PRACTICING AFFIRMATIVE ENGAGEMENT: WORKING WITH TECHNOLOGICAL

PRIORITIZATION IN POSTHUMANIST RHETORICAL THEORY

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Advisor: Dr. Raúl Sánchez

2nd Reader: Dr. Victor Del Hierro

By

Trent Wintermeier

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Abstract

This thesis examines how posthumanist rhetorical theories retain Western, humanist concepts of technology, and it explores the consequences of this fact. It first grounds the relationship between Western humanism and technology in Kenneth Burke's definition of "man" (*sic*) as "*the symbol-using animal*" (3). Next, it turns more explicitly toward posthumanism by outlining Rosi Braidotti's theorizing of the critical post-human, with its emphasis on science and technology studies. And it outlines and situates how these two traditions inform Casey Boyle's articulation of rhetoric as a *post*human practice and/as in-formation. It then turns to Lloyd Bitzer and Jenny Edbauer-Rice to argue that this lingering humanism amounts to a rhetorical exigence, which is a prompt for further engagement with an ecology of theories and traditions beyond those of Western humanism. Overall, this thesis proposes a practice for asking more pertinent questions about our philosophical and rhetorical concepts in the 21st century.

Table of Contents

Introduction

In her essay, "Disciplinary Landscaping, or Contemporary Challenges in the History of Rhetoric," Jacqueline Jones Royster explains that

> "what we choose to showcase depends materially on where on the landscape we
>
> stand and what we have in mind. The imperative is to recognize that the process
>
> of showcasing space is an interpretive one, one that acknowledges a view and
>
> often re-scopes that view in light of aesthetic sensibilities—values, preferences,
>
> beliefs. We landscape. We select, focus, and develop, bringing more clearly and
>
> vibrantly into view particular features that we frame and foreground, while
>
> simultaneously disregarding or minimizing other features and dimensions that we
>
> might have selected, developed, and showcased instead" (148).

I turn to Royster because I understand our current rhetorical theories to be transfixed by a landscape that foregrounds Western humanism. The landscape I am referring to is one that is generated by past traditions and is still employed in current practices. It is this notion of Western humanism that constitutes the field's current landscape of values, preferences, and beliefs. And it is on this footing where scholarship stands to highlight and minimize at will. When rhetoric is understood from this lens, we exercise the restrictions of what constitutes this landscape. That is to say, when theory depends on such a sordid, hyper-focused landscape, we only re-generate concepts and practices that are of past Western humanism. We landscape, we retain; better yet: We landscape, we restrict.

Rhetoric's landscape is what I see to be the reason why our theories retain Western, humanist restriction. When we look at *things* the way we constructed them *to be* instead of how they *are*, important components are simply missed. For when we focus on a tree—I would go as

far as to say a leaf—how are we to understand the entire panorama? In this sense, it is the Western, humanist landscape as a foundation for rhetorical theories that is problematic. When our theory retains the scope of this humanist purview, our theory serves to perpetuate the downsides. This includes the promotion of Western hegemony, anthropocentrism, faulty conceptualizations, and altogether inadequate representations of the human conditions. It is Western humanism that leads us to these restrictions. And when Western humanism retains these restrictive representations, we get inadequate theories of rhetoric—it is a simple cause-and-effect model. We are returned to the inadequacies of our past when our rhetorical theories depend on a constructed, ill-fitting, and non-representative landscape. This is where our current theories lie to theorize rhetoric and rhetorical practice in the 21st century.

Most recently, I notice rhetorical theories' retainment of Western humanism to manifest through the prioritization of technology. This is where I will direct my focus because our most popular and widespread theories seem to be attuned to this notion. While I am referring to artificial intelligence, information-communication technologies, new media, and many others, it is the use of these technologies that I am most concerned with—the *prioritization*. To continue with Royster's landscape metaphor, it seems that technology is foregrounded when our view is re-scoped to theorize rhetoric. Further, it is technology that becomes another one of the values, preferences, and/or beliefs that constitute our current, constructed landscape. We engender serious conceptual restrictions when we cultivate a landscape that believes technology should be prioritized to inform theorizations of rhetoric and rhetorical practice, which I will cover later. Nonetheless, it must be noted here that the restrictions prompted by technological prioritization are due to a Western, humanist landscape. This use of technology is what leads our theory to reveal past humanist practices and paradigms. It is here that our theory employs a faulty

framework to understand relations, practice, concepts, and conditions that are integral to understanding rhetoric's true functionality.

