

Aristotelian Semantics, Homo Economicus, Images, and Brands

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Aristotle's general theory of meaning is describing for the first time relations among linguistic signs, mental images, and real things. Centuries later, the triangle of meaning or the semiotic triangle became a model of how objects interact with signs and interpreters (C. S. Peirce) or how linguistic symbols are related to the objects they represent (Ogden and Richards 1923). However, these triangles can be traced back to the 4th century BC, in Aristotle's *Organon*, when it was first mentioned the importance of images and signs in the creation of meaning. The nature of universals as mental images and their relation to the objects is still debated and, recently Lambert Wiesing's *The Philosophy of Perception* challenges current theories of perception. Taking perception to be real is in the core of the new debates about concept of mind. What the reality means for a subject is a central philosophical question (Meztinger, The Ego tunnel). The new triangle of meaning is not only a relation among objects, realities, signs but a relation among real, objectified entities, irrespective if they are in the mind or outside it. In this new approach, the question of how human perception is possible is reformulated by questions about what perception induces us to be and do. Perceptions are embodied, to be visible, and to continually participate in the public and physical world we perceive. Looking back to Aristotle's work from these new approaches our paper argues that Aristotelian images were conceived by him as entities strongly related to action. As mind perceptions which determine us to act, they do not have a passive role but rather taking the lead in our life. This is very much in line with modern philosophical thinking. His thoughts about images and dynamics of reality based on perception and images had important consequences in economics, marketing and branding, giving to perceptions an active role in turning potential reality in actual reality. Brands are in fact images and perceptions in action and interaction and are built in order to compel us to act either to influence or to be influenced.

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In Aristotle's view perceptions where those to put man in the capacity to create meaning and take action, even they are more or less related to objectified reality, like phantasies. There were many scholar disputes about what Aristotle's word phantasia (De Anima 3.3) meant. He attached different meanings to this word. In some places, he describes phantasia as a capacity for producing images. In another places, he mentioned that phantasia is supposed to explain appearances, such as the size of remote objects. Therefore, he admits that phantasias represent capacity of the human brain to produce certain images as appearances which are not necessary related to physical reality. Interpretations on Aristotle's dual understanding of perceptions (as images with clear relation to reality and as appearances, or illusions as false explanation of reality) try to find how much images are related to appearances. There were interpretations that Aristotle is using phantasia to nominate

a different form of images. In the same time, others are not considering that Aristotle was not designating images when describing phantasias. In any circumstances, it is accepted that for him image was a crucial concept. Whatever understanding Aristotle gave to phantasies, it is clear that this sort of mental activities is responsible of giving meaning to reality and human action even if they may be considered as illusions. We are inclined to consider that Aristotle was further insisting on the importance of “would be” perceptions, and for him contemplating in image but also acting based on them was an essential faculty of human being. In another work (chapter 9 of Aristotle’s Poetics), he advanced the idea that the subject of poetry is what might happen, things that are possible since they are probable or necessary. Aristotle was going even further with the possibility of potential or “virtual” reality made by language and words through poetry. According to Aristotle, every entity can be described in terms of actuality (*energeia*) and potentiality (*dynamis*). Already with respect to their existence, any object or living creature can be understood as realization in one moment in time of pre-existing potentialities. In this respect, reality corresponds to actual creation in time of pre-existing forms. Superior or not for the human progress actuality is dependent on potentiality. One important faculty of men is that he can materialize what potentiality is beforehand in his mind. So, in this sense, it actuality contains more potentialities which were conceived in the mind. Aristotle’s work is indicating that there always remain a number of potentialities awaiting realization. Thus, potentiality is the inexhaustible ocean of actual being.

Having this in mind, we may say that actuality and potentiality do not belong to different orders, but to the one order of being. Potentiality—or a new modern version of it, virtuality—should not be considered opposed to reality, but an inner element of reality, preceding every actual state of the real.

Since the key elements in branding are *needs* and *actions*, Aristotle’s causes of Human Action explain how images interact based on human motivations. One of the most important aspects of market interactions is a strong call to action from both entrepreneurs and consumers, but aligning a marketing call to action with causes of human action defined by Aristotle thousands of years ago is essential in our search for benefits maximization. According to Aristotle, the causes of human action are related to human nature such as habits, gratification and compulsion, chance, reason, emotion and desire. In this respect, brand building is a process of combination emotions, desire, motivations, or other prime movers of human action. Triggering action is one of the most important attribute images as brands are differentiating themselves from other contemplative ways of perception and meaning creation.

