgrounds and employed in very different ways, essentialism is interpreted as the more objective of the two labels, the original poster’s point being misread as the idea that a different rhetorical framing would make such objective considerations more palatable to people (he does say, after all, that he wishes “to encourage more people to lighten the loads in their lives”). Minimalism therefore becomes the “minimizing [of] things that don’t add value to your life”, underlining at once its subjective nature, its positive spin on reduction – the “more” of “less is more” (in this case, the removal of whatever has no value, which can only be a cost) – and the inclusiveness that stems from both, as comforts and perhaps even luxuries can then be accepted insofar as they do provide value. By contrast, essentialism takes back the role it had in the

other thread, “minimizing to the least amount that will satisfy your human needs” – the bare minimum of necessity –, here with an explicit proviso for the possible inclusion of “fulfilment” as an intermediate field of more subjective, immaterial needs. And it is not the only response that suggests as much; another user, for example, describes minimalism as “when all you have is what makes you happy or has a purpose”, including “random stuff that is not essential”, while “essentialism is a more hardcore version” where “the sense of joy kinds goes away”, because you have what you “need” but “no more than that.”

In clearing up the misunderstanding, the original poster makes it clear that he takes minimalism to be more or less the “hardcore version” of itself, immediately applying to any area some universal, abstract standard with total disregard for practical situation and subjectivity, such as asking oneself what kinds of different activities one needs different clothing for. In his view, that is due to the very existence of a “minimalist” discourse online, which by objectifying it and providing “‘how to’ reference content” already makes it “feel a little more objective”, as he explains to another user:

[U1] Doesn't adding a new question to constrain the definition of essentialism make it more objective? It is subjective because the answer to the question varies for different people and things, but compared to minimalism it has a narrower, more well-defined way of measuring an optimum.

[OP] I can see your point. I guess, I kinda feel minimalism has a lot of 'how to' reference content that makes it feel a little more objective to me. Where the the personal interpretation of "what's essential?" has no reference.

One more time, the commenter had understood the labels the other way around: since minimalism is already taken to be thoroughly subjective and indeterminate, the fact of “adding a new question” to it – or its alternative – gets interpreted as in fact a constraint on the definition, not as loosening it up. In a sense, the original poster does look for more objectivity in his reflections, since his essentialist question amounts to an invitation to reevaluate things at least in their objective import as to the concrete subjective practicalities of the relevant situations of use (with clearly less emphasis on enjoyment, and no mention of the aesthetic dimension). While this does not necessarily entail that for any one thing, or category of things, there will be a “well-defined way of measuring an optimum”, a determinate objective solution to be found out, it is no surprise that it may appear as implying just that from a subjectivist standpoint, especially as it is not clear what asking oneself whether something is “essential” in a more emotive or aesthetic sense would look like. On the other hand, what the original poster – whose ap-

proach is no less subjectivist – finds more problematic is the presence of many examples if not models to confront and perhaps conform oneself to in the minimalist discourse, “objective” at least in the basic sense that they are indeed publicly out there, already shared and further sharable, and in fact – as shown by all the distancing gestures from minimalist influencers we have already witnessed – hardly avoidable. He seems to see the discourse as upholding stricter rules than his essentialist question, but he does not explicitly mention any, so it may be safely assumed that it is also if not primarily a matter of the implicit normativity of normalcy, of the common sense accumulated around minimalism through aestheticized representations, as it was in other threads. At any rate, the change of lifestyle label and the reframing that goes with it affords the original poster first and foremost a detachment from the minimalist discourse and its common sense. The strategy, after all, is still the usual one: a subjectivist appeal with some emphasis on intentional reflection, a basic favourable disposition towards reduction – here understood as a reduction of the “weight” of things upon life – balanced by a loosening up of the association with necessity, equated with mere survival and thus felt to be too restrictive a deprivation, and finally disregard for the aesthetic dimension and ambivalence towards the rhetorical one (he does reply to a brief ironic comment – “Labels. Lol.” – by saying that “semantics have meaning and are important in the formation and communication of ideas with nuance”, yet he does not appear to be proposing the construction of an “essentialist” discourse alternative to the “minimalist” one as a new rhetorical project: the new label rather serves the main purpose of carving out a fresh space for subjectivity safe from the sediments of discourse, and from the related commonsensical connotations of “minimalism”). In another attempt at clarification, the original poster further makes explicit what he takes to be the difference between the two labels:

The difference for me are this:

- As a minimalist, I focused on what I don't need.
- As an essentialist, I focus on what's important.
- Minimalism had me focus on less and limitations.
- Essentialism has me focusing on better understanding myself, desires, and wholeness.

Then this foundation framework of asking “is this essential?” is a guide I never had in minimalism. In general, I find essentialism more forgiving and introspective.

The issue, this time, is not articulated in terms of subjectivity or objectivity, which as we have seen do not appear to work that well: as evidenced by the conclusion, where “essentialism” is claimed to be at once more “forgiving” and “introspective” – that is,

accepting of subjective variation – and yet also providing a “foundation framework” or “guide” which does orient one’s subjective reflections in a more objective sense, the subjective-objective dualism cannot really account for what the original poster is trying to get at. There is also no mention of the problem with the minimalist discourse, and of the discourse-free of “essentialism” as having “no reference”¹⁴¹. Here the focus lies again on the commonsensical associations of the two labels: “minimalism” suggests a more negative emphasis on reduction per se and restriction to necessity, while “essentialism” has a more positive ring to it¹⁴², because it looks at what is “important” which lies beyond reduction – an accepting, integrating understanding of oneself which allows for “desires” despite them not being strictly necessary.

It should be obvious, by this point, that this invention of a positive “essentialism” against the negative “minimalism” is once again but a way to turn the crises sparked within the minimalist discourse and its common sense into conflicts, thereby expelling the contradictions. Although a “frugal minimalism” is not singled out – by contrast to the many explicit references we have encountered as to an “aesthetic minimalism”, which most seem instead to be quite aware of –, the distinction in the last two threads can easily be understood as an implicit polarization in the other direction, trying to unfasten minimalism’s potential identification with an extreme frugalist lifestyle (all the while still dismissing the aesthetic, of course, since such a lifestyle is in turn perceived to be aestheticized, recursively applying the very anti-aesthetic rhetoric of frugalism itself – with approving gestures towards “needs” and necessity, for example – to the criticism of frugalism!). Depolarization, which in a way does accept contradictoriness – or at least prefers it over all the crises and dualistic conflicts – yet drowns it into a monistic indeterminacy in order to defuse it, is of course sure to follow. This is already implicit in the original poster’s ambivalence towards subjectivity and objectivity, for example in the last quotation, because here he unwittingly admits that the minimalist

¹⁴¹ A few users do point out, however, that the term is already used with a totally unrelated meaning in philosophy and elsewhere, and besides philosophy there is in fact at least the precedent, also tied to the minimalist discourse, of Greg McKeown’s *Essentialism* (McKeown 2014), a self-improvement book of the sort most concerned with productivity – just like a great part of the mainstream minimalist discourse is.

¹⁴² Some commenters do agree with the original poster on this point. One of them, for example, claims that “this slight change in perspective is definitely powerful, very much so for the people who have an aversion to minimalism” because of its emphasis on the negative “loss of things” even despite impracticality: “While the minimalist in me would say that one set of bedding is fine, the essentialist says that two sets will make them last longer since I can alternate.”

discourse is actually very subjectivist in character: despite the complaints about the abundance of “reference content” in minimalism, he writes here that even such an indeterminate “framework” as asking oneself whether something is essential – or not, but with emphasis on the positive – is a “guide” that he “never had” in practicing minimalism. How to build up and gather together objective “reference contents” which serve critical reflection under conditions which are in some ways and to some degrees subjective is, of course, the very core of any rhetorical project; but here such a project is once more set aside, and the original poster unknowingly circles back to the depolarizing subjectivism which permeates minimalism to begin with (as also his ambiguous complaints themselves in part presupposed). There are thus other users that insist that what the original poster is talking about is nothing but minimalism as it really is, subjective from the very start – in fact, one of them agrees with him by saying that it was his or her own “personal definition” of minimalism as well, described as “having everything I need, and nothing I don’t” (and the stress of this form of “owning only” is clearly on the “I” part, not the “need” part). “To me they are nearly the exact same concept”, writes another commenter, supported by a sub-comment which makes explicit that “minimalism without ‘essentialism’ leans very close to asceticism” (though again it can go the other way around with the polarizing labels: to another user the original poster’s essentialism “sounds like utilitarianism”). In an exchange which involves again the original poster himself, the latter admits to a commenter’s claim that minimalism and essentialism are pretty much the same thing:

[U1] Minimalism is reducing to what is essential not to absolute zero. Minimalism = Essentialism. I think the trick is using criteria for “essential” that are more objective like how often the item is used (rate 1-10) and how important it is (consequences of not having it; rate 1-10) rather than “everything is essential” emotionally.

[OP] You are right. Minimalism = Essentialism
The frailty of essentialism could be individual interpretation that leads to justification.
Lightening our load is a personal journey.

[U1] Absolutely and letting others decide which is a challenge for me at times! If a person owns 3 cars but only uses one of them daily/weekly and the other two rarely and there’s no serious consequences for not having the 2, I’d say sell the other 2 but that’s what I would do. This individual may decide there are social or financial consequences i dont know about and do what’s right for them.

[OP] There is no right and wrong, only consequences.

Minimalism is itself “reducing to what is essential”, so it is clear that any supposed schism between it and essentialism comes to its own internal crises and its own difficulties in handling both the subjectivity and objectivity of criteria, which leads every time

to rigidly opposed emphases. As admitted by the original poster, “the frailty of essentialism” – which, as we have seen, was still primarily to be interpreted in a subjectivist way for him – is the danger of “individual interpretation that leads to justification”, while on the other hand there is the danger of moralism, that is, of fixing a dualistic distinction between “right” and “wrong” and judgmentally forcing it onto others, instead of “letting others decide” for themselves. The commenter and the original poster also agree on the necessity of pushing back against the more extreme subjectivism of those who reject all objective criteria other than their immediate emotions, which may end up making everything essential: it is better to reflect upon and even rate things according to more objective criteria like actual frequency of use or “importance” pragmatically re-framed as the consequences which would ensue from their lack (taken up and contrasted by the original poster, in the last bit, precisely to the rigidity of a moralist approach). On the assumption, however, that everyone knows better than others one’s own situation, thus seeing a broader range of consequences – “social” and “financial”, for example – which may go unnoticed to an external observer, subjectivism is nonetheless needed, especially when it comes to communicating with others. And this is supposed to be the minimalist position to begin with. From what we have seen so far, the subjectivism of the minimalist discourse generally goes much farther than this moderate version, at most attenuated by appeals to the good sense of intentionality¹⁴³ and of on-going reflection, particularly because of its need not to exclude, after all, the aesthetic (as again the commenter does not appear to do: how often does one “use” a decorative item, and what exactly are the “consequences” of removing it?). Still, “essentialism” gets absorbed back into the one indeterminate and primarily subjectivist “minimalism” that it tried to branch out from.

One more important point we can bring out through this thread, or rather reaffirm, is that the indeterminacy of minimalism leaves mostly intact its basic assumption that reduction is needed, and thus that some degree of “excess” – often times overflowing beyond physical things – is the default state that most if not all people find them-

¹⁴³ As we have seen, “intentionality” is still closely allied to subjectivism in the minimalist discourse, and it is here in this thread as well. A commenter whose partner grew up in a “very very consumerist” family, for example, has come to recognize the “importance in surrounding yourself with things that make you happy”, thus giving a more positive spin to minimalism precisely through the idea of intentionality (and, implicitly, that of the “less is more” principle): “I’m all about intentional living now and make the most out of my mental emotional and physical resources.”

selves in. That seems to be the case even when there is no implicit or explicit recourse to the “less is more” principle as complementing intentionality: there is, at any rate, a “load” to be lightened in our lives, so reduction is still generally to be favoured, even though its negativity is – as we have seen – often times disavowed, distanced, defused (and the “less is more” principle may be seen precisely as the main way the minimalist discourse goes about doing this, converting the negative into the positive). Were it not for this assumption, why would addition of things – and from there of people, of new and old media, of commitments, even of thoughts, perhaps of styles and so on – not be just as likely in general to be “intentional” than their reduction? Is there some inherent privileged connection between intentionality and subtraction? Conscious if not more ethical and environmentalist forms of consumption are, of course, an integral part of minimalism’s anti-consumerist component, but they are usually taken to be a follow-up on the core practice of decluttering, of discarding things, without which – also because of its aesthetic dimension – minimalism would be decomposed and dissolved into frugalist and/or ethical and environmentalist voluntary simplicity. At any rate, the core assumption is well voiced by a commenter who says that “as one becomes more delved into minimalism, what becomes essential is less and less and less as time goes on and you find your happy medium”: whatever one’s subjective starting point is, it must be a situation of excess, with minimalist practice aiming not at leaving the “essential” untouched but rather trying to lower it and lower it in order to find one’s golden mean; it must be, from this point of view, at least somewhat challenging. In the case of this commenter, who also provides a couple examples, the “happy medium” looks like the already mentioned sense of subjective integration which comes with “owning only” certain selected things, perhaps applied to more restricted areas such as a toolbox of limited but well-researched tools:

Today I went through my toolbox of Stanley toolboxes and cheap toolboxes I carried throughout the years. Studied my toolbox. My most recent stash (last year) were high quality gear that I needed at the time and took the time to research. ie I needed a screwdriver, got a Wera/Wiha. I needed pliers, I got a Knipex at the time.
Tossed out all the tools I never used. Tossed out all the tools I didn’t understand what they do.
And when (WHEN) the time comes when I need that tool, I’ll know what that tool does and I’ll do research and get the best version of that tool that matches my budget WHEN I need it. Don’t need it now. So in the end, everything in my toolbox is precisely and exactly what I need. It’s something I used before – and actually actually used – and something that I know is high quality.

After reduction and in order to maintain it, conscious purchases based on carefully researching the products before buying them can set in; but reduction comes first and ad-

dition is subordinated to it. Yet addition does not always come in the form of single well-defined needs, and the situation may lead upwards instead of downwards with what counts as one's "essential belongings": another user, who is aligned to the original poster's "more open" essentialism, could fit everything in the car as a student, but as a "home-owner", one who is "starting a family, working on a career, and settling into one place for many years to come", the number of "essential items" has of course increased a lot. The conclusion is once again that "minimalism is sometimes restrictive and puts forth rules of how many items we 'should' own that don't align with real life." The more indeterminate and subjectivist minimalism can instead work as a mere invitation to reduction equally for everyone and yet each in his or her own terms, at least encouraging a shared acceptance of the assumption of negative excesses to be solved by positively charged reductions. As such, the fault lies not in minimalism: "The only failure here is gatekeeping how people are allowed to interpret minimalism and how it fits into their life" beyond such inclusive indeterminacy, to borrow words from another user; "philosophy is and should always remain fluid, as that's what life is", and minimalism is no exception. Otherwise, as in the previous thread, we are dealing not with a tool but rather with "minimalism for the sake of minimalism", which is "just kind of silly" and pushes one to disregard one's actual needs, because "sometimes people need more than minimalism." Yet despite and besides needing more than minimalism, these hypothetical people seem to need being nonetheless included as "minimalists" in their own right, whatever the kind and extent of reduction they engage in. This is what the discourse as a whole returns to beyond the polarizations of aesthetic and lifestyle minimalism, or "buzzword bingo" – as a commenter ironically puts it – such as the opposition of "minimalism" to "essentialism", and vice versa. No one must be left out, even at the cost of continually stitching up the crises that at any rate will keep coming up¹⁴⁴.

¹⁴⁴ Again, both rhetorical strategies – polarization and depolarization – may very well work for any individual minimalist. One final commenter, for example, made up – like the original poster – a "bullshit term" of "parsimonialist" to describe the kind of minimalism he or she practices, precisely as a way to "avoid all the 'is this truly minimalism?' rigmarole" so frequent on the subreddit; here polarization may work, even though the minimalist discourse as a whole cannot let go of its rhetorical project just as much as it cannot seem to advance it, and thus ends up more often leaning towards depolarization. What is interesting is that the commenter's "parsimonialism" is quite subjectivist, individually asking "what's the most value I can get for the least physical/cognitive clutter" (again, the "less is more" principle), so that even owning a second laptop as "backup" can be justified as "eliminat[ing] some very significant mental clutter with respect to job security", just as "slackline" can be justified by the mere fact that he or she "enjoy[s] slacklining", even if it is not of course needed in any way. If minimalism is simply subjective as everyone claims and nothing else, why do crises emerge with such frequency that even a subjectivist

One more recent thread¹⁴⁵ (347 upvotes) dealing with “extreme minimalism” looks at it retrospectively as something of the original poster’s past, but with a double ambivalence towards it, due on the one hand to its delivering in fact the benefits claimed for it – despite the downsides –, and on the other hand to its being identifiable with minimalism as such, which would mean once again not being a “minimalist” anymore, as in the eyes of the original poster’s husband:

I know it’s silly but it still surprised me.
When my husband and I got married we moved into a studio. It was packed to the brim with my stuff. Plastic totes lined the wall. It was pretty bad.
After realizing we’d be staying in the studio for longer than expected I decided that I needed to make it livable. I began my decluttering journey and eventually found my way to minimalism.
Took a couple years but my previous packrat self went all in. I had only one of most things, a ten piece wardrobe, nothing on my countertops. That kind of thing.
I did find extreme minimalism to be peaceful as they said it would be. It lowered my stress levels and things were easy to maintain. But after a couple years of living that way I grew tired of it.
There was no room for hobbies besides reading or exercising. I wanted to learn to sew but didn’t have a place to put a sewing machine.
The super small wardrobe wasn’t ideal either. I’d always have to scramble to get outfits for dressy events and when I went to travel to visit family in another state I didn’t have any appropriate clothes for the different climate. The few times I was invited to go hiking or to the beach or even jury duty I simply made do with what I had which honestly didn’t work all that well.
If I needed to scan or print something I had to run an errand and do it at a store. That annoyed me. Same thing with gifts. Any time I wanted to give one I’d have to go and buy wrapping paper or gift bags. It felt wasteful.
We moved into a 2 bedroom shortly before the pandemic hit. We isolated as much as we could because I was pregnant. Seeing our families live perfectly fine at home since they already had everything they needed changed my viewpoint. Experiencing what it felt like to be without basic needs like toilet paper and hand soap and even clean drinking water was the final straw. I decided I wanted my household to be self-sufficient.
Today our home looks a lot different. I have a well rounded wardrobe that can go from casual to dressy and from beaches to mountains. I have a scanner/printer and a gifting station with the needed supplies. I’ve expanded my hobbies and got the appropriate gear. I have a closet that I keep stockpiled with goods (toilet paper, hand soap, wipes, diapers, rice, beans, water). Despite this I am still active in decluttering and minimalist groups.
I mentioned something about minimalism to my husband and he laughed and told me they took my membership card back a long time ago. I suppose he’s right but I still feel like one at heart. There are moments where I get overwhelmed and am tempted to return back to the extreme minimalist I once was. I miss the peace, the feeling I could pick up and go at anytime. But I disliked other aspects of it. I don’t know. I look around and nearly everything I see matters/is useful to me now, so I suppose I’m still on the right track.
Just wanted to reflect on how my journey has evolved these past 7 years. Anyone else find themselves on both ends of the spectrum?

The original poster expresses very well, in narrative form, the kind of dialectical movement that we have observed in our analyses, which the ultimate indeterminacy and ambivalence of the minimalist discourse as a whole afford or promote. The story begins, of course, with a perceived excess – actually relative, once again, to the conditions set by

might prefer giving up on the label altogether? The difference, of course, is that “minimalism” at the very least cannot but actively construct its subjectivism as something that is similarly shared by many people and recognized by them as such, because it is still a label; it cannot simply *be* subjective, it must continually *become* subjective.

¹⁴⁵ Deleted user, “Husband said I’m not a minimalist anymore.”, Jul. 2022, <https://reddit.com/vthhmo> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

one's particular situation (the limited living space of a studio) –, and from there it moves straight to the opposite extreme, it goes “all in”, with the typical more determinate elements of what at this time is, however, taken to be “minimalism” full stop: the bare minimum of “only one of most things”, the “ten piece” capsule wardrobe, the clean surfaces with nothing on them and so on. By contrast to most of the polarizations we have gone through, here the picture of what is subsequently thought of as an “extreme minimalism” is not all black, because the original poster is much more openly ambivalent about it (as she says, she finds herself “on both ends of the spectrum”): it was indeed a more “peaceful”, less stressful, more easily sustainable way of living, as long as it lasted. Eventually, however, she “grew tired of it”, and found all kinds of problems with all parts of her (extreme) minimalist lifestyle: there was “no room for hobbies”, even in the literal sense of not having “a place to put a sewing machine” in (despite the fact that living in the studio was an antecedent condition of her picking up the lifestyle, not a decision made because of it); the capsule wardrobe did not fit the diversity of situations – the social contexts, the geographical climates – she had to dress for; and her home was all but “self-sufficient”, both before the pandemic – she had to get out of the home for printing or buying materials for gifts – and especially after that, when she lacked access even to “basic needs”, while other families were fine (the pandemic was the “last straw” that turned her minimalism into the “extreme” one to be rejected as depriving). After this realization, the original poster pulls back from minimalism by moving to a bigger house, by making it self-sufficient with a closet “stockpiled with goods”, by expanding her wardrobe into a “well-rounded” one, by introducing hobbies as well as the printer and a “gifting station” with everything that comes with these. Despite her moving away from minimalism, however, she “still feel[s] like [a minimalist] at heart”, and she is troubled when her husband pointed out that “they took [her] membership card back a long time ago”: she is, after all, still actively engaged with the decluttering and minimalist discourses, and she does feel “overwhelmed” by stuff and longing at times to get rid of them – like a minimalist “at heart” would –, even missing what has by now become the “extreme minimalism” of her past. Is she still a minimalist or not? That is something for the subreddit to say, yet she does think she is still “on the right track”, by recourse to the subjective “only owning” framing we have already met with: if all that she owns “matters” or is “useful” to her, regardless of how much that is or anything

else, she must after all be a minimalist – just not an “extreme” one. So the full circle is travelled in narrative form, through polarization to depolarization.

The most upvoted response – it got 755 upvotes, more than twice those of the thread itself – confirms that this is “an excellent minimalism journey that landed [the original poster] on the minimalism spectrum”: she has “stripped out the bullshit” and “learned what [she] valued”, so now she only has to “mindfully” keep up with “what is necessary” for the lifestyle she has subjectively come to, and that is all. The husband’s joke is done with as involuntary “gatekeeping”, because “the truth is that minimalism is just being mindful of your possessions”: a variation, perhaps a slightly weaker one, on the theme of intentionality as one of the few minimal determinations of subjectivism in the minimalist discourse. One popular sub-comment (232 upvotes) fully agrees with this take, and adds to it by making explicit the underlying polarization: “living with only the barest essentials is asceticism, not minimalism”, just like in other threads it was “essentialism”, “frugality”, “simple living” or similar labels; it is not what is “necessary” for mere survival that counts, but what is “necessary” for whatever lifestyle one subjectively ends up settling in. When another sub-comment pushes back by claiming that “[she] lost me at gifting station”, doubting that “the spectrum goes that far”, it gets instead downvoted (-36 votes), and the problem is exposed: as an user explains, “It’s kind of hard to jump to that conclusion based on the limited information we have”, because “we all own things that are completely irrelevant to someone else”, and the presence of the “gifting station” may perhaps be offset by the absence of “baking pans”, “physical books”, a “bicycle because they don’t ride one” or “pet supplies because they don’t have a pet”, and so on; in fact, in another user’s view, having kids may make it even “less minimalistic to not have a ‘gifting station’ of sorts”, because “there’s a societal expectation and exchange for gift giving and the rituals around that”, so in this way at least one can be “organised” and “readily sort and reuse materials”, thereby “minimizing waste and purchases.” Consequently, no single item could ever be sufficient evidence to judge someone else as “minimalist” or not – it is a matter of one’s whole lifestyle, after all –, and, generalizing from that on the ground that information about others’ lives is always very partial, especially online, judgements are impossible even if minimalism were not thoroughly subjective, even if there were a set of criteria to meet in order to join the “club”, as another commenter again puts it. But of course, minimal-

ism is in fact taken to be ultimately subjective anyway: that judgments might be mediated instead of immediate, that additional information may be asked for, that there could be some way of fruitfully discussing together and even questioning things owned across subjective and situational differences – one part of the rhetorical project – beyond the point marked by generic more or less subjectivist appeals to “use”, “love”, “need” and so on, is not really taken into consideration; after all, the original poster’s husband did have access to the information the hasty critical commenter lacks, yet his judgment about the original poster’s not being “minimalist” anymore is to be discounted as well. The point of single items not providing evidence is not that there might be enough evidence otherwise, but rather that there can never be – it primarily functions as a reinforcement of the all-inclusive indeterminacy and subjectivism of minimalism as merely a reduction, whatever reduction, from the assumed initial excess of consumerism and/or hoarding which everyone participates in: as an user insists, “You can have a scanner and be a minimalist. You can have gear for your hobbies and be a minimalist. If you hoard shit you don’t use, then reconsider.” The husband’s opinion gets reformulated as the original poster being “no longer on the spectrum of extreme minimalism”, which is once again also implicitly tied to the aesthetic because of the more determinate character of the latter (despite of all the ambiguity that it still contains¹⁴⁶): “Minimalism isn’t one aesthetic, it’s a mindset, an approach to life.” Significantly, the same commenter finds it “so tiring when people have too simplistic view of what minimalism is or can be”, and yet, seemingly lacking any real way to actually make the minimalist discourse less simple than it is, the only way not to lose complexity becomes, paradoxically, that of defining minimalism in the simplest of manners and thus make it indeterminate, leaving all the rest entirely to each individual subject to determine for themselves.

All responses agree with this verdict. To a couple other users, for example, the original poster “sounds like [she is] still a minimalist”, because now she finally has

¹⁴⁶ The original poster praised her past minimalist studio both with regard to living inside it and with reference to at least the possibility of leaving it behind at any time if need be. Her language, of course, is not aesthetic but emotive and practical – living there was “peaceful” instead of stressful, and the ability of leaving was first of all a “feeling” she had, not something that she appears to have actually done –, yet she does show a central ambivalence of the modernist aesthetic of minimalism: on the one hand it can make a place more “liveable”, more inhabitable, and thus also more suitable for identifying oneself with it; on the other hand it may make it easier to move out from it – perhaps to another very similar place –, weakening the identification that comes with inhabitation. The former approach may be associated more directly to aesthetic minimalism, the latter to ascetic or extreme minimalism – particularly of the “digital nomad” kind, of course –, but we have already seen how intertwined they are, including in their being dismissed as aestheticized.

what she needs – she “simply lacked the essential items before” – “to make [her] life and time comfortable and efficient”, while she owns nothing that she does not need. This last remark leads to another exchange around a single item and judging others by that sign alone (“Anyone who says ‘you aren’t a minimalist because X’ is just a gatekeeper”), and this time it is the printer’s turn:

[U1] Sounds like you have what you need to make your life and time comfortable and efficient. Your example of having to run an errand just to print or scan something is exactly what I try to simplify out of my life – some people here will look down upon owning a printer or scanner, but that tiny amount of space occupied saves a TON of time wasted just to perform a simple task. Anyone who says “you aren’t a minimalist because X” is just a gatekeeper.

[U2] I think the reason a lot of minimalists look down on owning a printer/scanner is because it’s the kind of task that is done like once or twice a year for most people. Obviously, if you print/scan often, then owning the machines necessary for that job doesn’t break the concept of being a minimalist, because you do use those things!

[U3] But the few times you do need to scan/print you usually need it in a timely way and driving somewhere to do it is extremely annoying/time-consuming.

[U2] In that case, you have to balance what is more worthwhile to you: an appliance occupying space, which needs maintenance, electricity, replacing ink, etc., or the occasional trip to where you can print something. There is no right answer here! It depends on the person, their space, and their access to printing facilities.

[U4] My family printed/scanned often (daily). I don’t even remember exactly when I got rid of the printer/scanner, but it was well over a decade ago. It took time for everyone to adapt, but they eventually did. Today, they all agree that they never really did need the printer/scanner, but that’s not what any of them would have said in the first year of living without a printer/scanner. Generally, people behave differently when they’re not the ones paying for a service (paper, ink, electric, etc.). Usage frequency of a tool / object may not be the best measure.

[U2] That is a great point! I would say that it starts by analyzing what is being printed/scanned and if it is really necessary to do so or if a less time and resource consuming method could be used.

The exchange brings out the situational and subjective practical intricacies that enter into evaluating the opportunity of owning or not a certain item. While these support the conclusion that “there is no right answer here”, that it all depends on the numerous factors of one’s conditions and circumstances, and that immediate external judgments based on just one item or limited information are in fact impossible, it is clear however that the focus shifts along the way, moving away from the defence of a subjectivism that everyone involved seems already to agree on. First of all, these users are in fact discussing an item in general – the printer – in a way that, while not pronouncing a judgment on its minimalist status (and, through that, on the credentials as “minimalist” of those who own a printer), nonetheless takes up and tackles some of the potential complications in an intelligible manner: these are indeed something that one can fruitfully

talk about with others. Through such discussion, it also becomes evident that it is not merely an issue of people externally judging each other with different criteria, because regardless of how many people partake in the evaluation, and even if it is just one, criteria will be plural and conflicting, so that “you have to balance what is more worthwhile to you” or perhaps find a compromise, and so on. That is nothing strange, of course, because there would be no need for either reflection or discussion were it not for the uncertainty that comes with conflicting values, as well as for the irreducible contradictions among all the various dimensions of experience. Still, as a lifestyle, one could expect minimalism to at least suggest the priority of some values over others from an aesthetic and/or ethical-practical point of view, while as a discourse – as the rhetorical project of constructing, supporting and developing that lifestyle – it should at least provide those already mentioned “tools” to facilitate both reflection and discussion around the intricacies that, of course, it could never simply erase or overwrite. Subjectivism cuts short both of these quite interrelated tasks. Owning something in order to save time and effort, investing time and effort not to own something which is only occasionally used, or vice versa owning it because it is frequently used, or not owning it because, even if it is used frequently, one can get rid of it all the same and get used to it so to save money, or – circling back to the start – find alternatives which necessitate less time and resources: are all these approaches to the printer problem equally “minimalist”? The subjectivist answer is not only that they are, that minimalism does not have its own inherent, characteristic values – time over money, money over easy access to things, easy access over ease of maintenance, ease of maintenance over lack of stress, lack of stress over aesthetic expression and on and on –, since these are uniquely supplied by each individual, but also that they are “minimalist” even if such individual opts for a certain value without giving much thought to the others, which he or she might otherwise be less inclined to consider. The call for intentionality – or mindfulness –, often tied to an on-going reflectiveness, appears to compensate only slightly for the latter aspect of subjectivism, because it is itself underwritten by subjectivism and thus mostly left underdetermined: it is supposed to be easy enough for individuals to intentionally determine on their own what they need, use, enjoy and so on, even though the very existence of a minimalist discourse also presupposes that in fact it is not. What remains for determining the default assumption of an excess to be reduced is only the “less is more” principle but, as we will see, it cannot go very far by itself, because it is in turn very ambiguous.

Needless to say, to a large extent this subjectivism itself comes as a value for minimalism to promote, even at the cost of disavowing other values which are commonsensically associated to it in the discourse: the whole aesthetic dimension, as we have seen, may very well be sacrificed in order to defend subjectivism. After all, as we have also noted, personal “well-being” or “stress-reduction” and similar emotional therapeutic expressions are indeed often resorted to, in the last instance, when having to decide whether minimalism is serving its only or main purpose or not: if one is not feeling good or better, what is the point? The aesthetic work of minimalism becomes acceptable if it is justified as a form of therapeutic work on one’s own emotions, while on the other hand minimalism also dissolves into frugality or even asceticism if it does not aim at least indirectly, and ultimately, at one’s personal well-being; finally, bringing these two aspects together, minimalism would dissolve into simple living or some other form of voluntary simplicity – which often do come with a concern for well-being – if it severed its close ties to at least some implicitly aesthetic work which it cannot, after all, afford to exclude. This is the complex rhetorical knot we are interested in. Subjectivism as an underlying value orients minimalism towards emotional well-being of the individual – or happiness, stress-reduction and so on – as the primary concern beyond any other particular value it might be concretely realized through (space, time, effort, money, style etc.), often times also particularly emphasizing some integration through intentionality, and through the “less is more” principle which serves as the slightly more determinate common thread of its disparate practices. There is little to be surprised about here, since minimalism is steeped into the much broader discourses of self-help and self-improvement. What is actually interesting is that, in rhetorically trying to bring together and indeed somewhat integrate different aspects of the broader discourses into one “minimalist lifestyle”, crucially including the more aesthetic practices of decluttering and making capsule wardrobes – and a certain stylistic imagination along with them –, the minimalist discourse bumps into internal crises which lead it to continually repudiate itself, its own distinguishing traits, to uphold its inherited subjectivism, settling for indeterminacy (twice over in fact: as we have seen, since the repudiation itself opens a crisis, it too must be in turn repudiated – the aesthetic is rejected as too determinate, yet it is also often let back in, because the rejection would determine minimalism as well). Therefore, often times even the reference to the reduction of one’s belongings gets lost: as one user pointing out how “this subreddit takes [minimalism] way too far” writes to

reassure the original poster, “You’re being mindful of how you’re living. That alone deserves the ‘minimalist’ membership.” Minimalism then becomes “intentional living” itself as far as definition and thus rhetorical framing goes, although of course it cannot actually detach itself from what makes it exceed that definition, what distinguishes it from simply picking up this or that component in isolation and practicing it on its own terms. As a rhetorical way of framing and managing criticality, beyond – and in the service of – the direct valuing of personal well-being and the therapeutic rhetoric sustaining it, subjectivism constantly returns minimalism to indeterminacy.

That this movement is one of “returning” is fundamental to it. We have already seen admonishments against minimalism practiced wrongly because not practiced in an “intentional”, reflective manner – as in the thread attacking aesthetic minimalism as too impulsive –, but the rhetorical question is: would minimalism still be what it is if it did not continually undergo this dialectical process which polarizes it and then eventually depolarizes it as “subjective” and/or “intentional”, at least in the discourse at large? Would its intentionality be the same without going through the crisis against an impulsive minimalism, the mirror image of the impulsivity of consumerism it attacks? Would its subjective nature be the same if it was really taken for granted from the very start – everyone, after all, seems in fact to agree upon it –, instead of coming at the end as a pacifying solution to its internal crises? Or in other words still, would an ordinary household be “minimalist” in the same way if, besides setting aside that presumption of excess as everyone’s default initial state, the spectre of an aestheticized and/or ascetic minimalism were not continually evoked and then exorcized as a “spectrum” wherein everyone – each one in his or her own subjective and/or intentional way – can merge together regardless of differences (including, of course, socio-economic conditions)? As mentioned earlier, the original poster unwittingly includes the fact of once living in a small studio as part of her past “extreme minimalism”, even though she says she had begun practicing minimalism after moving there, because it affords this contrast: would her current home and life strike her as “minimalist” at all, or at least in the same way, if she had never lived in that studio and personally gone through the crises that the minimalist discourse at large also continually undergoes? The rejection of aesthetic and extreme minimalism – in a performative way which must be sustained by repetition – allows everyone to be “still minimalist”, as opposed to being straightforwardly “minimal-

ist” to begin with; that is, “minimalist” despite all differences, returning from them. Differences are recognized as unavoidable as well as important, but also understood, since they are unavoidable, as an insurmountable obstacle for the rhetorical construction of a “minimalism” which is more than the subjective and more or less intentional reduction of a presupposed excess – of material things, but from there also of anything else – in order to gain, in a seemingly paradoxical way, some sort of surplus (though not excessive in its turn). By appealing to situational and subjective differences in the abstract, usually more or less naturalizing them as well – they just are what they are –, a sense of unity within an undifferentiated, indeterminate minimalism is reproduced. This would barely be distinguishable from subjectivism as such, were at least part of the minimalist discourse actually able to sever its ties to the more mainstream counterparts and detach from its own common sense, but since it cannot do so on the whole, minimalism remains an ambiguous form of subjectivism modified – and reinforced – precisely by getting at it through that common sense and its crises. Although some do discard more strongly and explicitly the label of “minimalism” to detach themselves from the discourse it gathers, thus wholly rejecting any possible rhetorical project over it¹⁴⁷, most appear to hold on to “minimalism” even if “it’s silly”, as the original poster admits at the beginning of her post; they would rather nearly empty it out than abandon it. One reason is this performative reproduction and reinforcement of its very subjectivism in going through internal crises and differences and returning from them. It can be seen either as a failure in properly facing those crises, or as a success – though a short-lived one to be frequently repeated – at avoiding or expelling them as the extraneous results of misunderstandings and misrepresentations about minimalism in the mainstream discourse, or the discourse at large. Whatever the case is, including everyone is evidently made more important than determining further a set of shared values to construct the lifestyle around, as one particular lifestyle: the aesthetic and the extreme are thereby rejected as exclusive. Moreover, not excluding anyone is made more important than de-

¹⁴⁷ As we have seen, of course, these refusals can also amount to pretty much the same thing, by simply switching to a different label that is however employed in the same way. A preference for “essentialism”, for example, is also expressed again in this thread by an user who takes it to be “hav[ing] what I need to be happy and healthy, and just hav[ing] certain rules for myself and how I live”, without going too far as minimalism is implicitly taken to do. Through “essentialism”, one dials back on commitment to minimalism to only getting “close enough”, even though it is otherwise described in the same way (reducing one’s belongings to make them “manageable”, integrated and organized): “I think as long as your stuff is manageable and you have an idea of all your belongings, and every item has a home, that’s close enough to minimalism for the everyday person.” As a sub-comment glosses, again implicitly rejecting extreme minimalism, “It’s not about having as little as possible it’s about only having what’s essential to you.”

veloping the discourse around the lifestyle so as to make it more helpful in making critiques out of its crises: even the rejections of the aesthetic and the extreme may be exclusive, so it is to be largely rejected as well, while the rhetorical project of minimalism – if not rejected – must be held back in, or rather returned to, the indeterminacy of those few lowest – or indeed minimal – common denominators we have encountered (subjectivism itself, intentionality, the core assumption of excess, and the “less is more” principle). After all, crises involve struggle, and struggle is stressful – or, as another commenter in the last thread says, “tiring”: “Minimalism is whatever you want it to be. I’m tired of people dictating to others what Minimalism is or isn’t. It’s different for everyone. If you think you currently own only what you need and that makes you happy it doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks!”

None of this is meant to deny that there are genuine difficulties, perhaps indeed insurmountable ones in many respects, in pushing forward – or orienting elsewhere – the rhetorical project implied, at least as a possibility, by the on-going existence of a minimalist discourse online. The crises and differences are there, and they are many and indeed intricate. The point is rather that they are in fact denied by the discourse in the last instance, by just as much being unable and usually unwilling to follow through with the polarizations to decompose and/or dissolve minimalism, instead depolarizing them in turn. An important part of the genuine difficulties, of course, is that this whole process is not merely something that can be disposed of in its entirety as groundless and worthless, because any lifestyle and any related discourses, like other cultural phenomena, must negotiate their boundaries, manage criticality and often stress inclusivity, thereby making themselves welcoming for people to participate in them. Even if the discourse agreed on the most determinate of features as shared parameters for what minimalism is, there would still be an use for someone to say, for example to a newcomer into the lifestyle, that “so long as your mindset is inclined towards minimalism, you’re a minimalist”, as another user writes. That is all the more true since, in fact, ideals and interests such as a lifestyle do need indeterminacy, often to high degrees – those who say, like many commenters in this thread, that minimalism “looks different for everyone” are not simply wrong, and they would not be, again, even if minimalism were much less indeterminate or much less ambiguous than it has been so far. Therefore, looking closely at how crises arise in the discourse only to be extinguished is informative not only with

regard to the rhetorical limitations of the discourse – and the critical ones of the lifestyle whose many pieces it nonetheless keeps together –, but also with regard to the difficulties that any such discourse must face. Nonetheless, that minimalism’s relationship to subjectivism goes much deeper and further than that is already clear enough, so much so that it might indeed turn out to be but a particular – and peculiarly ambiguous – variation on its main themes of authenticity and autonomy. They are obviously connected to minimalism’s more anti-consumerist components, and many traces are in this thread as well: an user, while living in a “house full of stuff”, still takes himself or herself as a minimalist for “buying things with intention”, while another takes minimalism to be a realization of what one “truly value[s]” and makes oneself “happy”, naturally contrasted to “what society said we ‘needed’” and all the mere distractions that come with it (“We need to have what we need, but it’s not like you’re going out and buying extravagant things”). That subjectivism does not keep minimalism from its crises, but is rather nurtured by them, is also however clear at this point.

To sum up again, we can first of all note how the rejection of “extreme minimalism” appears to be much more compact than that of the aesthetic, in that it does not really trigger in turn responses that defend it by insisting on its legitimate inclusion within minimalism (the few that do it would get heavily downvoted, as we have seen). From this point of view, while aesthetic minimalism may still be saved by distinguishing it from an aestheticized minimalism and/or translating it in the therapeutic language of emotions, extreme minimalism – itself also associated to the aesthetic(ization) – seems by definition to negatively exceed the subjectivist boundaries ultimately set by personal well-being, stress-reduction and the like, especially since it appears too deeply and plainly entwined with the internal crises and criticality which can indeed be stress-inducing, in that they involve struggles. After all, extreme minimalism as a targeted pole to be again contrasted to a more genuine, balanced minimalism – perhaps under the name of “essentialism” – might be much more of a rhetorical construction than aesthetic minimalism is: in one other thread¹⁴⁸ (309 upvotes) which asks the subreddit for “extreme minimalist examples” or “the most minimalist thing” users have done, what strikes us is rather the heterogeneity of responses, which corresponds to the heterogeneity of what “minimalism” can include – we find “mental” and relational adjustments (in-

¹⁴⁸ [Inaerius], “What’s the most minimalist thing you’ve done that changed your life?”, Mar. 2022, <https://reddit.com/tq8ow8> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

cluding, among the most upvoted comments, many gestures towards authenticity or the management of criticality in general: no more trying to guess or make other people guess implicit thoughts and sentiments by indirect means such as one's things, no more caring about others' judgments about one's body or oneself at all, no more spending on looks in order to impress potential partners, no more stressing over self-improvement and so on), we find decluttering of a large part of one's belongings and/or special categories (gifts, books, collections), we find downshifting to a part-time job in order to practice a personal hobby by reducing purchases and saving up, we find transitioning to a capsule wardrobe or similar limitations on one's clothing, we find moving to smaller houses – if not actual tiny houses – or living abroad in continuous travelling, and still many other things (limitations on one's diet, use of public or shared transportation in place of moving by car, reductions in usage of social media, news or smartphones, and the implementation of various particular techniques – limiting one's very storage spaces, donating something every time something new is bought or brought in, regularly re-evaluating what one owns and so on). Is any of these practices “extreme” in the sense condemned elsewhere? So long as the rhetorical construction of “minimalism” as a more determinate, coherent lifestyle is not the issue at hand in the discussion, it is evident that all the diverse ways and degrees of practicing it – whatever the “it” may be at this point – happily co-exist without any problem. Minimalism works as the very loose connecting tissue of subjectively and intentionally reducing something – anything really, even one's thoughts – in order to keep some related excess at bay and/or to gain some other surplus from it (possibly also including, of course, the surplus derived from one's identification as a “minimalist” along with many other people, even if it is only on these very indeterminate grounds). Since all the multifarious things that are thereby included into “minimalism” can in fact interfere and conflict all too easily – one can spend a lot of money to substitute or upgrade things that disturb the unclutteredness or even aesthetic cohesion of one's home, while another perhaps holds on to old items in order to save money or the planet –, crises continually arise, and that indeterminacy must be returned to by polarizing and then depolarizing minimalism, positing a more determinate version of it as something to be rejected (the rejection itself to be then rejected, especially in the case of aesthetic minimalism, as in turn determining minimalism and thus exclusive). “Extreme minimalism”, as was “aesthetic minimalism” in the other threads – and more than it –, is something to be evoked and exorcized in order for

minimalism to keep on being all-encompassing, even if it means reducing itself to almost nothing. Besides being itself tied to the aesthetic common sense of minimalism in its more depersonalized and ascetic aspects, extreme minimalism more directly pushes for the critical bar to be raised, for the crises and the struggle of critique to be actually worked through, and thus for some common determinate limits to be sought in order that such struggle may be better advanced together instead of being wholly left to individuals to deal with; but this it does – it is taken to do, constructed as doing – in such an immediate, uncompromising way that it jumps at once to some supposedly universal and eternal determinate standard of human – rather than personal – needs for mere survival, which is easy to dismiss as “going too far” and being exclusive (of those who are also or mainly seeking subjective personal comforts, including the comforts of the aesthetic). Therefore, in spite of its name and certain manifestations or facets of its style, minimalism must steer away from the minimum as a mere lack, as the negative mirror image of the excesses it claims to fight against, as well as of the obsession with things – including aesthetic obsession – that it takes those excesses to stem from in the last instance. Each and every one must instead be included as keeping to his or her own personal minimum, as “only owning” what is needed, useful and/or enjoyable for them, or even only practicing this or that other form of reduction, perhaps unrelated to the reduction of actual things but by the indeterminacy of a metaphor.

Of course, this inclusiveness does serve at least the real purpose of bringing people together not only in terms of identification – and the surplus of sense that comes with it – but also in conversations such as these on Reddit, thus operating as a rhetorical bridge among many different cultural tendencies that involve some kind of reduction on the assumption of some kind of excess: just as we have stressed for identification with “minimalism” despite its indeterminacy that it might be enough of a solution for any one individual to solve minimalism’s internal crises, so we must also point out that “minimalism” might indeed be understood even at large to be exhausted by this rhetorical connection it affords, neatly detached from what the conversations it produces among even very different people may then lead to, and thus without involving itself in any further determination, differentiation and development – the fruits of those conversations are not to be gathered, but rather kept at the level of single individuals interacting among themselves with or without success. Yet the crises do recur, as we have seen,

also in terms of “minimalism” as a whole, and that means that this inclusive, indeterminate reading of it must be maintained by writing it again and again – that is, by reaffirming it in the discourse. The mainstream minimalist discourse relies on the assumption of “minimalism” as a lifestyle (though also, as we will see in a moment, on its negation); even if it were the only culprit behind the reoccurrence of the crises, misleading people into believing that minimalism is much more determinate than in fact is the case, the rhetorical issue could nonetheless be raised at least as to whether it is actually possible to disentangle “minimalism” from that discourse, especially since it was born within it to begin with. A second question about the rhetorical viability of “minimalism” as an indeterminate lifestyle label is then, of course, whether it is worth maintaining: how far can the conversations it opens up be fruitful in a distinctive way, as irreducible to conversations had in the name of decluttering, of anti-consumerism, of interior design and fashion, of digital detox and other self-help and self-improvement discourses and practices? Is it enough for these to be connected come what may, without raising and foregrounding the peculiarly minimalist issue of whether and how much can certain clearly aesthetic practices contribute to ethical-practical concerns such as those around both literal and media consumption, and vice versa? Minimalists do speak of minimalism as offering some “tools” besides mere connection, after all. Finally, a third issue of rhetorical import would be about not only the shortcomings but also the side-effects – if not just effects – of this freely-handed identification with “minimalism” for everyone which nonetheless happens and is held on to, again, beyond mere connection: as we have noted, the subjectivism it is founded upon can conceal situational and subjective differences, including general socio-economic ones, precisely by admitting them to the discourse only in the abstract and only as an impassable limit to conversation; in everyone being equally a “(still) minimalist”, the manifold differences of our lives are swept aside in ways that can be very problematic, producing an unfounded sense of unity (and, needless to say, an unitary audience for the mainstream minimalist discourse). In all these ways – entanglement with a discourse at large that has always taken “minimalism” to be a lifestyle, unfruitfulness of conversations afforded at least in the distinctive terms of interaction between the aesthetic and ethical-practical dimensions, and problematic consequences such as the erasure and underestimation of differences through an identification emptied out of them –, the rhetorical move of always returning to and keeping up with an indeterminate, subjectivist “minimalism” can surely be questioned. That is

all the more true when, as we will see next, the same rhetorical move is found out to be very much a part of the mainstream minimalist discourse as well, despite it being targeted by many as the source of the problem and as the common enemy of the more genuine minimalists.

We could, of course, exemplify much further the contradictory tendencies of the minimalist discourse on Reddit. While we have ultimately decided to focus on more recent threads all posted in the last few years, in order to pick up and stress some examples that are contemporary to our corpus of vlogs on YouTube, those discursive tendencies go back all the way to the first times of this subreddit – created in 2009 and then slowly gaining momentum in the following years –, and thus even before the wave of interest in minimalism which came with the publishing of Kondo’s and Sasaki’s books and the *Minimalism* documentary in 2015. Back in 2012, to cite one example, a thread which was relatively popular for that time¹⁴⁹ (96 upvotes) singled out an “aesthetic minimalism” – already put side to side with an extreme minimalism of “getting one’s possessions down the lowest possible amount” – as different both from those merely “interested in getting rid of clutter in their life to focus on other things”, sort of like the “lifestyle minimalism” we have seen (minimalism practiced not for its own sake but for improving one’s self or one’s life, with a more pronounced anti-consumerist and/or anti-materialist bent), and from the mainstream minimalist discourse of that time – the original blogs such as *Zen Habits* or *Miss Minimalist* – which is significantly taken, as we too have taken it, as being “a mishmash of different things”, neither all aesthetic nor all lifestyle. The original poster approaches the issue in a conciliatory way from the very start, taking all the different “crowds” of the minimalist discourse to be able to contribute something, but the problematization of the aesthetic and the extreme as stereotypical is there, just like its subjectivist solution and many features that we have seen in other threads (for example, the double contrast to the very rich and very poor: there is no need to “either become super-rich or homeless to be a proper minimalist”): minimalists do not have to buy a Mac to be included – though it is fine if they really like the “minimalist aesthetics” –, just like “no one is going to judge you for sleeping on a bed if you want to”, or “driving a car”, if it is personally “convenient” and enjoyable for you; “be your own minimalist!” is the original poster’s subjectivist advice for the sometimes

¹⁴⁹ Deleted user, “Over-zealousness in the minimalist community and you!”, Jul. 2012, <https://reddit.com/w3hmw> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

“over-zealous” community. Since this crisis is already closed as soon as it is opened up, the criticality of minimalism already managed, the commenters all agree very much with the original poster: they all share the basic assumption that minimalism must work first and foremost for the individual and his or her life, especially in the emotional terms of “mental peace” or other similar euphoric states (the original poster also already mentions “mental clutter”), and they all thus agree with detaching minimalism from perfectionist pursuit of a determinate ideal, with all the struggles that come with it, contrasting that to a never-ending but more gradual, attenuated individual process of on-going reduction which becomes habitual and comes naturally, without too much conscious and explicit effort. The original poster, who clearly belongs to the less aesthetically inclined “crowd”, also highlights the danger of minimalism becoming the negative mirror image of the obsession with “material possessions”, both in terms of discarding too much and in terms of buying too much in order to fit the minimalist stereotypes: “minimalism is supposed to be about breaking free of the bonds of material possession – not fretting over the extra knife in their kitchen cabinet”, just like “minimalism is about cherishing what you HAVE instead of working for getting something you WANT”; that minimalism then becomes a matter of “acceptance”, as another thread has put it, despite its problematization of at the least things owned and their organization, is the sign of an uneasiness with the criticality it entails and the complexity of the considerations it actually requires – a sign that, again, we have seen other times before. Even when it wishes not to concern itself with things, and perhaps especially because of such wish, minimalism cannot but be concerned with them; it simply strives to solve that problem once and for all, and dissolve it insofar as it fails.

Many such older threads have been taken into account in our analysis, even though we have set aside our initial project of solely focusing on the minimalist discourse on Reddit, while obvious limitations in space and time do not allow us to go further into its depths. Much of the old discourse considered in our analysis turned around the users’ definitions and redefinitions of “minimalism” in less conflicted contexts, for example those which simply asked for these “personal” definitions from the outset, thus exhibiting the various facets of the commonsensical understanding of minimalism to

which it returns after its depolarization¹⁵⁰. Similarly, among the more recent threads we have also included, through different keywords which get less directly to the issues of minimalism's relation to the aesthetic and to the extreme, still other threads more concretely concerned with actual advice as to how, for example, one can make a minimalist home more "cosy", avoiding the austerity associated to many manifestations of the modernist aesthetic¹⁵¹. What these threads show is again that, while no doubt recurrent, the polarizations of minimalism do not occur in all cases, or more precisely they come into play as less problematic internal distinctions in the minimalist discourse rather than crises that call "minimalism" and into question because of its ambiguity: often times, commenters have no difficulty in simply switching from one emphasis to another, and are fine with each combining aesthetic and ethical-practical dimensions of the lifestyle without addressing the issue of whether "minimalism" as a lifestyle can be distinguished or not from other forms of voluntary simplicity, and the advantages or disadvantages of identifying as minimalists at all. Moreover, even if we add all of the examined material up, there is of course no sure indication in our qualitative analyses with regard to its more quantitative weight, the frequency and significance of the more polar-

¹⁵⁰ One short thread, for example, included definitions of minimalism – all pretty indeterminate, of course, since "minimalism isn't some card-carrying club" – that ranged from the reduction of the "non-essentials in [one's] life" in order to focus on other things that make one "happy", to "having exactly what you need" with no reference to one's happiness, or perhaps to a mixture of these as "having less (that is, the bare minimum for happiness) and taking joy in little things", with also various allusions to the "less is more" principle ("the art of getting the most out of the least"), or to the reduction of "distractions" from the "core that is more meaningful" in one's life as a whole (deleted user, "How would you personally define 'minimalism'?", Nov. 2012, <https://reddit.com/135zca>; last accessed: 14/11/2023). To the original poster's having found definitions that "pertain more to art, music, and architecture than to a lifestyle", an user responds by recognizing that what is being talked about appears to be just simple living, and significantly wonders "if we're using this subreddit right because there's already a simple living subreddit." Other threads that revolve around definitions are similarly interesting in showing how minimalism is stuck between needing the aesthetic to distinguish itself from other forms of voluntary simplicity, but still wanting not to define itself also in aesthetic terms.

¹⁵¹ The whole spectrum of degrees of aesthetic expressions of "minimalism" is present, for example, in a thread about whether people decorate their homes and tips for a "cozy but still minimalistic" home: some commenters say they went "completely bare" ("No furniture. No art. No bed. No paint"; "No pictures, plants, items, nothing. It makes cleaning easier"), while to others "the appeal of minimizing" is precisely that they "can make space for cool pieces of art, pictures, arrangements etc.", and in the middle there are those, like another commenter, who "decorate but don't fill all of the available space, so [their] place feels larger and less cluttered", or those who "don't like decorative items that sit on surfaces that are also supposed to be useful, like kitchen countertops or end tables"; another user, who keeps sentimental items from travels, insists of course that a "minimalist lifestyle" does not mean that one should live in "some impersonal hotel room" or "prison cell"; another still translates aesthetic needs in more palatable "emotional needs" ("Plants and art are good for mental health"), and in those terms suggest asking oneself "what makes the space comfortable and enjoyable, adding slowly"; and so on and so forth, all expressions happily co-existing ([littlerunaway1984], "do you decorate your living space?", Nov. 2022, <https://reddit.com/ymsg62>; last accessed: 14/11/2023).

izing threads – or the comments as dismembered from their threads and assembled into an overall database, as one could attempt to do – as opposed to threads with lesser or no degree at all of polarization. Our grounds for guessing that the ambivalence towards the aesthetic, the extreme and thus its own criticality play an important role in the discourse are not at all statistical: from this point of view, they remain hints in no way coming with a guarantee of representing the discourse, though they were not cherry-picked either (in fact, even if our searches by keywords were to be counted as cherry-picking, these threads would have still been surprisingly easy to cherry-pick). Rather, besides the fact that one way or another even minimalists uninterested in this or that component do come into contact with others who do, and most likely have to go through some negotiation – at least recognizing those components as co-existing, and relating in some way to the minimalist influencers through which they have probably chanced upon “minimalism” the first time –, our hypothesis relies first of all both on the way in which a distinction between an “aesthetic minimalism” and a “lifestyle minimalism” is easily made, which points to it being in fact an integral part of the minimalist discourse – the need for such a distinction of course presupposing that its common sense is indeed as hybrid as it seems –, and the fact that more intensely polarizing threads do recur one way or another throughout the history of the discourse on the subreddit, so much so that such controversies around minimalism themselves seem to be part of the common sense: we have come across many comments that complained or joked about debates on what “minimalism” is, or judgmental and “gatekeeping” comments in general, being all too frequent – exasperatingly so for some – in the subreddit; this again does not prove they are, but it does indicate that they are perceived as such, which in turn suggests at least that discomfort with determinations – in one direction or the other – as well as uneasiness towards crises and criticality are to some extent commonsensical for minimalists. This guess is further supported by the fact that these rhetorical moves are also evident in the mainstream minimalist discourse itself, which means both that they are commonsensical enough for them to be available to influencers in communicating with their audience – which does get them and appreciate them –, and that they are made even more commonsensical in turn by their circulation in the discourse at large. Lastly, of course, besides our own theoretical lens and interests – for example our pragmatist wish to integrate the aesthetic, ethical and logical dimensions of critique as continuous, or our semiological insistence on the inherent open-endedness of discourses within common

sense and the encyclopaedia, which means that in no way can “minimalism” be secluded and made safe from all the interferences it gathers despite seeking to purge them –, our hypothesis is also rooted on the fact that the contradictions exhibited by the threads, and soon to be confirmed by the vlogs, are an intrinsic aspect of the subjectivism on which minimalism is instead no doubt founded: the very fact of presenting itself as non-aesthetic and non-ascetic – a form of simple living, but less identified with frugality and therefore not even excluding the aesthetic – serves to performatively reinstate and reinforce subjectivism at the core of minimalism, in ways that are not as extricable from the more mainstream discourse as critical commenters on Reddit think. Next, then, we are going to take a look at some of the numerous expressions of the internal crises and negotiations of the criticality of minimalism in the vlogs of YouTube. After that, we will take stock of some conclusions of these analyses in order to prepare the terrain for moving on to the analysis of more ordinary vlogs, which show how the ambiguities of subjectivism are fully at work on YouTube no less than on Reddit, being in fact part and parcel of what minimalism, “aesthetic(ized)” or not, is: one more way to express, articulate and promote the overarching call for authenticity and autonomy in the self-help and self-improvement discourse.

2.3.2 – Minimalism Immunized on YouTube

2.3.2.1 – *Minimalism’s endless end*

The most obvious place to start from is where the algorithms would have us start from anyway, that is, from one of the most popular minimalist YouTube channels: Matt D’Avella homonymous channel, with almost four million subscribers and vlogs extending from minimalism to the whole broader range of the self-improvement discourse – advices on productivity, personal finances, health, relationships, and all sorts of good habits; in fact, up to the start of 2019 it also included a podcast of interviews with other authors or influencers on these and many other topics, reverting after that to a more popular short format with an average duration of around ten minutes per video. In 2021, D’Avella published a video¹⁵² which encapsulates pretty well the ways in which the crises of “minimalism”, seemingly acknowledged through performative self-criticism of

¹⁵² Matt D’Avella, “Is this the end of minimalism?”, Sep. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i57ejDn6HRY> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

the lifestyle as a whole, eventually end up being dispelled to perpetuate minimalism in its indeterminate form. The title and cover of the video insinuate, in a “clickbait” fashion, that minimalism is coming to an “end”, which has had a tangible effect beyond the audience of the channel to other minimalist channels as well: soon after the vlog was published, a whole wave of very similar vlogs by other channels – some of which included in our selected corpus – followed it, which already demonstrates its rhetorical power. The argument is built upon the “three factors” of Gladwell’s early book on the viral spreading of behaviours in “social epidemics”, *Tipping Point* (Gladwell 2000), through which a narrative of minimalism’s rise and fall is framed. First there were “the few” early adopters of a minimalist lifestyle, the “influential people” who include the original bloggers but of course also, in the wake of them and at the “peak” of the curve, D’Avella’s own first movie with *The Minimalists*’ Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus in 2016 (although that was arguably made possible by the success of Kondo’s book the previous year). Thanks to the “stickiness factor” of an impactful, memorable message and the “power of the context” of an ever-growing consumerism on the one hand and an ever-deepening economic crisis on the other, the peak of minimalism has then led to the proliferation of other viral vlogs and blogs and new media products such as Marie Kondo’s 2019 Netflix series, the circulation of the label as a buzzword, the flood of visual contents on social media, as well as the online jokes and memes and the easy dismissals of minimalism by critical articles. Finally, a “market saturation” for “minimalism” was reached, making it gradually disappear from both popular attraction and critical attention, thus marking its “death.”

But of course, the answer to the rhetorical question contained in the title is yet again a “no”, because this is not the end of minimalism as such, but rather the end of minimalism as a “trend”, as mere “hype” surrounding its labels as a short-lived buzzword: framed by Gladwell’s lens of virality, the perceived crisis and weakening of the discourse around minimalism is explained away as something only and wholly natural, because that is how mere “trends” work – they come and go, they are ephemeral by nature. The possible disappearance of minimalism as a trend is functional to preserving – or projecting – once again a more genuine yet less determinate minimalism underlying it, even if it means that it will go under different labels:

While the trend is starting to fade, I do think that it will be here for the long run. As long as people struggle to find meaning in their lives; as long as massive companies funnel billions of dollars

into trying to solve our human needs with physical products; as long as we continue to trade immediate gratification for short term rewards: minimalism will have a place.

Minimalism is presented as a set of still valid solutions or responses to the enduring problems that characterized the socio-cultural “context” originally contributing to its success: since we still live in a consumerist society which from above tries to solve “human needs” with “physical products” and – above all, since that is where minimalism intervenes – irresponsibly yields from below to “immediate gratification” and “short term rewards”, minimalism is here to stay after all. Here minimalism is already clearly reduced to a more indeterminate anti-consumerist lifestyle, with no mention of its aesthetic dimension at all, which in fact may be taken to be implicitly assimilated to the “trend” and dismissed along with it; that amounts, after all, to the same rhetorical move of those users on Reddit who polarized minimalism with an “aesthetic minimalism” pole very much identified with aestheticized, “trendy” minimalism. In summarising the “sticky message” of minimalism, D’Avella adds to anti-consumerism, which encompasses the core assumption of some excess to be restrained, the two other main features we identified for depolarized minimalism, intentionality and the “less is more” motto: “The message itself: when we stop buying crap we don't need, and get more intentional with our decisions, we can lead more meaningful lives. In other words: less is more; it doesn't get much stickier than that.” The question, of course, would be whether there is in fact anything much beyond such vague sticky message – the indeterminate invitation itself to reduce, and the rhetorical bridge it affords from that to a wider invitation into other self-help or self-improvement components –, anything beneath the trend that message sustained for a while which is also distinctive of a more or less coherent lifestyle. Such distinctive coherence is here simply assumed and, just like in the threads on Reddit, it is apparently gained and safeguarded by keeping “minimalism” indeterminate, almost interchangeable with any other form of anti-consumerism – the more sustainability-oriented phenomenon of “zero waste” is cited by D’Avella as possibly substituting minimalism as a “trend” –, with no mention nor emphasis on the more obviously aesthetic and arguably core component of minimalism, decluttering (especially since this channel does not focus on it anyway). At the same time, despite the anti-rhetorical gesture of presenting the label of “minimalism” as actually unimportant and accidental

to a nameless undercurrent of true minimalism¹⁵³, the label is in fact held onto, retained in use by D’Avella as much as by all other vloggers (and the subreddit as well). The “death” of minimalism did not obstruct at all the release of another movie with *The Minimalists* in 2021, the *Less is Now* documentary mostly made up of repetitions of past excerpts from *The Minimalists’* previous books and blogs and other presentations; the movie in fact cited and linked to in the description, so that the vlog ultimately works as an indirect, implicit and inverse promotion of it: the label and the discourse it gathers, as well as its identifying features – the title of the documentary obviously plays on the motto –, are revived through the very performance of their death. That by doing so minimalism is actually reduced to some mostly indeterminate anti-consumerist common sense is quite clearly taken to be an advantage, a sign of its health, because it means that it has finally “saturated” society and thus become normalized as a mainstream “healthier way of life” that everyone has already heard of and knows about, even when they do not practice it (similar to “jogging” and “yoga”). That in such indeterminate form it was actually pretty commonsensical and normal to begin with, before the rise and fall of the minimalist trend, is not fully considered: normalization must have been a result, because otherwise the critical charge of the whole minimalist discourse would end up being defused as a wholly unnecessary, insubstantial addition – just like indeterminacy works best as a result of depolarizing previous polarizations. D’Avella’s minimalism, like minimalism in general, is therefore stuck in this ambiguous terrain between some nameless common sense and one named lifestyle presumably offering perhaps its own distinctive contributions to it, but first and foremost providing one minimal articulation of it as concerned with intentional reduction of excesses for a surplus (especially a surplus of “meaning”, by contrast to the excess of “physical things”). Far from being occasion for critique – which is always also self-critical of the conditions of one’s own discourse –, it then appears that the self-criticism by D’Avella in the name of minimalism rather works to immunize it from critique – including those of the online articles – by expelling its “trendy” side as extraneous, as external.

¹⁵³ This rhetorical move is also very much confirmed by the comment section of the video, where alternative labels such as “voluntary simplicity”, “essentialism” and even “intentionalism” are suggested, and where more explicit identifications of the “trend” with aesthetic minimalism frequently come up. We will mostly refrain from delving into the comment sections of the vlogs for the same limitations of space and time already mentioned, but on the whole they would of course work quite well as a joining link between the discourses on Reddit and on YouTube.

Various minimalist channels in our corpus immediately followed up – all within one month or less – on D’Avella’s vlog with their own vlogs, which however amount to pretty much the same points. The Simple Happy Zen channel, for example – a quite popular channel with around 200.000 subscribers and more of an emphasis on self-help rather than self-improvement –, released its vlog¹⁵⁴ just three weeks after D’Avella’s, already alluded to in the title, to arrive at the same conclusion: it may perhaps be the end of a trend, but it is not “really” the end of “minimalism the lifestyle”, which is “here to stay”; the only actual addition to D’Avella’s take is a mention of the role of the pandemic in pulling away people’s concern from minimalism – the channel’s viewer is shown to have had a sharp fall at the start of the pandemic –, forcing people into either a “survival mode” or wanting, for all the time spent indoors, to make their homes “more cosy” and “less sparsely decorated”, or to buy tools and supplies for hobbies or even just as “comfort shopping.” The ambiguity of minimalism is however more pronounced in this case, because while claiming that lifestyle minimalism is “here to stay”, and in fact more relevant than ever in “strange and uncertain times like these”, by providing generically “a way for us to focus less on the distractions and more on the things that really matter, so we can make more intentional decisions that actually serve us and people we love”, the host immediately says after that that in her view “minimalism is only a part of the story of living a simpler, happier and calmer life”, somehow distinct from other topics she covers on her channel, such as “intentional living, slowing down, self-care, mindfulness, happiness”: these are not, as elsewhere and as the previous more indeterminate praise of lifestyle minimalism would seem to entail, the same as minimalism, but rather disparate topics that “work very well all together”, minimalism more closely associated here to “decluttering” and again anti-consumerism. The host makes explicit that this also helps her keeping her content “fresh” and “new” and “inspiring” by bringing in new topics such as dealing with burnout, “how I learned to just be happy” or “mindset habits for a simpler and happier life”; that the indeterminate minimalist framework – and its aesthetic, which is fully incorporated in the channel’s vlogs – functions primarily to enforce or reinforce the cohesion of such topics, also by being upheld as a “lifestyle” beyond decluttering and anti-consumerism, is not clearly addressed, as the host is okay – here at least, and still ambiguously – with giving “minimalism” the

¹⁵⁴ Simple Happy Zen, “So... I guess minimalism is over now? (The end of minimalism)”, Oct. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZOBhj86e7k8> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

more specific place of its core dealing with material possessions, while other labels – the same used to depolarize it elsewhere – take on its role as indicating a lifestyle integration. Thus, since it is after all a form of anti-consumerism and “there are companies there trying to convince us that we aren’t good enough unless we buy their product, or that we would be happier if we became their customer, minimalism can still be used as a way to challenge the status quo and be more mindful with our shopping.” Yet, again, that is followed up by another oscillation towards expansion of minimalism beyond the more negative aspects of decluttering or of reducing purchases: “I know I mention this a lot, but minimalism isn’t just about the pursuit of having less stuff, it’s about what we can create more of through less, so we are not wasting our time, energy and money cruising for things to buy, and we are also not distracted in our home – in our space – by all the things that we own, that demand our attention; and, that leaves us free for – that is actually that you can decide, so which things give you meaning and purpose and fulfilment.” Again, to the anti-consumerist gesture towards a critique of the “status quo” are added the features of intentionality and of the “less is more” principle, and that is taken to sum up to minimalism, with no mention again of the aesthetic nor of the other internally conflicting tendencies that are drawn into minimalism through its indeterminacy (here also with the subjectivist appeal for each one to focus on whatever it is important for oneself, no matter what it is). The anti-rhetorical gesture against labels as “restrictive” and exclusive is finally accompanied, at the end of the video, with a few pictures of stereotypical, aestheticized minimalist interiors, thus contrasting a self-made minimalism different for each and every one due to situational and subjective differences to a “trendy”, “hip” and “new” minimalism which is too much rhetorically and aesthetically determined into a “strict idea” coming with normativity:

The fact that minimalism is becoming less of a trend can actually provide us with a very interesting opportunity to kind of get rid of that label, or that strict idea of what “minimalism” should be, and to kind of pause and take a little break and see what else is out there – because labels, like “this is what minimalism should be” or “this is what minimalism should look like”, can also be restrictive, and what works for one person and their life and personality and family situation and their job etc. might not work for someone else; but that doesn’t mean that both of these people couldn’t benefit from minimalism. It just means that we can all make it our own, and to have that concept of “less stuff, less burdens, less clutter, less distractions” work for us. [...] And so whether you have been a minimalist for a while, or you’re just starting to learn more about it and you’re just starting to declutter your home or change the way you’re buying new things, there is definitely still a place for you. You can still start this new lifestyle if you want to, and you can also keep it going for a long, long time – even after it stopped being trendy and hip and new.

Everyone can benefit from “minimalism” even if what remains of it is indeed minimal, a least common denominator among even very different lives, pacifically including

them and equalizing them into the same indeterminate “lifestyle” (and, correlatively, the same indeterminate target audience). Reduction in one’s “stuff” is thereby linked to other practices which can be read – metaphorically at least – as in some sense themselves forms of reduction, as whatever “less” leading to some “more”, and in the end “minimalism” is kept ambivalent between being mostly concerned with the former and identifying instead a “lifestyle” (whose label, again, while at first discounted is ultimately saved and severed from the associated “strict idea” – the real problem –, and thus held on to). All are once again happily included, and the crises are neutralized, externalized to be expelled: the “opportunity” they afford is not that of furthering critique, but that of avoiding criticality by showing its negative struggling face (resembling too much the “not good enough” message that is taken to be at the core of consumerism).

The irony of a YouTube trend of vlogs against minimalism seen as a “trend” has not entirely escaped some influencers’ recognition, and one vlogger in particular has taken the meta-critical step upward by opposing this very trend – with, however, once again the same outcome. The vlog¹⁵⁵ is by A to Zen Life, a minimalist channel with again a good following – 228.000 subscribers at present – and a variety of self-help topics, but overall more focused on decluttering and frugal living. The title already hints at an approach which rhetorically raises it above the rest of the discourse: “who says” that minimalism is “dead”, “over”, “cancelled” or “ended” (all adjectives which are indeed found in this whole stream of vlogs)? As it turns out, and as we also have already noted in examining two of these vlogs, everyone and nobody is simultaneously saying that. The host takes issue with the trend precisely because these vlogs more or less uniformly take up D’Avella’s video as a starting point, as if it were indeed proclaiming minimalism to be dead, only to then come to the same conclusion, that it is not in fact really dead – not “as a lifestyle”, at least. In this way, the host actually doubles down on that conclusion by exposing the initial doubt itself to be one more fake and overblown trend. She is not wrong in this assessment – as we have seen, the intent seems to be all but critical questioning minimalism as such –, but of course, she is at the same time participating herself in the trend adding one more vlog to the string with the same conclusions, only further entrenched by this meta-critical attack on the (pseudo-)self-critical anti-trend trend. This is instructive: not only a “true minimalism” can always be projected by

¹⁵⁵ A to Zen Life, “Who says it’s the ‘end of minimalism’?”, Oct. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XSbj79zNmXc> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

contrast to a merely “trendy” one, and thus reinstated and reinforced by safely passing through a diverted and defanged self-criticism, but even the critique itself can in turn present itself as truer than others, without any real change in its content. The downward trend of the discourse around “minimalism” is, like in D’Avella’s vlog, dismissed as an invalid hint with regard to the problems it is meant to respond to, which are not specified but nonetheless assumed to be still there. In fact, the host notes how “frugal living” – which is taken to be self-evidently good, unquestionably so, it seems, since it does not appear spoiled by aestheticization like minimalism – is faring even worse than minimalism as a discursive trend on Google Trends; but these, of course, are again just trends, just labels. By contrast, a “real minimalist lifestyle” is posited as unscathed by the swing of transient trends, and this time its enduring if not eternal value is even more stressed by referring it back – through its identification with an ahistorical, universal and indeterminate concept of “simplifying one’s life” and “living with less” – to traditional worldviews such as stoicism or Buddhism, or other forms of monastic life in general. Needless to say, the aim is not that of determining minimalism through confrontation with any of the extremely diverse concrete ways those worldviews or forms of life have actually produced in history, but rather that of borrowing from them the sense at least of a long-standing history and tradition beyond trends, thus decoupling “minimalism” from the discourse that rhetorically constructs it, and the aesthetic as well as ethical-practical common sense upon which it builds to do so, with all its uncomfortable or even conflicting determinacy. That such determinacy is something the discourse is not really able to do without is shown by the fact that not only A to Zen Life’s videos in general – including this one – display again a typical modernist aesthetic, but also that at the very moment in which the host renders a less determinate vision of minimalism as the idea that by letting go of the “clutter” of all things we do not value or do not make us happy we can make space for other more important or enjoyable things – once again, “less is more” as an unifying theme, with a heavily subjectivist bent –, pictures are shown with on-going voiceover of a perfectly clean and tidy modernist interior with white walls on wooden pavements, neutral colours in the furniture, one Japanese painting hung to a wall and designed chairs with organic shapes: are these really not an integral part of the more important and enjoyable things to be gained through minimalism? The host herself would doubtlessly say they are not, yet the pictures are employed ex-

actly at the right juncture in the discourse to serve as visual complement to her redefinition of minimalism, lending it their aspirational aura.

On the other hand, by now we can perhaps guess that if the aesthetic itself were under attack in the discourse as necessarily excluded by minimalism, the host would be careful to depolarize the very distinction between an “aesthetic minimalism” and a “true minimalism”, or “lifestyle minimalism”, she too goes on to trace, as we have seen commenters on Reddit do. As far as this video goes, however, the aesthetic is the target, and it is assimilated still more explicitly to trends and fashions, thereby reduced to a perfectionist, competitive and thus distressful chase after superficial, stereotypical appearances, an unsustainable and self-defeating struggle that wholly misses the point: it is not a matter of “achieving a certain look”, but rather gaining the “true benefits of a minimalist lifestyle” which “all boil down to practicality” and “actually liv[ing] minimally [...] not so much focusing on creating perfection, but rather how to make life less overwhelming and more manageable.” Is “true minimalism” therefore a non-aesthetic – and non-ethical –, thoroughly practical minimalism which is exhausted by decluttering and frugally managing one’s consumptions and one’s personal finances for entirely practical purposes? Is the “best and more authentic minimalist life” opposed to aesthetic minimalism reducible to that? The channel’s reliance on the aesthetic says the opposite, and the host is also self-aware of this fact, explicitly pointing it out but also turning it again to her advantage: she admits indeed that a past vlog of hers, for example, would not have gone “viral” if she had worn red instead of light grey clothes, yet she presents this as an unfortunate but inherent problem of the platform and the online discourse, conformity to visual stereotypes being necessary to gain a following; other than this, however, it is neatly extrinsic to minimalism – which, as she insists with a quote by *The Minimalists*, “looks different for everyone, because it's about finding what is essential to you.” Like the rhetorical trend and label, the aesthetic style can be jettisoned from the lifestyle, though ultimately they are nonetheless retained as necessary for the minimalist discourse to continue. A minimalist discourse must be possible, of course – vloggers depend on it, it is their work –, and the host says as much by pointing out that more newcomers to minimalism will keep coming, with questions to be answered such as “what do minimalists have in the kitchen?”, or “how do I know what to keep and what to get rid of?”, or “where do minimalists keep their umbrellas?”, evidently understood

as questions that can indeed be meaningfully responded to, somehow without overstepping those people's subjectivities: with her own "non-judgmental" approach to minimalism, the host presents herself as a mere facilitator for people to find their own subjective answers, which will be "minimalist" regardless of how they look like (in fact, regardless of anything else). Some gestures in this respect to manage and alleviate minimalism's normativity are made in this video: the host replies to one of those hypothetical questions by showing that she keeps umbrellas in the stark red water bucket used for cleaning; she displays close-ups of a few old and worn out items she keeps for their sentimental or historical value – a pink quilt made by her grandmother, a light blue curtain with Chinese decorations for her Chinese husband –, along with other more practical objects that are "cosy" and "warm" such as the colourful blanket with penguins for her children, all things which are explicitly presented as "not new", "not modern" or "not minimalist-looking." All of these, however, are but singular elements or aspects still inserted into and framed by an overall modernist aesthetic with again light grey clothes, white walls, wooden pavements, lots of empty space and sparse decors kept in perfect order. Would "minimalism" still be what it is if it actually did away with its aesthetic and embraced a different one, for example one consciously predicated on the historicity and imperfections of worn out things, instead of rejecting the aesthetic as such as irrelevant? This question is made unavailable to critical reflection by the minimalist discourse. Reduced to an issue of inauthentic appearance, the aesthetic dimension of experience – including but exceeding expression, which in turn however exceeds appearance – is substituted with an emotional one that is more compatible with subjectivism: the integrity of one's "authentic minimalist life" is an emotional, non-aesthetic integration, despite it clearly involving at least the ideal inhabitation of one's domestic space, and an encompassing new relationship to ones' belongings and "physical things" as such; it is, as in the story here retold of the host's past self, not really just a matter of practical advantages such as "more time to have fun" and more savings, but also a transformation from a "sad emotional hoarder" to a "minimalist."

