

## FROM THE EDITORS

### THE AMBIVALENCE OF THINGS

The concept of things is not unambiguous. Indeed, one might find it difficult to think of an intellectual category evoking more ambivalent mental associations and emotions. A ‘thing’ (*res*) is, on the one hand, a transcendental, an aspect or even an equivalent of being: a predetermined, existing essence or a particular nature (substance) which is a potential object either of sensual perception or of intellectual cognition, and which becomes such whenever a human intellect disregards the mere fact of its existence and strives to grasp its meaning and inner ontic constitution. As such, a thing is primarily a ‘bearer’ of being conceived as essence, and it enables the intellect to grasp the inward ‘organization’ of a particular instance of being. The approach to being conceived as *res* shows that human cognition is incapable of disregarding the aspect of essence<sup>1</sup> and that classical metaphysics (the study of being in the aspect of its existence) cannot rid of the concept of things, or it would lose its communicative power.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, however, the description ‘things’ is used in Western culture to designate a wide array of objects which are thus distinguished from human beings—and we are by no means dealing with a simple typology in this case. On the contrary, we are challenged by a sharp division within being itself, since things are perceived as radically different from humans. Already Aristotle pointed that a human being is essentially distinct from things: he enjoys the highest degree of soul, which is responsible for his ability to reason and which makes it possible for him to conceive of the world and of himself rationally. Unlike the human being, inanimate things are deprived of soul, animals

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<sup>1</sup> See Mieczysław A. Krąpiec, *Metafizyka* (Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictw KUL, 1983), 136. See also *ibidem*, 135–6.

<sup>2</sup> See *ibidem*, 136. Interestingly, a metaphysical approach to things can be traced in the question “How are things?” frequently recurring in the English language and an equivalent of the Polish “Co słycać” or the German “Wie geht’s?”. The ‘things’ about which the question asks are the entirety (or the essence) of what is going on in the interlocutor’s life. An instance of the natural cognitive attitude, which consists in striving to grasp the reality in terms of things (which is, incidentally, the cognitive attitude on which classical metaphysics draws) is the Polish word ‘rzeczywistość’ (rzeczy = things), meaning ‘reality.’

have sensitive, and plants merely nutritive one.<sup>3</sup> Medieval asceticism in turn, which proclaimed the need for adopting the Gospel inspired ideal of poverty, postulated a rejection of things together with the material attachments they cause, and considered such a stance as a *sine qua non* for true spirituality and openness to higher values. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophers argued that the world of material things is merely an illusion and that true existence belongs to the mind only. Having developed a moral philosophy on the grounds of idealism, Immanuel Kant asserted, in the succeeding formulations of his categorical imperative, that a human being must never be approached as a means to an end (and thus as a thing), but always as an end in itself.<sup>4</sup>

In the centuries that followed, Kant's insights were developed by idealist philosophers as well as well as by self-declared materialists. Thus, in a time historically closer to ours, Karl Marx would admonish against the danger of the estrangement, or the alienation, of the factory worker in his product (the things he made), caused by the fact that his labor became objectified and did not serve him, but the goals of those who owned the means of production.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, workers of the period of the Industrial Revolution, as if extrapolating the nascent ideas of Marx and referring them to their actual lives, would destroy industrial equipment in the hope that, once it is out of the way, they would not be made redundant and lose their jobs. The postwar reality of the twentieth century, in turn, was conducive to the rise of personalist philosophy, based on the recognition of the fact that human beings transcend the world of objects (things) and are infinitely superior to it.<sup>6</sup> It was then that an open critique of consumerism,

<sup>3</sup> See Aristotle, *De anima*, 413 a 22 – 415 a 8, trans. R. D. Hicks (Cambridge: at the University Press, 1907), 53–63.

<sup>4</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 402, 429, and 431, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 14–5, 37–8, 39–40.

<sup>5</sup> See Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Progress Publishers (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 66–80.