Posthumanist rhetorical theories are what I have been alluding to regarding the prioritization of technology. Theories of posthumanism in the field of Rhetoric have been emerging at an increasing rate since the early 21st century; in just early 2021, "Posthumanizing Writing Transfer" was published by Jeff Ringer and Sean Morey. From their perspective, posthumanism "describes how humans interact with each other and the world, seeking to make conscious these relationships for further investigation" (295). However, it is technology that seems to be the unanimous precondition that prompts this turn from humanism to post-humanism. In another notable work, *Rhetoric as a Posthuman Practice*, Casey Boyle mentions that our "era of information technologies…reformulates the commonplaces upon which many of our long-standing humanist institutions rely" (7). It is on this foundation that these authors—Ringer, Morey, and Boyle—prioritize technology to understand how the human (pre)condition is altered, which engenders our seemingly posthuman state. Moreover, this also informs how we understand rhetoric. As such, our rhetorical theories continue to rely on a tunnel-visioned landscape—one that perpetuates Western humanism through the prioritization of technology. When conceptualizations of the human condition and rhetoric are affirmed on this foundation, it is obvious that issues arise.

Therefore, this project will examine the restrictions posed by the retainment of Western humanism, which is now represented through the prioritization of technology in posthumanist rhetorical theories. I will break down this process into three sections: Recognition, integration, and engagement. First, I will turn to Kenneth Burke's concept of "*the symbol-using animal*" (3) to lay a foundation for contemporary theories of rhetoric. His work in this area will serve as a

framework for how the human condition is conceptualized in relation to technology. Second, I will highlight Rosi Braidotti's articulation of her critical post-human that "urges us to think critically and creatively about who and what we are actually in the process of becoming" (Braidotti 12). And with this grounding I transition and situate my claim in Casey Boyle's posthuman practice and/as information. It is here where I will discuss practice and information separately, but both in terms of how technological affectivity facilitates relations within ecologies. Finally, in section three I focus on Lloyd Bitzer's understanding of an exigence, which directly correlates to my issues with posthumanist rhetorical theory. Although, to not restrict us to the rhetorical situation, I also turn to Jenny Edbauer-Rice's ecological model to illustrate the in-flux and malleable state of this exigence. On top of all of this, I will be working with three versions of CAPTCHA technology to provide more tangible examples of my three aforementioned claims.

Overall, the purpose of this project is to offer a practice that contributes to un-landscaping the foundation that contemporary theories of rhetoric depend upon. In this, I believe that we may begin to reorient ourselves in two united directions: First, toward being ecologically in accordance with various other-than-Western-humanist concepts in the field, and second, toward more apt, just, and deserving rhetorical theories for our current moment.

I

Recognizing
Technology Difference

In the past decade or so, most Internet-users have come across two things: A video of Charlie biting his brother's finger, and a program that distinguishes the human-Internet-user from a computer. [1][2] While both are crucially important, I will focus on the latter in this project since this program is engaged with over one hundred million times per day to differentiate humans from computers—these programs are known as CAPTCHAs (von Ahn et al. 1465, "ReCAPTCHA"). Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart (CAPTCHAs) are those pesky, irritating, and time-consuming image and/or text recognition programs that appear after purchasing a product, creating an account of some sort, downloading software and applications, and accessing most information on the Internet. For example, this is how CAPTCHA programs work: After the user creates an account, say, an E-mail account, the user is posed with one of the following three tests: (1) Typing in a text box randomly generated, distorted word(s), (2) selecting images that contain a certain object (such as a fire hydrant, crosswalk, vehicle, etc.), or (3) checking a box to confirm that "I'm not a robot." Then, after (hopefully) passing one of such tests, the user has completed the final step in creating an E-mail account as they have been determined to be human by the CAPTCHA program.