A transformation is therefore involved in minimalism, but it has nothing to do with the aesthetic – in general as well as with regard to the specific aestheticized style –, and confusion about it is to be blamed for the apparent crises or struggles associated with the actually non-aesthetic and on the whole – or on the long run – unproblematic

“true” lifestyle. As the host says, minimalism can in fact be difficult for people who own a lot of “stuff” and are emotionally attached to it, but once that initial barrier is overcome, it will make life easier for anyone; if it does not, it is not because it is too “difficult” or “painful”, nor of course because evaluation of things are complicated and contradictory – even for individual subjects left to themselves –, but rather because one has done it wrong, pursuing appearance according to other people’s views – aestheticized, extreme views – even sacrificing one’s own happiness for it. “Never declutter yourself into a box that fits someone else’s idea of minimalism”, admonishes the host: one can get bored of having only a few clothes, and it is clearly unpractical if one does not have anywhere to keep their shoes, or enough dishes for guests to come over; as elsewhere, minimalism is not really about the bare minimum that defeats one’s good practical sense. As the aestheticization of minimalism online is necessary and unavoidable, justified as we have seen with the purpose of spreading its positive message, it is already implicit here that the responsibility ultimately falls on the individuals themselves: it is their job to detach minimalism from its own aesthetic common sense and from aesthetic interest in appearances altogether, making their own authentic minimalism regardless of whether it is recognizable as such by anyone. The possibility of a different discourse is not completely foreclosed, because the host does praise new emerging minimalist channels which supply ever more examples of minimalism as practically implemented in everyday life: such discourse is helpful to “normalize minimalism as a lifestyle and connect and understand each other better”; but that is, again, a matter of setting aside aesthetic concerns altogether in favour of practical tips – self-help advice around emotions, identity, relationships and so on being thus assimilated to such non-aesthetic, amoral matters.

Two vlogs in Ronald L. Banks’s YouTube channel (190.000 subscribers), whose approach is bent more heavily towards self-improvement and is much more explicit about “authenticity”, show very well how the latter suits perfectly the responsabilization of the former, including responsibility for not being deceived and led astray by the aesthetic associations of minimalism – despite the fact, again, that the channel does come with such an aesthetic. The host did not participate to the “end of minimalism” anti-trend trend, most likely because of the fact that he had already done so ante litteram

with the first vlog¹⁵⁶, released one month before D’Avella’s (and probably informing it in some way despite the different emphases, since it too targets the trendiness of minimalism and mentions a movement towards “saturation”). Even more than the others we have examined, this vlog is centred on the opposition of minimalism as a “style” and minimalism as a “lifestyle”, the former being presented as actually irrelevant to the latter, because it is after all as temporary as all material, sensible things are, while minimalism is “timeless.” Once again, the aestheticized trend may very well go: it will reach its point of “saturation” and then, being perceived as too uniform and omnipresent, it will induce reactions in the opposite direction, towards “maximalism”; fashions come and go in an oscillation which is taken to have no meaning beyond the short-lived competitive differentiation. On the contrary, the lifestyle is enduring because it is indeed concerned with “life”, of course understood as an inner, immaterial life – a matter of personal “mindset”, “belief”, “routine”, “habit.” Thus the anti-aesthetic rhetoric is here explicitly tied to the anti-materialist one: aesthetic pursuits are bound to be frustrating because they will be frustrated by change, and even when there is satisfaction in them, it is as ephemeral as the initial “excitement” gained by acquiring and owning material things is for the anti-consumerist discourse; it is not a true, long-lasting happiness (explicitly linked to the good habits promoted by the self-improvement discourse at large). Making the distinction between these two really unrelated things, the “style” and the “life(style)”, is however up to each individual: as the host says, the question in the title – “will minimalism ever go out of style?” – is only rhetorical, it is in fact the “wrong question”, because the real question is instead, “How committed are you to minimalism?”, that is, is it merely a style or a lifestyle to you? That the discourse at large is ambiguous, just like the channel itself, and will therefore reproduce this unfortunate confusion – if that is what it is –, is not a problem so far as individuals are “authentic”; and in fact, insofar as an “authentic life” is what a “minimalist lifestyle” aims at, having an aesthetic component ready at hand in order to reject it in a performative way as confusing can be rhetorically useful, as these vlogs show.

If this is the case, it is not a coincidence that this vlog by the minimalist channel most directly concerned with authenticity also exhibits the ambivalence towards the aesthetic that goes with it. Minimalism is once again explicitly derived by a generalization

¹⁵⁶ Ronald L. Banks, “Will Minimalism Ever Go Out of Style?”, Aug. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9ainoNZID0> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

of the “less is more” motto beyond the modernist design of “white walls, muted colour palette, perfect symmetry”, and thus supposedly turned into the non-aesthetic matter of practical benefits, the “less” and the “more” identifying in an immediate way, also by themselves, negative and positive elements: on the one hand we find “less stress/worry”, “less spending”, “less work”, “less things”, while on the other we have “more time”, “more space”, “more energy”, “more peace”, “more freedom” – in other words, “more of what matters” and “less of what doesn’t.” It is clear that “stress”, “worry”, “spending”, “work” and – on their wake, by the association at the core of the minimalist discourse – “things” are from the start presupposed to be self-evidently negative elements, so it should not come as a surprise – as the motto instead implies – that less of them translates into something positive: it is the negation of another negation. What the motto does beyond this, working as a principle, is to suggest that all the heterogeneous reductions and relative surpluses – vague enough for this purpose – cohere into a whole, into the overall surplus of meaning of a lifestyle, which in this case is an authentic life. In our view, this is already an aesthetic matter by virtue of its concern with, at least, a lifestyle’s sensible integration beyond this or that determinate means for some determinate ends – spending less to make ends meet in difficult times, for example –, even though it usually builds upon such practical advantages to get at life as a whole:

When life is simple, you have less to manage; and when you have less to manage, meaning bills and debts, your finances will improve tremendously. When life is simple, you have more time to invest and develop deeper and more meaningful relationships. When life is simple, you are more mindful, not only about what you consume but what you care about, including the opinions of others.

In this presentation, the “simple life” is built upon the practical foundations of less “bills and debts” and thus more money which, saved along with more “time”, can be invested in more life-changing matters such as “deeper and meaningful relationships” – yet also caring less about “the opinions of others” – and being more “mindful” in general, beyond one’s consumption per se. Even outside the framework of our critical theory, it is still the case that the practices involved and bound together by the minimalist discourse must at the very least negotiate their aesthetic dimension (in the reductive understanding of the term); our theoretical lens rather expands on an ambiguity that is nonetheless there, and that is discharged as a task onto the individual. Against the aesthetic of a “colour palette” as well as the extreme of the “specific number of things one owns or does not own”, one must focus on “the embodiment of less” in one’s life, and it is hard

to see how that “embodiment” could do entirely without the aesthetic. The solution to the aesthetic problems cannot but be aesthetic in nature. The host himself shows this best. In a quite significant scene in the vlog, he raises the question – to which, however, he finds no answer – as to who he would be in front of a mirror without any of his clothes and things, and the lack of an answer is taken to be evidence not of the absence of any non-material and non-sensible self, but rather of the opposite – an “authentic self” beyond all clothes. At the same time, clothes – and the crises they induce – cannot be avoided, so the quest for authenticity must still come to term with the aesthetic; the solution being, as we will see later on, that of “adding just enough to get the job done” and strip away the rest, including if possible one’s very caring for the aesthetic more than for the authentic. This is taken to not interfere with minimalism being indeterminate and thus inclusive of everyone, not demanding a “sterile” style which is “depriving” of a welcoming home or even of clothes which reflect – authentically, here – one’s own personality. The negativity of minimalism is, once again, amassed onto the aesthetic reduced to trends and styles, in turn reduced to the manifestations of the style that most exhibit such negativity as an external matter of going to extremes: the uniform, sterile, deprived and depersonalized face of modernism (which is of course not its only face, nor the one that attracts most people drawn to minimalism). What other negativity does remain is to be perhaps partly solved by some kind of aesthetic compromise, but also dealt with by a responsible individual rejecting the aesthetic to espouse the authentic.

The other short vlog¹⁵⁷ in the same channel was released towards the end of 2019, preceding D’Avella’s vlog by two years (which confirms, along with the threads on Reddit, that the perceived problems or crises of minimalism are actually nothing new in the discourse). Here the responsibility of each individual for minimalism’s confusions is as explicit as it gets: “The problem with minimalism, to be honest, is us”, it is “living your life for others and not for you”, which comes down in the end to an individual matter of “los[ing] focus while thinking you’re being focused” and thereby falling prey of an actually inexistent determinate standard, whether in the aesthetic or ascetic sense, for what “minimalism” is. This is further tied to the rhetorical move of setting apart “minimalism” as a means to an end – even if the end is what we would rather call

¹⁵⁷ Ronald L. Banks, “The Real Problem With Minimalism”, Oct. 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXuqlCxHlc0> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

an aesthetically grounded “ideal”, as it is meant as a transformation of one’s whole life and experience of it – and contrasting it to “minimalism” as an end in itself, as pursued for its own sake: despite the contradiction in terms, this “for its own sake” is associated to – and reduced to – the purpose of appearing as “minimalist” to others according to those standards. Again, from our point of view any interest or ideal turns the objects it takes an interest in as its “instruments” in the constitutive sense in which a musical instrument is instrumental for producing a certain quality of music, and it also includes association with other subjects (with all its crises and struggles as well, of course). The host is instead trying to get rid of both aspects by presenting minimalism as instrumental in the most practical sense – a means to an end it is more externally related to – and as, of course, authentically individual, both ways to make it non-aesthetic: in order to “stay true to you”, you must never lose sight of your own subjective “why” for practicing minimalism, an end which goes beyond minimalism itself into one’s whole life (despite it being at other times identified with that life as precisely a “minimalist lifestyle”). The crisis is again fastened to the aesthetic – including its ideal dimension, flattened on to a desired final end of appearing in a certain way to others – and jettisoned with it, actually leaving it to the individual to sort out. That it is a matter of managing the internal criticality is also shown once more by the framing of the aesthetic in necessarily perfectionist terms, which however are of course a part of self-improvement discourses themselves: there is thus on one side a good authentic drive of wanting to be really good at something, while on the other side there is a wholly distinct bad aesthetic drive of wanting others to think that we are really good at something; the one can be kept, the other sparks crisis and should therefore be discarded.

One further example of this wave of minimalist anti-trend vlogs on the “end” of minimalism is by the smaller and at present inactive Messy Minimalist¹⁵⁸ channel (59.400 subscribers), a channel which, as its name implies, positioned itself from the very start by contrast to a more exclusive aestheticized minimalism: its minimalism is inclusive of the “messy” people who, like the host, are not naturally inclined to declut-

¹⁵⁸ This is not to be confused with Rachele Crawford’s *Messy Minimalism* book (2021), despite the abundance of coincidences – the YouTube channel’s host is also named Rachel and she also first began getting into minimalism at the start of 2017, just like Crawford did. Crawford’s book, promptly published just a few months after the last minimalist vlog by Messy Minimalist, further demonstrates how available this rhetoric of inclusion against aesthetic stereotypes and idealizations is in the minimalist discourse, offering “realistic strategies for the rest of us” (the “rest of us” being, of course, nothing but an “us” that has returned from the crises as “still minimalist”).

ter, the main but again not exclusive focus of the channel. The vlog¹⁵⁹ was released just one week after D’Avella’s, to which it alludes in the description already giving it away that, for the host, minimalism is not exactly dead: “No, this is not the END of minimalism – but I’m hoping that we can find the truth in minimalism again.” It was, however, the end of the channel (up to now, at least): after reappearing from her one-year break from both minimalism and the channel, the host went on to release only one unrelated vlog on home-schooling, then she disappeared again. While the authentic personal convictions of influencers are obviously beside the point in our rhetorical analysis – each and every one of these channels has its own following that surely finds the host authentic enough to be believed, and that is enough for our purposes –, this vlog nevertheless offers us one rare example of minimalism actually ending. Even so, the way it ends is not at all dissimilar, rhetorically speaking, from the way it is kept alive and going elsewhere. What the host says she has “cancelled” during the previous year – the first year of the pandemic, which contributed to her decision to set the YouTube channel aside – is not minimalism per se, but rather the “term” of minimalism, its label, which has “lost the spark” for her: far from sparking joy, the minimalist discourse as a whole now started – in our words – sparking crises, once again because of its aestheticization. Since the channel was active for longer than many other minimalist channels – it was started in 2017 –, its criticism depicts minimalism as moving not in a downward trajectory of disappearance, as D’Avella and others did to naturalize and thus neutralize it – disappearing is what trends naturally do –, but in a trajectory of decline, of qualitative instead of quantitative downfall, precisely because of too much appearance. This illuminates the remarks by other minimalist influencers as to the “opportunity” afforded by the possible end of minimalism as a trend: projecting its disappearance can be comforting precisely because it helps project a minimalism that is free of appearance. As far as this host is concerned, however, this is far from what is happening, in fact the opposite – minimalism, in her view, is more and more a sensationalistic trend of “aesthetic minimalism” which has lost sight of its original task of “simplifying one’s life.” Despite refraining from giving a negative last word on minimalism as irrecoverable – though the fact that these are indeed her last words about it can be taken as a negative last word –, the possibility of minimalism having been corrupted once and for all is surely more present

¹⁵⁹ Messy Minimalist, “Minimalism got CANCELLED. | Why we quit minimalism for a year”, Sep. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uv3LbwhFD3Q> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

here than anywhere else. There is an evident sense of rhetorical impotency in front of the minimalist discourse at large, which has gotten “too big” and gained too much online “traction” through “too many Netflix series and things like that”, so much so that to the host’s eyes it appeared as if it was taking on “a life of its own”, making her “lose the strength” to continue with her project. YouTube and social media were inundated by a never-ending stream of pictures or videos of people talking about how much “trendy”, “clean”, “bright” and “airy” their homes are, again – as some users on Reddit claimed – showcasing perfect results while hiding the process behind it; “#decluttering”, “#minimalism” and “#homestyling” became fully interchangeable in gathering these aestheticized materials. By taking this path, minimalism has now become a “charade”, a “big fat lie”, which is unsustainably hypercritical and exclusive both because of its perfectionism (“If too many people only show perfection, this makes others feel inadequate”) and because of its commodification as the luxury of aesthetically upgrading one’s belongings (“buying into minimalism” becoming necessary, though inaccessible to many, insofar as it is not just a matter of discarding things anymore but also and perhaps foremost of replacing them with “new nice stuff”, raising the “price” of minimalism also in the sense of making it “mentally hard” for those who have not the economic means to participate in it). On the contrary, the channel’s project was that of “normalizing the process of simplifying one’s life” and thereby also of “opening oneself to this vulnerability of being messy and having one’s stuff all over the place and not knowing how to organize – simply being a real person”; a project again tied to authenticity, though understood in a more processual way. And yet, has this ever been what “minimalism” was all about? In the description to the vlog, the host says that she started decluttering before minimalism was popular, before most people “knew about Marie Kondo or what Spark Joy meant”, and she adds that “early adopters really seemed to have a passion for helping you declutter your life and live with less”, without all this talk of minimalist spaces “curated for the sole purpose of a photograph”, without the costly “replacing all one’s items with new stuff for a perfect photo”, which is “just senseless.” As we have seen, however, the internal crises of minimalism centred on its aesthetic dimension surely go further back than 2015, and they do not seem to be detachable from – at least – its presentation as an integral lifestyle and the undeniable aesthetic dimension of its core practices of decluttering one’s home and wardrobe. Without any way to critically respond to the aestheticized without targeting the aesthetic as a whole – a way of discern-

ing and remediating them rhetorically besides differentiating oneself aesthetically (as the channel to some extent did) –, minimalism cannot but seem corrupted. What is left, even if it is projected backwards as something more genuine that once existed, is at most and at any rate a possibility, the vague sense that “there is still so much minimalism has to offer”, as the description of the vlog again promises. That minimalism which is only possible is a non-aesthetic minimalism, wherein again the aesthetic is substituted with the emotional in order to purge it from too much determination – too much appearance: “If the process of decluttering and simplifying your life is to have an end goal of a perfect picture, I think the value is lost, I think you're part of the charade; it's not going to result in long-term contentment.”

Let us round up our survey with one last vlog¹⁶⁰ of this kind, though there are of course many more. It is from Ana Goldberg’s homonymous channel (37.300 subscribers), which we have already seen referenced and praised in a Reddit thread as fresh air by some users who did not feel represented by the rest of the mainstream minimalist discourse. The channel, a much more recent and smaller one – its first vlog is from October 2021, right after D’Avella’s vlog on minimalism (not) ending –, does in fact distance itself from other minimalist channels with regard to the aesthetic dimension of minimalism, aesthetically as well as in the selection of topics: the Russian host wears a wider variety of clothes – from a vivid red-and-blue check shirt to different wool sweaters, at times with accessories such as hats or bandanas – with a more down-to-earth look which is very well in line with her self-presentation as coming from a poorer economic background, also reflected in her first vlogs being more on the frugal side, or about the relationship of minimalism to poverty. While the staples of the more aesthetic side of minimalist vlogging are there – some vlogs on decluttering, on her wardrobe, and an apartment tour –, the channel covers a broad range of self-help topics from finding creativity or intuition to dealing with the fear of being judged or with feeling overwhelmed, sometimes explicitly framed as “minimalist” matters, often times not, other times still with recourse to different labels current in the self-help discourse (“highly sensitive people”, “multipotentialites”). There are also, of course, vlogs on things bought – or not bought – or gotten rid of, vlogs on shopping less and countering impulse buying, others on living more frugally and so on, but “minimalism” is nonetheless also employed as a

¹⁶⁰ Ana Goldberg, “Why I’m staying a minimalist”, Jun. 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2mpIhWGboDE> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

label for the host's lifestyle as a whole, irreducible to such anti-consumerist issues per se: it is appealed to, as in other channels, with regard to one's habits, one's mindset, one's overall relationship with things but also with the media; the channel's banner places side by side the words "minimalism", "mindfulness" and "creativity", words at the very least going hand in hand in the host's view. In the vlog where she responds – almost a year after D'Avella's video – to the idea of minimalism being in crisis if not coming to an end, the host too targets the "trend" of minimalism as a quite distinct phenomenon, again framing it and the rhetorical label in terms of a sort of fateful degeneration: every "-ism" is born to challenge the rigid limits of the past ones, but with time it also in turn falls back into "rigid patterns" of merely a different kind. This is not an insurmountable obstacle for the host, who is in fact willing to keep calling herself "minimalist", just not an "extreme" one. Minimalism is taken to be originally and primarily a response to consumerism, its degeneration consisting in the impulsivity it fosters through aesthetic appearances, "manipulat[ing] our desire to seem better than other people" and thus defeating the whole real point of minimalism by "artificially expanding our ego through material possessions", instead of detaching it from them. Needless to say, the rhetorical approach here is spiritualistic, and links minimalism – as a "philosophy" or "spirituality" – again to long-standing religious traditions¹⁶¹, from eastern "non-attachment" to the Christian theme of being "passer-by's in the world", from stoic "moderation" to the *Daodejing* – they are "all about the same thing as minimalism": "Minimalism is not about just a trend, a style, an art movement or design aesthetic; there is a good dose of spirituality in it." The vlog's aesthetic, while not without modernist white walls as a background, reinforces this spiritualistic language with pictures of flowers and the sea, with small rocks in a glass recipient or with an unifying piano soundtrack, as well as with the host's more rustic look, while the vlog ends with her walking away outdoor caressing the protruding stones of a wall, as pigeons peck bread: all of this is, of course, a form of aesthetic work over the vlog, but while suggesting a different aesthetic direction for minimalism to take, it is not recognizable as such to the host – it is a support for a sense of spirituality which is understood to be the very opposite of an aesthetic concern conceived as a preoccupation with appearances, even though many vlogs in the channel centre on art and, indeed, "creativity." While the aesthetic is

¹⁶¹ The ahistorical understanding of minimalism is also insisted upon with regard to current world events and her personal history of leaving Russia, because she affirms that she would still be "minimalist" even in other conditions, and even if she lived in a safer world.

different, then, the rhetoric about the aesthetic remains very close to that of all others minimalist channels – the large one just as much as the smaller ones –, taking it to be a degeneration to be rejected. Through such rejection, the possibility of a more genuine non-aesthetic minimalism, therapeutic and here also spiritualistic in character, is projected by contrast – and thus reinforced – as actually being the real minimalism all along, discerned and distilled from contamination with what it was meant to oppose. Just like in other minimalist channels, this purified “minimalism” thereby provides the host with a more indeterminate framework which contributes, directly and indirectly, to both the subjectivist outlook and the sense of coherence – itself central to subjectivism as the sense of lifestyle integration – of her own strand of the broader self-help discourse. Minimalism offers an entry point to such broader self-help and/or self-improvement discourse on the one hand by encompassing it in its indeterminacy – reduction of objects and purchases being expanded to anything from reduced consumption of media to reduced caring for other people’s judgments –, and on the other by supporting its subjectivism with a denial of the aesthetic dimension along with aestheticization: the problematization of one’s “relationship to things” becomes an individual issue of one’s own emotional or spiritual well-being, whose aesthetic nature and ambiguities and thus inherent vulnerability to aestheticization is passed over as extraneous.

Therefore, despite the differences in the channels’ aesthetic setting and rhetorical tones with the relative balances between self-help and self-improvement, we find in Ana Goldberg’s “still minimalist” vlog an emphasis on authenticity through anti-materialist, anti-aesthetic rhetoric similar to the heavy-handed one by Ronald L. Banks. Here too we find a “philosophically dramatic” anecdote around and against one’s material embodiment, as opposed to one’s inner, immaterial self: the host confesses of having had, in the past, the wish or aspiration to be “a radiant genderless globe of all-embracing light”, because what matters is “the light we carry within”, while external things are but a “personal choice” that must not be allowed to function as “materials prisms” blocking that light; it is only in this spiritual sense, and in its emotional consequences, that they can be subjectively “clutter” in one’s life. As in Banks’ case, the responsibility is on the individuals to detach from the trend and its aesthetically determinate and thus “restricting”, “judgmental” minimalism, doing away with people’s comments and judgments which are “all in our heads”: it is not the minimalist discourse, it is “we [that] limit our-

selves because we want to comply to some broad social standards invented by yet another human.” The main advice, of course, is “just be yourself”, “just choose what makes you happy, what makes you free”, despite the fact that that is most likely what those “aesthetic minimalists” understand themselves to be doing, and despite the fact that that is already what the subjectivism of self-help and self-improvement discourses promotes; the advice is to “see beyond limits and things” in general, rather than seeing through them – it is “finding what limits you and then decluttering it.” This is, once more, the indeterminate rhetorical kernel that can keep together under “minimalism” such practical concerns as one’s free time or finances and the sense of an overarching lifestyle with its euphoric emotional or spiritual quality: to the host, minimalism means being “not limited by the absence of things, not limited by things, by ‘thingism’” itself, whether it is an economic downshifting to “living with less” in order to work less and thus have more time for the “creativity” the channel espouses, or the emotional sifting through one’s belongings and letting of one’s past by getting rid of “something that hurts you”, instead of being “trapped” into a “museum of memories” or in an “universe of things” (like her dad was, having accumulated books he did not read only as a status symbol of “freedom”, and then suffering from their “burden” when leaving them behind as he moved from Russia). Nothing could be more indeterminate than the opposite of “thingism”, or anti-materialism, and nothing could be more compatible with subjectivism, and thus vulnerable to all its problems and crises – if one can subjectively afford aesthetic upgrades of one’s home or wardrobe, or buying or owning more than others in general without any financial strain coming from it and not feeling any particular emotional “burden” from what one owns, is one then “still minimalist” or is one inauthentic? The wholesale dismissals of aesthetic minimalism as aestheticized, as we have also noted on Reddit, do not offer much in the way of a nuanced critical answer, instead doubling down on subjectivism, reaching it from an alternative “minimalist” route (that is, an anti-consumerist, anti-aesthetic and/or anti-materialist rhetorical route gathered around assumed excesses to be reduced, intentionality and the generalized, de-aestheticized “less is more” principle). What at least potentially could be upheld as the most distinctive trait of minimalism, its dealing with the aesthetic practices of decluttering and curating wardrobes or one’s things in general, and joining these to other anti-consumerist concerns – or still further concerns addressed by self-help and self-improvement more in general –, must be continually discarded across the whole board

of the minimalist discourse, each minimalist channel reinstating and reinforcing in this way their own version of subjectivist self-help and self-improvement (just like each individual minimalist can freely reinstate and reinforce his or her private minimalism). The problem itself, highlighted by the ambiguity of sensing in things powerful “burdens” and “limits” yet immediately denying their power – as the host says, “things are just things after all, and they all disappear eventually, like we do” –, is avoided and postponed again and again. While, as we will see again later, smaller channels like Messy Minimalist and especially Ana Goldberg do intervene aesthetically on the mainstream minimalist discourse on YouTube, not conforming to the stylized “trend” themselves even while making vlogs on decluttering, wardrobes and the like, rhetorically they still play into what the discourse as a whole – as subjectivist, as concerned with authenticity (and autonomy) – is actually fond of denouncing, because that problem is reduced to a problem with the aesthetic(ized), rather than recognized as in fact an aesthetic problem (as well as, indeed, such rhetorical problem of how to think and speak about the aesthetic, how to face it). It is surely far from being the only real problem for a more critical minimalist discourse: its aspiration to universally include people from all sorts of economic backgrounds, for example, cannot but spark its own crises again left unsolved by subjectivism, by either insisting upon each individual keeping to his or her situation “living within one’s means” (the more “contented”, self-help face of minimalism), nor by indiscriminately promising upward mobility to everyone through individual frugality to save money and/or invest it (the more ambitious, self-improvement face of minimalism). However, it is nonetheless likely the most fundamental problem, precisely because of the fact that the aesthetic problem is the first thing that the whole minimalist discourse, as we have seen, will always point to in order to discharge upon it all its other internal crises, all its contradictions. The contented ones will only feel more authentically contented by contrast to the aestheticized minimalists, just like the ambitious ones will only feel much more authentically ambitious in setting aside all such superficial and ephemeral preoccupations – wasteful and costly as they are – with mere appearances; most perhaps will keep on bouncing back and forth from one aspect to another, they too feeling authentically “still minimalist” all along. In this way, minimalism will keep on ending without end.

2.3.2.2 – *Minimalism's minimal self-critique*

If we sum up all we have seen so far of the minimalist discourse, both on Reddit and on YouTube, it is clear enough how its crises, its fractures and attacks against itself (and at times against the attacks by others), are recuperated to work as a sort of immunization against criticality, against further critical determination and development of “minimalism” as a lifestyle – or set of lifestyles – which can be shared and discussed across all the differences it claims to include or bypass, especially with regard to its aesthetic dimension. As the minimalist discourse on YouTube shows, such immunization does allow for differentiation in the discourse: every channel, large or small, has its own mix of topics both directly related to minimalism and additional to it, each one has its own emphasis on either self-help or self-improvement, and each one also has its own relationship to aestheticization and the modernist aesthetic of minimalism in its necessarily visual contents; yet the rhetorical move of criticizing an aestheticized minimalism to project a more authentic one – at least, of course, one’s own – is equally available to all of them, and equally acceptable to their respective audiences. These audiences may, of course, also overlap, more or less easily moving – via “minimalism” – through all the varieties of moral advice on offer on different channels, perhaps even those that are not so compatible. At any rate, in all attacking the same aestheticized minimalism as a pervasive “trend” extraneous to the real minimalism, each one is immunized, pre-emptively and performatively shielded from critiques, and in fact confirmed and strengthened – at least to their audience – as authentic, perhaps more authentic than others. The same goes for minimalists on Reddit, who again often contrast their own subjectivist, indeterminate and inclusive minimalism not only to that of others in the same discourse, but also to the whole mainstream minimalist discourse, including vloggers on YouTube. All eventually agree in their disagreeing, and most keep holding onto the lifestyle label of “minimalist”, which in fact may be said to come out renewed from the immunization in its indeterminate promises of subjectivist integrity and intentionality, of “more” through “less” – a “more” certainly articulated at times in practical terms, but nonetheless most often suggesting a shift in one’s overall experience of life in emotional and/or spiritual terms (exalted as such by the rejection of the aesthetic). Insofar as minimalism is left to be one ambiguous route into self-help and self-improvement via subjectivist articulations of anti-consumerist practices, it is not, of course, immunized from its crises as much as immunizing the crises of the broader discourses it builds upon: a form of im-

munization, at most accompanied by a sense of universal inclusion into its indeterminacy, is all that it would amount to in that case. As we have mentioned, this indeterminacy of the minimalist discourse may work just fine for individual minimalists, who may no doubt gain benefits from subjectively cherry-picked and fine-tuned practices gathered around this label, in addition to whatever meaning is derived from rhetorically framing those practices as part of a “minimalist lifestyle.” Even our operational insistence on assuming that the minimalist discourse could be more critical, that its crises do signal an impulse in that direction despite leading it back to the start, can obviously be reabsorbed by the discourse itself, as that is of course what it thinks of itself as actually being, at least in its underlying real form: a critical discourse fostering “intentionality” (at least by exhortation, though also claiming to offer helpful “tools” as well). “Minimalism”, as its most minimal redefinitions as being “intentional living” as such especially stress, would then precisely coincide with subjectivism, the apparent gap between the two only due to the fact that minimalism incorporates some of the ways the subjectivism of the self-help and self-improvement discourses may be arrived at, that it incorporates what it must deny (but cannot fully deny, both in the sense that it shies away from the possibility of people criticizing each other anyway, and in the sense that – authentic or not – the minimalist discourse has indeed a “life of its own”, so it cannot be actually severed from the aestheticized common sense it has no doubt accumulated). Whether that gap and its crises could supply enough of an opportunity for a redirection or even reconstruction of the discourse, a different rhetorical project, is something that our critical theory perhaps suggests – for example by seeing the aesthetic dimension under cover in the discourse’s appeals to overarching emotional or spiritual benefits –, and something we must assume precisely in order to understand how by contrast the opportunity would nonetheless be missed or dismissed. In no way does it mean, however, that this hypothetical opportunity is what minimalism “really” is or should be: it would of course, at any rate, perhaps be a more critical minimalism, but not a “truer” minimalism than the one leading to subjectivism.

Before moving on to see how this subjectivist rhetoric of minimalism is indeed pervasive also in the ordinary – not self-critical – YouTube vlogs that deal with specific topics, further showing that it is in fact a constitutive part if not the core of the minimalist discourse as centred on authenticity and autonomy, we can end with some other ex-

amples from our corpus of vlogs that manage minimalism’s criticality either directly or again by administering it in controlled microdoses, immunizing the discourse as well as individuals from it, and performing and fostering influencers’ authenticity in the process. Many vlogs, before and after D’Avella’s vlog on the end of minimalism, take essentially the same route by suggesting in their titles and/or covers that there is some “problem” with minimalism, only to articulate that problem in ways that can make it manageable if not dismissible. Besides the vlog by Ronald L. Banks we have considered earlier, where the problem of minimalism was revealed to be “us”, The most obvious example¹⁶², released just before Ana Goldberg’s vlog, is from Nate O’Brien’s popular channel (1,3 million subscribers), one that is for the most part focused on financial investments and on the frugal side of minimalism, but also integrates the usual range of topics in the self-help and especially self-improvement discourse – how to become more confident or smarter, how to read faster, good habits for one’s morning routine and so on –, all the while exhibiting from time to time the host’s digital nomad life in a truck (he is most likely the vlogger implicitly referred to on Reddit when such a life is dismissed as either for the very poor or for the very rich). Despite being ostensibly about minimalism “not working”, and despite being received as such a honest confession by the channel’s audience¹⁶³, it is perhaps clearer than anywhere else that in fact the confession serves to double down on minimalism’s attractiveness, since it is precisely premised on the assumption that minimalism did in fact work for him on pretty much all respects, even suggesting that it contributed to make him rich, all coming from “not having as many items”:

Just thinking about the amount of benefits that I received from practicing minimalism, the lower stress-levels that I have had from not having as many items in my apartment, the amount of time that it saved me from not having to organize but instead minimize, the amount of money that it saved me – probably thousands of dollars by the years, by just having fewer items –, and the amount that it saved me by not having to clean as much, and living from one apartment to another – it was a very simple and seamless process, because I don’t have very many items.

¹⁶² Nate O’Brien, “Minimalism isn’t working”, Jun. 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Evqd2OXT23A> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

¹⁶³ A commenter, for example, praises the host by saying that “we need more creators like [him] who are honest about minimalism, self-help and personal success”, because there is “so much garbage to filter out online”, and the host “keep[s] it real.” Another commenter says that this is his favourite video in the channel, and remarks that it is “so incredibly refreshing to see someone who has ‘made it’ on social media still maintain such a high level of self-awareness.” A whole parallel analysis could of course be made out of comments to the vlogs we are examining, especially to compare them and perhaps flesh out more subtle differences in how authenticity is granted to the hosts, but for the most part we will have to set aside such a task, besides noting that authenticity is indeed granted to each and every channel at least by its audience.

The “problem” of minimalism is, in this case, that it works. How pliable is anti-consumerist rhetoric is here impeccably demonstrated, because the host disavows and discredits the rich, privileged lifestyle that minimalism and his channel have in fact afforded him, which of course rhetorically passes the message – in the less recognizable form of a premise already taken for granted – that both minimalism and his other advice, especially the financial advice (which is again promoted at the end of the vlog, with the announcement of another investment project), did afford him such a lifestyle.

The critique is levelled at the excesses of that lifestyle which the host has now experienced first-hand, the extravagant life of “yacht, private jets, helicopters, expensive hotels, very expensive dinners” offered by his millionaire and billionaire friends – he himself is not one of them, he is only on the threshold of that world –, because that life is presented as dangerous, it disconnects you from “reality” and makes you feel better than others: “When people have money, they start to really think they are somehow better than others, or that they are a winner and everybody else is a loser, or that they are more deserving than others.” The problem, of course, is not understood to be having money per se – that is the aim of most vlogs in the channel –, but the consumerist lifestyle it affords and its moral consequences, which can be addressed by restraining oneself without having to forego one’s money (or one’s aspiration to money, or at least to “financial independence”). Besides moral consequences, the host of course gestures at the distastefulness of those excesses, also advancing the usual point that “going more places, spending more money” and so on do not make you any happier. In addition, that lifestyle is criticized as unsustainable, and this gets to the core of the pseudo-criticism of minimalism: minimalism is here identified with the reduced consumption of mere “things” – it is the “primary form of minimalism” (one which he has already perfected, living with a backpack in a truck) –, while he now wishes to expand it to “the energy you are consuming throughout your life”, for example the fuel consumed on flights; he wants to “stop consuming as much” not just only buying less “things”, but “all around the board”, in order to decrease his overall “footprint” (any footprint, “whether that’s carbon footprint or just having a footprint on the whole in general”). In other words, minimalism is “not working” in the sense that it works so well that one is thereby put in the conditions of having access to a consumerist lifestyle which is immoral, unsatisfying and unsustainable, which is to be then rejected again through further minimalism,

through an expanded minimalism. Of course, this expanded minimalism is what everyone already presents “minimalism” to be, a lifestyle that goes beyond one’s physical things as such, rather affecting one’s experience of life as a whole; here the expansiveness hinges more on the environmentalist side of frugality – which is in fact contradictory to some extent with other forms of expansion, since the minimalist discourse also often opposes to consumption of “things” precisely consumption of “experiences”, not at all necessarily less eco-unfriendly –, yet that frugality is of course only one part of the authentic lifestyle on offer. This is confirmed by the frugal, nomad (anti-)aesthetic of this and many among the later vlogs in the channel: the host wears an all-black hoodie on black pants with a casual cap, but is filming in the midst and shadow of trees on a sunny day, at one point displaying his frugal desk where he will “get a lot of work done” all week – probably an implicit allusion to aestheticized minimalist “tours” of one’s decluttered desk –, followed by the truck he lives in. In the end, more minimalism is the solution to minimalism’s problem of working all too well; a return in fact to a truer minimalism since, as the host also says, minimalism is something that he had “lost sight of.” Whatever the host’s authentic beliefs may be, the vlog’s rhetoric is fundamentally ambiguous, both promising upward mobility with potential access to much higher standards of living and purging it of its ties to consumerist excesses, all the while also hinting at awareness of social privileges and environmental footprint: it is, again, minimalism at its most inclusive indeterminacy, which has something for everyone, and has it first of all on offer as a coherent and authentic lifestyle, a lifestyle both integral and of integrity, safe from critique. For good measure, subjectivist interjections are also added here and there, the host for example specifying that he has “nothing against” owning a beautiful car if one really wants to – he just does not want to for himself –, and that even if he personally wants to decrease his footprint, that “does not mean you should as well.”

Another example of vlogs addressing minimalism’s “problem” comes from a small channel which, as its name stresses, leans more to the environmentalist side of minimalism: Ecofriend Lia’s channel (28.800 subscribers), which once again joins its focus on sustainability to various self-help topics, though with more emphasis on minimalist staples (decluttering, things bought or not bought, wardrobe, packing for travelling and so on, but of course also expansions such as “decluttering people”: as usual,

minimalism as a lifestyle goes beyond things). In this vlog¹⁶⁴, the problem with minimalism lies again in identifying too much with it, which is not taken as a rhetorical problem of any discourse constructing a “lifestyle” as much as a responsibility of the individual: by itself, minimalism is “a great tool for many people”, and there is even nothing wrong, per se, in the fact that some people like that “minimalist aesthetic” which made everything start “looking the same”; it becomes problematic because of “how we use it”, how people become “obsessed” over it. The solution, as in Ronald L. Banks’ case – even though the channels are again quite apart in terms of emphases and of aesthetic –, is a call for authenticity, for “stay[ing] true to oneself” instead of comparing oneself to “other people that call themselves ‘minimalists’” and thus “do minimalism for someone else.” Perfectionism and competition is understood as naturally springing from the use of a lifestyle label, as one can then try to be “good minimalists” losing sight of the “important things” minimalism was in fact supposed to make space of. “It’s never about how well you can declutter, and how little you can buy, and what number of possessions you own”, or the colours of one’s wardrobe and look of one’s home, because what “minimalists” share is actually only the indeterminate search for a “good life”: “Having minimalism in common can mean we have nothing in common because we are all seeking our own, like, good life – through minimalism or through something else, because I think it is important to not take minimalism too seriously.” On what that “good life” may be, minimalism has no say, because “everyone decides by oneself what is important for oneself”, “how you spend time, the people around you, the things that you actually keep, the things that you value”; it is entirely subjective. Accordingly, minimalism is restricted, as we have seen before, to something instrumental with regard only to the circumscribed problems of “clutter” or “overconsumption”, while it is misunderstood when it is thought of as a solution to much broader problems it cannot solve: it is not possible to “gain happiness directly from minimalism”, nor “mental stability” or “mental health”, nor “problems in our relationships.” Only by relativizing it as just one “tool” among many – or one “interest” among many (which in our view gets more to the point) – can “minimalism” not be mistaken as something to identify with, thus not “letting minimalism be part of our identity” as “only minimalists” and nothing else. The ambiguity is however still there, and not only because it is admitted that in the begin-

¹⁶⁴ Ecofriend Lia, “The Problem With Minimalism”, Feb. 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=__WwALAXIjg (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

ning – during one’s transition – interest in minimalism might prevail as more important and demanding than it later becomes. The use of “minimalism” as the label for a “lifestyle” is held onto in the channel’s discourse – which partly depends on it – as well as in the vlog’s description, in which the host says she has “follow[ed] a minimalist lifestyle for seven years.” This use necessitates in fact an understanding of “minimalism” as something which expands beyond that set of tools that it is supposed to supply in the host’s view. Here as much as elsewhere, the point is maintaining that expansiveness of a “lifestyle”, especially one that presents itself as all-inclusive, while getting rid of the crises and criticality that come with it. In order to do that, minimalism must eventually return to its indeterminacy: it can still “help” and “point in the right direction” even with those problems that it cannot solve – the channel does have a vlog on minimalism applied to people, after all –, because in the last instance it can be generalized to the subjectivist intentional removal of what does not add value to one’s life, even beyond things; it is, as the vlog’s hashtags confirm, just the same as “intentional living.” The commonsensical nature of such indeterminate minimalism as “intentionality” is even almost recognized, it is “something that, it just makes sense, you know, no matter if you call it ‘minimalism or not’”: there are “many ways to kind of live minimalism without calling it ‘minimalism’”, “it still just really really makes sense to be intentional and, you know, think about what’s important to you and stick to these things, set priorities.” So generalized as a subjectivist call for intentionality with a bent towards a reduction of some sort, minimalism can then lead into other areas of the self-help or self-improvement discourse, whether it subsumes them – as an overarching label for a lifestyle is inclined to do – or just accompanies them and flanks them. Criticism of the “problem” of minimalism serves to keep it in this indeterminate form, safe from crises and criticality, even after having tried to restrict it. Here the emphasis is more on the rhetorical side of the problem, that is, the label more than the style, but even though a nameless minimalism is again projected as possible, the solution is not that nor is it really rhetorical, just like the solution to the aesthetic is not understood to be aesthetic: each individual should simply remind himself or herself that “minimalism” is subjective, that it is actually an indeterminate non-label, nothing to be in crisis – or critical – about.

While this recent vlog aesthetically enhances it by way of an outdoor setting – a bike ride into the quiet natural scenery of a park at dawn –, this rhetorical move is recur-

rent in Ecofriend Lia’s channel, especially since for a long time she has explicitly presented herself as an “extreme” minimalist closer to the frugal, ethical and sustainable sides of anti-consumerism (although this channel too does have its minimalist aesthetic coherence in line with its self-presentation, of course: wooden pavements and furniture, white walls and absence of items or of decorations besides a couple plants are here – in most of the vlogs – immersed in a dimmer suffused light, usually with an unmade bed with white sheets in the background, while the host wears simple and often monochrome clothes but with a more earthy muted palette). Even before she decided to just be a plain minimalist and discard her self-identification as an “extreme” one, the host addressed the possibility of minimalism “going too far” in a vlog¹⁶⁵ where, as requested by a subscriber, she repairs once again a cushion of her old couch as she speaks (in obvious contrast to the “clickbait” cover in which she stands naked and bewildered in front of a white wall, with “minimalism” written in capital letters above her). As already mentioned in the vlog’s description, the problem with minimalism is that people try to define it, because “depending on how you define minimalism something else would be outside this ‘norm’”; so a “better” question would be the subjective question, “Which definition makes sense so that you can get the benefits of minimalism but don’t feel overwhelmed or limited by minimalism?” A definition which does not “limit” anyone and is not shared by others is not, of course, actually a definition, but any limit may engender crises through other people’s judgments – whether direct or indirect, actual or perceived –, and these are both a dysphoric struggle in themselves, and can lead to forcibly act in ways that are not really beneficial to oneself. These two negative aspects of criticality are conflated, as we have seen other times: subjectivism as a claim that each individual has his or her own values, and/or is in the best position to assess what is good for themselves, is easily paired with subjectivism as some form of individualist concern primarily, if not only, with private benefits such as well-being. Minimalism thus goes too far “when it doesn’t serve you anymore”, but both in the sense that one does not practice it “in a way that makes sense to our lives”, which are always different because of different “needs” and “circumstances” – and even changing ones, so that the “perfect number” of items will change over time –, and in the sense that one practices it in a way that does not ultimately “make [one’s] life easy” as it should. “The most minimalist life-

¹⁶⁵ Ecofriend Lia, “Can Minimalism Go Too Far?”, Apr. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfefbZN5h3A> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

style”, as the host admonishes, “isn’t really if you declutter everything possible but then it causes a lot of stress because some of the solutions are not good for you”; yet it is easy to slip from “stress” being a sign of a certain solution possibly being bad for oneself, in one’s situational and subjective conditions, to it being itself something bad to avoid in any form, including the stress of criticality. And in fact, “the most minimalist life is a life where you can live easily, have everything you need but no more”, where only the individual alone can decide what his or her “needs” are and what is “more” than that, and where the individual’s “ease” of living is the only shared criterion (but, for the other reason, it cannot be utilized as such by others). The two together leads us to the conclusion that “minimalism really goes too far if people start judging about other people’s belongings, minimalism, definition of minimalism and things like that”; some space is allowed for the possibility of “constructive criticisms” in more positive communities like the virtual one of her own channel, of course, “but there are also some people that are just negatively critiquing everything”, deciding “what is right for others” or coming up with “very rigid rules”, only taking away “energy” from everyone involved (needless to say, no specific instance is cited, nor any other minimalist channel in particular is called into question). Once again, however, “minimalism” must be preserved as indeterminate, so the dismemberment and dissolution of “minimalism” into its components is in turn nonetheless resisted as well: if it is true that there is no “one real kind of minimalism” charged with values of its own, it is just as well insisted that there are no “categories of minimalists, like the ‘frugal minimalist’ and the ‘sustainable minimalist’”, because it should be obvious that everyone has his or her own values beyond minimalism (as indeed it is, if minimalism is so indeterminate as being almost equated to subjectivism itself). Even the host’s commitment to sustainability is claimed to be merely something that is personally important for her: she repairs again and again her couch because of that, even if it costs her time and effort and even if it is not that pleasing, but to others it might look like a waste of time and resources and as stressful, so if they were in her place they might discard the couch and still “minimalist” in their own way. A line that can be crossed does come up once – the too obviously inauthentic decluttering just for fun and without conviction, thus buying things again later –, but overall, everyone is included.

As mentioned, the channel's host decided at one point – some months after the last vlog – to publicly disassociate from “extreme” minimalism in another vlog¹⁶⁶ (only two months after D’Avella’s vlog on the end of minimalism), followed one year later by an assessment of the beneficial impact of such rhetorical transition¹⁶⁷. In the first vlog, the transition is in fact presented as natural yet decisive for her “mindset”, more stable than her previous oscillation between some periods in which she “reassessed” and “de-cluttered” everything and other times in which she focused on other things. We are by now familiar with the train of thought: minimalism is “extreme” when it is taken to indicate a search for the bare minimum, “a border when it doesn’t get any lower”, “the minimal amount of stuff” with determinative article, thus pushing for a “never ending declutter to have even less” in which one is always on the lookout for something to remove, and instead holds back from addition. Against the backdrop of (extreme) minimalism’s negativity, the positive step forward after the “first crucial step” of “removing everything that is not important” comes to the foreground: it is now time for “building a life that one loves”, because there is “space for something more”, for “adding something” and “trying something new”; addition of things is not addition of “clutter” if it adds “value”, and whether something has value or not sometimes entails trying it out for oneself, and at any rate it is relative to one’s situation. In the host’s case, she held back from knitting as a “possible business” which might make her “super happy” only because it would require tools and supplies, even though she could declutter them later on; also, as she is not planning to move, it does not make sense to only own “the stuff of a digital nomad” as she once did. Therefore, she is “over the constant focus on stuff” just to be a “good minimalist”, but she is “of course staying as minimalist as it makes sense in every area of [her] life.” The host even confesses somewhat that despite her intention of being “authentic” and “honest” in her vlogs, she felt indeed pushed to “capitalize” on YouTube’s predilection for the more sensationalistic “extreme” – but of course, now she is “done with trying to be a perfect extreme minimalist”, she will be authentic and give priority to her own judgments without having to justify herself in front of subscribers or critical commenters (for example, by keeping instead of decluttering sponsored products). Minimalism’s criticality is thus also again externalized onto the criticisms of

¹⁶⁶ Ecofriend Lia, “I Am Done With Extreme Minimalism”, Nov. 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mmALAAat_T2k (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

¹⁶⁷ Ecofriend Lia, “Quitting Extreme Minimalism | 1 Year Update”, Nov. 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7phrZnNk4YU> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

other people, as well as onto an “extreme” minimalism different from minimalism per se, which comes out underdetermined instead of undermined from the process. What remains of minimalism is the focus on having “enough”, “the right amount of stuff” with no “excess”, according to one’s subjective situation, thus balancing “being intentional when it comes to bringing in things into [one’s] life” with “be[ing] very intentional when it comes to spending [one’s] time” (in other words, precisely managing minimalism’s criticality: being intentional with regard to things requires effort, reflection and time, but this contradicts the anti-materialist premise – or promise – that “stuff should not take up as many thoughts and time and energy in our lives”). Through this subjectivist appeal to the good sense of intentionality – “enough” being “what makes sense” in one’s own life –, minimalism is kept together in indeterminate form, as exhibited by the host’s remarks that she “still enjoy[s] only having a small amount of things” or “being in control of [her] stuff”, and “absolutely not going out and shop for sheer pleasure to accumulate things”: so far as they are left indeterminate, these are not problematic but rather form the common sense that binds all “still minimalists” together (including anti-aesthetic dismissals of things that “look nice”, of “make up”, “jewels” and big wardrobes).

In the follow up vlog one year later, the benefit of leaving the “extreme” in minimalism behind is confirmed: the cover has “extreme minimalist” crossed out in red from “happy extreme minimalist” and substituted with “me!”, while the points of her decision are restated in on-screen texts as moving on to the middle way of “having enough” between both the consumerist “wanting more” and the extreme minimalist “wanting less”, and from “focusing on less stuff” to now “focusing less on stuff.” Here, however, “minimalism” too is called into question (as she would go on to do again four months later in the first of her vlogs we have examined). In fact, severed from the “ideal of extreme minimalism” of being “free from physical things, from the physical world even” as well as in “absolute control of one’s life” – a perhaps “wonderful” ideal that however is illusory, since we do depend from things and there are always “variables” and “things that could stress [one] out” –, minimalism appears as something instrumental to be left behind as unhelpful once one has reached, like the host, that “border” in which no more decluttering is possible or desirable for oneself. After that point, returns of the practice are diminished if not reversed into losses, as illustrated by the popular

“Pareto principle” of 80% of the results obtained by 20% of the efforts: the 80% of “a kind of carefree life” as well as practical benefits such as “spending less money”, “cleaning less” and “having to maintain less” is enough. Therefore identification as a “minimalist” is not “an important part” of the host’s life anymore, because she is “much more” than that, while “minimalism is just a concept that can help [her] live an intentional life.” She even lucidly recognizes that while minimalism could be defined as “looking at all areas of your life and getting rid of excess stuff, getting rid of distractions, and focusing on your priorities, and focusing on the things that actually add value to your life”, if it is so defined then “you can call everything ‘minimalism’, and then if you look too closely you can’t find minimalism in there anymore.” When applied beyond physical “stuff” to matters like “how you spend time”, “decluttering of friendships” or “cleaning up your mental health”, one is led to ask: “Is this minimalism or is it just, like, caring for myself? Is it therapy? Is it trying to be more effective in my work life?” The conclusion is that “a lot of what we do and call ‘minimalism’ is also just trying to live an intentional and happy life”: minimalism as a lifestyle just is, as a commenter suggests and as we have also seen proposed elsewhere, nothing but “intentionalism”, plus reduction employed as a framing device – and entry point – for self-help or self-improvement advice (and some subjectively chosen mode and degree of anti-consumerism). This, however, does not take anything away from the value of minimalism, from first decluttering up to one’s “border”, the point the host has reached, even though after that minimalism “should make itself obsolete”, as she puts it in another vlog soon after this one¹⁶⁸, where she explains that after seven years minimalism is now “second nature” to her, but she will keep releasing minimalist blogs for those who may not be there yet, while also making vlogs on other topics related to an “intentional and happy life.” Something becoming second nature, thoroughly habitual, is rather different from it becoming obsolete. Decluttering still has to be undergone, the assumed initial obstacle of an “excess” to be reduced still fully operative. All in all, minimalism is returned to its usual indeterminacy, and it is fine this way:

I am outgrowing the minimalism box. Now, I still consider myself a minimalist and I still think minimalism is a great way to live intentionally and stop overconsuming, live a more sustainable life and live a happier life. But I just feel like the walls of this “minimalism box” that you usually put minimalism into – they become transparent to a point where I’m not even sure if I’m still inside of this box. And I think that’s a good thing, because minimalism should be something per-

¹⁶⁸ Ecofriend Lia, “Minimalism | It took me 7 years to learn these lessons”, Dec. 2022, <https://youtu.be/y4MFg32O4-c> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

sonal, should be something that works for my life, and shouldn't feel like a concept that's like foreign to me, that I have to adapt to, that I have to fit into. I think being a minimalist, in the best case, doesn't feel like being a minimalist; it just feels like living your best life.

The promise of a “happier life” through minimalism is kept in place, just as the menace to it by consumerism, and this happier life is one with the subjective intentional life – “your best life” – offered by the self-help and self-improvement discourses in general, which the channel also incorporates in its range of contents, and increasingly so. The non-label of “minimalism” can still be used as it is by everyone for their own personal lifestyle – and by each minimalist channel as a frame for their own mix of self-help or self-improvement advice – without any need to determine it further as a concept, as something held in common, since it would always feel “foreign” to someone in that case, perhaps even excluding them. The crises and criticality that are in fact inherent to the minimalist discourse, which cannot of course avoid determining itself continually in each channel's vlogs and through the more aestheticized material to which it is often associated (and that the host does not address here), are thereby submerged again. As this series of five vlogs across two years shows, however, they are always there under the surface, from where they can be evoked and exorcised again.

So far we have seen minimalism trending but ending, minimalism not working or backfiring as problematic – often because of “us” –, and also minimalism going too far; yet it always survives, emerging even strengthened from this self-criticism – as the hosts' authenticity – as a more genuine minimalism, one that in its indeterminacy is at once less judgmental yet more intentional, and which includes everyone under its non-label (at least everyone that each audience perceives as authentic). There are many other manifestations of this rhetorical move we are interested in, which administers and manages minimalism's criticality at the same time, both taking it for granted – despite everyone evidently agreeing in claiming all the time that minimalism is subjective, that it is not aesthetic, that its value has nothing to do with the rhetoric of its label – and recurrently dismissing or deescalating it: an assumed commonsensical understanding of minimalism as too determinate and hypercritical is continually shattered to reproduce another commonsensical understanding of it as indeterminate and thus uncritical – not having inherent crises nor demanding too much of a struggle –, yet subjectively intentional and thus somewhat critical (as opposed to other inauthentic, impulsive people who “shop for sheer pleasure to accumulate things” or to impress others). In the dis-

course we also find, for example, vlogs on supposed “myths” or “stereotypes” about minimalism, vlogs decoupling it from its aesthetic, vlogs about emotional barriers or other obstacles that keep one from practicing it (or from doing it right), vlogs about the hosts’ own mistakes or minimalist rules they do not follow and similar confessions, vlogs on their experience with – or their advice for – living with “non-minimalists”, sometimes even tips on how to deal with others’ criticisms in general or with regard to one’s “minimalist lifestyle” in particular, and so on. Here we will restrict ourselves to only a couple more such vlogs dealing more directly with minimalism’s criticality, and we will take them from two minimalist channels in our corpus that have not come up yet (even though every vlog we have examined has its equivalents in other channels, which we have set aside to lessen redundancy¹⁶⁹). One example of the vlogs addressing the “myths” surrounding minimalism is from CKSPACE (83.800 subscribers), a channel which had previously been about contemporary fashion, but which at one point deleted all past content to become the minimalist channel perhaps most representative of the kind of rhetorical functioning we are trying to highlight in minimalism as a “lifestyle”: even more than in D’Avella’s case, the host always wears monochrome black or white clothes in the sparse modernist space of his room – the much criticized recipe of white walls, empty surfaces and a couple plants –, an aesthetic which is also reflected in the mostly white-themed thumbnails of the vlogs, contributing to tying together also

¹⁶⁹ Back in 2019, for example, Matt D’Avella released a vlog on minimalism “going too far”, more than two years before Ecofriend Lia’s corresponding vlog (Matt D’Avella, “When minimalism goes too far...”, Jul. 2019, <https://youtu.be/ZEcniHAC9ys>; last accessed: 14/11/2023). Here too minimalism is contrasted, on subjectivist grounds, to an “extreme” form which only fits few people: “less is more, until less becomes less”; everyone is still better off reducing something – the excess is still taken for granted –, but how much that amounts to, that is subjective and nothing to compete or criticize about. We also find the responsabilization of the individual we have noticed in other vlogs (“If you think you have pushed minimalism too far, then you are doing minimalism wrong”), as well as the banishment of the commonsensical associations of “minimalism” to the “minimum” and to negativity by presenting it again not in opposition to hoarding but rather to consumerism, as a more positive and moderate “conscious consumption” which is then expanded to “the things we introduce in our lives” in general: minimalists do not “consume as a pastime” but rather “curate” the things in their homes and even the people in their lives or the activities in their schedules (the enemy here is the extreme, not the aesthetic – even if there is the usual overlap, the cover showing a single white chair in an empty room with one artwork on the wall –, so no problem is seen in using the aesthetic frame of “curatorship”). As elsewhere, minimalism is about “finding what’s enough for you”, with emphasis on the more positive term “enough” and on the subjective “you.” The label is also problematized both in general as making minimalism feel like a subcultural “niche” or “cult” – and thus “extreme”, “unrealistic” –, and more specifically as being inadequate to the practice itself, that is, with “living with more intention” (“essentialism” comes up here too as an alternative label). Of course, this has not kept the channel and host from using “minimalism” all the same, all the time. Moreover, while D’Avella jokes here about minimalism not being a “cult”, that is – as one commenter notes – the first thing someone in a cult would say of his or her own cult. There are of course many more examples of vlogs on minimalism “going too far”, but for obvious reasons we cannot go too far into them.

self-improvement topics assimilated to “minimalism” (we find “work minimalism” and other vlogs on productivity as supported by minimalism – for example, one about “goal setting with minimalism” –, as well as vlogs on how to “declutter your mind as a minimalist” or how to “journal as a minimalist”). In his vlog “debunking” the myths on minimalism¹⁷⁰, the host starts off by immediately mentioning myths related to the quasi-twin polarization we have seen of minimalism as aesthetic or excessive, the myths that “minimalism is all about having one colour”, “minimalism means having nothing”, and “minimalism doesn’t buy anything”: these are so commonsensical – “extreme examples” being used as “representations” of minimalism all the time –, and at the same time fly so obviously in the face of good sense, that they can be in fact taken for granted along with their problems. The myths actually addressed in the vlog are nonetheless related to them, and illuminate once more what the contrast to these by now more obvious stereotypes really aims at.

The first myth, for example, is the identification of “minimalism” with “being eco-friendly” – or even “being vegan” –, more determinate anti-consumerist identifications that are “very similar in terms of living with less” yet differ in their “purpose” and their “ways”; what the differences are, however, is not explicitly stated at all by the host – the myth is already taken to be dealt with simply by mentioning it –, most likely because the point is rather decoupling minimalism from ethical and sustainable consumption – with their higher normativity –, plus breaking off the strictness of identification of minimalism with a determinate phenomenon in general (signalled by the “=” sign in this and other “myths”): minimalism must remain indeterminate. At the same time, since it is precisely within this indeterminacy that crises are provoked, the next myth that is tackled is the idea that minimalism is a “solution to everything”, to which is opposed once again the claim that minimalism is a “tool” just as removed from all-purposiveness as a “power tool” is worthless for washing the dishes: “By thinking that minimalism is the solution for everything, we might fall for the trap of applying minimalism to every single thing in our lives, even if it doesn’t benefit us; or even worse, we might forcedly apply it in other people’s lives as well.” The myth is almost duplicated in the next one, that for one to be a minimalist “everything has to be minimal” in all areas of his or her life, this time illustrated with Mida’s touch transforming everything into gold – or, in

¹⁷⁰ CKSPACE, “8 Myths About Minimalism”, Apr. 2021, <https://youtu.be/y9sxqfZd9SY> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

minimalism's case, changing all things into "minimalistic versions" of them, actually causing "distress" instead of being beneficial to oneself. That "minimalist" is used as an adjective generalized to all kinds of things is something that the host, like Ecofriend Lia's host, has "realized recently", which may count as something of a self-criticism since he also has used it in that way, he also participated in talk about "minimalist bedroom, minimalist wardrobe, minimalist friendships, minimalist worklife, minimalist phone, minimalist social media, minimalist wallet, minimalist finance, minimalist everything." This indeterminacy is here problematic because, used as a noun for a lifestyle, "minimalism" necessarily points at some distinctive and expansive integration of life, as well as of the discursive components it is built upon, and thus does entail – as long as it is not determined – a push for more areas of one's life being touched and transformed by it. As we are seeing throughout our analyses, this is in fact the main rhetorical purpose of "minimalism" in the discourse, the reason why it cannot be simply abandoned altogether as a label, nor be reduced to a mere ordinary adjective – with no substantivized counterparts – which merely attaches to and links together, but weakly and somehow without mixing them up too much, the single heterogeneous self-help and/or self-improvement practices it appropriates (to which it lends, on the contrary, its aesthetic and rhetorical glue as a unified lifestyle, even while also refusing to be further determined and developed as such). Since "minimalism" as an actual lifestyle would involve criticality, the effort and struggles to confront and integrate its various components – in ways recognizable as such by others and through reference to others –, it is here reduced to an instrumental set of determinate tools again, from which one can freely pick and choose – and yet, one will nonetheless be then a "minimalist" equal to any other, regardless of what was selected and what not. If what is "minimalist" is primarily the collection of tools, each coming with a determinate purpose, and only by extension from that would anyone using them be called a "minimalist", why would not "eco-friendly" people count as minimalists as well? The reason is that "minimalism" would then risk being decomposed and dissolved into its determinate components, with "eco-friendliness" being just one of them, one thus perhaps seen in its contradictions with others (as in the usual example of the aesthetic upgrading of one's things). By contrast, minimalism is projected to have a different "purpose" from ethical or sustainable consumption, but that purpose must not be determined beyond a subjectivist "benefitting oneself" tying everyone or everything together (as long as there is involved whatever form of re-

duction); when the internal crises of such indeterminacy come to the fore, then, minimalism can be reduced to a set of tools to subjectively select from, denying its rhetorical function as label for a lifestyle even while also affording it perpetuation by confirming its very subjectivism. In the end it all comes back to – and together with – the indeterminacy of subjectivism; but only in the end, as the result of this rhetorical move of emptying out “minimalism” as a lifestyle from its determinations – those of common sense, those entailed by its being a “lifestyle” – while retaining an indeterminate shell, so that subjectivism is turned into an ambiguous lifestyle that can be offered to everyone and bring everyone together despite all differences. Therefore, as long as criticality is so managed, “there is nothing wrong with applying minimalism to every single thing”, what matters is that it “works for you, and not because you are obsessed with it.”

While debunking the first myth loosens the associations of minimalism to anti-consumerism in its ethical or sustainable aspects – just like how, on Reddit, we have seen it set apart from frugality as such –, debunking the following two mitigates the problematic side effects of presenting it as a lifestyle in general: on the one hand its indeterminacy is concealed behind the instrumental determinacy of the tools it somehow gathers, but on the other it is reaffirmed and reinforced as a minimalist lifestyle is held onto, consisting in the subjectivist picking and choosing of some of those tools. The next myth goes on to this time loosen the aestheticized associations of minimalism, but interestingly it does so from a direction which is contrary to most of what we have seen so far: the myth, here, is not in the first place that minimalism comes with one aesthetic, but that “minimalists have no style”, a misunderstanding that is attributed precisely to minimalism’s rejection of “trends” or “consumerism” (upon which the greater part of anti-aesthetic criticisms of a false, “trendy” minimalism in fact rely). This inversion, probably tied to the fact that the channel once revolved around fashion, shows how these supposed “myths” can be built even in opposite ways, according to one’s rhetorical need, thanks to minimalism’s contradictory common sense: at one time there is the myth that minimalism is stylized, at another time there is the myth that it has none. This, of course, leads us swiftly back to indeterminacy:

At first, I didn’t really want to touch on this topic, because I think it’s really subjective. As a minimalist, I still need to clarify this. I’m not going to prove the opposite, by showing you a list of minimalists who understand aesthetics, but what I’m trying to say here is there will definitely be different types of people out there – minimalists who understand style, minimalists who have no style, a designer who does not know how to dress, an accountant who dresses well; and all this opinion is subjective. Anyone can be a minimalist with good sense of style; at the same time, an-

other minimalist can have zero sense of style, because it is not something that he or she cares about. And you know, either way, both of them are living their lives intentionally, based on their own value, which is what matters.

Even while “debunking” minimalism’s aesthetic dimension from the other direction, the destination of the rhetorical move is the same: minimalism can involve the aesthetic or not, but it will nonetheless still be minimalism in the indeterminate sense that each one will subjectively decide it for oneself and live “intentionally” in accordance with that; the aesthetic dimension of minimalism is only another tool in the set. In a sense, this host is more coherent than most others in his subjectivism, in that he is more accepting of the aesthetic as one legitimate subjective manifestation of minimalism, while others as we have seen base their rhetorical moves on attacking it. It is, however, but a mirror image, since here anti-consumerism is in turn deemphasized, and since the eventual outcome is the same subjectivist identification of minimalism with living intentionally, everyone thus getting to be still “minimalist” even regardless of what they care for, regardless of one’s values contradicting another’s. The fifth myth, the myth that “a minimalist lifestyle is boring”, complements the fourth by stressing the problematic side of minimalism’s aesthetic as alluded to at the beginning (that is, minimalism’s association to a monochromatic palette), and it too gets a subjectivist debunking: what is “boring” to one can be “intentional” for someone else. The host takes minimalism’s monochromatic uniform as an extreme example to claim that even this “might not be boring to someone who enjoys what he or she wears every day”, that it is “intentionally created to be consistent” and aimed at “not spend[ing] too much time and thought about what to wear”; but one can just as well be more “creative” with a capsule wardrobe (or, as we have just seen, not have style at all). This again approaches the issue from a direction reversed with respect to most other channels, because the minimalist aesthetic even in its most extreme, stereotypical aspect is accepted as legitimate and defended. Yet this is not meant to be a defence of minimalism as one possible aesthetic solution, creatively negotiable and remediable in different ways and degrees – as any aesthetic solution should be –, to an aesthetic problem, with regard to which one can be more or less of a “minimalist” (as most find unproblematic to do, so long as one is not said to be more or less “minimalist” tout court than another, instead of more or less aesthetically minimalist). The host’s point is again to stress that everyone can be “minimalist” regardless of one’s aesthetic or lack of it, one’s care for the aesthetic or lack of it; all of this is, as usual, subjective, and affirming this is “what matters”, allowing everyone to be still

“minimalists” insofar as they are equally subjectivist. Not surprisingly, then, the sense of “boredom” – which in its broad scope can be understood as the opposite of aesthetic interest in general – is taken as just as minimalist as caring for the aesthetic, so long as one is intentional: “Minimalism is boring if you want it to be boring.”

The last three myths cover the terrain of extreme minimalism: the myth that “minimalism rejects new purchases”, the myth that it “means you can only own x amount of things”, and the myths – presented together as “two sides of the same coin” – that “minimalists are the new poor” and that “minimalism is something only the rich can buy.” As elsewhere, the aim is to rather depict minimalism as an indeterminate middle way for everyone, again centred on subjectivist intentionality. Since “minimalists are still human”, it is not like they will stop buying or even desiring things, so is not a matter of avoiding consumption altogether: “limitation on one’s behaviour to change for the better” is needed only by contrast to “compulsive buying habits” or “buying things for the rush”, but so far as a purchase is intentional instead of impulsive, it is no problem. “Being a minimalist doesn’t mean suppressing your desire, but it is to understand the reason why you want something, and if that particular item will bring you value, and the action of buying it aligns with your goals – especially for your finances –, then I think there’s nothing wrong with that”, luxury items included. Since “value” and “goals” are of course subjective, so is the “reason why you want something”, which is evidently assumed to be transparent to the individual’s introspection provided he or she just refrains to buy at first sight and instead waits a bit. What is sure is that, despite an opposition of “value” to “the rush” is often of course implicit in the discourse’s opposition of emotional and/or practical lifestyle benefits to merely aesthetic ones, minimalism here does not come with determinate values of its own, as any purchase may be justified, at least so long as one keeps within the boundaries of one’s economic situation – the only objective factor beyond subjective intentionality. That this indeterminacy, reinforced again in the negation of any determinate limit by its reductive assimilation to a quantitative number of things owned – all too obviously senseless –, serves to merge even very different people under “minimalism” and thus actually submerge all their differences, can be clearly seen in the last myth about minimalism’s economic situations (which has also come up on Reddit, where “minimalism” was neither to be tied to the necessity of poverty, nor to luxury of wealth). While the host was first attracted to min-

imalism because he “was struggling to peel off [his] debt”, later learning that it also benefitted him “in other areas”, other people may come at it from a more affluent background, attracted to things like “buying quality stuff instead of quantity” or “pursuing the minimalistic aesthetic where negative space is needed to enhance the beauty”: these things are equally “minimalist”, his own room as much as Kanye West’s huge, white and sparse 3.7 million dollars modernist mansion¹⁷¹, which is explicitly cited as one example of something which makes minimalism seem like an unaffordable “lifestyle for the rich”, while it is, of course, a lifestyle for anyone. In the end, it is just a matter of subjective “perspective”: “Just because you see it on the right side doesn’t mean it can’t be executed from the left side; there’s not one way in.” Just like in other forms of critical immunization, debunking minimalism’s supposed myths does not aim at making better distinctions and helping clarify the differences – and their crises – it contains, but rather at maintaining its undifferentiating indeterminacy as quasi-identical to its subjectivism, yet still retaining its connotations as a lifestyle. Since, as we have seen, such minimalism actually depends on these myths, and since they are suggested by the very minimalist discourse which constantly rejects them¹⁷², they are much more the myths of minimalism than myths about it: that there are “myths” on minimalism as a lifestyle which make it hyper-determinate and thus hypercritical, when everyone keeps repeating it is subjective, is the actual core myth of minimalism.

Two last examples can be drawn from some older vlogs in the again oxymoronically-named Abundantly Minimal channel (77.800 subscribers), whose minimalism

¹⁷¹ Brain Marks, “Kanye West’s former Hollywood Hills home is listed again for \$3.7 million”, 26 Oct. 2021, Daily Mail, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-10132653/Kanye-Wests-former-Hollywood-Hills-home-listed-3-7-million.html> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

¹⁷² To give one example in the very same channel and in fact released just a few months after this myth-debunking vlog, CKSPACE also has a vlog describing Steve Jobs as the “perfect minimalist”: here the mythical or stereotypical becomes the “iconic”, as Jobs is also described (CKSPACE, “The Perfect Minimalist | Steve Jobs Minimalism”, Jul. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-xp-MFE-1bp-BZ8>; last accessed: 14/11/2023). The root of Jobs’ minimalism is attributed to the aesthetic and ascetic influence of Zen and Indian spirituality and Japanese arts such as gardening and ikebana, all seen generically as centred on a reduction of “noise” or “the inessential”, which Jobs would have then applied to other areas of his life – even, it is claimed, to his work-life balance, where he took time for himself and his family, for music and for meditation, despite the “huge responsibility” of his company; the myth of minimalism being a solution for everything and affecting everything is no more a problem, here. Minimalism’s ambivalence towards the aesthetic too is evident in how the sparseness of Jobs’ home is praised in terms of productivity – less resources wasted on researching and reflecting upon what to choose, more left for investing them in “creating something that can instead serve people” –, as is also his nonetheless appealing “iconic look”(both for a similar reason – not having to decide what to wear – and for others such as tying all workers together with an uniform), while it is also claimed that Jobs was not “anti-materialistic” because he loved “good design” such as that of his products (and the identity of “good design” with Apple’s modernist aesthetic – or that of Braun, or Porche – is of course taken for granted).

once more stretches beyond decluttering into self-help and self-improvement topics such as mental health, stress-relief and self-care, self-discipline, time management and work-life balance, finding one's purpose and so on. The first vlog¹⁷³ is just a brief example of the type of vlogs which manage minimalism's criticality by offering the host's own non-alignment to it in certain respects – either in terms of some mistakes and shortcomings that are confessed, or in terms of personal exceptions and choices – as signs that minimalism is not, after all, exclusive or rigid as it seems. As in the case of minimalism's never-ending end, the hosts' claim of being “not a minimalist” in these vlogs' titles does not refer to minimalism as such, but rather – as in this vlog's description – to a “perfect minimalism” which is unachievable. In this case, the host lists some areas in which her life is not “minimalist” in this sense, and the aesthetic comes first: she does not have a capsule wardrobe, but simply reduced her clothes to what she “uses” and “loves”, because a capsule wardrobe would not have been practical for her – oscillations in body weight, adaptability to different seasons or weathers and also variety as such are mentioned as her reasons not to build a capsule wardrobe. These reasons remain however personal reasons, not objections to capsule wardrobes and their aesthetic dimension as such, complications to be explored in the minimalist discourse. While the aim here is clearly and explicitly that of detaching minimalism from the perfectionism of its aestheticization, it is also true that, just like for the trends, myths and stereotypes continually evoked in the rest of the discourse, the assumption that a “perfect” minimalist would own a capsule wardrobe is reproduced along the way as indeed commonsensical; it is to be understood as not exclusive nor exhaustive, but it is still there. In fact, while in later vlogs the channel's host will start to emphasize more minimalism's practicality, distancing herself somewhat from the aesthetic in its more determinate forms, in this vlog she still presents herself with a black t-shirt on a bare white wall, despite not having a capsule wardrobe or a monochrome uniform. This is precisely the main point of our whole critical-rhetorical study of the discourse: the minimalist aesthetic common sense is reproduced and/or reaffirmed as commonsensical even when – in fact especially when – it is otherwise dismissed as a trend, a myth, a stereotype, an extreme or so on, because the whole discourse in many ways depends on it (if nothing else at least to reinstate and reinforce its “intentionalist” subjectivism while nonetheless

¹⁷³ Abundantly Minimal, “4 Reasons I’m Not a Minimalist”, Sep. 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bu-GTVNyxXc> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

retaining the sense of an integral, expansive lifestyle shared by many others). As we have seen on Reddit, many minimalists will dismiss the aesthetic as identical to the aestheticized, but then also retain some aspect of it understanding it as non-aesthetic, from the more obvious unclutteredness to – in our view at least – the very urge to “only own” things actively used or enjoyed, to know everything one owns and where it is placed in one’s home, and so on. In this sense, of course, the discourse depends on the aesthetic also in a more direct way than in its subjectivist denial. As one example of criticality managed by tempering it rather than dismissing it outright, this vlog still presents a capsule wardrobe as a very good idea for others and perhaps for the host herself in the future, without making much of the obstacles it incurs and those it generates in the discourse through its aestheticization, as long as everyone is reassured against perfectionism. The remainder of the vlog makes it very clear how this also works throughout minimalism as a lifestyle beyond decluttering things and clothes in the strict sense or avoiding purchases, because all the other reasons why the host is “not a minimalist” have nothing to do with the core practices, incorporating aspects of the broader self-help and self-improvement discourses: she is not as minimalist because she has no set weekly meal plan to follow in shopping for groceries and cooking – she prefers to experiment –, she is not as minimalist because while having a strict routine for using digital and social media she is disorganized when it comes to tabs and windows left open, email addresses and so on, and finally she is not as minimalist because she always schedules too many tasks or takes on too many commitments because that is satisfying to her (“Since I’m accomplishing a lot each day, I keep getting this rush of excitement and adrenaline”). Were it not for that first point about not having a capsule wardrobe, it would be hard to see how these things concern minimalism at all, because they would rather appear to be about perfectionism as such more than about perfect minimalism; yet the indeterminacy of minimalism, as we have seen, allows it to be generalized as indeed a lifestyle. As for capsule wardrobes, minimalism’s association with perfectionism is here managed but not really rejected: “It would be more ideal”, says the host, “if I was someone that had a perfect meal prep plan or always stuck to my list when I’m shopping”; it is just not something to beat oneself over too much. When “minimalism” comes overall to consist, as in this case, in the affirmation of the possibility of making a coherent lifestyle out of different self-help and self-improvement concerns, it also and especially takes on, of necessity, the management of the crises and criticality that emerge from their coming

together. It is clear, for example, that there is a contradiction in claiming that it would be more “minimalist” if the host had a predefined meal plan and shopping list to follow in an organized fashion, but also more “minimalist” if she had a better work-life balance with fewer things in her schedule. Besides subjectivist appeals to the fact that minimalism is different for everyone, because each one has different interests, is in different circumstances and is also at a different stage of the process, which once again leave minimalism indeterminate enough for it to work as “lifestyle”, criticality is here performatively managed by assuming the rigidity of perfectionism and relaxing it, even though the exceptions to the rule also implicitly reaffirm if not confirm the rule¹⁷⁴.

