

# The Human, the Non-Human, and the Thing

Sofia Nikula

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Robert Wilkie, English Department

## ABSTRACT

Engagement in critical discourse is an introspective work in which a person is confronted with their own inherent beliefs, biases, and worldview. By contrasting the prevailing themes found in works by modern theorists including Heidegger, Adorno, Bennett, and Braidotti, with thought by Thomas Aquinas in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century and Ignatius of Loyola in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, a distinct difference is found, hinging upon the concept of an intrinsic order to the universe and the distinction of the human person from the non-human creature or object. In drawing out the magnitude of these differences and the impact which they have upon the human experience, the questions surrounding these two major issues prove pivotal to how we approach the quest for meaning within our lives.

## INTRODUCTION

In the continued progression of critical discourse, the central issues upon which our perspectives and understandings are built become abundantly clear. In engaging with various theorists in the field, it becomes impossible but to acknowledge those questions which pervade our human experience: the purpose of the human person, the means by which the person was created or produced, and to what end the person is created (or exists) for. In short, it quickly becomes a study on the meaning of life; how our understanding of this central question influences our interpretations in everything that we consume, whether that be in media, societal movements, or our daily interactions with the material world and with each other. The human understanding of what life is, its consequences, and the meaning of the choices and decisions each person makes, is vital to understanding the field of critical theory in proper light, and what we accept or reject from each theorist will ultimately boil down to these central issues and our engagement with them.

Here is presented an examination of perspectives included in texts from the last two-hundred years, including fragments from Heidegger, Adorno, Bennett, and Braidotti. I further plan to contrast the issues presented by these theorists with thought by Thomas Aquinas and by Ignatius of Loyola. Although my own perspective by this selection perhaps becomes obvious, I intend to take careful consideration of each of these topics, examine their respective strengths and perceived flaws, and to draw out the underlying questions, assumptions, and beliefs that are infused in these schools of thought to propose further consideration. Ultimately, I aim to draw out the profound consequences these ideas have on the human experience.

Of particular importance in considering these writings is the central theme of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman. Specifically, the concepts of “New Materialism” as Bennett describes it, posthumanism as examined by Braidotti, nonidentity as proposed by Adorno, and the identity of the thing as discussed by Heidegger. Contrasted with these ideas are fragments by Aquinas and Ignatius of Loyola pertaining to the ends and nature of the human person, and to the nature and role of the nonhuman creature. In this manner, I hope to draw out the fundamental differences in these perspectives and to reveal how our consideration of these topics, and in extension, how we approach our lives, hinges upon this critical issue.

## RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

First, it is important to obtain a foundational basis for the relationship between the human person and the object (or “thing”), before moving onto examining the relationship between the human and the nonhuman living entity, and finally the question of what it means to be human at all. Heidegger’s examination of thingness is described in the jug example he uses in his writing. In this example, he describes how difficult it is to approach the identity of the thing as it truly is in itself. He indicates how, as we attempt to define what it means to be a jug, we begin describing what it *does*, i.e., its *usefulness* to the human being. Generally, we describe how the jug is a vessel to contain liquids, and

Heidegger uses this to point out that this sort of definition fails to approach the identity of the object outside of human interference. He writes that, “The jug is not a vessel because it was made; rather, the jug had to be made because it is this holding vessel” (Heidegger 166). In other words, the identity of the jug in and of itself is separate from its practical human function; it was constructed to serve this purpose, but that purpose does not address what the jug *is*. Heidegger says, “When we take the jug as a made vessel, then surely we are apprehending it -- so it seems -- as a thing and never as a mere object” (165).

What Heidegger proposes here is drawn out further when he says, “Science always encounters only what *its* kind of representation has admitted beforehand as an object possible for science” (168). What he reveals in this critique of scientific instrumentality is this inherent idea: our perspectives, studies, and understandings of any object or subject are critically impacted by our understanding of how it affects the human experience. It is notoriously difficult (perhaps impossible) for the human to approach the core identity of an object without infusing a human understanding of its purpose into it. However, objects still exist outside of human activity. Therefore, they must have being-ness outside of the human.