<sup>6</sup> Polish moral philosopher Tadeusz Styczeń would emphasize that, compared to the entities (whether animate or inanimate) which enjoy the status of things, the human being exists in 'superior' and 'different' a manner. He wrote: "A human being, that is anyone, reveals himself to himself as different and distinct from the universe of things, and yet as being always in direct cognitive contact with it. A cognitive subject who gets to know the actually existing world of objects, a human being can see, or indeed he can experience, that he is himself an absolutely different entity and one irreducible to what is—and can be—cognized by him, but is itself incapable of cognition. What makes a human being different from the world of things is what simultaneously distinguishes him from them. This particular quality is responsible for the fact that a human being exists as if 'distinctly' from everything else and appears to himself as a being who goes beyond this world, thus ... infinitely transcending it, as a being whose existence is 'different' and 'superior,' who is as if solitary, and who, due to his 'solitude,' is who he is: a person." Tadeusz Styczeń, "Normatywna moc prawdy, czyli być sobą to przekraczać siebie: W nawiązaniu do Karola Wojtyły antropologii normatywnej," in Tadeusz Styczeń, *Dziela zebrane*, ed. Alfred M. Wierzbicki, vol. 4, *Wolność w prawdzie*,

continued to this day, was begun, and the phenomenon itself was defined as an attitude which seeks security and comfort in life by way of acquisition and possession of things. While it is true that already advocates of the communist revolution (who were, incidentally, self-proclaimed materialistic monists) admonished the masses against the danger of excessive consumption, today the stigmatization of consumerism goes beyond ideological divisions. It is criticized by atheist ethicists and by radical environmentalists alike, the former represented by Peter Singer, who emphasizes the imperative of moderation and the moral duty to share the things one owns with other people rather than continually acquire new possessions,<sup>7</sup> and the latter by Wendell Berry, thinking in terms of the human being's rootedness in the natural environment and of the future of the planet, thus pointing to the fact that continuous overproduction of goods causes damage to the Earth's natural resources.<sup>8</sup> Already in 1935, Gabriel Marcel, a Christian existentialist, observed that "the philosophers seem to have always shown a sort of implicit mistrust towards the notion of having,"<sup>9</sup> that "our possessions swallow us up,"<sup>10</sup> and, apparently perturbed, he would add that "the self becomes incorporated in the thing possessed,"<sup>11</sup> and that "perhaps the self is only there if possession is there too."<sup>12</sup>

Commonly acknowledged thinkers of today, as well as religious leaders, seem to reason in a similar way, much as they address other issues or other particular problems. In the collection of his statements and speeches entitled *Beyond Dogma*, Dalai Lama praises the economic system of Marxism, which he considers as "founded on moral principles, while capitalism is concerned only with gain and profitability [and thus with acquisition and possession of things]."<sup>13</sup> John Paul II, in turn, wrote:

This super-development, which consists in an excessive availability of every kind of material goods for the benefit of certain social groups, easily makes people slaves of 'possession' and of immediate gratification, with no other horizon than the

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ed. Kazimierz Krajewski (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL and Instytut Jana Pawła II KUL, 2013), 353–4. The translation is mine.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Peter S i n g e r, *Famine, Affluence and Morality* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), and Peter S i n g e r, *The Life You Can Save: How to Do Your Part to End World Poverty* (New York: Random House, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Wendell B e r r y, *Our Only World: Ten Essays* (Berkeley, California: Counterpoint, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Gabriel M a r c e l, *Being and Having*, trans. Katharine Farrer (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1949), 157.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, 152.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> See His Holiness The D a l a i L a m a, *Beyond Dogma: Dialogues and Discourses*, trans. Alison Anderson (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 1996).