One last vlog¹⁷⁵ in the same channel, and an earlier one still – it was released nine months before the previous one –, is an example of vlogs addressing more directly the issue of criticism about minimalism by offering advice on how to respond to it. The hypothetical situation is that of dealing with others’ criticisms, and this already externalizes minimalism’s criticality, which is of course irreducible to a matter of conflict among minimalists and non-minimalists: responding to others’ hypothetical criticisms is also always a response to one’s own possible doubts. The premises do most of the work once again, because in this case not only criticisms are coming from others, but they are also imagined as being provoked by one’s own speaking about one’s “minimalist lifestyle”, as it is a natural thing to do given the enthusiasm for its beneficial effects (which are thus precisely “given”, taken for granted). Not surprisingly, the solution is a subjectivist emphasis on the self-evidence and immediacy of those benefits in emotional terms on the one hand, and rationalization of criticisms as due to others’ surprise, ignorance, resistance or even malice on the other. What matters, regardless of anyone else’s criticisms, is what you feel “in your heart, in your gut or whatever” about minimalism, the sense of positive benefits and of progress in the practice. If this sparks crises in others,

¹⁷⁴ In fact, minimalist “rules” are often the explicit targets of this type of vlogs – and of the discourse as a whole –, and they make it even more evident – since they are indeed accepted as truly “minimalist”, not “myths” – that these rigid elements are an inherent part of the discourse itself. An invitation to rather “pick and choose” and “make [minimalism] your own” with regard to these rules is the topic, for example, of a vlog in Simple Happy Zen’s channel, where rules such as “one in, one out”, the “minimalist game” of progressive decluttering for a whole month, Kondo’s “spark joy” leading question and so on are said to be too restrictive and unhelpful for anyone but beginners – since experienced people will have mastered intentionality and “think long and hard” about new purchases anyway –, especially if used all at the same time (Simple Happy Zen, “MINIMALISM Tips & Habits I Don’t Follow”, Apr. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wAqLQ8xJppA>, last accessed: 14/11/2023).

¹⁷⁵ Abundantly Minimal, “Minimalism and Criticism | How to Respond to Criticism about a Minimalist Lifestyle?”, Jan. 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blAPMchY0Vw> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

the fault is offloaded once again onto minimalism as an aestheticized trend and an ascetic extreme: other people may perceive one's change as too sudden or unexpected and thus assimilate it to the trend, or they may assume that it is going to be pushed too far and assimilate it to extreme, while minimalism has actually a broader "spectrum" of ways or degrees in which it is more genuinely and moderately manifested. Besides, the problem might lie even more with the person criticizing, who perhaps perceives the lifestyle change as either a rejection of the relationship – which may be tied to some form of consumption and practices such as going out for shopping, exchanging gifts, collecting certain things and so on –, or as in turn an implicit criticism highlighting similar problems in his or her own life which minimalism addresses, such "being controlled" by one's things or buying more than one can afford. In the last instance, lack of support from that person despite one's report of the subjectively felt benefits might even be a hint that the person does not really care about you, so that if he or she keeps on being critical and make you feel bad, it is time to reassess, in minimalism's subjectivist fashion, "the value that friendship or relationship is bringing into your life." While the possibility of a "meaningful dialogue" is left open, the dialogue is really a monologue in its one-sidedness, since the dialectical crisis it involves is foreclosed in advance: the host's advice is to speak of one's moment of realization, one's epiphany about the fact that one was not living as one wanted to live, and to relate one's process of re-evaluation of things during the transition, along with the benefits accruing from that; if the problem persists, then the conversation – if not, in the worst case scenario, the relationship – must be brought to a close and left behind. Even in this case, then, the crisis is self-inoculated for the purposes of immunization, for the sake of preventing it, more than for facing it and reflect on whether, for example, there might be some actual problem in minimalism's rejection of gifts and shared practices of consumption, on whether these provide in fact important occasions and situations for sociality that minimalism must find ways to remediate. The crisis remains external and extraneous to minimalism, at most an unfortunate by-product of its aestheticized and/or extreme commonsensical associations. At the same time, minimalism can remain indeterminate and reaffirm its subjectivism, while still getting to be a "lifestyle" (which here appears to be restricted to dealing with physical things, but is elsewhere presented – as we have often seen, even just now – as expanding to other areas of one's life like the self-help and self-

improvement discourses in general). The sparked crises thus go off like, indeed, little sparks incapable of lighting a fire.

2.4 – Living Within Tension. Minimalism Affirmed and Authentic

By now, we should hopefully have quite a good sense of how central it is, for the whole minimalist discourse – whether mainstream or less so –, this rhetorical move of denying itself, its own common sense, in order to double down on its subjectivism and almost dissolve into it, save for retaining the sense of practicing and partaking in an integral, expansive lifestyle. This lifestyle is distinctive even though it is undifferentiated, emptied out of all its determinations, thanks to a mix of least common denominators – besides subjectivism itself – such as intentionality, the “less is more” principle, and at least some reduction of one’s physical belongings and purchases made on the main assumption of their initial excess, different in kind from the meaningful surpluses gained through reduction. In this way, insistence on subjective and situational differences ends up actually downplaying and covering them instead of working them through in the discourse, because the rhetorical project of developing some language to better reflect upon and discuss them together – whether it is possible or not – cannot but pass through those differences with all the crises and struggles they spark, which subjectivism is of course allergic to both ethically and rhetorically: if the final end is some form of emotional well-being, then the discomfort of criticality is already a sign of failure – which is why the evident negativity of reduction and of the minimum must itself be negated and negotiated. Despite everyone seemingly agreeing in constantly projecting and promoting a genuine, moderate minimalism beyond its aestheticization and extremism, these two remain key if not indispensable tropes which set minimalism apart from subjectivism itself, since the former must pass through the aesthetic and through things – if only to reject them – in order to be subjectivist also as a conclusion, not just as a premise of the discourse: to be subjectively “still minimalist” by going through the polarization and immunization that circulate in the discourse is different than being subjectively “minimalist” to begin with. What is left of “minimalism”, however, is then indeed minimal, an indeterminate possibility which is promised and longed for, but never developed: it may seem to gain in determinacy at least within the scope of this or that YouTube channel, for example, since each one will pick on and emphasize different strands of its inde-

terminate, contradictory totality, but, apart from leaving the discourse at large as it is, this view gets it backwards – more than minimalism being determined by the self-help and self-improvement practices and discourses it is surrounded by, the latter are rather imbued with the former’s indeterminacy as a lifestyle (and also, of course, with the very aesthetic common sense that it regularly disavows but nevertheless depends on, both directly and indirectly). After all, every element that goes into the minimalist discourse actually predates it – as many minimalist influencers are themselves ready to stress, when it comes to decoupling “real minimalism” from online trend –, so that the rhetoric of a lifestyle identity label offering some kind of overarching integration of these elements, whether through an aesthetic common sense or through its rejection, gets more to the core of minimalism than any strict identification with any one of those elements. One might practice decluttering or digital detox without any inherent push towards identifying as “declutterer” or “digital detoxer”, nor towards expanding one’s commitment into other self-help and self-improvement practices and discourses; with minimalism, these pushes are aesthetically and rhetorically there, even in their disavowal. Precisely because this is the main import of “minimalism” to the discourses it gathers, without perhaps adding anything else to them in the last instance, the minimalist discourse also remains available for fruition, of course, to anyone who is interested in this or that element without caring much about minimalism as a lifestyle and all its crises. In fact, as we have seen, many minimalists both on Reddit and on YouTube are the first to claim that one should not really care, that its aesthetic is really just an aesthetic and that its label is just a label. And yet, if our analysis amounts to something, many minimalists do care a lot, and the minimalist influencers certainly do appreciate the aesthetic and/or rhetorical power of a “minimalist lifestyle” enough to hold on to it regardless of the numerous problems they themselves often point out, never really allowing it to end (nor, in fact, to begin). The discourse as a whole would rather make “minimalism” thoroughly indeterminate than get rid of it altogether.

While our qualitative, focused analyses do not offer us any guarantee of the relative weight of such meta-discourse on “minimalism” by minimalists in statistical terms, they do at the very least suggest that when it comes to dealing with its own criticality and thematizing its own negativity, the discourse does not appear to have the means to do so in a constructive, cumulative way: rather than critically building on itself, it re-

turns again and again to its indeterminacy and repeats itself as such, in its inchoate state (as is shown both by the multitude of nearly identical blogs and books which are constantly published about it, and – within our corpus – by the very fact that even the anti-trend critique by minimalist channels functions as a trend with little variation and no conversation, and is in fact repeated even when it is seen through and recognized as such, as in A to Zen Life’s case). With these analyses, we have already enough – if only the minimum possible – to state how and in what sense minimalism circles back to common sense, merely on the “other side” of it, and to review and restate its least common(sensical) denominators through the lens of our critical theory. However, it is also of course necessary to have a look at how the discourse works – and how its inherent contradictions show up – in its more positive form, that is, when “minimalism” is shown or spoken of but not primarily spoken about, as it is not seen as itself problematic. By doing so, we can see how this subjectivist authenticity projected by negative contrast to its common sense – and granted to everyone involved by the relative audience – is also always positively operative from the very beginning in the minimalist discourse, just as much as aestheticization (and of course also through it). The indeterminate sense of a lifestyle based on “living with intention” through reduction will thereby be shown again as depending on “living within tension”, within crisis. Needless to say, if the negative side of the discourse – which is necessarily the minority – is already unmanageable in all its different manifestations, the positive side is inexhaustible, especially since it is accompanied by or blended with other self-help and/or self-improvement topics, through different strategies and emphases in each case. While an in-depth critical study of this or that minimalist channel would be an interesting endeavour and afford a fuller investigation, it would also lead us to go into a multitude of self-help and self-improvement topics without those necessarily telling us much about “minimalism” and the way it works as a discourse broader than that of any one channel (which in fact relies on it seemingly indicating a widespread enough lifestyle). Consequently, we will content ourselves with a limited selection of minimalist vlogs – again not meant to be exhaustive at all – which highlight, within the more positive side of the discourse, the key points which have come forth in our main analysis of its negative side, showing these to be endemic to the discourse as ultimately one instance of moral discourse on authenticity. In particular, we will focus on vlogs that offer a tour of the hosts’ “minimalist” homes to better see how, and in how many ways and degrees, the aesthetic(ized)

common sense of minimalism is positively incorporated into the minimalist channels' discourses despite the rhetorical move we have surveyed: in all cases, the aesthetic is made to support the (authentic) minimalist lifestyle without acknowledging the inherent links between the two – an omission that defines for us the actual “aestheticization” of minimalism much more than any particular typified aesthetic per se, since it lets the aesthetic operate anyway, and largely unchecked. After that, we will more briefly go through some assorted vlogs from our corpus which again show authenticity at work, this time positively, in the hosts' advice with regard to one's wardrobe, things or habits; a quite restricted but significant sample which will not only provisionally confirm our previous analyses, but will also aid us in further taking note of the minimalist discourse's contradictions, which we will then synthesize in our conclusions.

2.4.1 – Inhabited Minimalism

Despite often taking sides against – or at least being ambivalent about – the aesthetic as a “trend” in favour of the lifestyle as something quite distinct from that, most minimalist channels in our corpus include – among other aesthetically-oriented vlogs – at least one vlog showcasing the hosts' homes. We have already noted, along the way, that every channel has its own aesthetic through which it positions itself differently with regard to minimalism's aesthetic common sense, regardless of what the hosts also explicitly say about the harms and misperceptions caused by the latter: we have seen denunciations of the aesthetic being made from perfectly clean, empty, spacious and white modernist apartments – with different lightings and palettes for different moods –, and by hosts often nonetheless wearing simple monochrome clothes. This is not surprising, of course, because some degree of aesthetic continuity – and the aesthetic work that this demands – is surely needed for something like a YouTube channel to work and form its distinctive identity, just like with other kinds of profiles on social media in general. That, however, does not take away much from its rhetorical role and power, and it would not take away much even if it were an entirely unintended side-effect or irrelevant circumstance – as it clearly is not –, because that aesthetic continuity is in many ways of a piece with the one that minimalism as a lifestyle promises. Whatever the hosts' intentions, each and every minimalist vlog will add to minimalism's aesthetic common sense, if only by adding one more example – which can always easily slip into being exemplary in the ideal, aspirational sense. The “minimalist home tour” vlogs therefore let us see the dif-

ferent shades that aestheticization, as demanded one way or another by the platform, can assume within the minimalist mainstream discourse, as well as the various manners and degrees to which the hosts relate to the aesthetic dimension of minimalism. As before, our aim is not that of assessing the relative weight of one approach over the others in the discourse, nor vice versa that of singling out any of them as more authentic and representing “true” minimalism, but rather simply to stress that all of these approaches coexist – each authentic enough to its own audience – and that they all are clearly aesthetic in nature, providing in every case an aesthetic framing to the supposedly non-aesthetic lifestyle. What this is meant to suggest is that, rather than searching for one true minimalism under the deceptive surfaces of the aesthetic, a much better question to ask would be how many different, perhaps incompatible aesthetic minimalisms it would be possible to construct. That would amount to taking seriously the aesthetic dimension of minimalism, its constitutive “longing for less” beyond any set of definite practical benefits, and starting over from the assumption that it is still only a possibility (an assumption that is internal to the minimalist discourse itself since its very subjectivism entails that minimalism is yet to be determined, but one that it betrays by at once celebrating and giving up too soon, both speaking about “minimalism” as if it were already something actual and determinate enough, and holding back in front of its obvious indeterminacy as if it were a mere nothingness, as if it afforded no way to work it through and move it forward). Of course, while our own study is also predicated on these same premises, it does not take up the task itself, because its much more limited purpose is to show how its possibility is rhetorically resisted and foreclosed, while still being held on to. It is still with this end in view that we are going to have our brief tour through minimalist home tours.

2.4.1.1 – Minimalism ironically aestheticized

We will start again from where anyone else could indeed start by searching for such a tour, the most obvious place: Matt D’Avella’s channel. Besides the fact that his vlogs are among the most viewed and thus do much to inform minimalism’s common sense, his two most recent home tours are also a good place to start for us because of their clear continuity with the rhetorical move of denying supposed minimalist myths or ste-

reotypes. The first vlog¹⁷⁶ starts off with the host presenting himself as a “minimalist” and declaring that he and his wife have just moved into a new “minimalist” home, but when the camera zooms out and the focus is shifted onto the background, an all-white but obviously luxurious mansion appears, and with rapid, well-edited segments the host for a while does an inside tour of that. The tour, of course, is ironic, and it clearly plays on the associations of minimalism to aestheticized wealth and luxury: the omnipresent whiteness of all walls and decors is praised; the perfect sparseness and cleanness are underlined and accompanied by a nonchalant remark on the effort they demand but is then offloaded onto others – it is hard to maintain them, but “[their] maid does a pretty good job” –; extravagant and inaccessible luxuries such as a monumental fireplace or a huge private pool or a richly intricate carpet are indicated as the host’s “minimalist” fireplace, pool and carpet, followed by his seven chandeliers and a series of expensive artworks or décor items accompanied by their prices (“This tapestry? Costs one thousand dollars”). The irony, however, soon appears to reach also the very minimalist appeals to “intentionality” which we have seen opposed to aestheticized minimalism, unwittingly revealing its inability to set a truer minimalism apart from it: while sitting on a royal-like red velvet armchair in the huge open living room, the host says – still in all seriousness – that he and his wife “were very intentional with all the furniture [they] brought into the space”, because they “wanted it to say, ‘We’re better than you’”; one can, in fact, just as easily live “intentionally” a luxuriant and aestheticized life. Even so, if an implicit criticism can be drawn out of the irony, that would most likely not be levelled against “intentionality” in itself but rather its exploitation as a form of self-justification, even though, absent any further determinations as in subjectivist takes on it, they are one and the same. On what grounds would one intentionality be distinguished from the other? The answer seems to be, of course, that minimalist intentionality would not be concerned with the excesses of luxury and aestheticization, collapsed as usual onto mere appearances as competitive and thus hypercritical status symbols (despite the fact that the same, again, can be said of intentionality as such, even in purely ethical-practical terms: minimalists’ pride in being intentional depends on the masses of consumerist people being impulsive, and can be reduced to the satisfaction of this comparison just as well as anything else). Subjectivist intentionality, as we have seen, must

¹⁷⁶ Matt D’Avella, “My Minimalist Home”, Dec. 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ysge8P178zs> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

be at least remain minimally determined by other least common denominators, reduction of some excess to get a surplus of a different kind out of it. But what excess, and to what extent? As subjectivism forecloses any determinate attempt at defining limits, the discourse can only fall back onto common sense, making them commonsensical more than just common denominators: for sure, no human being could ever need seven chandeliers, so we have at least this upper boundary (whose use as a criterion, beyond its rhetorical function, is proportional to the number of people that are ever faced with the opportunity of actually owning more than one or two chandeliers, of course). The mansion, whose vastness is again comically stressed by the host not finding where his wife is inside it, presents an upper boundary by contrast to which everyone else is indeed equally minimal no matter how far they push reduction (and how different their socio-economic conditions otherwise are). It is not that hard – so it is implied – to know where the excess lies: you know it when you see it, as proven by this ironic home tour.

This, however, does not exhaust the vlog, because there is indeed a home tour after this first rhetorical premise, by contrast to which the host's apartment cannot but appear minimal, thus offering a visualization by example of what the commonsensical life below the excessive upper boundary may look like. The ironical tone, with its softening of criticality, continues throughout the actual apartment tour: the shoes orderly disposed side by side at the entrance are contrasted as the way the home looks “when guests are over” to “what it looks almost every other day”, with more shoes and other things more messily lying around, and that is repeated for the perfectly-looking fruit basket in the kitchen; an “organized junk drawer” is “balanced out” by a “disorderly junk drawer”; the fridge too is not so organized because the host “resisted the urge to tidy it up before showing it”, and contains “lots of sauces”; stereotypes are played with also explicitly when the host makes coffee just because it would not be a “minimalist” vlog otherwise; and so on. Bits of personal everyday life are also inserted throughout the tour in a similar tone, sitting on cushions on the carpet being for example preferred to the couch and armchair – yet not gotten rid of –, and fake plants preferred to living ones because the host cannot seem to be able to keep them alive. Nevertheless, along



FIG. 10 – Matt D’Avella’s minimalist living room, quite spacious though not mansion-like.

with the host’s usual monochromatic casual uniform – a grey t-shirt –, the apartment still is quite modernist if casual in style, it still presents all the minimalist visual tropes – white walls and furniture, neutral palette with just a few wooden touches, spaciousness, empty surfaces, aesthetic cohesion, some plants and only a couple artworks and so on –, it still is very clean and tidy, and it still is displayed – with music, editing, natural lighting and the right camera angles – in an aestheticizing way, as if “guests” were indeed over (FIG. 10). Moreover, with a large living room and a dedicated room as the host’s studio, this hardly looks as an apartment anyone could afford (rather than aspire to), and while there is no “maid” maintaining it, the host has a robot vacuum cleaner – which appears in other such minimalist vlogs – that he does not “regret buying” despite initially resisting it. The apartment remains a visibly and ideal “minimalist” home not only negatively by contrast to the mansion, but also positively in its own aesthetic and aestheticization, and irony cannot do much to keep it from informing and confirming minimalism’s aesthetic common sense. The host’s identity as a “minimalist” is also reinforced by contrast – again softened by irony – to his “non-minimalist” wife, whose wardrobe is full of clothes while his own includes just some shirts and jackets, the rest – his everyday items and uniform – fitting in a few drawers (but of course, “it is not a competition”). What could then be left indeterminate as in the negative side of the minimalist discourse we have analysed so far, simply by stopping at the parody of luxury home tours at the beginning of the vlog and thus only setting up an upper boundary to

minimalism – as sure enough not encompassing mansions –, is instead ironically but quite consistently and coherently determined in a positive way as well, reproducing most of the criticized misperceptions of what minimalism is (including the very fact that one can meaningfully be said to be “minimalist” as opposed to another person, even one’s partner living in the very same home, by virtue of owning less things and clothes). This is what we mean by saying that there is no escaping the aesthetic and common sense merely by rhetorically denying them or their importance, projecting a non-aesthetic(ized) minimalism while still positively taking from and adding to the aestheticized one. It is with his casual monochrome uniform and with the crystal-clear, all-white background of his kitchen, his “favourite part of the entire place” (FIG. 11), that the host leaves us with the paradoxical moral of this minimalist story, that it does not matter how much one earns or owns:

I hope you guys got something out of this, maybe a little bit of inspiration for your own place, but if there is one thing that I’d leave you with, it is that it doesn’t matter how much stuff you own – whether you own a lot or a little –, your net worth is not your true worth.

The positive aesthetic “inspiration” goes hand in hand with the negative projection of an authentic, non-aesthetic “true worth” beyond things and money, and the projection depends on the inspiration both directly and indirectly: as we have seen it must deny it, or at least be ironic about it, but it also clearly remains of a piece with the aspirational charge of minimalism as lifestyle. Meanwhile, those who “own a lot” and those who “own a little” are merged together through the contrast to the upper boundary of those who own really, really a lot – and inauthentically show it off.

Two years later, and three months after the vlog on the end of minimalism as a mere “trend”, a second minimalist home tour¹⁷⁷ of a new apartment continues the ironical approach of the first one, though it does not of course repeat the parody tour in the “minimalist” mansion. It is “a little bit less minimalist and a little bit more festive” with a more upbeat soundtrack, and has from the beginning the ironical quips mixed in: the three “non-negotiables” included “lots of natural sunlight” and “two bedrooms” – one to be used again as the host’s studio –, but also the “washer and dryer in the kitchen”, because for the host “there’s just something about the aesthetic of the laundry next to your food that says, ‘You haven’t quite made it yet’.” Still, this new apartment – which

¹⁷⁷ Matt D’Avella, “Tour our minimalist apartment”, Dec. 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=isb4_1CopX4 (last accessed: 14/11/2023).



FIG. 11 – Matt D’Avella offering a final moral message against the background of a perfectly clean, white and modernist kitchen and dining room, out of focus like the very contribution of the aesthetic to the minimalist lifestyle.

is again predominantly white, though with a warmer and earthier palette with also a darker and more particular bedroom for his wife – has various upgrades from the previous one, such as a closet in the entrance for keeping jackets, shoes and other accessories away from sight (which is the host’s “favourite thing about the apartment”, because he “hates a messy entryway”). Expectations tied to minimalism’s associations to the aesthetic and/or the extreme are again played with: the host pre-empts a possible objection by his audience to the presence of both a breakfast nook and breakfast bar, which might seem not “very minimalist”, by simply shaking it off ironically (“What can I say? We love breakfast”), while he has desisted from making the breakfast nook – since it is also his wife’s office – “more minimalist” and conceded to her covering the seats with a white fur blanket. The rhetorical distancing from minimalism’s aestheticization is explicitly made immediately after that in the kitchen, again while he makes the usual cup of coffee: “I think one thing you’ll notice about the minimalist aesthetic or minimalist apartment tours is that everything is always so freaking perfect, but we really try to use things until they are unusable, or at least as close to that point as we can get.” The “case in point” to exemplify this are the dishes chipped all around the edge by continued use, but still held onto. The host claims that “this is really what minimalism should look like”, like a light-blue chipped plate, and the claim is complemented by a slight pushback on aesthetic cohesiveness and uniformity which contrasts and favours the

“random assortment of coffee mugs” having “some sentimental value” to the “the cookie-cutter matching set.” And yet beyond these few ironical gestures there is no sign of imperfection anywhere to be seen either in the home itself or in the editing of the vlog, which is as aestheticizing as the previous one. The drawers are now even more organized, and the rhetorical nature of the one that is instead disorganized – as well as the ironical “okay, I’m not perfect” that accompanies it – is even more evident, since the gap between the two is so obvious as to make it quite unlikely that that messiness just happened on its own. The cables are hidden by cable hidere to keep everything “nice and clean”, and minimalism’s aversion to decorations is confirmed along with the host’s identity as a minimalist again by contrast to his non-minimalist wife, because he “lost the fight” over keeping it “simple” with Christmas decorations – even though there are not at all many, and in fact there are few decorations in general, especially on the white walls. As the host goes on to explain, he and his wife “didn’t feel the need to put something in every corner of every shelf or of every wall. When we see an empty space, we feel like we need to fill it – but, you really don’t. And when you realize that, it takes a lot of the pressure out of decorating and making your home feel complete.” That pressure may be taken off the shelves and walls as it is chipped out from the dishes, but again, the home does not appear to be very much incomplete. It is here made explicit that the audience counts as “guests” for whose eyes the host had to “clean up”, while spaces like the studio are “normally much messier than this.” The home is thus aestheticized and does not look, after all, like the chipped up plate. The seemingly anti-aesthetic remarks – the irony on the white fur blanket, the dismissal of decorations – are internal to this broader aestheticization which does not really contradict minimalism’s common sense (it is no doubt true that “minimalism doesn’t mean that everything should be black or white”; but is it also as true that it does not have to be clean and tidy and decoration-free?).

2.4.1.2 – Minimalism morally aestheticized

As already D’Avella’s moral takeaway in the first minimalist home tour shows, the other face of his ironical aestheticization – surely well suiting the discourse’s rhetorical move – is the serious moral aestheticization which we find in the other most viewed of

minimalist home tours, the two by Nate O'Brien. The first vlog¹⁷⁸, actually released a couple months before D'Avella's first one – perhaps also a reaction to it –, works pretty much as a primer on minimalism as a lifestyle, because the host's explicit discourse is of a decidedly ethical-practical nature, and does not address minimalism's perceived aesthetic normativity. The tour, explicitly filmed as if the viewer were a guest coming over, presents us again a modernist apartment coming with all the elements accused of being stereotypical – white walls and furniture, neutral palette, a plant, the coffee cup and so on – along with the host's all-black uniform (FIG. 12). It does so with some degree of aestheticization as well, but here it serves as a frame for the host's moral discourse on the generic problem of “stuff”, and on why he has “sold everything” when moving to Philadelphia. In other words, the home tour is the tacit support through which the host both sets up the problem and exemplifies how a “minimalist” supposedly solves it.

I found that, as I moved from apartment to apartment in the past few years, I started to really acquire a lot of stuff – and there's really no other way to put it than just “stuff”: multiple blenders, slap chops, Christmas gifts that I got from my uncle four years ago, and a number of those “as seen on TV” items that are supposed to simplify your life, but I've found that, as I moved around and moved into these new places, that having more stuff didn't necessarily make my life any better. And I've noticed that in America especially we're so materialistic, that we just keep on acquiring things – one of the only places in the world where we have so much stuff, to the point where we have to go and rent storage units somewhere else to store our great uncle's couch from the 1930s that we will probably never use. So I've found that overall, as I've started to get more stuff, my quality of life actually started to decrease – and it's not that I've ever had a problem with the quality of my life, I've always been very happy, but I've noticed that while I was getting more, my life wasn't getting any better necessarily. And it's difficult to put a measurement on happiness, but I've noticed that as I started to scale back when I've moved into this new apartment, it really had quite an effect on myself. So, this is when I've really discovered something called “minimalism”, which is scaling back the items that you have and really focusing on the things in life that do add value to your life. So in the next few minutes I want to show you around my apartment, and I want to show you some of the things that I did away with, things that I've found that I just don't need, that aren't necessary to improving the quality of my life – and then also some items that bring joy to my life, some things that I find to be very valuable and useful throughout my everyday life.

Save from the lack of explicit emphasis on intentionality against the impulsivity and inauthenticity of consumerism, here subsumed under “materialism”, it would be hard to find a better encapsulation of minimalism's ethical-practical common sense. A generic excess of “stuff”, whose excess is also directly tied to its being generic – “there's really no other way to put it than just ‘stuff’” –, is posited along with its subjective and no less indeterminate counterpart, the materialistic drive to accumulate that stuff, as an unconditional problem for everyone: even when it does not appear to be a problem, even if

¹⁷⁸ Nate O'Brien, “My Minimalist Apartment”, Oct. 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VpoJc4cq0nA> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).



FIG. 12 – Nate O'Brien's minimalist living room as he explains that while he saved on his couch, he has instead invested gladly in the sound system, thus exemplifying the saving-investing version of minimalism's "less is more" principle.

one is reasonably happy as the host is, it is still a problem out of its indifference, that is, out of its not making life better either, as materialism or consumerism supposedly promise; if stuff does not make life – one's individual and private life, of course – better in any definite way at present, it must be making it worse, if only by somehow distracting oneself from what does, so it must be sifted through and greatly reduced in order to get a surplus of the latter. Here is the crux of minimalism as a distinguishable form of the anti-consumerist and anti-materialist discourse: it is not that impulsive and inauthentic pursuit of "stuff" must simply be stopped or restrained to immediately redirect one's attention to what lies besides and beyond it; it is that before one can do this, one must first go through – and perhaps recurrently or continuously go through – one's "stuff" in order to declutter it, to get rid of the things that break their promise (which is of course, in this sense, actually accepted). If there is no problematization and reduction of one's things, it is not really minimalism; one cannot go straight to simply "caring less about things" altogether without first "caring about less things", to paraphrase Ecofriend Lia's point in two of her negative vlogs we have analysed. The supposed non-consumerist, non-materialist things beyond "stuff" are accordingly kept on hold for the most part in one's reflections, and along the way their place as the surplus derived from reduction is easily taken up by those things that do keep their promise, those items that "bring joy"

and are “useful” in whatever subjective sense to oneself. Thus the rejection of “stuff” altogether is translated into the rejection of the indeterminacy of it, making an inherent problem out of one’s not “only owning” what actually adds some subjective value to one’s life, and from here further into the rejection of bad things as opposed to other good things (which can, of course, circle back to purchases of upgrades to one’s decluttered things). While the host does not mention at all the aesthetic dimension of minimalism in his speech, his new apartment is still offered as an example of such “only owning” which does have an “effect” on him, aesthetically connoting this seemingly purely ethical-practical common sense of minimalism: he “owns only” as a whole, with regard to his “stuff”, and it can readily be seen that he does, because the modernist aesthetic contributes to that in many ways – it makes everything more visible and weaves it all together into a whole, as well as suggesting with its sparseness the absence of discarded things and so on. Needless to say, this is exactly what many minimalists would dismiss as an aestheticization of minimalism, its degeneration into mere appearances for competitive exhibitionism and perfectionism as a mirror-image of consumerism, and thus a betrayal of a more genuine minimalist lifestyle. Yet they would have little problem accepting most of the host’s speech and the underlying idea of only owning what adds value to one’s life as characterizing well enough what the minimalist lifestyle is all about, and as we have noted before, insofar as that entails at least having a sense of the things one owns, uses or enjoys as the more or less integrated whole of one’s “stuff”, it already has an aesthetic dimension in our non-reductive understanding of the aesthetic. One solution to this aesthetic dimension of the problem is again offered only implicitly – though not ironically – by this vlog, which confirms and adds to the aesthetic common sense while the host ignores it in his moral speech. Would this speech have worked just the same if the host’s apartment had many more items and more “visual clutter” but he justified the former as all things he really uses or enjoys, and the latter as an irrelevant aesthetic issue? As we have seen, the rest of the minimalist discourse surely would not be able to function in the same way without this aesthetic common sense as its rhetorical target. At the same time, this vlog’s audience also takes the host to be authentic, and will probably associate his moral message to the apartment’s aesthetic it is expressed through. One way or the other, whether negatively or positively, the aesthetic plays its crucial role without it being acknowledged and addressed as such. It is at most something to be ironic about, or to be ignored.

It is not like aesthetic remarks are not made by the host, far from it. From the very beginning in showing the kitchen, the host underscores his “very simple and very clear” counter without many different and duplicate appliances nor dirt or mess, which can be “disgusting” and “kind of stresses [him] out”, while the living room too is described as “very simple.” These passing remarks, however, are clearly subordinate to the moral discourse: appliances are not expressly reduced for the sake of the counter’s or kitchen’s simplicity, of course, nor for the sake of an ideal of “only owning” recognized in its ties to that simplicity; the aesthetic is at best a side effect, and overall just implicit evidence – and tacit inspiration – for the host’s moral discourse. The aesthetic problem of owning excessive “stuff” per se is therefore translated into an ethical-practical matter of saving and investing on subjectivist grounds of one’s personal “use” and “joy”: the mixer is kept because the host uses it every day, while appliances for specific forms of cooking – such as toasters – are redundant and can be saved over; a cheap couch and an old wooden desk work just as fine for him as anything else, but a high quality music set and a comfortable bed can be invested on, because they make him happy or healthy; and of course, to such investments on other and better things are later added investments on experiences and financial investments (which are also one of the main topics of the channel). Here, then, the “less is more” principle – which is aesthetically exemplified by the apartment – operates in the form of saving on certain things in order to invest on others, obviously extended beyond “stuff” in the literal sense: anticipating a future vlog on the topic, the host seamlessly juxtaposes his saving on duplicate or redundant appliances to his saving on food by always cooking it at home and having a meal plan. Other traces of minimalism’s expansion into self-improvement are present, such as the host’s showing and praising his phone locker, which helps him fight off digital media’s distractions and dependence and be more productive, another common interpretation of the “less is more” principle (central to that “lifestylized” rephrasing of digital detox which is “digital minimalism”). Once again, it is clear that the rhetorical function of “minimalism” is making these different elements coalesce into a seemingly distinctive, coherent and cohesive lifestyle: by itself, no one of the practical or ethical benefits mentioned by the host – saving and thus investing, ease of cleaning, ease of moving, sustainability – can match the overarching “simplifying one’s lives” that comes first in the list. Alongside with the assumption of an excess of generic “stuff” – or even non-physical things – to be reduced, the very flexible framing of the

“less is more” principle and subjectivist intentionality – all of which already have an aesthetic dimension in our view –, the apartment’s modernist aesthetic also substantiates and sustains this ideal of an overall minimalist lifestyle. In fact, its aestheticized but much less curated aspect, by contrast to D’Avella’s, fits very well the host’s particular emphasis on saving and investing (which also lies behind some anti-aesthetic remarks, such as the claim that any desk does its job equally well – it is just a piece of wood – so it is not worth spending much for).

As in D’Avella’s case, the second vlog of this kind by the same channel¹⁷⁹, released about one year later, confirms the approach of the previous one while also heading towards upgrades – from a larger home with a bigger kitchen and more appliances (“Don’t mistake [the very clear counters] for thinking that I don’t have any appliances – I have plenty of appliances, but I keep all of them below or above the counters”) to a new higher quality couch (the previous one turned out to be not as adequate as the host deemed it to be, since “if you get a really cheap couch, they end up wearing down pretty quickly” and also “it was not very comfortable”; FIG. 13). There is probably D’Avella’s influence behind the host’s upgrading of the vlog’s aestheticization itself, now coming with background music and with the host’s slightly less monochromatic look, and we also find the same robot cleaner than D’Avella’s (again not openly sponsored). At any rate, one year after having begun “practicing minimalism”, the host appears pretty much better off and much better at appearing, while his speech again includes aesthetic remarks on spaciousness, clear surfaces and uncluttered bookshelves without fully addressing them as such, instead mostly repeating the same moral discourse. Productivity, for example, is even more stressed here: owning a robot cleaner is justified by time saved, an additional room to use as a studio – again, just like D’Avella – is justified by the need to separate working time from free time and its temptations, the phone locker is now less frequently used simply by virtue of having internalized its discipline, and having a black basic uniform – though now injected with some colour and variety through outer layers – is explained with not wanting to waste time on deciding what to wear (“Not to be too bland with the wardrobe, but also not have to spend too much time thinking about what you’re gonna wear every day, ‘cause that also takes up a lot of time and, if you know anything about me, I like to find ways to be as productive as possi

¹⁷⁹ Nate O’Brien, “my new minimalist apartment,” Oct. 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gwuwcLrHhE> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).



FIG. 13 – Nate O’Brien’s visibly upgraded couch and minimalist living room (as well as look), wherein he again leaves the viewer with a final anti-materialist and anti-consumerist moral message.

ble”). The host actually admits, speaking of the plants he included to give a “splash of colour” to the apartment (one typical aesthetic tip in the minimalist discourse, along with the addition of just a couple artworks – like the host also did here), that he is not good at “designing”, but he also adds that “it’s really difficult to go wrong with something like this”: just like for clothes, the apartment’s aesthetic is also something to be done away with as swiftly and easily as possible (though still not to be gotten “wrong”). The host reaffirms that minimalism is about only owning things that have a “purpose”, either a practical one or the emotional one of bringing “joy” (now exemplified by an electric skateboard, this time too not openly sponsored), with all the same anti-materialist framing and list of benefits of “minimalism” as a lifestyle in their place. Therefore, the aesthetic is ignored and downplayed as such even while it is also affirmed at every turn. With its white empty closets, its white and sparse bookshelf – only containing the most important books, a close-up of which shows many to be books on financial investments – and its clear surfaces, the apartment is presented as a quite unproblematic exemplar of minimalism: “The only thing that’s not minimalist about this apartment is that I have two separate computers”, says the host, justifying himself by pointing out that one is small and good for working outside or while travelling, while the other is a desktop computer that is easier to work with when he is at home. Despite highlighting all the time how few things he owns, and despite playing with the stereo-

types about minimalism being “extreme” in the vlog’s thumbnail (which says, “I own nothing”), like D’Avella the host of course stresses that “it’s not all about just, you know, not having anything, it’s okay to have things in your apartment, it just should be something that is used quite a bit; and if I’m not using something, like, for example, if next year I never use this Boosted board anymore, I’ll probably get rid of it, I’ll probably sell it to somebody – because if I’m not using it there’s no point having it cluttering up my apartment.” That once you “only own” what is subjectively used and enjoyed you will end up with a gorgeous modernist apartment like the host’s, or at least one that looks as cohesive, spacious and/or empty as his, is never explicitly stated, but the vlog’s aestheticization shapes that ideal regardless of the fact that it is recommended as a moral end in itself – it is simply good not to have extra “stuff”, since it lying around without a purpose is simply bad – and/or by appeal to ethical-practical benefits derived from it (even though their sum is not equal to the whole of a minimalist lifestyle). As hard as it is to take seriously the host’s moral speech – which is, besides its aestheticization, also often flatly contradictory, claiming for example that “it’s more important to value people, relationships, friendships over items and materialistic goods”, while on the other hand explaining earlier that he does not own nor need a table since he does not have people over –, many do take it seriously as authentic enough and inspiring. After all, when the minimalist aesthetic(ized) common sense that the vlog confirms is rejected in the more negative strands of the discourse, it is the same non-aesthetic minimalist lifestyle described by the host that minimalists appeal and subscribe to. Therefore, the positive discourse works both positively by tacitly affirming a certain aesthetic – both in its determinate character and in its broader cohesion, cleanness and unclutteredness – to support and qualify an ethical-practical common sense, and negatively by also giving the negative discourse proper, as we have seen, something to deny for the rhetorical move towards authenticity to occur. In this way, of course, the discourse eventually falls back on – or circles back to – the aesthetic, which nonetheless informs its ethical-practical common sense.

2.4.1.3 – Minimalism cautiously aestheticized

Many other vlogs are, of course, more openly positive than this, or at any rate not too self-conscious and apologetic about the aesthetic dimension of minimalism, though they too do not explicitly relate it to minimalism as a lifestyle. One example of this kind is an



FIG. 14 – Simple Happy Zen’s minimalist living room, which works as a background – and thus framing device – to this and most of her vlogs.

older minimalist home tour by Simple Happy Zen¹⁸⁰ which according to the host was by far her “most requested video”, but which she turns into a primer for, this time, the minimalist aesthetic: “reluctant” about doing a proper home tour because she feels that her home is her own “personal sacred space”, the host rather alternates between her usual vlog format with her speaking against the view of her living room in the background (FIG. 14) and simple close-ups of the aspects and elements of her apartment which illustrate the tips she offers on achieving “that clean minimalist aesthetic, while adding some personal touches that make it feel like [one’s own] personal sacred space” (FIG. 15). An aestheticization of the home as one site of self-expression is here opposed to the aestheticization of the “magazine look of minimalist space” in an initial disclaimer to the tips on offer, which would otherwise all seem to fall more or less into the latter category: quoting interior designer Nate Berkus, the host stresses that “your home should tell the story of who you are, and be a collection of what you love”, so that “if you love it, it’ll work” by default. The advice given by the host after this subjectivist disclaimer includes the use of soft, neutral colours or at any rate a well-defined palette for the home, clear wooden floors unifying all main spaces of the home and left as visible as possible by raised furniture, plants big and small and many other elements that make it all more “cosy” – “candles, soft rugs, cute tables, glass jars, incense” –, juxtaposition of

¹⁸⁰ Simply Happy Zen, “MY MINIMALIST APARTMENT | Minimalist Decor Ideas”, Jun. 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqS51mszugg> (last accessed:).

clear areas to other areas with more such colourful accessories – one way she is not as “minimalist” – in both surfaces and walls, and finally inclusion of musical instruments to practice and, for her personally at least, some “eastern influences” in the choice of décor items. All of these, including in fact the cosiness and eastern décor which the host contrasts to a more extreme and depersonalized minimalist aesthetic simply taken for granted, are indeed the “minimalist décor ideas” which largely form the core of minimalism’s aesthetic common sense, reinforced in their authenticity and comfortableness by the assumption of a (more) aestheticized and/or ascetic minimalism. It is evident how easily a subjectivist caveat like the host’s can be absorbed by aestheticization at different levels: first of all, the idea that the home should indeed be a “personal sacred space” of aesthetic expression is here affirmed, not denied, by the subjectivist rhetoric of authenticity; after that, it also finds its proper subordinate place as a matter of defining a certain palette and selecting the personal theme for one’s décor items, while leaving intact the pursuit of aesthetic cohesiveness, of clearness and cleanliness everywhere, of perfect balance in the arrangement of items standing out in museum-like fashion from the surrounding whiteness and blankness and so on. In other words, even if really meant in its broadest sense as in the claim that “if you love it, it’ll work”, the subjectivist appeal can then be de facto subsumed by the minimalist aesthetic positively offered as the appeal to slight personalization of it; after all, the viewer does not necessarily

FIG.15 – A small Ganesha statue, one of the host’s eastern “personal touches” to her minimalist apartment; the shot itself is quite in line with the typical minimalist presentation in pictures of sparse or isolated everyday items on white background.



know what he or she loves – such vlogs would not be so requested otherwise –, so the minimalist aesthetic can largely be picked up implicitly and confirmed as authentically one’s own by its allowing for, and in fact framing and highlighting, some “personal touches” (themselves often suggested by the aesthetic common sense, like the host’s eastern décor). This is how the positive side of the minimalist discourse works more generally with regard to the aesthetic, whatever the rhetorical disclaimers: involvement with the aesthetic is deemed to be subjective, but “inspiration” is still offered explicitly and implicitly by the minimalist channels, and it can therefore be subjectively taken up as one’s own, despite minimalism as lifestyle being a wholly different and non-aesthetic matter.

The only direct reference to the minimalist lifestyle in the vlog has to do with the accessibility of the host’s advice: “In the spirit of minimalism,” she says, “these things are easy to create and they don’t need anything expensive.” Like the subjectivist disclaimer that follows it, this accessibility disclaimer is left to its indeterminacy and not really put to work throughout the vlog; and in fact, as many minimalists themselves do in their dismissals of the aesthetic, it can be reasonably doubted how far achieving any cohesive aesthetic across one’s entire home and maintaining its clearness and cleanliness is that easy and inexpensive an endeavour. Regardless of that, the “spirit of minimalism” actually seems to also shine through the host’s praise for the minimalist aesthetic, because its qualities go hand in hand with certain emotional feelings or moods clearly aligned to the minimalist lifestyle’s promise of integral well-being: everything in the home feels “soft and matching” and makes up a whole without stopping the gaze with “anything specific” – it is “quieter on the eyes” –, it feels not only “clean” but also “airy” and “spacious”, and the plants make the host feel “calm”, “at ease” and “happy”, while other decors or accessories make it feel “cosy” or, in the host’s preferred Dutch term – which, like the more popular and also mentioned Danish “hygge”, precisely points to an aesthetic quality that emotionally suffuses everyday life¹⁸¹ –, they make it

¹⁸¹ The host contrasts her term to the English “cosy” by saying that “it means more to us [Dutch people]”: as in the case of Japanese common words – such as *wabi-sabi* or *ikigai* – often picked out as signifying entire worldviews or ways of living, the use of a word in a language different from that of the rest of the discourse facilitates its connotation of a lifestyle beyond mere style. This is, of course, how the label of “minimalism” would work as well, if its aesthetic common sense were not in fact complex and contradictory, and if it did not further attempt – in presenting itself as a proper “lifestyle” – at encompassing and even privileging an ethical-practical common sense which has in turn its own contradictions, both internally and with regard to the aesthetic. No one attacks “cosy” candles and cushions as hypercritical, which

more “gezellig”, more “warm” and “welcoming” and “comfortable”, “the same kind of feeling of when you’re having coffee with a really close friend or when you’re spending time with a pet.” The affective power of the aesthetic is therefore acknowledged and appreciated, despite the refusal elsewhere of tying the minimalist lifestyle to it out of a fear of being normative and exclusive (and before that, perhaps, vain and superficial as the aesthetic is often understood to be). Even so, the same affective power here positively affirmed literally operates in the background of all of the channel’s vlogs, also necessarily informing those dealing with the broader self-help topics, giving some multi-level aesthetic substance to their promises. The “eastern influences” – also visible in the reference to “Zen” in the channel’s name (as in *A to Zen Life’s*) – also contribute to the expansive sense of a minimalist lifestyle, this time drawing it closer to the self-help component of the discourse with its emphasis on “mindfulness” (whose problems overlap quite a bit with minimalism’s, though the latter more often appeals to intentionality than to mindfulness; Purser 2019). The inclusion of musical instruments in this list of advice for minimalist home décor, for example, goes straight to their power of “lifting one’s mood” and to the opportunity of “practicing mindfulness” and “being in the moment” through them. This is obviously again the affective power of the aesthetic, this time in the less reductive sense of the aesthetic experience: as the host notes, when playing music “you’re not rushing towards the end, but rather enjoying every note of the piece.” The same ease is what is overall promised, among other and often conflicting things, by the minimalist lifestyle. In accordance with her primary range of topics from the self-help discourse, this channel’s shade of aestheticization pushes that aspect into the foreground, again confirming and adding to the aesthetic common sense.

2.4.1.4 – Minimalism exotically or familiarly aestheticized

These first minimalist home tours we have seen so far already show us how aestheticization finds its way into the minimalist lifestyle whether the approach is ironical, tacit or (cautiously) appreciative, and how each time it lends substance and support to the wider discourse of each channel and its particular emphases: a comfortable middle way for everyone who is not ultra-rich to enjoy, a mirror of one’s moral commitment to the anti-materialist and/or anti-consumerist life of saving in order to invest, of personal pri

is also why the “cosy” is often aesthetically and rhetorically employed in the minimalist discourse to alleviate its perceived problems.



FIG. 16 – Samurai Matcha’s almost empty white-on-wood main room, summing up at a glance – with the laptop, the kimono and the camping chair – the channel’s aesthetic mix of modernist, Japanese, and countryside and eco-friendly elements.

orities and productivity, or a sacred space for an authentic self-expression which will ultimately nonetheless have to feel cohesive, cosy and mindful. To these examples, which still exhibit some negativity, we can add others that are even more positively aestheticized, whether they are ostensibly about a minimalist lifestyle or the minimalist aesthetic. Two home tours which showcase the modernized yet also traditional Japanese facet of minimalism’s aesthetic common sense are found in Samurai Matcha (301.000 subscribers), a minimalist channel by a school teacher living in Japan’s countryside and making travel vlogs and some more general self-help and self-improvement vlogs alongside the “strictly” minimalist ones. His first minimalist apartment tour¹⁸² presents us with an even brighter, cleaner and clearer yet more lightwood-centric version of the modernist aesthetic, specified as Japanese by all kinds of immediately recognizable elements – an affiliated sleeping bag working as futon, the host’s kimono, the typical teacup and teapots and so on (FIG. 16-17). The host’s “minimal life” is presented with an emphasis on sustainability and is explicitly tied to the Japanese traditional background (“I’ve always tried to live efficiently and without waste, like when I do traditional Japanese ceremony”). The bamboo bike, the avoidance of detergents besides baking soda, the front load washing machine to save up on water, the use of coreless toilet paper and

¹⁸² Samurai Matcha, “Minimalist Apartment Tour in small village in Japan.”, Feb. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8DuZ1eU1abw> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).



FIG. 17 – Samurai Matcha’s main room with his bamboo bike and sleeping bag unfolded.

so on all qualify his minimalist lifestyle as one oriented to sustainability, one which not coincidentally, like Ecofriend Lia’s, also presents itself as on the “extreme” end of the spectrum: few things are owned, the fridge is semi-empty, and the host often praises things for their lightness and thus mobility, such as the host’s sleeping bed and his foldable chair, claiming that “camping stuff” is particularly compatible with a minimalist lifestyle¹⁸³. While minimal in extent, the host’s wardrobe, beyond the kimono, is not monochromatic, uniformed or otherwise very curated – we see a glaringly red jacket, a more elegant dress with some shirts for special occasions, some shoes both formal and informal as well as one pair of sandals (which are his “favourite”, because they are “durable and flexible”). Needless to say, none of this makes the channel’s minimalism any less thoroughly aestheticized; it just qualifies a certain shade of aestheticization, which is here also entirely positive in its operation. Aestheticization still ties together and characterizes the host’s minimalism as a whole lifestyle beyond any one practice aimed at sustainability, and – contrary to the way such strands of aestheticization of the extreme are usually criticized within the minimalist discourse, as we have seen on Reddit – not at all a lifestyle that urges ascetic sacrifice and deprivation, rather a lifestyle again of personal well-being. The host notes how he uses the same mat underneath its sleep-

¹⁸³ The channel also later on released a vlog in which the host proudly moves everything he owns from a room to a different one inside the same building in less than half an hour, also carefully cleaning the place before leaving it (Samurai Matcha, “Japanese Minimalist: moving everything within 26 minutes.”, Nov. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yGt5OItvRU>; last accessed: 14/11/2023).

ing bed for working out, and he shows us his specific support for comfortably reading books or watching videos on his phone while taking a bath – it is not just a matter of sustainability. As the description of a second minimalist apartment tour – released by the same channel just three months after the first one – naively reads¹⁸⁴, the host’s lifestyle is still a “sophisticated minimal lifestyle”, and the host’s new room only confirms the aestheticization with much more explicit aesthetic remarks. After praising and recommending wooden floors and walls because they “make you feel so relaxed”, the host goes on to appreciate his “minimalistic room” for its view on the landscape and for its decorations: “When I get back to my room, I always feel so warm and calm, I almost don’t wanna leave my room. When I open the curtain, you can see the wonderful mountains and the sky outside. I decorated the room with an air freshener and a musk terrarium that I made. I think musk terrariums are one of the best things to heal your heart” (FIG. 18). We also get appreciative close-ups of things ranging from a branded pen to a hi-tech Japanese toilet, from an eco-friendly soft toothbrush to a bamboo cup (along with a whole set of wooden or bamboo kitchen items paradoxically replacing the ceramic ones for their higher durability). Electric cables have now been gathered together orderly and hidden away with a basket, while physical books have been decluttered and substituted with an e-reader. While the host mainly appeals to sustainability – again gesturing towards the “extreme” by, for example, not using shampoo anymore –, his minimalism surely is no mere ethical-practical means to that end. Sustainability is rather a qualifying feature of a lifestyle, it primarily counts as an aesthetically experienced and expressed whole, which is then implicitly but positively offered as an aspirational ideal to others who will perhaps be inspired by it – like many clearly are –, at any rate adding to minimalism’s aesthetic common sense.

If the previous examples handled the aesthetic in ways that kept it quite sharply distinct from minimalism as a lifestyle despite aestheticizing it, the total lack of negativity here does not lead to a very different result: the lifestyle is aestheticized without the aesthetic being explicitly addressed as a constitutive dimension of it (and therefore even less facing, of course, all the problems that come with it). In the case of this channel, after all, the host’s authenticity is not much of a concern, as it is already supported well enough by his lifestyle’s associations to sustainability, rural naturalness and Japanese

¹⁸⁴ Samurai Matcha, “Minimalist Apartment Tour 2. Japanese man's room in countryside of Japan.”, May. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHZmlnoBoXA> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).



FIG. 18 – The host, again wearing kimono, expressing his appreciation of the new minimalist apartment.

traditions, whose aestheticization is less legible as such than other kinds. As we have often mentioned, however, for the most part that also appears to be the case – at least or especially to their audiences’ eyes – for all minimalist channels, which are far from being obligated to always play the authenticity card or make the rhetorical move of setting up a minimalist lifestyle against its aesthetic(ization), precisely because minimalism’s aesthetic is dismissed wholesale instead of being struggled and grappled with in the overall discourse. Consequently, we do find – and we did catch in our corpus too – many minimalist vlogs and channels which focus much more on the aesthetic, dealing mostly though not exclusively with decluttering and its maintenance. One example is the minimalist apartment tour by Benita Larrson (161.000 subscribers), a channel whose most popular vlog – highlighted in the channel’s homepage – offers solutions to reduce “visual clutter” in one’s home, while others range from keeping one’s home organized to tips for a minimal wardrobe and even advice for where to store “ugly” things. The host’s apartment in the vlog¹⁸⁵ might have been manifested straight out of the minimalist discourse’s talk of myths and stereotypes about the lifestyle (FIG. 19-20): it is ubiquitously white and bright on wooden pavements and touches in the furniture, with a few plants and design pieces such as the rocking stool at the desk (coming with an affiliated link), and it is perfectly cohesive and uncluttered though not at all undecorated (as the

¹⁸⁵ Benita Larrson, “APARTMENT Tour 2022 MINIMALIST”, Mar. 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DMBdLRB0zvc> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).



FIG. 19 – Benita Larrson’s minimalist home workstation and living room, also featuring the sponsored stool designed to oscillate to keep the body moving while working at the computer.

white pop rabbit at the entrance shows); the patio outside is also just as clean and well-organized. No hint of negativity is present in the vlog’s aestheticization of the apartment, but we find here too a few dedicated vlogs from time to time in which the host responds to minimalism’s association to wealth¹⁸⁶ and whiteness¹⁸⁷, or affirms herself as (still) a minimalist despite being “a person who owns more things than can fit into a suitcase”¹⁸⁸. These vlogs show once again how the very same rhetorical move of distinguishing an indeterminate minimalist lifestyle, almost equivalent to “intentional living”, from its all too determinate aesthetic(ization) is also entirely available to the channels whose discourse otherwise implicitly collapses the two, the ones which positively contribute the most to the lamented myths and stereotypes. The host claims that minimalism is not only for the rich, because everyone surely can, like her – she has bought, renovated and sold a couple properties –, work hard and save money on the things that one does not care as much about in order to intentionally buying fewer but selected and higher quality items, including the durable and enduringly satisfying design pieces shown and sponsored on the channel; especially coupled with the minimalist aesthetic,

¹⁸⁶ Benita Larrson, “Minimalism | Minimalists are rich”, Nov. 2020, <https://youtu.be/-pF2jTuSrK8> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

¹⁸⁷ Benita Larrson, “MINIMALISM | Why are all minimalist homes white?”, Jan. 2021, https://youtu.be/Fpm1b2_G8Wg (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

¹⁸⁸ Benita Larrson, “Am I a minimalist? INTENTIONAL LIVING | MINIMALISM”, Oct. 2021, <https://youtu.be/zyALAKm6Yco> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).



FIG. 20 – The serene, aesthetically cohesive view from the entrance of Benita Larrson’s minimalist home.

spotlighting the things that one does own, the result will probably look more luxurious than a more “bohemian” home with a lot of things, and yet that does not mean it necessarily is luxurious from an economic point of view. Here the aesthetic most associated to minimalism is one contributing factor, but already the fact of being “intentional” and thus very selective about one’s things is presented as potentially giving off the impression of being wealthy, since it is taken for granted that one will select for higher quality things (and, we can guess, that they will be featured in at least an aesthetically cohesive environment). As for whiteness, the host acknowledges that it characterizes the minimalist aesthetic and that it is “not for everyone”, that “a lot of people find this look boring and bland, or hospital-like or even asylum-like”, but to her “it is just serene and calm”, and those who have the generic “minimalist mindset” will tend to want “calm surroundings”: “Minimalism for me is not just about having fewer belongings, it’s also about having fewer distractions and disturbances”, so the aesthetic is at least a legitimate dimension of it, though it does not exhaust it. In other words, even from the most aestheticized side of the discourse, “minimalism” is for the rich and the poor – or at least less rich –, for the aesthetically-oriented and for those who do not care about these things, as long as all share the same indeterminate “mindset.” The last vlog brings it all together by breaking down “minimalism” into seven heterogeneous types – “frugal”, “nomadic”, “green”, “extreme”, “aesthetic”, “practical”, “gradual” – as proposed by an-

other minimalist influencer not included in our corpus¹⁸⁹, so that the host can identify with the practical, aesthetic and gradual versions of minimalism while still affirming one minimalism:

So, am I a minimalist? Yes. There's no blueprint for what minimalism is. In my book, you're a minimalist if you choose what you have around you intentionally. Remove the clutter, the items, the tasks and the people that don't bring you joy or don't add anything to the life that you want to live; the rest you can keep, and call yourself a "minimalist" – even if it's more than fits into a suitcase.

As in the polarizations of minimalism on Reddit, the distinction among different kinds of minimalism ultimately serves to keep “minimalism” indeterminate and justify one’s own side as one part of its inclusive, non-discriminating whole (when not making one’s own more appealing by contrast to the excluded sides, especially the extreme and/or aesthetic): the inclusive, non-discriminating whole of subjectivist intentionality inflected in a generalized reduction of anything from clutter and items to tasks and even people. Everyone can subjectively pick and choose the contents of his or her own intentionality – or, though it amounts to almost the same thing, the contents offered by the different minimalist channels –, but he or she will still be a “minimalist” with no need to confront the numerous ways in which one “type” of minimalism actually conflicts with or contradicts another, and the crises that tying them all together into one “minimalism” will keep generating no matter how often all minimalists keep reaffirming its indeterminacy. Is the host’s final upgrade of her IKEA table and desk – the same ones that she had pointed to as signs of her not being rich – with sponsored design items as replacements “minimalist”, despite the table being but slightly worn at the base? Of course it is. Meanwhile, all these vlogs confirm minimalism’s aesthetic common sense, since they all look very much like the minimalist apartment tour at the start, with aestheticized shots of the whole or of small details accompanied by the voiceover speech, the host appearing only from time to time in her serene daily life while she waters plants or cosily – she adds “cozy” to her “aesthetic minimalism” – covers herself with a grey blanket sitting on the designed chair. Her style is still a lifestyle thanks to the freely-handed label of “minimalist”, which in turn is thereby filled with the emotive associations of the

¹⁸⁹ Ashlyne Eaton, “What’s your minimalist PERSONALITY TYPE? | 7 types of minimalist”, Feb. 2020, https://youtu.be/_9npY6VvwU4 (last accessed: 14/11/2023). Similarly to others such as A to Zen Life and Matt D’Avella, the channel is one more example of an aestheticized minimalist channel which nonetheless expands to many other self-help and self-improvement topics – not surprisingly, the host explicitly claims she identifies most with “practical” minimalism along with sympathies for the “frugal” and “green” ones, not with the “aesthetic” one.

modernist aesthetic that – though often denied through minimalism’s rhetorical move – reciprocally turns mere life into a lifestyle. Aestheticization lies in this exchange being left implicit.

2.4.1.5 – Minimalism hyper-aestheticized

It should be clear, by now, how the two opposed polarities we have started with – an “aesthetic minimalism” and a “lifestyle minimalism” – actually support each other in the discourse by preserving minimalism’s indeterminacy and, through the multifarious associations that it grants, allowing both the aesthetic to be more than aesthetic and the lifestyle to be more than ethical-practical in any one limited sense: style becomes lifestyle, as does life, without one being reducible to the other – yet also without one fully engaging the other in a critical manner, except for easy one-sided irony, denials and dismissals that leave the aesthetic common sense and its affective power as intact, unchallenged and thus rhetorically available for use as the ethical-practical one of subjectivist intentionality (that the aesthetic nonetheless also supports, at the very least with its sense of wholeness among different subjectively and intentionally selected items). From our critical point of view the problem is not, of course, the indeterminacy of a label in itself, but rather what it leads to – the uncritical concealment and obfuscation of all kinds of very important differences –, and the rhetorical impotency if not unwillingness of the discourse around it to really face and pursue and define its limits. Rejection of the aesthetic as aestheticized will not do, as will not the less negative forms – irony, silence, attenuation and so on – down to the pacifying distinction among “types” of minimalism, which simply amounts to avoiding altogether the question of their compatibility and even actual similarity. It will also not be enough, again for the discourse as a whole, to trace the same line between the entire discourse of the minimalist influencers online on the one hand – especially on visual platforms such as YouTube and social media such as Instagram – and the more genuine subjective minimalism of ordinary people outside of it on the other, whether in their own privacy or as voiced on Reddit: that may perhaps solve the problem and work fine for any one self-described “minimalist”, but it will still keep “minimalism” exactly where the minimalist influencers they criticize insist on keeping it, and most likely with the same aesthetic common sense still operating in the background to keep it all together (both positively as affirmed inspiration and negatively as denied aestheticization). The same goes for doing away with the label, or replacing

it with others such as “essentialism” or “intentionalism” in order to make it clear that it is but subjective intentionality as applied to one’s things: this misses and in fact reverses the point of minimalism as it seems to stand, which is to get at subjectivism through the practice – and meshed-up related discourses – of intentionally reducing one’s things, rather than the other way around, and through the very denial of criticality that is disavowing its own aesthetic; otherwise, minimalist influencers would have no particular reason to hold on to the label (and most often to the denounced aesthetic as well). All these forms of negative disengagement to the aesthetic actually come when the aesthetic has already done its main job of projecting and giving an affective substance to the “minimalist lifestyle” that is then set against it. And the positive inspiration carries on regardless, supporting and surrounding, infiltrating and overwhelming the negative.

A few more examples of minimalist home tours from our corpus will highlight the extent of the internal gap that the “minimalism” label and the discourse around it stitch up, and also underline again how positive aestheticization and negative anti-aesthetic rhetoric play their roles at both ends of the spectrum. On the uppermost end of the aesthetic spectrum we can place one of the minimalist apartment tours by Jenny Mustard’s popular channel (477.000 subscribers), a channel which mostly provides fashion and design advice – complemented at times with vlogs about healthy habits, morning routines and various other self-help topics, or veganism (the host also published a book of vegan recipes) –, while still employing the idea of minimalism as a lifestyle in the usual combined appeals to intentionality and authenticity as well as sustainability and frugality¹⁹⁰. In the tour¹⁹¹ of a minimalist apartment in London they are

¹⁹⁰ In one vlog rhetorically asking if she is “still a minimalist”, the host’s answer is ultimately of course affirmative, on two levels: firstly because she has been a “minimalist with a capital M” in the past out of necessity, moving and travelling with few things and little money with her partner, and secondly because in fact, even now that she has settled down “getting comfortable” and “getting a good salary”, she remains a “natural minimalist” anyway, as she has always been from compensating her “overactive” personality and from her Scandinavian upbringing with its aesthetic influence (Jenny Mustard, “am i still a minimalist?”, Jun. 2020, <https://youtu.be/V1svXRAIM0U>; last accessed: 14/11/2023). In the end, minimalism as more determined, as a negative and thus demanding reduction or minimization, is a passing “experiment” that leads one, as we have mentioned, to the “uplifting life lesson” of subjectivism, of authentic intentionality:

I don’t have the same urge to experiment and to push myself and to see how little I need to be happy, because you know what? I’ve already done that. Living outside of society’s norms for so many years has taught me one incredibly uplifting life lesson: happiness is all about priorities. For me, now, a life of a minimalist – that’s how I would define the concept: as making priorities. I do not chase the type of happiness society tells me to chase, I choose for myself what happiness is. We all have three things to spend: money, time and energy. Minimalism for me is choosing consciously what to spend it on.



FIG. 21 – Jenny Mustard’s minimalist living room, with the host’s clothes matching the room’s palette and making her appear aesthetically at one with – and at ease within – her domestic space.

actually about to move from – they are looking for a place to settle on and buy instead of renting it –, the host and her partner weigh in on both its positive and negative aspects, thereby making aesthetic judgements despite not insisting explicitly, of course, on the normativity of these judgments or of the aesthetic in general. The apartment, again

The “less” resources of all kinds – money, time and energy, all equally assumed to be scarce – one wastes on what is not authentically wanted in one’s life as a whole, the “more” there will be for those that will make one happy (whatever they are, including of course fashion and design): just like in less aestheticized vlogs or on Reddit, “minimalism” ends up extending by generalization the reduction of things and purchases in decluttering and anti-consumption to all areas of life, turning them into exercises in – and framing devices for – authenticity and intentionality. Regardless of how one enters the process and what comes out of it, one will then be “still minimalist”, and “minimalism” will still indicate a lifestyle. This is confirmed two years later in a vlog with a list of “signs” that one is a “naturally born minimalist” like the host (Jenny Mustard, “11 SIGNS YOU’RE A MINIMALIST!”, Sep. 2022, <https://youtu.be/-8Sf6Z0EEpNE>; last accessed: 14/11/2023). Here we find anti-consumerist as well as aesthetic aspects: “Black Friday is the last day you’ll choose to do shopping, [...] instead you choose to do your hunting online, carefully considered and far away from shopping-happy crowds”, and “shopping is a chore only done by extreme necessity”; “in your living room there’s a slight but distinct echo [...] if it bothers you, you still prefer it to the alternative: adding more stuff”, and “fresh starts” and “clean slates” such as when moving are more “exciting than daunting”, because of “the number and organized manner of your worldly possessions”; and again, ebooks are preferred to books, there is no “overfilled wardrobe”, and even having a “gram-worthy home” is included. However, we also get generalized rejections of commitments, of “anything with a later obligation, deadline, demand at a future time” which “stresses you out” – “contracts”, “subscriptions”, “taking home library books”, “borrowing clothes from friends” –, even up to “no dogs” and “no kids”, and overall “simple schedules.” The concluding invitation to “choose”, instead of “letting our culture, or parents, or friends, or social media trends dictate how we live, or how our lives are supposed to look like”, is then applied to “minimalism” too, but this echoes the conclusion of the other vlog and only serves to keep minimalism from being too much determined by this very list of signs.

¹⁹¹ Jenny Mustard, “Minimalist London Apartment Tour”, Jul. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=utaQ8JK-weI> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

modernist and white on wooden pavements and furniture but in the more elegant and high-end expression of the modernist style (FIG. 21-22), is therefore openly praised for its wide open spaces – allowing for, and further emphasized by, furniture detached from the walls –, the uniform white and wood going all over the apartment, the abundant natural light and so on, and it is naturally exhibited in perfect order and cleanness, with few well-placed and good-looking items (flowers, books, candles and also designed items such the modernist teacup at the desk, which would be sponsored in later vlogs). On the other hand, the kitchen is criticized for its lack of space and of openings, the transparency of the closet is deemed ugly because it exposes its contents, the doors are too small for the space and make no contrast to the walls because they are painted the same exact white, while the pre-existing fixed lights are “tiny” and “not modern at all”, and so on. The urban noises from the nearby bars, shops and frequent construction works is compensated by the trees in front of the windows, which grant privacy to the apartment. Being openly passionate about fashion and interior design – the host’s partner had just launched a second channel all about tours of “gorgeous” modern homes –, the two do not have any particular need to problematize, justify or attenuate aesthetic judgments and aestheticization in general, nor do they link these in any overt way to minimalism as a lifestyle. There is a note accompanied by some pictures on the couple’s “cosy” habit of having “pre-dinner drink moments” in front of the fireplace – turned into a décor frame for fresh flowers and candles –, and we can see the host quietly working at her desk with such perfectly matching light grey and white clothes that she really seems to be blending with her surroundings in one single whole, but these are but hints and suggestions, no less implicit than those in the minimalist channels more focused on the “lifestyle.” Overall, then, we have indeed reached the opposite end of the spectrum: while in O’Brien’s minimalist home tour we had a moral speech kept separated from the aestheticization which nonetheless supported it, in Mustard’s case we find a designer’s speech which only alludes at the lifestyle aspect nonetheless present in the aestheticization of one’s domestic space (and again also supporting it). Between them, we find all other shades of aestheticization, from D’Avella’s irony to Larrson’s aesthetically-oriented yet still much more emotionally-articulated emphasis on decluttering and design. It is a matter of qualitative “shade”, more than just a strictly quantitative “degree”, because in fact these vlogs and their channels cannot be mapped that easily onto a singular line of increasing aestheticization, since the latter is one with the rhetorical stance it is taken



FIG. 22 – Jenny Mustard’s bright and all-white minimalist bedroom.

towards it: Mustard’s minimalist home tour certainly is the most glamour in our corpus, for example, but on the other hand it is upfront – at least in the vlog itself – about its representing the host’s aesthetic interest in design, while O’Brien’s tours, especially the second one, are perhaps less but still very much aestheticized while leaving unspoken and unclear – precisely in its being all-to-clear, commonsensical – the relation of the aesthetic to his anti-materialist and anti-consumerist moral speech bridging minimalism towards self-improvement. To the extent that the challenging critical links between style and life, the aesthetic and the ethical-practical, are not clearly addressed, discussed and sorted out – as the minimalist discourse could be said to be especially well-placed to do (or at least try to) – but rather negated or neglected yet nonetheless exploited, these vlogs probably do not differ that much in degree of aestheticization. At any rate, they all contribute to it by implicitly confirming it and adding to its internally complex, contradictory commonsensical reservoir of inspiring suggestions for all audiences’ aspirations.

As mentioned earlier, besides still relying on the ideal of a minimalist lifestyle boiling down to a non-aesthetic “intentional living”, the negativity of minimalism towards the aesthetic also plays its role within the openly aesthetic discourse of Jenny Mustard and other minimalist fashion and design influencers, as it is in fact one core aspect of minimalism’s modernist aesthetic common sense in all its varieties: by constraining the qualitative excesses of the aesthetic into immediately legible wholes made

out of simple geometric shapes and lines, neutral muted palettes with monochromatic colour fields and few if any coordinated decorations, and also by emphasizing those colours which are commonly and culturally associated to an absence – the absence of inscriptions in white, the absence of light in black –, modernist styles often come with the ambiguous anti-aesthetics of design itself (Parsons 2016), because they are understood and presented either as merely functional instead of ornamental, or at any rate as timeless and universal in their aesthetic fulfilment – the way perhaps mathematics and its diagrams might indeed be taken to be. This affords an easy opposition between such styles and the passing “trends” of fashion, one that however paradoxically accords all too well with fashion’s own contradictory nature, already highlighted by Simmel (Simmel 2015): contrary to what the anti-trend minimalist discourse we have examined assumes, fashion by no means could be reduced to a one-sided impulse towards conformation to others at the expense of one’s own authentic individuality, because it also encompasses the opposite impulse towards individuation, and often manifests both at the same time – one conforming to the few exhibiting some novelty is thereby individuated against the many who are yet to pick it up, or at least against the others in his or her local circle of social contacts who have not picked it up, just like, more generally, one might differentiate from others by belonging to a certain group but also have to differentiate himself or herself from the other members of that group. In other words, even when it is reduced to a mere play of appearances, the aesthetic has the same contradictory, dialectical nature that it has in our account rather based on aesthetic experience understood much more broadly. Because of this, minimalism’s modernist aestheticization also promises an end to fashion, an authenticity that despite being a negation of the inauthenticity of appearances – and thus dependent on them – also offers itself positively as perennial or enduring in its own appearances (which it cannot really avoid). As noted before, if our study of minimalism had been a primarily aesthetic instead of rhetorical study, this would have been its main knot to grapple with and disentangle in all the different ways and degrees it can be. For our purposes, however, it is enough to stress that the minimalist discourse’s negation of the aesthetic in favour of a “minimalist lifestyle” actually fits quite well with, and is positively supported by, the modernist aesthetic common sense which it nevertheless holds on to (and is at any rate stuck with); the “less is more” in lifestyle which is said to be “timeless” by, for example, appealing to long-standing spiritual traditions is also declared to be “timeless” within its original strictly –

or rather reductively – aesthetic confines, so that either way minimalism’s promise of an enduring if not everlasting authenticity can always be advanced and sustained by the discourse. Aestheticization supports minimalism in both a negative and a positive way, at both its rhetorical poles of an aesthetic (life)style and an ethical-practical life(style).

We will see some examples in the next section, but for now we can point to Jenny Mustard’s contradictory advice, through many of her vlogs, about both trends and “anti-trends”, all sharing the same high-end mode and degree of aestheticization. In one vlog¹⁹² continuing her “anti-trend” series with specific regard to interiors, the host wears a monochromatic black t-shirt and offers her suggestions for “timeless investments that never go out of style” to those people who “don’t want to waste money, time, and the planet’s resources” through their new purchases: “We’ve all been there, right? Falling in love with something in the shop only to fall completely out of love with it after, like, six months.” The vlog focuses on five specific items – the host’s “all-time best interior design purchases” – mentioned along with their brands (not explicitly sponsored or affiliated), such as for example the grey backless daybed and glass tea set we have seen in the minimalist home tour, and modernist design is praised through them: the daybed gives off “Scandi vibes” and is a “classic” whose bluish tint of grey looks “cool, inviting and restful”, while the absence of a back makes it possible to place it in the middle of the room – as the host did – without being “ugly” by obstructing the view like the ordinary sofas; the tea set is “such a happy mix of, like, Bauhaus simple practicality with that sixties’ modernist quirk – you know, the futuristic shapes and just having a pure formal design which came with the fifties and even more with the sixties”; and the same goes for the other items, such as the expensive – but investment-worthy, as a piece that one will keep “forever and ever” – handmade wooden chess set, a modernist “Bauhaus super minimalist chunky set with matching board” whose wooden tone warms up and softens the black-and-white contrast usually also associated to minimalism. As these examples show, a modernist aesthetic does not fully or necessarily boil down to strict uniformity, because in fact it can accommodate a variety of shades, it can include the

¹⁹² Jenny Mustard, “ANTI TRENDS - Timeless Interior Design Trends Worth Investing In This Summer”, Aug. 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cII8jW76K0U> (last accessed: 14/11/2023). Needless to say, the title already exhibits the contradiction: the “anti-trends” are still “trends”, and they are still – for unspoken reasons – worth investing “this summer” (the unspoken reason most likely being that “this summer” is another way of saying “right now”, implying in addition, by association with fashion’s seasonality, that some other people – though not all nor too many – might be doing the same).

unique qualities of designed items, and it can also feed off differences, as in the host's concluding example of a luxury set of six glasses all different from one another, which leads to the vlog's final general point:

The thing I love most about this design is that the glasses actually look better when mismatched. They're supposed to be different and play off each other's silhouettes, creating this imperfect quirky happy set of bubbly shabby shapes – what can I say? These make me happy. I don't know why this is, but ingenious design with that unique innovative aesthetic – I get so much happiness from it. And, are you noticing a pattern here? The sixties, Bauhaus, modernism, quirky, futuristic – but still, somehow timeless shapes. It will never go out of style. I am 99% sure that I will be just as much in love with these items twenty years down line as I am right now, and I feel like this is the most important aspect of investing on collecting beautiful homeware: investing in few items that will age well.

Modernist design has a history and is “innovative” in its “futuristic” character, but it is so timelessly, and to this timelessness is here tied the long-lasting “happiness” of those surrounding themselves with such items through the upgrade-susceptible investment version of the “less is more” principle: one buys less but gets more value in the long run through the aesthetic as well as material durability of the items. Internal differences can be subsumed under and contribute to that value, though overall both the channel's particularly glamorous aestheticization and its general aesthetic cohesiveness and cleanliness are not at all put into question: the host's aesthetic happiness still has an expression that encompasses and exceeds any singular item, and it is a high-end modernist expression. This expression is also in place when the host offers her advice on current trends instead of “anti-trends”, as she had done in another vlog¹⁹³ just a few months earlier, this time directly about whole aesthetic styles: trends like organic shapes with an “eighties pastel” palette or a desert, “seventies rustic” look – with more wood or other natural materials but again organic, visibly imperfect and “wabi-sabi” shapes – are here appreciatively suggested by the host as such on top of the minimalist “base of warm neutral colours” with mix-and-match elements. While there are again the usual gestures towards increasing sustainability in the materials on the part of producers and more long-term, second-hand purchases on the part of consumers, the host's excitement for trends here goes even so far as including “gigantic glass lamps”, an “opinion divider” which some – like the host – will “absolutely love” and others will instead hate, but which at any rate is praised – not criticized – as “opulent” and “over-the-top”, even wholly apart from its functionality of lighting rooms:

¹⁹³ Jenny Mustard, “the 7 INTERIOR TRENDS you need to know right now – 2022”, Apr. 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4VKTozTY4Ek> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

The glass lamps are everywhere, but the hottest thing right now is the ceiling lamp – the bigger the better. We see ceiling lamps shaped like a cluster of bubbles, coming down like ice shards, or the modernist eighties version of a good old chandelier. The expensive Murano glass from Italy are especially making a comeback. Personally, I'm in love, and it might shock you to hear this, since I have always had such a strong dislike for ceiling lights, but here's how I see it: the glass lamp is not made for lighting a room; it's made to be a centerpiece – it doesn't even need to have a bulb, its job is to glistening sunlight like a piece of art. My view: either go big or don't bother; it should be a monster, opulent and over-the-top.

Such ceiling glass lamps are “bloody expensive” even when bought second-hand, as the host admits right after advising to try and “go vintage” with them, “but what can you do?” she rhetorically asks: they too are investments, just like the anti-trends. Thus we do circle back to where we started from, that is, Matt D'Avella making fun of chandeliers ironically deemed “minimalist” though luxurious. Of course, the host here does not claim that the ceiling glass lamps are minimalist, but she does take them to be compatible with “minimalism”, both in the very indeterminate sense that other minimalists oppose to the aesthetic – as pretty much synonymous with some degree of anti-consumerism by way of a more conscious and perhaps also ethical, sustainable consumption – and in the strictly aesthetic sense, since a modernist aesthetic can both frame and incorporate other aesthetics.

