In Search of [a] Reason: Questioning Considering Answers as Solutions

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ABSTRACT

The advent of the "posthumanist" position in critical theory implies a perceived necessity to move away from the legacy of humanism. A quick but critical look at the Humanist legacy exposes a deep schism between its (espoused) intent and its actual impact. However, is posthumanism any better? Examining the posthumanist theories of Braidotti and Haraway in relation to the ideas of Kant, Heidegger, and Derrida, I propose that there is a fundamental gap between what a thing "is" and what it is "for us." Awareness of this gap, rather than providing a basis for social change, leads to the conclusion that understanding on a personal level doesn't facilitate the deepening of feelings and interpersonal connection and thus will not lead humans to treat each other better.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the "posthumanist" position implies a perceived necessity to move away from the legacy of humanism. A quick but critical look at the Humanist legacy exposes a deep schism between its (espoused) intent and its actual impact. To therefore eschew the humanist position from the continued evolution (or at the least, development) of critical theory necessitates a similar examination of critical theory's impact. To shape this examination, I posit the following question: what is the intent, or purpose, of critical theory? "It must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation."[1]

THE ENLIGHTENMENT ISSUE

There is a thing, in Heidegger's widest definition of the term, called the European Enlightenment.[2] According to Kant, the Enlightenment heralded in an age where people's conceptions of the world and how it ought to work became "mature," or "self-referential," by the which he meant that ontological and metaphysical ideas were developed by individualistic creative thought, without dependence on a previously-developed framework of metaphysical understanding, "to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another."[3] Authority over what constituted Understanding was given to humans acting on their own. The humanistic Ideals-as-things, those constructs and concepts "regarded as perfect,"[4] were under the Enlightenment "progressive" concepts such as freedom, progress, and equality. Humanists' reason understood these ideals as those rights which should be afforded to humanity, the "practical goals" whose achievement ought to govern societal transformations. Also given primacy was "progress" of the scientific and economic sort, in addition to that of the social sort, and this was to be the root of a great many contradictory productions genealogically attributed to the Enlightenment. Successful achievement of these Ideals was intended[5] to be measured by their ubiquitous social presence was instead measured in success by that of *societal* progress, chiefly problematic in that a society of peoples is a bit smaller than humanity as a whole.

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[1] James Bohman, "Critical Theory," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Stanford University, March 8, 2005), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/critical-theory/.

[2] Martin Heidegger, *What Is a Thing?*, trans. Vera Deutsch (Chicago: Regnery, 1967), 5.

[3] Garrath Williams, "Kant's Account of Reason," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Stanford University, November 1, 2017), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-reason/.

[4] "Ideal," Merriam-Webster (Merriam-Webster), accessed May 11, 2021, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ideal.

[5] Hopefully

Additionally troublesome, a society is not solely the people it holds, but a combination of bodies and political theory and economic theory, and the "progress" of the latter few has been interpreted as an adequate condition for the "progress" of society, the realities of the bodies this society holds notwithstanding. At the end of the day the political, economic, and social ramifications of the European Enlightenment rather undercut its self-espoused ideals, while the understandings it developed have continued to be considered authoritative constructs to adhere to for ethical social progress. Moreover, the continuation of this tradition has proved Kant's claim, that the Enlightenment implemented a non-referential development of understandings, inaccurate. Beginning in the 1960's a second attempt at rewriting the script was begun.

THE ROLE OF CRITICAL THEORY

Let's address the first purpose of critical theory and "explain what is wrong with social reality." The deconstructionist movement argues that the constructions, or rather the belief in uncreated constructions, is wrong. Derrida is considered to be the first deconstructionist, but as previously ascertained, there is no such thing as a non-referential theory. Instead, I will begin with Heidegger. Heidegger himself was drawing on Kant's delineation of every physically-existing thing as being both a "thing-for-us" and a "thing-in-itself," and the necessity of separating the definition of the former from that of the latter. What the thing actually is, human or animal or object, does not matter. What matters is the consideration of the former as the true, or authoritative, definer of the thing is what Heidegger considers to be "wrong with current social reality,"[6] and to correct this "requires that we perceive more exactly and with clearer eyes what most holds us captive and makes us unfree in the experience and the determination of the things." How can I, then, understand and convey what something *is*, as a "thing in itself"? Let's try and lessen the ambiguity of an ambiguous concept a tad and choose a thing to define. An apple. What is an apple? An adequate response will fall along the lines of an apple being a thing with apple properties. The specific properties of the adequate response can vary, but so long as the properties are in fact applicable to apples in a general sense, the answer will be considered correct. The connection between subject (apple) and predicate (answer) determining what the subject *is* is considered to be a natural understanding, which in turn gives the definer authority over the (assumed) primordial essence of the apple. Heidegger denies this, and "conclude[s] that the definitions, which seem so self-evident, are not 'natural.' The answers we give [are] already established. When we apparently ask about the thing in a natural and unbiased way, the question already expresses a preliminary opinion about the thingness of the thing."[7] For example, I could define an apple as a red fruit, roughly the size of a fist; but this is based on my cultural framework for linguistically expressing color, my generalized idea of a body part's size, and of chief emphasis it is a description of an apple delineating my visual experience of it. Conceding the inaccuracy of my first definition, I could instead give the chemical composition of an apple, which has nothing to do with my visual experience of it—but how could the connection between the chemical properties of the apple and the apple itself be concerned "natural"? To a non-chemist, a group I am a part of, it would be absolute nonsense, and thus unrelated to any primordial identity. The unsuitability of my second definition highlights Heidegger's main critique of any answer to "what is a <u>thing</u>?," which is that the answer will be dependent on my "self," my circumstances, and all that has gone into the shaping and development of my circumstances on a personal, cultural, and linguistic level. Such dynamic and multifaceted definitions can never be ubiquitously, or inherently (two very different concepts) correct. And further, to consider my definition to be correct is to cast all those for whom this definition is *not* applicable into the realm of "other."