multiplication or continual replacement of the things already owned with others still better. This is the so-called civilization of ‘consumption’ or ‘consumerism,’ which involves so much ‘throwing-away’ and ‘waste.’ An object already owned but now superseded by something better is discarded, with no thought of its possible lasting value in itself, nor of some other human being who is poorer. All of us experience firsthand the sad effects of this blind submission to pure consumerism: in the first place a crass materialism, and at the same time a radical dissatisfaction, because one quickly learns—unless one is shielded from the flood of publicity and the ceaseless and tempting offers of products—that the more one possesses the more one wants, while deeper aspirations remain unsatisfied and perhaps even stifled.<sup>14</sup>

Thus Western culture has adopted an unquestionably suspicious or even reluctant attitude towards things. One might go as far as to say that despite the inevitable overflow of things (after all, humans live surrounded by them<sup>15</sup>) they ultimately ‘lose’ in confrontation with ideas, because, unlike the latter, they are incapable of carrying away the human mind. Perhaps this is the reason why intellectual currents such as physicalism or reism never gained popularity and are appreciated mainly for their implications for the methodology of the cognitive effort employed in the pursuance of science rather than for their cognitive potential for grasping the reality.

However, Western culture—as if against its original insight—is simultaneously a culture of things, and it appeals to the succeeding generations of its members by means of objects which are its symbols. Evolution of things accompanies the development of culture not only as its reflection, but also by inspiring and driving it. This function, however, is not performed merely by objects such as works of art or architecture, or things manifesting the triumph of the human spirit over matter, for instance national or religious symbols, or the symbols of power, but also by things which make up the everyday environment of a human life to such extent that they become silent companions of man, occasionally not even consciously recognized by him. While some of these things are deliberately chosen and others can be considered as inheritance, still others take root in a human life, so to speak, accidentally, sometimes

<sup>14</sup> J o h n P a u l I I, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, Section 28.

<sup>15</sup> A multi-level analysis of things present in our lives, and of the transformation of their meaning in time and in history, as well as a scrutiny of the contingency of the relationship obtaining between a human being and physical objects, is provided by an investigation of waste. See William V i n e y, *Waste: A Philosophy of Things*, London, New Delhi, New York, and Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2015, 29. Viney’s work includes a probably unintended reference to the ideas of John Paul II, who—in the above quoted extract—emphasizes the extraordinarily fast ‘flow’ of things (the extremely fast change of their status from new products to used products and, ultimately, waste), a mark of the civilization of consumerism. Viney also refers to Bill Brown in pointing that the name given to a thing denotes the relationship between the human being and the object in question rather than the thing itself. See *ibidem*, 31. See also Bill B r o w n, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001):4.

without one's awareness of the process. Precisely this meaning of objects, their power to attract human beings, as well as to hold them captive, was the issue Georges Perec, French thinker and writer, was striving to comprehend. In his novel entitled *Things*, he told the story of a couple fascinated by the prospect of possessing things, desiring to possess them, and relating their image of happiness, freedom, and the fullness of life to their ability to acquire objects. Perec's protagonists wished to be like "complacent fish."<sup>16</sup> "The world and its things would have had to have always belonged to them, and then they could have imprinted on them myriad signs of their ownership."<sup>17</sup> Their intention, however, was not empty comfort or being rich for the sake of being rich; rather, their dreams were filled with a particular image, with a vision of life in which things would provide a kind of 'habitat' for them to grow: to absorb the world and its culture, to taste their existence and to have an increasingly deeper insight in it. "They would know where to find the little twelfth-century Madonna, the oval panel by Sebastiano del Piombo, the Fragonard wash drawing, the two small Renoirs, the little Boudin, the Atlan, the Max Ernst, the de Staels, the coins, the musical boxes, the candyboxes, the silverware, the Delft china"<sup>18</sup>... It seemed to them that once they only began to pursue such an ideal of happiness, it would automatically come true. And yet "money stood like a barrier between them"<sup>19</sup> and "it sometimes felt as if their only real conversations were about money, comfort and happiness."<sup>20</sup> The dreams of the couple whose life Perec describes are an insightful illustration of how deeply things penetrate human life and how significantly they affect a human person's capability of developing her humanity, but also how subtle the line is between such an approach to things and a purely materialistic attitude. However, one can also note that the dreams cherished by Perec's protagonists in a way undermine an unequivocal understanding of the concept of consumerism and unmask its vagueness, as well as a fallacy inherent in the assumption that the only condition for the shaping of a human subjectivity and for the growth of humanity in man is living in a community with other human beings, things being perceived in a sharp contrast to persons. A community which makes no reference to the material world of things and one which exists in a cultural void, so to speak, is by no means a community a human being desires. The human need for things—which must not be identified merely with the desire to possess them—has a different origin and a different goal than the attitude