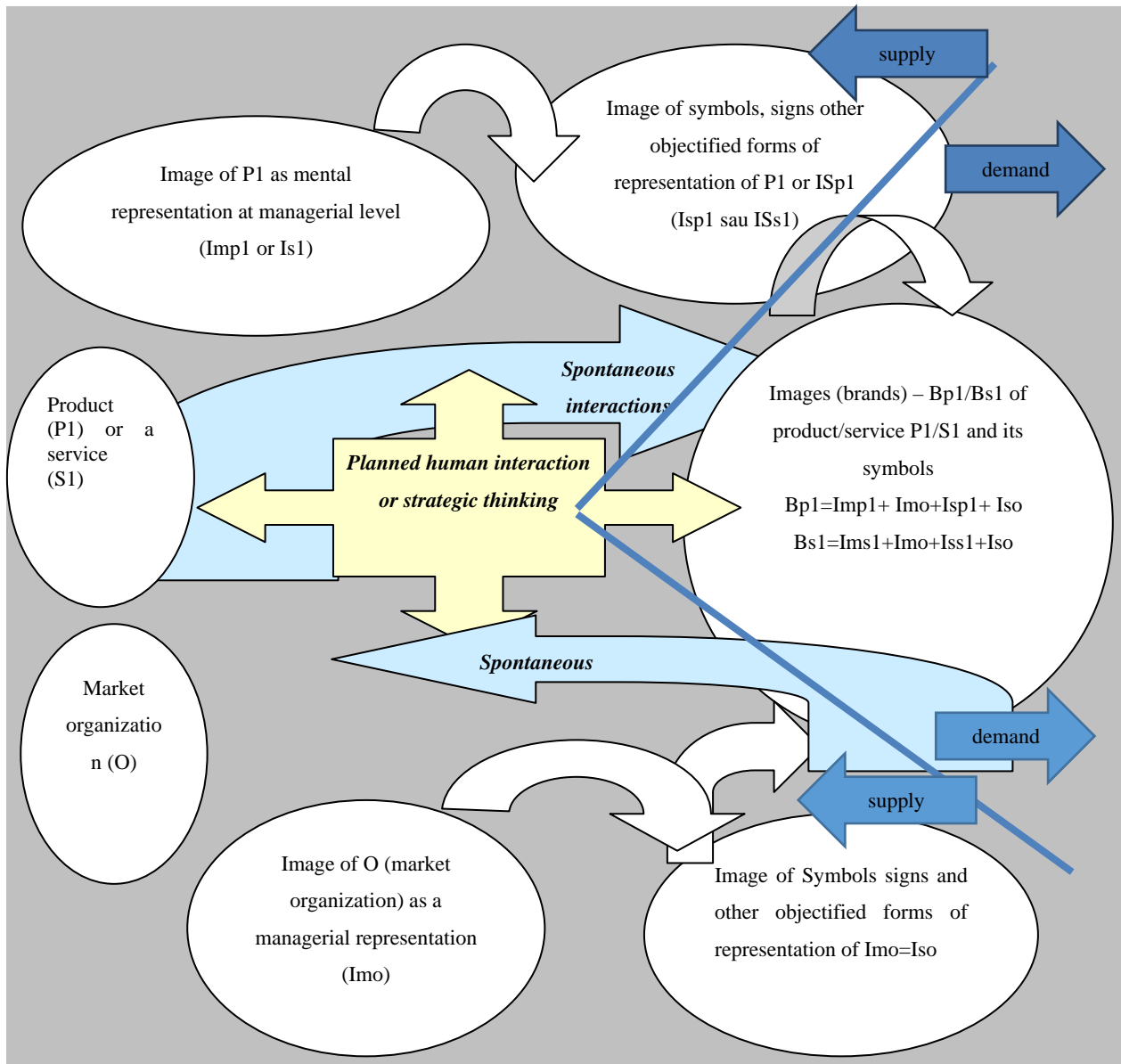
It is worth saying that the initial meaning of the word brand was of a differentiating sign. Since the markets developed faster, the meaning of a brand moved from sign to what triggers a sign or a product in our mind and how we perceive those signs and products and, even more, how we act to change our perception about market entities. Which are those entities? Here is the tension of the word brand. Is it a sign? Is it a perception? Or even both? We may understand better the concept of brand if we understand images since, as Aristotle put it, *we are necessarily* thinking in images. Indeed images as well as brands are representations of outside of the mind realities, past or present, of inside of mind realities, past, present of future, virtual realities. They may be as well phantasies, abstract constructs not based necessarily on something present outside your mind.

