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Roman Ingarden's Ontology and Non-anthropocentric Humanities: On (Non-)Obvious Relationships

Abstract: The discourse on non-anthropocentric humanities has an essentializing and ontologizing character, allowing connections to be made with Roman Ingarden's own ontology. The problems considered by researchers such as Bjørnar Olsen and Graham Harman appear to allign with those of the Polish philosopher. Concepts problematized in both non-anthropocentric discourse and Ingarden's theory include self-containedness, autonomy and independence of the object from the cognizing subject, together with the manner in which the object itself is endowed as a subject with its own merits. Although functional questions (how things act as non-human actors in reality and what relations they form with human actors) seem to be the most important for modern researchers, the essential points they raise allow for a better understanding of what conditions objects require for their action and even causality. Introducing the discourse of non-anthropocentric humanities into the context of Ingarden's ontology could allow, among other things, for the clarification of certain concepts. In this way, the return to things, a subject hitherto lacking its own vocabulary, can be perceived as a significant new discourse within contemporary humanities.

Keywords: non-anthropocentric humanities, return to things, ontology, thing, Roman Ingarden

Abstrakt: Dyskurs humanistyki nieantropocentrycznej ma esencjalizujący i ontologizujący charakter, co stwarza możliwość jego zestawienia z ontologią Romana Ingardena. Problemy, które są rozważane przez badaczy, takich jak Bjørnar Olsen i Graham Harman, wydają się zbieżne z rozważaniami polskiego filozofa. Pojęcia problematyzowane zarówno w dyskursie nieantropocentrycznym, jak i w teorii Ingardena to między innymi: samoistność, autonomia i niezależność przedmiotu od poznającego podmiotu oraz sposób uposażenia przedmiotu jako podmiotu własności. Mimo że dla współczesnych badaczy najważniejsze znaczenie mają pytania funkcjonalne (jak działają rzeczy jako nie-ludzcy aktorzy w rzeczywistości i jakie związki tworzą z bytami ludzkimi), stawiane przez nich pytania esencjalne pozwalają na lepsze rozpoznanie tego, co warunkuje działanie, a nawet sprawczość przedmiotów. Wprowadzenie dyskursu humanistyki nieantropocentrycznej w kontekst ontologii Ingardena mogłoby pozwolić między innymi na doprecyzowanie pojęć. W ten sposób zwrot ku rzeczom, dotychczas nieposiadający

własnego słownika, mógłby zyskać większą dystynktywność jako nowy styl myślowy współczesnej humanistyki.

Słowa kluczowe: humanistyka nieantropocentryczna, zwrot ku rzeczom, ontologia, rzecz, Roman Ingarden

The broad set of contemporary tendencies known as non-anthropocentric humanities (sometimes also referred to as a return to things or a return to materiality), represents a radical retreat from the previously dominant theory of constructivism. Here, reality is no longer conceived of as mediated by personally-, socially-, and culturally-determined descriptions; rather, things now appear to the cognizing subject as individual entities with independent properties. This shift away from constructivism in non-anthropocentric humanities has already been widely discussed by scholars, who have variously tried to pin down the features of this still relatively recent current within contemporary scholarship (Olsen, Domańska 2008; Cyzman 2021). The return to things, however, has one crucial, but still overlooked, dimension: any discourse on non-anthropocentric humanities is clearly ontologizing and essentializing. I would not, however, insist that any return to materiality also represents a return to ontology. A strictly ontological description of things is not what non-anthropocentric humanities scholars aim to achieve. Instead, such descriptions usually lay the groundwork for analyses that highlight the functionality, independence, or even agency of things in the world (Domańska 2006). Accordingly, traditional narratives used in various academic disciplines such as archaeology or history, can be remodeled so that the human subject, previously dominant, is conceived of as equal, rather than superior, to non-human actors.