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<sup>16</sup> Georges P e r e c, *Things: A Story of the Sixties*, trans. David Bellos (London: Vintage, 2011), 68.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, 32.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, 86.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, 67.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

described as consumerism. The presence of things (both products of man and those present in the natural world), as well as the fact that they attract human attention, stimulate the mind, sensibility, and imagination, that they, as it were, demand to be approached individually, and that they are indeed approached in such a way (a human cognitive act being always unrepeatable), proves that things in a sense overcome—one might say: surmount—the status of objects we ascribe them. A thing transcends its physicality. And even should the process in question necessarily involve the presence of a cognitive subject (and, in the case of artifacts, also the subject who is the creator putting his intention or design into the matter he uses), it inevitably gives the object a particular autonomy which will mark its existence, although the latter will remain deprived of any degree of soul in the Aristotelian sense.

Georges Perec was indeed fascinated by the phenomenon of things. In his essay “Notes Concerning the Objects That Are on My Work-table,”<sup>21</sup> he described the things usually present on his desk as he was working: some of them appeared all of a sudden and would stay there for a brief while only, others remained longer; they might, but did not need to, be related to the process of writing; nevertheless they were connected to some aspect of the philosopher’s life and, as such, its continuation. Thus, among them, there were: pencils, paper, a coffee mug, three ashtrays, a bud-vase, a matchbox-holder, a cardboard box containing index-cards, an inkwell, several stones, some wooden boxes, an alarm-clock, a calendar, a lump of lead, a cigar box (“with no cigars but full of small objects”<sup>22</sup>), a dagger handle, account books, exercise books, loose sheets<sup>23</sup>... “On the whole, I could say that the objects that are on my work-table are there because I want them to be,”<sup>24</sup> said Perec. In the sense he described, things may be considered as signs not only of the individuality of a human person, but as her subjectivity as well, since their presence involves, in each case, an act of choice-making and a free decision. Among the objects which fascinated Perec most were books (there were always a few volumes on his desk). Arranging one’s volumes is always a challenge, he confessed, yet one which makes it possible to give justice to them as things. But how to arrange them? Should one do it alphabetically, by continent or country, by color,

<sup>21</sup> See Georges P e r e c, “Notes Concerning the Objects That Are on My Work-table,” in Georges Perec, *Brief Notes on the Art and Manner of Arranging One’s Books*, trans. John Sturrock (n.p.: Penguin Books, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, 37.

<sup>23</sup> See *ibidem*.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, 36.



date of acquisition, date of publication, format, genre, major periods of literary history, language, priority for future reading, binding or series?<sup>25</sup>

Although Perec considered books as enjoying a special status among things, it seems that the position in question belongs also to musical instruments, paints, and other tools or materials used in visual arts, as well as to film or photo cameras. All of them make it possible to create a new, non-physical quality cognizable by a human being only, owing to his genetically empirical and methodologically rational cognitive acts.

An indeed peculiar case of a work of art in the sense of its being a physical object and simultaneously a bearer of non-physical content is described by Zbigniew Herbert in his essay on Torrentius's *Emblematic Still Life with Flagon, Glass Jug and Bridle*.<sup>26</sup> While all the other works of the Dutch painter have been lost, the painting in question survived three hundred years of history, serving—due to its round shape which made it appear useful and practical—as a cover for a barrel with raisins kept in a shop.<sup>27</sup> The case of the *Emblematic Still Life with Flagon, Glass Jug and Bridle* makes one realize the astonishing multi-level dialectics of the physicality and the non-physicality of a work of art.