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[1] While each version of CAPTCHA replaces the next, I will refer to all three versions in the present tense since all versions are currently employed and interacted with on websites.
[2] CAPTCHA section titles generated by: https://fakecaptcha.com/

To stop a computer from creating fake E-mail accounts, purchasing items online, accessing private information and more, there are three versions of CAPTCHA that are designed to be successfully completed by humans *only*. Underlying these three versions of CAPTCHA is a universal sense of human-computer difference that is employed as the foundation for the programs to function accordingly. All three of these CAPTCHA programs "rely on the intuition that most humans can pass these tests, while current computer programs cannot" (Hossen et al. 1, "Bots Work Better"). Respectively, ReCAPTCHA (RC), ReCAPTCHA V2 (RCV2), and ReCAPTCHA V3 (RCV3) are implemented on a universal supposition that there is a certain degree of difference which underlies the human and computer, and the programs attempt to exercise this difference through various distinctive tests. That is why "it is important to understand CAPTCHA as both a conceptual device which has remained relatively unchanged, insofar as it is still used for the identification of human users, but also as a variegated and constantly transforming collection of identification strategies" represented through the three evolutions of the program (Justie 33).

However, the difference between each version of the CAPTCHA program lies in how the tests are implemented to identify a human or computer. As I previously stated, Internet-users are posed with three tests that align with each version of the program—RC, RCV2, RCV3— respectively: (1) Typing in a text box randomly generated, distorted word(s), (2) selecting images that contain a certain object, or (3) checking a box to confirm that "I'm not a robot." Therefore, while difference is universal to all versions of CAPTCHA, each program differentiates human from computer differently. This concept is not too complex, but it does cause some tests to be more complex than need be. For example, I cannot count how many times I miss a CAPTCHA photo that contains a miniscule part of a crosswalk in the *very* corner of a

frame. However, I never miss checking the box to confirm my humanness. Nonetheless, while each "generate and grade tests that: (A) most humans can pass, but (B) current computer programs can't pass…to differentiate human from computers" (von Ahn et al. 294, "CAPTCHA"), the difference lies in how this is achieved.

In this vein, let me turn to ReCAPTCHA V2 (RCV2), the version of CAPTCHA that relies on humans to differ from computers in object identification. This is the second version of the program that was implemented after Alphabet (Google) bought the original program software. The difference between RCV2 and its predecessor, RC (which I will cover in section two), is that RCV2 implements a test for the user to identify objects in a set of given photos. I am sure many are familiar with this version, but, if not, this is how it works: When the user creates our aforementioned E-mail account, a test appears for the user to "Select all images with [blank]." This might be fire hydrants, taxis, crosswalks, trees, streetlights, alligators—and the list goes on, for the images are generated from the millions of photos in Google Images (Hossen et al. 1, "Bots Work Better"). These photos are normally "noisy, blurry, and distorted images" (Hossen et al. 270, "An Object Detection Based Solver") that are difficult to decipher (see: Figure 1). Then, the user selects the photos in which the objected is located, leaves unselected the photos that the object is absent from, and (again, *hopefully*) passes the test.

My concern with RCV2 is that this version of the program assumes human difference based in a supposed ability to construct, identify, and act within and throughout their symbolic universe. This difference is a condition in which the human encompasses that is based in symbolism. When the user is tested on their ability to identify an object within a given set of photos, they are asked to employ symbol-using strategies to determine some*thing*. Identifying this *thing* is how RCV2 functions; this version relies on humans to be symbol-users to pass the