Heidegger was essentially <u>asking</u> *how do I understand, and convey, what something truly is*? Derrida, meanwhile, was <u>responding</u> to the question of *how do I convey what I mean*? The practice of deconstruction is dependent on a previously conceived concept of construction; that is, that there are essential, by the which I mean uncreated, structures underneath our creations or experiences, ubiquitously present throughout the entirety of the happenings of humanity, guiding or shaping every human creation and experience. These were the answers to "what is a thing?" that Heidegger sought to find. To rephrase this, it is the hypothesis that there are kernels of truth that, if one could identify and understand, would provide a guarantee of understanding the meaning of language and other human productions. Or, maybe, it is the belief that it is possible to absolutely or perfectly represent something linguistically. Personally, I believe it is easiest to grasp this construct, and that Derrida which follows, by flipping the focus: the theory of construction is searching for a way to guarantee the *intent* of language. That, as a creator, there is a way to perfectly convey what you intend to say. Derrida looked for moments in a text where the meaning or interpretation of the narrative is dependent on the interpreted meaning of a single "thing," a moment in which the

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[6]Heidegger, *What Is a Thing?*, 50-51.

[7] Heidegger, *What is a thing?* 43

reader could make a decision that thus alters the meaning of the rest of the text. Derrida is criticizing the notion that this new interpretation, if differing from the common interpretation, or the intent of the author, would be therefore invalid, and that anyone could claim an authority over the meaning of language. To argue an authoritative interpretation of a text is to imply the existence of "an impossible presence," a "structured and differing origin of differences" behind the meaning of our words.[8][9]

DECONSTRUCTION'S LEGACY

Theorists' movements towards the decentralization of logocentric authority has manifested anxieties over ontological authority as well. The adoption and progression of posthumanist theory has thus been met with "widespread concern about the loss of relevance and mastery suffered by the dominant vision of the human subject."[10] Our social rhetoric contains the constructed binary of nature-givens and social-givens. That the Humanists' "human rights" have been since their development afforded solely to those with the most social power has been understood and broadly accepted, but the common rhetoric has yet to accept that *any* attempts to define the (ideal) circumstances of humanity for the purposes of social transformation will be simplistic and exclusionary in their impact. "What is humanity?" is a form of "what is a thing?," after all. This is intertwined (though not actually dependent on) the fact that the nature and continuation of capitalism means those with authority over ontological 'definitions' of humanity are living lives directly dependent on those *scientifically* defined human beings living without the social realities these definers espouse as their birthright. Faith in theory, i.e. the belief that this can be fixed through a transformation of the social rhetoric (or understanding of reality), is because of this dynamic in dualistic opposition to the *acknowledgement* of our reality. This state of affairs rather undercuts a potential achievement of the stated goals and purpose of critical theory. Still, Braidotti argues that the potential to overcome this impediment lies in rejecting the notion of the human. Accordingly, she states the "posthuman condition introduces a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this plane,"[11] as the ideals of humanism, under humanism, have failed to be implemented. She argues for a "rejection of self-centered individualism," calling for an acknowledgement that "the worldview which equated Mastery with rational scientific control over 'others' also militated against the respect for the diversity of living matters and of human cultures," which forms the heart of the oxymoronic legacy of Western Humanism.[12] Her solution is to "move beyond anthropocentrism," to develop an "enlarged sense of inter-connection between Self and Others," wherein the Other is all that is not the individual Self, and thus expand the hope of achieving a primacy of humanity to the rest of the world.[13]

The specifics of what this move might look like if implemented are expanded on in Donna Haraway's *The Companion Species Manifesto*. Underlying this work is the assumption that the ultimate human condition is the desire for connection. She defines the failed struggle of a human attempt to connect to others via a shared construct of humanity, on an individual level, as "people, burdened with misrecognition, contradiction, and complexity in their relations with other humans," who therefore switch their attempts towards finding unconditional connections of love from other humans, to dogs.[14] In the process, she argues, they are denying the autonomous identity of their canine counterparts. Haraway contextualizes these attempts at connection as essentially "seeking to inhabit an intersubjective world that is about meeting the other in all the fleshly detail of a mortal relationship."[15] To find "true" companionship with an animal requires efforts towards "how to see who the dogs are and hear what they are telling us, not in bloodless abstraction, but in one-on-one relationship, in otherness-in-connection."[16] Ultimately, to

[8] Jacques Derrida, "Différance," http://mforbes.sites.gettysburg.edu/ (Northwest University Press), accessed April 27, 2021, http://mforbes.sites.gettysburg.edu/cims226/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Week-5a-Jacques-Derrida.pdf, 293.