From the economist, angle brands are set of impressions; he believes in the mind related to objects (Kotler 1997) but also even to signs of the objects, as we are arguing. In this respect, brands are motivating and determinants of human action. Thus, the semantic spectrum of the brand may comprise:

(1) *Image as mental process, for a present stimulus but also for past memories or anticipating activities or experiences;*

(2) Objectified images of a mental process in terms of arts, signs, abstract works.

But brands, being images related to human interaction and competition on markets, may be understood not only as rigid mind perceptions but vast interactions between signs, products and mental processes as seen in the figure below:



Source: reactualization, Costin Lianu, Strategii de branding Ed Economica, Bucuresti 2010.

Above figure shows a simple interaction between images of products and symbols of a market organization conducting to the formation of perceptions in the consumer mind in the case of:

- A single product or service P1 or S1;
- A single organization, O.

Even in a single simple interaction, formation of the final image in the consumer mind may be decomposed in:

- Image of the a product and it is symbols at managerial level- supply side (Imp1);
- Image of a set of symbols and signs developed by the organization supply side, Sp1;
- The managerial image of the organization (Imo);
- Image of Symbols and signs of the organization (Iso).

In fact, we can see a complex set of human interactions between images created by the entrepreneurs (supply side) in order to persuade us to buy. Finally, in the brain, the aggregate of these perceptions is as below:

$Bp1=Ip1+Io+Isp1+Iso$ where $Bp1$ is the brand of a certain product ($P1$).

In the same logic, it goes formation of a brand of a service $Bs1$.

But, what $Bp1$ does, what consumers are doing, is not only to buy those images created by entrepreneurs in order to sell. A simple interaction may be discribed as below, where there are:

- *Spontaneous unplanned perceptions for brand creation in consumer mind;*
- *Planned strategic influences where especially entrepreneurs would like to benefit for a better image, created by them, but also the consumer would like to influence the brand mangers.*

Managers will always like to impose a certain consumers' conduct and, therefore, strategic planning of brands or branding will prevail for a matured company.

All in all what we can see in on the markets is *a permanent interaction of images from both the supply side but also from the demand side, confronting like a continuum between humans as market actors, as homo economicus*. It is a scene of confrontation among images, icons, signs with a perpetual actualization of their power to influence the other actors decisions. Competition is not only a question of choosing among products but rather than making decisions based on images, on brands.

If we are looking at images through the lenses of homo economicus, there are clear and specific understandings of images as drivers of market forces through brands and branding. There are several things which may result from this:

(1) Firstly, brands are images, perceptions in the mind of the consumers to give the reasons and motivations to buy or to promote certain products or services. The brands are present through symbols and signs attached to products or companies but also images in the consumer's minds. Consumers co-participate in brand building, not only companies (demand side).

(2) Secondly, even if consumers give brands value by developing perceptions and expectations for those brands, companies are engaged in branding or brands strategy. Companies enhance the value or create brand captivity by delivering brand strategy (supply side of the image creation) experiences that consumers can trust, even in the form of appearances or illusions. From the angle of the brain perceptions, brands are images of entities engaged in competition on the market.

(3) Thirdly, phantasies as Aristotle described them are part of the perceptions related to the market entities while these sorts of perceptions are frequently misleading. Phantasies, illusions, and appearances are producing effects perceptions and real market results.

(4) Fourthly, Aristotelian phantasies and appearances are prevailing in the new electronic, virtual worlds of today. This would be world of possibilities described in *Ars Poetica* which are now a strong reality. With electronic worlds we have to redefine *ontology*. Distinction between appearance and essence may not apply. Appearance is in fact identical with their *essence*. We are moving into a different type of world of phantasies which are as real as other objectified perceptions of the mind before electronic space.

Our conclusion, based on re-visiting Aristotle from a philosophical approach of both images and brands, as market entities, is that Aristotelian phantasies, appearances, images, as fundamental way to perceive the world, are interactive processes of man engaged in action. Taking the form of brands, they have the capacity to impose and influence action and to change behavior of individuals and societies, ideas which fits exceptionally to the Aristotelian ancient thoughts related to dynamic capacity of men to turn potential into reality. Even more, from an economic prospective, brands as images are in many cases more powerful compared with the related objects making perception a stronger new reality. Once re-visited ancient ideas pave the way for new philosophical understandings of our minds in action and interaction.

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