The issue of the mode in which non-physical contents exist inevitably triggers the question about what a thing is and what a thing is not. Does a thing (in the metaphysical as well as non-metaphysical senses) necessarily involve physicality? And what about non-human animals? Are they things which we have at our disposal?<sup>28</sup> Objectified by the human being, used in various ways, and ultimately serving as food, is an animal really a ‘thing’? Was Descartes right to claim that animals are ‘automata,’<sup>29</sup> incapable of conscious experience, or do humans need to reconsider their attitude to them in the light of Peter

<sup>25</sup> See Georges P e r e c, “Brief Notes on the Art and Manner of Arranging One’s Books,” in Perec, *Brief Notes on the Art and Manner of Arranging One’s Books*, 66.

<sup>26</sup> Johannes van der Beeck (Torrentius), *Emblematic Still Life with Flagon, Glass Jug and Bridle*, 1614, oil paint on oak panel, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

<sup>27</sup> See Zbigniew H e r b e r t, “Still Life with a Bridle,” trans. John and Bogdana Carpenter, in Zbigniew Herbert, *The Collected Prose: 1948–1998*, trans. Michael March and Jaroslaw Anders, John and Bogdana Carpenter, and Alissa Valles, ed. Alissa Valles (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 247.

<sup>28</sup> The issue in question, due to its moral appeal, has for years inspired the imaginations of fiction writers and was poignantly described by Roald Dahl in his short-story “The Sound Machine.” Its protagonist constructs a machine which can record and play the sounds inaudible to the human ear, and the inventor is horrified to hear the cries of pain flowers make as they are being cut and the wailing of a tree in whose trunk an axe has been hammered. See Roald D a h l, “The Sound Machine,” in Roald Dahl, *Someone Like You* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), 152–66.

<sup>29</sup> See *Selected Correspondence of Descartes*, ed. Jonathan Bennett, <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/descartes1619.pdf>, 131, 147, 165; Peter H a r r i s o n, “Descartes on Animals,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 42, no. 167 (1992): 219–27; John B r a d s h a w, *The Animals Among Us: The New Science of Anthrozoology* (n.p.: Penguin Random House, 2017).

Singer's thesis that should it be the case that animals are capable of suffering, veganism is a moral imperative for man?<sup>30</sup>

To conclude this introduction to a volume of *Ethos* focused on 'things' one needs to mention the current evolution of the universe of inanimate beings which was triggered with the ascent of the digital age. Their number gets visibly reduced as things are gradually supplanted by their digital equivalents. We slowly say goodbye to printed books, traditional paper notebooks, vinyl records (although the existential endurance of these particular objects is indeed astonishing), we need fewer pens and pencils; the art of the digital age is being born and it is unrelated to the skill of using paint and a paintbrush properly, while computers, as well as other devices, take over the function of traditional music players or television sets, simultaneously forcing the listeners to compromise on the quality of sound. We are silent witnesses to a shrinking of the universe of things whose physicality is combined with a non-physical element and which we consider most personal, since they appeal directly to our sensibilities and imaginations. At this point in history, it is probably impossible to anticipate how the current evolution of things will ultimately affect culture as well as what we used to describe as *Lebenswelt*. And yet it is hardly conceivable that this new reality, in which the fast flow and disappearance of things have become ubiquitous to the point of becoming unnoticeable, would make it possible for the *Emblematic Still Life with Flagon, Glass Jug and Bridle* to survive three hundred years, waiting to be discovered.

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<sup>30</sup> See Peter Singer, *Why Vegan? Eating Ethically* (London: W.W. Norton & Co. Ltd., 2020).