This ontologizing discourse within non-anthropocentric humanities has not yet been adequately examined; my aim here is to sketch out a very preliminary outline and explore its possible affinities with the philosophy of one of the most remarkable Polish ontologists, Roman Ingarden. My literature review under the umbrella moniker of non-anthropocentric humanities has revealed no indications of having been inspired by Ingarden nor, indeed, are there any references to his philosophy. Among scholars working in this field, the most commonly-cited philosopher is Martin Heidegger (Olsen 2013, 112; Hoły-Łuczaj 2018), whose concept of the *ready-at-hand* has been variously interpreted and functionalized. The origins of the very concept of the object / thing, the key idea of non-anthropocentric discourse, are usually not clarified, although the American founding father of *object-oriented ontology*, Graham Harman, has drawn attention to the ideas of Brentano and Meinong as the sources of his own theories (Harman 2018, 41). And yet it seems that it is Ingarden, with his meticulous description of the object and its properties, who might furnish a particularly good frame of reference for non-anthropocentric humanities. Indeed, revealing possible parallels between these two fascinating discourses could also open up new avenues for the application of the Polish philosopher's theories within the various discourses of contemporary humanities.

Non-anthropocentric humanities scholars and Ingarden differ in their motivations for reflecting on things and capturing their autonomous, independent properties. The Polish philosopher describes things within the framework of a wider ontology; he examines the existence of the world and the things that comprise it, each with a different mode of existence. However, he does not do so in opposition to the human subject; instead, he tends to point out the various interrelations between the world of things and the human world. As he writes in his *Książeczka o człowieku* [*Booklet on Man*] (Ingarden 1987a, 13, 17):

> The only important thing is the fact that nature existed prior to any activity by man and that it changes within itself, for the most part independent not only of man's activity, but also of his existence. Nature is also the ultimate foundation of man's being, as well as of the existence of his works…

> Man finds himself on the border of two fields of existence: of nature and of the specifically human world without which he cannot exist, but this world is not sufficient for his existence and is not able to guarantee it.

In contrast, contemporary scholars are motivated by a rejection of the *perennial dictatorship of the human* (Olsen 2013, 51), which makes them strive to identify and describe the properties of things that are autonomous and exist independently of man. As pointed out by Ewa Domańska, *the objective is not to eradicate the human from any reflection* (Domańska 2008, 11), since such an enterprise would be doomed to failure, but rather to relinquish the notion of the supremacy of man as the only active and agentive subject in the world, to whom all non-human beings are subordinate.

The outcome of this scholarly focus on things is a description that appears essentializing and stands in stark opposition to constructivism. Due to their different epistemological foundations and goals, the correlation of ontological discourse and non-anthropocentric discourse is not an easy task, and if attempted irreflexively, can lead to intellectual errors. For this reason, I shall begin by presenting the ontologizing aspects of non-anthropocentric humanities, before I go on to highlight their possible correlations with the ideas of Roman Ingarden.

Ontologizing discourse is most fully present in the writings of the pioneer of non-anthropocentric humanities, the Norwegian archaeologist Bjørnar Olsen. Olsen frequently emphasizes the distinctness of things and their separate, essential properties. When analyzing elements of landscape and inanimate nature, for instance, he repeatedly expresses his belief in a material world that exists beyond our perception (Olsen 2013, 8). He specifically uses phrases such as *material culture*, and *the world of things*, to underscore an essential distinction with respect to the universe of texts. When the human subject comes into contact with the world of things, the encounter is nothing like reading a text, as post-structuralists would have us believe. Since things form a variety of relationships with us and can influence our lives in non-discursive ways, they should not be viewed as always discursively mediated. However, neither should they be analyzed in terms of otherness. Ewa Domańska, a Polish scholar who has transplanted the discourse on the return to things to Poland, has vocally opposed this discourse of otherness

and exclusion, even though she does agree that *things* have been marginalized in discourses thus far (Domańska 2008). A new focus on the separate, autonomous properties of things that non-anthropocentric humanities propose is meant to determine how objects function independently of human beings and how they interact with us, either forcing us to take certain actions or else inhibiting them.