[9] Derrida, "Différance," 287.

[10] Rosi Braidotti, "Posthuman Critical Theory," *Critical Posthumanism and Planetary Futures*, 2016, pp. 13-32, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-81-322-3637-5_2, 2329.

[11] Braidotti, "Posthuman Critical Theory," 2329.

[12] Braidotti, "Posthuman Critical Theory," 2351.

[13] Braidotti, "Posthuman Critical Theory," 2352.

[14] Donna J. Haraway, "The Companion Species Manifesto," *Manifestly Haraway*, January 2016, pp. 91-198, https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816650477.003.0002, 33.

[15] Haraway, "The Companion Species Manifesto," 34.

[16] Haraway, "The Companion Species Manifesto," 45.

connect to any external entity, human or animal or other, requires "the recognition that one cannot know the other or the self, but must ask in respect for all of time who and what are emerging in relationship," as "all ethical relating, within or between species, is knit from the silk-strong thread of ongoing alertness to otherness-in-relation".[17]

CONCLUSION

If we consider Heidegger through Haraway as representing one genealogical line of posthumanist critical theory, how can we identify "what is wrong with current social reality... the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation"?[18] In answer to the first, I propose a combination of Braidotti and Derrida. Braidotti's statement that "not all of us can say, with any degree of certainty, that we have always been human,"[19] and the solution to which she suggests "expanding the notion of Life towards *zoe*,"[20] are both very much in line with Derrida's directives towards "question[ing] the presence qua consciousness."[21] However, while Braidotti is certainly "aim[ing] at finding again either the pleasure or the presence that {has} been deferred by (conscious or unconscious) calculation,"[22] hoping this expansion (or, I would argue, substitution) of the meaning of the human would solve the problem of inhumane treatment, she fails to acknowledge "the relation to an impossible presence, as an expenditure without reserve, as an irreparable loss of presence, an irreversible wearing-down of energy," and *most importantly* "a death instinct and a relation to the absolutely other that apparently breaks up any economy."[23] Braidotti's "achievable, practical goals" of developing "strong sense[s] of collectivity, relationality and hence community building" [24] is essentially promoting the primacy of the enlightenment ideal of fraternity,[25] while failing to take into account the "unconscious," or other, or nonhuman, "being definitively taken away from every process of presentation" in pursuit of such ideals thus far.[26] I think the posthumanists' problems with our social reality, presented by the likes of Braidotti and Haraway, are rather missing the point of Derrida and Heidegger, in that truly understanding something for *what it is*, as opposed to what it is *to us*, is impossible, regardless of our valuation of the "thing" in question's humanity. The communicative potential of language is not sufficient to bridge the schism between separate identities. Braidotti has a point in that we fail to afford what humanity we consider a right to many humans, but underneath her and Haraway's works is an assumption that learning to understand these people as humans, or possessed of *zoe*, or existing as individual's with their own identity, is the "actor to change" for "social transformation." These solutions are the legacy of the deconstructionists who deem them impossible in their execution. Whether or not I agree with the impossibility of understanding is beside the point, as I don't think this misunderstanding is the "wrong with social reality" that, corrected, will fix the problem of some people, or many people, treating other people poorly. Haraway's point, that seeking *and producing* unconditional love from a dog precludes recognition of their "autonomous identity" brilliantly, if unintentionally, reveals the schism between understanding an identity and an unconditional application of anything ("love" or other sentiments), but in the interest of finding "*achievable* practical goals," I would settle for respect, or decency. This is not to say that understanding on a personal level doesn't facilitate the deepening of feelings and interpersonal connection, but on a societal level, increased understanding (or connection) needs to stop being considered the "actors...for social transformation." That Braidotti considers it to be more feasible to increase the valuation of all things than to do so of solely humanity further indicates a common frame of reference is not an adequate impetus for social transformation, while missing the reality she has revealed—understanding, of any sort, will not lead humans to treat each other better.

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[19] Braidotti, "Posthuman," 2329.

[20] Braidotti, "Posthuman," 2352.

[21] Derrida, "Différance," 269.

[22] Derrida, "Différance," 270.

[23] Derrida, "Différance," 270.

[24] Braidotti, "Posthuman," 2352.

[25] Reiteration of an enlightenment ideal is not something I consider problematic in itself, nor does Braidotti

[26] Derrida, "Différance," 271.

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