

Unnecessary, Unwanted and Uncalled-for: A
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‘Uselessness’ as a response to ambiguity: diminished things and marginal places

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Introduction

While the scope of the term ‘useless’ is a broad one, applied in many different ways to various social phenomena, this paper focuses on uselessness in relation to the designed objects of everyday life¹. I will argue ‘uselessness’ is not a property of such objects; it is not measurable, quantifiable and is not subsumed qualitatively within one theoretical perspective. There is no ‘theory of uselessness’. Nonetheless, the charge of uselessness is often and confidently made against the designed paraphernalia of everyday life. My thesis here is that we often apply the label of useless to objects which are ambiguous or nebulous and that we apply it as a confident declaration against such uncertainty.

Useless objects—nothing is designed to be useless...

Functional objects are not designed to be useless. That is a bold claim and one thinks of objects, or classes of objects, which do seem to be deliberately useless. For example, the Japanese phenomenon of *chindogu* (International Chindogu Society, 2016) is often interpreted as comprising useless objects as they undermine or over-elaborate their own self-declared functional purpose: a solar-powered torch for example. However, such objects are best seen as belonging to a long line of fanciful devices, contraptions and impossible objects. Irrespective of their functional usefulness, they all draw attention to ideas of usefulness, that is, they have a symbolic function. Indeed, proponents of *chindogu* describe it as a type of ‘unuselessness’ based upon it being a form of nonverbal, universal communication (*ibid*). Such ‘useless’ yet provocative objects are also part of quotidian speech such as ‘as useless as a chocolate teapot’ or injunctions to job trainees to fetch a ‘skyhook’ or some ‘striped paint’.

¹I particularly focus on objects in a domestic context. However, the majority of our consumption and divestment is institutional. Many of the same points apply but with some interesting differences that are beyond the scope of this paper.

Likewise, anyone critical of the excesses of vapid consumerism will also be able to identify useless things with ease. My favourite is 'Neuticals', testicular implants for neutered pets. Such 'medically approved polypropylene' testicles apparently '...allows pets to retain their natural look, self esteem (*sic*) and aids the pet's owner with the trauma associated with altering' (Neuticles, 2016). In regard to allowing pets to hang on to their 'self-esteem', neuticles are useless as pets do not have a sense of self-esteem. Nevertheless, they are functional in terms of allowing the owners to maintain a sense of the 'natural look' of their pets, as well as attending to the owners' loss of self-esteem in face of the 'trauma associated with altering'.

...but objects do become designated as 'useless'

Putting to one side objects which deliberately question their own usefulness, such as *chindogu*, and those which our cynicism urges us to declare to be useless (useless 'for me' at least), it is still the case that many objects in everyday life we regard as being useless. Such a designation depends on the person doing the labelling, the location of the object and the point in time of the encounter, as much as it does on any physical attribute of the object itself. For instance, a technical object of specific function is likely to be useless to those unfamiliar with its form and operation, but not by those for whom it is an everyday tool (Taylor 2015). Similarly, a functional object placed with other objects located in a designated place for useless things is itself likely to be subsequently seen as useless. So, again, more 'throat-clearing' which does little to address the nature of those objects which we call 'useless'; it is time to add some more object-specific detail.

Broken things; just when does an object become useless?

Broken things are the most obvious candidates for the charge of uselessness especially those that will not perform their intended, core function. Of course, one needs to know what a thing is and does before one can be sure that it is broken, but that is restating the question of familiarity alluded to previously. Even if one is familiar with the function and use of an object, one's naming of it as useless might be either uncertain or incomplete. For example, objects which have several functions, or more than one way of implementing one function might not be as broken, or as 'useless' as others singular objects where core functions are no longer available. So, a screwdriver with a broken tip is more useless, as a screwdriver at least, than a multi-tool where one out of a series of blades has similarly

broken. The latter object may still provide the function associated with the broken blade through the use of other integrated tools. And, it is also worth pointing out that even clearly broken tools can be either adapted to other purposes or have their affected function restored, at least somewhat, through improvisation.