test. Is this functionality not governed by a sense of difference that is symbolism? When we fill in the (metaphorical and physical) blanks that RCV2 uses to function, it is apparent that the program assumes an amount of human symbol-use that is enough to differentiate such human from a computer. This is because, to risk oversimplifying my claim, computers are assumed unable to identify what is of human symbolic construction. At this point, RCV2 may be understood to employ a framework that is driven by a sense of symbolism, and, as we may come to find out throughout this section, this difference stems from Western humanism that defines the human as "*the symbol-using animal*" (Burke 3).
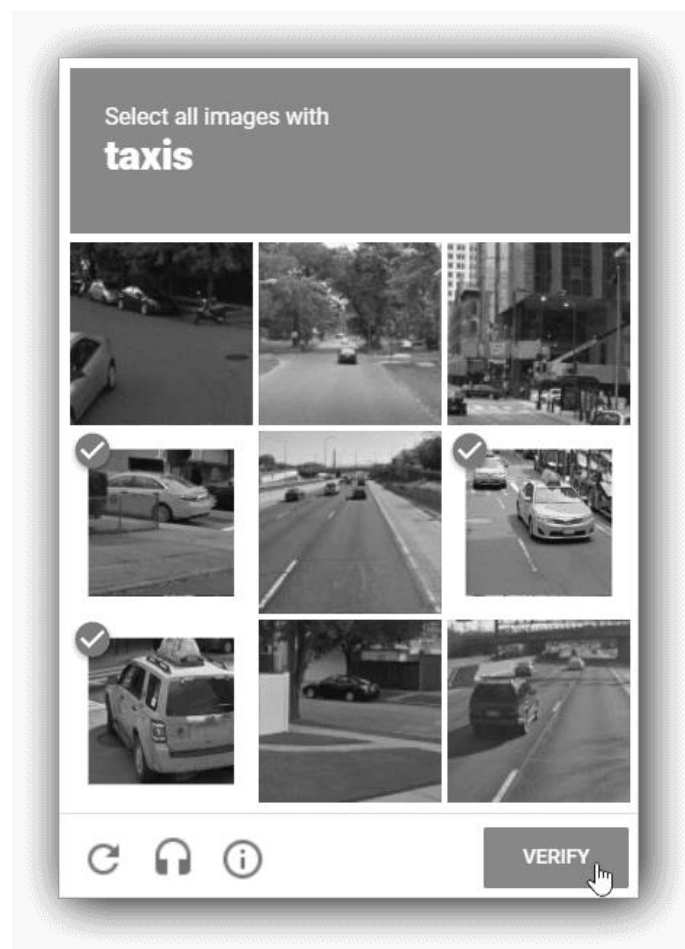

Figure 1: ReCAPTCHA V2 object identification test example (2020)

I am not only highlighting RCV2 because of my personal vendetta against the program for wasting an incalculable amount of my time, but because the program illustrates a clear human-technology dichotomy that is similarly found within Kenneth Burke's work on "*the symbol-using animal*" (3). I plan to use Burke's work in this area because his conceptual framework relies on intrinsic human difference, and this is a sufficient lens to view how Western humanism informs the human condition. His essays, such as "Definition of Man," "Terministic Screens," "Rhetoric and Poetics," and "What Are the Signs of What? (A theory of "Entitlement")," develop his concept of the human, which then defines the non-human as well. In all of these works, Burke's sense of difference is only a justification of Western, humanist difference that he understands to be symbolism; it is yet another one of the "human, all too human, resources and limitations that frame our collective and personal levels of intensity and creativity" (Braidotti 12).

When Burke says "symbol-using," he is first laying a foundation that explicitly differentiates the human from the "other." In developing this claim, he uses an example of a bird flying around his philosophy class and not being able to escape through a window, and a wren "discover[ing] how to use the principle of leverage as a way of getting a young bird off the nest," but not being able to conceptualize this act (4). In both of these cases, symbol systems are perceived to be absent from the birds since they cannot communicate nor conceptualize. Further, both of these examples develop the human as symbol-using, and the "other"—birds, in this case—as not symbol-using. What comprises the human subject then is the ability to use, make, and misuse symbol systems that constitute their reality, while also using symbols for a multitude of other possibilities (Burke 6-7). This symbolic difference is what defines both the human and non-human condition; both are conceptualized on a foundation where difference is established by

symbolism. As the human is defined, so is the wide variety of "others" that fall (are placed) into the established non-human category. Burke simply says this, stating, "the "symbol-using animal," yes, obviously," and this is where difference lies (5); the binary that the human falls (puts itself) into is based on intrinsic, fundamental, and *essential* separation from the non-symbol-using "other."[3]