The autonomy of things, then, seems to be one of the key issues for scholars calling for a new, non-anthropocentric turn within the humanities. Graham Harman, working in what he has called *object-oriented ontology*, understands that autonomy in several ways. An object (Harman uses this particular word) is autonomous in the sense that it preserves the separate features that are proper to it regardless of any relationship it may form with other objects. As such, it cannot be viewed solely in the context of the relations it forms within reality or only from the perspective of its impact. Objects may, indeed, elicit reactions in time and space, leave their trace, and undergo modifications as a result, but they are far from fluid and indefinite. They possess an identity of their own that determines their distinctness and autonomy. This conception, Harman notes, stands in contrast to the reductionist view of things proposed by Bruno Latour.

Whereas the ontologizing discourse of Harman's *The Quadruple Object* and the ontologizing reflections of Bjørnar Olsen both have a clearly discernible essentializing dimension, the essence of things is an aspect that is ignored by Latour. This aspect is never problematized, however, since Latour's primary interest lies in the relations that connect non-human actors to one another as well as to human actors, and their identities are always seen as fluid, occasional, and shaped within these relationships. If, then, one can speak of the essence of things at all, it is merely in the sense of a weak, momentary essence that remains in a permanent state of potentiality, ruptured only by temporary stabilizations. For the French philosopher, however, the matter is even more complicated, since he also questions the very distinction between thing and non-thing as such. The goal now is not to search for the essential properties of specific entities or attempt their strict classification; what matters instead is the process of creating links, the overlapping of relations and translations between human and non-human actors. The participants of this process are hybrids that preserve and retain these relations (Latour 2011). As such, they have distributed identities, created and actualized in a constant translational process. A thing becomes an actor not because of any permanent, essential property that it may have, but because of its activity. Actors are neither real, nor constructed, neither social, nor natural; they should be analyzed beyond all dualisms and oppositions. For this reason, Olsen's question as to which essential properties of things predestine them for action and whether that ability to act is rooted in their essence (Olsen 2013, 8) cannot conceivably be asked at all within the context of the *actor network theory*.

This assumption of strong identity and the essentialist vision of things is normally accompanied by an equally firm belief in their autonomy and reality. Their modes of being, however, are not analyzed in greater depth; non-anthropocentric humanities scholars rarely discuss the whole gamut of possibilities. That things are independent from the subject that perceives them, or self-contained, is un-

derscored by both Olsen (Olsen 2013, 128) and Harman (Harman 2018, 89). The latter also emphasizes that an object can never be exhausted by cognition. No possible description can ever capture it adequately; it cannot be reduced to any set of descriptions, no matter how accurate or precise. Harman also insists that some properties are only occasional; unexpectedly, things can manifest them only under specific circumstances or through certain relationships (Harman 2013, XXIV–XXV).

Graham Harman associates reality with facticity. Not unlike other speculative realists, he assumes that the underlying principle at work in the world is necessary contingency. While facts may be negotiable, facticity as such is absolute. To recognize the facticity of things – recognizing the fact that what exists may be certain things but not others – and that things exist separately and autonomously – is different than simply acknowledging the diversity in our perceptions of things.

For Olsen, the reality of things has one more important dimension, which could be described as their ability to form somatic relationships with human beings that can be experienced in a sensual, bodily manner. By entering into dialog with the world of things, we establish a relationship of intimacy, experienced sensually, and not merely discursively. Olsen resorts here to a rather imprecise metaphor, describing the speech of things as *physiognometric rhetoric* (Olsen 2013, 101). The term refers to the strict and imperative way in which things speak to us to induce specific sensual reactions, giving rise to a special, empirically experienced but discursively elusive, intimacy between man and thing. A good example of what Olsen has in mind can be found in the essays of Roger-Pol Droit (Droit 2005), who perfectly illustrates this intimacy – almost tenderness – that can manifest between things and people.

The ontologizing vision of things, as proposed by Olsen and Harman, could be viewed as characteristic of non-anthropocentric humanities as a whole. Indeed, it is a complex subject and scholars differ in their views. However, all analyses converge on at least several points, such as: the autonomy, identity and reality of things, their independence from the cognizing subject or any relationship they may form with other, human and non-human, entities, their inexhaustibility by cognition, and the inability of any description to take adequate stock of their essence. As I mentioned before, the ontological turn, strictly speaking, cannot be defined as the distinctive feature of non-anthropocentric humanities. It can only be attributed to selected individual scholars. Thus, for instance, while Harman can reasonably be seen to represent the ontological turn, scholars such as Olsen cannot, since for the latter, questions of essence only serve as a springboard for reflections on the relations and configurations between human and non-human beings. The function of ontologizing description in his case is merely an accessory to the main objective, which is to describe the *intermingling of things*, their peculiar configurations and scope of cooperation with human beings, as well as their agency (Latour 2010, 519–553).