So, brokenness, on its own, is not a sufficient condition of uselessness; it might not even be a necessary condition. Nonetheless, just the perception of brokenness might be enough for one to decide an object is useless. For many years my father, who was otherwise a competent and skilled user of devices, struggled to cut a slice of bread that was either even or straight. This frustrated him enormously and often resulted in exasperation from other members of the family, and, on occasion the charge of ‘uselessness’ was made against him as he accused the knife of being equally useless. It was only after he died that I realised that his problem lay with the bread knife; it was a right-handed one. As my father was left-handed when he tried to slice bread he was using the knife the wrong way around; the knife would cut into the loaf rather than away from it. His apparent clumsiness, which caused the charge of ‘useless’ to be shared between him and the knife, was a result of ignorance rather than brokenness, poor design or incompetence (for a celebratory view of clumsiness see Čapek, 1990, 243-246).

Similar points, to those made in relation to broken things, apply to objects which have worn out, are redundant or obsolete (for an extensive overview and attempt at classification in the literature see Orlando, 2006). More stuff than ever before enters our homes and, while more stuff than ever before also leaves, much of it stays with us even though we do not consider it immediately useful. That many such objects promise potential usefulness seems enough for us to retain them. Some will be obsolete because, while they still work, they are unfashionable—perhaps, we think, they will come back into fashion? Others are obsolete because they no longer support, or fit with, other products with which they form a coherent system of objects (various charging devices for electronic products, for example). And, there will be those objects whose technological obsolescence is welcome but for which easy and obvious routes to divestment are not readily identifiable or practically attainable

And, of course, function, or lack of it, is not the only aspect of an object which makes it significant to us. We cherish broken, worn out and obsolete objects for a myriad of other reasons to do primarily with what they mean rather than what they do/no longer do. In such instances, it is easier to bypass the question of usefulness of function as it is not the prime factor underlying an object’s significance.

This all leads us to consider that, often, we apply the description of ‘use-

less' against objects which are ambiguous rather than functionally flawed, broken or redundant.

Useless things are often ambiguous

A seemingly obvious and simple characterisation of an object as useless is often only sensible when the contexts of use, understanding, familiarity, and so on, are also understood. There is much uncertainty evident in the characterisation of objects as useless. Why should this be so? I am arguing that this is due to the fact that many useless objects are ambiguous, and that the charge of uselessness is often used as a convenient shorthand covering different aspects of the ambiguity of objects.

A small amount of academic attention has considered ambiguous (or 'nebulous') goods and things. Much of this attention has focused on a similarly small number of initial questions; how to define 'ambiguous', what is the relationship between ambiguity and the ordering, both conceptual and physical, of goods, and so on. Space does not permit an extended summary of the answers on offer but, I would agree with Slater (2014) that

Ambiguity...is clearly not a property of goods, and no category of thing is essentially any more or less ambiguous than any other (Slater, 2014, 100).

This very much echoes my point about uselessness, neither ambiguousness or uselessness are identifiable physical qualities of objects. Rather, such terms are descriptions of things which arise from multiple interpretive possibilities on offer and, these interpretive possibilities are themselves dependent on contextual considerations; place, time, previous experience, knowledge, etc.,

...ambiguity is a state of uncertainty that arises because there is more than one possible interpretive frame available to classify or order things... (Denegri-Knott & Parsons, 2014, 89).

Consequently, to designate an object as ambiguous is to make a statement about what an observer infers about an object rather than anything intrinsic offered for interpretation by the object. And, of course, there are multiple, and often competing, interpretive frames available,

One of those interpretative frames builds on our notions of what is useful or useless, and it is the central theme of this paper that much of what we call useless is ambiguous, in various ways, rather than 'without use' in a literal sense. So, what are some of sources of ambiguity which may lead us to declare an object to be 'useless'?

Unfamiliarity—what is it/what does it do?