This can be best seen from yet another vlog released just a couple weeks earlier¹⁹⁴, which distinguishes different kinds of “minimalist aesthetic” as to interior design, but also sometimes clearly attaches them to the different lifestyles of people undertaking them. The “Scandi” or “Nordic” minimalism comes first because of its inclusiveness: it is predominantly white, spacious and simple, but it can go with all different shades of wood from light to dark, and such wooden character also pairs well with vintage, antique and hand-me-down items either freely acquired or cheaply purchased second-hand. This is followed by the “decluttering addict” minimalist aesthetic, where again the more stripped-down, depersonalized, functionalist face of modernism is identified with the lifestyle in its more extreme, and therefore exclusive, manifestation:

I guess when most of us think of “minimalism”, we think of the declutter addict – the people knowing the exact amount of socks in the drawer, discarding everything that doesn't serve a very specific purpose. In the home of the declutter addict, each item has to work to earn their stay. This is an amazing way to live for many people and can be quite anxiety reducing, but I do have to say that minimalism having the reputation for being just this particular minimalist puts a lot of people off from trying the lifestyle. I have myself lived in a highly decluttered way, back when Dave and I did the whole “digital nomad” thing and moved from place to place every month, just carrying our possessions in a couple of suitcases. I think it was a great experience, a quite fun adventure,

¹⁹⁴ Jenny Mustard, “TOP 4 MINIMALIST INTERIOR STYLES – (to try at home!)”, Apr. 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4VKT0zTY4Ek> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

but not a way I would like to live forever. If you feel like your possessions are stressing you out though, adopting a bit of the decluttering addiction is not so bad a place to start.

The same commonsensical aestheticized image of the minimalist lifestyle as extreme is here used to project a more indeterminate minimalism which, while being by itself indeterminate – the host does not tell us what exactly “trying the lifestyle” would entail, and it does not seem to amount to just do some less extreme decluttering –, clearly serves here the inclusion of the channel’s aesthetic interest in interior design and fashion as “minimalist” too. The third minimalist aesthetic, thereby placed on equal footing with the lifestyle as centred on decluttering, evidently fits the host’s own, because it is the “iconic design collector”, wherein the “light, bright airy space” of “a simple backdrop of white walls and concrete or wood floors” works as the frame for “a collection of the most gorgeous pieces of furniture and décor imaginable, every single piece show[ing] care and love – kind of like a gallery.” If the minimalist lifestyle is aestheticized in the second aesthetic, here the host’s overall minimalist aesthetic – as compatible with other ones, even with trends, as an art gallery is – is “lifestylized” in the character of the collector, an exemplar of an intentional buyer first and foremost rather than a declutter addict:

The collector would never just buy a sofa because you need a sofa; the collector would rather sit on the floor for months by rummaging through vintage shops for that perfect piece. Luckily, the minimalist home is not overfilled with things because, obviously, the more iconic a piece of furniture the more expensive. This type of home is all about saving up for those showstoppers, but the good thing is that the showstopper pieces can easily be paired with simple, clean timeless pieces from more inexpensive shops or second-hand places. To create this type of home we need patience and passion for great design. I see this type of home more as an on-going passion project rather than a slapdash “let’s decorate the whole thing in a day” kind of thing. For the budget version, stick to décor: iconic design furniture is bloody expensive, but décor pieces like glassware, lamps, kitchenware and mirrors are easier to find at more reasonable prices; and believe it or not, going to those large, in-the-middle-of-nowhere flea markets and sales, you can really make a bargain on this stuff.

Is this “passion project” a well-demarcated interest – an aesthetic minimalism neatly distinguishable from a lifestyle minimalism – or is it, like all lifestyles, an ideal coming with the promise of qualitatively affecting one’s life as a whole? Our entire point is, once more, that the distinction is not at all as clear as it might seem at first sight, that the negativity towards the aesthetic in the minimalist discourse leaves it obscure and is easily appropriated within both (supposed) camps, and that their varying shades of aestheticization – each authentic at least to its audience – all contribute positively as well as negatively to the vague sense of there being indeed a minimalist lifestyle (one in which everyone – rich and poor – can partake). Designs do make the host “happy”, they do

most likely promise – through the beautiful scenery and artful shots of these vlogs – that same happiness to the channel’s audience, and the hunt for them is after all as “intentional” a form of consumption as any other in the limited terms of the minimalist discourse itself. The fourth and last minimalist aesthetic in the vlog, the “traditional” – but obviously modernized and modernist in the pictures shown – “Japanese homebody style”, is praised by the host as having “that beautiful cosiness about [it], that most of us feel relaxed and at home in – like we just want to listen to instrumental music and drink tea all day long.” Coupled with the closer ties between aesthetic and lifestyle in the “de-clutter addict” and partly also in the “iconic design collector”, is there not the promise of a certain quality or way of living in such supposedly aesthetic remarks? Would “minimalism” work in just the same way without that promise constantly in the background, even when negated? Or in other words, is “minimalism” really just an unfortunate case of homonymy among entirely distinct phenomena, the lifestyle itself being actually just a perfect synonym for some kind of non-aesthetic “intentional living” and/or “simple living”? The explicit answer of many minimalists to the last question is often affirmative, as we have seen, yet the discourse is incapable and unwilling to do away with either the aestheticization or the label, and in doing so at least the possibility arises of a “minimalism” actually incorporating the aesthetic and the ethical-practical – if not the political – in all their conflicts and contradictions; this possibility is tacitly exploited by the minimalist discourse at large and especially that of influencers, somehow both positively and negatively holding it together despite all differences, but it is nonetheless disavowed across the board, even by those voices who do have a positive “passion” for the aesthetic. The indeterminate promise of “minimalism” thus keeps operating, in the service of each minimalist channel large and small, mostly outside of critical scrutiny and discussion.

2.4.1.6 – Minimalism hypo-aestheticized

From the perspective of that “minimalism” which is still but a possibility, the advantage of the more aesthetic-positive minimalist channels – and discourses more generally – is that they do show, at least to some extent but positively and concretely, the variability and flexibility of a minimal aesthetic, even though, as it seems to be Jenny Mustard’s case, this may on the whole function more as a framing device for the channel’s own higher-end aesthetic: the declutter addict’s aesthetic is problematized as extreme, the

traditional Japanese aesthetic is presented as an all-or-nothing matter and thus as less accessible than all the others, so what remains besides the design collector's is only the more basic Scandi – and it too is somewhat tilted towards the design collector's, though more on the vintage and antique side. The contribution of the aesthetic to one's lifestyle, and vice versa, is nonetheless left unaddressed as anywhere else, no matter if positively charged at least implicitly. In addition, the downside remains of an aestheticization uniformly perfectionist and extraordinary in kind, here foregrounded but more or less present in different ways and degrees in all the other minimalist home tours we have seen. In fact, just like from the more ethical-practical side “minimalism” can be made so indeterminate as to almost coincide with “intentional living”, so from the primarily aesthetic side it can turn out almost synonymous with aesthetic care itself, with basic design principles that can accommodate all other styles: in a vlog about “the new trend curated maximalism”¹⁹⁵, a label we have also encountered on Reddit, “refined maximalists” – contrary to “cottagecore” as well as “cluttercore” and similarly excessive styles – are said to be “minimalism's cousins”, “minimalists with a love for luxury, design classics, modernism, big showstoppers and, above all, a carefully considered curated collection of items”, because they share an aesthetic cohesiveness and coordination of spaces and colours, the selection of fewer well-balanced pieces – though large in one case and smaller in the other –, and they even overlap when it comes to “warm minimalism”, with its much less austere look; moreover, some lifestyle compatibility is also pointed at through the usual reference to a more sustainable and accessible approach to such design purchases through second-hand vintage and antique pieces (which the maximalist is supposed to love). The lifestyle's intentionality has its aesthetic equivalent in such curatorship: the “curated maximalist” is in fact indistinguishable from the “design collector” who is explicitly deemed “minimalist” in the other vlog. Once again, other minimalists would probably dismiss with little thought this claim as the aestheticization of true minimalism, but – apart from the fact that they too rely directly and indirectly on such aestheticization – the indeterminate minimalism they continually return to cannot, as it is, actually do much to cut off this aesthetic curatorship from the otherwise non-aesthetic lifestyle: it is quite intentional, it is subjectively valued – and authentic enough – as bringing about one's own happiness, it does reduce excesses to get a surplus, here

¹⁹⁵ Jenny Mustard, “what is the new trend CURATED MAXIMALISM ?”, Oct. 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbYD_oHqJjg (last accessed: 14/11/2023).



FIG. 23 – Ana Goldberg’s more luminous and modernist half of the living room, where she filmed many of her earlier vlogs in the channel.

too also justified in anti-consumerism’s economic and moral terms – higher quality items are investments which will not only be appreciated more but also last longer both materially and aesthetically –, and it aligns fine with the clearly aesthetic practices of decluttering or capsule wardrobes. Given all this, one may ask “lifestyle minimalists” why they are not merely “frugalists” or some other version of anti-consumerism, just as much as one could ask “aesthetic minimalists” if they are not after all “maximalists” in their love of things and even luxury items; both are stuck, and happily so in the case of most minimalist influencers, in the indeterminate, commonsensical middle ground which, like the “less is more” principle, is at once aesthetic and ethical-practical in nature. A proper response on the part of lifestyle minimalists – that is everyone, since Jenny Mustard too also symmetrically relies on the idea of a minimalist lifestyle beyond the aesthetic – would have to critically engage the extraordinary perfectionism of minimalism’s aesthetic common sense not by equating it wholesale with the aesthetic as such and offhandedly rejecting both, but rather in its own aesthetic terms, actively generating and advancing minimalist aesthetic alternatives (as well as the rhetorical language needed to clearly articulate, reflect upon and discuss them). In other words, the often evoked “spectrum” of minimalism would have to be made aesthetically concrete, not something abstract merely called upon to immediately exorcise, as we have seen,

the undying haunting spectre of the aesthetic¹⁹⁶. Besides all the untapped resources of reductive strands in modern and contemporary art, the complex and even contradictory reservoir of minimalism's aesthetic common sense no doubt contains many more possibilities than it is credited with when it is discredited.

One crucial knot to be disentangled in undertaking such endeavour would be that of the relation of the aesthetic to perfection, and more generally to the extraordinary; this much is clearly true, as will be shown again by our last example of minimalist home tours, as diametrically opposed as it gets to Jenny Mustard's. However, it is one thing to appeal to imperfection as something that should be accepted or tolerated, or wield it as simply the indeterminate face of the indeterminate minimalist lifestyle, in which cases it is respectively retained as anti-aesthetic or maintained as non-aesthetic in character; it is another thing to express and explore it as something to be itself appreciated aesthetically (in a much broader and more primary way than Jenny Mustard's appreciation for mismatched glasses, of course)¹⁹⁷. The minimalist channel which offers us this last home tour is, not surprisingly, Ana Goldberg's channel, whose vlog¹⁹⁸ differs from the others right from the very beginning: as anticipated already in the vlog's title, she makes explicit how much she pays (224\$/month) to rent her small apartment (48.8 m²), and she also points out that all furniture in the apartment but some home accessories is actually

¹⁹⁶ This, of course, would also entail even more difficult critical work in the opposite direction, concretely engaging the matter of the actual conditions for the accessibility and sustainability of the aesthetic – also and crucially on digital social media –, as well as its practical maintenance and all sorts of ethical and political issues that may thereby arise.

¹⁹⁷ For example, in *Abundantly Minimal's* minimalist home tour – which we have excluded to avoid making this section even longer than it is – the host walks us through her modernist but not as aesthetically cohesive home, “not the most aesthetic or heavily decorated”, to stress that minimalism is a gradual process besides being first and foremost a matter of intentionality and frugality, so that one will keep an item even when its style is not liked – such as the stark red cinema-like armchairs she got as a gift – until it can be affordably and sustainably replaced, (*Abundantly Minimal*, “Our Minimalist Home Tour”, May. 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aj0_5-SEVFg; last accessed: 14/11/2023). By only taking this rhetorical route, however, she alleviates aesthetic perfectionism without making it any less attractive and aspirational per se. In fact, while her home does look more imperfect than most others we have seen so far – we find decorations such as posters, blue walls in the bedroom, the already mentioned red armchairs and so on –, and while the vlog itself has a more amateurish camera work and much less editing, the home is still not only generally clean and clear but for few places, but also not actually appreciated for its imperfections: when the host got a chance to do things over, such as in her second bathroom, she has made it all-white and now describes it as “one of [her] favourite rooms, just because it's so calming.” Needless to say, the fact that a minimalist home tour is even made also already contrasts with the claim that the aesthetic is something it can be detached from.

¹⁹⁸ Ana Goldberg, “Minimalist apartment tour in Siberia | What I rent for \$224/month”, Dec. 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lojW_fi0N6g (last accessed: 14/11/2023).



FIG. 24 – Ana Goldberg’s minimalist bedroom, whose dark and patterned wallpaper, golden bed frame or furniture and unmade – yet not white – bed all obviously contrast very much with the other minimalist home tours.

her landlady’s property. This preamble alone already displays the underlying contradiction, because – as in her channel’s vlogs more generally – it is clear that “minimalism” is understood mainly as an anti-consumerist as well as anti-materialist frugal lifestyle, yet a minimalist home tour is produced despite the fact that the host did not choose or even really change anything in her apartment. In fact, apart from the living room area where she often films her vlogs and where the preamble is recorded (FIG. 23), with a grey couch and bright though not white walls, the apartment is in no way a modernist apartment like the others, whatever the shade of aestheticization, and it is not even particularly decluttered nor in order: in the bedroom, for example, we find an unmade bed with a golden frame – and a couple of pictures and ornaments on it – over a “fancy” purple floral wallpaper (FIG. 24), the matching golden nightstand having a journal, an ebook reader, candles, a box and a bag of jewellery and other items still; the kitchen has all the appliances and many cooking tools and materials in plain sight (FIG. 25), some of which are also shown and indicated one by one in close-ups, and the same goes for the wardrobes – where she says she explicitly does not follow “Marie Kondo’s principles” – and the drawers and bookshelves filled with books, artworks and art supplies; meanwhile, the opposite end of the living room has New York wallpaper accompanied by a warmly and earthily coloured pouf (FIG. 26). The host’s wardrobe is reduced but by no means aesthetically revised, not to say neutral or monochromatic in its colour pal



FIG. 25 – Ana Goldberg’s minimalist kitchen as she affirms that what she has there is the “right quantity” for her.

ette, while the hangers are all different and the host explicitly states she does not mind. Things are nowhere stored in an orderly, organized way. Even before all this, the apartment tour itself actually starts not with her opening the door to the viewer as an incoming guest, but with her entering it and thus showing from outside the tall, thin, isolated old building with its “hideous” entrance, the worn and cracked walls’ “nasty inscriptions” and the stairs which the host avoids even at the cost of suffering claustrophobia in the elevator, since she would risk having “unwanted encounters with drunk individuals and their cigarettes’ smoke.” Moreover, the vlog is very lightly edited with simple fading transitions and the usual cheerful background music, moving back and forth from fixed views and more trembling amateur shots with handheld camera; as the host points out apologizing at the entrance, the vlog’s lighting is also poor, dark and changeable because of the snowy weather. All things considered, then, we could be no farther from minimalism’s lamented aestheticization. The host’s minimalism is clearly about subjectively having “the right amount of everything” for oneself, as she says after pointing out that perhaps the kitchen is too small and crowded at times when cooking more demanding meals, and in fact the same attitude is affirmed in front of other limitations: for example, the round wooden kitchen table is the only table in the apartment and thus also serves as her “office”, but again she is “not against it at all”; only in the case of the small and “kind of claustrophobic” toilet room she does not meet the limitation with



FIG. 26 – The other side of Ana Goldberg’s minimalist living room, empty but presenting yet another style.



FIG. 27 – One of many close-ups of the host’s things, artworks and art tools or supplies: the “home tour” genre of vlogs affords an aesthetic frame and chance to appreciatively go over and display everyday items and creative works.

such explicit acceptance. The “right quantity” of things is not made particularly visible or intelligible in any way per se, apart from details such as the hanging clothes not filling up the closet, but it is assumed and subsumed under the host’s very attitude towards limitations, including of course economic ones. Contentedly owning fewer things is what makes a “minimalist” such, as is made evident by the host’s comments – she says

she is “pretty minimalist” in having just three towels plus extras for guests, for example –, even if one has more stuff around which one cannot discard nor change and replace, such as the other half of the closet at the entrance – whose contents are not shown by the host – where she stores the landlady’s things that she does not need.

Have we thus finally found true minimalism beyond the aesthetic? Many commenters to the vlog do think so, and express their relief along with their appreciation of the host’s authenticity. The host’s vlog is a “realistic portrayal of minimalism” which is “refreshing to see”, her apartment is a “real genuine home” instead of an “Instagram show off”, or one of those “polished, super aesthetic, monochrome, Ikea-like, very rich folks videos” of such apartments – “fashion-design shows” which make one “feel like an underachiever, or that [one’s] place doesn’t look like it should.” The contrast to an aestheticized minimalism is there even though in this case the host never mentions nor alludes to it at all, not even ironically; that the vlog is a “minimalist home tour” is enough for the contrast to be triggered. Once again, then, it is clear that the non-aesthetic lifestyle depends on what it negates, the aestheticized common sense to which it is bound, even if here the contrast is shown, not told or explicitly stressed. Insofar as it is shown, of course, it already becomes itself a proper aesthetic expression of that contrast, confirming the rhetorical distancing from aestheticization that we can see in other vlogs by the same channel – such as the vlog on the end of minimalism –, and building up the host’s authenticity instead. However, what this vlog shows beyond the rhetorical move on which we have centred our study is that far from abolishing the aesthetic, the negativity can actually clear up space for a different yet positive aesthetic expression of minimalism, just as it allows for all the shades of aestheticization of other minimalist channels to appear positively authentic despite exhibiting very often this or that form of precisely the same stereotypical aesthetic they rhetorically disavow or dismiss. This minimalist home tour is still a minimalist home tour, showing a home which is actually presented by the host’s very first words as “the nicest apartment” that she has ever lived in. The host’s authenticity, though negatively generated by implicit contrast, is positively expressed by the apartment’s very limitations and imperfections, which do aesthetically keep together her “minimalist lifestyle” under qualities such as – to quote random commenters again – “warm and fuzzy”, “homey and cozy looking”, “lovely”, “genuine”, “welcoming” and so on. But as these adjectives or their correlatives for the

host herself – who feels like an “old friend” or a good “neighbour”, “genuine” and “authentic” and with a “peaceful, soothing, and kind demeanour” – already show, here it is not just a matter of authenticity, even positively expressed. Throughout the tour, the host appreciatively indicates, mentions, touches and/or briefly displays her ordinary, everyday things in a caring way that already aestheticizes them, and it is also this gesture that makes viewers resonate with her, as not only “authentic” but also “just a regular person” like the viewers themselves, still qualitatively identifying with her familiar things beyond their quantity. The aestheticizing frame of this genre of vlogs about minimalist home tours – or also wardrobes, which the channel also has vlogs about – is also positively relied upon to again afford aesthetic attention to everyday life, only in a different mode – one which the contrast to the others both fosters and renders unrecognizable as such, as aesthetic. Thus we find, for example, explicit appreciation for the “comfy” and “familiar” coloured little carpets which the host disseminates around the apartment, for the small bottles of perfume along with soap bars which she keeps among her clothes – as her mother taught her – to make them smell nice as well, or for the plant she has saved and even named as “Augustus”, for the linen hand towel and so on. The host also shows some of her personal DIY or artistic projects, such as her tablecloths or the dried out herbs hung on the walls, her printed bags and some collages (FIG. 27), along with a few of her cousin’s paintings and others still. In fact, in her concluding remarks, the host says that if she could freely change anything in this apartment, it would have still more artworks and pictures on the walls, as well as thick purple curtains which give her a “sense of protection.” Her art supplies and tools such as a sewing machine and some stamps are also shown, and this too is appreciated by some commenters who thank her for “showing that even a minimalist has a stash of craft projects in potential and in progress”, unlike those minimalists who “seem to have decluttered their soul along with their material items.” The host’s minimalism, it turns out, is not really about the right quantity as much as – as the channel’s banner puts it – “creativity” and also “mindfulness”, between which it is in fact placed, and to which it is evidently taken somehow to contribute. As we have seen, its contribution is not reducible to frugality per se, for example to saving money for art tools and supplies or downshifting to a part-time job so that one can dedicate to such creative projects, because “minimalism” is still employed in the channel as indicating an overall lifestyle and worldview, though in the usual indeterminate manner. The channel’s imperfect aesthetic, along with the mix of

other topics – from management of anxiety and “overfeeling” to slow living and slow travel, from “developing intuition” to “decluttering your past” –, here too locally determines the lifestyle without it being fully recognized and addressed as such. Does this not amount to another, final shade of aestheticization, albeit surely a different, divergent and also minor one? And does it not share first and foremost with the others an aesthetic attention to the everyday aimed at being more fully “at home” within it, as adjectives we have found all across the minimalist home tours, such as the popular “cosy”, seem to indicate?

As our interest lies in the minimalist discourse as a whole, where vlogs like Ana Goldberg’s remain marginal exceptions in their aesthetic dimension, we can only confirm that “minimalism” is plural and contested even in its positive aestheticization of everyday life, not merely rhetorically as to the degree to which the lifestyle should even have to do with the aesthetic at all. As things stand, it is evident that minimalism’s aesthetic common sense supports both negatively and positively every minimalist channel – including Ana Goldberg’s – to such an extent that it is quite hard to imagine that “minimalism” would be just the same phenomenon if most of its visual discourse rather looked like this host’s apartment. All shades of aestheticization are actually interwoven in their offering an indirect invitation to aesthetic attention or care if not work over one’s everyday domestic environment, or one’s own wardrobe, as implicitly part of a lifestyle change whose aesthetic roots are however continually denied. The denial does not stop but rather end up heightening the affirmation, everywhere looking authentic to at least its audience (but most likely beyond that, of course: for example, the commenter setting Ana Goldberg against the other “super aesthetic” minimalists admits that she does watch those other minimalists’ vlogs). Moreover, this denial avoids the further determination of minimalism(s) and development of critical language apt to reflect upon and discuss the aesthetic in its many and often contradictory relations to the ethical-practical aspects of a lifestyle. The contestation, accordingly, always remains internal to each channel’s discourse: no one really accuses or critically assesses other particular channels as being too aestheticized, and all in fact – across all shades of aestheticization – appear to explicitly agree in taking minimalism to be a non-aesthetic “lifestyle”, even though they then proceed to each determine it in different ways, both aesthetically and in their range of favoured self-help and self-improvement topics. In such conditions, to

take any of the contenders to truly represent “minimalism” according to whatever criteria, whether popularity or its opposite, would be to miss the most important point, which is once more that “minimalism” not only has yet to end, but that it is always also yet to begin as well. The overall discourse keeps it in this inchoate state, from which all sorts of contradictory suggestions can be drawn – aestheticization and authenticity, appreciation for things and anti-materialist spirituality, higher quality or experiential alt-consumption and more ethical or sustainable anti-consumption, saving for future investments and contentedness with what one already owns, increased productivity by less time wasted on cleaning or getting dressed and mindful, creative slow living, and on and on. Just like the minimalist channels, each individual minimalist is left subjectively picking and choosing whatever resonates enough with him or her, perhaps oscillating among contrary pushes but still on the whole projecting onto them the sense of a cohesive, coherent and common minimalist lifestyle. When this lifestyle is explicitly detached from its more determinate aesthetic common sense, what remains is precisely, as we have seen, a version of subjectivism got at through this rejection and also framed by the assumption of excesses to be intentionally reduced in order to get a surplus, the “less is more” principle applied to all sorts of things. Yet this living with intention never stops entailing living within tension, including both the tension with the aesthetic as such, and the tensions within the reservoir of shades of aestheticization circulating in the discourse.

As we have remarked many times, this may be a satisfactory enough situation for minimalist channels as well as individual minimalists – who, at any rate, can always dismiss or distance themselves from the discourse when disillusioned –, but still the crises and tensions point to possibilities which may indeed be pursued, instead of being immediately spent wholesale on projecting the sense of everyone being one into a “minimalist lifestyle” somehow shared despite all differences. In order for the discourse to actually move beyond this state, if anyone were to carry this possibility forward, acknowledgment of the aesthetic dimension of the lifestyle – and the discourse around it – would be a crucial starting point, leading to actual engagement of the crises (as well as of external criticisms, of course). Needless to say, we take it that a pragmatist critical theory and framework as the one we have here only begun sketching may aid in this endeavour, from whatever side one approaches it: if “minimalism” as a lifestyle remains

on the whole a mere possibility, even its scientific study would transform it by determining and developing it further, or else it would have to stop and declare it indeterminate, or reductively identify it with one of its components, perhaps chosen by some quantitative external criterion. In the present case, for example, it is quite obvious that what is at stake in the continuum of shades of aestheticization within the minimalist discourse can be closely related to the concerns and internal tensions of everyday aesthetics, itself torn as we have seen between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the familiar and the strange, in line with the more general dialectical nature of aesthetic interest in its interplay of habit and impulse. An aesthetic study might, for example, draw out a multitude of internal layers from what we have reductively understood as shades of aestheticization. By contrasting his own apartment to the luxurious extravagancy of a mansion, D'Avella's first home tour insists much more on the ordinary and familiar, on a middle-class comfortable average, despite the extraordinary unclutteredness, cleanness and cohesiveness of the apartment – if not also its spaciousness –, and despite the aestheticizing frame of the impeccably edited vlog itself; just like the host's self-presentation in casual yet monochrome uniform, it is somehow extraordinarily ordinary. On the other hand, Mustard's passionate aesthetic care, though not without its negative components, is much more bent towards an ordinarily extraordinary aestheticization of one's everyday domestic environment – and personal look –, where strangeness too finds its place in a hunt for curious – though enduringly satisfying, it is claimed – designed items (clearly sustained, too, by her partner's channel wholly dedicated to more spectacular or exotic home tours). Though they indirectly play off each other, since D'Avella mocks interest in expensive artworks and designed items as a form of aestheticization while Mustard writes off the all-white empty “declutter addict” aesthetic as in turn an aestheticization that is depersonalizing and alienating, both approaches showcase an everyday which can be easily inspiring and aspirational to many if not most eyes, an everyday which is aesthetically integrated – and isolated from the external environment – in a clear and cohesive way, an everyday visibly under control, just like the hosts' lives. The same goes, with all due differences in aesthetic quality and its rhetorical uses, for the minimalist home tours we have placed in between. O'Brien's two apartments, for example, are much more than D'Avella's presented – despite, again, the aestheticizing lens and frame of the vlog, especially the second one – as nothing special nor particularly relevant or important to him, yet they are also exploited in the most ob-

vious ways as support and evidence for his vague moral discourses (which just as obviously serve the channel's range of topics, centred on personal financial investments): it is again a perfectly tamed, and self-contained, everyday life. We find another tint of strangeness, of course, in the more exotic and rural though nonetheless modernized Japanese aesthetic of Samurai Matcha's tours, while Larrison's and Simple Happy Zen's are thoroughly familiar in their emphasis, even though their aesthetic care remains extraordinary. All these incorporations of the aesthetic – and surely more that escaped our corpus – into the lifestyle and discourse of “minimalism” cannot be disentangled if they are wholesale rejected as one and the same kind of aestheticization, and if aestheticization as such is taken to be disqualifying something from being a “lifestyle” instead of precisely qualifying it as such (both things that the minimalist discourse clearly does). This being said, an essential part of the task is surely that of reinserting all these aesthetic possibilities to be drawn out of minimalism's commonsensical reservoir into the more encompassing streams of an everyday which is indeed infinitely plural and varied and changing, and thus also irreducibly imperfect, no doubt also problematizing along the way the aspirational, more than merely inspiring, workings of these aesthetically perfected minimalist discourses. What our analyses show, however, is that in order to do so the imperfect everyday cannot merely be thought of as anti-aesthetic or non-aesthetic along with a more genuine minimalist lifestyle, but it must on the contrary be articulated – and cultivated – as itself aesthetic, and thus confront and challenge all other shades of aestheticization also on explicitly aesthetic grounds. Only this would bring out and to the fore minimalism's crises and contradictions.

In our corpus, Ana Goldberg's channel gets indeed the closest to the aesthetic recognition of imperfection as such. In her vlog on minimalism's perfectionism¹⁹⁹, in fact, the host goes so far as to say that “we should focus on being intentionally imperfect, because that is where real freedom lies”: making art and finding one's own style are impossible without going through trials and errors, just like trying new things or hobbies or jobs more generally, and besides being needed to accept oneself as well as others – especially those who are particularly different from oneself –, there is also beauty to be found in “things that are generally considered ugly and dark”, as in two senses illustrated by the work with which the vlog begins and ends, Shelley's *Franken-*

¹⁹⁹ Ana Goldberg, “When things ‘have’ to be perfect...”, Aug. 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdHdN2MJhtw> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

stein, at once showing that a pursuit of superhuman perfection may turn into an inhuman monstrosity, and that valuable art can nevertheless be made out of the latter. The host does not want to be like Frankenstein's artificial, perfectionist ideal that led to "pain" and "ugliness", but rather like Shelley's finding "significance" and "beauty" – through her art – in "the most unimaginable human experiences." Her channel is offered as itself an example: "I don't look perfect, I don't speak perfect, my camera is not perfect, and so on and so forth", she points out (adding at least for this vlog "imperfect" to her triad of "mindfulness", "minimalism" and "creativity"). However, this vlog too remains overall an expression of the rhetorical move against aestheticization, blamed on "perfectly looking and perfectly living minimalist influencers who have hacked the 'frugality' principle to perfection": it is the minimalist aesthetic that "triggers" perfectionism, the risk of becoming "obsessed" with the idea of "owning less objects, but perfectly selected", thus leading to uncertainty and feeling "paralyzed by fear of making a mistake" by buying something useless, inadequate or not fitting the commonsensical aesthetic (here summed up in things like identical jars, bamboo lids, plants with white ceramic vases and wooden items). As just seen, minimalism per se is implicitly taken here as centred on "frugality", while "visual clutter" is sceptically accompanied by the host's air quotes. We also find the usual dismissal of "identity labels", including that of "minimalist", as inherently provoking a tendency towards perfectionism. In both ways, aesthetic and rhetorical, minimalism can degenerate in perfectionism and thereby lead to the "anxiety, resentment and frustration" of pursuing modern society's unachievable goals of "hustling, materialism, competition and consumerism", instead of an enduring "sensation of happiness" and of "joy of being who one is and doing what one does"; in other words, minimalism can be once again inauthentic, and that is its core if not whole problem. Accordingly, most of the channel's later vlogs on minimalism carry on the same kind of discourse on individual authenticity and intentionality that underpins those other aestheticized minimalist channels. In one vlog²⁰⁰, for example, "a more minimalist approach to living" is offered through four denials, three of which are directly tied to authenticity: the host says "no" to her "fantasy self", to "the eternal youth agenda" of covering up aging through beauty products, and more generally to "the image that is expected of [her]"; lastly, she says "no" to "uncontrolled information feeds" on digital

²⁰⁰ Ana Goldberg, "I say NO to these 🌿 Minimalism", Apr. 2023, <https://youtu.be/hYPKMyiFoHA> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

and/or social media, intentionally choosing what information she consumes because “to a certain extent, we are what we consume” – and “minimalism is not just about buying or owning clutter, it’s about a simpler approach to life, saying ‘no’ to certain aspects of social culture and embracing what truly matters to you, not to anyone else.” In the end, we circle back to a non-aesthetic yet neither just frugal lifestyle of authentic intentionality, which metaphorically extends the individual’s gesture of reduction in decluttering and restriction in consumption to every other area of life – making it one more entry-way, and framing, for the broader self-help and self-improvement discourses in which minimalism is embedded. The appeal to imperfection may here soothe and soften the contradictions of these discourses, lower their criticality, but it is ultimately assimilated to them and really doubles down on them: the host casts off her “fantasy self” for her “real self” by saying that she is human and thus “imperfect”, but she is simultaneously doing this casting off as if that “fantasy self” – and the other rejected things, both here and in other vlogs – were invading and corrupting her “real self” from an outside space, wherein they can simply be pushed back; her imperfection is then something to be itself insulated and protected – by “decluttering” anything from “ambitions and plans” to “visual representations”, “symbols” and even “people online and offline”, as another vlog also suggests²⁰¹ – in order for her to be perfectly at ease with it, that is, in order for imperfection to stop being and feeling so patently imperfect, and getting more imperfect still. Rather than something to be aesthetically expressed – also on digital social media –

²⁰¹ Ana Goldberg, “Go Minimalist: How to Dramatically Change Your Relationship With Things!”, May 2023, <https://youtu.be/5OmGq1R8uCA> (last accessed: 14/11/2023). This vlog serves as the channel’s most recent general introduction to minimalism, and it significantly comes with an additional authenticity section offering “three bonus tips [on] how to stay true to your unique self without turning into a cookie-cutter minimalist”: one should “focus on [one’s] own life, not everyone else’s”, should not “overdo” it by not allowing for one’s own “personal preferences and comfort things” – at least from time to time –, and should not “go 100% digital” and thus lose the “sense of reality” that comes with the “physical presence” of things; which amounts to the usual pushbacks against aesthetic and/or extreme minimalism and minimalism’s ties to digital social media (and their inauthenticity and, paradoxically of course, their immateriality). In other words, the rhetorical move is here incorporated in the very introduction to minimalism. By doing so, it is more apparent than elsewhere that authenticity is both the starting point and endpoint of minimalism’s rhetoric, because the heterogeneous self-help tips on the minimalist lifestyle proper are actually no less centred on authenticity than the additional tips: as alluded to, decluttering is generalized – as is throughout the minimalist discourse – to a paring down of all sorts of things which exceed who one currently is or does, from one’s too long lists of tasks and ideas to the usual “just in case items” owned but unused, from the “mental clutter” of unexpressed bad moments to one’s attachments to the mere “physical manifestations” of success; and even saving money is translated into personal, emotional terms (“After saving, say, one hundred dollars by laying aside five dollars a week, you will see how much joy and confidence it brings”). Needless to say, these tips are rife with contradictions, as is made perhaps most evident by the host’s idea that “taking a photo of an item that you like immensely in the shop, and taking it back home, can be a cool trick of owning a thing without buying it”: here, with the obvious sub-text of saving or sticking to one’s economic conditions, the image of an item is to be preferred to the actual thing, even though it is really appreciated.

, imperfection thereby functions again as a ground to rhetorically deny the aesthetic, not remediate it. Insofar as it works thus, it is one last and fully complementary shade of aestheticization of minimalism, one that in fact any other minimalist channel – even the supposedly aestheticized ones – would probably have no problem accepting and praising. The indeterminate promise of an authentic, intentional minimalist lifestyle lives on through the whole commonsensical continuum of shades, at every turn negating and affirming the power of the aesthetic.

2.4.2 – Minimalism in Habits

While we have decided to focus on minimalist home tours, primarily out of their more direct link to the overall encompassing aesthetic – and rhetoric – of each minimalist channel, which characterizes the hosts’ aspirational lifestyle as a whole, minimalism’s contradictions are even more evident when it comes to wardrobes and clothes. In this last analytical section, we will see again how authenticity seeps into the discourse independently of the level of aestheticization involved, subjectivist criteria for discarding clothes and things being – along with some arbitrary rules – the generic tools offered by minimalism to fulfil its promise of making a “lifestyle” out of one’s varied dealings with all sorts of things. Moreover, we will also see from the outset how the discourse slips or jumps from merely addressing one’s physical possessions as such to qualitatively characterizing this promised lifestyle of minimalism by aesthetic connotations and metaphorical generalizations of its indeterminate core. In both ways, minimalism leans onto and leads back into self-help and self-improvement discourses more generally, as we have often noted, covering with its indeterminacy their contradictory thrusts, just like it in fact papers over the complexity of (anti-)consumption (while the aesthetic goes on, of course, more determinately affirming the lifestyle as authentically aspirational for at least its immediate audience). All in all, the supposed minimalist revaluation of one’s things, or one’s relationship to those “things”, rather becomes an invitation to and exercise in acquiring good individual habits of all kinds, including the good habit itself of endeavouring to take on habits, more often understood as routines. The negativity of minimalism as reductive and restricting is then not only accompanied by the positivity of the aesthetic – disavowed or not in order to construct one’s authenticity –, but also, as we have already seen before, converted into the indeterminate positivity of intentionality, which is here further allied to habitualness against impulsivity. Is an individually au-

thentic and intentional yet stress-free lifestyle purged from the intrusion of the aesthetic and impulsive, with all their crises and thus struggles, really possible? Minimalism is ultimately the self-perpetuating catch-all promise that it is – for anyone, no matter the differences –, which can be directly appreciated as meaningful both in its discursive and its practical performances. It makes a “living with intention” out of living within tension.

2.4.2.1 – *Never thinking about clothes again*

A whole section at least as long as the last one could be filled with all the minimalist vlogs extolling the virtue of always dressing in the same way, usually wearing similarly casual monochrome shirts. They are, of course, one of the main sources of the minimalist discourse’s sense that it is pervasively stereotyped in too rigid and aesthetically determinate ways, but not only in doing so they actually allow for the rhetorical move to happen – as we have seen –, it is also itself an expression of the appeal to authenticity that the discourse ends up with one way or another, exhibiting the contradictoriness of wanting to do away with the aesthetic once and for all. Some months after a brief vlog overviewing his “minimalist wardrobe”²⁰², with each casual and mostly monochrome neutral item shown on all-white background as a simple, unexplained positive example – but with brands and affiliated links to products in the vlog’s description –, Matt D’Avella released another vlog²⁰³ in which he instead speaks explicitly of the benefits of a minimalist wardrobe (all immersed, as usual, in the same modernist and well-edited aesthetic of his apartment, with white walls and white or neutral furniture and wooden or brown touches, a lot of natural light, perfect order with very few visible items and so on – these are always positively affirmed throughout the channel’s vlogs, as we have noted earlier). The host relates at the very start his realization that somehow he had always been wearing the same grey t-shirts for more than a year, directly extrapolating from this fact the main aspirational lesson, for himself and for the audience: “Wouldn’t it be great if I could just wear my favourite clothes every day?” In his case, of course, the favourite clothes are casual monochrome basics, and the emphasis is on the lack of qualitative variety itself more than the quantity of clothes: the host owns fifteen copies

²⁰² Matt D’Avella, “My Minimalist Wardrobe”, Mar. 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSHsIOIhjJY> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

²⁰³ Matt D’Avella, “The Benefits of a Simple Wardrobe”, Jul. 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWl6t4agmtw> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

of the same t-shirt and various copies of his other items, so that he “will never run out.” The message, however, is of course also generalized towards the end, where the assumption of an excess to be reduced in anyone’s life – as an “average” life – is made explicit: “At least the average American has too much in their closet”, with “probably at least 20% of the items that you don’t use – for most of us, it’s probably closer to 80% of clothes”, so that in the end “we all can do a little better in simplifying our wardrobe and taking a little bit of stress out of our lives.” While minimalists such as those on Reddit could easily point their fingers at the vlog’s aestheticization, then, the host does not really insist explicitly on his casual monochrome aesthetic in particular, because his point is rather about “owning only”, or wearing only in this case, one’s favourite and thus actually used and appreciated clothes – independently of one’s subjective stylistic preferences. Needless to say, the aesthetic nonetheless does most of the actual work in making the host’s abstract claims appear both plausible and appealing: unless they are aesthetically cohesive if not uniformed like the host’s, having only “favourite” clothes – taken one at a time – in one’s wardrobe does not guarantee that one will no more have to face the “stress” of finding something there that fits well and looks good, since at the very least one will have to match one’s different items of different kinds; even less does it guarantee that there will be less of a “temptation” to waste time and money in shopping for new clothes, since it would not feel as aesthetically complete and self-enclosed as a set of identical clothes may indeed perhaps feel; and the same clearly goes for the more practical benefit of not having to wash clothes as frequently – it only works if one has at least a few copies of each favourite item like the host.

The promise of solving or rather dissolving the aesthetic once and for all is made by aesthetic means, but presented in the more abstract anaesthetic and anti-aesthetic terms of one’s subjective favourites, glossing over the concrete complications that would be met by different or plural styles. Most of all, of course, what is entirely ignored is the multiplicity of diverse situations and occasions one actually gets dressed for and within every day, not as traversable by all aesthetic styles with the ease with which it may be traversed by a (male) casual monochrome wardrobe of basics (there is also, not surprisingly, but a passing reference to the fact that it is the stably hot climate which allows the host to not own additional heavy clothes). Therefore, on the one hand the aesthetic is dismissed in the usual way as something unnecessary – and in fact stressful

and wasteful – which is mainly or solely pursued for others and not otherwise enjoyable, so that it can be cut out: the host says that he has “[n]ever got a lot of enjoyment out of picking what [he] would want to wear for the day”, that in fact it “slowed [him] down” or “stressed” him out by making him worry about “what people would think”, while now he does not “feel the need to impress people anymore” – he is now authentic. On the other hand, it is just as clear that at least the need for some basic aesthetic adequacy, plus avoidance of marked ugliness, is very much maintained, and achieved by the host’s minimalist aesthetic: it is after all, as the host’s partner puts it, something “like ‘whatever’”, “very basic” to the point that “it’s hard to have a problem with it” (while “maybe if it was ugly then I might care”, she admits), in other words something “lacking offense”, stirring up no particular reactions or crises. Thus, despite the usual rhetoric of authenticity, it is not that the aesthetic is actually dismissed, but rather that it is dissolved by being solved once and for all in compliance with its minimal requirements of adequacy, not at all necessarily reachable through any other style (or by lack or plurality thereof); as in the case of O’Brien’s minimalist apartment, the aesthetic is one where it is difficult to go wrong, insofar betraying the need not to go wrong, not to offend. The host might not want to “impress” people, yet he does not want to impress them negatively either. This second half of the message, however, gets lost by being conveyed only implicitly through the host’s and channel’s positive aesthetic, while the overall take is the typical authenticity baseline. The ambivalence can be especially seen in the host’s insistence that, contrary to what everyone feels, in fact “nobody gives a shit about you, everybody’s thinking about themselves and they’re just worried about how they look in their clothes”: aesthetic criticality is downplayed and turned into something of one’s own individual making (and responsibility), yet some change in one’s wardrobe is in order if one wants to alleviate the everyday “stress” of getting dressed and be perhaps not impressive, yet always adequate. As elsewhere, the host pairs the authenticity rhetoric with the irony of self-mockery, pointing out that his minimalist uniform set so “terribly low expectation” that his partner noticed and complimented him even for just switching to another monochrome colour in one t-shirt; but that does not take anything much from the aspirational character of his wardrobe, whose promise of discarding the aesthetic for the authentic is pursued elsewhere independently of its much-criticized casual monochrome style (which however will nonetheless positively inform it). What constitutes this vlog’s aestheticization, as in the home tours, is not that the aes-

thetic is employed per se, nor that it is too determinate, idealized and stereotypical, but that it is not openly acknowledged nor addressed but in fact dismissed as irrelevant and insignificant, turned against itself to instead support – paradoxically – an abstract, supposedly non-aesthetic individual authenticity.

Two years later, a new vlog²⁰⁴ by the same channel reaffirms the host's approach to minimalist wardrobe and uniforms, with casual t-shirts in two basic neutral tones and similarly casual clothing worn every day except for rare occasions such as weddings or other events. Past use of the items – this time more specifically in the preceding year – is again the only criterion offered to determine what to keep and thus what one's own preferences are, which are apparently supposed to be already clear and coherent and fixed enough in advance to be carved out of the excess and maintained (it is also advised not to buy new clothes without one being somehow certain in advance that they will be regularly used for a long time, again something not at all as simple to do with most styles which are not casual and monochrome, and even less when not having any particular style at all). The aesthetic is again dismissed and downplayed in favour of the authentic: one can choose whatever one likes and feels at ease and comfortable with, and others' judgments are mostly imagined – nobody notices anyway – and at any rate nothing to care about (again expect one trespasses into the territory not of ugliness here but of the “weird”, as the Christmas toilet cushion the host had when he was young is described). At the same time, it is admitted even more clearly than before that aesthetic decisions are “stressful”, because the host says that he does not think he has “ever got through more stress going through that maze of a building [of Ikea stores] picking out different throwpillows”: one can and must freely choose whatever one likes, yet that by itself does not seem to be enough to turn off aesthetic criticality after all. Consequently, the way out of the aesthetic is to solve it once and for all in advance with the least effort, by reducing it to one's own fixed minimum of favourites – something that, as mentioned, does not seem to be as effective and workable with other styles, though the host never explicitly advocates his own casual style as such. Importantly, besides being made still more explicit, the host's message is here openly generalized to all everyday decisions, thereby delineating the minimalist lifestyle as basically a lifestyle of routines:

²⁰⁴ Matt D'Avella, “I wore the same shirt every day for 3 years.”, Oct. 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NlcBA8s22BA> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

The main point is, you really wanna try to reduce the amount of decisions you make every single day – and that’s when simplicity comes in: you make one decision one time, and stick to that choice over the long run. When you do this for lots of things in your life, it has a compound effect. You decide that you’re gonna wake up at 7am every day, wear the same shirt and pants, eat the same breakfast, follow the same routine. If you had to remake these decisions each day, it would begin to wear away at some of the other really important decisions you need to make in your life. Add variety and spontaneity where it matters to you. When you try to reinvent your routines and daily decisions over and over again, you’re doing a lot of work for very little return. When you batch all these tiny decisions upfront, you’re making room and mental clarity for the really important decisions in life. Instead of choosing which outfit goes best with which pair of shoes, you have already had breakfast and you’re out the door. Now you can spend your limited time and attention on the things that really matter – maybe even your side projects, passions and hobbies.

As with things, so with one’s activities and life as a whole: the less one’s limited resources are spent on what is not subjectively important, the more supposedly remains for what instead is – one saves in the former to invest on the latter, this way getting more “return” out of decisions as well as avoiding the stress of “decision fatigue.” Such entrepreneurial outlook, one common version of the vague “less is more” principle of minimalism, is also tied to the “compound effect” of a multitude of little effects adding up in the long run again to something more, an impact on one’s life perhaps as qualitative as the uplifting background music that starts playing exactly during this concluding section of the vlog (which then moves on to the most common minimalist sponsor in such vlogs, Skillshare, in line with the promise of dedicating to “side projects, passions and hobbies”); in this sense, too, “less is more”, small habits – along with less effort – cumulatively resulting in big changes. Since it is of course not determined what the “important decisions in life” are – though the host is shown working at the computer on editing his vlogs while he mentions them –, this in principle should also include the aesthetic as an interest as legitimate as any other as well, yet it is clear that it is not so, both from the opposition of “choosing which outfit goes best with which pair of shoes” to the “things that really matter”, and from the host contrasting himself to his non-minimalist partner who instead spends a lot of time in choosing what to wear: if that is something that is important to her, does not that make her as much a “minimalist” as the host is? The answer is as unclear as the relationship of authenticity to the aesthetic actually is, but since the vlog – and the discourse – opposes them, it is likely to be a negative one. It is not that easy to say whether the host’s wardrobe offers an example of minimalism because of his minimizing what is subjectively unimportant to him – which just happens to also be the whole domain of the aesthetic (from his point of view at least) –, or rather as a minimization of the aesthetic as such, as what any other authentic person would and

should probably minimize, in order to focus instead on the more worthy things. It works both ways.

This generalization of minimalism from things – and in this case clothes, the “stuff” most directly tied to the aesthetic – to activities and one’s life in general is of course at the core of minimalism as a “lifestyle”, where it is turned into a few indeterminate framing devices for other discourses and practices (plus the dismissed yet reproduced aesthetic common sense). The authenticity of only keeping one’s favourites, as determined by past use, is married to the intentionality of only focusing on what matters to oneself, however determined; so much so, in fact, that it is not clear whether it is authenticity that serves intentionality first – the aesthetic being a waste of time, money and so on – or rather the other way around, intentionality serving authenticity by foregrounding one’s personal projects (no mention is made, of course, of the constricting realities of work). These two aspects are correlatives, though not coincident. It is not surprising, then, that they exhibit similar contradictions: just like the crises of the aesthetic are denied, the judging gaze of others being dismissed as a fantasy and as unimportant anyway, the crises on which intentionality is grounded are also in fact denied, downplayed as self-generated – it is the individual “try[ing] to reinvent” his or her habits – and thus to be settled at once by fixing one’s decisions into routines. In both cases, the uncomfortable otherness of experience is cut out, which looks appealing and plausible precisely because it is not in fact as irrelevant as it is made out to be, but rather dissolved by way of an optimal solution: with intentionality, too, if one is to take a decision once and stick to it without further questioning – supposing that “questioning” is something that an individual does all alone and unprompted –, one would better make it a very good if not optimal decision; this in turn obviously circles one back into the very self-improvement discourses that promise such optimization (and thus provoke, much more than the individual, that incessant reinvention of habits which is lamented, as the care for others’ judgment is lamented). Two years later still, D’Avella confirms once more all of this in other vlogs in which he directly praises a life which is “boring on purpose”, or “boring by design.” One vlog²⁰⁵, for example, is pretty much the equivalent of the previous one but applied this time to one’s diet: the host has had the same routine in his healthy meals, with just a minimum of variety and with freer meals when not at

²⁰⁵ Matt D’Avella, “Why I eat the same thing every day”, May 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PnArAiGKzjk> (last accessed:).

home, and again contrasts himself – in a pacific way that nonetheless defines him as minimalist – to his partner who eats whatever she likes. Just like before, routine – which is again extended to his wardrobe, workout and job – is justified by saving of time and effort and decision fatigue as well as keeping off temptations, their immediacy and rigidity being here praised as a virtue: decision making is in fact better when it is not (anymore) a matter of one’s decisions, when it is “off one’s plate.” As before, the excessive crises of actual intentionality, clearly those promoted by self-help and self-improvement discourses themselves, are projected only to be ejected as unsustainable: it is exhausting having to count and evaluate each and every different food for its macro-nutrients, calories and so on, just like it is too much work having to look for recipes, carefully shopping for the ingredients – another thing which, of course, the very anti-consumerist discourse of minimalism asks for – and prepare a new meal up from scratch. Interestingly, perfectly mirroring the other vlog, the routinized intentionality which is the main focus is here too accompanied by its correlative authenticity in anti-aesthetic remarks against digital social media: the infinite variety of delicious meals to try is reductively associated to the pictures shared by other people and influencers online, and stopping to think about what others eat to focus on the dish in front of oneself – never mind its being the same everyday – is presented as a “great metaphor of life.” The host does say that he has little skill and enjoyment in cooking and eating anyway, as well as little time to do so, but of course, if the benefits of a routinized life lie in a “compound effect”, one will have to routinize a sizable portion of one’s everyday life to get them, and nutrition is at least positively offered as a very compatible area with that.

Another recent vlog²⁰⁶ finally states the point in the most direct way, claiming that “if you're bored with your life, it is not because you're doing the same thing every day, but because you're doing the wrong thing every day”: if one discovers and then intentionally sticks to one’s authentic favourites or passions, one will never get bored, and – in marketing author Seth Godin’s words, quoted in the vlog – one will have “set up a life [one doesn’t] need to escape from”, as opposed to looking forward to the “next vacation.” The point is expressed by the rhetorical contrast between the exceptional, eccentric and excessive life the host had just had in his honeymoon abroad with his now wife, also underscored by his wearing a colourful summery shirt instead of the usual

²⁰⁶ Matt D’Avella, “Why my life is boring on purpose.”, Oct. 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07T0MsLFIQc> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

monochrome t-shirt: sipping cocktails on the beach, parachuting from a plane, doing other extreme sports or going for exotic trips are all opposed to an everyday life which is nonetheless felt as “exciting” in its ordinariness (and also made, as else everywhere in this channel, aesthetically appealing in its own way, its rhythm slowed down after the rapid fire of images that is the honeymoon section). This everyday life of significance – of “creativity” and “connection”, of “realizing” and “challenging” oneself and so on – is again of course promised to every individual, aspirational yet also average by contrast to the excessive luxury of the extremely rich: the host presents himself as neither a millionaire nor one living from check to check, but rather one comfortably living without stress and anxiety, and having just enough to dare doing something he authentically likes doing “regardless of the money”; and the same is also possible for everyone else, because the belief or fear that it might not be is again externalized and blamed on others saying that it is unrealistic, that one must accept the job one finds and feel lucky to even have one, while the truth, for the host, is that “small steps” add up in the long run to whatever “big changes” are pursued. All of minimalism’s ambiguities are here meshed up: a lifestyle for the rich and the poor, for those who want to contentedly settle on their economic situations and those aspiring to improve them and move on to a more authentic – and enjoyable – creative job, for those rejecting many areas of the aesthetic as inauthentic, wasteful and/or stressful and those appreciating the appeal of an aesthetically cohesive and “exciting” everyday life, for those who would like to slow down from the stressful optimization of everything seemingly required by intentionality, and those who would rather gladly apply it to all of their lives, alleviating its weight by routines; a lifestyle which consists in living within these tensions, but on the premise and promise of the possibility of reconciling them, which – as we have seen again and again in our analyses – is performatively reproduced by negating this or that component or aspect, especially the aesthetic for the lifestyle. These vlogs show how far the aesthetic, the authentic, the optimal – or perfect – and the intentional are actually interwoven in the minimalist discourse, remaining so tied to each other throughout it within all shades of aestheticization, each time articulated according to the channel’s particular emphases. As Ecofriend Lia – declaredly on the lowest end of aestheticization – had put it in her vlogs about “extreme minimalism”, one “thinks about less stuff” in order to “think less about stuff”: the promise of never having to think about one’s things and clothes anymore is generalized to never having to think about many other “things” in life, yet still being au-

thentic and intentional (and individually yet nonetheless aesthetically enjoying it as well). In its fight against an impulsivity taken as an external imposition – the gaze of others, the temptation of images – yet at the same time internalized as something under one’s control, minimalism’s “simple life” takes sides for habits understood as routines, all the while alleviating the crisis and contradictions entailed by the complexity of fully intentional choices. Keeping and sticking to one’s authentic “favourites” itself relies on one’s tastes being fixed into something routine-like – in fact, they are most often claimed to be directly determinable by reference to the frequency of past use (though just as often coming along with the loophole of also keeping whatever one immediately, transparently “loves” or “enjoys”). While the casual and monochrome uniforms like D’Avella’s may easily be dismissed by other minimalists in projecting a non-aesthetic minimalist lifestyle, this does not get rid of the call for habits and routines which constitutes at least in large part its picture of a simpler “intentional life”, nor consequently the call for a fixation of one’s authentic favourites and activities. In fact, the discourse’s bypassing of the aesthetic seems to make it only less able to really deal with it, leaving the door wholly open to all shades of aestheticization, like D’Avella’s ironical one which we see again in these vlogs.

For another example, we can turn to Ronald L. Banks’s more authenticity-focused channel’s vlogs on his wardrobe. Reportedly in response to commenters’ requests, he released a vlog²⁰⁷ showcasing his minimalist wardrobe, which like D’Avella’s is casual and monochrome in style, though a bit more expansive and varied: most clothes have neutral or blue colours, and they are all also neatly organized in categories in the closet – in line with the perfect order of the apartment –, but we also see jeans and winter clothes, a pretty long series of shirts, polo shirts and t-shirts hung by colours and inclusive of a starker red, and boots as well as sneakers, elegant shoes and so on. The brands are all mentioned in the vlog or its description²⁰⁸, while the items themselves are aesthetically appreciated as “very warm”, “very stylish”, for their “very heavy material” and so on. This is all predictably turned into evidence for the fact that “minimalism doesn’t have to be black and white”, that a minimalist is “free to love colour” if he or she loves it, and accordingly no explicit criterion – stylistic or otherwise – is offered as

²⁰⁷ Ronald L. Banks, “My Minimalist Wardrobe + Closet Tour (2019) [Minimalism Series]”, Feb. 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkaZ7mx4GSM> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

²⁰⁸ Updates in one’s things are implicitly accepted here, and the host himself says he has already replaced two pairs of sneakers in the brief time since a vlog he had recently made about the shoes he owned.

to what makes a wardrobe “minimalist”, yet the host’s own positive example still remains, as in the minimalist home tour vlogs. The host openly praises the flexibility of his “smart casual” style, which allows him to easily raise or lower the level of formality in his look and thus equally meet any situation: “[With] the pieces that I own, I can dress up for the office or meetings, but then I can dress down with sneakers if I’m just running down the streets or going on a date with my girlfriend or anything like that – it will still keep a stylish look to it.” Would this be as possible with any other style, or no style at all? Probably not, and another vlog²⁰⁹ of the “always wearing the same thing” thread, released two years later, makes it quite clear – even while holding on to the authenticity rhetoric (not as prominent in the first vlog). Here the convergence of minimalist influencers on wearing always the same thing, and especially a black monochrome shirt, is not deemphasized but rather given a positive spin to, for the same reasons which were explicitly or implicitly in D’Avella’s vlog: less time wasted in dressing up, fewer useless decisions, more time and energy left for the decisions that have a real impact on one’s life, and yet also both feeling always at ease in one’s clothes and dressing the way one feels like – the crisis of the aesthetic solved once and for all, and authenticity being identified with the consequent seeming dissolution of it. In this way, the host makes more explicit what was more implicit in D’Avella’s vlogs: there may indeed be something to the minimalist aesthetic, elsewhere criticized as stereotypical – perhaps it is in fact “easier to wear”, as well as more appreciated in itself by minimalists. Here too the gaze of other people is attenuated, because the host too claims that others do not really notice and care about the way one looks or how often he or she wears the same thing, and here too the uniform is nonetheless detached from its aesthetic determinacy to stress its compatibility with authentic self-expression: “Although minimalism is about owning less, you shouldn’t feel deprived in your personality or self-expression”, and this is demonstrated by a brief edited slideshow in which the host strips away his initial black t-shirt to reveal underneath differently coloured t-shirts – grey, blue, red and white – and finally a casual light blue opened shirt with the white t-shirt below it; as the host reassuringly admits, he too “sometimes like[s] a bit of colour.” However, the uniform per se is still explicitly presented as a good idea, and the aesthetic variety displayed in the slideshow is in fact limited to the mostly monochrome casual, if in different colours: as

²⁰⁹ Ronald L. Banks, “Why Do Minimalist Wear The Same Thing Every Day?”, Sep. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPZeuXvTuro> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

the host puts it in the conclusion, “Should you have an uniform? I think so. But does it have to be all black? No, it doesn’t.” The ambiguity thus remains, but it is far more readable – though authentic to the channel’s audience – in its being more openly embraced and thus exposed than in D’Avella’s irony. Nowhere it is more evident than in the host’s contrasting of a minimalist uniform to a school one:

As a kid, I thought an uniform was limiting, and to an extent it was because the school system could control what I was able to wear; but as an adult and one who is practicing minimalism, I now understand why most minimalists wear the same thing every day: it's because it's their uniform.

The too blatantly imposed – and immaturely rejected? – uniform of the school days is replaced with an uniform that is instead one’s own uniform, intentional and authentic. Accordingly, the negativity in minimalism’s reductions and restrictions is taken more generally to be nothing like a deprivation: “Wear what you love, embrace who you are, but never consume more than you need, because there is so much more to life than stuff and things.” Just like the casual monochrome uniform promises a solution to the aesthetic which can still be subsumed under the authenticity rhetoric, so the other restrictions of minimalism can be undertaken enhancing instead of contradicting one’s intentionality, or one’s life more generally. This promise, as we have seen, is only reinstated and reinforced by the minimalists who would dismiss the likes of D’Avella and Banks as aestheticized and inauthentic by contrast to a more genuine though indeterminate minimalist lifestyle. Such “minimalist lifestyle” is indeed part and parcel of that very promise. More than D’Avella, the host here is at least a bit more willing to openly consider the concrete aesthetic advantages of his uniform and its casual style, but the need for authenticity rhetoric cuts such consideration very short (the right length so as to be able to still have an affiliated link to a “cool t-shirt” like his, “super comfortable” and “very versatile”).

Even more explicit yet is the case for the minimalist wardrobe as anti-aesthetic, and thus authentic, by CKSPACE, especially in the vlog²¹⁰ in which the host announced

²¹⁰ CKSPACE, “I quit fashion because of minimalism”, Jun. 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5je85Hbyrgk> (last accessed: 14/11/2023). In an earlier vlog, released just two months before this one, the host already admitted having a “contradicting mind” because of his being “in love with that avant-garde style” yet still “want[ing] to be a minimalist” – a contradiction that is not, however, really stylistic: the “avant-garde style” he speaks about is not only based on stark black and white, but is explicitly tied by him to the “wabi-sabi style” with its emphasis on “individuality” and “imperfection”, which he elsewhere closely associates to minimalism. The problem is rather that minimalism is both taken to be an aesthetic style which concludes the host’s “10 year timeline” of styles, and a life-

that he had transitioned to minimalism and left fashion behind: “I gave up on fashion. If you guys are here with me from the very start of ‘CKSPACE’, you can probably tell the change, the transition that I’m making with all the wabi-sabi and minimalism video, but for those who are new here, I used to make videos regarding snickers and fashion – but today I’m really tired of it, I’m tired of fashion.” All the older fashion vlogs were deleted to underscore this conversion, also performatively expressed in the vlog in various scenes, like the opening scene in which the host pauses from reading *The Minimalists’* book on minimalism to walk straight to his wardrobe and take off a bunch of clothes – he swiftly puts them in a plastic garbage bag –, or the paradoxical bit in which, all dressed in a casual monochrome black t-shirt, he somewhat theatrically lets go from his grasp a black leather jacket which in fact would fit quite easily his minimalist wardrobe. The vlog’s and channel’s aesthetic is quite an impeccable embodiment of what the minimalist discourse at large – and the host himself, as we have seen earlier – would take to be a stereotyped style: a black t-shirt on grey pants, a white empty dresser – against a white wall – with only a small pot of plants on its surface, a black mattress on the ground, and natural lighting (though here more dimmed and emphasizing the shadows), all within a well-edited vlog. Nonetheless, this aesthetic is successfully used, like in the other cases, to back-up the host’s ambivalent anti-aesthetic discourse and his break from fashion. Were it aimed at minimalism as itself mistaken for or degenerated into a mere “trend”, this vlog could have just as easily been included in our section on the anti-trend trend of minimalist vlogs, because fashion is identified with trends inevitably spiralling into the consumerist vicious circle of endless updating on the “hedonic treadmill”, the back-and-forth between ephemeral excitation and eventual dissatisfaction:

There's no way you can escape from trends, as long as you are looking at them – just as you totally caught a wave for this trend, someone is already starting the next; the more I tried to understand fashion, the more I found myself in this endless cycle of pursuing more: more fashion items, more garments, more snickers. [...] I could never be satisfied with what I owned, I had endless feelings of wanting more, craving for more and new fashion items. [...] I got myself a new, expensive fashion item: I felt elated for a week. One week later, the happiness wears off as the item became part of my life. One month later: I'm kind of sick of the item; I still love it – but one more.

style coming with an anti-aesthetic rhetoric and the promise of individual well-being, which combine here again into “not having to stress about what to wear every day or on a certain day.” “Minimalism” is a style yet anti-style, and its label is thus implicitly opposed to those of the other styles mentioned – “streetwear”, “workwear”, “techgear” and so –, along with trends and brands and logos, as a non-label: despite increasingly identifying himself and his channel as “minimalist”, the host says, “I’m working towards a life where I’m not defined by all these label, all these category – I’m not defined by what I wear; a life where trend do not even exist in my wardrobe; a life where brands and logos are just redundant and excessive in life” (CKSPACE, “10 years timeline of my style”, Apr. 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ee3kohPIUNs>; last accessed: 14/11/2023).

In this case, however, what other minimalists would dismiss as itself a “trend” is instead taken to be the way out from all trends, a cure for fashion. If D’Avella’s vlog depicted his minimalist wardrobe as “inoffensive”, the host here describes it even more strongly as being “immune” to fashion, giving him back the “peace of mind” he had lost in his “fashion days”, steering him away from the “negative path” he found himself in – a path of “comparing” to others and either “envying” them “judging” them (“and [as] we all know, ‘comparison is the thief of joy’”). Immunization is a fitting image for the host’s simultaneous lamentation of the inevitability of fashion and responsabilization of the individual for all its ills: on the one hand, “living in this fashion culture it’s hard not to get distracted by trends, they are everywhere” – in social media, YouTube, but also people in the streets and one’s own friends –, and yet on the other hand “the issue is not with the trend, the issue is with me”, even though ultimately the reason why the host believes he “started to pass judgment on people based on what they owned and how they dressed” is, as he says, his “insecurity of not being able to own expensive fashion items, not being cool enough to fit in” – the fact that those items were economically inaccessible to him, “way out of [his] financial capabilities”, is taken as indeed just a bare fact that he has to take individual responsibility for, simply accepting that he cannot afford fashion and make himself “immune” to it and its omnipresent influences. The ambivalence is thus much more evident, because the negative side effects of fashion are not here reduced to an inherent feature of it, but rather traced back to socio-economic disparities – although, of course, the outcome is the same, and it is nothing socio-economic in scope. The host had to “voluntarily lose interest in fashion” by refraining from visiting websites and YouTube channels related to fashion and unfollowing all similar profiles on social media; the authenticity rhetoric is something he ends up with in order to deal with the downsides of his “love of fashion”, not a starting assumption against the aesthetic.

Because of this ambiguity, it is again not wholly clear whether by “minimalism” at any time the host indicates an aesthetic style, a non-aesthetic lifestyle or rather both undivided; he too is not explicit, though his fashion background makes his self-presentation in minimalist uniform still more of a positive example nonetheless. Just like D’Avella and Banks, he describes his minimalist wardrobe as quantitatively minimized to clothes he can wear every day in order to get rid of the aesthetic altogether and

its crises – even at the cost of sacrificing self-expression –, focusing instead on more important things:

By minimalizing my wardrobe, it gave me a lesser selection on what I can wear every day. Some might think it's bad because we kind of express ourselves with different look, but the good thing is I don't have to worry on what to wear every day, just like an uniform. [...] "I use my brain on something else instead of worrying what to wear every day and getting my mood all fucked up because I chose a wrong outfit. [...] I still love to look good, but it's not an important value that I need to become the person I want to be."

The last sentence confirms that more than a full and flat rejection, it is rather a matter of dissolving the aesthetic by solving it once and for all, and thus always “look good” – or at least not “ugly” nor “weird”, as we have seen earlier – without the effort and stress and uneasiness (which, even if they were actually eliminable by way of a minimalist casual monochrome style – and all the internal dissent and discontent we have seen it surrounded by in the discourse already raises doubts –, would at any rate be no doubt harder to avoid in different styles or with no particular style at all, even notwithstanding social or situational conditions). This reveals the contradictory core of minimalism as an anti-consumerist, anti-materialist as well as anti-aesthetic discourse: just like these minimalist influencers would like to dissolve the aesthetic by still solving it, thus actually doubling down on it to try winning after all at its game – the very game they explicitly deem unwinnable –, so the appeal to declutter unused and unloved items and start consciously or intentionally consuming from that time onwards, always “only owning” enduringly satisfying things, is clearly a similar attempt at winning the unwinnable game of consumerism and/or materialism – with the difference, of course, that one thereby goes through the rhetorical move we have explored in this study. The same point obviously holds for minimalism’s relation to the very self-help and/or self-improvement discourses it is equally embedded in, again projecting with its indeterminate sense of a coherent “lifestyle” the possibility of winning at their no less unwinnable games, the way D’Avella seemingly wins at intentionality by turning it into a fixed yet healthy routine; but of course, the minimalist discourse’s wholehearted emphasis on “intentionality”, even stronger and more stable than the correlated authenticity – to the point of often equating “minimalism” with “intentional living” altogether, making it almost the only character commonly shared by “minimalists” –, is evidence of the fact that the unwinnable nature of self-help or self-improvement discourses is not at all as widely, readily and prominently recognized within the discourse (which is why “intentionality” remains rhetorically available to it as last refuge from its other contradictions). The host “still

like[s] to see beautiful garments, appreciating the material used, the treatment on the garment, the cutting – less on the brands and label”, and ultimately he claims that “fashion is not inherently good or bad”, because it is true that “being able to dress in what you love can give you the confidence that you need, the increase in dopamine that makes you feel really good about yourself – it’s a good way to express ourselves and have a certain image that we want to portray”; this hesitance highlights the contradiction between the rhetorical forfeiting of the game and the aesthetic solution that is actually employed and displayed to win it at last.

Overall, then, the aesthetic nature of this solution, along with its conditions and consequences, is still left hidden or implicit. It is still so in a vlog where the host directly displays his “minimalist wardrobe”, one year after his transition²¹¹. It is, once again, a casual monochrome wardrobe with many copies of black or white t-shirt but with different fits – comfortably large for the most part –, only one having a print on it (by a friend of the host’s), with only some grey sweaters, a pair of grey trousers and one of grey sandals; the rest – including a leather jacket, despite having associated it to fashion in a previous vlog – is all black except a white blazer (and the white and red tank tops used for exercise only, which do not “look good” yet are fine because the host does not care while working out). The host puts on and displays all the clothing items one by one, also adding close-up shots, and in doing so clearly accentuates their aesthetic value; despite his rejection of “brands and labels”, he even mentions brands and models – from Uniqlo and Levi’s to Owndays and Seiko, and his Nike “Air Force 1” –, though the vlog has no sponsorship or affiliated links to any product. Even so, minimalism is presented in an anti-aesthetic frugal light, it has helped the host “live below [his] means” – though of course not “deprive” himself – by making “spending money on clothes” not his “priority” anymore. This, however, it has evidently achieved not merely by provoking a shift in priorities, but by taking the host to the point in which, while not owning his “dream wardrobe”, he is nevertheless “pretty satisfied” with what he has, thereby feeling no “urge” to buy new clothes: it is not “perfect” in the sense of being extraordinary, perhaps, yet it is still a perfect wardrobe in the sense that it is complete, that nothing needs to be added, nor – above all – subtracted (fashion’s criticality is rejected, yet “‘just in case’ clothes” and clothes which are no more clearly appreciated are dis-

²¹¹ CKSPACE, “My Entire Minimalist Wardrobe”, Jan. 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HEVmgFEWc9M> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

carded). Whether in the casual monochrome style or not, this is an aesthetic solution. The host himself gives it away by inserting a rhetorical gesture towards authenticity in the vlog even while exhibiting such a commonsensically minimalist, and pretty much all-black, style: “I know it might not be how some of you guys visualize [how a] minimalist wardrobe should be, with t-shirts of the same colours” he says apologetically, “but what I’m left with are what I really need and stuff that I really enjoy wearing.” Aesthetic uniformity is clearly associated by the host to minimalism, for example when saying with regard to his pair of Converse shoes that he does not “see [himself] wearing them anymore”, or when expressing his desire to sooner or later “standardize in just one colour” his underwear at least, if not his whole wardrobe. In fact, in his concluding three-words definition of his wardrobe as “minimal, kind of frugal, and a bit of wabi-sabi”, the term “minimal” is associated on-screen to a pile of identical well-folded black t-shirts held by the host – who is wearing a large white sweater –, while “frugal” is matched by a close-up shot of a pair of black jeans’ unravelled hem, and “wabi-sabi” by his visibly worn out runners. Just like in the discourse at large, minimalism confusingly moves back and forth between a frugal life(style) and a minimal (life)style, respectively unrecognized and unexplored in their aesthetic and ethical-practical dimensions (the “frugal” is itself employed, along with the “minimal”, as an aesthetic category, overlapping with “wabi-sabi” for the emphasis on aesthetic imperfection). Consequently, even though the host’s background in fashion vlogs – which obviously shows very much here – lets us see them even more clearly, the contradictions are still there: the promise of never having to think about clothes again is still not understood as an aesthetic promise, but rather one allied yet again to an anti-aesthetic rhetoric of authenticity (as well as to the anti-consumerist rhetoric of frugality).

The aesthetic nature of this underlying promise of doing away with the aesthetic is further illuminated by vlogs which sit on the opposite end of minimalism’s supposed spectrum, the aesthetic end. With regard to these, we can again draw from Jenny Mustard’s openly aesthetic – yet nevertheless aestheticizing²¹² – minimalist channel. As we

²¹² As we have mentioned earlier, this channel too has both implicit allusions and explicit contents related to lifestyle besides or beneath the aesthetic, without making a straightforward case for the contribution of the aesthetic to the lifestyle. Even though it makes no explicit mention of “minimalism”, one vlog offers, for example, “simple healthy habits” that are closely related to the minimalist discourse, such as limitations on the use of digital and social media or the quite literal management of criticality in one’s everyday life:

have seen with her minimalist home tours or interior design tips more generally, the anti-consumerist rhetoric of the “intentional” consumer – or the “mindful” consumer, the “conscious” consumer and so on – actually fits all too well the intentionality entailed and displayed by aesthetic work on oneself and/or one’s surroundings, just like the saving-and-investing take on the “less is more” principle readily accommodates the upgrades and luxury purchases that the minimalist discourse so often attacks (without dealing any damage). It should not surprise us, then, if Jenny Mustard has one vlog²¹³ on “how to always look expensive on a budget” and concomitantly become a “more clever and conscious and organized shopper” (also by using the sponsored app, Shoptagr, to keep track of items and save money): “No more purchases until we have a master plan in place”, insists the host, precisely because “our dream wardrobes and clothing budget quickly go down the drain because of spur of the moment, money-wasting decisions”; on the contrary, “smart, focused and well-planned shopping” is the way to “build a wardrobe we truly love and stay kind to the planet at the same time” – through wishlists with “only the pieces which absolutely fit the criteria”, a monthly budget to invest in just one perhaps more expensive but much better and thus enduringly lovable item, a mix of “eco-friendly” second-hand stores and more economical sales, and loyally sticking to the sellers we have been satisfied by. However, before any of these non-aesthetic tips are offered, the host’s “master plan” involves the construction of a minimalist stylistic core for one’s wardrobe with “the essential basics that our whole wardrobe will be resting on”: a white t-shirt and a black one, neutral jeans and “black smart trousers”, a random “boyfriend shirt”, a blazer, a “solid colour knit sweater”, a versatile dress and an undershirt – again black and white in the pictures shown on screen – and a “solid colour turtleneck”; these basics, with their “neutral colours” and “great quality”, will al-

It doesn't always work, but I try one day with completely no “shoulds”: nothing in the calendar, no plans, no telling myself I need to work out – or eat well, or exercise, or anything –, I do whatever I want whenever I feel like it (within reason, obviously). But, I'm definitely a 'I should' person, so getting a break every week is very healthy for me. But to feel good about having a day a week without “shoulds”, I try to have one day a week where I accomplish all the “shoulds”: work focusedly, eat super-healthy – just nail the whole day, so that at the end of the day I feel like I'm a total pro. After one of these days I feel so good, and then of course I get the reward of the completely “should-free” day.

Just like a diet’s cheat day, the host’s “should-free” day actually highlights the regimentation of everyday life into more or less intentionally planned routines, from “try[ing] to always have at least one day in between social things to rest up” to turning off one’s devices in order to go into “deep focus” or having “routine touching” with a partner, a pet or even oneself in order to relax (Jenny Mustard, “HEALTHY HABITS – 7 Simple habits that changed my life.”, Jun. 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JP6_YRfE7GE; last accessed: 14/11/2023).

²¹³ Jenny Mustard, “how to ALWAYS look expensive on a budget!”, Aug. 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7MWh6zmYuCk> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

low for endless “styling possibilities” by framing all the “fun stuff” – the “showstoppers” – one will invest in, “the pieces you absolutely fall in love with on first sight, even though they’re far from neutral simple basics.” This approach may seem to make the minimalist wardrobe literally recede into the background, a museum-like neutral frame for singular clothing items in the place of artworks, but it is actually a fundamental background which also always comes to the fore on its own, characterizing the whole wardrobe. How does a fully subjectivist “absolutely fall[ing] in love on first sight” with a clothing item differ from consumerist impulsivity and excess, if not through the compensating frame of intentionality and self-restraint that lies in those minimalist essentials? What does it make it any more authentic than just purchasing what one already loves in the first place? It is, once again, the promise of solving the aesthetic – for the most part at least – once and for all. The minimalist core of the wardrobe, with its perfected yet apparently easy aesthetic cohesiveness, is here too contrasted both to “trends” with the ephemeral “spontaneous shopping” they elicit, and to the transient nature of the aesthetic with the crises it provokes, from getting bored to getting noticed. When the host recommends decluttering of those clothes that one does not “use” and/or “love”, that minimalist core is foregrounded to qualify the whole wardrobe:

I so much more prefer a pared back and simple wardrobe, where I know everything goes together, [...] realizing we don't need a gazillion items. In fact, I find it really stressful to choose outfits when my wardrobe starts to overflow. A more pared-back look where everything goes together and makes sense, where showstoppers can be paired with your basics – that's the way to make a luxurious yet useful wardrobe. [...] Find great minimalist fashion Instagrammers to follow for info and reset your eyes to appreciate a simpler, pared-down look that's not all about trends and spontaneous shopping. The beauty, with gorgeous basics, is that you never grow tired of them, and you can use them over and over again without people noticing. [...] Prioritize the pieces that you love the most right now, and will wear for years to come.

The minimalist core works as an (anti-)aesthetic “reset” to get at those items that will solve the aesthetic by being authentically and thus enduringly satisfying, or the other way around: finding “pieces that you love” authentically is taken as a guarantee that they will be enduringly satisfying, but on the other hand, it is actually the “gorgeous basics” of minimalism that promise to be enduringly satisfying more than any other style – never making you tired of them, nor making others turned off by them –, and this makes them in turn appear authentic, reversing the direction in that reasoning. The authenticity of the “showstoppers”, along with the intentionality of shopping for them, is therefore borrowed from the authenticity promised by the stylistically minimalist wardrobe, both aesthetically and through the anti-aesthetic and anti-consumerist rhetorical move of

denying trends. The aesthetic dimension of the promise here goes well beyond the “in-offensive” and the “immune” we have seen in the other cases, of course: the host’s minimalism is chic and glamour, not casual, as is made evident from the explicit promise in the title of “looking expensive”, and the use of “minimalist” along with positive aesthetic qualities in the vlog’s description (which specifies the promise as a way “to look trendy, chic, luxurious, minimalist, sexy, beautiful (or whatever your jam happens to be)”). But it is not a different promise, and the title also clearly signals that, with its “always” accentuated with uppercase letters: while desirable, the aesthetic is still to be basically solved forever, and then pacifically – and authentically, of course – be dealt with in the single concentrated doses of one’s monthly quality purchases. The channel’s higher-end aestheticization surely qualifies the promise, making it more attractive at least to its audience, and also positively contributing to the minimalist aesthetic common sense for the discourse to disavow it elsewhere; and yet it remains an aestheticization, precisely because it too ultimately leans onto the offer of an authentic end to the aesthetic and its crises and contradictions, obscuring but not forsaking its relations to a lifestyle.