The reflections of non-anthropocentric philosophers are not analogous to those of Ingarden. Their explorations, however, do focus on issues that the Polish philosopher also identified, and later resolved, with methods specific to ontology

in his study *Spór o istnienie* świata [*Controversy over the Existence of the World*]. Below, I shall discuss the most characteristic affinities that exist between these two discourses.

1. Autonomy and individuality of things

Ingarden formulated the concept of the constitutive nature of an individual object (Ingarden 1960, 373), which attests to the separateness and individuality of every thing. That which is named is a concrete individual, expressed in a specific material quality, which encompasses the object as a whole. Constitutive nature represents a special moment of the matter of the object in its proper form, which determines the "what-ness" of the object, or its essence. It permeates its entire object's endowment, marking it with a stamp of individuality, autonomy, and separateness from other objects. It is in its constitutive nature that an object is embodied as a subject of properties. Individual constitutive nature thus determines the subject of properties in an object in an absolute manner; the qualitative moment that defines it is independent and cannot be further differentiated. Each object has only one and unique constitutive nature that does not change, regardless of the configurations it may form with other objects. This Ingardenian concept, understandable within the context of his broader vision of objects in general, seems to be a very useful method of expressing the autonomy of every thing that exists in the world.

2. Endowment and complexity

Reflecting on the importance of the name, Ingarden identified the following components: the intentional directional indicator, material content, formal content, the moment of existential characterization, and the moment of existential position (Ingarden 1960, 101–103). The intentional directional indicator represents the moment whereby a word refers to a specific object. Material content refers to what the name means and ascribes specific qualitative features to an object so that it constitutes a separate, self-contained unit of being. Material content, Ingarden argued, consists of constants and variables: constants are the elements that strictly define the qualitative moment, while variables introduce moments of indeterminacy in the object. That which is designated by material content is treated as an individual that actualizes a certain form, determined by the name's formal content. Existential characterization determines the mode of being of an object, while its existential position points to the facticity of its existence.

Ingarden's theory of nominal meaning, which directly translates into an understanding of an object's endowment, seems incredibly useful for any reflection on things. Even if only some components of the meaning are functionalized in non-anthropocentric discourse, they could still point to the degree of the object's complexity, its potential variability, and the way in which its individuality is formed. Particularly useful would be ideas concerning material content and formal con-

tent, since they represent two important moments that define the "what" and the "how" of any given unit of being.

For Ingarden, an object is complete, self-contained, and constitutes a concrete, indivisible unity. No process of cognition can exhaust all its features, especially given that, in order to know an object, one needs to observe it in action and analyze its impact on other things. Accordingly, certain components of the material content must remain in a state of potentiality, as if suspended, until they are actualized via interaction with another object.

Ingarden's theory also serves as a solid springboard for reflections on how the properties of an object are interconnected and what in their material content predisposes them to form certain connections rather than others. By examining the relationships that manifest between different parts of an object, one can determine the kinds of unity that emerge as a result. Ingarden distinguished the following types of unity: factual unity, essential unity, functional unity, and harmonic unity. Essential unity occurs when two material and formal moments, by virtue of their essence, cannot be separated from each other. Functional unity represents a functional relationship between two moments; whenever one changes, so does the other (Ingarden 1987b, 47–49). Harmonic unity suggests that a combination of specific qualities entails the appearance of a third qualitative moment, which encompasses them both without compromising their specificity (Ingarden 1987b, 49–50). Factual unity occurs when specific moments are brought together to form a whole in a non-necessary way; the resulting whole can be further supplemented or may form an element of yet another whole. Factual unity, for instance, is what binds together the pieces of a shattered object. These pieces are no longer a cohesive whole, but still belong together in some special sense (Ingarden 1987b, 42–44). Considering that non-anthropocentric scholars are interested in objects that are broken, imperfect, with a fragmented structure, these four types of unity can provide them with a useful theoretical framework. It would also be informative to use Ingarden's theories in order to explore the various ways in which objects connect to one another in order to form new wholes, in which a previously isolated whole becomes part of a new unity.