Apart from designations of ‘uselessness’ founded on functional compromises of an object, the most obvious dismissal of an object as useless arises from unfamiliarity. This is most evident when we encounter an object that we have not seen before and which exhibits few, or any, familiar attributes which may point us towards a confident deduction or guess as to its purpose. This is especially pronounced with respect to highly specialised, technical devices. In such cases, unfamiliarity produces ambiguity about things because there is usually enough of a residue of identifiable elements—size, shape, materials, design, similarity to objects known—for some recognition, however faint, to register. Such things may be clearly ‘useless’ for me while just as clearly being useful for someone who knows what it is.

The charge of uselessness derived from unfamiliarity may also arise with the myriad peripherals, paraphernalia and accoutrements that are an increasing feature of product offerings. Some are necessary for functional accomplishment while many simply promise functional extension that is never brought into use. This is especially the case over the last decade or so in relation to ‘digital’ goods; there has been a huge proliferation of add-ons of various sorts, many of which we store out of sight and whose familiarity fades further as new iterations of products and their own paraphernalia accumulate in our lives. Many of us pay little attention to these gewgaws as they enter our homes, preferring to get on with the main action promised by the functional things we have purchased, and it is then difficult to later distinguish and identify the purpose of this marginal impedimenta.

Lack of ‘functional’ knowledge—how does it work?

Closely related to the above is the ambiguity that results from not knowing what something does, how it works, how to use it, even though one knows what it is. Again such confusion is often the progenitor for the charge of ‘uselessness’ against an object. How often have we heard the exclamation that something is ‘@&^%\$! useless’ from someone whom we know has simply not learnt how to use the device they are struggling with?

On other occasions, lack of functional knowledge can be less straightforward than simply being the result of wilful negligence of operating instructions and advice. Bruno Latour’s famous essay ‘The Berlin key...’ (Latour, 1991) aptly illustrates such material ambiguity. Most people would recognise the Berlin key as a key but most will also find confusing its double-ended design and its purpose beyond locking something. Without knowledge of the ‘Berlin lock’, and its operation, the

key remains suspended in our attention between recognition and ignorance. To dismiss such an object as useless neatly resolves this tension.

Latour's example also reminds us that the material context of an object will play a role in it being determined to be useful or useless; without the lock the key makes little sense. Many of the familiar objects that contribute to the solidity of our daily lives are, in fact, not discrete functionally but, rather, rely on one or more other things for enacting their function. And, of course, we can see where the importance of this material 'context' gets amplified across broader cultural differences. We simply may not recognise the nature, worth and usefulness of objects from other cultures, especially if shorn of the material and use contexts in which they make sense.

Inability to sort/order—where does it go?

As a form of ambiguity, 'uselessness' is often attributed to things as a result of our inability to successfully sort, order and place them. As Ross argues,

Instead of being a category, ambiguity is better conceived as being generated around already existing categories, produced through socio-material processes and interactions... (Ross, 2014, 140).

We judge and designate objects in relation to the categories we already use, and we look for physical characteristics which suggest, direct and confirm our assignment of an object to both an ideational category and a physical place. Our inability to do this classification and spatial ordering successfully might often result in declaring an object useless, in which case it then becomes part of a category we already use; the designation and placing of 'useless' things.

We cannot easily separate the material and the ideational, of course, and the confusion described above (and the quick-fix of the pronouncement of 'useless') results from the interplay of each; how much an object resembles another one, if it reminds us of one we are familiar with, its physical design and make-up, its haptic qualities, and so on. A seemingly simple set of questions including 'what is it for', 'what does it do', 'where does it go' sit atop a complexity of thought, experience and decision-taking that might not be adequate to the object before us.