Adorno also echoes this concept in saying that “objects are always ‘entwined’ with human subjectivity” (Adorno 2433) and that “the thing itself is not positively and immediately at hand” (2445). Although it is important to note that Adorno and Heidegger differ in their overall approach and thought, similarities in this issue, as well as other issues, are striking. This concept of the object and its relationship with the human are crucial to understanding the object itself. However, both Adorno and Heidegger focus on an abstract attainment of identity, rather than exploring the ends and purposes of the object. They argue that the human perspective is, by its nature, tainted, and unable to achieve a genuine understanding of the object as it truly is. Ignatius of Loyola, by contrast, concentrates on the spiritual ends of the object as they pertain to the purpose of the human person. In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius writes:

Man was created for a certain end. This end is to praise, to reverence, and to serve the Lord his God and by this means to arrive at eternal salvation. All other beings and objects that surround us on earth were created for the benefit of man and to be useful to him, as means to his final end; hence his obligation to use, or to abstain from the use of, these creatures, according as they bring him nearer to that end, or tend to separate him from it. (Ignatius 18)

Clearly, this demonstrates a profound contrast in thought. These two understandings of the object, one which presents the object as unknowable and tainted with subjectivity, and the other which presents the object as being for the human *in identity*. Clearly, these two perspectives, when respectively adopted, will result in very different outcomes in terms of human behavior and attitude towards the thing.

From my understanding, the second perspective certainly gives more clarity to the approach to using things, while it gives the purpose and thereby identity of the object as a given (for the use of the human being insofar as it aids him in his eternal salvation). Ignatius would not see a flaw in understanding the jug in terms of its human use, as he would understand the jug’s purpose to be what it *is*, as it has no other specific end other than to aid in the glorification of God by the means of salvation of souls. It is also important to note that the goal here is not to argue for any particular perspective, or to prove anything specifically, but rather to draw out the fundamental shifts that each theorist requires in our thought and perspective.

Because Ignatius of Loyola has an assumed belief in God and that the universe has an intrinsic order to it, as well as that all things are beneficial insofar as they serve that order, he will then put all other things in subject to that order, oriented toward God and to the salvation of man. Adorno, on the other hand, rejects this depiction of God and man, but does acknowledge the transcendent nature of the human person and the human quest for higher meaning. However, he sees this as a perhaps flawed tendency which may be in an empty quest that humanity is somehow unable to shake. Evidently, Adorno and Heidegger do not demonstrate this same sense of order to their questionings that Ignatius of Loyola adopts, and although they open up numerous avenues for thought and contemplation, they do not seem to be oriented towards a specific end. Therefore, there is no way to discern progress as it pertains to the quest for a more meaningful life as there is not a clear pathway on which to progress, or at least not one which leads anywhere in particular.

Bennett also contrasts with this more classical view of a specific intrinsic order. Rather than viewing the universe as created with a certain purpose, order, and end, she hopes to “inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations” (Bennett 2444). Bennett, then, sees the subjectivity which influences how things are perceived, and hopes to fight against that by instilling more awareness of that constant effect that everything has in relation to each other. In becoming more aware of how “all bodies” are in intense relation with each other, it becomes clearer the very small part the human plays in the grand scheme of things. So much is outside of our control and we cannot even fathom all the tiny factors that play into each moment that passes. To emphasize this, Bennett writes, “I believe that encounters with lively

matter can chasten my fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common reality of all that is, expose a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests” (2431). In this way, she doesn’t undertake a vertical approach of ordering everything to a higher good, but rather a more horizontal approach of how things are intensely interwebbed, but fundamentally at an equal playing field. By taking this approach, she hopes to achieve a movement away from a perspective “that places humans at the ontological center or hierarchical apex” (2433).

How we approach this question of the role of the human, the centrality (or non-centrality) of the human in the world and the universe, and the placement of non-human creatures, other forms of life, and non-living entities, reveals much about us as individuals and as a society. In fact, these questions indisputably affect every aspect of our lives, since the human person makes decisions based upon the foundational philosophical ideals which they may choose to adopt. A much-discussed question is regarding the distinction (or lack thereof) between the human and other living beings. Aquinas, in the *Summa Theologiae*, writes that, “Corporeal creatures according to their nature is good, though this good is not universal, but partial and limited, the consequence of which is a certain opposition of contrary qualities, though each quality is good in itself” (Aquinas & Kreeft 220). In other words, Aquinas understands the role of non-human living beings to be an intrinsic, but limited, good. As Aquinas works further in describing the role of non-human living beings in the world, Dr. Peter Kreeft further stipulates in his commentary that, “The modern question about ‘animal rights’ is decided here by an ontological difference in kind, not in just performance or behavioral I.Q.: human souls, being intellectual, are subsistent (and therefore immortal); animal souls are not” (246).