3. Modes of being

Ingarden basically distinguished three modes of being: real, ideal, and intentional. An excellent description of an intentional object can be found in *O dziele literackim* [*On Literary Works*], but this concept can also be applied, with certain modifications, to objects that exist in the realm of fiction, figments of our imagination, and internally contradictory objects. Non-anthropocentric humanities scholars, however, do not make such distinctions. Graham Harman is the only such philosopher to discuss different types of objects, such as real and sensory (Harman 2018, 80), or to pay attention to the mutual relationship between fiction and reality, emphasizing the role of metaphor in cognition and its capacity for capturing the essence of things (Harman 2018, 102–105). This characteristic fixation on a single (real) mode in which things exist seems insufficient for describing the

pulsating network of our own reality, equally importantly formed by the objects of fiction, and which could thus be viewed as special non-human actors with roles of their own in the creation of society, history etc.

4. A vocabulary to describe things

Ingarden's concepts alone form an excellent lexical base to tap for a more coherent description of the world. A self-contained, individual object, its constitutive nature, material content, formal content, the unity of the object, real objects, modes of being – these are but some of the ideas that could potentially be used in any discourse that aims at a return to things. As of this moment, such a discourse largely unfolds by way of intuition and imprecise concepts, and scholars currently explore the concept of things as if merely sounding out the field, even though it has already been explored by ontology for centuries. This leads to terminological inaccuracies, whereby the object of reference is rarely identified clearly. Words and phrases such as "thing" and "object", or even "state of things", are used interchangeably; the scope of the phrase "set of things" is unclear, and the entities of interest are so diverse (human-animal hybrids, animals, machines, everyday objects), that it is often difficult to grasp how exactly they act and interact in reality, and with human beings.

The style and language of scholars whose investigations involve a return to materiality lack precise linguistic identifiers of things/objects; the repartition of concepts to which they refer, their semantic scope, and their relationships with related concepts are also unclear. This reveals a more general absence of a consistent language of description, which in turn makes it almost impossible to fix the boundaries of this current state of scholarship, which still seems to be in flux (Fleck 1986). Fleck's categories provide us with the best framework within which to understand the return to materiality. A thought style also becomes distinct and autonomous as a result of the words and meanings that circulate and are understood within it. This particular aspect seems the most problematic in our case; the language of reflection, which is of a supposedly non-anthropocentric provenance, remains fluid, changeable, and unclear.

In strictly ontological terms, the worlds of things and people now seem much more diverse, and, consequently, more difficult to describe coherently (Kamieński 2022). At first glance, the methods and concepts of Ingarden's ontology may seem insufficient as an epistemological framework and vocabulary for a description of the wealth of entities that we observe in our world, including hybrids, cyborgs, and curious man-machine or man-software combinations. The observation of these, so to speak, unobvious entities in our world may also encourage us to ask to what extent Ingarden's ontology is still able to describe it.

What matters for most scholars in non-anthropocentric humanities, and stands out as the primary issue for Latour, is the question of relations that non-human entities form with human beings. Relationships between things, as Latour has shown, can be studied without focusing on essences to create a coherent and interesting description of the flow of things – hybrids in reality. However, one might

also follow Olsen and deliberate over what kind of essence predestines a thing to action and how that action is determined by the essence. Questions of essence do not rule out questions of function (e.g.: what active relationships do things form in the world?), and any abstract discourse does not preclude empirical focus, or, ultimately, practical value (genetic engineering, technoscience). Moreover, consistent and linguistically precise ontological diagnoses can actually help us better understand the relationality and agency of things within the network of reality. Accordingly, any additional context that can make the discourse of non-anthropocentric humanities more precise merits a closer look. To what extent Ingarden's ontology could work in that role is a problem that requires further attention, but the parallels mentioned above allow us to suppose such an attempt would not be in vain.

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