Needless to say, other promises in the minimalist discourse at large go hand in hand with the anti-aesthetic promise, from indiscriminate economic access to higher quality consumption through individual saving to the reconciliation of aesthetic interest and ethical concern with sustainability or other issues, all converging to the ideal of the responsible consumer. The host sums it all up nicely, making it again clear that the goal is that of actually winning at the games of consumption and aesthetic appearance: “Buying things we truly love, and taking care of them and treasuring them: that’s the way to be a smart, economic and planet-friendly shopper – all while looking gorgeous as hell, of course.” Loving things, caring for them and associating oneself to them through appearances are all aesthetic phenomena, but the emphasis clearly falls on that “truly”, that is, on authenticity: in order to enduringly if not eternally love things, care for them and look good with them – all at once –, one must first find out what one authentically loves and then intentionally stick to it (which is why all is addressed is the “buying things” part, not the “taking care of things” one). The most openly aesthetic statement of minimalism is thus still anti-aesthetic in that it takes, like the other minimalist vlogs, the aesthetic problem to be individually solvable and/or dissoluble through authenticity.

This is confirmed by later vlogs in the same channel, and most of all by two vlogs which together perfectly exhibit the ambiguous relation between the aesthetic and the authentic, first providing advice to “stop feeling ugly once and for all”, then adding to it – two years later – advice to “always look good.” In the first vlog²¹⁴, the host responds to comments expressing lack of self-esteem and a feeling of being ugly, a topic that she empathizes with already in an ambiguous manner: as “a person who had [herself] plenty of ugly moments back in the day” but now “feels most of the time completely fine with the way [she] looks”, she claims to know both “how devastating it can be to not liking the way you look” and “what a relief it is to finally feel like, ‘Hey, I look pretty good today’”; the relief does not come just as a dissolution of the aesthetic problem, but already also as a promised solution to it. The host’s take on both the problem and its solution is thoroughly steeped in the rhetoric of authenticity, because the “ugly spiral” of feeling ugly, in between the “feeling pretty” of childhood and the “feeling pretty again” of her present state, is blamed on the discourses of visual media of all kinds – from MTV music videos to fashion magazines and social media – as well as those of people around oneself more generally, the former displaying perfection and insisting on “how to treat [imperfections], hide them, to get rid of them, balance them” and so on, while the latter further pushes imperfections to the fore by “bonding over insecurities” with others, “showing [oneself] vulnerable” to “indirectly push others up” and vice versa. The solution, accordingly, is “finding a passion” and “muting society”, both ways to authentically “drown out” aesthetic criticality: a passion is in fact “something you care so much about in your life that you kind of drown out that annoying voice in your head chattering about all your imperfections”, the voice which has already internalized those discourses, while “muting everyone around you – in magazines, online or in everyday life – who constantly point out their own or other people’s imperfections” takes care of further critical interferences from others.

It is, as always, responsabilization of individuals for problems that are somewhat recognized as social in scope, because while the host does not believe that “there’s anything wrong with caring about the way you look or talking about it – it’s how we talk about it or think about it”, still the solution is not transforming discourses as much as restricting them or dodging them altogether. And it is also, again as usual, an authenticity

²¹⁴ Jenny Mustard, “how to stop feeling ugly – once and for all.”, Feb. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QT4xEKt5JQ> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

that is backed up by the aesthetic and ambiguously circling back to it. The host's mention of "passions" is accompanied by pleasing shots of her modernist teacup, of a white table with just a few sheets of paper and notebooks and books artfully depicted from above, and then the host's white uncluttered desk again with a notebook, an e-reader, a computer and a laptop, while the "muting society" half of the equation is illustrated by the host – wearing a black jacket with make-up and confidently posing like a model – putting on sunglasses as if screening out society's influences. These implicit positive affirmations of the aesthetic as authentic are also matched by an explicit reappropriation of the aesthetic as still one viable "passion" or project to authentically partake in: while other projects are indeed necessary to distract oneself and to avoid turning personal appearances into one's only project ("If I have nothing else taking up my brain energy, I for some reason find more negative things I want to fix with my looks: I care more about my fitness level and my beauty regime, and how white my teeth are, when I have nothing more important or, like, fun to care about"), and while that is doubly the case for women ("[We live in] a society where we women are told that the way we look is more important than the way we think, or speak, or write, or whatever [...] a bloody systematically sexist society"), aesthetic care for appearances is nonetheless still a passion of the host, of course. The aesthetic, so reduced again to appearances – no mention is of course made of other forms of aesthetic expression, or the aesthetic nature of those other projects –, is a valid passion so long as it is authentic, and so long as its negativity is thereby expelled:

Sometimes I wonder if I'm a bad feminist for not shaking this, for still – you know – caring about my appearance, and still having an interest in fashion, and loving how we look with lipstick or whatever. Bad feminist or not, this is who I am: expressing myself through the way I look is something that makes me happy – if, and only if, I feel good about the way I look.

The aesthetic care imposed by patriarchal society, by visual media and by other people's comments is reappropriated as authentically "expressing oneself" through appearances in a way that never fails in bringing about satisfaction and happiness. It might not precisely coincide with the kind of "never thinking about clothes again" we have seen earlier, but it still clearly amounts to at least never having to think about them negatively, which is almost the same (even the other minimalists specified it as negative thinking anyway, as "worrying" or "stressing" about clothes and so on). The cure for the aesthetic is "changing one's mind" about it in order to make it wholly authentic and positive, and its ambiguity is in full display with regard to imperfections, authentic "quirks"

to be celebrated and only spoken about in positive terms, yet suppressed and concealed when that is somehow not possible:

I worked hard on changing my mind into thinking that style has only to do with expressing myself, having fun and celebrating my own personal physical quirks; I do not balance, I highlight. [...] I only comment on looks, my own or others', if my comment is a compliment; I never talk about my own imperfections negatively, I only talk about the imperfections I have in a positive light. [...] But I don't talk about the imperfections I'm not happy with, first of all because I don't want to think about or draw my own attention to it – so [that] it becomes like a hiccup, you know –, but more importantly because I don't want you to search for these imperfections. [...] I can't even tell you how many annoying imperfections I discovered on myself simply because I've seen a vlog, or ad, or read an article talking about that same imperfection.

The admonishment that “our insecurities become contagious” which appears as on-screen text over a shot of the host quietly sipping from a glass of water in her stylish apartment, all while wearing an elegant gown, underlines the contradictions in the host’s speech, celebrating some imperfections yet suppressing others and blocking off all talk of imperfections as really such: if positive depictions of perfected appearances already can spark aesthetic crises – as in the host comparing her thighs, when she was younger, to those of dancers seen on MTV –, then simply “muting” the negative talk of ugliness and imperfection will not suffice (even if it were at all possible), and the host’s own perfected appearance in the channel would have to be problematized despite its recuperation of certain defects – “stretch marks”, “ears sticking out” and “weird wobbly knees” – as “somehow kind of gorgeous.” If anything, the vlog and the whole channel demonstrate that such recuperation is in fact a matter of aesthetic work, and that it is not equally feasible on any imperfection and can also fail. The rhetoric of authenticity obfuscates both points, actually reiterating the (anti-)aesthetic promise of “stopp[ing] feeling ugly once and for all”, all by oneself.

Two years later, the vlog on “how to always look good”²¹⁵ makes it clear that one is returned to the same kind of discourse the host criticized in the previous vlog, because imperfections are not mentioned here either positively or negatively – it is just taken for granted that they are to be hidden away. The host suggests, for example, having “‘in-case-of-emergency’ items” – in her case the “holy trinity” of cap, sunglasses and lipstick – to cover up most temporary defects, from unwashed hair to bad skin and bags under the eyes, and to these she adds the “huge oversized coat” again explicitly in order to hide imperfections, including “unsuccessfully styled outfits” (it turns out one

²¹⁵ Jenny Mustard, “how to always look good.”, Feb. 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYT68ASBxOc> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

can indeed fail at aesthetic appearances): “The exaggerated shape you get from head-to-toe oversized will give you an immediate cool factor, and you can hide more or less anything under that, like an unsuccessfully styled outfit or a PMS bloated tummy or the coffee stains that you got in the morning meeting; basically, if you're talking about safety blanket items, you cannot get any more blanketed than this.” It is not like the ambivalence has simply disappeared, because the vlog is framed by a vicious circle between aesthetic appearance and emotional mood. On the one hand, in the vlog’s premise, the host openly upholds the power of the aesthetic as capable of determining one’s “happiness” and “mental well-being”, which justifies the straightforwardly aesthetic tips on offer this time: “The problem is that it really affects your confidence, don't you think? Like, whether you feel like you look good or not can just make you behave differently – and also, weirdly, it can make you feel happy about your day or actually kind of miserable [...] affecting your mental well-being.” On the other hand, in the conclusions the host plays the aesthetic down by reversing its relation to the emotional and making the latter determine the former instead, in a subjectivist rhetorical move: “Those days where we are hard on ourselves for the way we look, I believe that it actually has very little to do with the way we look, and it's more like being in a bad mood – like, it happens: we are ‘hormony’, or having a tough day for whatever reason. Let's not take it out on our appearance: tomorrow we will be hot again.” In fact, both of these opposite takes on the aesthetic are subjectivist, because they turn it into a matter of an individual’s private emotions, whether as an end to be reached with aesthetic means or – vice versa – as a means to a (reductively) aesthetic end: the previous vlog emphasized the latter perspective, the present one is rather centred on the former, but both remain attempts at discounting aesthetic criticality – coming with struggles and thus dysphoric emotions – in subjectivist ways. Aesthetic tips on concealing one’s appearance by way of coats, scarfs, sunglasses and so on are more generally one part of those basic items that one can “create a look with” and “always, always feel like [one] look[s], you know, at least decent [...] and feel kind of good” (a more sober aim closer to that of the other minimalists we have seen, though the “holy trinity” is said to make the host “just go from, you know, ‘Oh I just woke up with messy hair’ to a superhot female in all about 30 seconds”). The host stresses versatility: a few favourite shoes that match every item in the wardrobe, a “chameleon go-to outfit” fitting any situation – from “dinner party with people you don’t know” to “job interviews” or “first day in a new school or a new job”,

and “semi-professional, semi-casual evening work events” or “first dates” –, a “hero outfit” that “works with any type of mood”, from “dress up” to “casual”, and so on. While there is here no explicit mention of “minimalism”, and while the host remarks that one’s versatile outfit “will of course be different for everyone depending on their personal style and taste”, her own positive examples are – predictably – black monochrome overall, from shoes to turtlenecks and blazers, and just like before, it is not at all clear how other personal styles may equally or similarly work in such a flexible manner in all situations and occasions. Moreover, the oversized coat is, for example, not just described but praised as both “cosy” and “Scandi chic”; it is evidently – and rightly – assumed that the audience’s styles or tastes will not differ that much from the host’s, after all. At any rate, the aesthetic is portrayed – and promised – as something that can be definitely and unilaterally solved or dissolved by the individual. Here, more aesthetic work is clearly endorsed by the host, because she explicitly says that to her being “overdressed” with regard to any context is better than being instead relatively “underdressed”, and thus more versatile: “Being underdressed, I hate; but being overdressed? Yeah, it's like a nice feeling. But I know lots of people feel uncomfortable being overdressed. Why though? Is it like, because of the attention to yourself? Or is it because you feel like you look like a 'try-hard'? I like looking like a 'try-hard' myself, because – you know what? – I am a 'try-hard', I'm just going to own it: I try hard, just in life, in general.” Nonetheless, or rather all the more because of this, aesthetic criticality must be regularly attenuated – at least – with subjectivist authenticity, promising to solve the aesthetic in an enduring and independent way (as in the “anti-trends” vlogs in the same channel, of which we have seen an example earlier).

Even though, for brevity’s sake, we have had to skip all the steps in the middle, the path we have followed in this section is the same we have gone through with the minimalist home tours, and makes more explicit – by virtue of clothes’ even closer ties to one’s personal expression – the rhetoric of authenticity that we had found in most of them, especially those lying at the supposed ends of the spectrum of the different shades of minimalism’s aestheticization. Whether it is D’Avella’s ironical inoffensiveness, CK-SPACE’s tired immunization or Mustard’s passionate muting, authenticity is called up in support of each channel’s broader project along with the positive display of minimalist clothes that, whether low-end casual or high-end chic, make the underlying promise

to solve and dissolve the aesthetic individually – once and for all – look more plausible. Even when the hosts only speak of just keeping one’s “favourites” and ignore, dismiss and/or downplay their own minimalist styles, they never concretely address the difficulties that would most likely emerge from trying to achieve the same (dis)solution of the aesthetic through different styles; what remains is the promise that it is indeed possible, that the aesthetic can be won and authentically so, which is one with other promises in the discourse (such as the anti-consumerist promise of more intentional and possibly also more economical and eco-friendly consumption, of course). To complete this abbreviated survey, we can draw again from a minimalist channel that mostly lies opposite to Jenny Mustard’s, in order to see how the promise remains operative, authenticity being only redoubled – as in Ana Goldberg’s case – by its further detachment from the more determinate minimalist aesthetic. In a vlog released in response to comments on one of her wardrobe tours²¹⁶, Ecofriend Lia’s host directly addresses the expectation – reflected in those comments – that a minimalist wardrobe would only be comprised of pieces of clothing one loves, items one is fully satisfied with, or indeed one’s “favourites”:

I got a lot of comments on this video [about my extreme minimalist wardrobe] where people said, “Why do you keep clothes you don’t love? You have such a limited amount of items; why don’t you just have things you love? Why do you keep things you are not happy with?” And that got me thinking, because it’s not totally wrong. Marie Kondo says that, and other people say that as well: when you move towards minimalism and declutter all of your items, try to keep your favourite items. Wouldn’t it be nice, wouldn’t it be great to wear your favourite items of clothing every day?

The promise we have seen explicitly or implicitly advanced in the other vlogs is here laid bare: minimalism’s reduction, as so often remarked in the minimalist discourse, has its positive face in selection, usually subjectivist – sifting through the unused and unloved to get at what is indeed used and loved by oneself, eventually “only owning” the latter; applied to one’s wardrobe, that indeed might mean a wardrobe made up of favourites only, or at least of clothes one can equally wear without incurring in any crisis, without struggling and making efforts to get dressed – without much thought. This is also the process the host herself went through in getting to what, at the time of this vlog, she still described as an “extreme minimalist wardrobe”, a result of multiple rounds of decluttering (despite her only owning favourites already after the first one): “I just kept what I liked best [...] and I was left with my favourite items. Over the past five years, where I decluttered more and more, I cut the items I keep in my closet in half again.

²¹⁶ Ecofriend Lia, “Why I don’t have a perfect MINIMALIST WARDROBE //Minimalism Struggles”, Sep. 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSCQ2cHrhuE> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

Right now, I'm pretty much at the minimum possible for my life.” From her experience, the host has come to realize that a minimalist wardrobe that is “perfect” at any one time is impossible, because of minimalism’s very drive towards perfection together with its internal conflicts:

With 99% of clothing items there are pros and cons to it, and that is exactly what happens to my clothing items as well. [...] I only have one of most of the things I own: I have one pair of shorts, I have one backpack, I have one pair of sandals, I have one pair of jeans, I have one pair of sweat-pants, I have one hoodie – so, the one I have kind of has to be perfect; and if I end up finding the perfect one, I wear it all the time. Since I only have three sweaters, that also means it will fall apart sooner [...] and I'm going to fix it. [...] So if I find a piece that is really perfect, it will not last that long, because it has to go anyway – because I can't wear it anymore. [...] It's quite normal to not be in love with all the pieces you own, and I also think that your needs and your style and your pieces change over time, so keeping your wardrobe at the perfect state at all times is really almost impossible. Because I have only one thing, I want it to be perfect; because I try to buy it sustainably, that means I'm on the hunt for the perfect piece second-hand, and that is sometimes the journey, that sometimes takes two years until I find a perfect piece. During that time, if I even had a perfect piece, that piece is not perfect anymore, because it's worn down to an extent where I can't wear it anymore. So I think that my wardrobe is in a constant change, and I have to say I love change, I have nothing against change, and I'm bored if there is nothing changing. But I'm perfectly happy with my wardrobe the way it is, even though, as you're totally right to comment, I am not happy with all the pieces I have.

The host accepts the idea that minimalism’s reduced wardrobe means a more selective wardrobe, in her case all the more so because of its “extreme” one-item version, and so she does endorse the pursuit of the perfect piece, yet this takes time – especially if one strives to buy sustainably and/or frugally, like the host –, which means that at any one moment one’s wardrobe will be made imperfect by frequently used, worn out and perhaps also repaired pieces. Moreover, change happens anyway, affecting one’s “needs” as much as “style” and thus the items, so that it is even more difficult to “be in love with all the pieces you own.” The underlying issue is, of course, actually an internal conflict of minimalism, because both its frugal and sustainable aspects would seem to demand acceptance of imperfect items – and care and repair – beyond one’s full subjective satisfaction with them, aesthetic or otherwise: were it not for this, a perfect wardrobe would only require constant replacements or upgrades. However, what our analyses show is precisely that the minimalist discourse at large actually works to obscure such internal conflicts and differences, making the frugal and/or the sustainable aesthetically – or emotionally – satisfying, and vice versa, through the same rhetorical moves of individual subjectivist intentionality and authenticity, all framed by literal or metaphorical reduction of excesses. Despite her lucid acknowledgment of the impossibility of perfection, therefore, the host does not really give up the pursuit of it by way of decluttering

and intentional purchases, and she in fact claims to be “perfectly happy” with her wardrobe as a whole, even though she may have issues with this or that single piece.

As in Ana Goldberg’s vlogs examined earlier, the appeal to imperfection does not ultimately undermine minimalism’s promises, revealing its contradictions. Insofar as it is insisted upon, imperfection surely alleviates the criticality of the discourse, but it mostly does so through the same route of authenticity that characterizes the discourse at large. The host is again well aware that, given one accepts imperfection, and given that a minimalist wardrobe has nothing to do with a certain aesthetic style – as it is here taken for granted –, such a wardrobe becomes so indeterminate as to make one wonder why decluttering should be even gone through in the first place, instead of embracing whatever wardrobe one starts from: “Maybe you also think now, why do I have such a limited amount of clothing items, why don’t I just have more, like a lot of other people, and then I’m maybe not happy with all of them, but at least it’s okay. Well, I think it’s still making me happier, it’s still making my life easier when I have such a limited amount of pieces.” She later contrasts her present wardrobe to the one she had as a child and especially as a teenager, filled with many pieces she did not like, and this is evidently understood as a bad thing. Neither the “happiness” for the minimalist wardrobe nor the distaste for her old wardrobe are concretely explained and justified in terms of their sustainability or unsustainability. Instead, it is once again an issue of authenticity, whose perfectionism – while hardly distinguishable from its adversary – is allied to sustainability against the aesthetic perfectionism of fashion, the one – as we have seen – intentional, while the other imposed or impulsive:

Fashion for me is not the same as it is for other people, maybe. I do always try to be comfortable in my clothing items; I also want to have clothing items that I think are beautiful, that I think I look good in, but that might just not be the same thing that you are looking for in clothing items – I don’t care, because it has to make me happy. And I think that I’m attached to a certain point to my clothing items, because they have to fulfil these qualities, they have to be adding value to my life, they have to be helpful to my life, and they have to make my life easier; but on the other hand I really want to suggest that we move away from being so, so focused on fashion. I do not want to offend anybody – I think everybody can do whatever they want with their wardrobe. That is what I try to do for myself: I try to be as sustainable as possible, I try to live my life as simple as possible, I want my clothes to support my lifestyle, and I’m not attached to the point where I think all of my clothes have to make me completely happy, or have to be perfect – but still I am looking for the perfect pieces, because they will make my life even easier, will be even nicer, will support me even more.

It is difficult not to lose track of where the aesthetic ends and the authentic begins. The host pursues clothes that are comfortable, beautiful and fitting her, and it is not clear how any of this significantly differs from fashion, especially if it is true that personal

needs and styles change as well. The difference, of course, lies in the very rhetorical negation of fashion and the aesthetic, without however ending up with the purely ethical-practical, with a sacrifice or desertion of the aesthetic altogether in service of environmental sustainability or other such causes. The aesthetic remains as the authentic, as the promise to enduringly resolve its crises, problems and overall negativity by oneself, including other concerns such as sustainability (which are similarly to be addressed by way of individual acts of intentional consumption). Decluttering must still be traversed to reject the aesthetic and get at the authentic, at its stable satisfaction for one's clothes taken as a whole, by which one does not partake – emphatically, that is, negating them – in fashion, trends and similar consumerist phenomena anymore; one can then make purchases whose intentionality is guaranteed by the same contrast with the consumerist and the aesthetic, and by maintenance of one's newly-found authentic wardrobe. So the host is attached yet not too much, pursues perfection yet not too much, and this “too much” is set up – as in the minimalist discourse at large – by the idea of an inauthentic, impulsive consumer. A minimalist wardrobe, whatever the shade of aestheticization, functions first of all as evidence or guarantee that one has left that inauthenticity and impulsivity behind (and in the host's case, of course, also that she is living sustainably²¹⁷).

If we look at one of the latest minimalist wardrobe tours in Ecofriend Lia's channel²¹⁸, then, we find even more explicitly the ideal of an “easy wardrobe” that solves and dissolves the aesthetic, just like in the other – presumably more aestheticized

²¹⁷ In her vlog relating her break from fast fashion – the “second-largest polluter on our environment” – four years before, the host makes the link more explicit: though “we as consumers are not responsible for all of it”, we do partake in it and increasingly so, to the point that “how we consume, and what we spend our money on, does really have an impact on how our world looks and which businesses can be successful”; this impact, however, is then translated in negative terms – the host's “consuming fashion in a sustainable and ethical way” is a way to “remove this bad impact” one otherwise has, so that one can “feel more at peace with [one's] decisions and actually living a life that is aligned with [one's] values” (Ecofriend Lia, “4 Years of No Fast Fashion | Sustainable Minimalist Wardrobe | My Slow Fashion Story”, Jan. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNSBEFvPc40>; last accessed: 14/11/2023). In other words, whatever the actual positive efficacy of individual intentional consumption, it nonetheless works as a form of purification, of detox indeed. The host's conversion is located in her last act of “impulse buying” a piece of clothing only because it was “nice”: after that, she was “removed” from shopping and has “completely broken the habit of buying fast fashion”, not feeling any desire to enter into stores when passing by. Her extreme minimalist wardrobe helped with that by “mak[ing] [her] choose very carefully” every new item instead of “just impulse buy[ing] it”, going for more sustainable brands as well as frugal second-hand stores; she now tries to “avoid consuming for consumption”, instead only buying what will “add value” to her life. A disclaimer on the many discriminating conditions behind such approach – budget, location, body-type, gender and style, along with accessibility of second-hand and/or sustainable alternatives – is added as a generic gesture, but it does not affect the host's confidence that the aesthetic can be authentically (dis)solved.

²¹⁸ Ecofriend Lia, “My Minimalist Wardrobe | Sustainable 4 Season Capsule”, Jul. 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2NMZ3kDO8CY> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

– vlogs: “I don't want to take a lot of time to pick out my outfits, I do wear clothes multiple times in a row and not wash them if they're not dirty – I just want to, like, be dressed easily, be super-comfortable, be confident, have beautiful pieces of clothing that I like myself in. And that's kind of, you know, an easy wardrobe that supports my lifestyle, instead of me needing to take much time out of my day to care for my wardrobe.” The host is even more satisfied with her present wardrobe, saying that she has “[n]ever been this happy” with it, and she has finally “ditched that label” of “extreme” minimalism by adding a few pieces and allowing for “winter accessories and winter stuff packed away in a second drawer”, though if one compares her non-extreme minimalist wardrobe to the previous “extreme” one²¹⁹, the differences appear pretty negligible: six t-shirts instead of four, two baskets of underwear instead of one, four pairs of pants instead of two – it is unclear how these changes could make any practical difference, especially given that the host's home has enough storage space to accommodate more than that. In fact, the actual changes made by the host – apart from the rhetorical move of disavowing the “extreme” – are almost entirely a matter of qualitative replacement of many pieces and especially the more worn out items (plus some upgrades, such as a new winter hat), because the only thing that is worn out now is her sandals. The host puts on almost every single piece in the wardrobe, commenting on it for what she likes or does not like about it, then puts it all away in the final fast-motion section in the drawer, wherein the wardrobe sits in perfect order. It is not a stark black-and-white wardrobe, especially not a “chic” one, nor is it the typical kind of casual uniform in cooler tones of D'Avella and Banks – it has a warm palette –, yet its clothes are nonetheless casual, monochrome and mostly neutral, and in it “everything works with everything else, like a capsule wardrobe should work.” The host does not present her own wardrobe as determining what a “minimalist wardrobe” in general is, of course, but neither did most if not all other minimalists we have considered, regardless of the shade of aestheticization: the host's wardrobe is displayed as one mere example that nonetheless positively confirms and adds to the aesthetic common sense, again making the promise of a resolved aesthetic plausible. As usual, this host is no doubt particularly aware and open about the conditions that make her wardrobe work in the promised way:

²¹⁹ Ecofriend Lia, “Extreme Minimalist Wardrobe (Everything I Own) | My Sustainable 4 Season Capsule”, Aug. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXNeNePaFPU> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

Keep in mind that that's just what works for me. I do have a pretty casual lifestyle, I don't need to meet any, like, dress code or requirements – and that is, like, my best approach to try to be minimalist, simple, sustainable, and still have, like, a bit of fun with my wardrobe. [...] I do not own any, like, dress shirts, zip hoodies, blouses or anything like that, just because my lifestyle doesn't require me to have these, and I like to have, like, a simple wardrobe where everything works with everything else like a capsule wardrobe should work. So I also do not have any dresses or skirts, or various other, like, categories that people have items in their wardrobes.

What a “minimalist wardrobe” would look like that included those different categories of clothes as well as a different style – or various styles at once –, and whether such a wardrobe would indeed be even possible or recognizable as such, the host does not however venture to say. The possibility remains implicit, indeterminately, in the positive example as in fact exemplar, as promising; the same could be said for the channel's aesthetic, the host's home and background being all-white and empty with just a few plants with just a warmer lighting than that of other channels. Of course, the host could always take the subjectivist stance and either say that any wardrobe is “minimalist” as soon as it is made up of only things one actively uses and/or loves, or that one can at any rate be “minimalist” in general even without being such with regard to one's wardrobe (or even one's owned things). However, what would then be the reason for releasing recurrent vlogs displaying her wardrobe, if it does not bring at least some “inspiration” to the audience? It would perhaps amount to the sponsorship of the few sustainable brands from which she draws most of her new clothes (here more than in earlier vlogs – this indeed seems to be the main change from the “extreme” minimalism to her now unqualified one). As in the minimalist home tours, then, we see that the rhetoric of authenticity and intentionality – framed by reduction of excess for a projected mostly emotional surplus – can operate across all shades of aestheticization, positing and promising an enduring solution to the aesthetic and its correlated consumerist imposed impulsivity without really acknowledging and thus critically exploring its aesthetic nature and its concrete conditions or consequences. D'Avella's uniform may be an available route to some, but first and foremost it works as an aesthetic support to the very rhetorical dismissal of the aesthetic (in turn generalized into a framing for a routinized lifestyle). Mustard's message is not as different from this as the gap between the casual and the chic may suggest: her passion for the aesthetic is still an authentic passion, also allied as elsewhere to a more sustainable and ethical intentional consumption. Ecofriend Lia may reverse some emphases, but the promise lives on. In fact, especially in her later vlogs, she accords less of a weight to imperfection than Ana Goldberg does, though the latter too – as we have seen – exploits imperfection to get at authenticity and more gen-

erally at the alleviation of aesthetic criticality, instead of pursuing it as itself aesthetic, as what “minimalism” may be better off actively looking like. Though the outcomes of this rhetoric do not coincide, since it is always put in the service of the single minimalist channel having a peculiar range and mix of topics, the fact that it works for all of them demonstrates, at the very least, that if there are indeed internal differences or even oppositions among them, that rhetoric does not at all suffice to bring them out, clarify them and deal with them. Like the subjectivist minimalism coming out of depolarization of the discourse as an all-inclusive indeterminacy, so the authentic minimalism rather seems to work to submerge and obscure the internal contradictions of the discourse, including its positive or negative reliance on an aesthetic common sense (and after all, the discourse’s link to other forms of frugality or “simple living” may easily stretch its common sense to include the warm and worn out aesthetic of Ecofriend Lia and similar channels, of course). It is, in this sense, what it most wishes not to be: an aestheticized minimalism.

2.4.2.2 – Ruling out the restrictive rules, except the rule of restriction

Our study has been focused on the minimalist discourse’s relation to its aesthetic dimension because of its central place both within its practices and as the prominent distinctive trait with regard to other forms of voluntary simplicity. However, a quite similar analysis could have been advanced, using other materials in our corpus, by examination of its ambiguity towards the methods and rules it circulates – the “tools” it claims to offer –, no less intense than that towards the aesthetic. By now, it is hopefully easier to imagine that minimalism’s subjectivist dismissals of all criteria to further determine what “minimalism” is, to develop itself as such, as well as its correlative appeals to authenticity and intentionality against the aesthetic and the impulsive, are both matched by similar rejections of definite methods and rules; and just like with the aesthetic, positively employed by the discourse regardless of its reservations, so the methods and rules too circulate in the discourse itself together with their negation or attenuation as overly rigid, overly critical. The rhetorical mechanism is pretty much the same: negation of aesthetic trends, ascetic myths and other stereotypes leads the discourse back to the indeterminacy of a common sense uniting more or less everyone – a common sense that is actually at the very least in continuity with the aesthetic –, and in a similar fashion the negation of rules ultimately circles back to common sense, appealing to practical good

sense in either letting the rules go altogether or applying them tentatively, moderately. The two are closely related, of course, since minimalism's intentional reduction – of things owned or bought, and then of anything else – is based on only keeping what one “uses” and “enjoys” – or “loves”, or what “sparks joy” and so on –, meaning by that what one authentically uses or enjoys: what is the need of methods or rules beyond this, especially since they are necessarily taken in from outside, from others? In closing this last section, we will look at just a few examples of vlogs that show the rhetoric of authenticity at work with regard to minimalism's tools for decluttering and discarding items. Rules too will be shown to make a positive and negative contribution to the discourse: negatively, rules stand in – in an exaggerated way – for the restrictive character of all shared objective criteria, which can thereby be exorcised, in the way the aesthetic is, for the authenticity of what one uses or enjoys; positively, rules still affirm, as the aesthetic in its own way does, that some restriction is needed, that intentionality comes by reduction and restraint – which paves the way, of course, to the other good habits, healthy routines or all kinds of tips from the self-help or self-improvement discourses that minimalism is embedded in. In the end, we are left with a subjectivist authentic intentionality with no content, which is supplied at most by the positive examples set by each channel for its audience, as well as by vlogs on broader topics (with or without mention of “minimalism” in them). It is worth repeating once again that any one “minimalist” may very well manage to put together his or her own subjectively favoured methods, rules, criteria and so on – commonsensical or not –, or make do with good sense aided by minimalism only as the vaguest reminder of being intentional, of leaning by default towards reduction. It is entirely possible to shrug off critique of the discourse's shortcomings and contradictions as beside the point, the point being nothing more than an inchoate invitation for each person to determine for oneself. As we have seen, however, this does not at all keep the discourse from proliferating, also in all kinds of positive determinate ways – and all shades of aestheticization –, nor does it in turn foster critical questioning of the promises that come with the invitation to be authentic or intentional with regard to one's things and/or throughout one's life at large. In both ways, the discourse is problematic as a whole regardless of the gains of this or that minimalist. It may rule out all rules, but not the one that backs up this very ruling out, nor the rule of restriction itself in all its infinitely malleable indeterminacy. As we have seen, the discourse is indeed problematic to minimalists themselves; it is just that in

their attempt to dispel its problems by doubling down on the rhetoric of authenticity, they are actually trying to put out fire with fire.

A good starting point would be Ecofriend Lia's vlog on the four principal methods to build a minimalist wardrobe²²⁰, which obviously works well as a transition from our previous section. These methods seem to be ordered by their increasing difficulty and commitment to minimalism, so that it is unclear how far the first two actually count as "minimalist" in the host's view. Her own approach, however, comes third on the list – despite her self-identification as an "extreme minimalist" –, precisely because on the one hand it pushes the commitment way beyond the first two methods, but on the other it disassociates itself from the rigidity of the fourth one (which is also reflected in the rule-bound nature of the first two); moreover, since the first two are associated with the aesthetic and the last one with the extreme – even more than the host –, the overlap we have just mentioned with our previous analyses is clearly present as well. The first method is the "10x10 challenge", a temporary experiment in which, with the exception of underwear, pyjamas and accessories, one picks ten items out of one's closet "that you really like", "that go well together" and "that you can build ten outfits out of", and then only wear those for ten days in order "to really see how much is possible with such a limited amount of clothing items." As just noted, the method's exact relation to minimalism is not that clear, because it is described as a way to "try out" minimalism without going "full out", but it is also praised as offering "different options" and already "mak[ing] the maximum out of [one's] individual pieces" by flexibly matching them in multiple outfits (which, as we have seen, is taken to be a defining character of a minimalist capsule wardrobe, despite it being not so obvious how the same could possibly be achieved through very different or plural styles). The second method is the "classic project 333", which already comes with more long-term commitment because here at least some things are actually decluttered, though only one season at a time: again with the exception of certain categories – underwear, pyjamas, sports clothing and so on –, but this time including jackets, shoes and accessories, one selects 33 items to use for three whole months – basically one season –, storing everything else away to be dealt with in due time, keeping it out of sight and thus out of mind: "For right now – for each individual point in time – you just have the 33 pieces to concentrate on, so that can remove

²²⁰ Ecofriend Lia, "MINIMALIST WARDROBE | 4 Good Ways to Start your Minimalist Capsule Wardrobe", Mar. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M6rN5WLbROA> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

a lot of stress, it can make things so much easier.” Now, while this second method is of course associated from the start to minimalism, it shares with the first one a character that makes it again appear as a weaker commitment: like the other method, which basically does not demand any decluttering in the sense of actual discarding of items – instead of just storing them away –, this second method maintains a gap between the foregrounded seasonal wardrobe and all the rest which is left concealed in the background, but is still there. Needless to say, this foreground-background gap easily calls forth that between the aesthetic apparent and the authentic real, which is difficult to bear for minimalists as we have seen:

But again, I also have to say you have more clothes than these 33 pieces, so if you're looking to really drastically declutter and downsize your belongings in general, you might not be satisfied with that approach because you still always know that there's more than you currently have. [...] You always know – in the back of your mind – there is more, there is more you have to tackle, there is more you have to change once a new season comes up, there is more that you can't really touch right now or decide right now, because it's not the current season. And that is one point for me that made me decide to not go forward with project 333 or similar rules with, like, a limited amount of pieces – just because I want to have all the clothes at once.

Vice versa, in praise of her own method, the host claims that “it’s a good approach to have, like, the whole picture, to know that you’re going forward with your minimalist wardrobe, to actually declutter things that you don’t need, to actually downsize the number of possessions”: while again it is not explicitly said that the first two methods are not “minimalist” too, it is nonetheless clearly suggested here that “going forward” with the minimalist wardrobe entails “actually decluttering” and “actually downsizing”, so that it is primarily if not only the discarding of items that counts as proper evidence and confirmation that one is becoming a “minimalist” (at least with regard to one’s wardrobe). That minimalism is at bottom not just a set of practical solutions for practical problems – as is sometimes claimed in the discourse, especially when the crises of “minimalist” as an identity-label arise –, but rather an aesthetic as well as rhetorical performance of authenticity, could not be illustrated any better than by this distaste for storing things away instead of getting rid of them. If the point of a minimalist wardrobe really is to make one’s life easier, for example by simplifying the choices involved in getting dressed every day, what difference could it ever make whether the leftover things are kept or discarded, provided one has the practical option of storing them at no cost or consequence²²¹? The difference is that, in fact, the hidden interiors of storage spaces are

²²¹ This is already evident in the minimalist discourse’s disdain for separate storage spaces, which – as we have seen in O’Brien’s minimalist home tours – are pointed to as signs of an obsession with accumulation

never actually hidden in the first place, as it may appear from the relative contrast of foreground to background, because “you always know in the back of your mind that there is more”: out of sight is not necessarily out of mind, since the absent can still be phenomenologically present even as relatively absent (including decisions to be made in the future about what is absent, of course). This demand to have “all the clothes at once” makes it clear, as did already the wish to solve and dissolve the aesthetic once and for all, that minimalism’s authentic ideal of “only owning” what is used and/or enjoyed is really an aesthetic ideal, something that one must be able to see expressed – and thus confirmed – at a glance, nullifying that foreground-background gap but by making everything foregrounded, not the other way around. This “whole picture” is then of course reinforced by aesthetic cohesiveness, by the possibility of ideally matching everything with everything else, so that this too becomes part of the paradoxical aesthetic ideal of authenticity, irreducible to its supposed practical advantages.

Thus we get at the third method, the host’s own approach, and we already know that it deals with the whole four-seasons wardrobe at once, nothing excluded: it is a riskier method that requires the commitment and confidence to “not be afraid to actually declutter things that you don’t need” in one’s overall clothes, but still also “be pretty sure that you will be able to get by with the amount of clothes you now have left.” This third method, however, is not really specified any further than this, which is why it is simply labelled as “decluttering”:

It's just decluttering the clothes you have and only having a very limited amount of clothes after decluttering [...]. I just decluttered again and again and again, and the number of pieces decreased each time I decluttered; and now I ended up at something between maybe 15 or 25 pieces depending on how you count – and I'm happy this way. [...] Usually you just have a mix of things you had in your wardrobe and you declutter that and you end up with another mix of things: it's usually not very curated, it's usually not very thought through, because you keep your favourite things, the things you have to keep, other things you couldn't decide to let go. And so I think what is really important with that approach is to really also look at what you have, maybe fill some gaps in your wardrobe if you really need something that you don't have, but also not be afraid to actually declutter things that you don't need.

One simply keeps decluttering one’s clothes multiple times until one is “happy” with what is ended up with, only being careful about having enough to get by at each round

for its own sake, without justification in terms of actual use or enjoyment. This once again reveals that authenticity is not only nor primarily a matter of taking sides for the authentic real against the aesthetic apparent, but rather of collapsing the gap between the two after having opened it up: the authentic here is not identified with the hidden interior – that is in fact what is criticized, the storage space –, but rather the thoroughly manifest exterior use and enjoyment of all things with nothing hidden in isolated interior spaces.

of decluttering. The criterion of aesthetic cohesiveness and matching clothes is implied in the concession of “filling the gaps” in one’s wardrobe, but it is not insisted upon: one keeps the “favourite things” regardless of that, in addition to necessary things (and others still which one is uncertain about, but will perhaps declutter in subsequent rounds). The point is first and foremost that eventually one only owns “a very limited amount of clothes”, without that limit being determined in any direct or indirect way – though again the host’s own positive example is there, and pushes the limit quite far (after revealing that she only has 11 pieces of clothing for spring, one third of those allowed by the second method, she explicitly says – with no concrete explanation or justification whatsoever – that the amount in project 333 was “too much” for her, even though it is already less than what most people usually own). This leads us to the second opposition that negatively constitutes this third method as such, in its typically minimalist indeterminacy, already with regard again to the first two methods: while more committed, the third method is nonetheless not as strict and rigid as the previous two, because these involve – as we have seen – specific rules that define and fix the limits in advance and arbitrarily, so that for example in project 333 one does have the recurrent chance of making and remaking intentional decisions at the start of every season, but is then bound to leave things as they are for the whole three-months period, steering clear from any decluttering or shopping or change. Despite keeping available many more options through its larger amount of clothes in the foreground, its reserve at any rate present in the background, and its allowing for peculiar pieces meant for special occasions, the second method is here presented as more restrictive than the third one, just because it seems more determinate – by virtue of both its more openly aesthetic character, aiming as it does at “curating” the foregrounded wardrobe in a cohesive and matching manner, and of its rule-bound character, setting up a quantitative limit. On the contrary, the third method pushes further towards a limit which is indeterminate in both these senses, yet remains clearly inclined by default – and by the host’s own example – to less and less stuff, in a way that is in fact at least as arbitrary than any number adopted in advance: there is no actual criterion offered to help one evaluate whether he or she has decluttered enough – as we have just said, practical advantages do not suffice –, only the suggestion that there is probably more to be decluttered in further rounds. Like everywhere else in the discourse, subjectivist indeterminacy is taken to constitute flexibility on its own, without any aid needed from shared criteria: one that “really looks at what one

has” will just know when he or she is “happy” with the amount of clothes, and will also know when some further change is to be made. The host does realize that “you can do that with every approach, obviously”, that one can adapt as much as adopt the rules provided by the first two methods, but still they are employed as representative of rigid rules for a rhetorical contrast which once again makes the subjectivist lack of any criteria appear more reasonable, more “organic” and “natural” instead of mechanically and artificially imposed from the outside, more authentically intentional, despite the risks (decluttering too much, buying or buying back too much, or oscillating too much or too often between the two):

You can always add more clothes, you can always declutter more clothes, you can make your own rules because it's not, like, a set idea – but you can do that with every approach, obviously –, but what I love about a minimalist wardrobe like this is it's, like, the most organic way to approach it – or more natural way. But that is again really both strength and weakness, because you can now personalize it and decide each day what you want to change with your wardrobe, [...] but that flexibility also makes it hard for ourselves to be strict sometimes and to actually move in the direction that you want to go in the long run.

It is evident that the host here is trying to detach a rule of restriction – the push to “actually move in the direction that you want to go in the long run”, which is on the whole less than before – from the restrictive rules, or more generally criteria (such as aesthetic cohesiveness), that determine the limit and make it appear too obviously as something externally imposed. In other words, the “weakness” of the third method is that one may intentionally decide that no more reduction – or no reduction at all, or too little – is needed! Was that not the whole point of stopping where one is “happy” with the wardrobe? Stopping anywhere is suspicious, and since no other criteria are available, what remains is this suspicion, with the concomitant call for being perhaps just a bit stricter and try pushing some more. The rule-bound alternatives are not excluded by the host, yet this rule-less strictness is clearly the preferred way, again more authentic and intentional than the previous ones.

A fourth method is included to reaffirm the same opposition to rules, but at the other end of the first opposition, that between the foreground and the background. We already know this method from the previous section, because it is the personal uniform, even more extreme than the host’s extreme minimalist wardrobe, but above all rigidly and artificially determined in advance: since a single uniform is surely not enough to get by, one will have to purchase multiple copies of its elements – which may seem needlessly redundant – after decluttering everything else and having decided on one’s uni-

form once and for all. As in the first and second method, the uniform has the “strength” of being strict in its push for reduction, plus – as we have seen – (dis)solving the aesthetic once and for all, but it is also similarly presented as too inflexible for most people:

I think a personal uniform is a great way to just really remove every thought about your wardrobe out of your life, to really – you will always have something to wear, you will never have to think about what outfit you want to pick, you have it very easy when it comes to laundry. [...] It has that huge strength of removing all the attention from your clothes [as far as] possible – to just have a very simple uniform and wear it every day to concentrate on the things that matter more to you in life, to have more time and energy just for other things that you think are more important. [...] But of course, with that comes the downside that if you are excited about fashion, if you want to change up things, if you want to be flexible and have different kinds of outfits, that's not really possible with an uniform. [...] I think most people at least want to have some variety in their wardrobe, most people want to be flexible, most people are not super sure about the future that much that they would declutter everything else except for that one kind of outfit they have as their personal uniform.

The host's own indeterminate method is thus also opposed to the fourth one, which is after all rule-bound as well (the rule being: only one specific type of outfit, no matter in how many copies). If we keep in mind our analyses in the last section, we will readily see that what is at stake here is precisely the way in which “intentionality” and its criticality have to be understood, more than the practical issue of how many or how few clothes it makes sense for a person to own for whatever purpose: the intentionality represented both by the minimalist uniform and by the other two rule-bound methods is an intentionality that plans things in advance and then just sticks to the plans in a routine manner, while that represented by the host's vague decluttering method is one which instead continually and flexibly questions things along the way. These accounts of intentionality are obviously contradictory, because the former is the attempt – corresponding to that promise of authenticity – to (dis)solve intentionality and its criticality once and for all, so that it can be directed to the worthier things, but the latter on the contrary strives to perpetuate it, even to the point of “decid[ing] each day what you want to change with your wardrobe.” How embroiled minimalism's understanding of “intentionality” is in this contradiction can be noted by recalling Ecofriend Lia's later problematization of minimalism as obsessively “thinking about less things” rather than just “thinking less about things”, as she will by that time prefer to stress (she comes close to getting rid of the “minimalism” label altogether, but eventually holds on to it). In those vlogs, the host rejects the “thinking about less things” as minimalism pushed too far, too extreme, opposing to its obsession a more easy-going and unconcerned “thinking less about things”, and yet this is clearly but a perpetuation of the same promise of not hav-

ing to think about clothes anymore that is most associated here to the extreme uniform. This reversal illuminates the workings of the minimalist discourse as managing criticality and its contradictions, on the one hand calling for a more critical – intentional – consumption, on the other avoiding the crises it involves – as struggle and stress conflict with subjectivism – by instead pursuing an enduring solution of authentic consumption (the two sides, intentional and authentic, collapsing into one – “intentional” is usually preferred in the discourse – as both understood in a subjectivist way). The host’s method in the present vlog emphasizes an on-going criticality by ruling out all restrictive rules but the rule of restriction, and yet, just like it draws from the first two methods the principle of aesthetic cohesiveness and matching of clothes, so it cannot but draw from the fourth one the promise of never thinking about clothes again, of thoroughly solving their problem (and having the proof on sight at a glance): it is positively though implicitly connoted by both, since it otherwise has little to no content of its own, except the indeterminate invitation to declutter and discard more (certainly more than what can be justified by practical advantages only). The relationship is the same as to the aesthetic common sense: it is denied to negatively project a more authentic, intentional minimalism held back into the indeterminacy of reducing excesses for some vague surplus – usually emotional, but if need be linked to all kinds of other benefits, such as practical or social ones –, but at the same time it is constantly affirmed to positively inform and influence it in all sorts of way (for one, making it appear more plausible that the aesthetic can be done away with once and for all by oneself, as in the case of the minimalist uniform). Just like for the aesthetic, if methods and rules were to be actually confronted in a critical way, that would entail determining and developing minimalism’s ends and ideals to the point of stumbling onto its contradictions, and then either give “minimalism” up or face its contradictions to concretely reconcile them (or differentiate plural minimalisms, but without denying their incompatibility in the very next breath). Instead, rules are easily dismissed – as stereotypes are on the aesthetic front – as rigid, imposing, artificial, and elsewhere also as excluding some people from “minimalism”, and so on: they are, indeed, stereotypes of criteria, highlighting the way in which objective shared criteria may go wrong, and on that basis holding back the discourse from further determining and developing them at all.

When reporting on items they have decluttered or suggesting items to be decluttered – more often both at once, of course –, minimalist influencers exhibit at every turn these kinds of rhetorical moves, which are the ones that constitute “minimalism” as a lifestyle at all, as something more than the sum of practical solutions to practical problems: these provide support to the discourse’s plausibility by making the surplus it promises more concrete, but the surplus is not exhausted by them (as minimalists instead often claim, when they present minimalism as just a set of instrumental “tools” for purely practical benefits, in order to get rid of the crises it sparks precisely because it is not such a set of tools). In fact, the items minimalists list are frequently general categories of items, and they are addressed in terms of the owner’s relationship with them, often a negative emotional one which is to be discarded along with the item. These categories work much more as “rules” of the discourse than the arbitrary quantitative ones that are often dismissed or rejected, but they are not recognized as such because they are usually already soaked into the rhetoric of authenticity, into the rule of restriction. One last vlog²²² by Ecofriend Lia can be our first example, its title already displaying minimalism’s lifestyle promise of “a better life” beyond definite practical advantages (despite the criticism that the host had levelled at minimalism one month earlier, in her vlog on the problem of minimalism we have examined): the vlog is explicitly meant to clarify “how to make sure that we're not just blindly getting rid of stuff and consuming stuff – trying minimalism and maybe fail at minimalism –, but that we're actually making sure that the decluttering we do does have a positive impact.” The way to dispel the potential “blindness” of decluttering is not, however, to critically take into account some set of shared objective criteria, but rather to keep the criteria subjective and persist with authenticity, pushing it further. The general categories of “things” – some of which will turn out not to be actual things – offered by the host are for the most part varieties of unused or underused items immediately attached to negative emotions: items – especially electronic devices – with overlapping functions, duplicates with one and the same function, items with only a specific function coming up too infrequently and so on, they all are tied – with no explanation – to a feeling of “guilt”, and in an increasingly obvious way; it is not just a matter of practical advantages or disadvantages. One category exemplifies very well the underlying emotional interpretation of items that we find in

²²² Ecofriend Lia, “10 Things I Decluttered To Live a Better Life | Minimalism”, Mar. 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxIdiVpB0vU> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

the minimalist discourse (as in perhaps the most widespread category that we have already encountered before, the “‘just in case’ items”): the “‘missed chance’ things” are bought for a certain practice which is then however abandoned or not even begun, like the host’s tools and supplies for making her own bags – she “only” made a few, then “started feeling guilty” because the items were “laying around” without her using them; in her words, such items “just take a lot of space in your home and on your mind”, so it is better to declutter them and “be okay with failing.” It is clear that the “space on your mind” has priority on the supposedly practical “space in your home”, since the host’s mostly empty house appears to have still enough free space not to be at risk; the problem is the feeling of “failing” at regularly if not continually sticking up to a certain practice – that is, at authentically taking it up. The same goes, as we have also seen in other vlogs, for clothes tied to special occasions, necessarily infrequent in their use and yet – with no real explanation, again – somehow suggesting a failure on the part of the host: “They often made me feel guilty – I didn’t use them as much as I wanted to use them –, and overall they just didn’t add value to my life, but have made it more complicated because I had to think about when to use them, feel guilty if I didn’t, [and] kind of like make sure I make up enough opportunity to use them.” The basic criterion of actual “use”, taken abstractly by itself with no further determination, is turned from an objective criterion to a subjective one, so that the problem of unused items and clothes is not so much – if at all – that, for example, other people could use them instead, but that one is not authentic (nor an authentic “minimalist”, which is almost the same thing). As with imperfection, being “okay with failing” here betrays more an uneasiness with it than vice versa, because the items are decluttered precisely in order to get rid of that feeling of failure, in the same way in which the aesthetic perfection disseminated by digital social media as “minimalist” is rejected through appeals to (supposedly non-aesthetic) imperfection in order to do away with the feelings of imperfection, not to stay with it and actively, positively cultivate an imperfect aesthetic. The rule of restriction is taken for granted and passes on without any restrictive rule openly in place, though the categories do positively inform it by suggesting general sorts of items that the viewer too should consider decluttering.

If practical benefits are strongly overshadowed by authenticity, ethical issues are completely absent here: we find few traces, here, of the host’s concern with sustainable

or ethical consumption. In fact, the host here openly pushes for upgrades and replacement of things not only when they cannot be used anymore, but also when they are just not liked anymore – even aesthetic, like the host’s pink plastic laundry basket replaced with “a beautiful wooden one” because she “just didn’t like it”: she bought it second-hand and with no “waste” by giving the ugly one away to someone else, but no particular caution is urged when she suggests getting rid of things one does not like. Therefore “bad quality stuff”, along with anything that is not enjoyed for whatever reason, can be substituted – after saving up – with “the good quality version”, all justified in the usual subjective terms of authenticity, of not being “excited for” those things, especially but not exclusively clothes:

If I, you know, save up or invest in the good quality version, then I can rid of the bad quality one, because I think that spending our time with things that are not working is just taking so much energy at times. [...] A way [minimalism] made my life better is through decluttering things that I wasn't excited for. Like, I kept items that I thought I had to own or that somebody else told me I had to own, or that I liked in the past or had to own in the past, but that were just not right for my current life. So they were just items I didn't like wearing, that didn't fit well anymore, that I just didn't need and were never items I liked wearing. [...] And that also goes for other items in your house, that are just not your favourite, that you don't enjoy using – and especially if you have enough other stuff that you can use.

This is but “excess stuff”, unused or not enjoyed, “stuff that you can easily cut away from your life and you won't notice a difference in the sense of, like, missing it, but it's something that you haven't used anyway, or you only used feeling bad.” It is inauthentic stuff, either taken up from outside as a perceived or overt imposition, or taken over from a past that is equally understood to be external to oneself. Nothing that is not both currently and regularly used or enjoyed should remain, with no reserve forming a background of possibilities not actualized. This is made most explicit in the similar treatment of sentimental items – in the host’s case, especially drawings and pictures –, because here the host claims that there is no point at all in keeping those that are not at present actively looked at and appreciated (meaning by this, as is implicit, getting positive emotions), and thus also no point in keeping more than one could so contemplate at any one time:

[Those sentimental items] were not useful, and they were just a lot, so to look at them I would maybe need to take a whole day or two to actually look at each single piece – and it was just too much for me to actually appreciate them. And so by decluttering I could make sure that I keep my favourites, that it doesn't take as much space. [...] If you just store them away, and if there's too much for you to actually go there and look at them, then there's no reason for having them like this. [...] It only makes sense to keep sentimental items if they're accessible to you, if you like looking at them, if you have – get a certain value from owning them at all.”

It is then better to consider “the situations and people and feelings [one] had for these items again”, prioritize and finally declutter them in order to get at “a number that [one] can actually look at, that [one] can actually appreciate.” We see again, in this striving for actual appreciation of things, that in fact authenticity is not at all opposed to the aesthetic, but is rather aesthetic to an extreme, intolerant of anaesthetic things stored away in the background (beside the unaesthetic ones, like the pink plastic laundry basket disrupting the aesthetic cohesiveness of the host’s home). The promise of a more meaningful life is then of course one with this authenticity, since it is basically the demand for everything to be meaningful together, at once and at present to oneself: a surplus which does not come from, nor return to, any excess. When she reveals that one of the “things” she decluttered from life is “music”, that she “did not actively listen to music” for the last ten years, suggesting that it might be a good idea doing the same for other media – podcasts, TV shows, Netflix series, even YouTube itself (despite it being her source of income) –, the host explains this decision by saying that silence “adds more value” to her life than music, that it adds “more space to think, more space to rest, more space to also, like, figure out some problem, and relax and be myself – instead of me thinking about the lyrics, or singing along, or choosing the next song and things like that”; however, in addition to these apparently anti-aesthetic remarks against music, she also points out that she had “a very, very overwhelming and weird library of illegally downloaded music and legally purchased music, and it was just a whole mess.” How can one authentically listen to music when there is so much of it? It is better to let it go altogether and “be oneself” elsewhere, as well as through the rhetorical negation of music as alienating in its aesthetic engrossment of oneself.

Whether the accent falls on use or enjoyment, then, the general categories of items are clearly centred on authenticity. They could not be presented as rules, nor do they need to – they already offer positive examples and “inspiration” anyway, and they all take for granted and reaffirm the rule of restriction in all areas of life. The ambiguity of authenticity and its counterpart intentionality with regard to rules, which is what we want to stress by pointing to a “rule of restriction”, is also present in this vlog through direct and indirect reference to “decision fatigue”, another of the main negative emotional relationships to things addressed by the host. The on-going intentionality of the previous vlog is here supplanted by the other kind of intentionality, the one that settles

decisions once and for all to avoid criticality: it is, once again, not just for practical reasons that the host prefers not to have electronic devices with overlapping functions, for example having half of one's files on a computer and the other half on a smartphone, or having to recharge two devices instead of one, but also in order to not having to decide which one to use – the small, lightweight but worse camera or the bigger and better but less portable one? Similarly, the host does not own bags, suitcases or anything of the sort except for one and only one backpack that works for everything, avoiding “decision fatigue” as well as the risk of perhaps making a mistake: “Right now, I just only have one backpack and I use it for every, every, everything, and that's great because it's always – I can never make the wrong decision, and everything I left in my bag is always gonna be in there.” Just like with the minimalist uniform, the point is not, of course, that everyone should get a multipurpose backpack, though it might indeed be positively suggested by the host's recurrent enthusiastic praise for her backpack in many of her vlogs; the point is rather the promise, thereby made more plausible, that criticality can generally be done away with once and for all in many areas of one's life. Although it does not define any determinate rule, this promise is a promise of regularity, of routine, which the opposition to explicit, determinate and quantitative rules serves to make authentic, just like the opposition to the aesthetic. Therefore, the host claims she has also “decluttered” nothing less than “variety” itself from her life, in the wardrobe – no bags, dresses, skirts, blouses, heels, belts and so on, no unmatched colours – as well as elsewhere, and at this juncture she appreciates having a “very easy formula” to follow:

That might sound a bit sad, but I cut out of my life variety, and that was also meant to be in my wardrobe and in, like, other areas of my life, even maybe how I spend my time sometimes. But I think variety is good, you know, if you enjoy it and if there are many different things you like, and then you choose to do all these things, you choose to wear all these different things. [...] If you would take this to the extreme, that would mean having ten black t-shirts and no other t-shirt – and I think for some people that might be right, because again it eliminates a lot of decisions, it makes it impossible to choose the wrong one and things like that. But for me, eliminating a certain amount of variety [...] makes getting dressed a lot easier for me, because there's just a very easy formula. [...] I also kind of limited the variety of colour I have in my home and my wardrobe, and it makes combining pieces a lot easier. [...] In your case it could be something else than your wardrobe, it could be the meals you eat each week [...] if it's not an area that's important to you.

An authentic variety where you “choose to do all these things” and enjoy them is not excluded, just like it was not in D'Avella's appeal to “add variety and spontaneity” in the things that matter more, after having saved up on them from other unimportant areas such as one's aesthetic appearance, but it would have to be indeed authentic, as free from negativity and criticality as the host is with regard to her wardrobe (though even

then, as we have remarked at times, it is not clear whether it would be recognizable as “minimalist” anyway, instead of perhaps being understood as only authentic). Everyone should make his or her own rules, but some rule must be pursued, or at least some regularity, within the minimalist framing of reduction. Rejection of rules for minimalism serves to make regularity as such – plus the positive suggestions of rules and other criteria that circulate in the discourse anyway – more authentic. The host says she wants to “try to live up to [her] expectations”, not those of others (such as women having longer hair, or the idea that being a YouTube vlogger is not a real job): “I’m trying to get rid of, like, arbitrary standards and rules and beliefs and mindsets that I have about myself and that maybe also society has about myself, because I think there are so many things that can make my life harder if I try to please other people, if I try to live up to the expectations that I think society has for me.” These external expectations, opposed by the host to an internal “liv[ing] up to my own expectations” and “try[ing] to live my life”, are again one of the “things” that the host has decluttered along with guilt, decision fatigue, risk of making mistakes and so on. The result may not be fixation of an arbitrary amount of things as a rule for minimalists, but the aversion to and reduction of possibilities by regularization and routinization is nonetheless there, in fact all the more so: all things should be actual and regular, with no neglected activities to feel guilty for, no aesthetic or other crossroads to be exhausted by, no mistakes nor judgments to be afraid of. Since it is in fact rules and regularity on both sides of the divide, just like with the aesthetic and the authentic, this intentional living actually encloses the living within tension that it promises to get rid of.

As in other sections, we can find a similar approach even at what should be the diametrically opposed minimalist channel in terms of aestheticization, Jenny Mustard’s. In one of her recent vlogs listing things that one “should get rid of”²²³ in one’s spring declutter, the things listed are again general categories of items all defined in terms of one’s negative relationship to them: the “‘maybe one day’ things” unutilized at present but possibly usable in the future, especially those for special occasions like “weird hiking boots” or “kitchen gadgets”; the usual “‘just in case’ things” which are kept as an emergency reserve of lesser quality duplicates or alternatives to other items used; the “‘so-so’ clothes” which are not bad per se but neither make one “one bit happier”; the

²²³ Jenny Mustard, “6 THINGS YOU SHOULD GET RID OF! (spring declutter)”, Feb. 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i0mmVVVpAAG> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

“‘for now’ items” that are held onto “until we find or can afford that perfect item”; the “‘I should’ items” which are tied to certain practices and were bought as “tools for improvement” of oneself – “camera equipment”, “at home workout gadgets”, “pile of books on knitting” – but ended up not being used, making one just feel worse about oneself; and finally the “‘if only’ items” which are kept for distant “dream castles” one is not already working on at present, such as one day buying a bigger house, or moving to a different city or the countryside. The correspondences with Ecofriend Lia’s more loosely handled categories are evident, from the rejection of special-purpose and thus infrequently used items to the exigency that items “excite” one and make one “happier”, or the guilt provoked by tools and supplies bound to neglected or abandoned practices: “Every time you make eye contact with them, you hear them whisper: ‘you should’ – ‘you should learn this’, or ‘practice more’, or ‘eat better’, or ‘workout today’, or whatever those tools are saying.” No better illustration could be found of how the criticality of self-improvement itself is managed by the minimalist discourse, encoding it into things in order to declutter it along with them. Moreover, as in Ecofriend Lia, here too the act of decluttering is alleviated by reference to other people who may actually use and enjoy those things one merely has lying around or stored away as a background reserve of possibilities, or those that are not liked even if in fact “there’s nothing wrong” with them: “It’s so easy to hang on to a piece of clothing that has never made you feel gorgeous, or excited to accessorize in style with your other clothes, simply because there’s nothing wrong with it: it fits you, it’s whole and clean, it’s not in any way bad-looking, but still – we never reach for it when deciding what to wear. [...] Better give it to someone who will actually wear it and be excited about it.” This is again a call for replacements and upgrades, and the host has of course no problem including those that are aesthetically-motivated, since it is at any rate taken for granted that it is an authentic aesthetic for “beauty hunters” like the host, whose emotional well-being is negatively affected by the unaesthetic:

I feel that looking at items I find aesthetically displeasing affects my mood negatively so much. I know not everyone is like this, but for us beauty hunters fewer, beautiful items will always be better than looking at things we find ugly used to fill up the space. I mean, I’d rather have no wine glasses than wine glasses that I don’t even like. [...] The thing with these interim temporary [“for now”] items is that they often become permanent. If you have a boring desk lamp you don’t particularly like, you’ll have much less motivation to find that one really good treasured one.

The contradiction in all these remarks is evident: at one time, the problem with “things” is that they remind one of unfulfilled aspirations for self-improvement and their critical-

ity, while at other times it is rather that they satisfy one enough to dispel the push for aspirational self-improvement, here in the aesthetic terms of surrounding oneself of a collection of beautiful objects. While no doubt made clearer by the host's openly positive attitude towards the aesthetic – as long as it is authentic, without anyone else but the individual seemingly coming into view and into play –, the contradiction is no different than that in Ecofriend Lia's suggestion of discarding things we are “not excited for”; in fact, her stronger anti-aesthetic rhetoric has precisely the problem of obscuring the contradiction. In both cases, minimalism's decluttering is based on the rule of restriction which is authenticity, whose indeterminacy can then be made to support what else the channel positively suggests. The host here does distinguish the things that only “take up space both mentally and physically”, as well as “need maintenance”, from those that are “downright sinister” and “make you actually unhappy”, but in the end both are best decluttered from one's life – they are all things one “should” get rid of, as the title of this vlog explicitly says. Each in its own way, they all open up a crisis, a gap, in one's authenticity: the gap between what one actually and regularly does and what one might do (“‘maybe one day’ things”) or should do (“‘I should’ items”), the gap between what is and what might happen (“‘just in case’ things”, “‘if only’ items”), or that – in contradiction to the others – between what one actually desires and what one owns instead (“‘so-so’ clothes”, “‘for now’ items”). Being aesthetic to the extreme, aiming at its enduring (dis)solution, the rhetoric of authenticity can both raise criticality and promise its dissipation. Similarly, such general categories of items are rules that, being based on authenticity, are not easily recognized as such, yet push for regularity.

It is not surprising, then, that the minimalist channel most openly and strongly relying on the rhetoric of authenticity – Ronald L. Bank's channel – has a vlog in which the same criteria encoded in the general categories of items are summed up into one's inauthentic relationship to things as the main obstacle for minimalism²²⁴. Feelings of guilt, of fear towards the future as implicit in the items kept “just in case” or obligation to the past as implicit in sentimental items, together with dread of deprivation more generally, are imputed to a self-identification with one's belongings to the point of feeling like one is losing pieces of one's very self in decluttering things. With no mention of practical benefits at all nor of ethical consumption, it is here entirely explicit that at its

²²⁴ Ronald L. Banks, “Something All Minimalists Need To Hear”, Aug. 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9EGLW_xnGqQ (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

core minimalism is a matter of authenticity, in fact almost identical to it, and – in this vlog at least, since “minimalism” is problematized – subordinated to it:

When you prioritize yourself [...] by default you start prioritizing what is important to you, what adds value to your life, what you like or don't like, the things you want in your life or not. [...] If it's hindering you in any way from just being yourself, [...] then why would you want to keep it in your life? [...] What if minimalist living, what if minimalism itself, was just the outcome or the result of you being yourself, your whole self, your authentic self?

Problematic identification with things is paradoxically solved by discarding all one does not identify with. Since authenticity thereby works as the promise of solving aesthetic criticality once and for all by oneself, it is easy to see why it may be appealed to as solving minimalism's problems despite the fact that they are almost taken to coincide. As a spontaneous natural consequence of just “being oneself”, the crises of minimalism are concealed and downplayed by the supposed effortlessness of “prioritizing” things of all kinds by one's supposedly self-evident subjective preferences. This is an alternative to the claim that minimalism is just a set of “tools” instrumentally leading to a better life which is more authentic or intentional, again subordinating minimalism to something broader in order to disavow its problematic dimension as a positive aesthetic ideal and/or rhetorical identity. The two alternatives would be in opposition since the former amounts to claiming that no tool is needed beyond one's authentic subjective judgment – which just comes naturally –, while the latter stresses the aid to such judgment provided by minimalism's tools. However, when minimalist authenticity is itself recognized as an indeterminate rule of restriction beyond any set of too determinate restrictive rules, the opposition is quite softened: the “tool” minimalism provides is first and foremost its invitation to subjectivist authenticity and intentionality through the particular framing of its practices of restriction and reduction of all kinds of things (or “things”). The title of the vlog unwittingly underscores the core point of our rhetorical analyses: the host's brief motivational speech on authenticity is “something all minimalists need to hear”, despite the assumed and affirmed subjectivism and despite the fact that its rhetoric already permeates the whole minimalist discourse, because only by going through these rhetorical moves the rule of restriction can be offered as the “tool” for authenticity without it fully appearing as a tool and rule, which would instead contradict authenticity. Our point, in this last analytical section, is precisely to stress that this contradiction goes hand in hand with the one we have focused on between the authentic and the aesthetic, which is also visible here: the subjective “prioritizing oneself” is neces-

sarily translated into the objective “things you want in your life or not”, and that is why things can “hinder” one from being oneself, and therefore why authenticity is covertly – especially within the minimalist discourse – an extremely aesthetic matter; the “unfiltered self” that minimalism is supposed to get at will still be aesthetic, and actually as determinately so as the host’s spacious and empty white modernist apartment or his usual monochrome and casual black t-shirt. By contrast to the commonsensical “minimalist ideals”, the host urges viewers to “just try being yourself”, but this urging is in fact only possible because the viewers are already trying to be like the host, at least in this respect (but most likely also taking up, as authentically theirs, part of the host’s tacitly affirmed positive qualities): “Don’t copy me, don’t copy your friends [...] and that clarity will tell you all that you need or not”, he concludes; but one must first and foremost copy his not copying others, take it on as one’s own authentic rule. Accordingly, decluttering is both praised as a way of “discovering what’s important to you and why”, assuming an authentic self to be thereby only negatively unveiled, and as a way of “re-inventing” oneself, that is, as positively transformative or constitutive of oneself as a new self. Our analysis suggests that, in order to be a “minimalist” beyond merely practicing any one set of the practices encompassed by the minimalist discourse, one does indeed “need to hear” such contradictions play out rhetorically in the discourse.

Bank’s channel also has vlogs on lists of general categories of things and “things” as well, of course. An older vlog²²⁵, for example, lists easy-to-declutter things to get started with minimalism, a common sort of introduction that again adds to the promise of a crisis-less and yet critical minimalism. Files, documents and cards that can be digitized, worn or emptied out stationery, old textbooks and other school materials such as one’s old backpack, worn t-shirts and underwear and sheets, broken electronic devices, broken kitchenware and so on: getting rid of such things seems easy and obviously a practical gesture; like authenticity or intentionality per se, these are quite commonsensical tips. Even apart from the usual minimalist aesthetic of the channel, however, it is clear that aesthetic criteria and interest are positively implicit in the examples, like stained containers or underwear and linens that scratch the skin, have holes, are tainted or lost colour: “Go ahead and declutter them, replace them for something new, fresh, that you're actually going to use and want to use, 'cause there's no need to hold

²²⁵ Ronald L. Banks, “10 Things To Declutter Right Now [Minimalism Series]”, Sep. 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1U2SjAdNbLE> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

onto items that are just taking up space: you know you're not going to use it because you don't like to use it – just get rid of it.” Similarly, the basic criterion of past use is appealed to in order to justify decluttering unused electronic devices (“If you really need something like that [electronic device], you'd be using it”), but a functioning and still utilized can opener is also to be decluttered just because it does not work as smoothly as a new one would: “I'm guilty of holding on to it, being cheap and being lazy and not wanting to replace it.” The actual rule is the rule of restriction in view of authenticity, of dissolving aesthetic crisis, in ways that are positively determined by aesthetic common sense within each channel and its shade of aestheticization. A few months later, another vlog²²⁶ lists “things” to let go of in preparation for the coming year, generalizing minimalism’s “clutter” from “physical clutter” to “emotional clutter”, that is, to “negative emotions”: “Declutter those emotions at the same time that you're decluttering the physical things around you.” Two of these are significantly applied solely to minimalism itself, which must be authentic and not spark “envy” and “doubt” in those who practice it:

In regard to minimalism, [if] there are other minimalists that you see and their lifestyle, their aesthetic and things that they own or don't own, and you start to have this feeling like “I wish that was me”, I wanna encourage you to let go of that. [...] Minimalism and the journey of minimalism is unique to you. [...] Focus on you, put your blinders on. [...] When it comes to minimalism, if you're doubting your journey, if you're doubting whether or not this lifestyle is for you, if you're doubting whether or not you look like a minimalist, if you're minimal enough, let that go, change your mindset in the new year. [...] Let go of that feeling of “I'm not quite good enough, I'm not sure it's for me.”

Uniqueness is emphasized, yet the channel’s aesthetic is the most stereotypically minimalist; “blinders” are encouraged, yet the channel itself and its vlogs are not to be screened out by them as well. Similarly, restrictive rules are implicitly ruled out along with criticality, yet an unquestioned rule of restriction – along with positive examples – remains behind the general categories of items suggested for decluttering. Such practical tips as discarding one’s underwear if it has holes, aside of course from their relying on a common sense that has little or no place for mending things up and aesthetically appreciating them as repaired, would hardly add up by themselves to the promised “intentional life” or “happy life” or “[being] the best ‘you’ that you can be” of this second vlog. Vice versa, the much more directly emotional tips of letting go of “negative emotions” as “clutter” would hardly be distinguishable by themselves from those offered in the self-help or self-improvement discourses at large. Minimalism must instead remain

²²⁶ Ronald L. Banks, “6 Things To Let Go Of Before 2019 [Minimalism Series]”, Dec. 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y5Y0Bh6tCIY> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

stuck in the middle with its rule of restriction, indeterminate enough to encompass both into a lifestyle, yet also determined by aesthetic common sense and positive examples. Recognition of the aesthetic dimension of lifestyles, together with the need for objective shared criteria – with both of them understood in a non-reductive way, the aesthetic not reduced to stereotypical appearances and the criteria not reduced to strict rules –, would therefore help making minimalism both less aestheticized and less regimented, not the other way around. That perhaps would reconstruct “minimalism” to such an extent that it would engender a different discourse altogether, but if authenticity is in fact aesthetically achieved, then even the current discourse’s emphasis on authenticity would be reconstructed, and solutions then pursued more than promised.

A few more examples from our corpus will offer us one last overall picture of how the minimalist discourse works. The first one is a vlog from Simple Happy Zen²²⁷ which, again with the new year in view, presents many general categories of things to declutter as a “minimalist challenge” for oneself. By themselves, most categories lean here towards the triviality of common sense, as simple pointers for items to consider that have nothing new about them: unused clothes, empty boxes, food or cosmetics that are expired or nearing their expiration date, unutilized kitchenware, old electronic devices and cables, assorted things accumulated in the car or in one’s wallet or bag, holiday decorations and so on. What actually carries the rhetorical weight of the vlog is the decluttering of “negativity” by way of getting rid of these things, any sort of things really, so far as they are “not serving us anymore” or “holding us back” – that is, so far as they are inauthentic, out of step with oneself at present (in line with the frame of the new year, “you cannot really start anything new if you are still holding on to negativity from the past”). Besides the usual aesthetic of the channel – the host wears a light grey sweater perfectly in tune with the various shades of grey of the sofa and furniture, or the white wall with plants –, the host’s remarks are pervaded by positive aesthetic affirmations, praising “a clean, organized pantry” and cautioning that a “hobby area”, if cluttered, “can also stifle our creativity”, or again noting how “cables and stuff” when left visible “can make space feel so messy and disorganized.” The authentic and the aesthetic go easily hand in hand as long as the latter is spoken about in wholly positive terms, solved and dissolved in what is emotionally euphoric at present for oneself, so that in

²²⁷ Simple Happy Zen, “MINIMALISM DECLUTTERING CHALLENGE » 20 Things to get rid of before 2020”, Nov. 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGX3XC_D8xk (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

the end “decor items really only have one function, and that is that they make you feel something positive whenever you look at them – whether it's ‘happy’, ‘inspired’ or ‘at peace’.” Therefore, “décor items that do not spark joy for you anymore” must go too, and aesthetic upgrades are explicitly accepted and urged, by contrast to “holding on” to old used things: “Most people tend to hold on to old socks and old underwear for a really, really, really, really long time – so see if you can give yourself the gift of only owning those underwear and socks that are comfortable, that you like using, that don't have any holes in them, and that you wouldn't mind wearing if someone happened to find out what you're wearing.” The rule of restriction overrides again the restrictive rule of use by the built-in exception of enjoyment, including aesthetic enjoyment. This is precisely because the authentic is itself aesthetic, as is made evident by the many references of the host to the satisfaction of discarding things: “deleting all apps that you haven't used in the last three months and keeping your phone and your other digital devices, if you have any, clear and simple and organized”, for example, is one of the “personal favourites” of the host because it is “so rewarding”, while the practical benefits are not even mentioned. Similarly, on the one hand we find a more decidedly aesthetic decluttering of larger “heavy things” which is “the best feeling” and “will be such a big reward and just a great feeling of all that space opening up and all that weight being out of your life”, while on the other hand we find the authentic decluttering of “anything in your home that's carrying bad energy, negative emotions, bad juju or whatever you wanna call it – things that just make you feel bad when you look at them”, including “gifts from exes or things from past relationships, or things that make you feel guilty when you look at them or stressed” – as in the general categories we have seen earlier –, or eventually “anything that is just not contributing to your happiness: let it go and experience how good that feels.” The authentic is aesthetically pursued and enjoyed, or the aesthetic is authentically expressed and appreciated – it is the same thing so far as negativity is not involved, and so long as the determinacy of minimalism's aesthetic common sense, which as we have seen sparks crises, is passed over in silence (while positively affirmed by the host's appearance and apartment). Nevertheless, lack of explicit acknowledgment of the aesthetic dimension of minimalism – and authenticity – leaves the discourse without adequate criteria for straightforwardly engaging it as such, instead of merely referring to the subjective, indeterminate and often contradictory and contradicted criteria of use and enjoyment. This vlog in fact also shows that it is the absence

of criteria that leads the discourse to come up with and circulate those rigid rules that, just like the aesthetic, it then conveniently disavows: in the host's view, for example, supplies for "hobbies and craft" can be reduced by deciding on an arbitrary fixed amount or an equally arbitrary limited space or container, in order to force one to select only favourites and exclude the rest, while broken or unsold items that one had in mind to repair or sell could be dealt with within a certain self-imposed arbitrary deadline such as the end of the year, or otherwise donated and discarded. Sometimes, the host appeals to good sense against such arbitrary limitations, suggesting for example that even though certain clothes were not used for a year, it is still a good idea to actually try wearing them and see whether and why one does not indeed like them, yet she has nothing to replace them with except for her own positive example, and so at other times she employs them too. It is true, of course, that the things dealt with by minimalism are ordinary and familiar things which people can mostly be assumed to be able to judge for themselves, both by common sense and through their individual good sense as shaped within it, but leaving minimalism at that is again like identifying it with "intentional living", as if it did not had a positive aesthetic common sense of its own, which it criticizes precisely to avoid being fully critical of. The minimalist discourse is constantly being produced and reproduced on Reddit, YouTube and elsewhere along with its common sense; there would be no need for that, if individual good sense or "intentionality" were enough to face its contradictions as indeed it promises.