For Aquinas, the separation between the human and the non-human has not so much to do with the magnitude of their impact or influence in our world, their intellect, communication, or any of the other ways that we tend to qualify life. For him, the defining difference between the human and the non-human is the presence of an immortal soul, an “intellectual” one. By “intellectual” Aquinas is referring to that “transcendent” nature of the human being as described earlier by Adorno, that inherent quest for meaning (or, as Aquinas and Ignatius of Loyola would understand it, for God). This distinction of the immortal soul is perceived by Aquinas to be the *imago Dei*, the image of God in which the human was created, which thus impels him to that creative and introspective work of the Divine.

Of course, this kind of understanding requires a presupposed idea of what it means to be human at all, which is expressed by Ignatius and Aquinas in the concept of being created by, and ultimately for, God. Braidotti did not see this quality of being human as definable a feature as did Aquinas and Ignatius, writing, “Not all of us can say, with any degree of certainty, that we have always been human, or that we are only that” (Braidotti 2329). This begins to approach a socially constructed concept of humanness, particularly as it pertains to civil life. It is certainly worth examining, as Braidotti promotes, how certain groups of people have historically (and currently) been “othered” from society, and how their treatment has been justified (in cases subconsciously) by promoting language which categorizes them as somehow less-than-human, or even in the non-human range of being. Braidotti further argues that, “the human is a historical construct that became a social convention about ‘human nature’” (2337).

It can be argued that this comes down to a contention between the subjective and the objective nature of the human person. Braidotti emphasizes whether certain people are, in a practical, everyday sense, being acknowledged as human as it pertains to the realities of their rights within society. It could be argued that this is irrelevant because the perceived realities of identity do not negate the objective reality of being. In response, however, it could also be argued that it is similar to how nations seek to become acknowledged as sovereign states. Certain states vehemently insist their sovereignty although they are almost universally not acknowledged as such by the United Nations. Similarly, certain states, which are widely recognized as sovereign throughout the world, remain unrecognized by a few lone states. In this case, those few lone states not acknowledging their sovereignty does not really affect the fact that they are, as far as the vast majority of the world is concerned, a sovereign state. However, there is a great impact on the realities of a state’s existence, when it is largely not recognized to be sovereign, especially by those states in most power.

Humanity cannot be this way, however, because there is in fact a certain objective reality to being human. Aquinas saw this in the presence of the immortal soul, and I am apt to agree with him there. However, it is also important to acknowledge how, by not recognizing the “sovereignty” (or humanity) of a person, there is a deep injustice which is being done. Obviously, Braidotti would agree with me on that point, but I think she sees the solution in many ways in dismantling our historical concepts of humanness to become more inclusive. However, I see this as being ultimately unsatisfying, as lowering our perceived dignity of what it means to be human can only lead to more mistreatment and injustices. We can only achieve a greater respect of the dignity of the human person by cultivating our innate respect for that quality of being human and reverence for all that entails.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, it is clear that we cannot approach these theories and ideas without confronting the core of our beliefs and the way we understand ourselves, our life's purpose, and our social responsibility in how we make choices as we progress through our lives. In examining these lines of thought as produced by Heidegger, Adorno, Bennett, and Braidotti, it becomes clear that a common thread runs through: that search for meaning that is integral to the human experience. Critical theory tends to be applied in an outward approach, almost inside out — we examine what has been produced, and apply lenses to it in order to better understand the implications that the text has and how it has been influenced by the nuances found in the contexts it was created in. However, ultimately this journey becomes an internal approach of inquiring into our own internalized beliefs, our interpretations, and what implications that has for us as citizens, as family members, as beings-in-the world. In order to understand these aspects of our lives, we must look out, and examine what we consume, how we treat other people, animals, and objects, and how we think about ourselves. In particular, it is important to examine our relationships with the material world, with other living beings, and with each other. It is only by examining the ultimate ends to these relationships where it becomes clear how these interactions should be ordered. If we have no vision of where we go, we cannot arrive at a destination. It is only through this search, this honest confrontation with the problems we face within our societies, and most importantly, within ourselves, that we can hope to make any meaning from our lives.

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