Burke supports his claim of difference that is symbolism and symbolic action through five clauses that he outlines in his essay, "Definition of Man." These five clauses are as follows: "*Man is* [1] *the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal* [2] *inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative*) [3] *separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making* [4] *goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order) and* [5] *rotten with perfection*" (16). Each of these clauses are dependent upon the presupposition of symbolism and symbolic action, and this should be considered to stem from Western, humanist epistemology. This same "idea of the 'Human'…has historically been the image of Man as a rational animal endowed with language," which "constitutes the basic unit of reference for the knowing subject" (Braidotti 1, "Humanities"). Therefore, these clauses that support Burke's claim are nothing more than another justification that the human is different from the "other." Inherent to this sense of difference is a human experience that is fraught with its own symbolic capabilities and creations, such as the ability to use language to conceptualize escaping out of a philosophy classroom window (when we learn how to fly—which is my next project). Differentiating "Man as the kind of being that is particularly distinguished by an aptitude for

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[3] I will cover Diane Davis's work, *Inessential Solidarity: Rhetoric and Foreigner Relations*, and other similar works (in terms of conceptualization) in the conclusion.

such action" (Burke 54) leads to a condition where the human is understood to be different from what falls below or beyond this binary.

Not only do Burke's five clauses support the distinguishment of the human, but the priority of symbolism is also what furthers his sense of difference. Burke claims that the human is *first* the symbol-using animal; "even if one views the powers of speech and mechanical invention as mutually involving each other, in a technical or formal sense one should make the implications explicit by treating the gifts of symbolicity as the "prior" member of the pair" (14). In this sense, priority suggests that the symbolism (including symbol-use and symbolic action) specific to the human precedes human invention, which advances how the human is understood as different from its successor. Burke elaborates on this claim by speaking to how humans construct their reality through symbolic creations; "what we mean by "reality" has been built up for us through nothing but our symbol systems…take away our books, and what little do we know about history, biography, even something so "down to earth" as the relative position of seas and continents?" (5). I am fond of this example because it illustrates the lengths to which symbolism is extended. In this sense, Burke's claim of priority suggests that even reality— something that seems *so* primary—is misunderstood without symbolism. In summary, human difference is not only constituted by symbolism, but it is prior to every*thing* (language, invention, excluded peoples, *things*, etc.) within our constructed reality.

Furthermore, I would like to situate Burke's claim of difference even more explicitly by citing his work on the priority of symbolism in terms of tools, specifically. According to Burke, "if we defined Man first of all as the tool-using animal…our definition would not be taking into account the "priority" of its very own nature as a definition" (14). In this sense, seeking to define the human—here, Man (*sic*), as referred to by Burke—illustrates that humanity is first symbol-

using. In the act of "choosing *any definition at all*, one implicitly represents man as the kind of animal that is capable of definition (that is to say, capable of symbolic action)" (Burke 14). This notion extends his argument of priority on to tools, broadly defined, as such tools are understood to be both a successor to the human *and* the non-symbol-using "other." Note the fact that tools are understood to encompass successor and "other" status from this lens—it is the overlap here that is important. This problematizes the relationship to every*thing* that may be considered a tool; what is included in this binary is often then subjected to the hegemony that is the action of "*the symbol-using animal*" (3). This too perpetuates the opportunity for the human to use its symbolic capabilities to further their difference over the non-symbol-using "other." Thus, such a conceptualization of humanity is rooted in symbol-use, and priority of such difference is reflected in the construction of the "other," namely, tools.

I understand "*the symbol-using animal*" (3) as a useful framework to outline how technology is prioritized to conceptualize the human condition. For Burke's articulation of difference from the "other"—which is based in priority—underlies how technology is understood currently. Take for example how artificial intelligence technology is used to conduct human beauty contests (see: Benjamin's *Race After Technology*), or even how brain-computer interface technology is used for disabled individuals to transverse communication infrastructures of the "able-bodied" through imagined handwriting (see: Willet et al.'s "High-performance brain-to-text communication via imagined handwriting"). Both of these examples exhibit a relationship to technology wherein a supposed difference is prior to and upheld through these encounters. This epistemological lens is perpetuated throughout the technological relations that we find ourselves in-relation to throughout the 21st century—a notion covered extensively throughout section two and three. When the human condition is defined by difference that is *so*

extensive, to the point where perceptions of reality are dependent on symbolic action that precedes such conceptualizations, everything that falls after, between, and/or beyond is understood to succeed that of the humanist register. For is technology not prioritized as a tool/"other" from this lens? Is it also not a tool used to reaffirm what the human *is*? This human difference is constantly positioned in contrast to the "other"—which may be considered as technology—to conceptualize the human.