Another example²²⁸ from the A to Zen Life channel shows how authenticity indeed underlies the intense emphasis on positivity that we find especially in minimalist channels which are closer to the therapeutic discourse of self-help, like Simple Happy Zen, but that equally supports all the others too, with their promise of solving and dissolving the aesthetic by being positively – though also tacitly, as usual – "inoffensive" towards others and in turn "immune" to them, "muting" the criticality along with the sociality of the aesthetic (and perhaps picking up whatever style and shade of aesthetization the single minimalist channel offers). As in the rhetorical move of negating the stereotypical or mythical or trendy minimalism, whether luxuriously "aesthetic" or ascetically "extreme", in order to project an indeterminate truer minimalist lifestyle that can be then positively determined by each channel separately while appearing as more

²²⁸ A to Zen Life, "10 Fantasy Self Items to DECLUTTER in 2021 | Minimalism & Mental Health (Part 1)", May 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-0Z1a8hKiA> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

authentic to its audience, so the very relation to things to be decluttered in the minimalist discourse is shaped by this negative-turned-positive rhetoric of authenticity beyond practical and ethical benefits: although the indeterminate framing of “less is more” is often tied to such benefits in different versions, as in the saving-to-invest interpretation, the surplus promised by “minimalism” is ultimately that of an overall authentic intentional lifestyle cleansed of its own negativity, its own crises and criticality. The vlog by A to Zen Life, just like the previous one, describes decluttering as “rewarding” or “immensely healing and cathartic”, explicitly turning it into a matter of mental health in opposition to the “toxic” effect of social media, which of course stand in for the inauthenticity and negativity of the aesthetic contaminating one’s relation to things at large: decluttering things, here, is a way to “declutter your fantasy self to be your happiest and most authentic self”; the authentic is immediately allied to the emotional positive (which in turn circles back to the aesthetic positive, since the host’s home is a spacious, all-white modernist home kept in perfect order, even though she presents herself with a more casual, faded black Pink Floyd t-shirt and a light grey New York cap²²⁹). The categories of items are again just that, simple categories pointing at different areas to look at through the lens of authenticity, which the host also performs in first person by relating her own “minimalist journey” to personal traumas: with tears in her eyes she explains, “Over time I have come to accept that the things that made me the way that I am will never truly go away”; and yet, by contrast to the indelibility of traumas and thus attitude of acceptance, she has nonetheless overcome them by way of getting rid of things not aligned to her “current self”, identified with an “authentic self” which is fully present instead of past-oriented or future-oriented (temporalities which both entail negations). This contradiction is one with that between the authentic and the aesthetic, wherein the former is actually a more extreme version of the latter, immediately demanding the positivity it promises without negativity: the inauthentic “fantasy self” rejected by the host is a “highly idealized image” whose positivity by contrast provokes negativity, since it is an ideal and thus a future positivity; but just like in Ana Goldberg’s channel – which at least is actually imperfect in its aesthetic –, the response is not, in the last instance, an accepting embrace of negativity and imperfection as in some

²²⁹ In fact, the ambivalence of minimalism towards its aesthetic common sense is well expressed by the host’s saying of stereotypical minimalism – “people in neutral clothing, sitting in an empty room with a white wall, no furniture” – that “that’s just not what minimalism is”, while at the margins of the screen she has added as a text, “It can be... But it’s also more!”

allusions, but rather a more immediate total elimination of negativity, which is why decluttering of “sentimental items” tied to the past instead of the future is included as well. What this means, of course, is that the same promise – the possibility of winning at the aesthetic and/or consumerist games – is ultimately reaffirmed again to the audience as authentic, simply muddling and managing its criticality. The desire to improve one’s “financial situation”, “appearance”, “self-confidence” and “relationship” with oneself and others is accepted – the channel often directly deals with such self-improvement topics, after all –, but its inherent criticality and negativity are evoked only to be exorcized as tied to “outward appearances” and the influence of other people and social media, as for example with clothes only bought because of having been suggested by friends or seen on a magazine, or influencers’ “amazing lives” which devalue one’s own by contrast (and must therefore be decluttered – apart from the host’s authentic channel, of course – in order to “protect your happiness”).

Even though the host dismisses the promise of confidence and self-esteem in the purchase of clothes which will “just make you feel like your most perfect self walking around”, there is not that much of a difference with her own promise of a “happiest” and “most authentic” self, except for the fact that one goes through the rhetorical moves we have examined, here performatively in conjunction with the practice of decluttering in every area of one’s life (discarding both things and “things” such as emails in one’s inbox or accounts followed on social media, since ultimately it is a matter of decluttering one’s emotions through things). Once again, then, it is a matter of making one’s ties to things wholly positive, not severing them: the positivity is preserved as emotional, while negativity is offloaded on the aesthetic and – rhetorically at least – rejected along with it. The only criteria actually offered by the host are therefore the usual ones of past and present lack of use – on whatever arbitrary scale, from six months to a year, five years or even more – and present, immediate enjoyment with subjective positive emotions, both understood as ways to access one’s “authentic self” in order to recover it and then supposedly stick to it (since they only go as far as decluttering goes, instead leaving unaddressed the question of how to better evaluate purchases or projects in the future, without falling again in the trap of the “fantasy self”):

A lot of times people purchase items that feed into this desire to achieve their “fantasy self” that they have on this pedestal, but they end up just not using them – and they are stuck in a corner or stuffed in drawers, and they just end up taking up space in our homes, in our lives, in our minds, and weigh us down from achieving real true happiness and being our true selves, which can cause

a lot of negative emotions like guilt, anxiety etcetera. [...] So if your fantasy self is a master chef, but you can barely grill a grilled cheese sandwich, then maybe it's time to look at what works for your current self in your kitchen right now. [...] Maybe you used [these makeup, haircare or skincare products] one or two times, but for some reason they just don't work, or you don't enjoy using them, or they don't solve the problem, you don't see any difference – it's okay to let these items go and say, “Hey, maybe I used this in the past and I enjoyed it, but it's not who I am now. [...] Maybe [these sentimental items] aren't something that we are using or that make us happy when we look at them now, so if you're holding on to something from the past just because it made you happy then, but it's not something that fits your current lifestyle or that makes you happy that you use and display on a daily basis right now, maybe you can consider letting it go.

All must be positively present, actual and regular, with nothing unused or not enjoyed left pending from the future and the past; the concrete reasons why those things were not used or are not enjoyed at present, together with the possibility that perhaps they may still be used or enjoyed – or also kept for other reasons despite or even because of the negative emotions –, are not considered, and thus at best left to common sense and to each individual's subjective good sense, with no counterweight at any rate offered to the insinuation that owning unused or not enjoyed things is by itself a sign of inauthenticity (and unhappiness). As we have noted many times before, this authentic “only owning” the subjectively used and enjoyed is already a form of aesthetic cohesiveness, one that is continuous with – and made more plausible by – the more determinate forms displayed by minimalist channels. In a later vlog²³⁰ listing again general categories of items to declutter in one's wardrobe, now coming often attached with allusions to negative emotional relationships (“‘guilty gift’ items” that were received from others but not liked, work uniforms or other clothes one holds onto “just in case”, “sentimental clothes” one has “bad feelings” about and so on), one's “personal style” functions as criterion to get rid of things, made authentic – as usual – by contrast to the aesthetic “latest trends”, transitory and external to one's “honest” tastes:

People can waste a lot of time and money trying to keep up with the latest trends, and it's like a dog chasing its own tail. Now, I don't want you to think that I'm 100% anti-trend: I think it's absolutely okay to buy into trends if you think that it honestly fits your personal style, goes with other items in your wardrobe, and it's something you can see yourself wearing for longer than one season. [...] When you have too many clothes that don't fit your body type you're not living in the present moment, you're living either too much in the past or too much in the future, and if you don't have clothes that fit your sense of personal style you're not going to feel good about wearing them.

Everything having to be used and enjoyed by oneself at any one time goes hand in hand with everything having to fit one's body and personal style at any one time, taking for granted aesthetic cohesiveness and matching items as well as long-term stability of one's authentic preferences. Being authentic, this rule of restriction is not recognized as

²³⁰ A to Zen Life, “10 Clothing Items You DO NOT NEED in Your Minimalist Wardrobe”, Oct. 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hm4yjWLR3FU> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

such – and in fact, just like one’s “style” is contrasted to others’ “trends”, so good sense is contrasted to arbitrary quantitative rules for minimalism such as the “rule of one”, included as itself one thing to be decluttered: duplicates and similar items can be kept if it is “not practical” to declutter them, because “while there are times that you can pare down to only needing to own one item [of a kind] in your minimalist wardrobe, that also isn't something that you need to force yourself into based on some arbitrary rule that you can't be a minimalist if you own multiples of certain things.” Yet whether reduction and restriction are practical – or even ethical – at all is just assumed to be always the case, and at any rate it is clearly very far from being the most central driving concern behind minimalism’s invitation to declutter.

In the vlog just following the previous one²³¹, the host simultaneously offers a method to declutter one’s wardrobe and performs it herself, and it is again a method predicated both on the ideal of authenticity and on its related criteria of individual use and enjoyment at present. The occasion of Halloween even leads the host to actually frame it as the performance of a “full wardrobe exorcism” of the clothes “haunting” her with negative emotions:

You know what's scarier than ghouls and goblins? The fact that 99% of us are letting stuff just hanging around in our closets, taking up space, wasting our time, and making us feel bad – basically haunting us every time we open the door. It could be the clothes that don't fit you anymore after pregnancy and having kids, or that really expensive outfit that you bought and feel guilty about for only wearing it once. But to that I say, “No more” – no more my friends, because today we are tackling those skeletons in your closet and we are going to perform a full wardrobe exorcism.

The excess and its negative emotional effects are, as usual, simply presupposed, and they are the real issue much more than either “space” or “time” per se, as the large “no more guilt” text occupying half of the vlog’s cover – the other half showing the host happily standing next to her clothes, orderly hung by colour – makes very clear: guilt is foregrounded among other negative emotions because it not only indicates one aspect of the inauthentic relations to one’s belongings, but can also sum up and encompass the resistance one might feel towards discarding things – that too is inauthentic. The minimalist discourse thus affords a framing which does encourage reduction a priori, also by granting permission to do so without guilt: as categories like the “‘just in case’ items” highlight, reasons not to declutter are turned into suspicious irrational pretexts for not

²³¹ A to Zen Life, “Decluttering My ENTIRE Wardrobe | minimalism + capsule wardrobe”, Oct. 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wpfeOiXEAf0> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

doing it, and guilt is one of these. The vlog's structure literally pulls the rule of restriction beyond the reach of the individual's intentionality, which only comes later – after having already prepared the boxes for decluttered items to be sold, donated or recycled, so that one is not tempted to put them back in the wardrobe – as the step of setting up one's intentions for the wardrobe. The intentions are of course entirely subjective, yet some reduction and restriction is in order – the host has even set an arbitrary “boundary” of one closet door and a drawer for herself –, and the host's positive examples remain: her stated intentions are owning comfortable and durable clothes such that she will “think as little as possible about [her] wardrobe” – the emotional “haunting” of things is not mentioned, here –, and to these she only adds as possible alternatives “want[ing] your wardrobe to fit a certain aesthetic” and “par[ing] down to a capsule wardrobe and experiment with wearing a certain number of essentials – like 20 items, or 33 items” (that is, the same aesthetic and extreme minimalisms that she elsewhere dissociates from). The progression too is pre-oriented in favour of reduction as well as aesthetic cohesiveness, because the host advises to first select one's “favourites”, the “things you know you love”, in order to have a paragon and standard for subsequent things, which will thus have to measure up to them and usually also match them; after that, one discards clothes not worn during the past season and the “clear nos” – things self-evidently unused and not enjoyed, again for whatever reason –, and only then one does tackle the more difficult intermediate cases of uncertainty, that is, the ones where reflection is actually needed. The tools on offer for these intermediate cases are a checklist of fifteen questions and a last-resort “time-out box” technique, both again leaning towards reduction or restriction. The questionnaire puts the item into a long trial starting with an already answered and also manifestly loaded question – “Does the current me love this item?” –, followed by the item's condition and one's willingness to “actually mend/repair it” if necessary, by frequency of need or use and many other tests: one should ask whether one would purchase that same item again – an indirect way of comparing it to possible replacements and upgrades²³² –, what the value it adds to one's life is, what the costs and whether it is replaceable by other owned or purchasable items,

²³² Most of the host's decluttered items in the vlog are followed by replacements, and affiliated links to all the products – both new and second-hand – are included in the vlog's description along with the usual affiliated links to her “favourite declutter + organize stuff”, such as the “velvet hangers”, “fabric storage boxes” and “bamboo drawer dividers” that we see keeping her wardrobe in order. All of this, of course, provides a positive example for the viewer to keep in mind when he or she will have to set up authentic intentions and authentically answer the questionnaire.

whether someone else could benefit from it more than one does, and also the aesthetic criteria of whether there is a place for the item to “live in” and be used and displayed in one’s home, as well as again the authentic suspicions towards one’s wrong motives for holding on to the item (“What is motivating me to keep this item?”, “Who am I holding onto this item for (i. e., is it really for you)?”, and “Am I honoring this item or simply afraid to let go?”). If uncertainty persists even after all these questions, then one will have to put the item in a box and place it “out of sight out of mind” for a certain time – three months, six months or more –, after which period, “if you don’t find yourself wanting or looking for that thing [...] you’re free to send them out of the door” without guilt. Like other more or less arbitrary self-imposed rules or restrictions, the time-out box works by enforcing clarity in preferences – either used and enjoyed or not, either kept or discarded –, favouring reduction by already detaching one from that item, thus eventually getting at the standard situation in which the item was unused in the past and is therefore liable to be rightfully discarded as inauthentic. As a rule of restriction, minimalist authenticity is actually supported by restrictive rules (and vice versa, as in authenticity being used to support routinization), just like it is supported by the aesthetic common sense. This is why both keep circulating in the minimalist discourse despite being recurrently dismissed as rigid impositions and disavowed, or attenuated by appeals to common sense and subjective good sense. Only abstract arbitrary rules can be paired to subjectivist criteria, especially since the full aesthetic dimension of the lifestyle is also downplayed, sidestepped or neglected.

As we have already noted before, the criteria are subjective both in the sense that they are to be determined by the individual, and in the contradictory sense that they should be at least primarily aimed at the individual’s own benefit, and especially an emotional well-being. Similarly, the subjective criteria of individual use and enjoyment are no doubt quite indeterminate, yet not so much as to be themselves in turn questionable by the individual: like the happiness it is attached to, authenticity is just assumed to be what the individual will subjectively pursue by his or her intentional reductive and restricting practices. However, besides the aesthetic, the minimalist discourse also contains frugalist pushes to saving, sometimes coupled with investing, and anti-consumerist gestures – at least – towards ethical and sustainable consumption, both potentially in conflict not only with the aesthetic, as in the polarizations on Reddit we have started

from, but also with the authentic, since it might be more economical as well as ethical and sustainable to repair something, for example, rather than replacing it after having it decluttered as unused and not enjoyed. The possibility of these conflicts also appears as a contradiction between the subjectivist criteria themselves, because something might be used even though it is not particularly enjoyed or loved as an item and, vice versa, one might enjoy something that is only used from time to time – which, as we have seen, does not seem to be acceptable from the standpoint of authenticity. Moreover, the criterion of use is per se more objective, though still extremely abstract, than the criterion of enjoyment: in fact, the former lends objectivity to the latter – if one does not use an item, it must be inauthentic –, while the latter keeps the former subjective, usually confining it to this immediate evidential function for inauthenticity. The two criteria may even be identified with the ethical-practical and aesthetic dimensions at large, which they hold together as made compatible precisely in and through one’s intentionality and authenticity. At any rate, whether the crises are located at the level of the whole minimalist discourse or read into its basic criteria, the promise is continually made that they can be solved or dissolved by the authentic, intentional individual (thereby also leading one into the broader self-help and self-improvement discourses). This is what constitutes “minimalism” as one distinct discourse, what the “minimalist lifestyle” it projects amounts to: the former may indeed be understood as a vague umbrella term gathering very different ways and degrees of practicing various forms of reduction and restriction directed at very different aims, a neutral repository from which one can then subjectively pick and choose to build his or her own personal “minimalism” – as we have seen it defended in certain depolarizations on Reddit –, yet the latter relies on the idea that the components can be integrated, that they contain no inherent contradictions, that everyone will thus be united as “minimalist” – no crisis and critique allowed – regardless of their differences (including socio-economic ones), and that pursuing a component will at least have positive side-effects in terms of other components, to which it will be associated (as seen especially with regard to ethical or sustainable consumption, of course). Consequently, to the extent that this umbrella can be wielded to shield oneself – whether an individual or especially an influencer – from differences, contradictions and complications, in fact promising in all the ways we have surveyed an end to crisis and criticality, it actually defeats its hypothetical purpose of gathering together and drawing into contact and communication those components, and is therefore imma-

nently problematic (notwithstanding all the problems one may raise with regard to the broader self-help and self-improvement discourses in which it is embedded, and into which it leads). Rejection of the aesthetic and of any other determinate criteria – mere trendy stereotypes and rigid rules – for the authentic and intentional only holds the discourse back from actually recognizing and facing its problems, while granting each minimalist influencer the unobstructed liberty of keeping up with his or her own discourse as it is – even with added authenticity –, taking advantage of its indeterminacy whatever the shade of aestheticization. Just like the promise itself, the aesthetic common sense and the arbitrary restrictive rules of minimalism keep circulating anyway, both positively and negatively supporting the discourse.

In other words, even if “minimalism” were to be reduced to an entirely indeterminate invitation to “intentionality” in owning, consuming and purchasing things – the equivalent of repeating to oneself, “Think about it first” –, as a whole discourse it would still be accompanied by so many other conflicting factors that the first thing to be intentional about, the first thing to think about, would nonetheless be the discourse itself and its problems and contradictions; and as we have seen, rejecting these altogether through the subjectivist rhetorical move of authenticity only circles one back to the start, either confirming or at least leaving the discourse intact, unchallenged. Moreover, besides being itself commonsensical – who does not already believe that it is better to think before purchasing something, and who knows it better than those that must do it anyway because of their economic situation? –, the invitation to intentionality is an invitation to exercise good sense, and this while subjective is rooted in the common sense and cultural encyclopaedia one partakes in: by disavowing its own aesthetic common sense without however really offering alternative criteria beyond the rule of restriction, the intentional subject can just as easily fall back into common sense – minimalist or otherwise. So abstracted, intentionality can actually appear as such only by contrast to the supposed impulsivity of others – the consumerists –, just like authenticity by contrast to the aesthetic, and it equally promises a final solution and dissolution rooted in nothing but the individual. In both ways, simply calling for more intentionality or more authenticity, without fully addressing common sense and encyclopaedic criteria, does not help, and in fact further entrenches one – though with perhaps a temporary relief from criticality – into the discourse. We can best see this summed up one last time in a vlog in the

Abundantly Minimal channel²³³, where the host shares her change of mind about the minimalist wardrobe and what she now “focuses” on instead. Here two sorts of perfectionism about such a wardrobe are pointed out, respectively corresponding to the aesthetic solution which we have found to be authenticity – whatever the shade of aestheticization – and the consumer solution that is intentionality:

We like the idea of, you know, perpetually being able to wear certain pieces, like, go-to essentials that we can reuse for years and years and years and get so much value out of them that they are, like, perfected, [...] optimizing a wardrobe [in such a way that] everything is just perfect and can be used in all the different ways we want. [...] The follow-up goal to build upon that is, we're trying to find this perfect balance: the balance with the style, with the comfort, with being able to mix and match it, with it working for our body type, with it being ideally affordable for us and within our clothing budget, ideally sustainably and ethically made; we want these pieces to be able to be used for a long period of time and have that longevity, and we want them to be easy to care for so we're not going to have to deal with any high maintenance washing or drying, or even dry-cleaning, or anything like that. We want ideally all these pieces to align; but I think, as I reflected more about my own minimalist wardrobe journey as well as anyone else who's been trying to pare down their wardrobe and make intentional choices, I feel like these are just so difficult to attain that it's almost worth just kind of, you know, throw them out entirely, or at least to acknowledge that, guess what!, it's never going to be perfect, it's never going to be optimized, because life is just too unpredictable in many ways and any change in life also may yield a change in one's wardrobe. [...] I think it's very difficult to, you know, have a whole wardrobe that checks all the boxes.

On the one hand, there is the optimization of one's wardrobe as such, that is, with regard only to the use and enjoyment one gains from it, independently from all sorts of other considerations – ethical, practical, economical and so on; depending on whether a determinate minimalist style is involved in it or not, this would be understood in the discourse as an aesthetic or authentic pursuit, but the host does not specify it one way or the other, and in fact just underlines as part of minimalism's common sense (“We like the idea”). On the other hand, and especially after having already decluttered one's belongings, there is the further and broader optimization of them through new, and now intentional, acquiring and purchasing of things, where it is even harder to “check all the boxes” – style, comfort, aesthetic cohesiveness and matching, fit, frugality, ethical and environmental sustainability, durability and so on – that the minimalist discourse gathers together, since, as the host exemplifies, one can find very high quality items of clothing that are equally expensive, or stylish ones that are not however comfortable. These might strike one as the most banal and obvious remarks ever, but the point of our whole study is confirmed precisely by the fact that they need to be made, because it suggests how much the minimalist discourse instead relies on the promise that both with

²³³ Abundantly Minimal, “How My Perspective of a Minimalist Wardrobe Has Changed (and What I Focus on Now)”, Apr. 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WRHwGmIL-4> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

regard to a specific area – especially the aesthetic ones – such as one’s wardrobe, and with regard to consumption more generally, it is possible to easily hold all these implicit criteria together through authenticity and intentionality alone in reducing one’s belongings and restricting one’s purchases, without making explicit and facing their conflicts in order to actually determine and develop minimalism(s). This picture gets even more complicated when the concrete intricacies of subjectivity are taken into account instead of being merely gestured towards: as the host goes on to acknowledge, there is a lot of variability and mutability in everyone’s life according to roles, family status, job and hobbies, seasonality and other geographical factors, body-weight fluctuations and so on, “even our own tastes change over time” (“I have had favourite pieces of clothing maybe from three to five years ago that generally, at this point, I’m not really much of a fan of”).

Does the host therefore give up on and “throw out entirely” minimalism as unachievable, or is this another case of minimalism surviving its own death? Despite the particular clarity with which the problem is laid out, the answer, of course, is once again that it is indeed a problem of perfectionism, not ultimately of minimalism as such, which is again salvageable as non-aesthetic and rule-less authentic intentionality. As the use of the first person plural “we” indicates, the host does recognize that there is something problematic in the minimalist discourse and its aesthetic common sense, but she locates the problem – like everyone else in the discourse does – not in the lack of shared objective criteria, especially pertaining to that problematic aesthetic common sense, but rather in the opposite of that, the determinacy of the style and the rigidity of the rules, both pushing for perfectionism. In this way, criticality is attenuated without the crises being really faced, again ending up with the subjective good sense of intentionality and identifying minimalism with that, that is, equating it with conscious ownership and consumption as such. The optimization implicit in the criteria of use and enjoyment is relaxed: “What do you do with the pieces of clothing you have that you don’t love or does not check all the boxes but, overall, they’re pretty good – maybe you like it, but it’s not a love? [...] In my case, I generally haven’t let go of [these.]” Imperfection is thereby tolerated and even accepted, and yet, as before, it does not otherwise enter into the criteria to question and shape them, because these are taken to be already too rigidly determinate, too critical. The host suggests “avoiding any hard and fast rule that says, ‘This is

fine', 'This is not okay'", so the "mindset" she now rather subscribes to is "really being choosy about what [the item] is, and really reflecting about what's necessary and what my needs are": the aim is still that of being intentional and critical or "choosy", but with no criteria except for the usual inclination towards reduction and restriction to what is subjectively "necessary", "needed." Needless to say, this is coupled with the detachment of minimalism from its aesthetic dimension, from its styles, though of course not excluding that it is possible to be "into fashion" with the same "self-awareness", or – like the host herself – appreciate it at a distance without submitting to the influencers' pressure to aesthetic work:

There's definitely people who look really good and put together and, you know, their outfits are lovely, and I can appreciate that without that leading to be me – without trying to be doing that. And it's kind of liberating to say, "You know what? Screw that! I don't need to be trying to fit that box." [...] That's just not me.

This quote encapsulates the very gist of our study, which shows how the minimalist discourse offers liberation from absolute limitations it projects in the first place – a perfected aesthetic and perfected consumption with restrictive rules – as incorporated into and circulated by the discourse itself, only to reinstate them again as the subjective limitations of authenticity or intentionality, eased and diluted by contrast when necessary (though actually no less restrictive); meanwhile, the sense of criticality, of being anti-aesthetic as authentic and/or anti-consumerist as intentional, is preserved. A minimalist does not need to "fit that box" of the aesthetic or "check all the boxes" of rules for ownership and consumption, nor does he or she have to favour and pursue certain values over others at all, except for some reduction or restriction – some "box" – made authentic and intentional by opposition, whatever its concrete manner and degree. As the host explains, and as we have already seen claimed elsewhere as well – notably by Ecofriend Lia after having almost abandoned minimalism –, the initial decluttering of a self-evidently "super overwhelming and packed wardrobe" is still "essential", while after that it is a matter of "gradual optimization" and "gradual evolution" through a now more authentic and intentional consumption. The experience of reduction in decluttering – necessarily an experience of selection, of "choosiness" –, accompanied by the restriction positively though tacitly promoted by minimalism's aesthetic common sense and rules, and framed by the rhetoric negations of the aesthetic, the rule-bound and the consumerist in its discourse, is what actually makes the subsequent consumption an authentic and intentional one, regardless of anything else: it is critical consumption, but

without criteria. As things stand, “minimalism” precisely is – at its most distinctive – this rhetorical path to get at the authentic and the intentional through reductions, restrictions and negations, thereby circling back to the aesthetic and consumerist as games that can after all be won by the individual, all with a promise of a surplus – ultimately of well-being in life beyond any particular benefits – attached to it. Everything else that minimalism positively and determinately is, it can and does often disavow, despite heavily relying on and returning to it anyway.

2.4.2.3 – The minimalist habit of lifestylization itself

In the end, what the host in the last vlog “focuses on”, after setting aside minimalism’s perfectionist ideal of focusing on everything, is nothing in particular – which is just the other side of focusing on everything. Second-hand shopping, for example, allows her to simultaneously “buy different brands for a cheaper price” and not partake, by giving them her money, in the “terrible ethics” of those bad companies that have “exploited workers” and “bad materials”, all while getting their products anyway – after all, “it might be a good product” –, and in fact saving them from the landfill: by apparently holding it all together, this “sustainability loophole” reflects very well minimalism’s promise, though the latter extends much further by including authenticity as dissolution of the aesthetic, plus overall personal well-being (if not happiness). Minimalism is then maintained, by contrast to a projected hyper-determinate minimum possible – the aesthetic style, the extreme rules –, at the level of just a minimum possible of determination: subjectivist intentionality and authenticity with reduction and restriction of excesses for a promised surplus, potentially extended to all areas of life – as “lifestyle” – by metaphorically framing them. This minimum possible is also the minimum possible that can immediately include and unite everyone, that can be shared by everyone despite all their differences and conflicts, as authentic and intentional individuals all together set against the aesthetic and impulsive others and the equally external impositions of society. It is minimalism’s common sense, its basic philosophy. However, this second half of our study has hopefully demonstrated how in fact the minimalist discourse successfully appeals to this common sense in support of any and all shades of aestheticization, and how vice versa the aesthetic – just like the rules, which push for restriction – in turn positively affirms and informs that common sense, at the very least making it more plausible and promising (but most likely tacitly determining its preferences). Minimal-

ism's critical common sense – however little critical it actually is – is not as neatly distinguishable and detachable from the aesthetic common sense it perpetuates, no matter how often it is dismissed and disavowed. Because of this, its “living with intention” cannot really stop being a “living within tension”, even though the crises it sparks are denied, deemed an external issue of excessive determination of minimalism – not the other way around. As criteria are ruled out along with rules, and as criticality itself is exorcised along with the aesthetic and consumerist – one should ultimately “think less about things”, not more “about less things” –, the tension cannot be straightforwardly faced, only managed and alternatively raised and relieved. Therefore minimalism cannot be reduced to subjectivism, because if anything it is subjectivism arrived in an through what it disavows, and in and through the playing out of its ambiguities in an endlessly repetitive discourse. The consequences of insisting on its own indeterminacy are that on the one hand minimalism will keep on being positively determined by each influencer – for at least the relative audience – without any chance of critical pushbacks, simply relying on and adding to its common sense, while on the other hand it will keep serving, again quite uncritically, as a bridge to the self-help and self-improvement discourses it is embedded into. Two strands of vlogs analysed in our corpus were originally meant to appear here as examples of these consequences, beyond what we have been able to see or glimpse in other sections: respectively, vlogs centred on lists of items the host of the channel did keep or buy despite his or her minimalism – with variations like the hosts' favourite things – and vlogs offering simple or minimalist habits to adopt for one's minimalist lifestyle. Unfortunately, there is no space nor time left for us to get into either of these; it is a work that will have to wait for a future occasion, going beyond the minimum possible that we have been able to achieve at present. However, since the second strand illustrates well how minimalism's rule of restriction is at once conveyed and managed by the discourse, we will conclude our analyses with just one particularly comprehensive example of this kind, helpful both in recapping our whole study in view of the general conclusions, and in tying the previous sections together: clothes may be denied as aesthetic and rules as imposed, but habits – rules to be worn and clothes to be ruled, as in religious uniforms – can be affirmed as authentic and intentional, critical without any crisis²³⁴.

²³⁴ Moreover, the most immediate insight from the other strand of vlogs, apart from the positive affirma-

The example we will consider is a two-parts vlog by CKSPACE in which the host offers his ranking of a list of “minimalist habits” gathered from his subscribers’ suggestions on YouTube and Twitter: it is not his only nor his first vlog on minimalist habits, but it is more extensive and lets us better see the contradictions within minimalism’s indeterminate common sense. In fact, what we actually get from the vlogs, as we will see, is exactly a sample of minimalism’s most commonsensical elements and aspects, not actually “habits” as defined in whatever coherent way. Already in the first part²³⁵ we find all sorts of clearly heterogeneous things classed as habits, from the various minimalist rules and techniques to generic principles such as “gratitude”, from practices like continuous decluttering to features like monochromatic colours. This might sound like not really addressing minimalist habits at all, but if our study has told us anything of how the minimalist discourse works, the opposite is rather true: its support for habits as such through its rule of restriction and its management of criticality is in fact more representative of what “minimalism” is as a lifestyle than any collection of habits termed “minimalist” yet borrowed from the self-help and self-improvement discourses, as in other minimalist vlogs about habits (though all display the same vagueness about what is considered as a “habit” anyway). In its (aestheticized) indeterminacy, the proper contribution of the minimalist discourse is, in our view, a push for “lifestylization” as such, for the conditions – subjectivist authenticity and intentionality, individual self-restriction and thus responsabilization and so on – of those other self-help and self-improvement discourses it provides an entryway into and escape valve for, even though it also always falls back onto the positive determinacy of the very common sense it rejects. This is what we find in this two-parts vlog, many ranked items of which may just as well fit into any generic self-help or self-improvement discourse, but are here accompanied by the rejection or marginalization of certain aspects of minimalism’s common sense as well as by its core practices, that nonetheless promote a generalizable rule of restriction. Both parts of the vlog present four tiers for ranking these “habits” by their value and impact: an “S tier” for “life-changing actions” recommended to everyone because “they bring us the most value”, obviously associated with the promise of a “life-

tions of the aesthetic that we have already witnessed elsewhere, is easily summed up: unsurprisingly, the minimalist discourse affords an easy framing for all sorts of influencers to establish themselves as trustworthy consumers that viewers can rely on to discover good products, often – like in Ecofriend Lia’s affiliated links to eco-friendly brands – associated to ethical, sustainable and thus guilt-free consumption.

²³⁵ CKSPACE, “Ranking The Best and Worst Minimalist Habits | Minimalism Tier List”, Feb. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UGAJJSWBP30> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

style” beyond any definite practical benefits; an “A tier” for “simple habits” again clearly beneficial yet “not as impactful”, precisely because they are more definite; a “B tier” of suggestions that are “not for everyone” but still worth trying in order to “create your own way of minimalism”; and finally a “C tier” of “not worthy” habits that “might not exactly be minimalist habits”, the ones that “you can skip and avoid wasting your time.” Since it is evidently a supposed requisite for what counts as “minimalist” that it be beneficial – the more life-changing, the more minimalist –, the distribution of the items among the four tiers will show how minimalism prefers to remain anchored to the contradictory yet promising indeterminacy of common sense by disavowing or downplaying the determinate and more distinctive features of its own common sense, as widely circulated in the minimalist discourse itself. Not surprisingly, the host claims the ranking is based on “how effective [the habits] are in improving our minimalist lifestyle, and how it can help us to live more intentionally”: once again the two go hand in hand, almost – but only ever almost – identified.

The two bottom tiers of the ranking are mostly filled, as by now we should expect, with aesthetic aspects of minimalism and its restrictive rules – what the discourse continually disavows. Interestingly, rules and methods are at least placed in the penultimate tier: their being “minimalist” at all is not as questioned, and they are still taken to be worth trying out for oneself. On the contrary, it is simply irrelevant to “minimalism” whether one embraces a certain aesthetic or not – it is “nothing more than personal style or preference” –, so two basic aspects of it, inexplicably included as “habits” and standing metonymically for minimalism’s whole aesthetic common sense, end up in the last tier: monochromy and “negative space”, that is, emptiness. This is so in spite of – or perhaps by virtue of? – the host’s explicit appreciation for both, as well as his implicit positive affirmation of them in his channel’s stereotypically minimalist aesthetic:

Some might think that being a minimalist is as easy as coordinating your living space with monochromatic colour – black, white, or maybe new pastel colour. I agree, monochromatic colours can be easier to match and pleasant to look at, but they are nothing more than personal style and a preference. [...] Embracing negative space is a reminder for ourselves that not all empty space should be occupied. Empty space can be something that complements other things around it – or even better, something we can appreciate. However, even though I like this concept, I’ll still classify it as tier C, because it’s nothing more than a style or preference of how you want your living space to be.

Aesthetic criteria are deemed too subjective to say anything about “minimalism” as a lifestyle, even though it is a lifestyle that is centred on decluttering – so much so, in-

deed, that it cannot bear simply having things out of sight by storing them away from the most foregrounded surface, but also wants them out of sight from storage spaces in the background as well, fully discarding them. Decluttering is in fact ranked high by the host, though not highest, just like having a capsule wardrobe of matching clothes: they are both in the second tier; nonetheless, their aesthetic dimension is thereby denied (along with the concrete difficulties that would await anyone with different or plural aesthetic styles and preferences, as we have noted before). This is nothing new to us, of course, as minimalism projects itself as a “lifestyle” that anyone may – and at times even should – partake in, so that paradoxically it champions subjectivism yet cannot accept subjective criteria such as aesthetic ones: the discourse aims, as we have said, at that commonsensical “minimum possible” that can objectively hold and merge together all authentically and intentionally reducing subjects beyond all differences. Yet ambivalence towards the aesthetic also surfaces in another habit – for once, a proper habit – ranked in the lowest tier: the habit of removing labels from products in order to reduce their “visual clutter” is not criticized for the subjectivity of wanting less of such aesthetic clutter, but rather only because it demands too much effort if it is even feasible at all, since labels, brands and so on are everywhere around us and thus unavoidable. Here as elsewhere, it seems to be taken for granted by the host that certain aesthetic qualities – order, organization, cleanness, sparseness, cohesiveness, lack of contrast and so on – are desirable for a minimalist.

There is one last habit ranked in the lowest tier, but we will get at it in a moment, because it unwittingly confirms how in the minimalist discourse it is criticality itself that is actually at stake as something to be attenuated and managed, rather than any thinking through of solutions to problems. For now, rising to the penultimate tier, we see most of the minimalist rules and methods tied to arbitrary quantitative limitations (all drawn from the *The Minimalists* blog): the gamified method of the “minimalism game”, wherein one progressively discards for a whole month one more item than the previous day, for a total of about 465 items eventually decluttered; the “20/20 rule” for identifying and discarding the classic “‘just in case’ items” as things that can be bought back in 20 minutes with 20 dollars or less; the “90/90 rule” of discarding what one has not used in the last three months and does not intend to use in the next three; and the “30/30 rule” of waiting a month before buying anything that costs more than 30 dollars.

Predictably, these rules – while still worth trying – are deemed too inflexible, because “when it comes to rules with specific numbers, they can be kind of too rigid, [...] it might be useful to test the water but it might not be a solution that can fit other people.” The same goes for minimalist uniforms, included in this tier because they are understood as aesthetically indeterminate and in fact as anti-aesthetic, allowing one not only to “cut down on daily possessions” but also, as we have seen, “make everything easier when it comes to dressing up”: its problem is not that they are aestheticized but that they are too “extreme” for most people. On the other hand, in addition to the restrictive rules and the uniform, the host also places in the tier the “KonMari method”, that is, Marie Kondo’s main decluttering criterion – part of minimalism’s common sense despite her never defining herself as “minimalist” – of keeping the items that “spark joy”: if rules are too rigid, this criterion on the contrary is “too sentimental” for the host, and as he explains when also ranking here the removal of sentimental items, sentimentality is something too “subjective” for it to count as a higher-ranked aspect of minimalism either way. However subjective, though, restriction must still be undertaken, just like with the aesthetic – no subjective judgment could ever conclude that decluttering is not needed, or that whatever amount of sentimental items is fine: “When it comes to sentimental items, how we evaluate varies from one another and depends on the thing itself. I don't think it's terrible for us to have sentimental items, but we need to know how to keep them under control”; the host’s hand gathering scattered pictures into a neat pile upon an all-white background emphasizes the point and gives away its aesthetic nature. In other words, then, no reduction down to a certain amount reached by arbitrary numbers, yet some reduction for sure, which is perhaps why restrictive rules and methods and restriction of sentimental items are not wholly excluded (while the KonMari method too remains a decluttering method, so it presupposes that reduction will be carried on). This is where the last habit from the lowest tier – “upcycling”, that is, reutilizing something one owns for a different function – displays its full significance: the habit is dismissed as “not really a minimalist habit” for the sole reason that it may turn into a pretext, that “if it’s done wrongly, we might end up creating an excuse for us to hold on to things just because we give them another ‘function’”, instead of decluttering them as one should evidently be more inclined to do by default. This dismissal is all the more noteworthy in view of the fact that, as we will see, using what one already has is praised as a minimalist habit of the highest rank. What it highlights, along with what we have

encountered so far, is that minimalism's subjectivist rejection of rules and of the aesthetic is matched by a deep distrust in subjective reflection as well, because it threatens not to abide by reduction and restriction at all – or far enough –, violating its rule of restriction. Therefore quantitative rules such as the “90/90 rule” or the monochromatic palette do not seem to leave any place for interpretation, while practices such as “upcycling” appear to leave too much, running the risk of offering pretexts (like those often defining general categories of items in the discourse, such as “just in case”, “maybe one day” and so on). Ordinarily, this problem could be solved by determining further the concept at hand, setting out for example the way in which a minimalist would go about upcycling and the point where instead it would start backfiring, but that is out of the question, because it would also determine minimalism. The fact is, if it discourages reduction and restriction, it is already backfiring as far as the minimalist discourse is concerned, and that is all that matters – no need for going deeper into it. The subject may choose only so long as reduction and restriction are on the whole chosen as well (thus remaining open to the minimalist discourse, including its rules and aesthetic, and all the broader self-help and self-improvement topics). Subjectivist rejection of the rules and of the aesthetic, of determining and developing “minimalism” in shared objective ways, does not apply to its own rule of restriction, but rather makes it appear by contrast as such a subjective choice, concealing it as a rule.

The minimalist discourse does not seek to determine the middle ground it seeks between too rigid objective rules and too indulgent subjective pretexts: it rather accepts them as the only alternatives; it mostly presents minimalism as thoroughly subjective – even to the point of coinciding with intentionality as such – while being predicated on reduction and restriction being objectively necessary (and the influencers' tips being worthy and trustworthy, of course), oscillating between the two extremes as needed in order to hold minimalism back into indeterminacy. This indeterminacy serves the minimalist discourse in many ways: it passes on its rule of restriction as a subjective, intentional and even authentic choice, it performatively alleviates criticality – no one else can object to whatever one's personal “minimalism” is except for oneself (and for the authentic influencers through oneself) –, it allows for infinite contradictory interpretations each time and tacit positive determination, and it nevertheless offers the promise of holding it all together into an integral lifestyle of intentionality, authenticity, well-being

and perhaps even moral worthiness, or at least innocence. We can observe all of these pulls back towards indeterminacy play out in the vlog. Still in the penultimate tier, together with rules, we find a couple of “mantras” which – as the word suggests – are similarly taken to necessarily work in a rigid rule-bound fashion while being open to misinterpretations, like the practice of upcycling when left as one indeterminate term. One of these mantras is the “experiences over things” principle which does indeed deeply inform the minimalist discourse, pushing for rejection and reduction of “physical” or “material” things – first owned, then also purchased – in order to focus instead on “immaterial” experiences, relationships and so on (a rhetoric that clearly overlaps with the related one we have focused on: the dismissal of the aesthetic for the authentic “things that matter”). This principle is one with minimalism’s promise of a surplus gained by reduction, a “lifestyle” achieved by decluttering and discarding things. In fact, as with the aesthetic aspects of minimalism that he has dismissed altogether even while appreciating them, this principle too is actually endorsed by the host at the same time in which it is supposedly criticized:

It's one popular mantra among the minimalists – and I love it, I believe in it as well. But I think this mantra can be misleading. I do agree that experiences are more valuable than most things, but it creates a misconception that a minimalist should reject all the things. That don't make sense, because some things can be tools that make experiences more pleasant and enjoyable. So it's not really for everyone.

As in the attacks against an ascetic “extreme” minimalism, the principle is led straight to its extreme consequences and turned into a restrictive rule, so that it can be banished; by so doing, it is returned to indeterminacy and left there, kept in the vague form that can be endorsed by everyone while also not excluding that one could take it up in the rejected restrictive sense (it is just “not for everyone”), because restriction is in fact what is saved by such rhetorical moves. The minimalist discourse relies a lot on this dualistic opposition between the material and the immaterial, just like that between the apparent, external aesthetic and the hidden, internal authentic – though it contradicts it, of course –, so that if one were to really carry further the recognition that things are integral and instrumental to experience, much of the discourse’s rhetorical strength would probably vanish (again, as it would be in the case of the aesthetic, disavowed across all shades of aestheticization). Instead, the recognition here only serves attenuation of the principle, of its criticality, without undermining it and its call for (some) restriction. The aim is not that of making the principle less “misleading” by determining and developing

it, but rather safeguarding the indeterminacy which makes it work in this discourse: it is rejected as a restrictive rule, despite being manifestly indeterminate and open to interpretation, precisely so that it can be retained in the form of indeterminate rule, a version of the rule of restriction. The other “mantra”, the “quality over quantity” principle also pervasive in minimalism’s discourse, confirms this reading by instead stressing restriction (and betraying its grounds): while no less indeterminate, it is not criticized as potentially “misleading” – for example affording excuses for buying high-quality upgrades to decluttered things –, but rather just because “there’s no point in getting the highest quality if it’s out of our financial capability.” The principle is actually accepted at face value – pursuing quality is indeed fine and better so long as one can afford it –, and it is downplayed only in order to keep minimalism indeterminate and thus all-inclusive, disregarding socio-economic differences (as we have already seen many times before). Like the aesthetic common sense that affords positive expressions to its promise, all these rules, methods and mantras are actually vital to the discourse – all that it has to offer beyond mere miscellaneous examples, indeed –, so they are returned to their indeterminate status and retained that way.

Moving on to the second tier, we are met with the actual core practices of minimalism, here understood as habits because of their regularity (another criticism the host had for the “minimalism game” was that it appears to be just a one-time event): recurrent decluttering, putting things away in their “original spot”, recycling, restricting one’s purchases and making a capsule wardrobe. The fact that these are not ranked highest despite literally constituting minimalism is due to their not having, taken individually, the “life-changing” impact required by the first tier; in other words, they are less than the integrated “minimalist lifestyle” they add up to, irreducible to immediate practical benefits. These habits are the direct positive expression of the indeterminate rule of restriction beyond the restrictive rules and the determinate aesthetic. In fact, the very vague usage of “habit” – central to the whole self-help and self-improvement discourse – may be understood, by contrast to the “rules”, as the very indeterminate push for individual regulation and routinization that is the rule of restriction. Decluttering is not done once and for all, because we must “constantly look at our surroundings [to ask] whether our possessions have become clutter in our life”, we must keep our home in order, and also guard it from the invasion of new stuff by buying less. Yet this habitual re-

striction does not appear as restrictive as the aesthetic and the rule-bound: the “no-spend challenge” included in the tier, for example, wherein one does not buy anything either in general or with regard to some category of things, is praised by the host as “flexible” because “when it comes to the things you can buy and the things you can’t buy, you create your own rule”; similarly, the capsule wardrobe is contrasted to the uniform as “way more versatile” and applicable to “anyone’s lifestyle”, because it does not demand “a specific number of clothes you are allowed to own”, nor does it require a certain style (though, as we have noted earlier, it does involve clothes “able to mix and match and give us multiple looks despite having fewer clothes”, and it is also all predictably accompanied by images of the host’s black and white casual wardrobe). It is nonetheless restriction, carrying on aspects of the aesthetic and of the rule-bound that it is contrasted to. The widespread technique of the “wishlist” included here, for example, is in fact pure self-restriction: desired items are simply added to a wishlist instead of being “impulsively” bought right away, so that one just has to “wait for the impulse to fade” (or, if it does not fade, purchase the item without feeling as guilty); reflection upon the item and one’s desire, and thus criteria that may aid in that reflection, are not needed because they are in fact always suspected of offering rationalizations rather than reasons, pretexts for not submitting to the rule of restriction. In the last instance, less must be more.

The reduction and restriction characterizing the core minimalist practices is tied, as we have suggested, to the self-restriction of habits more generally, by way of which the discourse is linked to self-help and self-improvement. Habits are understood and presented, as in the case of recycling, as “simple” and “small” yet somehow cumulatively engendering big changes (“Small action, but in the long run it helps the planet a lot”). The link is here explicit, because we also find in the second tier a few productivity habits that are “minimalist” only by the metaphorical framing of reduction and restriction: the “rule of three”, that is, limitation of one’s habits to adopt, goals to achieve and/or tasks to carry out to just three items; “single-tasking”, as a more “extreme” version of that rule as applied to one’s current activity; and the “3-minute job” habit, the habit of doing immediately whatever can be done in just three minutes. It is striking that these habits are ranked in the second tier despite being as rule-bound and quantitatively definite as the rules in the lower tiers, and despite not being directly tied to the core minimalist practices. When understood as a “lifestyle”, however, minimalism is easily gen-

eralized – through its reductions, restrictions and rejections – to the regularity of routine as well as to authenticity and intentionality, as we have seen: from prioritization of things it reaches prioritization of all sorts of “things”, like tasks in this case, while the “3-minute job” habit is clearly tied to the habit of putting things away in their assigned place right after one is done using them. It is in this sense that minimalism’s indeterminate rule of restriction is ultimately a habit of lifestylization, a framing for and entryway into – through the discourses and/or the actual practices – the subjectivist intentionality, authenticity and regularity characterizing the broader discourses it is embedded into; to the latter it lends its promise of “more through less”, of a “life-changing” surplus gained by reduction and restriction of whatever excess, and beside and beneath that, of course, the aesthetic common sense to which the promise remains bound (whatever, again, the shade of aestheticization). If we finally consider the “habits” ranked in the top tier – the “life-changing” ones –, we see that in fact they coincide with the promise of that integral minimalist lifestyle, and of course betray its contradictions. One of these contradictions has to do with the productivity habits just mentioned: in the top tier, the host includes both the self-improvement of enhancing one’s “productivity” – as distinct from mere “business” –, and the self-help appeal to “slowing down” in order to “enjoy every single moment”, failing to comment on their inherent tensions. The relation between these two “mindsets” maps perfectly onto the one we have explored between the aesthetic and the authentic as well as the perfect and the imperfect: “productivity” is distinguished from “business” purely on the grounds of one authentically valuing or not the activity at hand (“We can be busy and have no time for what we value, but we can be productive and dedicate time for whatever we appreciate”), with no other criteria and thus no caution against being mistaken or even misled, as is instead presupposed later by the call to “slow down” and to avoid “packing our life to extreme fullness”; just like one can and in fact is invited to be authentically perfectionist – also through more or less disavowed aesthetic means –, imperfection being invoked only to manage the criticality of this pursuit and hide it by blaming it on the aesthetic, so one can and is invited to be authentically productive, and slowing down is invoked mostly if not solely to soften it. Although our focus was on the aesthetic and the authentic, then, it is easy to see that a similar “living within tension” applies to areas more directly having to do with intentionality in the strict sense (which is why minimalists can speak of “intentionality” and cover authenticity with that one term as well). Other facts further hint at the subor-

dination of slowing down to productivity and self-regulation more generally: not only there are, as we have just seen, some restrictive rules emphasizing productivity that are even included in the second tier, with no equivalent for slowing down, but slowing down is also praised as “for everyone”, not just “minimalists”, while no such disclaimer is made with regard to productivity. And yet, “slowing down” remains a top-tier minimalist habit. It is the other face of the same promise, just like imperfection is employed to reaffirm the promise of a non-aesthetic and anti-aesthetic authenticity. Minimalism’s indeterminacy can subsume such contradictory pushes in order to rhetorically play them off each other with a different emphasis at different times, even within the same minimalist channel or vlog.

All the highest ranked “habits” of minimalism are presented by the host through the rhetoric of authenticity, because that is what is actually promised by the discourse beyond any practical benefit. Some, like rejection of trends and “digital decluttering” of “digital distraction” – which is thus ranked higher than the decluttering of actual things! –, are in fact directly tied to it. However, most of them are not. The use of what one already owns, for example, is immediately translated in terms of the anti-aesthetic and anti-consumerist authenticity of “being enough” instead of comparing oneself to others, and the same goes for the related habit of “practicing gratitude” (which, like slowing down, is taken to be more “generic” than minimalism):

There's no need for me to keep up with the Joneses if I'm not impressed by the Joneses. Knowing the fact that I'm already enough is the best thing I've learnt from minimalism, and it's also the best way to curb impulsive purchases, because I can make the full use of what I already have instead of buying something new – I'd say this awareness is priceless. [...] [Practicing gratitude] sounds generic because, whether we are minimalists or not, it's important for us to practice gratitude and stay grounded. It's a great way to remove the need to compare ourselves with others, prevent us from buying things just to impress people, and declutter a huge chunk of negativity out of my brain.

If we recall how the concrete practice of upcycling – using what one owns for a different function – is summarily dismissed as “not minimalist” because it may afford an excuse for keeping something instead of discarding it, we see how strongly the minimalist discourse is predicated on the rhetorical allusion to certain practices – left at their most indeterminate and thus malleable – rather than on the practices itself in their intricacies and complications. A minimalist should use what he or she owns already and be grateful for that, but only insofar as this constitutes a rhetorical gesture of authenticity, supporting others such gestures like decluttering itself – despite the fact that decluttering is of-

ten contradictory with all forms of reuse, as well as with gratitude for one's current things and situation. As we have seen, after all, the host does not even address the problem of replacements and upgrades implicit in the "quality over quantity" principle: does one have to first gratefully use to the end what one already owns, or are replacements and upgrades acceptable so far as one can afford them, as the host implies in dealing with this "mantra" of minimalism? No one can really say, because the point is ultimately that of "declutter[ing] a huge chunk of negativity" by whatever means, all rhetorically made authentic and intentional, again along the lines of the imperfect and the perfect: gratefulness is just a way to achieve authenticity through imperfection, while upgrading achieves that through perfecting oneself in terms of one's preferences (and one's fixed socio-economic conditions); minimalism must accommodate both within its indeterminacy. The host's words with regard to the rejection of trends admit to the difficulties and lack of criteria with regard to the problems raised by minimalism, yet they are set aside for an easy enthusiasm about one's "awareness" of these problems, itself already a "life-changing realization": "If you buy things for its trendiness, it will be short-lived. But I know, it's hard for us to identify what is a trend or what is impulse – but I'd say this awareness is a life-changing realization for me, when it comes to my purchasing habit." That the problems are not well-formulated, that they in fact engender all sorts of other problems tied to minimalism's contradictions, cannot be recognized, because no attempt at working them out and at establishing criteria²³⁶ is made. It is enough, for the minimalist discourse, that a sense – a promise, a pursuit – of authenticity and intentionality be generated by contrast to the aesthetic and impulsivity, in any possible way. This is confirmed by the two habits we have yet to mention, one ranked in this top tier and the other in the penultimate tier, where we find the same exact move of accepting something in an indeterminate form while having dismissed or downplayed it in a more determinate form that reveals its problematic nature: the habit of "rejecting gifts" is attenuated while the habit of "saying no" – which covers all the range of minimalism's authenticity – is praised as "crucial" and "vital" for minimalists, even when it comes to gifts. Rejecting gifts is not for everyone, especially given that "knowing how to reject gifts is a skill not everyone can master – it's a challenge, and this action might seem

²³⁶ As we have noted earlier, this is why the minimalist discourse must appeal to arbitrarily restrictive rules and techniques such as the "wishlist", wherein impulses are restrained in a purely negative manner on the assumption that what will resist or persist after such restraint will be ipso facto authentic and intentional.

rude to some”, it requires “good communication with our loved ones”, and yet the more indeterminate “saying no” can later be recommended to everyone with ease: “The ability to say no at the right time is crucial for a minimalist, whether it is rejecting gifts you don’t like or saying no to projects when you are already packed; so in order for us to do more of what you value, you have to say no to the things that don’t align with us²³⁷ – so this will go to tier S for how vital it is.” We have here another confirmation of the fact that the discourse has no problem with indeterminacy so long as it affirms instead of problematizing the commonsensical core of minimalism, its rule of restriction in line with a rhetoric of authenticity, intentionality and regularity. What is indeterminate can after all be determined by influencers even just by tacit positive example, as the host does when he says that he appreciates “thoughtful gifts” but still rejects the “gifts that are redundant”, illustrating these two kinds of gifts with a picture and a keychain of the Tour Eiffel respectively – again the (aestheticized) authentic and the aesthetic opposed to one another.

All things considered, then, we have here a very nice recap of what “minimalism” ultimately is, as distinct from any of its practices per se: a commonsensical glue positively informed by its aesthetic and rule-bound determinate aspects, while also negatively supported by them in the rhetorical dismissal or disavowal of them, which projects an indeterminate restrictive yet authentic, intentional and regular “lifestyle” available for each minimalist influencer to determine (and link to the broader self-help and self-improvement discourses). It is not just decluttering nor just reducing purchases, it is something more – something expansive and integral – that these and all other practices afford as a promise, in and through the rhetoric of authenticity which frames them in the discourse: the practices are always accompanied by the rejected common sense on the one hand, here included in the bottom tiers, and by the promise of a “life-changing” impact beyond all practical benefits on the other, as in the top tier here. We can now complete the picture – more briefly – with the second part of the vlog, released less than a

²³⁷ The host’s slips in the English pronouns – he is from Singapore – unwittingly express very well the ambiguity of authenticity as that minimum possible that should bring all individuals together: the authentic “you” is a common “us”; the viewer learns how to be authentic from others, from the minimalist influencers he or she deems authentic enough (and in doing that, he or she will also most likely draw upon some expression of minimalism’s aesthetic common sense as authentic as well).

month after the first part²³⁸. The classification here appears less stringent in that the rationale behind the four tiers is not explicitly repeated and insisted upon, so that there is no more any mention of the necessity of life-changing impact in order to qualify for the top tier. On the whole, however, the assumption is still there, and is completed with an aspect of minimalism previously absent but as one fixed constraint on an individual (his or her “financial capability”): frugality and financial independence and/or investment. The top tier of this second list of “minimalist habits” includes “tackling your debt” – especially “consumer debt”, as opposed to debt tied to investments “which can make us more money” – and “saving money” more generally in view of one’s “financial independence”, even though the host is curiously hesitant about their proper relation to minimalism, in both cases wondering whether they are rather “by-products” of minimalism, only coincidentally stressed by so many in the minimalist discourse: “I’m not sure if this is a by-product of being a minimalist or it’s just somehow [that] a lot of minimalists emphasize on this; regardless, putting a clear focus on clearing my debt is one of the best things.” Improving one’s economic conditions is clearly a core part of minimalism’s indeterminate promise²³⁹, but – as we have seen since our first analyses of Reddit threads – the latter cannot be exhausted by frugality and its all too practical concerns, just like it cannot be exhausted by a more ethical and sustainable approach to consumption. Minimalism must be a lifestyle, it must be life-changing. This is why a metaphorical decluttering is again the only form of decluttering ranked highest by the host, like “digital decluttering” in the first half, though this time with some passing doubt about it: “I was contemplating if I should put [meditation] in the list, because I think that everyone can

²³⁸ CKSPACE, “Rating the BEST and WORST Minimalist Habits that can Make or Break you | Minimalism Tier List”, Mar. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8TM-xLxb5mw> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

²³⁹ As we have mentioned, some minimalist channels such as Nate O’Brien’s or Gabe Bult’s link their minimalism to tips on frugality and financial investments, and calls for saving money, setting up monthly budgets, monitoring expenses, paying off debts and so on are common currency in the minimalist discourse, especially through the framing of good minimalist “habits” to adopt (for example, Ronald L. Banks, “10 Habits For Everyday Minimalism”, Apr. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQQfhegyXyA>; last accessed: 14/11/2023). As subjective and situational conditions, including socio-economic ones, are actually ignored, they are turned into fixed constraints that one must individually heed to and take responsibility for. Thus there is little to no emphasis, at least in our corpus of threads and vlogs, on solutions that involve others on the interpersonal, communal or social level, even basic sharing of items used only occasionally. On the contrary, in the present vlog the host ranks renting things instead of buying them – that is, an individualized and commodified form of shared property – in the second tier, because for example “it saves us a ton of money and the shame of not being able to stick to one hobby” that one wanted to try out without being so sure about committing to it: “We don’t need to own everything just because we need it once.” Accordingly, minimalism’s promise of an individual life-changing transformation always has on the background the socio-economic individual responsabilization which makes all alternatives to private ownership, acquisition and consumption of things inconceivable.

meditate, you don't need to be a minimalist to do it. But then I remember, 'Why I even meditate?' It's to remove my mental clutter and give me more clarity. So in some sense I'm kind of like doing a decluttering challenge for my brain every day." The practice of meditation is framed as "mental decluttering" and incorporated in the discourse, because after all a kind of mental decluttering is what minimalism is after anyway. Of course, in actual fact everyone can not only practice meditation without being "minimalist", but also practice pretty much all other practices that circulate in the discourse, and most assuredly all the indeterminate "habits" praised by the host – frugality, productivity, slow living, recycling and so on. As our analyses show, the difference is rather a rhetorical difference sustained by way of the discourse around the practices. If faced with the question of what the relative weight of all the components of "minimalism" is, and whether they all have to be present in one's mind while carrying on the core practices – reducing things and clothes, restricting new purchases –, the host would in all likelihood just double down on subjectivism. In fact, the top tier also includes the "habit" of "knowing the why", that is, the personal reasons behind one's actions in general and one's engagement with minimalism in particular, which must of course be authentic engagement as well, not determined by others: "A lot of us start out on our minimalist lifestyle absorbing whatever information from others, so in order for us to prevent ourselves from going through the motion or making mistakes, we need to understand the purpose why we are doing something." Each and every individual will have different reasons for practicing minimalism, and perhaps they will be practicing different types of it, yet they will all practice "minimalism" too, since the inherent contradictions between the various components are left unspoken; no minimalist has to enter into conflict with other minimalists and criticize them.

The remaining two items in the top tier of this list strongly confirm what we have said about the indeterminacy of principles not being a problem for the minimalist discourse, because they contradict the first half of the ranking: here prioritizing "people over things", especially in terms of the time spent with them, is immediately ranked in the top tier with no qualms, even though it is clearly almost equivalent to the "experience over things" principle, in that both needlessly and misleadingly oppose "things" to the first term in a rhetorical anti-materialist gesture; similarly, this same rhetoric is appealed to by also including in the top tier the habit of not "attach[ing] to stuff emotion-

ally” and not “treating everything as sentimental items”, but rather “as a tool”, while in the other vlog the issue of sentimentality was deemed too “subjective” to be determined either way. This reveals that in fact the host’s problematization of certain principles or practices in the other half of the ranking was just a way to manage and attenuate them while retaining them: as minimalists do not have to “reject all the things” in favour of experiences, so here they do not have, on the contrary, to accept “everything as sentimental items”; and the accent must be put on the universalization of “all” and “every”, because once denied it projects the indeterminacy of a “some” – some things must be rejected, some things can be sentimental, and the anti-materialist rhetoric often backing up the rule of restriction is thus saved. The same could be said of the aesthetic, whose implicit affirmations in the previous half of the ranking are now made more explicit, though it is – as usual – handled in emotional terms, and even justified as beneficial for productivity. In the second tier, three items point to the aesthetic dimension of minimalism already implicit earlier: “be[ing] mindful of what you bring home”, removal of “visual clutter”, and the principle of “everything has a home.” The first of these is nothing but the generalized affirmation of restriction beyond purchases and thus beyond frugality – even against it, because it encompasses again gifts and also any other free item: “I’m a frugal person, and sometimes when things are free I tend to forget that I’m a minimalist. But I need to remind myself that it doesn’t mean that everything that is free is good.” As we have just seen, frugality per se no less than the aesthetic cannot be said, from the point of view of the discourse itself, to exhaust “minimalism”, but its excess is for us clearly aesthetic: one’s home should have few items – or at least fewer relative to its initial state – and, if nothing else, it should further display the basic aesthetic cohesiveness of one’s subjective approval and appreciation of each and every thing. These, and most likely more determinate aspects taken up from the aesthetic common sense, are pursued for their own sake, that is, for the very experience of them as following the experience of getting at them, of getting through reduction and restriction, and of course of being transformed by all of these. The removal of “visual clutter”, which is now deemed “easy and beneficial” for all, is subordinated by the host to emotional well-being and especially productivity, but it is clear that the claim that “a clear environment means a clear mind” exceeds both of these: a “clutter-free environment” without the “distraction” of “mess and chaos” may be good for one’s “focus” at work, but that leaves unexplained minimalism’s main concern with the home, since most people – ex-

cept minimalist influencers, of course – do not work at home; and the same could be said for emotional well-being, which is not necessarily to be sought within the confines of one’s domestic space, aesthetically or not. Needless to say, yet worth reminding, the aesthetic is always positively affirmed by the host, here in a way that precisely mixes up the home environment with the work environment: a kitchen sink full of dirty dishes is followed by his gesture of straightening up his computer’s keyboard on a black monochrome desk, all in perfect order and with all-black mouse, monitor and organizer and so on. The “everything has a home” principle, according to which one sets up “a designated location to keep every single item” one owns, is a reinforced version of the habit of putting things away in their “original spot” after using them, and again makes more explicit its call for “keep[ing] our home organized.” Like sentimental attachment to things besides experience or people, some aesthetic is patently good, so far as it is not determined but tacitly in the discourse, and so far as it is not fully acknowledged as aesthetic.

There is here too, of course, the negative side of rejection of the aesthetic that allows for it to be accepted in the indeterminate form, and it is again located in the bottom tier. One of the aesthetic elements that are dismissed is tied to extreme minimalism, and thus exhibits the same ambiguity we have noted in our analyses of Reddit threads about the latter, and the same rhetoric of rejecting “rejecting all things”: the extremist removal of all furniture, which can look like “the most minimalistic way of living” by “stripping everything down to its bare minimum”, gets conflated with the aesthetic by virtue of its commonsensical association to it, its determinacy, its manifest nature and thus the perceived competitiveness around it, but it is also what justifies some “comfort”, some furniture and thereby some aesthetic by contrast to needless deprivation. Once more, then, by dismissing too evident a form of reduction and restriction undertaken for its own sake, and in an extreme and determinate manner, some reduction and restriction of that same kind is pre-emptively kept safe from criticism. After all, “cabin life” with just the “bare minimum” at least makes it to the penultimate tier, in that it is no doubt extreme and thus “very subjective” – as was, however, the removal of sentimental items that is nonetheless promoted –, but also good “to distract ourselves from our busy world” and “pull ourselves from our busy schedule and to do list”, so that one may give it a try as a form of vacation from time to time: here the (aestheticized) extreme minimalism ap-

pears more positively as an escape from – and rhetorical escape valve for – the very productivity minimalism itself often urges, just like the subordinated invitation to slow down. The other aesthetic element, again one associated in a commonsensical way to minimalism, is also explicitly tied to “slow living” and – as were negative space and monochrome colours – also appreciated by the host, yet it ends up in the bottom tier as well because it is too determinate and therefore not tied to “minimalism” in any strictly necessary way, uniting all minimalists: “No, there’s definitely no connection between minimalism and having plants. It’s just coincidentally that many minimalists appreciate things that cultivate slow living. So it’s not really a minimalist habit; so I’ll put it in tier C, even though I’d want it to be in [tier] S.” As soon as minimalism’s means are determined any further than abstract reduction and restriction, they enter into its aesthetic common sense and must therefore be rejected, even if they are acknowledged to be effective means. What counts as “minimalist” is understood to be the valuing of “slow living” per se, which in its indeterminacy makes the contradictions – such as the equally “minimalist” valuing of productivity – harder to see. Surely not every minimalist will practice meditation as well, just like not everyone will cultivate plants, yet meditation is ranked highest while plants are ranked lowest, because the former’s “mental decluttering” does not exhibit the aesthetic dimension of minimalism, but rather reinforces its confinement into the (supposedly) individual subjective sphere of emotions, leaving it indeterminate beyond the rule of restriction. However, one could just as well do the same rhetorical move but reverse its direction, noting that minimalism differs from practices such as meditation precisely in that it is first and foremost concerned with one’s things, clothes and home at large, while meditation goes straight for that subjective well-being that minimalism often claims as its final end: if meditation works for that, then why go through the trouble of decluttering at all? As we have seen throughout our study, that is both because minimalism has in fact a positive aesthetic dimension, and because it also strongly depends upon its disavowal – as the host’s ranking shows – for its negative rhetoric of subjectivist authenticity and intentionality (that is, an anti-aesthetic, anti-consumerist and/or anti-materialist rhetoric), which also serves to manage the criticality of the self-help and self-improvement discourses of which the minimalist one is part. It is through the aesthetic – positively and negatively – that a minimalist must get at the promised subjective well-being of its integral lifestyle. It is what makes some reduction and restriction necessary.

A few rules or methods, with the usual contradictoriness surrounding them, are also present in this second half of the host's ranking (beside the principles we have mentioned, here directly employed in their indeterminacy). The bottom tier, for example, also includes the decluttering question of asking oneself whether one would buy a certain item again or not, which appears as too low a bar to the host's eyes: it can work for "cheap [stuff], duplicates and 'just in case' items" – that is, for the things that one is usually urged to declutter anyway –, but not for other things which one would not perhaps buy again yet has no problem sticking to (just like the host's watch, lamp and plants which are shown here). Vice versa, in the second tier we find the rule of not replacing something before it breaks, praised against the temptation of upgrades, though also noting that it too could offer a loophole for the very act it should warn against, since one may break something on purpose just in order to be justified in replacing it – as if, once again, this was not true of any abstract and isolated rule or principle at all. These two rankings may seem to make good on the host's ambiguity towards things already owned and replacements or upgrades, but in fact it is still there to some extent, because reparation of things – like upcycling in the other half – is ranked in the penultimate tier, praised for its limitation on purchases yet also requiring too much skill, time and effort for everyone to practice it: "[It is] an extraordinary skill to have. Being able to fix things when they are faulty, instead of rushing to buy stuff, can save us a lot of money – but I'll put it in tier B, because to some [people] fixing things might not be the most time-efficient thing to do." One should then use what one already has, generally speaking, yet not necessarily repair things or even less upcycle them. The basic alternative remains, as always, that between keeping or discarding, and this is also visible in the popular "Pareto principle" ranked high in the second tier, according to which "80% of your possessions, clothes, tools, are used 20% of the time", so that by "identify[ing] what's essential in our daily lives" we can "display what is frequently used, hide what we rarely use, and declutter what we don't need": reference to "displaying" and "hiding" betrays minimalism's aesthetic dimension, but we have seen that its rhetoric of authenticity and its rule of restriction make it hostile towards "hiding" things by storing them away instead of decluttering them, so the basic choice is always whether something must go or may stay – with the assumption, of course, that some things must certainly go. This is perhaps the perfect rule for the minimalist discourse, because its quantitative percentages are merely illustrative of the commonsensical rule of restriction on

the basis of authenticity – the “essential” for one’s life against an assumed excess –, without really prescribing that roughly four fifths of one’s “stuff” will have to be discarded (though the positive suggestion may nonetheless be operative). Other rules are, by contrast, either too determinate or too patently restrictive. The host places the tip of not having a credit card in the lowest rank as a needless limitation: “Having a credit card doesn’t mean that I will spend on things I couldn’t afford, and likewise not having a credit card doesn’t mean you can curb your impulsive purchases.” Similarly, the “packing party” method of packing one’s belongings as if one was about to move elsewhere, so that the items that are actually needed and used – and enjoyed? – are taken out with time while the rest can be decluttered after an arbitrary period (a month, three months or a year, for example), is ranked in the penultimate tier as too “extreme.” At the same time, the latter is still deemed an “excellent way” per se to identify those 80% of inauthentic things, because such arbitrary limitations are all that the minimalist discourse has to offer anyway, despite disavowing them as with the aesthetic. Pursuit of multifunctional items, praised as “minimalists’ favourite tool” – obviously accompanied by a picture of a smartphone –, are placed in the penultimate tier because their value depends on each object, as if that was not the case with all items. Digitalization is praised in the second tier as a way of getting rid of documents and sentimental items without entirely losing them, but “going paperless” is deemed subjective and ranked in the penultimate tier because some find it easier to stay organized with paper files, just like sentimental items were problematized as subjective in the first half of the ranking.

Minimalism thus remains everything and its opposite. No rule can get around reflection on a concrete and specific object, and no rule – especially the isolated, abstract and arbitrary ones found in the minimalist discourse – can simply be applied bypassing the concrete and specific subject that employs it within a certain situation, with the risk of being mistaken, misled or even mischievously specious that this implies. Yet minimalism demands just that, because it is itself based on a rule that some reduction and restriction is objectively good for anyone, beyond whatever subjective pretexts to the contrary one comes up with, and that such empty reduction and restriction – generalized to all of life – is enough to constitute authenticity and intentionality, and thus to engender an integral lifestyle of well-being that is critical but crisis-free, piecing together all values (practical benefits of all kinds – from ease of cleaning to financial independence,

from productivity to free time for slow living –, positive emotional affects, ethical and sustainable consumption, aesthetic solution or dissolution). Rhetorical rejections of the aesthetic and the consumerist – externally imposed, internally impulsive – sustain this identification of reduction and restriction with authenticity and intentionality, making everything subjective in minimalism but the indeterminate need for some restraint, which is nonetheless identified with as authentically and intentionally taken on. Further rhetorical rejections of the rule-bound partly add to this same rhetorical move, partly afford vice versa occasions to point out and warn against subjective misinterpretations that sidestep the rule of restriction. The aesthetic implicitly, but also especially the rule-bound more explicitly, still positively project a “minimalism” that does have its cohesiveness and coherence, that does bring all sorts of people together regardless of their differences, as in the Pareto principle or the “less is more” motto more generally. However, that remains as a promise whose indeterminacy leaves it wholly available for contradicting determinations within and without each minimalist channel on YouTube and other regions of the discourse, such as on Reddit. It works as one aesthetically appealing and malleable entryway into the discourses of self-help and self-improvement in which it is embedded, and from which it actually inherits its common sense and its contradictions: by concealing these behind its inclusive metaphorical framing of reduction and restriction, it affords management and alleviation of their criticality, as all centred on individual responsabilization in all areas of life. Thus bullet journaling, though put in the penultimate tier because the host has only just taken it up, is appreciated as “minimalist” because “it’s an excellent way to minimize and organize our life – our to do lists, important notes, events happening that day, even tracking our habits”: an organized life is a “minimized” life as well, as we have seen with the productivity rules ranked high in the other half. Slow living, as we have seen earlier, is on the other hand invoked – like imperfection – to attenuate this push for organization, regulation and routinization summed up by the idea of the good “habit” (as opposed to the bad rules). Not surprisingly, the host also places in the bottom tier an extreme version of it, “do nothing”, which may work for those who cannot relax but is not needed “if you have already slowed down” like the host, that is, if you are authentically productive yet not busy and sometimes taking a break. Planned meals are also ranked in the penultimate tier, because they remove “decision fatigue” yet they also demand it in advance and they again require effort:

I love meal prep. It actually helps us to reduce all the decision fatigue from thinking what we are going to eat for lunch or dinner, since the food is already prepped. But of course, you still have to make the decision before you prepare it, and it's also not for everyone's liking because you have to make your own food, you need to spend more time preparing, for example, seven portions for a whole week – that can be really exhausting.

The promise of a life that is intentional yet tensionless is what the host loves in planned meals, precisely like a rule once adopted and yet forever valid and one's own, and its low ranking is due to the evident failure of living up to that promise. Is then the pursuit of a collection of things that are similarly authentic without aesthetic crisis, and enduringly so, also destined to fail? And what about the criticality at any rate required by purchases of new things, into which a multitude of conflicting factors may always enter? Minimalism's answer, left at its minimum possible, is that one should simply stop and really – authentically, intentionally – think about all of this for oneself through the metaphorical framing of reduction and restriction for a surplus (plus the positive inspiration of the aesthetic and the rule-bound). Somehow, the final result will resemble lightweight travelling on a minimally packed luggage, ranked by the host in the second tier as “one of the best things” about minimalism. The promise always lives on, regardless of contradictory interests and ends and conflicting, underdetermined or disavowed means. That promise is minimalism.

2.5 – “Less is More” is More. Minimalism Lifestylizing

What is left of “minimalism” at the end of our study? On some level, we may say that everything is left, because almost everything was left out: on YouTube alone, a myriad “minimalist” vlogs on any topic from frugality tips to decluttering sessions, from wardrobe tours to relational advice, from digital detoxing to other healthy habits, from suggested quality products – perhaps by some sustainable brand – to rules for increasing productivity or way for escaping it through self-care and slow living, and on and on, were all left out, though much of it was included and taken into account in our original corpus; what we have focused on is but a small sliver of a discourse that has been endlessly proliferating for two decades regardless of the professed self-evident simplicity and subjectivism of its message, and regardless of all its contradictions – in fact, only reinstated and sustained by the crises it sparks. From another point of view, however, we may just as well say that nothing is left, because the discourse itself – both on Reddit and on YouTube – strives to keep “minimalism” indeterminate and thus as close to

nothing as possible, and even our limited analyses are enough to claim that reliance on indeterminacy, the rhetorical moves to maintain it and an aesthetic common sense that both positively and negatively makes it appealing, alluring, promising, may in fact be the features that tie together a “minimalist” discourse as such, preserving its on-going viability and pliability. These two claims are both true. If we ask ourselves whether we now understand “minimalism” any better than at the start, any better than after leisurely reading a handful of the most popular books or even just a few blogs about it, we may reply that we have indeed learned very little, but also that we understand minimalism much more accurately because of that. We hopefully see more clearly, now, how it is in fact everything and nothing at once, the ways in which it resists determination and development as a discourse at all, if not as the critical discourse it often claims to be. We have spent all our efforts on achieving this minimum possible. As we have disclosed in advance, minimalism mostly consists of the rhetorical move of projecting an indeterminate, all-inclusive common sense – a minimum possible of consensus, the least common denominators among all authentic, intentional individuals – by negations of its own original common sense as too determinate, too exclusive and extreme, too rigid and restrictive, too arbitrary, too critical: minimalism is the shadow cast by this contrast with the literal “minimum possible” – or “bare minimum” – supposedly pursued by the aesthetic and/or the extreme minimalists, impulsively taking on aesthetic and rule-bound standards that are really imposed just as much as other consumerist trends (and in fact so often flowing back into them, as with higher quality, authentic and intentional upgrades to one’s decluttered belongings). This minimum possible remains indeed “possible”, yet its construction and reconstruction is never undertaken beyond such projection of it as an indeterminate promise, not least because its very subjectivism on the one hand discharges all criticality onto the responsible individual of good sense, with no need for shared discussion, and on the other hand it also dispels criticality as a threat to the well-being it promises, thus managing and alleviating the very crises and recoils engendered by its individualized responsibility. This is most evident in the rhetoric of authenticity that is merged with “intentionality”, because it is paradoxically allergic to the radical indeterminacy of possibility, seeking a minimum possible in the sense of just a “minimum” of possibility, and thus no interferences with one’s thoroughly actualized authentic self: one should “only own” what one presently uses or enjoys, not what might be used or enjoyed in the future or what has been in the past – all attachments may be

pretexts for not reducing and restricting –, especially if any trace of negativity or even uncomfortable ambiguity is there; and it is for this same reason that things cannot just be stored away, remaining as possibilities, but must be actually discarded. This minimization of possibility goes very well, of course, with the regulation of habits and routines in the self-help and self-improvement discourses that minimalism leads into, contributing to them its promise of an integral lifestyle and its framing of practices or advice around metaphorical reductions or restrictions that are voluntarily – authentically, intentionally – undertaken in view of a multifarious surplus (a practical, economic, ethical, emotional and aesthetic surplus all at once). Meditation and other self-care practices become forms of “mental decluttering”, digital detox opens up a boundless fields of other “things” to reduce and restrict – emails, files, photos, accounts owned or followed and so on –, productivity tips minimize “decision fatigue” and effort altogether through implementation of optimized small habits and routines adding up to big changes in the long run, schedules are trimmed down – again decluttering tasks as “things” – to what is authentically valued at present by the individual to achieve a non-busy productivity, compatible with some slowing down from time to time. As with the aesthetic and the rule-bound, the minimalist discourse can always disavow all these more or less metaphorical extensions as not truly “minimalist”, but the point is that the discourse itself has no way of actually pushing back against them, since it is in fact entirely continuous with them in its rhetoric (though it remains distinctive in the ways it gets to the very same common sense, and the ways it covers up its contradictions). If the disavowed aspects of “minimalism” were to disappear overnight, almost nothing of it would remain. It would actually revert to a nameless, indeterminate commonsensical invitation to think hard about what one owns and purchases, with no further content.