It is not just conceptual or ideational ambiguity and confusion, even where that flows from the material/functional features of an object, that might lead to identifying things as useless. There is another aspect of sorting which depends on a further series of material qualities. This concerns

what the psychologists and design writers refer to as ‘affordances’, that is, those physical aspects of an object which ‘afford’ and ‘constrain’ action. While such considerations are clearly a crucial aspect of the intentional functional design of an object, where an object is ambiguous its affordances and constraints may be equally confusing. For example, should such an ambiguous object be stored with other objects sharing specific ambiguous features and, if so, which feature should be the determining one: shape size, colour, material and similarity to other objects? These may all apply, singularly or in varied combinations, in the absence of functional knowledge of an object as means to guide identification. ‘It’s useless’ is a charge which cuts through much of this uncertainty and resulting work.

Similarly, the places in which things end up also have affordances, that are more or less suited and welcoming to the objects delivered to them. Drawers are good for small and irregular things, boxes for slightly bigger objects, attics, cellars and outside spaces for bigger objects still, garages, lock-ups, and so on². The spatial distribution of ambiguous things generates its own affordance dialectic; this goes there because that its shape, size, etc., and ‘there’ becomes the place where certain things, now reinforced by the common-sense of such actions, end up. We can say more about these ‘marginal’ spaces of everyday life.

Diminished things and marginal spaces

If one were to enter someone else’s living space and ask them to point out all the useless things they have it is likely that the response will be unhelpful. We tend to surround ourselves with the functionally and symbolically useful. From tools to gadgets to ornaments, if it is on display it is likely deemed useful to the owner. Dig a little deeper, however, and the respondent may well start to identify particular places where ‘useless’ things accumulate, most of them places where these useless things are out of daily sight³.

Useless things, along with other ‘diminished’ objects, often disrupt the common-sense view (and oftentimes, academic assumption) that unwanted objects get disposed of outside of the home. Rather, they tend to accumulate in particular places in around the home; drawers, cupboards, under

²The exponential growth of the storage industry over the past two decades is also notable. It has become acceptable to store unused household goods away from the home. Things stored in this way are ‘useless’ in as much they are physically remote from where their use makes sense.

³There are often visible locations (the end of a table or sideboard, for example) where things on their way to classification and storing as useless have been placed (see Cwerner & Metcalfe, 2003).

beds, cellars, attics, garden sheds, behind garden sheds, and so on (Droit, 2005). In my hometown one often hears reference to the ‘rammel drawer’, that is, an easily accessible drawer, where all manner of ambiguous stuff is placed and kept—often with a silent promise that these things will be classified, sorted, ordered and made unambiguous at some future point (Maycroft, 2009).

Such ‘storage’ strategies can serve several purposes: they provide a means of classifying ambiguous objects including ‘useless’ ones, they provide an acceptable place, a way-station, for objects identified in these ways and they help to maintain the ‘accepted’ ordering of objects in the domestic space of everyday life. Of course, not everyone adheres to these strategies at all times and in all places. However, it is often noticeable, especially to onlookers, when such practices are not followed. Hoarding, for example, might be an extreme inability to classify, sort, store and discard ‘unwanted’ stuff with the resulting disordering of material in the domestic space (Maycroft, 2009).

Combining questions of ‘what is it’ and ‘where does it go’ can result in a genuine confusion and, consequently, the charge of ‘uselessness’ can, again, cut through this uncertainty.

Concluding remarks

The charge of ‘useless’ is often applied to objects which do not fit the categories identified here, the analysis is not exhaustive. Rather, we may apply it to neglected objects when one simply does not want to maintain an active relationship with them. One can become bored of objects for various reasons—ennui about maintenance, preferring a replacement, performing the same function in a different way, etc. Some objects typically allow us to achieve something in a meaningful, engaging manner while others seem to deny us the involvement in achieving those same ends. Our preference, itself dependent on a whole host of factors, for one type of object over the other changes over time, place, mood, inclination and so on (Maycroft, 2004).

Again I would argue that it is ambivalence, more than a coherent and consistent idea of ‘uselessness’ which guides many of these characterisations. Indeed, the full blown charge of ‘useless’ might be a last resort of sorts. We often hear the justification for keeping something that is no longer used ‘It’ll come in handy’ which, if nothing else, is a testament to our faith in a world of useful things.

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