To advance this claim, the prioritization of technology is also used to further conceptualize what the human is *not*. Just as "others" and tools indicate non-humanness, I am claiming that technology is prioritized to uphold and further how humanity conceptualizes itself and its relations. As the definer (humans) make the definition (non-human), technology is all but exempt from this notion; the technological tool only further defines what human subject is (not) in our technological moment. This is achieved "by organizing *differences* on a hierarchical scale," which is why "this humanist subject define[s] himself as much by what he excluded from as by what he included in his self-representation" (Braidotti 2, "Humanities," added emphasis). When the human prioritizes technology as a tool/"other," what is regurgitated is a sense of difference that is not of its creations. This positions a human standard that is "categorically and qualitatively distinct from the sexualized, racialized, naturalized others and also *in opposition to the technological artefact*" (Braidotti 26, added emphasis) to govern perceptions of self. To illustrate my point, I will turn to Burke in two examples to explain how the prioritization of technology is used in a similar manner to what I have just outlined.

Burke alludes to the repercussions of prioritizing technology by referring to how negativity, thus, symbolism, is informed. It should be noted that his understanding of technology is representative of the early to mid-20th century since most of his work was conducted during

that point in time. However, his claims still are factual and accurate, especially when he speaks

of how technology has extended human life expectancy. To highlight one example, he states that

> "[humans] also face an opposite kind of positive technologic threat to the
>
> resources of our moral negativity. I refer to the current "population explosion." In
>
> earlier days, the problem was solved automatically by plagues, famines, high rates
>
> of infant mortality, and such. But now the positive resources of technology have
>
> undone much of those natural "adjustments," so that new burdens are placed upon
>
> the Muscles of Negativity as the need arises for greater deliberate limitation of
>
> offspring" (Burke 13).

Here he is suggesting that a greater need for negativity is engendered by the influence of

technology. In this case, when negativity is positioned as a facet of symbolism, how humans *do*

negativity becomes informed by the prioritization of technology. Not only this, but how the

human understands itself is redefined by this affection. As technology alters how humans do

negativity, the state of being symbol-using is repositioned and redefined accordingly. This

prioritization, then, does not only extend life expectancy, but it shapes conceptualizations of

humanity and/as difference.

Burke's sense of the human as a symbol-using perfectionist is where I will turn for this

example to advance my same claim. In his work on the "principle of perfection," Burke claims

that "a given terminology contains various *implications*, and there is a corresponding

"perfectionist" tendency for men to attempt carrying out those implications" (19). He claims that

symbolism underlies perfectionism, and that being "*the symbol-using animal*" (3) invites us to

exercise perfection. In his example, he explains that "each of our scientific nomenclatures

suggests its own special range of possible developments, with specialists vowed to carry out

these terministic possibilities to the extent of their personal ability and technical resources" (19). Is the prioritization of technology not of use in this example as well? While it might not be explicit, technology informs the perfection which is attained through personal ability and technical resources. What is important is the symbolic precondition for technology to inform humanity's perfectionist tendencies. As thus, the prioritization of technology alters human ability to attempt and/or achieve perfection. This example might be less clear than the prior, but it nonetheless illustrates how Burke's Western, humanist framework condones the prioritization of technology as a tool to inform understandings of the human condition.

Two things: I hope it is clear that Burke's framework of human difference is further conceptualized through the prioritization of technology as a tool, and, if this is not clear, note that I have slipped in his five clauses to solidify this claim. "*The symbol-using animal*" [1] was the basis for my argument of difference; "*separated by his natural condition by instruments of his own making*" [3] informed how the human perceives symbolic priority to the "other"; "*goaded by the spirit of hierarchy*" [4] organized the human according to what he/she/it is not; and "*inventor of the negative*" [2] and "*rotten with perfection*" [5] proved that technology is central to conceptualizations of humanity (Burke 16). Knowing this, let it be clear that symbolism is not of specific importance, but instead how Western humanism slips into our framework—just as Burke's clauses slip into this section. I see this as the case with the prioritization of technology; a similar use of tech has slipped below or beyond our radar, and it now alters current understandings of the human condition.