The indeterminacy of a promise allows, as we have noted, for determination to be carried on anyway by each minimalist influencer – each one with his or her own emphases and mix of topics – through equally “authentic” positive examples, very often also tacitly affirming what is denied, with various shades of aestheticization (jointly disavowing the aesthetic). The minimum possible of consensus which is reached is therefore at any rate positively pervaded and shaped by the commonsensical but more determinate aspects or elements it rejects. Since the rejection of the aesthetic and the rule-bound is aimed at their determinacy as such, the negation does not determine “minimal-

ism” the other way around – for example, openly endorsing and expressing an aesthetic of imperfection – but just returns it to indeterminacy, without excluding that minimalist influencers will keep on presenting themselves and their homes with a modernist style, a casual or glamour monochrome look or all the assortment of traits otherwise dismissed as stereotypical (from all-white walls and neutral furniture to plants and few isolated artworks). The critical common sense of “intentional living” distilled by disavowal of the original common sense of the aesthetic and rule-bound remains in fact confused with it, just like they both are left confused with the aesthetic and consumerist they claim to oppose: the authentic, as we have seen, is an attempt at dissolving the aesthetic by solving it once and for all – also made more plausible and appealing by aesthetic means, like monochrome neutral clothes that always match each other and any situation –, while the intentional also includes a similar attempt at winning at the game of consumption by somehow holding together all the different factors that may go into evaluating any product or service; and replacements and upgrades are not really discouraged by either of them. In other words, minimalism is in fact commonsensical through and through, at all levels, despite playing them against each other to distinguish itself – again minimally – from any of them taken separately: the subjectivist intentionality or authenticity of the self-help and self-improvement discourses and their practices, the various shades of the modernist aesthetic – plus other associations no less commonsensical and fully compatible with it, like that to the Japanese aesthetic –, the anti-consumerist conscious, frugal and/or ethical consumption, with hints of the anti-materialist moral rhetoric in favour of experiences and relationships as opposed to things, and yet also the consumerist pursuit of an enduring satisfaction with what one owns – none of this can really be said to be “minimalist” if taken on its own, if not thrown together with the rest in one amorphous common sense whose contradictions can be rhetorically exploited by the discourse. This is the reason why in our present study we have resisted both the temptation of identifying by fiat “minimalism” with any one of its components to get a more determinate and thus more palatable, manageable object to analyse, and the temptation of dismantling it into neat components to analyse separately as adding up to the lifestyle. Despite the different emphases of each minimalist channel, and despite the fact that the distinction of “types” of minimalism is sometimes made within the discourse itself, what characterizes the discourse is the maintenance of the indeterminate promise of these components not conflicting after all, com-

ing together into a “lifestyle” that is both subjective and yet shared by many others regardless of all their differences. Without this promise, we would surely have decluttering, capsule wardrobes, frugality, simple living, fashion advice, productivity tips and on and on, but there would be no “minimalist lifestyle” over and above them.

The “minimum” at the heart of minimalism is therefore the minimal common sense – as well as good sense – supposedly shared by authentic, intentional individuals who reject both the aesthetic, consumerist excesses and the deprivations of the minimum possible, turning the latter into a matter of minimizing anything that is merely possible, that is, anything that escapes the current actuality and regularity of the individual’s authentic self (including the values he or she subjectively takes into account when being an intentional consumer, since it is difficult or impossible to consider them all). In other words, everyone should have his or her own minimum possible, but will still be united with others as “minimalists” by common sense and its layered disavowals, negations that only lead them into the other side of that common sense. The promise that one can be a better consumer than others – practically and/or morally – by consuming more intentionally is in fact no less consumerist than the correlative assumption of others consuming impulsively: they are mirror images of one and the same contradictory common sense, a (anti-)consumerist common sense; they both maintain that one may be enduringly satisfied with things owned and bought, and that owning and buying are the most central sites of action for the individual (including action directed at social change). Similarly, the promise that one can just as satisfactorily express himself or herself in a more authentic manner, instead of complying and conforming to others, is actually the other side of the same (anti-)aesthetic common sense, which is again contradictory: aesthetic expression of one’s individual uniqueness is actually granted by fashion’s differentiating vector, though frustrated by the opposite push towards conformity, which turns it into a never-ending pursuit of trend after trend; rejecting social conformity for individual authenticity only reaffirms and heightens the pursuit, and if it does not, it is rather because one has ended up conforming and taken that as authentic (gaining through some version of the modernist aesthetic an “inoffensiveness” towards, an “immunity” from and a “muting” of others and their trends which is at once in line with common sense and rhetorically made authentic). Minimalism can run freely from one end to the other of this (anti-)consumerist, (anti-)aesthetic common sense (in addition to

even more encompassing descriptions such as “anti-materialism”); this is what distinguishes it from the no less commonsensical yet more direct appeals to individual authenticity or intentionality in the self-help and self-improvement discourses. Its indeterminacy leaves the door open for minimalist influencers to influence, since that is what their authentic, intentional audiences are actually looking for: if they already knew what to do by simple appeal to their good sense, there would be no need for a minimalist discourse, and no problem in the first place. “Minimalists” might no doubt refuse to adopt wholesale a certain determinate aesthetic style, but they will probably pick up at the very least some less determinate aspects of it – tidiness, sparseness, cleanliness, organization – and some degree of stylization, of aesthetic cohesiveness, as authentic. In the same way, they will fill in their indeterminate subjectivist intentionality with the individualism that puts one’s personal well-being above all else, and with all the influencers’ tips – including their sponsored brands and affiliated products and services – for a better and again stylized life just like theirs. An aesthetic common sense is thus rhetorically passed on together with a reductive critical common sense on the aesthetic which disavows it; the same goes for the ethical-practical common sense that slips through the reductive critical common sense on the ethical, equated it with the rule-bound so to dismiss it all the more readily. Some aesthetic stylization and some ethical regulation of life through reduction or restraint are necessary for a “minimalist lifestyle”, and such indeterminate necessity is what the discourse protects and makes promising, and all that the minimalist influencers need. An indeterminate “minimalism” can equally address everyone, presenting itself as universal and eternal, as potentially bringing everyone together as authentic, intentional individuals regardless of crises and differences. Minimalism thus “lifestylizes” more than it proposes one determinate lifestyle among others.

A full-fledged critical study of minimalism would be itself an attempt at pushing forward its determination and development, much further than how the minimalist discourse wishes to carry it, and facing all its crises and contradictions. It would have to really explore the promise made, and so it would largely be a creative endeavour of reconstruction. Our much more limited study has rather aimed at demonstrating how this endeavour – the actual exercise of criticality – is resisted, holding the discourse back: refusal to determine and develop minimalism, as if all determinations were destined to be rigid aesthetic trends and rigid ethical rules, does not actually make its discourse any

less rigid, and does not impede but rather supports the rejected determinations. Minimalism gets at good sense and circles back to common sense, with a lot of positive implicit examples and no explicit criteria. The discourse does not, for example, carry on and encourage inquiry into a wide range of culturally diverse concrete ways of relating to things one owns, buys, uses, enjoys, wears and displays: it rather repeats again and again the same vague commonsensical advice that is found elsewhere; it does not build upon itself. This is the reason why minimalism's principle of "less is more" – that is, of achieving a positive surplus by reduction of a negative excess – is itself more, in its malleable indeterminacy, than any of the various ways of determining it, and also any more determinate stylistic trait or conceptual "tool" – usually nothing but rules – offered by the minimalist discourse. In closing, we will briefly look at how this principle's metaphorical frame for minimalism's contradictory, reductive common sense reveals its ambiguous multiplicity when mapped onto the critical common sense we have sketched at the start in our pragmatist critical theory. In fact, part of the critical study of minimalism would be a philosophical critique of it even in the terms the discourse prefers to present it with, that is, those of authenticity and intentionality as already critical in and of themselves. That alone would be a task whose pursuit would be enough to write a whole thesis about, because it has only implicitly accompanied our analyses. Having ourselves only done the "minimum possible" in our present work, projecting our own promise of a critical study we have not been able to properly undertake, we will just add these final considerations to at least offer a sense of what such a study would look like, and how it relates to a semiology reconstructed through pragmatist philosophy.

2.5.1 – More Than One "Less is More"

Besides the rhetorical move of disavowing its own common sense in order to performatively project a sense of subjectivist authenticity and intentionality, what distinguishes minimalism is that it must also get at them through some kind of reduction and restriction, often metaphorically extended from material things to every other area of life: it presupposes an excess to be reduced in order to achieve a surplus. This surplus is meant to come as a surprise, something unexpected and even paradoxical: that one may get "more" through "less" appears as something of an oxymoron. The sense of a counterintuitive revelation in the minimalist principle of "less is more" is one with its rhetorical positioning at the other side of common sense, since it presents minimalism as

something that runs contrary to what most people would ordinarily – or otherwise – think, and thus also as something distinctive that one may indeed learn from minimalist influencers and authors. The surprise is really part of the surplus, because – as we have seen – the latter is an indeterminate promise of a “lifestyle” that goes beyond any determinate practical benefit one may get: it is first and foremost a surplus of meaning, pervading life with a sense of authenticity, intentionality, regularity and so on. Through the framing of “less is more” many heterogeneous practices become “minimalist” practices, themselves performances working in synergy with the discourse’s rhetorical moves – but also, of course, with the aesthetic common sense they disavow, since “less is more” is originally a modernist design motto. It is accordingly the perfect encapsulation of the contradictory “minimum possible” of minimalism, that is, its common sense – supposedly critical, yet ambivalent and continuous with the common sense it rejects, and in fact very often hostile towards criticality. The “less is more” principle is constitutive of the very “more” that it promises, and it is just as indeterminate and contradictory, just as malleable. “Less” and “more” are terms applied to all sorts of things and “things”, and usually to different sorts each, at any one time: less clutter, more time spared from cleaning; less quantity of purchases, more higher quality items become affordable; less tasks in one’s to do list, more energy for each of them. Moreover, “less” may just be a means to achieve “more” – as when “minimalism” is presented as just a “tool” –, or it may rather be that “less” itself is indeed “more.” What relation is there between the “intentional life” promised by minimalism and the gesture of reducing and restricting for a surprising surplus of meaning? Our pragmatist critical theory does ascribe a crucial place to intentionality, which thereby partakes in the making of sense or meaning through critical experience, but its framework is much broader, encompassing other dimensions of experience both beneath and beyond intentionality. How does the “less” of reduction fit into our framework, engendering a “more” of sense and meaning? By briefly going through some more examples of vlogs from our corpus centred on the “less is more” principle, one last time showing the indeterminacy of minimalism with all its contradictions, we will see that these contradictions are indeed tied to those of common sense as articulated by our critical theory, and that “reduction” works quite differently depending on the level upon which it operates. This will confirm, and sum up in the manner of a (temporary) conclusion, our analyses of minimalism as a rhetorical path to a common sense of intentionality and authenticity through on the one hand rejections

of the broader common sense that it nevertheless retains, and on the other hand reduction and restriction of excesses for a surplus as its overall framing.

In the formulation that comes closest to offering an explicit “rule of restriction”, as we have called minimalism’s insistence on the necessity of some reduction and restriction even against one’s subjective judgment, the “less is more” principle appears as the “80/20” Pareto principle, taking on a semblance of law-like quantitative exactitude and certainty. As we have seen with the ranking of minimalist “habits” by CKSPACE, the too obvious rule-bound character of quantitative rules makes them suspect to the minimalist discourse, and yet the Pareto principle was ranked in the second tier, where core minimalist practices such as decluttering, capsule wardrobes and intentional purchases were placed. In his vlog on the “less is more” principle²⁴⁰, the host identifies the “overused phrase for minimalism” with the Pareto principle as “the one best rule” applicable to everything and anything in one’s life: whatever the contents of the two terms, 80% of “output” (or “result”) will come out of just 20% of “input” (or “effort”). At the end of the vlog, the host admits that “there’s nothing mathematical about this principle”, that the two percentages may vary a lot because “this principle is just a simplification or an explanation of how imbalanced our reality is”, but this does not take anything from its worth as the catch-all rule “for your countless hobbies, a house full of collection, the time spent on studying, or using it for your monthly budget”, because it is its indeterminacy that allows it to work in this way: “Accuracy is not the focus here, but instead it’s the awareness, what are we going to do after knowing this: how can we improve our productivity, increase our sales, declutter our possessions or even save money.” In this sense, the Pareto principle is pretty much equivalent to the “less is more” principle, but emphasizes its instrumental aspect as a rule – no doubt a rule of thumb, but nevertheless one that presses on reduction and restriction as necessary and desirable. Despite the host’s disclaimer, there remains indeed a hint of necessity in the Pareto principle, which papers over the gap between what is a social and cultural man-made product and what is taken to be natural: the origin of the principle is attributed to Pareto’s observation that “80% of his country land was owned by 20% of its people” just like the ratio of peas produced by plants in his pea garden, as if they both were natural imbalances of reality

²⁴⁰ CKSPACE, “The one best rule”, Feb. 2021, <https://youtu.be/6VIxrdFKNSw> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

to be simply reckoned with. We can see this in action very clearly in the host's application of the principle to his own "work efficiency" as a YouTube influencer:

We often waste time overthinking the smallest detail of our work without knowing if that effort makes a difference. For my case, I make videos on YouTube, and I'll say I spend less than 20% of my working time on creating my thumbnail and naming the title; but then I realized that probably 80% of you choose to click on it only if my thumbnail and title are relatable. So that tells me I need to spend more effort in creating the clickable thumbnail. If not, no matter how much effort I put in my storytelling, scripting or video editing, all of those will go to waste if my thumbnail doesn't reach out to you guys – which is a sad truth I have to accept. And on the other hand, I'm spending way too much effort on stuff that gives me insignificant results – for example, perfecting my script and finding the best typeface. No doubt they are important, but I take too much time and effort [for these,] to a point where it reached a diminishing return.

The constraints posed by YouTube's platform and its competitive, quantified mediatic environment are taken as a "sad truth" to be accepted and conformed to, putting more effort – despite the disdain for appearances in the minimalist discourse – in the vlogs' titles and thumbnails, less in their actual contents, which are more demanding and thus provide a "diminishing return" relative to effort. Similarly, regardless of work environment, "we can restructure our time and effort based on the results you receive so to increase our work efficiency": whatever the constraints revealed by positive feedback in the results of one's efforts, one should adapt and focus on them. Here, "less is more" works as a call for optimization of ways and means of action according to efficiency as it is already settled in one's work environment, just like the ends are – including the very end of work efficiency. Why should a minimalist be work efficient in the first place? Why should an increased "productivity" be part of the "more" of "less"? The host does not address these issues, and after all he would probably reply with a subjectivist appeal: minimalists do not necessarily have to be efficient and productive if they do not wish to, but if they do, they can (all the while, his channel – like many other minimalist channels – positively affirms efficiency and productivity as valuable just like it affirms the rejected aesthetic style of minimalism). And yet if productivity just required more effort it would not appear as a plausible aspect of "minimalism", because it would involve no form of reduction or restriction. The answer to the question is thus that a minimalist may – if not should – be work efficient just because efficiency can be framed as one form of the "less is more" principle which must inform a minimalist's lifestyle. Optimization also entails saving on resources that may be then invested on other better things, "it might even save you some time for what you always wanted to do, or spend it with the people you care [about]": here the resulting "more" is not the direct outcome of the "less" which is done, but rather a by-product of efficiency outside of the action at

hand, outside of work, in terms of saved scarce resources that can be spent elsewhere (such as time, effort and so on). This duplicity of the optimization of ways and means of action is a central knot in minimalism's contradictory appeal to productivity and slow living: optimization enhances results relative to one's effort – or other resources –, but it does not decide whether results should remain fixed, thereby simply lowering the effort required to achieve them, or it is instead effort that should be fixed and thus results increased. In fact, it does not even exclude that both effort and results will be increased overall, as this is actually the host's own case, because he admits that the 80% of effort – in his case, that put into producing the scripts for his vlogs – may still be needed “to reach 100%”, and will simply be enhanced by the additional focus on the most effective 20%. The host's positive example is thus bent towards the reading of efficiency which stresses productivity, even though he also gestures towards the opposite reading. Of course, he does not actually distinguish the two, but rather moves from one to the other thanks to the principle's indeterminacy – that is the whole point of our study. By doing so, it leaves both doors open, passing over their contradiction.

If minimalism were just a matter of definite practical benefits, each minimalist would surely have to balance the results to be sought with the resources gained as by-products through efficiency, but – apart from the lack of a clear distinction between the two – this would not constitute anything like a fatal flaw: minimalism would indeed be a “tool”, a means, that does not prescribe the ends to be pursued through it. However, as we know from our pragmatist critical theory, means do partake in the determination of desire into ends to be intentionally pursued: just like everything looks like a nail to the ones who only have a hammer, so the “less is more” principle – which, as we have seen, is almost all the minimalist discourse has explicitly on offer as “tool” – will indeed affect the end to be sought, though it will do so in contradictory ways. This is all the more true for minimalism understood as a “lifestyle”, wherein the “less is more” principle – applied to many areas of life – is instead an ideal to be also pursued for its own sake, for the experienced sense and meaning it affords. From this point of view, as we have just noted, one may or even should be work efficient because it is a “minimalist” experience of (one form of) “less is more”: whether one turns this into a subjective self-identification as a productive and efficient person or more simply enjoys the experience of it (if not even just the promise of such experience as made by the minimalist dis-

course), optimization becomes a constitutive aspect of a minimalist lifestyle; which in turn makes it, in our terms, already an aesthetic aspect of minimalism – a “tool” more similar to a musical instrument than to a hammer. In both ways, a minimalist is led by the “less is more” principle towards contradictory ends for optimization, as well as towards optimization as an ideal: “If I can apply this principle into my lifestyle, I can actually remove this redundant 80% that gives me small value, and put all my focus on the 20% that can give me the most value”; the principle is generalized to the whole lifestyle, and at the same time it is assumed that some overall “value” for oneself is to be maximized (which may just as well be productivity as free time, though it does seem to push more for the former in this case). Needless to say, the indeterminacy of the “less is more” principle covers much more than just its own contradictions, just like the subjectivism of “minimalism” conceals all sorts of differences among people, especially socio-economic ones, conflating everyone into (the aspiration for) a comfortable middle class that is only defined – as usual – by negative contrast to the extravagant, wasteful ultra-rich. In this case, for example, the host fails to mention that in most jobs as employees one’s work efficiency does not necessarily translate in saved time and efforts, since the workday is fixed by contract; it is not the same as being a YouTube content creator. In the same way, one does not necessarily reap – not directly, at least – the fruits of his or her increased productivity. All of this, however, confirms that behind the appeal to practical benefits such as productivity and saving there is an ideal of optimization as such, as one way of experiencing “less is more” in one’s life, stylizing it – rhetorically if not also aesthetically – in accordance with the principle. Practical benefits add to the promise and make it more concrete and thus appealing – as the determinate aesthetic styles also do –, but they do not exhaust it.

The host applies the principle to material things and clothes as well, of course. In the case of his wardrobe, he goes so far as to claim that even after decluttering it and ending up with two piles of black or white casual clothes he still uses only 20% of the pieces most of the time, for subtle differences in their cuts or materials. In a way, this evidently contradicts the goal of getting rid of “the redundant 80%”, since in the end one develops other preferences that make a large part of the items still underused or underappreciated, but instead it is clearly meant as a confirmation of the principle as descriptively true. Here too a constraint is naturalized into something to conform to as

fixed fact, as we have seen in the other vlogs about the minimalist wardrobe: habitual, unreflective past preference for certain items is frozen into evidence for one's authentic tastes, and vice versa lack of use in the past is a sign of inauthenticity and thus of the fate of the item, which will just keep on being unused. The two sides – descriptive and (covertly) normative – of the principle are evident: on the one hand, “less is more” is understood as a statement of fact about the natural “imbalances” in many areas of life, including one's preferences, and on the other hand it is presented as something to simply accept and submit to. The noted facts about one's preferences are thereby taken to be unchangeable, despite the fact that noticing them affords precisely a chance to reflect upon them and shake oneself from solidified habits: instead of asking whether one may start using what has perhaps been unduly neglected, one is encouraged to discard it. This is why authenticity is allied to a “rule of restriction”, as we have called it: besides the rhetorical rejections of the aesthetic, minimalist authenticity relies on the assumption of a limited set of things that are used and enjoyed regularly at present by oneself – or rather one's authentic self –, and does not tolerate much beyond that. As we have shown, this is actually an attempt at solving and dissolving the aesthetic once and for all by oneself, and one even made to look more plausible by the determinate aesthetic of minimalism (both casual and glamour). Whether it is clothes or things in one's home, authenticity is the ideal of everything being habitually used and enjoyed in a thoroughly actual way, with neither the excess of one's past nor that of one's future possibilities in sight (including mind's sight: storing things away is not enough, because they are still there and one knows it). We have already noted authenticity's connection to routine, which is here confirmed by the host when he says that identifying the 20% of frequently used things serves the purpose of “mak[ing] the whole process seamless”, while other things can be stored away or decluttered (he is less insistent than other influencers, at least explicitly, on discarding items instead of simply storing them away): “I need to place [frequently used items] at a location where I have easy access, so to remove frictions [in order] to make the whole process seamless. When I need a drink, bam!, my water bottle is here; when I need to film, bam!, my camera is under the table; when I need to practice guitar, bam!, it's mounted on the wall.” Since it is a very common topic, the benefits of a minimalist wardrobe are taken for granted and not explicitly stated, but they are usually of the same kind: one will be able to get dressed easily, without the crisis of doubt and the criticality of deciding what to wear; it will just be another routine.

Of course, just like efficiency – of which it is, after all, an expanded version centred on minimized crisis instead of minimized effort –, routine too is often justified in the practical terms of saved time and effort that can be invested in the “things that really matter”, but it is even clearer than in the case of efficiency that it is first and foremost a matter of a “seamless” experience, of which that of “only owning” what one currently uses or enjoys is but the synchronic aspect. Although there is more to it, since it is also allied to intentionality against impulsivity and impositions in the negative rejections of the aesthetic and the consumerist (and, paradoxically, the rule-bound too), authenticity goes hand in hand with regularity, for the simple reason that subjective uses and enjoyments as well as activities are assumed to be quite stable if not fixed. Together, they point at a more decidedly aesthetic interpretation of “less is more” that concerns habits, though indeed pushed towards the status of routines (which circle back to the immediacy of impulses): the less interferences, obstacles, hesitations, mediations and so on in one’s activities, and/or the less noise of past and future unrealized possibilities embodied in one’s belongings, the more regular and authentic one’s habits will be. This naturally lies at the very core of minimalism’s promise of an integral lifestyle, because it already is an aesthetic stylization of life, continuous with all the degrees of aesthetic cohesiveness (from setting up a coherent personal style to adopting a minimalist style). The clean, clutter-free organized home where everything is immediately legible at once, every item has its proper spot and so on is also very much in line with this ideal of a perfect habituation, which is also a perfect inhabitation²⁴¹. While in the case of optimization the “less” part of the principle was primarily instrumental to the “more” of ends which were – in principle at least – definite internal results or external by-products, in the case of habituation the “less” is instead immediately correlated to the “more”: though direct reduction of crises or centrifugal impulses is not at all the only nor the

²⁴¹ We have often seen that, in association to both the aesthetic and the rule-bound, the perfect is also disavowed and dismissed by the minimalist discourse as extraneous to a more genuine minimalism, but just like them it is retained and keeps circulating within the discourse, because no alternative is really in place: even those minimalist influencers who do exhibit some degree of imperfection in their channel’s aesthetic, like Ana Goldberg and – to a lesser extent – Ecofriend Lia, rely on the very same rhetoric of authenticity; the alleviation of criticality they perform with that rhetoric and their imperfect aesthetic actually depends on the rejected perfection, keeps it viable for positive affirmation – at best softened – and at any rate shares in the same promise of dissolving aesthetic criticality in an enduring and entirely individual way. This is why, especially in light of our main interest which was rhetorical, we have included these channels’ approach as one “shade of aestheticization” among others: imperfection is appealed to – as it is also appealed to by minimalists with nearly perfect homes – in order to deny the aesthetic for the authentic, thus failing to critically recognize both the power of the aesthetic and the aesthetic nature of the authentic itself, and failing to offer aesthetic solutions to both issues.

main way to get at the integral organization of habit – far from it, since habit is first and foremost a remediation of them –, it is indeed one way (notwithstanding its unsustainability), and the one does generally accompany the other.

Most other applications of the “less is more” principle in the vlog can be traced back to these two cases, optimization and habituation. For example, the host suggests that what goes for material things also goes for “digital tools” such as the apps on the smartphone, even absent the determinate practical benefit of freeing up its storage space: “If you don’t have storage constraints like I do, you can still make space for clarity when it comes to using our phone. [...] Display the 20% frequently used apps, hide the 80% which you rarely use.” On the other hand, relationships are forced through the framing of the Pareto principle into something to optimize, something that each one invests his or her own time on – as scarce resource of the isolated individual – for as high a return as it is possible: “[The] 80/20 principle forces us to reflect [upon] who are the 20% of people in our lives that gives us 80% of our happiness, because they will be the people we should appreciate. That is utterly crucial for us, because our time is limited and so is theirs. We wouldn’t want to waste so much time, even if it’s a second, to invest in a relationship that doesn’t bring us much value in our lives.” Insofar as it is assumed that there is a 20% of people that is already supplying an 80% of “happiness” to oneself – and enduringly so –, so that one must simply keep to that by reducing the excess relationships, this also fits the frame of authentic and regular habituation; in fact, it shows how much it can overlap with optimization, since it is a habituation that is often subordinated to positive emotions of the individual as such, as if it were an external means to them. The anti-materialist rhetoric that opposes experiences and people – as “things that really matter” – to mere things as well as appearances also ties relationships to the (non-reductive) aesthetic dimension where authenticity sits. However, here it does so through the “quality over quantity” principle, which works as another form of the “less is more” principle: the less the quantity the more the quality, because there will be more spent on what remains (whether it is money spent on an item or time spent with a person); accordingly, in authenticity rhetoric, it is for the host all about “the quality time you have with the people you love, not how many followers you have in your Instagram.” Strictly speaking, this is a broader version of optimization of ways and means of action, because while the latter can also be understood as an optimal allocation of scarce

resources – mainly time, effort and focus –, it primarily stresses the results of their investment; here, on the contrary, it is purely a matter of such allocation, regardless of what further comes out of it: the less the denominator of a fraction, the more will result – mathematically, not in action – from division, meaning that more scarce resources will be allocated to each item (or, in this case, each person). This shows how different readings of the “less is more” principle are not only possible, but also entwined together. Less relationships means that more time will be available for each of them, that more happiness will come out of its investment in them, and that they will be more authentic and regular since they will all be relationships that have already proven their “value” for one’s life – not forced, fake or superficial relationships that are just a “waste” of time, like those on digital social media. The relation between “less” and “more” that grounds each of these readings of the principle is not at all the same: concentration, optimization and habituation are quite distinct ways to get some kind of surplus from reduction (and the related surplus of meaning). Accordingly, the excesses they address are also different: concentration responds to dissipation of resources from too much division; optimization responds to waste of too much effort relative to results; and habituation responds to too much interference or interruption – ranging from weak noise to strong crises – relative to integrated activity within one’s environment and with one’s things (including, of course, the activity of identifying oneself with them). Moreover, although the framing of an overall lifestyle beyond practical benefits makes them all fold back into aesthetic experiences, into sources of sense and meaning before anything else, their places in common sense as articulated by our critical theory are different as well: by itself, optimization is concerned with the ways and means of action relative to their results as to more or less determinate and often external ends, while habituation regards the whole experience of a certain activity or even of one’s life itself (again, also including the reflective identification of the subject which enters experience). As for concentration, in its mathematical abstractness it may go either way, from an instrumental allocation of resources akin to optimization to an ideal shrinking of interests – for example, one’s hobbies – in order to properly cultivate the ones that remain, closer to habituation. It depends on the term attached to the “more”: in the case of relationships, for example, “quality” here suggests a globally enhanced experience more than some determinate external result to be gained, indeed functioning like “experience” itself – and “people” –

as opposed to “things” in anti-materialist rhetoric (which points more directly to yet another “less is more” we will consider later).

There are still a few versions of the “less is more” principle showing up in the vlog. The host applies it to nutrition as something that can be routinized in planned meals with fewer repetitive ingredients, thus promoting a habituation that is more focused on regularity than authenticity, and that is also closer to instrumental optimization (in its defence, the host simply states that it saves time in shopping for groceries). After that, however, the host addresses the issue of “guilty pleasures” such as eating fast food, applying the principle to them as well:

The first 20% [of time] when we are enjoying our guilty pleasures, that could be good for our mind or body to relax, but the next 80% might be what we consider as a binge. [...] When we are eating fast food, you feel good about it in the start, until you finish your meal – it makes us feel really shitty, whether it’s because we are too full or it makes us feel guilty about it. And that led me to the conclusion that guilty pleasure is at its best when it’s controlled. The scarcity makes us appreciate it even more.

On the face of it, one may read this application as a variation on the theme of optimization: just like efforts at work, “guilty pleasures” too offer diminishing returns, so one can optimize them by keeping only to the part with higher returns. Here, however, it is not a matter of finding out which guilty pleasures are optimal in the pleasure they engender, but rather a purely quantitative question of how much of them can be allowed – regardless of what they are – before falling into the less pleasurable or even unpleasant “binging” on them. A proper equivalent in optimization would consider effort in general relative to results, as when perfectionism is criticized as a pursuit of less and less noticeable and important changes with more and more effort, while after an optimal point – or even a sufficient one – it is not really worth it to keep going. Even so, the case of guilty pleasures would still be a different case, and for two reasons. First, it directly concerns the quality of the experience itself as aesthetic more than the results of some action, so that “scarcity makes us appreciate it even more.” Second, it emphasizes the restraint of self-control by negative contrast with one’s lack of it and its bad consequences, including – and especially – that of feeling at odds with oneself in feeling regret and guilt for having given in and lost control. Taken together, these two aspects add up to the exception confirming the rule which figures in plans like diets (for example the “cheat day” in weekends): the regimentation of the meal plan – and more generally of other routines – finds its escape valve in the occasional exception to it, not unlike the

way slow living releases the pressure towards productivity while not challenging it as such; on top of it, its scarcity or infrequency as an exception will make it even more enjoyable. The two aspects can nonetheless be detached from each other and read as two different takes on the “less is more” principle: one amounts to the claim that the less one is used to a certain experience, the more it will be exalted by contrast with the usual as an exception (even within the experience itself, if we keep eating the same thing – at least if no break and variation is introduced, but that possibility is of course invisible to the host, since it is a positive rather than negative solution); the other, instead, is rather the claim – obviously central to the minimalist discourse, coupled with authenticity – that the less one is given to impulses, the more intentional one already is for that alone. The first aspect is clearly contradictory with the push towards perfect habituation, but as we have just seen it is made to serve it as an exception to its rule of restriction, which is emphasized concurrently by the second aspect: deviations, transgressions or even relaxations are valuable in the contrast – the crisis, the difference that makes a difference in aesthetic experience – that they afford, but they must be domesticated, circumscribed, prearranged and thus subordinated crises that do not give too much free rein to impulses. The second aspect, which is of course reinforced like authenticity by minimalism’s rhetorical moves – in this case, the core rejection of the impulsive consumer –, affords the much loved sense of being more intentional and in control. Needless to say, our critical theory demands much more than self-restriction of one’s impulses for granting intentionality: in our framework, intentionality is the cornerstone and sliding door between self-correction and higher and higher degrees of self-control which depend on positive reflection upon – at least – desired ends and ways and means of action; moreover, it can move on to reflection on the logical criteria of reflection itself, as a special class of the means at one’s disposal, and it can also move backwards by releasing its own control, even beyond the granting of a very limited and bounded exception to a rule. This is, of course, the overarching point of our study, which has shown how both the aesthetic dimension of the lifestyle and any set of shared objective criteria are summarily rejected to enhance a subjectivist sense of authenticity and intentionality, and yet retained precisely for lack of alternatives in what is actually of vital importance. We are seeing this at work right now in the host’s promotion of the Pareto principle as “the one best rule” of minimalism, despite the multiple incoherent readings that its extreme indeterminacy conceals (though that may indeed make it the best rule – rhetorically speak-

ing – for the minimalist discourse, insofar as its main aim is that of simply perpetuating itself and its contradictory common sense around the rule of restriction, thereby granting each influencer a frame for their disparate and conflicting messages, including self-help and self-improvement topics). Both shared common sense and individual good sense soften this reductive understanding of intentionality as merely constituted by reduction and restriction: if one were to blindly follow this one best rule in the reading that links a “more” of appreciation to the “less” of scarcity and infrequency, one may also deprive himself or herself of water all day every day in order to maximize, out of thirst, appreciation of it at the one moment in the evening when one can finally drink; this may indeed count already as an intentional act overall, but to the extent that no alternative ends and means were considered, it falls short of critical intentionality (that is, it would be easily vulnerable to criticism). There is something behind and beyond the ethical-practical intentional – the aesthetic interesting, the logical intelligent. Minimalism, with both its aesthetic and critical common sense and its “less is more” principle encapsulating them, does of course promise something interesting and intelligent, but that remains indeed little more than a promise. As we have put it, its “living with intention” is more of a “living within tension”, within the crises rhetorically sparked from its indeterminacy.

We find even more readings of the “less is more” principle in A to Zen Life’s vlog about it²⁴², which also comes with a link to a page in the host’s blog where yet more examples are offered²⁴³. As is often the case – since every vlog is the first one that newcomers to a YouTube channel will see –, the vlog also works as an introduction to minimalism, which is why it begins with the host’s evocation of her husband’s humble birthplace, a Chinese rural village where life is still simple and which her husband feels nostalgic about despite the hardships that life involved: this sets the scene for the excess presupposed by minimalism and its lesson that “we really need much less than we think” and that “buying things and owning a lot of stuff isn’t what makes us happy.” From the very first application of the “less is more” principle – purposely placed first in the vlog by the host, since it is halfway through the list in the blog – we see this anti-materialist and anti-consumerist lesson converted into a plea for discarding things for the sake of authenticity, this time explicitly linked to a rejection of the past and future

²⁴² A to Zen Life, “Why Less is More | MINIMALISM”, Apr. 2022, <https://youtu.be/2AtNAhpyTD0> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

²⁴³ A to Zen Life, “LESS IS MORE: 21 REASONS TO MAKE IT YOUR LIFE’S MANTRA”, Feb. 2022, <https://atozenlife.com/less-is-more/> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

for the present: “less past and future, more being present” is how the host puts it, and while the vlog emphasizes decluttering of actual things, the blog presents it as a more general self-help advice about “cherish[ing] and learn[ing] from the past” but not “let[ting] it stop you from moving forward”, “mak[ing] plans and hav[ing] goals for yourself” but also “allow[ing] yourself to go with the flow”, and thus “let[ting] go of the things you can’t control and focus on the things you can.” Now, even from the point of view of our critical theory there surely is something to these suggestions, that is, they do get at certain aspects of common sense (which is why they make sense): in fact, experience is critical to the extent that it does not just repeat but instead remedies and remedies the past, and it can indeed be hyper-critical and backfire if its looking ahead to the future is not ultimately rooted in a careful attending to present conditions (though “things you can’t control” are not at all neatly and self-evidently so, and may always become controllable). This contradictoriness of critical experience, of experience in crisis, is however disavowed insofar as – through the “less is more” framing – the present is opposed to the past and the future as external to it, so that they must simply be ejected along with one’s things (indeed as if they were things as well). As we have seen, authenticity promises a permanent solution and dissolution of aesthetic crisis, and this includes the crisis induced by past and future possibilities – usually identified with things suggesting them – that are actually internal dimensions of one’s present experience: by rejecting them as only external, the aesthetic temporality of the present which in our account is most closely associated to possibility rather becomes a temporality of the thoroughly actual (both the actuality of the current and of the regular). Ironically, this assimilates the present to the past because it understands it as fully determined, as clear and certain, just like when past lack of use is taken to be a sure sign of a thing’s inauthenticity. The promise of a fully authentic and regular life of routine is the promise of a present that is like the just past, wherein everything follows with little or no crisis from what happened right before, in thorough actuality. As some supplementary applications of the “less is more” principle listed in the blog clearly show, the appeal to the present – including its “spontaneity” – is a way to attenuate and manage criticality: here the host invites to “less planning”, “less fear” and “less anxiety” to achieve “more action”, “more courage” and “more peace of mind”²⁴⁴, “let[ting] go of your need to control and

²⁴⁴ The first of these takes on the “less is more” principle is more obviously but a specification of the “less future, more being present” version, but the other two function differently in their immediate reference to

opt[ing] to be more spontaneous instead”, “adopt[ing] a courageous attitude” and “unlearn[ing] disturbing thoughts” by “focus[ing] on other activities” instead of “ruminating.” On the other hand, the blog also equals “less bad habits” with a “healthier lifestyle”, and in this case “the hard work you do now is going to pay off in a happier, healthier, and better life later.” A life thoroughly under control is what is actually sought, with all the heavy individual responsibility that comes with it (“What you aren’t changing, you’re choosing”). It is, again, a life of intentionality primarily if not solely understood as reduction and restriction of oneself, the other dimensions of criticality being disavowed on the way of promising a crisis-free, authentic and regular life.

In the vlog, as we have mentioned, the reduction of past and future is tied to the decluttering of material things: attachment to the latter is a symptom of attachment to the former. The host offers again herself as an example, because after having once lost within a year some relatives, friends and other people and having lost her home in a fire, she has tried to “fill up that hole” and “rebuild [her] life like a puzzle” by spending money and time on buying items that reminded her of her past, such as the books she owned as a child, while on the other hand she has also struggled to let go of things because she thought that she might need them in the future (“I kept every single book, notebook and scrap of paper from my college years, and hauled them around from place to place without touching them once in ten years”). Through decluttering, she has “committed to not living in the past, and to stop worrying so much about the future”, thus giving herself “the gift of being present in [her] own life right now.” The ties of this broader version of the “less is more” principle – one concerning the whole landscape of critical experience – to authenticity is also highlighted by related applications of the principle which in the vlog are pushed at the end, but that in fact precede the one on temporality in the blog. One reads “less comparison, more connection”, and not surprisingly it relies on a rejection of digital social media as inauthentic displays of extraordinary lives:

emotion. The “less fear, more courage” version would be as trivial – and thus not at all surprising – as the “less anxiety, more peace of mind” one in its opposition of contraries, wherein it appears only natural that lessening one will heighten the other; in fact, however, the host contradicts herself in expounding it, because she notes that “having courage in life isn’t about being free from fear – rather, it’s about stopping the fear from controlling you.” In other words, it is actually a tautological “more courage is more courage”, which of course does not say anything at all about how one would go about “consciously adopt[ing] a courageous attitude” by way of some kind of reduction and restriction. Most likely, it is a matter of reducing and restricting thoughts about one’s fears, just like one reduces anxiety by “limit[ing] ruminating” on “disturbing thoughts.” The (hyper-)criticality of thought must be solved by suppressing it.

Social media has made the world more connected than ever, and yet many of us have never felt so unhappy or lonely. It's easy to log on to platforms like Instagram, YouTube or TikTok and watch other people lead these seemingly amazing lives, dancing around the world – and they make us feel like our own lives are so average and boring by comparison. But I want you to remember that social media is real, but it isn't reality. [...] So I would encourage you to compare yourself less to other people and try to find ways to be more connected with the people who make you feel good in your life – stop comparing your life, your home, your marriage, your body, your clothes or whatever it is to someone else in a negative way, because that is a downward spiral to nowhere good. Instead, look for opportunities to go out with people who make you laugh or who share a hobby that you enjoy doing together, maybe something like running, or having a quilting circle. You could also start a gratitude journal and take 15 minutes at the end of each day to write down the things that you did or things that happened that you were grateful for – and that's a much better night-time routine than scrolling on social media anyway.

We are already familiar with the attempt at dissolving the aesthetic all by oneself with authenticity: on the one hand the social roots of aesthetic crisis are recognized, but on the other hand one can and must simply “stop comparing” himself or herself to others, avoiding crisis as if it were again an external intrusion – usually circumscribed to digital social media – into one's otherwise authentic life. As with clothes and things, the trick is then to surround oneself only with authentic, crisis-free relationships with “the people who make you feel good” outside of those media that are infested by the aesthetic. This is also reinforced by other items in the blog: attacking “mindless scrolling and binge-watching of TV shows”, the host opposes media consumption to “actually liv[ing] your life” (“less screentime, more living”), and also complements reduction of comparison of oneself to others with reduction of judgment in general (“less judging, more accepting”, where acceptance is immediately translated again in emotional terms as “peace of mind”). As with rejection of the past and the future, here too it is criticality itself that evidently must be reduced for a surplus, which is made possible by the fact that it is taken to be something that can be discarded, this time along with media rather than things. The surplus, while in the last instance it takes the form of positive emotions, nonetheless alludes to something more, to an authentic lifestyle which encompasses “living” free of the mediation of screens and “connection” and “acceptance” free of the criticality of comparison and judgment. If criticality does nothing but divide people, like temporality separates them from the present, then the less one is critical the more he or she will be connected to others. Needless to say, our critical theory takes crisis and criticality to operate within continuity in determining and developing connection, not just set up absolute, dualistic and hierarchical differences of value for people to war over. It can go wrong or astray in numerous ways, like one's relationship to the past and future can, but it is not the opposite of continuity any more than the latter are opposite to the present. In fact, it is precisely dualistic to oppose them in this way, as the “less is more”

framing encourages to do. In this way, the authentic is no less critical – even aesthetically critical –, and no less rule-bound as we have seen: it is a rule of restriction; one can just as easily judge oneself for comparing too much to others, or vice versa for judging others too much, for living too much in the past and in the future, and for all other failures in literally and metaphorically reducing or restricting (for example holding on to items “just in case” or for other such suspicious pretexts). This is exactly what our rhetorical study has hopefully shown: the minimalist discourse is in fact pervaded by crises and criticality, just like the broader discourses of self-help and self-improvement with their push for individual responsabilization, but it attenuates and manages them by rhetorically disavowing them, discharging them as external and extraneous to itself.

The appeal to “connection” works more as a promise than as the positive invitation to action that it seems to be in the last quote: the point of the principle is that the “more” somehow passively results from the active “less”, otherwise it would amount to saying “do less of this” and “do more of that”; the indeterminacy in which the principle is left allows for such slips or misuses too, of course, but at the very least the second term, if active, must be enabled or enhanced by the first one (as it is in the “less screen-time, more living” application of the principle, after all: in order to actively go out and make those authentic real-life “connections”, one must restrain the time wasted on digital social media). First of all, then, one must restrain “comparison”, and in doing so shield oneself from others and the crises they spark, for example by focusing instead on the positive things one is grateful for, which is akin to only surrounding oneself of one’s preferred clothes, things and people. Other applications of the principle reveal the contradiction of valuing relationships only insofar as they are free of negativity. In the vlog, the host relates her past experience as a “doormat” who “used to say ‘yes’ to everything and everyone” regardless of how “overwhelmed” she felt, and who was still left alone by her “so-called friends” when she was the one in need: for example, she once helped a friend who was “too cheap” to hire someone relocate his furniture and belongings in his new home, but later on he did not return the favour. The lesson the host draws from generalizing this anecdote is that “‘no’ is the magic word”, that one must “learn to prioritize [one]self and [one’s] time and energy” to fight off “people who want to drain you and use you.” This goes under the “less feeling ‘spread too thin’, more life satisfaction” application of the principle, wherein again scarce resources must be concentrated

to avoid the dissipation of “spreading oneself too thin”, cutting out bad relationships and superfluous commitments: as the host writes in the blog version of it, “Your life was always meant to be yours – and not other people’s!” As we have noted from time to time, subjectivism as a rejection of others’ critical intrusions is easily paired with subjectivism as an affirmation of one’s individual well-being – or other personal gains – as the main or sole criterion for one’s newfound authentic intentionality (as if, of course, this were not itself the product of the critical intrusions of the minimalist, self-help and self-improvement discourses). Despite the appeals to “connection”, it is clear that overall less others equal more you, so to speak. “Less stuff to do, more time for you”, that is, more “you time”, and while in the vlog the “less stuff to do” part is presented as a result of minimalism in general (“When you declutter your home and your life, you reclaim your time in so many ways, and you are free to do with that time whatever you want”), we have noted that the principle requires it to be an active reduction or restriction, which is why the blog version encourages to “cross out everything that’s not essential” – for oneself individually, of course – from one’s “weekly schedule”, as it is “the fastest way to get more time for yourself”; the actual decluttering of clothes and things does not seem, after all, to free up as much time as it promises. The suggested uses of one’s free time are all cases of individual “you time” indeed, from reading books to “traveling around the world to exotic places”, or “learning a new language or a new skill.” Two more blog-only consecutive applications of the principle highlight the contradiction even more. First, in line with the rhetoric of authenticity, the host equates “less seeking outside advice” with “more trusting your inner voice”, inviting viewers to “trust [their] inner voice” or “intuition” beyond the “plenty of noise all around”, because others’ words “may create more confusion than benefit.” Right after that, however, the host instead urges “less talking” for “more listening” and claims that “it is listening that ultimately helps us tune into the other person’s feelings and connect to them.” Setting aside the obvious paradox of an influencer advising people not to seek “outside advice” – which is irrelevant since the host is “authentic” too as far as her audience is concerned –, the stark contradiction here is in the invitation to listening to others but not to their advice, to talking less yet only after having said “no” to whatever negativity may come from them, or to the whole relationship if need be. The promise then is at one time that “self-confidence will grow naturally” by blocking out others’ advice and not comparing with them, and at another time that “relationships will instantly improve” by listening

and connecting to them; it is now more “you time”, then more time with just “the people who make you feel good” – and the latter clearly fold back in the former. Again, while the “less” and “more” appear here as alternatives in action, so that one must do less of one thing and more of the other, the primary if not only action remains negative: if one seeks less “outside advice” from others, one will “naturally” trust more his or her own “inner voice”; if one talks less, one will “instantly” listen more to others. Purely positive connection and relationships are part of the promised surplus, and they enter the practice only insofar as they set the bar for what and who to get rid of in one’s life.

All the applications of the “less is more” principle we have seen up to now gravitate around authenticity and regulation through habituation, concentration and insulation from the crisis sparked by others, or by the otherness of the past and future. We also find a reference to the Pareto principle that pushes for reductive routinization to avoid feeling “overwhelmed” by criticality in every area of life, because “fewer options, easier choices”:

How many of us have wasted time standing in front of our wardrobe trying to decide what to wear, or scrolled through Netflix to find something to watch, and felt too overwhelmed by too many choices? When you decide to prioritize the things that you truly love, use and value, and naturally own less, then choices about things like what to eat for dinner, what to watch on TV or what to wear can become much easier.

The assumption, of course, is that there is a definite set of authentic things that one “truly loves, uses and values” just waiting to be uncovered from the excess, that they are already owned and not to be bought, and that they will therefore be less than what one has at the start (one will “naturally own less” by intentionally prioritizing and fixing one’s authentic preferences). This is the same appeal to habituation we have already dealt with, again minimizing possibilities to extinguish crisis, yet doing so in a way that retains a sense of criticality instead of impulsiveness and imposition: reduction and restriction are equated with intentionality tout court – which does involve them, but exceeds them – with the aid of the rhetoric of authenticity, which evokes crisis only to exorcise it, and bases that intentionality on assumed – and promised – subjective preferences that are already thoroughly actual, already one’s own and not others’, and thus crisis-free. Were it not for this rhetoric, the host’s claim in the blog version that “it will be simpler to choose what to wear in the morning and which mug to drink coffee from when you are given just two choices instead of ten” would sound more restrictive, more akin to depriving oneself of water in order to appreciate it more. The compensatory al-

clusion to “connection”, to “listening” or to the “present” – like that to “slow living” in other vlogs – contributes to this disavowal, alleviation and management of criticality. The aesthetic too does its part, and not only in the tacit positively affirming way we have noted, that is, through the channel’s aesthetic of perfect order, cleanness and clearness, spaciousness, white walls on parquet with neutral modernist furniture and so on. The second and third applications of the principle, following the one praising the present, tie the crisis-free to the “clutter-free”, to the aesthetic that is at other times rejected. The formally trivial “less furniture, more space” appreciates space as something “for your living and enjoyment”, something which – as the host makes explicit in the blog – “instantly creates new possibilities”: “Imagine removing all the extra junk from your basement and turning it into a small ballet studio or entertainment zone for your kids. Or finally emptying your garage of all the excess and being able to park your car inside!” In the host’s example, by using the same “comfortable and high-quality wood pieces” of patio furniture both out on the balcony and inside her home, space for people and experiences can be freed up whenever it is needed. Of course, space can actually be freed up only if it is there in the first place, and while the host declares herself to be “passionate about making a simple minimalist lifestyle easy and accessible to everyone no matter what their life currently looks like, the size of their home or the size of their family”, once again these differences are simply glossed over and left unaddressed. What concerns us, at any rate, is the aesthetic and here rhetorical association of space – like the present – to indeterminate possibility, which obviously fits the minimalist promise of an overall “life satisfaction”, an integral lifestyle marked by personal well-being and more experiences and relationships through authenticity, regularity, intentionality and reduction or restriction. Such appeal to “space” as indeterminate possibility also masks and compensates, just like appeal to the present, the push for criticality, actuality and regularity, including the pressures of minimalism’s aesthetic common sense. Not surprisingly, this appreciation for space is not presented as aesthetic but again as authentic, by way of rhetorical contrast to some subscribers’ “complaints” that the host’s home is “too empty” and necessitates “more artwork on the walls, more furniture in the corners, more storage to serve this or that function”; and yet, if free space is a matter of “living” and “enjoying” more indoor experiences, it is of course not at all clear what the advantage of having empty white walls with no artworks would be. The third application of the principle offers us an answer that we have already encountered frequently in

our analyses: “less clutter” is “more calm”, because clutter is associated to “increased cortisol levels”, the “stress hormone” which can manifest in “stress, anxiety and depression” and even in “negative physical effects such as insomnia, headaches, digestive issues and weight gain”; the aesthetic is translated into a form that is individual, crisis-free and thus acceptable, the therapeutic or positively emotional, so that “a clutter-free home can not only give you more peace of mind, but also make you healthier.” In the blog, the host has no problem pointing to the commonsensical aesthetic association of minimalism to the depersonalized environment of the hospital: “Have you ever wondered why hospitals tend to keep their interiors basic, with only minimal decor? It’s to give their patients peace of mind.” However, as noted earlier, this “less anxiety, more peace of mind” is associated by the host to the authenticity call for “less past and future, more being present.” From the authentic to the aesthetic, it appears that all roads lead to reduction and restriction, and the indeterminacy of “less is more” allows free movement on those roads.

It is evident that the host’s overall emphasis falls heavily on authenticity, regularity and the alleviation of criticality. Allusions to more definite practical benefits are present, of course, such as the “less clothing, [more] simplified laundry routine” version of the principle, which can be generalized to decreased effort in maintenance of clothes, things and one’s home at large with the decrease of one’s belongings: besides having their cost in terms of money, space and even positive emotions, things also cost time and effort to care for them. Reference to saving such scarce resources – in this instance, “less time spent doing laundry” – is the most typical manner of appealing to practical benefits in the minimalist discourse, but with regard to the “less is more” principle, it is as trivial a form of it as that linking “less” of a negative emotion, or of crisis in general, to “more” of positive ones: there is nothing surprising in the fact that the negation of a negation is positive, that an avoided cost from a removed obstacle is a gained saving (or even more than that, since “you can even sell clothes online to make some extra cash”). The same goes for reduced waste in the only reference – included in the blog, but not in the vlog – to the ethical benefit of environmental sustainability (“less waste, a happier planet”, writes the host, inviting readers to “buy less, live more minimally, and reduce consumption”: it is, of course, wholly a matter of individual responsibility and action). What underpins both the saving of resources and the saving of the planet is an accumu-

lation of what is economized, adding up in one case to some indeterminate possibility (as we have seen, through minimalism “you reclaim your time in so many ways, and you are free to do with that time whatever you want”), and in the other to some indeterminate positive impact: here less is not just more, but more and more. It goes without saying that saved costs and waste do not all cumulate in the same way and to the same degree as money may do: setting aside the contradiction with the minimalist discourse’s assumption that we actually use a small portion of our clothes anyway, which if true should leave laundry unaffected by how many more items of clothing one owns, is it really less time-expensive or demanding of efforts to wash less clothes much more frequently before they get “out of hand”, instead of doing so less frequently but with more clothes at a time? Moreover, these “costs” of things are not as definite and relatively fixed as those appearing on a price-tag: it is the minimalist discourse itself, after all, that suggests homes should always be clean and clear and in perfect order, that clutter has negative emotional impact, that the domestic space could and should have room for any activity, and – at times at least, though usually contradicting itself – that things should be taken good care of, for example by repairing them; above all, it is the minimalist discourse itself that generally assumes these to be tasks of the individual. In both ways, this “less is more” of economization for accumulation is no more determinate than the anti-materialist opposition of “things” to “experiences” and “relationships”, as if the latter were not materially founded by the former. Like space and the present coming with the suggestion of indeterminate possibilities – one with minimalism’s promise –, the saving of abstract scarce resources trades the determinateness of things with the indeterminacy of supposedly immaterial experiences and relationships to be gained, and something similar can be said of the very indeterminate sense that one is contributing to a “happier planet” (or at least not participating in its saddening). By economization there is a sense of accumulation of means as such regardless of ends, just like with money, because ends are taken to be determined in a purely subjective way by the individual. In the case of economization of waste, the corresponding accumulation is rather that of the effects of many actions by the same individual – which, as we have seen, is also central to the push for habituation, with small habitual acts adding up to big future changes – and/or by a mass of many such individuals. Both are closely related to the optimization of ways and means of action insofar as it is read as a way of saving effort instead of enhancing results, but they do not coincide with it, because they can more readily be ex-

panded to anything and everything – even just things as such – as having a cost and generating waste in all sorts of ways.

The host also includes the literal saving of money, of course: “less spending, more saving” is another of her many applications of the principle, with “more money in your pocket” being “another excellent benefit of minimalism” (only “another”, otherwise it would amount to being frugal). This is read by the host both as an absolute reduction in spending and as a more relative spending less on things and experiences that are not valued and more on those that are. Just like intentionality in decluttering things is taken to mean, conflating absolute restriction with selectivity, that one will “naturally own less”, so intentionality in purchasing things will make one “naturally start spending less money” in general:

As you move towards minimalism and become more intentional with your life and habits, you'll probably find you naturally start spending less money and are more careful with your purchases. [...] The important thing is to decide what our money goals are and how to put our money towards the things and experiences that we value and that bring us lasting joy. [...] So I encourage you to find ways to spend less money on the stuff that doesn't matter, so that you can save or spend on the things that do.

Like the other resources, what money is saved – and also regained by selling things – can thereafter be spent on whatever one subjectively sees fit, so long as it is authentically valued: here things stop appearing as costly, wasteful obstacles and go back to being means that promise “lasting joy.” Saving is thus both a “more” to be gained by reduction and restriction, also coming with its own surplus of meaning in the accumulation of indeterminate means or effects, and part of another active “less” which we have already encountered and which follows it: the concentration of resources of the “less quantity, more quality” application of the principle, wherein savings are invested into a fewer higher-quality set of items. That is why one can either “save or spend on the things that do [matter]”, or in other words why minimalism is not just being frugal, just like it is not “just” any of its conflicting components. A push towards saving is surely there, but so is that towards saving in order to invest back on alternative, higher-quality consumption (elsewhere also including financial investments); it is, as usual, up to shared common sense and individual good sense to trace the line and set up one’s subjective “money goals.” This is, of course, where the issue of upgrading lie: is the replacement of things for newer, better versions of them – perhaps on merely aesthetic grounds, yet nonetheless authentic and thus promising “lasting joy” – acceptable for a minimalist? Is

it not perhaps better to go by with the cheapest and even worn out items – repairing them – in order to focus all of one’s saved resources on the experiences and relationships that were earlier opposed to things? And would that not be more environmentally sustainable too? Or is it more sustainable – or sustainable enough – to buy things second-hand and/or from ethical and sustainable brands? The host does not address these questions, but we have seen that minimalism’s answer is either none or all of the above; it is subjective (though, as we have also seen, this subjectivism does allow for and lean towards pursuing “lasting joy” and well-being for oneself through renewed consumption). This indeterminacy nonetheless posits and promises at least a compatibility or convergence among all these factors and more, which the very frame of saving scarce resources – no doubt one of the dominant ones in the discourse – also contributes to: at first, the host “just wanted to save money” and so bought “the cheapest product available”, but then she realized that she would actually have saved more money, time and effort by purchasing “higher quality” things that would not be “broken or worn out very quickly”, things that “last longer” – like the “joy” they offer – so that one “not only saves money but also time and effort that comes when you have to search out and buy new things to be constantly replacing the old ones that were of poor quality” (perhaps even when they are still functioning, though not performing optimally). The game of consumerism can be won by consuming more authentically and intentionally with the only criterion of this protean reduction and restriction, any further determination being subjective matter for common sense and good sense to deal with, along with all the contradictions. One curbs “impulse buying” by setting up wishlists and a budget by categories, or perhaps by trying the “no spend challenge” for a month, and that will already foster intentionality enough to make better and “minimalist” decisions regardless of one’s ends or criteria. Just like authenticity to the aesthetic, or both to the rule-bound, the rhetorical contrast of intentionality to impulsivity reinforces the sense of criticality of the former despite the disavowals of it at every turn of the discourse.

It is clear, at this point, that “less is more” is more than one principle consistently applied to different areas of life. At times, “less” is indeed “more” as such, engendering it directly: the less the indeterminate noise of the merely possible, of present doubts obstructing the regularity of a routine and of past and future extensions contaminating the authenticity – at whatever level of aesthetic cohesiveness – of one’s current prefer-

ences, the more one's habits will indeed be more integrated into the thorough actuality of a lifestyle, a stylized life, clean and clear and organized just like one's minimalist home (habituation). For this to be possible, crises must be taken to be external and extraneous, so that they can be relegated to a space outside of one's own immediate domestic space – especially including, of course, the most infiltrated front that is one's digital media devices: the less others intrude and interfere, the less crises one will have to go through in comparing or at least feeling compared to them (insulation), and thus the more one will be left alone and at ease. This is again the negation of a negation, similar but more direct than the previous one, which must involve a positive constructive process even if not fully acknowledged or even disavowed: the rhetoric of authenticity turns what is a transformative process of habituation – usually picking up all sorts of other elements from the self-help and self-improvement discourses, and from the positive aestheticized example of one's favourite influencer – into the disclosure of what was already there, a set of subjective preferences to be fixed at least, or one's "true self" to be followed at most. In other words, by framing habituation as a matter of "less is more", it gets confused with insulation, with the mere expulsion of what was always already external and extraneous; which leaves the viewer in front of the influencer with nothing but the choice to either keep listening to pick "inspiration" and cues and tips, or reject him or her as part of the inauthentic minimalism (though every minimalist channel is made authentic enough to its own audience by the rhetorical moves of denouncing the inauthentic minimalism or making subjectivist appeals). These two forms of the "less is more" principle, pushing for habituality by pushing out criticality, are contradicted by other versions that instead promote a sense of indeterminate possibility or one of criticality. First, the less determinate elements in one's life, including one's clothes and things but also one's scheduled tasks, the more possibilities appear to be freed up by contrast (cancellation): by denying things, one makes "space" for experiences and relationships, for new activities, and in this same direction also go appeal to the present – since it is not in fact reducible to the currently actual –, to imperfection, to slow living and so on, but also – of course – the whole subjectivist rhetoric of "minimalism" as something entirely indeterminate for each to personalize and make his or her own. Since it is only assumed by the discourse that what one owns already contains a subset of items that will be recognizably "authentic", and since there is little and often no push at all for holding on to things already owned regardless of that, discarding items can both

function as a chisel removing the excess of noise and interference, and as a rubber removing on the contrary the quite different excess of determination as such, of what is already there, in order for one to start again with a white page to write on. The two can obviously overlap²⁴⁵ when it comes to rejecting determinations supposedly imposed by others in order to affirm one's own more authentic ones: the unwanted commitments can be cancelled to free up some "you time", while "productivity" becomes "business" when inauthentic, though also an unsustainable self-imposition if in turn never compensated by some slowing down; and of course, we have seen how the rhetoric of authenticity functions by disavowing the rigid determinacy of the aesthetic common sense and of the arbitrary quantitative rules in which the discourse remains enmeshed, so that any and every one can be "still minimalist" regardless of all differences. Being primarily negative, authenticity keeps a foot in both camps, because negation can equally do and undo determination.

In the second place and in between both authenticity of habituation and cancellation, there is the further contradiction of criticality being instead promoted as intentionality: one must not follow impulses – also understood as externally imposed by the aestheticized consumerist society –, but rather stop and intentionally decide for themselves; and just like habituation is understood negatively as an expulsion of the excessive inessential that is external and extraneous, so the less impulses one follows through, the more one will automatically be and feel intentional (restriction). The contradiction, as we have just pointed out, is that criticality is on the one hand avoided or exorcised, while on the other hand it is promoted and evoked again and again, even to the point of making it the one defining character of "minimalism" as such: "living with intention",

²⁴⁵ Especially in the limited area of the wardrobe, the two opposite pushes find an articulation in the flexibility of clothes that can all match the others in many different ways, thus generating many more possibilities than it appears from their actually restricted amount. This is a "less is more" of combination: the less the variance of one's pieces – which can be reduced while reducing the number of items, even though we have seen that strictly speaking there would be no need to actually discard them –, the more possibilities will be readily available to be tried out. Such possibilities will of course be more akin to moves on a chessboard, since they presuppose already some more or less pronounced aesthetic cohesiveness, and perhaps some degree of minimalist stylization (which fosters it with easily matched neutral colours, monochrome pieces, "inoffensive" casual clothes that can both "dress up" and "dress down" according to the occasion, higher-end glamour ones that do the same by overshooting and compensating it with casual details, and so on). The same combinatory "less is more" surfaces elsewhere in the discourse with praises for multifunctional items, including the quintessential exemplar of convergence which is the smartphone (despite that being one of the reasons why it is such a source of noise and interference). This was implicit, for example, when the host of *A to Zen Life* praised her wooden patio furniture as usable both outdoor and indoor.

which engenders – as we put it – “living within tension”, yet continually disavows it to promise a crisis-free criticality. Therefore the indeterminacy of the “less is more” principle can frame a whole deadlock of contradictory pushes in critical experience: authentically regular habituation, plus insulation, promises a determinate routine that is free of crisis – and will enduringly be so –, yet routines appear at other times as imposed and effortful, and thus to be rejected in order to open up some equally authentic but irregular indeterminacy (which is impulsive, but not recognized as such for obvious reasons); finally, impulses as well as impositions – including rigid rules – must be restricted for an intentionality which is instead both critical and effortful. These are the main commonsensical elements that are freely played off against each other – as well as against the presupposed consumerist common sense and the discourse’s own aesthetic, rule-bound common sense – according to the rhetorical needs of the moment, overall projecting and promising an “intentional life” that is all of the above at once; an integral lifestyle which includes everyone in its commonsensical “minimum possible” (that is, the possibility of a minimum of consensus across all differences around “less is more”), but leaves each within his or her own individually authentic, (ir)regular and intentional “minimum possible” (that is, the minimum of possibility that can be afforded – or at least anticipated – while otherwise restricting and regulating oneself). Absent any acknowledgment of the inescapability of these and other crises and contradictions within the whole spectrum of critical experience, the minimalist discourse can only repeat and reject and readjust itself endlessly, which is of course no bad news for minimalist influencers and authors, while viewers and readers are left making do with their good sense and picking up from the rejected common sense in all its layers. In its rhetorical moves ending with indeterminacy, the discourse can and often does call for moderation, turning its pursuit of the minimum in the pursuit of just “some” reduction and restriction, and thus also some habituation, some intentionality, some irregularity and so on, but that only revives the promise of the minimum possible: it is not moderation as mediation among different pushes that are clearly recognized as fundamentally at odds with each other, but rather – once again – moderation as further reduction and restriction of this or that push each time, as in the ironical call to “minimize minimalism” both on Reddit and on YouTube, precisely because it is not understood that the “less is more” principle covers up quite different and conflicting demands. Other versions of the principle complicate things even further: they push for productivity against the indetermi-

cy of possibilities (optimization); they push for the future-oriented, long-term – and thus planning – accumulation of resources and results as saved costs and waste (economization), aligned on the one hand with the pushes for optimization, restriction and habituation, while on the other also backing up those indeterminate possibilities more or less pushed off in the future (less if one mainly raises the quality of one’s consumption, more if one rather saves and invests money – and probably time and effort as well – for an ever-increasing return; and this same economization also promises, through waste reduction, one’s contribution to a “happier planet”, of course.) Some forms cut across the critical spectrum, such as concentration, that can both push for reducing any amount of things or “things” in order for each of them to get more attention, appreciation, care and so on – for example limiting one’s interests to more deeply cultivate fewer of them –, and more literally push for investing one’s saved scarce resources in fewer but better things or again “things.” All these and more interpretations of the “less is more” principle are conflated and conflict, and each keeps the others in check when need be without ever affecting the indeterminate unity it promises – in and among individuals – around reduction and restriction and the (more or less) surprising surpluses they afford.

While they all have their aesthetic dimension and offer an experienced surplus of meaning, it is clear that the later forms we have mentioned often appear to take “less” as leading to “more” in a more instrumental way, instead of being itself more: one may indeed discard its belongings in order to save money by selling things and not paying for as much storage space, for example; having less is then a means to gaining more money, which means – if it is just that – that if one could have gotten more money without discarding anything, one would have likely preferred doing so instead (unless he or she could do both and gain even more money, that is). This reading can always be applied to all forms of the “less is more” principle, as is done – we have seen it many times – when the discourse tries to detach minimalism from the ideality of a “lifestyle”, presenting it instead as just a set of “tools” that only lead to an assortment of practical or ethical benefits, from more money and free time to reduced environmental footprint and improved emotional well-being; other times, the minimalist tools do lead to an “intentional life”, an authentic, intentional and integral lifestyle of personal well-being (and perhaps eco-friendliness), but this life is not itself “minimalist” – sometimes emphatically so, when the rhetoric of authenticity comes to the fore. Accordingly, the routiniza-

tion of one's life can be presented more instrumentally as an economization of time and effort to be invested – concentrated – on the authentic “things that matter”, in experiences, relationships or passionate projects, and also as an optimization of each area that it is applied to (from meal planning according to some healthy diet to the authentic wardrobe of only favourite clothes). Or, intentionality could be presented as indeed the true aim of the minimalist decluttering of things and decrease of purchases, as experiences that force choices upon oneself and thus work as a training ground for intentionality, regardless of the amount of things and purchases one eventually settles upon, and also regardless of whether one goes on reducing and restricting (as a “minimalist”). The problem, of course, is that the minimalist discourse in fact affirms all of these readings – and more – at different times, with influencers also having different emphases. Is “less” itself something to be desired as somehow “more” in its very being “less”, or is “less” desirable only insofar as it gets one to a “more” that was already “more” regardless of it? We can have a look at this deep ambivalence through Simple Happy Zen's vlog on “wanting less”²⁴⁶, whose cover – as the “saving money” in the title – points to the economizing version of the principle (“less stuff, more money”), but whose contents go on to depict this lessening of desire as itself “more”, regardless of the saving of money – which is never mentioned at all in the vlog itself.

In this vlog, the host breaks down “minimalism” into three sides – the outflow of decluttered stuff, the (lower) inflow of purchased stuff and the “mindset” –, laying down quite lucidly through them the contradiction of its calling for more criticality and yet also promising to “make life easier, and not harder”:

When it comes down to it, there are two big sides to minimalism. The first is decluttering the things that we no longer want, need, use or love; so that might mean that there will be a flow of stuff leaving your house. And then the other big side of it is being more intentional about the things we buy, so bringing fewer new items into our home. So there will be a flow of stuff leaving, and fewer new items coming in. But there's another side to it as well, and that is something that I don't think we really talk about enough: mindset. Because sure, we can all stay, like, motivated to buy fewer new things for a while, but if that means that we have to control our impulses every time because we kind of do want to buy that thing, then that means that we might have a hard time with minimalism; and that's a shame, because minimalism is supposed to make life easier, and not harder. After about 10 years of minimalism, the “not buying things I don't need” part has become easier and easier for me, and I think that is because I've learned to want less. I mean sure, sometimes I will buy something, and it might not even be a necessity, just something I enjoy. And that is perfectly fine. But, overall, I can honestly say that I now really don't want a lot of stuff anymore; and that makes everything easier.

²⁴⁶ Simple Happy Zen, “How I learned to want LESS | Minimalism & Saving Money”, Mar. 2023, <https://youtu.be/zp8XK1z4njw> (last accessed: 14/11/2023).

If the outflow of decluttered inauthentic stuff is to remain higher on the whole than the inflow of intentionally purchased stuff, one's "mindset" must change by desiring less things, because otherwise that intentionality – which is reductive and restrictive by default – will become unsustainable on the long run, giving way to impulses again; if not that, then one will at any rate have "a hard time with minimalism", because he or she will have to exercise critical self-control again and again. Less desire is then already "more" for the same reason – not surprisingly – that less crisis or less future are: it "makes everything easier", because there is nothing one strives for, and consequently no necessity of striving against that striving. As we have just noted, the title and cover subordinate this version of the principle to that of economization, as if desiring less were instrumental to saving money, but that is not mentioned anymore by the host: as the quoted introduction to the vlog shows, nowhere in her definition of "minimalism" is money even a factor; it is all about the authentic things one owns, the intentional purchase itself of fewer new ones, and the "mindset" – which is the focus here – that helps sustaining them both by alleviating criticality. The first advice the host offers on how to desire less thus corresponds neatly to the authenticity call for "less comparison" of oneself to others in the previous vlog, that is, for insulation from crisis: the "super basic" but "most important thing" for the host is avoiding "exposure" itself to desirable things, because clearly "you cannot want something if you don't know it exists." As with comparison, such exposure is seen as something that can be kept at a distance from oneself by steering away from others and especially social media:

If you keep exposing yourself to things that you might want, then it's going to be really hard not to want these things. So for example, if you follow a lot of influencers that do clothing hauls, or skincare hauls, the chances of you watching that and being influenced by that and wanting these things for yourself are quite high, whereas if you didn't follow that person and you didn't see all of those products, you probably wouldn't want them. Because there's oftentimes not a real, like, reason or problem that you have that is going to make you go out looking for these things if you weren't already exposed to them. Even for me, after 10 years of minimalist living, there are people whose videos I like but I stopped watching, because they made me want to go out and buy anti-aging skincare for example – when if I don't watch those videos, I feel perfectly fine about my skin, I feel perfectly fine about aging even, and I don't even think about products like that.

Setting aside the fact that such avoidance of exposure is itself quite a struggle and can demand a lot of intentional effort even if it were confined to digital social media only, so that it may very well be less challenging to just refrain from buying in the first place, the host's discourse is evidently based on the rhetoric of authenticity: if one does not need or want something by oneself, as an isolated individual, than his or her desire of that thing is not authentic, it is not something that is really needed or wanted. Needless

to say, this makes little sense if seen through the lens of our critical theory, because in our framework all desires come from previous exposure to crises (that is, from experience): there may be problems that are themselves problematic, and fighting one's aging with skincare may be one of them, but there are no problems that are more "real" than others on the grounds of coming or not from experience, including social interaction with others.

This rhetoric of authenticity surfaces most clearly later in the host's anti-aesthetic rejection of "shopping for image": "Ask yourself if this thing that you want is really because you want it, and not to look good to others or to impress others", she advises, because that is taken to be an external problem that comes from others – "by wanting to look like we have it all together for friends, family, colleagues, neighbours", we are "influenced by image" and indeed doing something for them instead of ourselves. As usual, the assumption is that, left to oneself, one would be left with authentic desires only, and that these would naturally be much fewer, weaker and simpler than those bound to the aesthetic: "When we really think about it, there's a good chance that you might be okay with a smaller house, or like a modest second-hand car – things that could be much more affordable." Desiring less is more authentic: there is no crisis, no future, but instead enduring satisfaction with what one already has – and is – actually and regularly. As in the previous vlog, a gesture towards practicing gratitude "for the things you already have" is also included as a way to keep the "gap" of desire from opening at all, disrupting one's otherwise regular authenticity. This authenticity is achieved by way of decluttering all things that have lost their value to oneself – becoming "clutter" –, so that indeed only what one can be easily grateful for remains and is highlighted:

I think [decluttering] is helpful for two big reasons, and the first is just a simple shock factor. Because, if you're decluttering, that means that you are going through all of your items, and that means that you are very likely going to come across items that you have spent money on, that took up resources to make, and that have been reduced to simple clutter in your home – and these are items that you're never using. And seeing that, for me at least, it was a huge eye-opener. Because it is such a visual representation of all the things that you at one point thought you really wanted, and now they're just clutter. And it makes you kind of think about the things that you now might want, and what if they just become clutter in your home later on as well? [...] And the second reason is that I really believe that as long as we have everything we need, like we don't have to worry about basic necessities, having less stuff will make us want less stuff, and having more stuff will make us want more stuff. When my closet was bursting at the seams with clothing, I felt like shopping every other week, because somehow, I really often felt like I had nothing to wear. Whereas now, with only like 40 or so clothing items in my wardrobe, I never feel like I have nothing to wear – and so I really don't feel like going out and shopping, because I feel like I have enough. And that's because I know exactly what's in there: all of these things get used, I like them, they fit me. So, you know, I never feel like I don't have anything to wear.

Not surprisingly, the example that comes first to the host's mind is that of one's wardrobe, which is where the authentic attempt is most tangible at dissolving the aesthetic by solving it once and for all and all by oneself. Without the noise of the excess stuff, one can fully inhabit one's authentic things by knowing them clearly in all respects, especially knowing them as indeed authentic, as things that have been successfully used and enjoyed in the past and will remain so in the future. The doubt can thus never arise of something lacking – unless, of course, it is not instigated by the intrusion of media and others at large. Therefore “having less stuff will make us want less stuff” – which is in turn “more” (money or else) –, because one will have unearthed the authentic set of belongings that will not lose value and become clutter, or will at least only do so in a long time. The “shock factor” provoked by decluttering is here taken to be that some and perhaps many things will lose value, but not all, and the trick is foregrounding – and fixating – those that do not by discarding all the rest, all the noise. The anti-aesthetic rhetoric is matched by the anti-consumerist one that sees new purchases as a “nice dopamine hit”, as something “fun” that we do “when we feel bored” or as “distraction from our daily worries and stresses”, which however only works “short-term” and is “kind of addicting”, leaving behind that clutter. Authenticity, as long-term habituation to one's things (and organized inhabitation of one's domestic space, clearly implied), is an antidote to the addiction: “Just being able to see everything I have clearly, knowing where things are, being able to find things, and just knowing that I only have things I need or like, makes it easier for me not to go out shopping.” By insulating and habituating oneself to one's things, clothes and home as authentic by contrast – rhetorically enforced and reinforced – to the inauthentic, aesthetic and consumerist clutter that has lost its value, one will desire less, whether it means more money or – as it seems to be mostly the case – just more of the very crisis-free lifestyle that insulation and habituation themselves promise.

The host's praise for insulation as “most important” reveals, of course, that authentic habituation through decluttering one's things is not enough by itself: if it worked, there would be no need to insulate oneself – a contradiction we have already seen between the claim of becoming “inoffensive” towards others and “immune” to them on the one hand, authentically dissolving aesthetic crisis, and having nonetheless to dismiss and “mute” them, along with all media (and society at large), on the other.

Moreover, not even insulation is enough, not only because it is possible or sustainable to a relatively small degree only, but also because it does not account for the desires that can in fact arise from decluttering: one may come to desire – or even need – replacing if not upgrading at least some of the discarded things, or otherwise come to notice the lack of something by knowing all that one owns, or even just want more of something authentic that is used or enjoyed (or things similar and contiguous to – and thus combinable with – it, such as a matching new piece for one’s authentic clothes). In these cases, how does one make sure that what is purchased is authentic and will not become clutter? Or should one restrict new purchases anyway, regardless of their supposed authenticity? As we have noted, the minimalist discourse simply assumes that one’s authentic subset of things is already there in the owned excess, that it is relatively small and that it is stable if not fixed on the whole – at least if insulated –, thus identifying authenticity with reduction and restriction. However, being content with “enough”, with the “okay” and “modest”, with having “basic necessities” and so on, is not actually something that inheres to authenticity as such, and thus must be actively pursued – as the first term of the “less is more” principle requires –, and also actively promoted through the rhetoric of authenticity which does instead confound the two (and all the other forms of reduction or restriction). In other words, the lowering of one’s desires or expectations – contentment – is irreducible, as its own form of reduction for a surplus, to the habituation and insulation that only back it up to a certain extent. All desire for better things, but also and especially for better socioeconomic conditions overall – regardless of one’s situation, so long as “basic necessities” are there –, is conflated with the inauthentic desire of projecting an image for others and because of others, but is not actually reducible to that. This also contradicts other forms of the “less is more” principle, since the very saving of money which the host alludes to, but – not coincidentally – does not explicitly insist upon, comes with the promise of improved socioeconomic conditions, and often with investment in fewer but better things. All in all, this amounts to saying that one should take things not to be desirable in order to more easily – with no crisis, no effort – save money and finally get them, as now desirable again. Of course, one can also save money just to make “basic necessities” more and more secure or spend it – along with the other saved resources – on “experiences” and “relationships”, but that will require an active reduction and restriction of desire (especially given that those basic necessities are not fixed, that experiences also can involve all sorts of things such as materials or

tools, and that relationships expose one to others' influence and thus to crises). Therefore the time eventually comes for purely restrictive techniques like the wishlist, where you "practice waiting" by setting up "a rule that maybe you want to think about [a certain desired thing] for at least a week", after which period "chances are [...] the desire to buy that thing has become a lot less", and "you might even feel like you don't really want it anymore." Even if it does not, if "it can wait a while", one can also "write it down for [one's] birthday or for the holidays" in another list. This is framed both by economization, as the "huge life skill" of "delayed gratification" or "the ability to hold out for something now, for a better reward later", and by authenticity, because "the desire that you feel in the beginning, like that instant gratification, becomes a lot less strong by itself as well" with practice, until one immediately knows that the thing is not "really" wanted or needed: "I already know that this is going to be one of those things that I'm just excited by when I first see it, but I don't really want it or need it." This restriction is, of course, exactly the intentionality whose criticality had to be alleviated at the start, but here it is tempered by an economizing promise of "future rewards" ("a vacation", "buying a house", "an emergency fund" and so on), by the promise of eventual habituation to it, and by its reduction to a technique – a literal "rule" of restriction – that actually bypasses and postpones reflection (since it could result in not reducing and not restricting). Ultimately, one just should restrict oneself until one is more easily contented and gets habituated to it: less must be more, and will be more – eventually.

Contentment is akin to cancellation in its relaxing of determinacy for a more inclusive indeterminacy, wherein "enough" – like imperfection and slow living – can be accepted. Accordingly, it exhibits the same contradiction of appeals to "the present", which work at times as appeals to indeterminate possibility, but at other times – contrasted to the past and future – as fully determinate actuality and regularity; and both readings are presented through the rhetoric of authenticity. Gratitude is for "the things you already have" – the things that are present – despite their imperfection, but the same acceptance is not offered when it comes to declutter the inauthentic things one does not use or enjoy anymore. With its alleviation of criticality, cancellation does contribute to the lessening of desire, but in the usual compensatory manner it does with regard to habituation and insulation. Desires should be actively restricted, not just made indeterminate (cancellation), actual and regular (habituation), or avoided altogether (insulation),

and not even just pushed off in the future (economization). This is in part because only by reducing and restricting desires – as *prima facie* suspect of being impulsive or imposed – can they be proved intentional (restriction) and thus authentic, within this minimalist common sense, absent any other criterion (which also means, of course, that once that week of putting the purchase off is passed, if one finds he or she still wants that thing written on the wishlist, there is nothing in the minimalist discourse that will keep him or her from buying it, unless one doubles down on restriction, perhaps from a different angle). In part, however, it is because it has its own “less is more”: desiring less will “make everything easier”, and not just because it will alleviate the criticality of intentionality – since one ultimately has to go through it and get habituated to it –, but because it will lower expectation towards something “affordable”, something that one will more likely or surely and easily get. How much less one should desire is, needless to say, only subjective: it is certainly not the extravagant luxury of the ultra-rich denounced as aestheticized and consumerist – by contrast to which, as we have seen, everyone else can appear equally well-off –, but neither it is the ascetic, depriving, literal “minimum possible” of “basic necessities” that is dismissed as extreme (but often to the aesthetic as well); it is just somewhat less, less to a subjective extent. Out of subjectivist indeterminacy around the subjective, this means that it will all depend on what one can indeed afford in one’s situation, and therefore that each has to keep oneself in one’s socioeconomic starting place (or lower for good measure): each will perhaps receive some “future reward” eventually, but each at his or her own pace bound to socioeconomic conditions – ignored and thus fixated, taken for granted –, and each relative to lowered expectations. The “simple life” that is incorporated in minimalism, and that its aesthetic common sense also can reflect in many ways – from the emptiness of certain homes to the associations to monastic settings –, is more than a frugal life in that it is actually contented with (somewhat and subjectively) less, like the Chinese villagers at the beginning of the vlog by A to Zen Life. Through its indeterminacy, the “less is more” principle distances itself from the merely instrumental “less leads to more” of frugal saving that it nonetheless includes, even though its contradictions show that it is not enough to avoid resorting to the “less must be more” of the rule of restriction, and that such reductionist self-control of reduction and restriction will push in conflated but conflicting directions each time. It is in this sense that “less is more” is itself more: it merges (anti-)aesthetic, (anti-)consumerist and (anti-)materialist rhetoric through the gesture

of reduction and restriction (and of its very rhetorical rejections), arriving at a subjectivist individualism whose contradictions appear diluted or dissolved in the indeterminacy of that gesture (including, after all, the retained affirmation of the aesthetic and the rule-bound). This can be seen as a rhetorical application of the “less is more” principle itself, centred like cancellation on reducing determination for a sense of indeterminate possibility, in this case a “minimum possible” of consensus and thus of belonging together among individuals as “(still) minimalists”: the less “minimalism” is determinate, the more it will be inclusive – and this it achieves, as we have seen in our analysis, by defining itself negatively not only with regard to an assumed consumerist, materialist common sense, but also with regard to its own common sense as supposedly excessive in aesthetic and rule-bound determination. Arriving at the indeterminacy of the “minimum possible” through this negative rhetorical path is not the same as either simply positing it on the one hand or achieving it on the other: as simply posited, it would not afford the promise of an integral lifestyle that is distinctively “minimalist”, which does push instead for its determination (together with the aesthetic common sense which would nonetheless be posited as well against it); while as achieved – that is, as set against its many determinations as fleshed out in their contradictions – the same would be even more true, because the indeterminate whole would lose its promise of being free of contradictions, free of crisis. Instead, a minimum possible of determination is endlessly maintained, which on the one hand allows for the determinacy of the aesthetic and rule-bound to be retained in its operation – together with the positive examples and advice of minimalist influencers –, and on the other affords enough indeterminacy to neutralize contradictions, alleviate and manage criticality, evoke and exorcise crises to invest influencers with authenticity, and lead into broader self-help and self-improvement topics as metaphorically framed by reduction and restriction. The idea of a “minimum” calls both for determination and for the extreme version that is disavowed. Thus the “minimum possible” is itself a “less” that is “more”, and “less is more” lies at the core of it – including, as we have seen, a (reductionist) sense of authenticity, regularity, intentionality and more, all promised to come together into an integral minimalist lifestyle.

Therefore, “less” is itself desirable as “more”, and part of it is that one must desire less, must be content, even though it is only a part of it: it clashes with the aspira-

tional promise of a “minimum possible” that is minimalism, however it is framed. The host too has to reaffirm the promise beyond contentment as achieved through restriction and habituation to it. “Desiring less” is circled back into “desiring ‘less’”, through the economization and cancellation frames for “desiring less things”:

Part of minimalism that I love so much is also about shifting perspective away from things, and buying anything and everything that catches your eye, towards other things – that are not things – that perhaps are more valuable to you: doing fun things with your friends and your family; picking up a new hobby, like making pottery or starting a language course; maybe for you it’s traveling or moving somewhere, a completely different country. One of the best things for me about minimalism is, it shifts away the focus from the material things towards things that bring us more fulfillment, and it frees up a lot of our time, space, money, energy, for these new things. So instead of buying a new fancy watch, maybe you pick up a new hobby. [...] Having less stuff around to store, maintain, organize, manage, is a huge benefit by itself. It makes life easier, cheaper, lower maintenance – cleaning is easier. So I really take that into account if I do want to buy something, or add something to my life: I will ask myself if that thing is worth more than the fact that I will have one more thing in my life, and less “less” in my life.

Here, desiring less is not contentment – it is not less desire –, but rather an aspirational desire simply redirected towards “experiences” and “relationships” as opposed to “things”, as if the former did not involve the latter, and sure enough also money and good socioeconomic conditions at large, and also as if the whole minimalist discourse and all its readings of the “less is more” principle were not predicated precisely on a rejection of the crises of experiences and especially of relationships. Why would things bought for the aesthetic experience of displaying them in one’s relationships to others not count as part of “experiences and relationships”? As a commonsensical claim, it is true – though indeed commonsensical, and thus not “minimalist” outside of the rhetorical way it is reached – that value is always ultimately experiential and relational, but the minimalist discourse contradicts itself by excluding the aesthetic dimension that most clearly illustrates that very claim, tying it to the consumerist and materialist. The reason is that while that claim is true, such experiential and relational value – including the encompassing ideal value of an integral lifestyle – is inherently permeated by crises and contradictions, some of which are irreducible ingredients of critical experience, while the discourse leans on the promise that they can be discarded along with things (and “things”), that just like the aesthetic and consumerist games, so too the experiential-relational game at large can be assuredly won in an enduring way, all on one’s own. When the promise fails, the rhetorical moves are repeated, or the emphasis is shifted to a different reading of the “less is more” principle – for example praising slow living against productivity, or imperfection against perfectionism, or practical saving of resources through minimalism as “tool” instead of “ideal” – in order to alleviate and man-

age the crises that are inevitably sparked within the discourse but never really faced, and thereby revive the commonsensical promise (to which the aesthetic, rule-bound common sense also keeps contributing positively as well). In addition, of course, the failure can be directly or indirectly blamed – as we have often seen – on the individual himself or herself, who is simply doing “minimalism” wrong both by falling prey to some false aestheticized presentation of it, and by pushing it too far or applying it in too rigid a way, even though aestheticized presentations and rigid principles, rules or techniques only concerned with quantitative reduction and restriction are actually all that the minimalist discourse has on offer: it can still be the individual’s fault for not exercising his or her good sense in engaging the minimalist discourse and the contradictory common sense in which it is deeply rooted. When the discourse does not attack itself to renew the promise of a more genuine minimalism – that of any and every minimalist influencer for his or her audience –, it attacks the individual for failing to see that it is all subjective – except for the rule of restriction –, and thus for failing to be authentic and intentional enough as promised by the discourse; including, of course, the failure of making up “pretexts” not to reduce and restrict at least somewhat, at least some more.

In the end, the host is more than willing to admit that “‘less is more’ doesn’t always apply”, that minimalism is subjective and thus “we make our own choices, we’re all different”, and interests do require material things: “Maybe, for you, you like books, or you have a lot of art supplies, or you like building stuff – you have a lot of tools.” However, if this is “all fine”, it is because “we can still be minimalist in other areas” and “overall”, that is, we can still reduce and restrict elsewhere and also keep framing our lives through the “less is more” principle, and keep drawing from the discourse and its common sense. After all, if the subjective “minimum possible” can fall anywhere in between luxury and deprivation, and if the main or sole criterion is the authenticity criterion of what one uses and/or enjoys, and if in addition one is thereby cultivating “experiences” and “relationships”, then why would “a lot” of books, art supplies or tools be anything else or more than “minimal”? The answer is that it is not arrived at through some reduction and restriction – or rhetorical rejection –, and thus does not afford the meaningful experience of “less is more” in any of its versions, nor its indeterminate frame for an integral lifestyle. The host reaffirms that “overall” she finds that “having less is just a wonderful thing by itself”, which is why she is always ready to ask herself

if she is “willing to have less ‘less’” by purchasing something new. Were it only or directly a matter of economizing, this would awkwardly translate to not wanting to have less “less costs” and thus to not wanting less “less ‘less money (or some other resource)’”, in a chain of negations that does fit well the rhetorical workings of the discourse, but eventuates in some determinate criterion to what “less” ultimately is, losing others and the promise of their indeterminate whole. It is only a generic “less” that is generically “more”, that can offer, or at least promise, “something else entirely that perhaps could be even more valuable” than any particular “more”, and again any generic “more” which is straightforwardly pursued without passing through some “less”:

And the last thing, that I think is so helpful, is really reflecting on what it is that makes you want more in the first place; what is it that always makes you want more or something new or something better, even if you already have enough of that thing. And there’s a good chance that this desire for more is triggered by something. For example, for me personally – this might not apply to you, but I found out about myself that I had, or have, a huge scarcity mindset, and that made me want to go out for more, because I was always worried that I wouldn’t have enough. We always had just enough money when I was growing up for, you know, basic necessities – food, clothing, school supplies, all of that stuff. I basically never wanted for anything. My parents worked very hard to provide for us and I’m so grateful for that, but I do remember that my parents were often worried about money, that there were issues with money sometimes, and my parents really had to work hard to make ends meet at the end of the month, they were living paycheck to paycheck. And again, I’m very grateful for all of their sacrifices and hard work, but I also think that I remember being scared about money when I was still a kid, and I think that partly contributed to me even, like, being a little worried about money, and having a scarcity mindset as an adult. Maybe for you it’s something totally different, so it could be very helpful to dig a little deeper and to really reflect on what it is that makes you think that more is more, and that makes you want to have more or buy more. Are you really going to be lacking or unhappy if you have less of that thing? Or is having less of that, and not always being, like, on the lookout for the next thing to buy, going to provide you with something else entirely that perhaps could even be more valuable?

While the host offers the “scarcity mindset” as just her personal example – the way her stereotypically minimalist apartment, which defines the aesthetic of this vlog too, was presented – , it is nonetheless one’s “mindset” that needs to change, as she had said in her initial remarks on the three sides of minimalism. A suspicion is cast over the thought that “more is more”, the same suspicion that invests – despite the subjectivist claims – the decisions of individuals if they end up not reducing and restricting or rejecting: if they have opted for “more”, they must have given in to impulses or impositions, their justification must be just a rationalizing pretext; they must have failed in being authentic and intentional, because these qualities – as we have seen – are constellated into a common sense whose every element is framed by reduction, restriction and rejection, by some reading of the “less is more” principle. The “more is more” principle is the aestheticized, consumerist, materialist common sense that minimalism subverts through its seemingly more surprising “less is more” principle, which adds its very sur-

prise – as a meaningful experience and as defining a lifestyle – to the “more” of the surplus it promises, and which is otherwise no more determinate than the “more” it supposedly rejects (but cannot actually reject). The “less is more” principle is surely a more interesting principle, but insofar as it is kept indeterminate to cover up its contradictions, the interest will remain as little more than a promise, blindly and endlessly pushing back and forth in opposite directions. The host’s suspicion can be easily turned back against it: is one really going to be lacking or unhappy by having more of something, or is having more of that thing, and not always being on the lookout for the next thing to declutter, going to provide you with something else entirely? The discourse would probably be glad to applaud this rhetorical quip as a “minimization of minimalism”, only to reaffirm the “less is more” principle as nonetheless the overall rule, more valid than its opposite so far as one handles it with good sense (and the contradictory common sense behind it). This is, therefore, minimalism in a nutshell: a rule of restriction confirmed by its innumerable exceptions.

2.5.2 – Minimalism, Semiology and Common Sense

We can now try to sum up the main points that have emerged from our critical engagement with the minimalist discourse. The broadest and most central of these is that, while prolific enough and spanning two decades, the discourse remains thoroughly commonsensical in its workings, and especially so with regard to what “minimalism” is supposed to be: as a lifestyle, it refuses to be reduced to this or that component – frugal living, anti-consumerism, aesthetic makeover and/or practical management of the household through decluttering, productivity mindset or vice versa slow living, self-care for emotional well-being and so on –, therefore it must be left and even kept indeterminate, so that it can work as common sense for all the self-help and self-improvement tips and topics it draws upon. At its most explicit, this common sense turns around “living with intention” – the one thing that all minimalists appear to agree on –, and can thus be thought of as a form of critical common sense, but its subjectivist articulation as an individualist pursuit of authenticity besides intentionality would be hardly distinguishable from the underpinnings of the self-help and self-improvement discourses, not contributing to them anything of its own. What differentiates the minimalist version of this common sense from the broader one is on the one hand the set of rhetorical moves that it has to go through in order for its indeterminacy to be maintained, and on the other

hand its no less indeterminate framing through the “less is more” principle of a surprising surplus achieved by reduction of excesses. Minimalism thus cannot be directly and straightforwardly equated with “living with intention”, because it requires at least its qualification by way of negative rejections, reductions and restrictions, all of which are packed into the other explicit feature of the minimalist critical common sense, the “less is more” principle in all its different and often contradictory readings. That is why minimalism cannot do without a rule of restriction, without enforcing at least some reduction, and also why – even setting aside the aesthetic origins and nature of the very “less is more” principle – it cannot do without an aesthetic common sense to reject, together with the rule-bound techniques that circulate so much as to have become themselves commonsensical. However, what is further characteristic of minimalism is that the common sense it rejects is indeed its own: rhetorical rejection of the aesthetic and the rule-bound could be achieved by rejecting phenomena that could more hardly pass as “minimalist”, but the discourse instead affirms a minimalist aesthetic and minimalist rules – only to disavow them at other times. Minimalism’s dependence on the aesthetic and rule-bound is therefore not only negative but positive as well, and while contradictory, the two sides reinforce one another: a negative rejection of the aesthetic dimension of the “minimalist lifestyle” does not hinder but rather constitutes its aestheticization – whatever its shades –, because it leaves its role and power unaddressed, allowing for tacit appeal to it and uncritical, commonsensical offering of it as an “inspiration” to be simply picked up without relating it to other components of minimalism; similarly, a wholesale rejection of the rule-bound blocks off the search for shared objective criteria for reflection and discussion, but also leaves fully in place the push for reduction and restriction – as indeed a rule of restriction – that underlies minimalist rules, techniques and methods. The critical common sense often identified with a minimalist lifestyle as such would not be as promising, if it did not rely on the appealing aesthetic common sense it is associated to. Moreover, it would not be as convincing if it did not lean onto the demanding rule-bound common sense that exacts reduction and restriction from all. Aesthetic cohesiveness, organization, cleanness and clearness on the one hand, and on the other hand a rule of restriction that takes at least some more reduction to be objectively needed, make the critical common sense positively continuous with the aesthetic and rule-bound common sense it negatively disavows at times. It is one contradictory, layered common sense.

This continuity also lies behind the special place of decluttering actual things and clothes in one's domestic space as the primary minimalist practice in the discourse, even more than – and prior to – conscious consumption: authenticity and intentionality are gained in and through the process of decluttering, which is also metaphorically generalized to the other practices (for example “decluttering” negative thoughts or Instagram profiles). The aesthetic nature of this practice is most evident when it comes to capsule wardrobes, but it is clear even in the more general case of decluttering, in which the authentic criteria of “only owning” what one actually and regularly uses and/or enjoys often betray it: such things must be discarded, instead of merely being stored away, precisely because one knows and thus perceives that they are there even though they are not directly seen. Intentionality, too, is aesthetically manifested in the sensible reduction of things in the home, confirming that a selection has been made, and so too is regularity, for example in setting up a “proper place” for each thing to be kept and returned to. Often times, the influence of the aesthetic is admitted but converted into emotional terms, so that visual clutter for example becomes stressful or distracting, and care for one's home turns into a matter of evoking a certain mood and atmosphere – primarily a “cosy” one, or its more exotic cognates (as in the Danish “hygge”); and yet this is an impoverished, reductionist approach to the aesthetic that mostly serves to reinforce the promise of individual well-being in the minimalist discourse. The entanglements between the critical common sense of “intentional living” and the aesthetic and rule-bound common sense beneath the “less is more” principle are mostly disavowed, or otherwise not fully acknowledged: the sense of authenticity and intentionality gained by the rhetorical rejection of the aesthetic, with rule-bound impositions and/or unrestricted impulses, is often more important to the discourse than that achieved through aesthetical means; moreover, it also affords alleviation and management of its own crises and criticality, making authenticity and intentionality appear to be allied to individual well-being, those crises being external and extraneous. This rejection of the aesthetic and the rule-bound is due to their association into yet another layer of the minimalist common sense: the consumerist and/or materialist common sense it rejects to present itself as indeed a critical practice and discourse. Consumerism is criticized as the impulsive and imposed endless pursuit of superfluous, ephemeral, apparent and immediate gratifications through material things as purchased or owned, and aesthetic interest – reduced to following fashion and trends coming from outside oneself – is taken to be the quintes-

sential form of this pursuit. The same obviously goes for materialism, understood as indicating a drive to acquire and consume material things as satisfying in themselves, even at the cost of more fulfilling experiences and relationships, and in this way associated to the aesthetic (despite the fact, again, that aesthetic interest is experiential and relational too). The anti-consumerist and anti-materialist negative rhetoric of minimalism thus also pushes forward an anti-aesthetic one: minimalism rejects its common sense in rejecting the broader consumerist, materialist common sense it positions itself against.

If the rule-bound too is partly associated to the aesthetic, consumerist and materialist insofar as they are ultimately taken to be external impositions, it is however also associated – in the role of affording a target for the discharge of criticality – to “extreme”, ascetic minimalism, which tempers by contrast the anti-consumerist and anti-materialist rhetoric: if one goes “too far” with minimalism, he or she will end up depriving himself or herself; this may count as “frugal living”, but contradicts the individual well-being that a “minimalist lifestyle” also promises. By this route, as we have seen, the aesthetic too is at times defended from too definite and definitive exclusion, which would make minimalism identical to frugal living or anti-consumerism at large: through the principle of “quality over quantity” which complements the “experiences and people over things” one, the aesthetic finds its way back in when need be. While often rhetorically attacked, replacements or upgrades are never consistently discouraged per se, nor vice versa is there any strong advocacy for repairing, recuperating or at least tolerating things that are not working properly, or for that matter those that are not as enjoyed anymore. The criterion of enjoyment accompanying that of use keeps the door silently open for the aesthetic, here the site of authentic subjective tastes, and through that door renewed – and no less authentic – material consumption can easily enter as well. In other words, ambivalence towards the aesthetic and the rule-bound extends to ambivalence with regard to the further layer of consumerist, materialist common sense the minimalist discourse intends to distance itself from: just like the former, so the latter is too part of the minimalist common sense positively as well as negatively. We have seen, for example, how authenticity is an attempt at solving and dissolving once and for all, all on one’s own, the crisis and criticality of the aesthetic, not really abandoning but rather immediately winning at its game, at least like the casual, monochrome and black-and-white wardrobe wins: it is inoffensive in most situations or occasions, it makes one im-

mune to having or wanting to change it, and thus it mutes the sociality of the aesthetic on which crisis and criticality are blamed. Implicit in this, and in the authentic “only owning” things used and enjoyed more generally, is clearly also the attempt at winning the consumerist game in the same way, at last finding the enduring satisfaction it promised with one’s things, and from that moment on being a more intentional, and perhaps ethical, consumer; one’s relationship to things remains that of an owner and consumer of them. Then, if the attempt fails and engenders more crisis and criticality than there were before, the rhetorical move is repeated just to alleviate and manage them, turning it into a problem of perfectionism fostered again by aestheticized and extreme minimalism: of course one is not fully satisfied with one’s things, and of course one cannot keep track of and satisfy all possible criteria for purchasing new things; just as surely, however, that is once again not what “minimalism” is all about, so the attempt can always be restarted. Since imperfection, like slow living and other similar attenuations of criticality, is understood through the very same anti-aesthetic rhetoric of authenticity that cuts across all shades of aestheticization, it does not appear at odds with the attempt at winning at the aesthetic and consumerist games: it does not challenge it, only compensates it by relaxing criticality. If one were actually okay with imperfection, what would be the point in discarding supposedly inauthentic things and restraining supposedly impulsive purchases? As with the aesthetic and rule-bound, continuity with the consumerist and materialist common sense is what actually underpins the place of decluttering in minimalism, with its paradox that while one should “think less about stuff” and instead focus on experiences and relationships, one must first – and usually again and again without end – “think about less stuff”, that is, going through all the focused effort of getting rid of certain things and then of putting restrictions in place. Therefore, the anti-materialist rhetoric of minimalism too serves the purpose of turning material things into a problem and obstacle within a game that can be won, not that of really shifting attention altogether away from the game.

As a whole, then, the minimalist common sense is only ever (anti-)aesthetic, (anti-)consumerist and (anti-)materialist, with parentheses indicating that while negatively depending on these features for rhetorical moves, the discourse also depends on them positively as further commonsensical layers from start to end: it is deeply informed by, and ever circles back to, the common sense it supposedly rejects. The authentic, inten-

tional individual urged by the critical layer of its common sense is an authentic owner and an intentional consumer, one that also puts personal well-being over criticality, dismissing the latter as too subjective to be fruitfully discussed without shared objective criteria turning into rigid restrictive rules; such an owner and consumer is not really at odds either with the aesthetic and rule-bound or with the consumerist and materialist. Even so, the layered and partly overlapping rejections project a minimalism that is critical of consumerist, materialist and aestheticized society, a sense of criticality which the individual minimalist can performatively partake in by reducing and restricting. Absent any clear criteria, especially those for dealing with the contradictory pushes of the discourse, that individual will however mostly have to fall back on common sense, whether it is picking up the tips, cues and examples of his or her favourite and “authentic” minimalist influencer, emulating the minimalist aesthetic imagery as after all reflecting one’s own authentic tastes, or switching to different brands and products – suggested perhaps by influencers, minimalist or otherwise – which appear to match this or that aspect of the minimalist promise, including enduring satisfaction with things. This multi-layered rejection of common sense thus opens up a space for common sense to operate again, and for influencers – again, minimalist and otherwise – to exert influence seemingly without violating any one’s authenticity and intentionality. Appeals to individual good sense in fact imply that individuals might actually not have enough of that good sense already, as when they are blamed for minimalism going wrong or too far, or more often – but in the opposite direction – when a suspicion is cast over their reflections for not arriving at the foregone conclusion that reduction and restriction are necessary, instead coming up with mere pretexts and excuses. Subjectivism might alleviate criticality with indeterminacy and its promise of personal well-being, but it also imposes criticality on the individual in the first place as not yet authentic and intentional, and in the case of minimalism has not having reduced or restricted enough (or at times having reduced and restricted too much, and thus having to reduce and restrict minimalism itself). At the same time, it is what allows the layers of common sense and the shades of aestheticization to be all meshed together into an overall “minimalist” common sense to draw from without critical pushback (apart from that of the rhetorical moves, of course, which however always reinstates a true or real minimalism in the last instance). In these conditions, an individual that is ever doubtful about his or her authenticity or intentionality actually exercises good sense by relying on common sense and engaging further in the

discourse, and then, when contradictions arise and spark crises, these are taken as confirmations that the individual really was not authentic or intentional enough, restarting the vicious circle. This is the reason why subjectivism is ultimately insufficient and problematic, even though any one individual minimalist may indeed be fine with setting the discourse aside and only relying, thereafter, on his or her good sense (still shaped by common sense, of course). The discourse can push in different directions, endlessly play all sorts of contradictions off each other and blame crises either on some other, less genuine parts of the discourse, or on the individual that somehow failed; and this renews its indeterminate promise every time. Rhetorical rejections only place minimalism “at the other side” of common sense, which however does not really have sides or layers outside of such rejections, rather collapsing and conflating and confounding all that it encompasses, putting it all in reciprocal influence even if by mere association. From start to end, minimalism is and remains commonsensical.

By rejecting the aesthetic and rule-bound “bare minimum”, the minimalist discourse pursues an indeterminate “minimum possible” that can accommodate not only the aesthetic and rule-bound, but also the consumerist or materialist insofar as they are not as luxurious or extravagant as those of very wealthy people. This minimum possible will be subjectively different for everyone, and yet not to the point of not demanding always some (more) reduction and restriction in view of a final state, that is, not to the point of not being a minimum to be pursued at all. The pursuit of it binds minimalists together along with the rhetorical rejections that support it, constituting the “minimum possible” of consensus as well: no matter how different their subjective situational backgrounds are, minimalists will appear one in their attack on consumerism and materialism, their disavowal of the aesthetic and rule-bound, and their practicing some reduction and restriction of some excess for some kind of surprising surplus. This second minimum possible is minimalism’s critical common sense as constituted by the other two layers of common sense, and thus as distinct from going straight to authenticity, regularity or intentionality without going through – rhetorically if not practically – the pursuit of a minimum possible in the first sense. Authenticity, regularity and intentionality are all defined, like other surpluses, in the negative terms of rejection, reduction and restriction (which, not surprisingly, turn out to be reductionist). However, as the contradictory versions of “less is more” show, negation per se can lead anywhere and

everywhere, it can justify productivity as well as slow living, and it is the minimalist discourse itself that sets up the relative weights each time: it manages contradictions in the minimum possible of consensus, not just those among the layers of common sense (which include the shades of aestheticization). This is what we also mean by the “minimum possible”, which can be read both as a “minimization of possibility” – a minimum to reach and stop – and as a “possibility of minimization” yet to be explored. Overall, the weight of the discourse appears to fall on a pursuit of a lifestyle of thorough actuality and regularity free from the interferences of possibilities, a life stylized indeed, to the point of being ambivalent towards the very intentionality that it praises, since it entails the criticality of choice among many possibilities: like authenticity, intentionality is often presented as a form of planning, as a decision that one only takes once and then simply sticks to as a routine, while intentionality towards purchases is equated to restricting oneself before buying something, without really facing the plurality of conflicting criteria for deciding whether one should buy that thing or not (not to mention any consideration that would go beyond the act of purchasing). This minimization of possibility is a minimization of crisis and criticality, and it is clearly one with the promise of an integral lifestyle of well-being – and thus a great bridge towards the broader self-help and self-improvement discourses. It is, however, just a promise, not only because all the differences that are simply ignored by the discourse – that is, almost everything – do make the difference in all sorts of ways, but also because that promise itself demands the criticality it disavows, requires all the effort of reducing, restricting, rejecting and – in a word – regimenting one’s life, stylizing it. Still, criticality is alleviated and managed thanks to the contradictions of the discourse, so that every time the promise is revived as possible. This is the “possibility of minimization”, where minimalism is returned to the rhetorical start – indeterminacy – in order to make it appear as something possible, and again as something that each may therefore construct for himself or herself. This is achieved by the rhetorical rejections of the other layers of common sense, and by the appeal – no less rhetorical, and at any rate compensatory – to indeterminacy within the critical common sense, as in the call for slow living, for acceptance of imperfection and what is already owned, or for the present (as not reduced to the actual and regular). In the end, this possibility of constructing minimalism is preferred to the actual work of constructing it, to its further determination and development, and probably also its differentiation. This completes the circle: the minimum possible of consensus around

the pursuit of the minimum possible in one's life must be maintained as a promising possibility of minimization, so that the minimization of possibility may go on despite its crises and criticality, despite its contradictions (and in fact through them). This is then the crux of our whole study: minimalism demands determination, but backs off from it in order to maintain its promise as an indeterminate possibility, one just enough determinate as to make it look like it is already distinctive and integral, not contradictory as it is instead. Such indeterminacy is positively but often tacitly filled with the common sense it rejects, pushing and pulling in different directions, and also affords influencers a space for offering their positive – and authentic – examples, and a frame for venturing into other self-help and self-improvement topics. Individuals too are of course free to determine “minimalism” on their own, perhaps also disengaging from the discourse, but they will be doing it by initially pursuing the same promise, and whatever they eventually make of “minimalism” will leave the discourse around it unaffected (and in fact, they will probably still draw upon it to some extent).

It is impossible to say whether the discourse refrains from developing critically for the sake of promising an authentic, regular, intentional and integral lifestyle – minimally distinguished by its rhetoric and the common sense behind it –, or whether it promises the latter for the sake of alleviating and managing criticality and thus keeping on circulating the more determinate positive contents of each influencer (including the aesthetic ones, besides the ethical-practical advice drawn from the self-help and self-improvement discourses). In other words, is the minimalist discourse to be indeed understood as primarily a distinctive way to get at that critical common sense, or is it rather more of a platform for influencers to frame themselves and their otherwise heterogeneous and less authentic contents? While a quantitative analysis may show the relative weight of each component, each layer of common sense, each shade of aestheticization and so on within the discourse, the critical answer would have to be that as things stand these are two sides of the same coin, and that further discourse could always try and reconstruct “minimalism” differently, perhaps pulling it away from both functions; it does remain as a possibility, even if fraught with contradictions that already point to differentiations. Here we have been concerned with a qualitative exploration of the perpetual surrender of this task on Reddit as well as YouTube – that is, both among minimalist sympathizers or practitioners and among the minimalist influencers the former often

distance themselves from. The rhetorical differentiation of types of minimalism that we find both on Reddit and on YouTube is never pushed so far as to make each a critical challenge to the others, because these types are usually presented as a set of self-consistent possibilities that can be freely combined as one sees fit in one's own personal minimalism, thus bypassing their contradictions as internal components of "minimalism" at large. When these contradictions spark crises and lead to polarizations, especially those against "aesthetic minimalism" and "extreme minimalism" that we have witnessed on Reddit, the tendency is actually not that of fragmenting and decomposing minimalism, which would also neutralize the polarization, but rather that of depolarizing it into a subjectivist indeterminacy that is all-inclusive, wherein everyone can be "still minimalist" regardless of their differences. Minimalism without the aesthetic appears then as mere frugal or simple living, so it is often defended as legitimate, and advice is easily given for ways to come up with personal variations on the theme of its aesthetic common sense. The need to detach minimalism from the deprivation of the extreme also makes the aesthetic more palatable to the discourse, the comfort of things – including fewer but higher quality things – going hand in hand with their appreciation within one's renewed minimalist home or wardrobe. Yet others push back and insist that minimalism without the ethical-practical – whether it is for the sake of frugality or for sustainability – is a mere aesthetic that one can adopt and even purchase wholesale without it making any difference, and in fact leading one back into consumerism. Apart from those who prefer to disengage from the discourse – though still declaring it within it –, giving up on its rhetorical task by dismissing "minimalism" as a mere label, most seem to resist reduction of minimalism to any of its components: its integral lifestyle does not seem to allow for either "life" or "style" to be excluded. The gap between the aesthetic and the ethical-practical dimensions of minimalism – not to speak of the logical-rhetorical one, of course – appears nonetheless unbridgeable, so that they are affirmed in turn but hardly related in explicit ways to one another. In fact, the closest the discourse gets to the positive appreciation of the contribution of the aesthetic dimension is usually one that translates it in the therapeutic terms of the positive emotions, which are allied to the very authenticity whose rhetoric demands the disavowal of the aesthetic. When they blame minimalist influencers for having aestheticized minimalism, minimalists on Reddit might mean by this that they have ruined the aesthetic dimension of the lifestyle by idealizing it and determining it too much, but absent alternative under-

standings of it, the aesthetic usually ends up being dismissed along with digital social media and the influencers. Yet both this rhetorical move of authenticity and the subjectivist indeterminacy that results from depolarization, with its ambivalence towards the aesthetic, are compatible and in fact fully aligned to the discourses of those minimalist influencers.

We have seen this at length with our analysis of certain strands of the more mainstream discourse on YouTube, wherein all kinds of minimalist channels immunize minimalism – and thus also themselves – from critique precisely by administering it, by criticizing minimalism and its discourse and projecting by contrast a “true minimalism”, a minimalism as genuine and authentic as each host ends up appearing in the eyes of his or her audience. Criticality is performed to discharge it onto the false minimalism of digital social media, even while doing so on such media, in order to make both minimalism and the hosts authentic, crisis-free and criticality-free, thus reinstating its promise. Not surprisingly, here the indeterminate “minimalism” is often equated with anti-consumerism as such, or with some very long tradition of simple living, disregarding all that makes it distinctive, especially its ambivalent relationship to an aesthetic common sense. This is of course nowhere more evident than in the series of vlogs declaring the “death” or “end” of minimalism, only to project a true minimalism that is instead endless – and sometimes beginning-less –, because it has nothing to do with the superficial, apparent and ephemeral aesthetic “trend” it is confused with, with its commonsensical “stereotypes” and “myths”, nor with the extreme “rules” that are conflated with that trend. Many minimalist vlogs therefore deal with minimalism’s problems to alleviate and manage its criticality, oftentimes discharging it onto the individual as just the result of his or her mistake in falling prey to the trends or going too far with minimalism; a mistake they can make good on by engaging further with the discourse and embrace true minimalism, of course. Even when the inconsistency or insubstantiality of “minimalism” is lucidly recognized, leaving nothing but an “intentional living” empty of all determinacy – since the sense of its determinacy is rhetorically dependent on rejection, reduction and restriction –, it is always reaffirmed in the last instance: it just needs to be handled with individual good sense, that is, with generic moderation and with attention to what “just makes sense” in one’s subjective conditions and circumstances (despite offering little to no concrete guidance on how to evaluate them). The same goes for the

recognition of the contradiction with criticality that is at the heart of the discourse, that between “thinking less about stuff” and “thinking about less stuff”: the anti-consumerist, anti-materialist and anti-aesthetic rhetoric promises an integral lifestyle that is centred on experiences and relationships, on the authentic regularity of a routine and on better intentional decisions leading to personal well-being, all set against mere material and sensible things, and yet the discourse itself continually demands attention to just these things, because otherwise nothing would remain distinguishing “minimalism” from the self-help and self-improvement discourses it is embedded into. Since the minimalist channels obviously depend upon “minimalism” never actually dying, having to a large extent organized their discourse around it, it is not surprising that they back off from letting it die, but it is nonetheless significant that all they can do to save it is taking it back to the start, reverting it to the indeterminacy of common sense – right after having denounced commonsensical misunderstandings of it –, and leaving its problems to individuals’ good sense. Whether it is on Reddit or on YouTube, crises are sparked to evoke criticality and then exorcise it through disavowal of the aesthetic, rule-bound common sense or renewed attack on the consumerist and materialist one: in both ways, negative rejection carves out an indeterminate minimalism that is just determinate enough for its promise of a distinctive integral lifestyle to seem plausible (and appealing), but that leaves the crises untouched, unsolved and unaddressed. The operation, however, can just be made as recurrent and recursive as the crises sparked: recurrent, because the rhetorical moves must be repeated again and again, since the minimalist discourse is not in fact content with its indeterminacy; and recursive because, just like it works on Reddit as much as on YouTube – despite the dismissals of the latter on the part of the former –, so it also works fine across all varieties of minimalist channels with their particular mix of topics and shade of aestheticization, all authentic enough to their respective audiences. In this way, minimalism as a promise never ends, even though at the cost of never fully beginning either – at least as the critical discourse it often presents itself as.

A positive affirmation of the aesthetic underlies all minimalist channels regardless of the rejections, and to some extent it cannot but be so: every channel must maintain a recognizable profile; in most cases, it is also a recognizably “minimalist” one – white walls on wooden floors or touches, neutral colours with low contrast in the furni-

ture, sparseness of decorations and items on the surfaces, order and organization for both visible and stored items, spaciousness, clearness and cleanliness, natural lighting, plants and few artworks, and also simple monochromatic clothes, whether casual or glamour, all appear in the minimalist vlogs we have examined. Besides, most channels have a minimalist home tour – often more than one – as well as vlogs displaying their clothes and things, turning the everyday into an aesthetic interest despite the disavowal. This omnipresence of the aesthetic, partly due to the medium or YouTube’s platform but largely tied to the minimalist discourse’s own ambivalence towards it, is one reason – besides the critical-theoretical ones – why we cannot understand aestheticization simply as a process of making “aesthetic”, usually in a pejorative sense, what was not at all aesthetic at the start. Instead, and also on the contrary, our view is that aestheticization is rather precisely a matter of insulating the aesthetic from ethical-practical and rhetorical concerns to withdraw it from a more general critique, still leaving it to operate in a suggestive, commonsensical way. In fact, across all shades of this aestheticization – the spectrum that one might have otherwise identified with a spectrum of aestheticization, with some aesthetically middle-brow and casual channels and others higher-end and glamour, some more exotic and others low-brow and laidback – the aesthetic is never explicitly if not critically linked to the minimalist lifestyle at large, but still it is more or less ambiguously suggested as its manifestation. Sometimes the aesthetic is kept at a distance through irony and a softer implementation of the rhetorical moves against it – for example by only rejecting now it in a luxurious, extravagant version –, other times it is rather ignored in favour of a (seemingly) pure ethical-practical discourse, while other times still it is the latter that is ignored in favour of a (supposedly) pure aesthetic exhibition; oftentimes the two collapse, with routines and other aspects of everyday life being tacitly merged into the overall aesthetic; yet other times, display of imperfection affords rejection of the aesthetic without notice of the aesthetic nature of this rejection, both for its negative dependence upon the rejected aesthetic common sense and for the positive potential of an aesthetic of imperfection. One host will therefore appear authentic by contrast to the bizarre exaggerations of the ultra-rich, another will appear authentic by moralistic disregard for the aesthetic that he or she nonetheless faithfully reproduces; still another will appear authentic through the direct merging of his or her style with everyday life, and – at the higher-end – through the intentionality with which he or she has put it together; yet another will appear authentic by exhibition

of what are considered to be imperfections or defects. These strategies are not at all equivalent, but the basic rhetoric of authenticity underpins them all and obscures the aesthetic dimension that, whatever their strategy, all of them positively rely upon in their depiction of a minimalist lifestyle, adding one way or another to its contradictory common sense. In fact, far from being incompatible with the aesthetic, minimalism's authenticity is the attempt at solving and dissolving it once and for all, however the attempt is carried out. We have seen this with regard to minimalist wardrobes, where again all across the spectrum of shades of aestheticization the promise is made that one will not have to think about clothes again, whether by picking up and fixing an uniform, one's favourite items or a core of essential basics to stick to or build upon (or an ambiguous mix of all these options); one will thereby always look good – or at least “inoffensive” – to others, and will vice versa be “immune” to their influence (though, for good measure, it is still best to “mute” them if crisis arises). While other minimalists may always dismiss these vlogs as part of the mere aestheticized minimalism, the pursuit of an enduring satisfaction with things by “only owning” those one uses and enjoys – not even storing away the rest – is really no different, though more indeterminate, from the pursuit of whatever degree of aesthetic cohesiveness in one's home or wardrobe. The same fixation of an intentional decision into a crisis-free routine we find, after all, generalized to other areas of everyday life, where it is usually justified by the same promise of more authentic and intentional experiences, relationships or productive activities elsewhere – the “things that matter” – by saving up resources on daily ones. Habituation is encouraged all across everyday life, from one's inhabited home to one's wardrobe or one's good healthy habits, which open the door to the self-help and self-improvement discourses: it is life stylized, however visible its promised aesthetic cohesiveness is. Unless minimalism is actually reduced to a matter of definite practical benefits such as cleaning more easily, saving and gaining money by selling one's decluttered things, or even reducing stress or any other negative emotion, an aesthetic dimension will always underlie it insofar as it presents itself as an integral “lifestyle” gathering together but also going beyond those benefits. On the other hand, reducing minimalism to “intentional living” or any other formulation of an abstract ethical-practical “mindset” – what we have termed its critical common sense – would leave largely unjustified its central practices of decluttering material things or clothes (and only from there “things”), unless they were directly presented as training grounds for such a mindset. In both cases, how-

ever, it would be more open to critique as to whether there are better ways to get to the practical benefits and/or the ethical-practical mindset, especially given its contradictions: for example, cannot one clean less simply by cleaning less and renounce the cleanliness and orderliness that the minimalist aesthetic common sense promotes? Cannot one go straight to grateful appreciation for what one owns – supposed to be already “enough” –, or renewed dedication to experiences and relationships, without going through all the trouble of discarding things? Why should intentionality towards things to be decluttered or purchased transfer to intentionality in other areas of life, and cannot the latter be cultivated from the start with recourse to the abundant self-help or self-improvement advice out there? The likely answer to these questions is that minimalism is not just this or that. Its promise is that all its numerous practical benefits and ethical-practical mindset will merge into an integral lifestyle based on the practice of reduction and restriction, and this is an aesthetic promise, continuous with the positive affirmations of the aesthetic in the minimalist discourse.

At minimum, then, minimalism needs to retain enough of the aesthetic as to support a promised change in one’s overall lifestyle beyond definite benefits, and also a distinguished version of its own for the critical common sense of individual authenticity, regularity, intentionality and personal well-being it identifies with after rhetorically rejecting common sense: this would be the “minimum possible” of determination for it to stay – no matter how precariously – on the other side of common sense, or rather to ever return to it again and again. This minimum possible holding minimalism together is the “less is more” principle, whose indeterminacy – and aesthetic origin – allows it to cover all sorts of reductions, restrictions and rejections, positing an excess and a surprising surplus – of meaning first of all – to be achieved or realized. However, the principle contains but does not erase all the contradictions among and within the layers of minimalism’s common sense (and of common sense at large): it just facilitates the continual shift from one component or aspect to another, as well as the metaphorical generalization of reduction to all areas of life with their own “things”, including one’s own thoughts. Even if taken at its most general as applying to critical common sense – which we have briefly tried doing at last, mapping it onto our own critical theory –, the principle is clearly no less heterogeneous and contradictory in its versions than minimalism, confirming that minimalist “living with intention” cannot help but engender “living

within tension”, contrary to its promise and especially its refusal towards crisis and criticality. Even setting aside its origins as an aesthetic motto, the principle still points to an aesthetic dimension by suggesting that less is indeed more, instead of only leading to more instrumentally in the future (though it is also used in this way, of course); if it does not appear to be already more, than it will – since it must – become so with time, by repeated self-restraint: eventually one will come to desire less and desire “less”, making it seep into aesthetic sensibility. Moreover, it would not be difficult to match the various readings of “less is more” to the aesthetic features commonsensically associated to minimalism. The most obvious example is habituation, wherein reduction, as reduction of the negative noise of inauthentic things – aesthetically incoherent in whatever way and degree –, translates to a meaningful surplus of integration and organization in oneself and one’s newly stylized life: the cohesiveness, the tidiness and indeed the organization aesthetically minimalist homes, where nothing really jumps out on its own from the whole it constitutes as a part with no residual excess of possibility, surely resonate with such broader pursuit of an authentic, regular everyday life of habits and routines, of “only owning” what is part of these, and having a schedule filled with mostly one’s preferred activities (besides strictly necessary ones). As we have seen, this is complemented by insulation from crisis, as pursued in a temporal rejection of the past and the future for the present (as reduced to the actual or current), a mediatic rejection of digital social media and even of others as such, and also a spatial rejection implicit in the exclusive attention to one’s domestic space: minimalism’s modernist aesthetic common sense can easily overlap with these aspects and reinforce them, for example through its supposed timelessness, its immediately readable formalism of simple lines, shapes, colours and patterns, and its white-walled museums, galleries and fashion stores, which frame the things they contain as a collection. Even the contradictory and compensatory push for cancellation, which on the contrary reduces determination for a surplus of indeterminate possibilities – minimized in habituation and insulation –, is well supported by the implicit allusion in the empty walls, surfaces and space to the indeterminate possibility of filling them in whatever personal ways; moreover, cancellation too relies on presence and immediacy that the aesthetic common sense can connote – a slowly lived present and immediate connections to others –, though here they are not reduced to actuality. Authentic and regular habituation to one’s collection of things and inhabitation of one’s home, with its concomitant though contradictory insulation from

crisis and cancellation of determinacy – the one shrinking and the other enlarging horizons (or at least projecting unlimited ones from within the shrunken horizons) –, can all be read into minimalism’s aesthetic common sense, which contributes to cover up their contradictions. Both less indeterminacy and less determinacy can be “more” in appropriate conditions, both offer a surplus of meaning, which is why aesthetic experience is dialectical; and even the most stereotypically minimalist home can allude to them both.

In all its forms, the surplus promised by the “less is more” principle depends on some active reduction and restriction (even though it is at times indirect or implicit): despite their promises of an end to – or at least pause from – crisis and criticality, habituation, insulation and cancellation actually demand them in the first place as the intentional restraint they need to be maintained. Things and clothes as well as schedules must be sifted through, digital social media must be resisted and others at large “muted” – as perhaps also the past and the future is to be repressed –, while at other times it is these very restrictions that must be restricted, opening up to imperfection and indeterminacy. The reason why “intentional living” is the preferred rephrasing of minimalism is that it centres the active gesture of restraint that all readings of the principle presuppose, even while promising relief from it; the very expression suggests at once the criticality of minimalism – which as intentional is opposed to consumerists’ impulsivity – and its being nonetheless a crisis-free “living”, a lifestyle that solves and dissolves that criticality (as in fixing up intentional decisions as planned routines). Restriction is the rule of minimalism, no matter how indeterminate: some (more) restriction is necessary, because that is what realizes any version of the “less is more” principle in one’s experience; at the very least, rhetorical references to it are necessary to maintain it (which may be another reason why it is metaphorically generalized to other areas of life, and why it depends so much on its rhetorical rejection). As engendering a sense of intentionality from restraint – including rhetorical rejection – of impulses (or impositions, since both are understood as external threats to oneself), restriction is its own reading of the “less is more” principle, the one where “less” is most directly “more”, since it is valued as such as an exercise of one’s intentionality, being ultimately identified with it in the discourse. Here too minimalism’s aesthetic common sense echoes the reading, because – despite the appeals to having less to clean, maintain and care for – the clean and tidy home may suggest a self-restrictive discipline in making and keeping it so, even if it has become

habitual as is promised (one of the habits commonly promoted in the minimalist discourse is that of putting away things right after they have been used in their original and perhaps intentionally planned spot, or washing the dishes – and other household chores – immediately after eating). The readable and functional organization foregrounded by the modernist aesthetic also reinforces the sense of intentionality, which is why the latter gets allied to authenticity through the regularity of routine, but restriction is actually irreducible to habituation, precisely because it is minimalism's unconditional rule: were it not, any well-ordered home would already be minimalist without having to go through some reduction, restriction and rejection. At the same time, of course, restriction for restriction's sake, for the sense of "living intentionally" in the strict sense, would be unsustainable on its own as an explicit interest – as the rhetorical rejections of the rule-bound also show –, so it does need other readings of the "less is more" principle to be implemented in, in order to manage its criticality and promise something further, something that in its indeterminacy encompasses and covers up restriction as an interest of its own. Habituation, insulation and cancellation, all of which in contradictory ways promise a relief from restriction's criticality, do at least translate their "less" into a "more" they are not identical with, even though it is an immediate translation: less noise does constitute more integration or organization, but still the latter terms may be set against the former as opposites external to it, and to be achieved by restriction as a somewhat merely instrumental gesture (even though less so than in the more instrumental readings). On the other hand, in the case of restriction the "less" is itself already "more" without any terms applied to the two of them: to say that it leads to more intentionality may be true or not, but insofar as intentionality is wholly equated with negative reduction, restriction and rejection of impulsivity, the gained sense of intentionality will be almost one with the sense of restraint. As we have noted earlier, one eventually learns to desire "less" by itself, besides desiring less (and all other forms of "less is more"). If intentionality appears as a "more" that is different than the "less" of restriction – whatever it is applied to, things or "things" –, it is because it takes on all other sorts of "more" that minimalism promises in the "less is more" principle as left unanalysed. By itself, in the minimalist discourse at least, it is almost the same as restriction: as long as one discards things, reduces purchases, waits some time before buying something, refuses others' gifts, cancels commitments, restricts time spent on digital social media and so on, one will already ipso facto be and feel more intentional for it.

Contentment, the reading of the “less is more” principle that calls for less desire, often indirectly by urging a grateful acceptance or appreciation for what one owns as already enough, is allied to cancellation in its compensatory push for indeterminacy: gratitude is directed toward what is present even if imperfect, and entails slowing down from the pursuit of something – which makes everything “easier” (in fact even more than that, since it makes everything seem already achieved from the start in the last instance). Thus contentment carries on the contradictions: acceptance or appreciation of things already owned clashes with the discarding of things not currently owned or enjoyed; lowered or more indeterminate standards clash with the shift to purchasing fewer but higher quality items; while lowered socioeconomic expectations may also clash with at least the more aspirational versions of the appeal to saving – at times also investing – money, or more generally with the promise of more “experiences” and “relationships” through saved resources, which can lead to experiential consumption. At bottom, of course, if one could just be contented by practicing gratitude, minimalism’s own aspirational dimension would be called into question, at which point it would probably have to be reduced to the contradictory but irreducible aspiration not to aspire: it takes time and effort to come to desire less, becoming content through gratitude or other practices (and discourses), so one first has to desire it in turn, at least enough to practice. If we put contentment at the centre of minimalism, then the desiring “less” of restriction and the other “less is more” frames could be taken to serve and facilitate this lessening of desire, which again would not work as well on its own as explicitly promoted: besides being commonsensical – if one expects little or nothing, he or she will of course be hardly disappointed –, contentment would not be as appealing without being mixed up with the promise of “more” beyond more ease (or more positive emotions); and at any rate, it would not be as “minimalist” on its own. This being said, contentment can hardly be placed at the centre of the minimalist discourse anyway, as is evident in its rhetorical rejections of “extreme minimalism”, of the deprivations of the ascetic – or even just the frugal – no less than the luxuries of the consumerist and materialist; it promises a middle way of comfort. As usual, then, some restriction is called for with regard to desires, some lowering of expectations (from one’s initial situation), but it is indeterminate to the point of alleviating, managing and concealing its criticality – its restrictive nature – making it compatible with the aspirations to “more” promised by minimalism. Reference to “needs” is made insofar as these seem to point to a reduced core of desires from

the impulsive excess – aesthetic, consumerist and materialist – of “wants”, but it is abandoned as soon as it appears depriving, restrictive like an objective quantitative rule, instead reintroducing desires through subjectivist authenticity and intentionality: if one “really” wants something, and if one has waited on it – and perhaps restrained himself or herself elsewhere –, then desiring it is acceptable, even if – strictly speaking – one does not need it. Still, a push for less desire is part of the contradictory whole, deeply tied to the anti-consumerist and anti-materialist rhetoric wherein desires are assimilated to impulse. The aesthetic common sense of minimalism also plays its role in this case, for example through association with depersonalized spaces such as hospitals or, often in a more positive and idealized light via Japanese traditional aesthetic, monasteries. Needless to say, a generic reference to the simpler times of the past is often put forward as evidence of “true” needs being much less than the modern excess of desires, which paradoxically underpins the assumption that there is a definite set of authentically desired things to be uncovered through decluttering, instead of simply being content with one’s belongings as they are from the start: like slow living, imperfection and presence, simple living can be coated in the rhetoric of authenticity as well, even while it contradicts – and compensates – the way it is primarily understood in the discourse (habituation, insulation), because it is itself contradictory.

The “less is more” principle can equally accommodate determination of desire as a reduction of possibility that facilitates action, just like it can justify both habituation and cancellation. While such a reading has not explicitly come up in our few examples, it is implicit in minimalism’s assimilation of productivity advice on goal-setting, to-do lists, “monotasking” and so on, as well as in the related emphasis on optimization – which, as we have noted, presupposes determinate ends relative to which the results of action may be maximized. Setting up explicit long-term or short-term goals, perhaps also quantifying them in some way, is a “less” of indeterminacy that engenders a “more” at least in the sense of progress – more definitely sensible, or even measurable – towards them. When these are further broken down into something like a series of small tasks on a to-do list, there is also clarity of action. Other broader readings of the “less is more” principle bear on this, from concentration of more resources on fewer things or “things” – which, as we have seen, can support economization and optimization as much as habituation and insulation in its generality – to accumulation of small and thus

more easily achievable results of habits, or in this case of tasks, into big changes. Its own emphasis, however, is on determination of desire into ends – however few or many – supposed to be already clear, perhaps measurable and fixed from the start. This, as we have just said, backs up optimization – with its sense of efficiency in ways and means of action –, and also fits the economization of supposedly measurable scarce resources, if they are saved up for with some definite future goal in mind. Besides contradicting the others in various ways, most of these readings apply primarily or exclusively to action, not to one's things and clothes and home, but the "less is more" principle assimilates them by metaphorically generalizing reduction and restriction to frame them as such. As a lifestyle, minimalism has to expand on other areas of life, and if this lifestyle is an "intentional living" then determination, concentration, optimization and so on will contribute to a sense of intentionality in different ways, including above all a confirmation of its understanding as a negative reduction, restriction and rejection. Moreover, in this case too minimalism's aesthetic common sense may sustain some of these readings of the principle: the modernist industrial design's focus on definite single functionalities for items may evoke determination and optimization, while the correlative lack of decorations – which can also be confused with the rejection of the aesthetic altogether – may suggest economization of resources on the superfluous. And after all, authentic and regular habituation in one's integrated, organized domestic space can be seen as an optimization expanded to one's life as a whole, as we have seen with the praise for routine which is at the same time also a push for optimization: at first those routines have to be intentionally set up not just in any way but in the best way, as in the uniform – or capsule wardrobe of only favourite clothes – and the healthy meal plan; and these in turn are often justified within an economizing frame of saved time, besides the alleviation and management of intentionality's critical demands of effort. Precisely because of its relationship to the aesthetic – even as merely implicit in the commonsensical associations of minimalism –, in many ways the more ethical-practical readings fold back into the aesthetic ones, even though they offer distinctive and partly contradictory surpluses of meaning: determination of desire can be allied to authentic and regular habituation, since the latter also insists on determinacy, but it provides or at least promises a future-oriented sense of progress – even long-term – that is its own and may always clash with habituation's present-oriented focus (and even more with cancellation's more indeter-

minate present, which as we have seen is also mixed up in the rhetoric of authenticity as compensatory of habituation, insulation and restriction).

The point of all this is that with negative reduction, restriction and rejection, even when minimally determined through the “less is more” frame of a reduced excess engendering a surplus, anything can be put forward and supported and justified. Minimalism’s principle, which should provide the “minimum possible” of consensus among minimalists around a critical common sense for its integral lifestyle, submerges into indeterminacy many contradictory readings which work on different aspects of critical common sense (as partially mapped in the grammars of our critical theory). There is no overarching way in which “less” is – or translates to, or leads to – “more”, even if we consider only reduction of material things owned or purchased. At the same time, the minimalist discourse’s indeterminate promise of an integral lifestyle, or at least of a better life overall, is incompatible with disintegration of the principle into any one of its versions, and thus any one of its forms of “more”, whether it is saving money, feeling grateful or never having to think about clothes again; that overarching whole remains indispensable, even at the cost of leaving it indeterminate. This is then why, as we have put it, “less is more” is itself more in a rhetorical sense: only minimally determinate, the principle is just enough determinate as to constitute “minimalism” and its lifestyle as something objective, thus objectively demanding at least some (more) restriction from everyone, but otherwise it is so indeterminate that it can be used to push in contradictory directions, to frame and lead into any number of other self-help or self-improvement topics, to freely fill minimalism up with influencers’ positive examples – from their nonetheless affirmed aesthetic to their products –, to promise something more than any definite “more” anyone could come up with and to everyone regardless of their situations and conditions, and finally to play commonsensical aspects against each other to alleviate and manage the very criticality it exacts. Therefore, even if we concede to the discourse’s rejection of its own aesthetic and rule-bound common sense along with the consumerist or materialist one, it still exhibits the same contradictions when equated to the critical common sense of “intentional living” plus the “less is more” principle – the “minimum possible” for distinguishing it from self-help and self-improvement. While some form of literal or metaphorical reduction appears in all of them, the experience of some aesthetic cohesiveness in one’s home and life through selection, integration and

organization of only one's authentically used and enjoyed things is actually quite different from that of disciplining oneself by intentionally putting off a purchase by writing it on a wishlist; and in turn both are different from that of efficiently achieving something, that of saving on resources that may determinately or indeterminately be invested some other day, that of striving for a clear goal or vice versa that of giving up on striving and appreciate what is already at hand, and so on. Does this mean that minimalism should also finally reject the "less is more" principle along with the aesthetic and rule-bound, turning into something even less determinate than that, or almost nothing? If it did, of course, as it sometimes tries to by unqualifiedly identifying itself with nothing more than "intentional living" as such, it would really not be "minimalism" anymore, since it would have nothing to back up its rule of restriction; besides, no degree of further indeterminacy can actually get rid of the contradictions, only cover them up again. There is no way out (and no need for it, at least for those who actually depend upon the minimalist discourse's endlessness).

Whatever other side of common sense it gets to, minimalism will keep on sparking crises as minimalists live within tension, pursuing that promised more of "less is more" itself in any number of different ways pieced together – hopefully with some good sense – from the minimalist discourse and the rhetorically layered, aesthetically shaded common sense it is embedded in. This really is the "minimum possible" that can be said about it, and yet also all that can be said without actually shifting to something else, to some other object than the one it rhetorically constructs itself as – even if it only achieves the oneness of indeterminacy, of common sense (just like that of "thing", easily passing from indicating physical things to any "thing" whatsoever). What it lacks in limits as one object, as something which can rhetorically bring subjects together in their critical reflection or discussion, it replaces with the negativity of its rejections of what it cannot reject: minimalism is (anti-)consumerist, (anti-)materialist, (anti-)aesthetic, (anti-)rule-bound, (anti-)extreme – in a word, (anti-)commonsensical. In addition to these rejections and turning their rhetoric into performances, there is the further negativity of the indeterminate practice of some (more) reduction and restriction, rhetorically framed in contradictory ways by the "less is more" principle, and metaphorically generalized to a lifestyle. Other than these purely negative ones, no other limits are set up, leaving "minimalism" so indeterminate that its negative dependence on common sense cannot

but be accompanied by a positive dependence on it; at best – or worst, from a critical standpoint –, the difference it makes is that the same common sense will now appear more authentic, intentional or promising in any other way, leading into the no less commonsensical – nor less contradictory – advice of the self-help and self-improvement discourses. Both the discourse and the individual must go again and again through reduction, restriction and rejection to end up mostly with common sense again; the individual at some point may no doubt get tired of it and disengage minimalism itself or some aspects of it, but the discourse never does. The alternative would be not just rejecting but rather critically reconstructing the relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical-practical, within everyday life, which minimalism at once exhibits more clearly and directly than most other self-help and self-improvement discourses do, yet also disavows and leaves it to operate uncritically in contradictory ways. From the “style” in the lifestyle, minimalism carves out every determinate content and takes itself to have thereby rejected the aesthetic, but its multifarious push for stylization of life is actually no less aesthetic for it, even when it is purely a matter of feeling more authentic, regular and intentional; which is why such experiences can be continuous with the more aesthetically determinate stylistic aspects in minimalism’s common sense. Needless to say, this reconstruction would require an entirely different understanding of the aesthetic than minimalism’s reductive – and still commonsensical today, of course – one, wherein it is concerned with superficial, ephemeral appearances that are only subjectively liked by each individual and yet objectively imposed on all by society (along with an impulsivity towards them). We take it, of course, that an adequate understanding for this task could be built from an everyday aesthetic inserted into the broader continuous landscape of critical experience which we have sketched in our pragmatist critical theory, thereby also linking it to semiology’s rhetorical emphasis on discourses, and on the encyclopaedic unfolding and – sometimes – determination, differentiation and development of common sense via different modes and degrees of mediation. That, however, is still a long way ahead from the present work, which more modestly intended to show that it is needed, and that there are already many promising avenues to pursue it.

What our work hopefully shows is that however the critical reconstruction of minimalism is to be pursued – if it is worth to be pursued –, and whether it be carried out by more internal or more external subjects with regard to its discourse, a core indis-

pensable element of it would be acknowledgment of crisis and contradictions as inherent in and ineradicable from experience, all the more so if it is critical experience: as such, they are neither avoidable nor solvable once and for all, and they point more clearly than anything else to the further impossibility of doing either thing on one's own, because they highlight one's essential involvement with otherness. After all, the rejection of the aesthetic and the surrender of the rhetorical task of determining and developing "minimalism" – which is "just a label" – is at bottom an attempt at rejecting crisis itself and at surrendering criticality (even while it presents itself, both aesthetically and rhetorically, as fostering the latter without the former). Minimalism is the paradoxical aesthetic expression of the supposedly anti-aesthetic paradigm of authenticity: although often couched in the individualist language of emotions in order to set it against the relational one of the aesthetic, self-expression through one's belongings in one's domestic space is de facto accepted and affirmed by the discourse just as much as it is rhetorically rejected, because a sense of aesthetic inadequacy and inconsistency – if only that between one's "favourites" and everything else – is made less instead of more bearable than it was. As we have seen, even the appeal to aesthetic imperfection is mostly compensatory, circling back to the promise of authenticity as some sort of perfect imperfection, an imperfection free of crisis that is no less in need of insulation from others than the perfectionism it opposes. In its rejection of others as external sources of the aesthetic crisis and thereby shrinking the horizon, insulation literally carves off an island that is made authentic by contrast to what lies beyond it, but that is no less aesthetic for that: one's immediate domestic space works at the very least as a buffer between oneself and others, a sort of second body doubling down on the opposition between the interior and the external – and the familiar and the extraneous – so that the latter can be filtered out in a way that is aesthetically expressed and experienced, and the more so the more it is aesthetically cohesive. At each round of its rhetorical rejections, the minimalist discourse retreats further and further from the contradiction of aesthetically securing an authentic refuge from the aesthetic and its crises, disavowing – though never abandoning – what actually distinguishes it from other self-help and self-improvement discourses around authenticity. Decluttering one's home is then justified on the grounds of emotional mental health or well-being, practical saving up of resources, avoiding distractions and so on, or any one of the frames granted by the "less is more" principle, but it never loses its ambiguous promise as the aesthetic basis for authenticity, only reinforced

by the rhetorical rejections and made more indeterminate, implicit and thus uncritical; so it remains vulnerable to the crises it cannot really shield one from, since they are not really external to begin with, and the same rhetoric can be repeated again and again. The supposed initial identification with the consumerist, materialist world is rejected for an aesthetic yet authentic identification with the domestic space, then this too is rejected in a recursive and recurrent manner for an authenticity which is almost purely internal to the individual – only almost, because the rule of restriction cannot be renounced: one must always practice some (more) reduction or restriction of one's things. At no point is the aesthetic at last left behind for the authentic: however much it disavows it, the authentic will still be aesthetic both in its dependence upon negating it – insulation is itself an aesthetic practice and experience, as is habituation – and in its need of positively filling up whatever space it carves out for itself. If crisis and contradictions were acknowledged, this indefinite escape would not only appear futile, but also harmful with regard to one's ability to face them when they do arise. Just like the minimalist discourse has nothing to say on how to reflect upon the concrete conditions of one's subjective situation – not despite but rather because of its subjectivism –, it also has little to say on its own concrete conditions as rooted on digital social media: one is “minimalist” only as authentic individual beyond any of his or her roles – with all the professional, gender, ethnic, class and other relations to which they are tied – as well as beyond any of his or her profiles on digital social media, and yet neither of these disappear just because they are ignored. The same goes for minimalism's ambivalence towards the criticality of intentionality, which it similarly wishes to make crisis-free, with the help again of the insulation of a domestic space wherein one seems to be fully in control: the intentionality with which one gets rid of inauthentic things will transfer – or so the promise goes, of course – onto all other reductions, restrictions and rejections of things or “things”, and will be just as easy, with nothing needed – no real criteria – but a bit of self-restraint and individual good sense. The contradiction of wanting to be critical without crisis lies behind both the rejection of the aesthetic for the authentic and the rejection of the impulsive – or imposed – for the intentional.

An aesthetic theory which stresses the unavoidable qualitative and positive dimension of all experience – even that of abstract rules and principles –, its intrinsic relational nature with regard to both others and the world, its coalescing into distinguishable

experiences – whether of a practice, of a lifestyle or of its discourses – that while somewhat coherent and cohesive nonetheless include crisis and thus contradiction as an element, and finally the continuity evidenced by all these features, is at the same time already a first indispensable articulation of a critical common sense which does not turn its back on criticality, as the aestheticized minimalist one does. The rhetorical problem of minimalism is not that it is contradictory, but that it endlessly disavows and thus obscures the contradictions instead of openly addressing and working through them as such, ever reviving the promise that they can be easily and enduringly reconciled or at least balanced. A minimalist's saving of money is no less commonsensical than anyone else's, especially that steeped into the discourses on frugal living and financial independence, but it is now endowed with a sense of authenticity and intentionality, of the indeterminacy of a slower life or the determination of a productive one and so on, and also vice versa, and still also through the pervasive influence of the aesthetic. In justifying each other on different occasions, every component and aspect thus obscures the others and their conflicts: saving is no longer just saving, yet intentionality too is no longer – despite the discourse's universal prizing of “intentional living” – just intentionality, it must also be saving on the one hand, and authentically crisis-free on the other. If we follow the discourse in boiling down “minimalism” to intentionality as framed by the “less is more” principle, it is nonetheless an intentionality the is not clearly aware of all that goes into making it aesthetically interesting, besides – of course – being even more unaware of what could make it logically-rhetorically intelligible and intelligent; above all it cannot recognize that crisis and contradictions are indispensable ingredients for both, which is why such intentionality must be rhetorically sustained by rejections, sparked crises and lived tensions. From here, it is no doubt possible to go on and criticize minimalism philosophically in many ways: authenticity can be relativized as only one paradigm for identity, and not exhausting individuality; intentionality can be shown to be irreducible to restriction, and mostly covering short problematic gaps in habitual experience; subjectivism can be exposed as precisely making it harder for individuals to critically reflect upon their subjective conditions, ignoring and thus concealing the whole passive, historical, situated and already socially mediated aspect of subjectivity; and all sorts of undying dualisms, such as that opposing material things and immaterial experiences and relationships, or that externally pitting the self against the other, the mind against the body and so on, can be readily unravelled once more and most likely

not for the last time. Similarly, it is also possible to do a full-blown critique of minimalism as a social phenomenon by pointing out all of its relations to actual conditions or consequences: the covering up of socio-economic differences behind the thin veil of an universal rejection of both extreme wealth and extreme poverty – only abstractly conceived as on a quantitative scale –, which brings everyone together into one indeterminate, simply comfortable middle-class; the perpetuation of an aesthetic common sense whose wholesale rejection only makes it far less amenable to critique, and also to creative adaptation and reconstruction in combination with other styles (including those of marginalized ethnic and socio-economic groups); the intense reinforcement of private ownership as the primary or exclusive model for one’s relationship to things, and the further concealment of its social dimension as in large part a relationship to other people with regard to those things; the similar entrenchment of individual responsibility through rhetorical alleviation, management and overall compensation of its criticality, as in the push for both productivity and slow living, both saving with a strict organized budget and spending more on experiences or even higher-quality things; the waste added to by getting rid of things and clothes en masse, ejected into a natural and social environment which is even less identified with as lying beyond the confines of one’s home; and on and on. Here, however, we have contented ourselves with a more limited rhetorical critique that points at the ways in which the emergence of any of these problems within the minimalist discourse is prevented, and thus also – and crucially – how they might always be summarily dismissed and avoided as singular issues which do not concern minimalism as a whole, or real minimalism. If not coupled with a problematization of the minimalist discourse on its own commonsensical terms to make explicit its crisis and contradictions, as we have tried to do in our study, more in-depth and thus specialized critiques will miss the core indeterminacy which keeps minimalism and its discourse alive, ever reborn again and again. Moreover, the promise of a “minimum possible” – which does remain a possibility – can thereby be taken on for critical reconstruction, instead of being simply rejected in a way that mirrors minimalism’s own rejections of itself: its discourse can always agree on this or that determinate feature of minimalism being problematic, so long as the promise can be held onto; therefore a critique of minimalism must also, and above all, make explicit and reconstruct this promise. Acknowledging the contradictions of the promise is not at all incompatible with pursuing it further, if they are clarified instead of obscured; it is only incompatible with

a minimalism that universalizes itself as a critical common sense it actually stops far short of, a minimalism that at bottom denies being a lifestyle among many others. Determining and differentiating minimalism, including its aesthetic expression, would not impede but rather foster its further development as a lifestyle, because indeterminacy can never be exhausted anyway; leaving it indeterminate, on the contrary, does not stop it from always falling back on rigid determinations dictated by the aesthetic, rule-bound, consumerist and materialist common sense it wished to reject.

Critique of common sense cannot amount to a wholesale rejection of it as uncritical – impulsive, inauthentic and so on –, landing on some separate, special “mindset” which is instead critical: to do so circles it back to common sense, rendered not more but rather less critical by the conviction that it is already critical, and by the correlative and often compensatory idea that no further crisis is necessary. Rather, critique is both directed at and rooted in common sense: critical common sense is common sense made critical of itself and by itself. There is no other side to common sense external and extraneous to it, wherein refuge can be taken by rhetorically evoking and exorcising it; there are only more or less critical remediations of it. This is no less true of semiology or any other scientific discipline, which may equally prize and promote itself as defeating common sense in its being critical just through some special means and principles of its own, even while relying on it. What makes semiology better off, in our view, is that its ambiguous, plural positioning on the map of the arts and sciences still retains a particularly strong philosophical root, which comes with the ambition to deal comprehensively with all sorts of meaning, no doubt with a rhetorical focus on discourses and texts, but also extending to the practices and experiences – or even lifestyles – in which a semiotic dimension is already implicit, though not dominant. Our idea is that a pragmatist reconstruction of semiological tools, drawn from all corners of its tradition, may make critical analyses such as the ones we have tentatively offered in this work much less arduous, muddled and meandering than they have in fact been on this occasion, and in turn revive semiology’s critical outlook as essential to it, already implicit in its very encyclopaedic ideal when recognized as indeed an ideal to be pursued. All meaning, even the most strictly discursive and linguistic one, is inherently tied to critical experience in its never coincident aesthetic, ethical and logical dimensions, so that the signs making up the encyclopaedia cannot be reduced to repositories of factual – including

fictional – information, or exclusively logical interpretations: they rather comprise a core part of the means by which experience may be made more interesting, intentional and intelligent, and common sense enriched, expanded and deepened – not by mere positive addition or accretion, of course, but by working through crises. This in no way would necessarily make semiology any less scientific and academic than it cares to be: as in our present work, that discourses may and should develop beyond indeterminacy and vicious circles is a guiding assumption of an analysis that need not commit to actually intervene in the discourses it criticizes (though it need not abstain from doing so either, perhaps at another time); it just highlights by contrast some crucial features of those discourses, their workings within both common sense and encyclopaedia. The semiological tradition has a multitude of resources to meet this challenge, and it is not a new challenge for it either, just a renewed pragmatist formulation of it, which calls for a development of tools to handle – among other things – proper contradictions, ways and degrees of determination and development, qualitative phenomenological and aesthetic grounds for semiotic mediations in the strict sense, dialectic relationships between common sense and encyclopaedia which do not reduce either one to the other, open-ended and on-going continuity never definitively arrested once and for all in a dyadic fashion – whether by caprice, routine, authority or universality –, triadic overcoming of all dualisms – as opposed to mere non-dualism –, and so on. From the explicitly foregrounded contradictoriness of the encyclopaedia to the obviously critical underpinnings of lifestyle regimes, there are reasons to believe the task to be both feasible and promising, or at the very least worth properly trying out beyond our inchoate sketches. Semiology's insistence on narrativity as the model for meaning-making may still prove itself to be its best bet, in view of the central place of the ethical-practical within critical theory: just like the latter, the narrative easily blends – without exhausting them, nor vice versa – with the expressive and the argumentative that lie behind and beyond it, and the interlinked triadic critical grammars afford a way of making these transitions without having to give up on mediations on the one hand, and without any leap from narrative theory to sign theory on the other (even less subordination of the former to the latter).

Just like with minimalism, a reconstruction of semiology would not require its unification: if anything, it would end up differentiating it even more, with both old and new differences, including those that go all the way back to philosophy – that is, to its

critical common sense. However, pushing these differences towards more and more explicit clarity, as well as challenging them, is already reason good enough to try reconstructing it as if it could indeed be reunited under a more pragmatist critical common sense. Even if such an attempt ended up with the indeterminacy of semiology as an extremely broad field including all kinds of studies having to do with whatever form of signification and communication, the struggle to determine and develop it further would make this indeterminacy itself more significant (and sensible). Beyond all of this, however, having a look at semiology as reflected and refracted in the pragmatist mirror would first and foremost shift the question about it as a matter not so much of what semiology is or has been, but rather of what it could and in some ways should still become. Pragmatism's anti-foundational map of arts and sciences makes a scientific endeavour even of that very mapping, on the basis that sciences too are historically evolved organisms that at one time reflect upon themselves in a more and more encompassing way, tracing distinctions as well as connections. If semiology, as an encyclopaedic modelling of cultures, also appears in and contributes to the synthetic branch that is charged with that architectonic mapping of sciences, then it is no surprise that its status as a discipline is even more irreducibly open-ended – often self-consciously so – than that of other perhaps similar disciplines: more than any other discipline, semiology cannot and should not forget its ultimate openness (even though it should neither lose sight of its plural but actual disciplinarity as distinct from others, which makes it de facto irreducible to a broad indeterminate field as such). Still, this openness is as much the synthetic openness of encyclopaedia as the cenoscopic, philosophical openness of common sense, with the former always mediating and remediating the latter without exhausting it; neither can be flattened on the other. Whatever different shapes it takes, then, semiology pragmatically reconstructed will have to ask itself what kind of difference it means to make within the common sense and encyclopaedia upon which – as it knows full well – its scientific activity both depends and impacts anyway. The answer will vary with each particular tradition and formation of the discipline – which, again, will surely not be vanquished by a pragmatist reconstruction –, and also with each concrete research project, but as far as we are concerned, the minimum possible that should be said is that even if solely interested in a strictly scientific inquiry, semiology will have to aim at making common sense more critical, and pushing encyclopaedia forward – with all its signs, texts, discourses, cultures – in its never-ending remediations of

common sense in and through all sorts of crises and contradictions, and out of all kinds of vicious circles. The vicious circles we have explored in the minimalist discourse are almost a perfect representation of what semiology should work to avoid, expose, contrast and undo: it is a double paradox for a discourse to rhetorically construct an authentic, intentional subject that is sharply isolated from and opposed to discourse, cut off from common sense and encyclopaedia, and precisely for this reason to end up circling back to the very common sense it rejected, thus becoming dependent upon the infinite encyclopaedic repetition of itself, in order to keep minimalism minimally distinct from that. While already aiding and encouraging critique as they are in numerous ways – not least through the association to the canonical figures whose work has indeed foregrounded deeply critical veins –, the tools and concepts and principles of semiology are not really grounded on an encompassing critical theory yet, one that at once includes semiosis all the way back to purely phenomenic mediation, yet also exceeds it even in the other modes of mediations it admits. The first task, then, still calls for as much work as it has been devoted to the second one: as much as it has attended to encyclopaedia, in part also sweeping under it all that on close inspection would turn out to be less than encyclopaedic, semiology must recover and reconsider its philosophical roots in common sense, working to make it itself critical as much as criticisable – a common sense that has rendered critique commonsensical, and that consequently does not as easily shy away from crises and contradictions. Just like minimalism's, this minimum possible for a reconstructed semiology remains a mere promise despite all the work – and all the words – that we have already put into it. Our final hope is that the evident limitations in this tentative, unrefined and preliminary path towards reconstruction may not take too much away from its appearance and appeal as indeed promising; our commitment is to keep on pursuing it regardless, if only to make its errors ever clearer.

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