Esposito, R. 2005. *Persons and Things*. Cambridge / Malden: Polity. 147 pp. ISBN: 978-0-7456-9065-0

In this brief book, Roberto Esposito, Professor of Theoretical Philosophy at the Scuola Normale Superiore, Italy, questions the distinction between persons and things. As a bio-political theorist, Esposito's work, along with that of other contemporary Italian political theorists such as Negri and Vattimo, builds on, departs from and develops the work of continental philosophers such as Foucault, Derrida and Merleau-Ponty. Esposito, in his latest contribution to bio-political theory, argues that we should re-conceptualise politics from the perspective of bodies; which are neither persons nor things.

In *Persons and Things* Esposito shows that persons and things have traditionally been characterised as not only different, but opposite; i.e. they are defined in mutually exclusive terms. The distinction has, according to Esposito, been a common element in our thought; to the point that it has become, in effect, a 'presupposition that serves as the implicit ground for all other types of thought' (2). This distinction, however, is increasingly inadequate as a means of meeting the challenges posed by our changing world. The increasing use of technological objects, the rise of the bio-hacking movement, and the changing role of bio-medicine in our lives leads Esposito to doubt the validity of the strict binary distinction between persons and things. The problems and paradoxes created by attempting to apply the traditional framework leads Esposito to argue for the development of a body-centric point of view. Focusing on the body is a means of re-conceptualising our lives and politics: bodies are neither persons nor things. As bodies cannot be adequately conceptualised from either side of the distinction, we are in need of a new perspective, one that acknowledges the body as having a peculiar ontological consistency. *Persons and Things*, whilst lacking analytic rigour at times, constitutes an interesting philosophical reflection on an increasingly relevant theme: how we relate to our bodies. This review will take the following structure. Firstly, I will offer a brief synopsis of the main arguments in the book following Esposito's three-part structure. I will then proceed to offer a few critical remarks in order to finally conclude by returning to the question of how *Persons and Things* can help us reflect on the biotechnological revolution.

Persons and Things is divided into three parts which focus on the *person*, the *thing* and the *body* respectively. In the first section, devoted to the person, Esposito traces a selective (non-comprehensive) history of the concept of the person from Roman law, through Christian theology to the works of Locke and Kant. In Roman Law, the concept of person was used as a means of differentiating between those humans who were, in addition to being human, persons and those who did not have this additional status. Hence, in Roman law, the notion of person denotes a normative status, one which it not coextensive with the notion of human. The notion of the person in Roman law, then, separates humans into two classes: persons and non-persons. In the Christian canon, this distinction is reinterpreted as 'an ontological division within the human-person composite' which separates the two substances that make the human distinct: flesh and spirit. This development laid the foundations for the third progression of the notion of the person from theology to philosophy. Philosophical conceptions, which Esposito analyses through the work of Locke and Kant, explicitly link personhood to moral agency.

The concept of the person, hence, is often used as a way to "exclude some types of humans from the benefits granted to others" (32) and implies a hierarchy between things and persons in which persons take precedence over things. The notion of personhood can, in virtue of the hierarchy implied by the concept, be used to justify the subjugation of some humans to others as those who are deemed non-

persons are reduced to the status of things. This historical usage of the term still informs current bioethical thinking. In contemporary liberal bioethics, personhood is conceived of as a matter of thresholds "that only fully include adults in good health who are endowed with consciousness and therefore capable of self-determination" (53). Having a notion of the person which leads to a hierarchy of value amongst humans is, for Esposito, a worrying phenomenon. Once personhood (and the normative status that is implied in its application) is denied, the door to slavery, oppression and injustice is opened. The notion of the *person* as independent from the *thing* leaves the body in an ambiguous position, often making the body "the channel through which the person was transformed into a thing" (29).

The second section of *Persons and Things* focuses on to the notion of *things.* In this chapter, Esposito draws on an eclectic group of sources; including Heidegger, Roman Law, Walter Benjamin, Marx, Plato and Lacan, in order to trace the genealogy of the notion of the *thing* across time and through cultures. Esposito then uses this genealogy as a basis for a discussion of the ways in which the value of the *thing* can be diminished. Firstly, Esposito draws on the etymology of *thing* ('*res*', '*eiro*') to argue that things attained significance, originally, due to their importance to humans. Esposito argues that, once we moved away from this etymological usage and into the language of 'being', we introduced negation into the notion of *thing.* In defining what one thing is, we inevitably suggest "everything it is not, or in other words, its difference from every other thing" (60). This tendency is present in the work of both Plato and Aristotle, who rarify the *thing* through the notion of 'essence'. The *thing* becomes, hence, a composite; it contains a true part (the 'form' or *eidos*) and a part that is non-essential, and by extension, less real. Furthermore, in accounting for the ultimate existence of things, Aristotle and Plato both suggest that *things* are the products of craftsmen, either human or divine (whether the 'demiurg' or the 'unmoved mover').

Having discussed Plato and Aristotle, Roberto Esposito turns to the relationship between words and *things*. Language, Esposito claims, does not correspond strictly to the world; it is, in part, representation. Language, like the rarification inherent in the discussion of the essences of things, takes away from the reality of the *thing.* In order to represent something a distance from that which is represented is necessary.

The third way in which *things* can be robbed of their value is by being treated in accordance with their exchange value and not their use value. Exchange values, in so far as they reflect the time necessary to produce the objects, become not a *thing* "but the reversed outcome of relationships between people" (83). This leads Esposito to conclude (rather hastily) that focusing on exchange values, as well as robbing objects of their value, requires that a certain group of persons become things, i.e. the proletariat.

Finally, *things* can be robbed of their value by their reproducibility. Esposito reinterprets Walter Benjamin's remarks about the technical reproducibility of artistic objects reducing the object's aura to claim that, in a world of proliferation, things can become eternal in time but will ultimately lose ontological depth. The *thing*, in proliferating, becomes less real.

The third, and final, section of *Persons and Things* is devoted to the notion of the *body*. Here Esposito develops his positive account of the body as a response to the challenges which the binary distinction between persons and things cannot explain.

The first of these challenges is tied to the development of technology. In a world of biotechnological advances, persons can no longer be identified with their bodies: our bodies increasingly survive us as

persons, and our persons now survive the loss of body parts and the mixture of our bodies with things. Hence, the distinction between person and thing is no longer as easily applicable as was thought.

The second challenge to the hegemony of the person-thing distinction is its inability to explain the contribution the body makes to knowledge. The body, in having a unique function as a medium through which things and people interact, influences the outcome of knowledge. Drawing on Spinoza and Nietzsche, as well as the work of phenomenologists such as Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, Esposito claims that the body is irreducible and ever present in our lives, essentially being a "precondition of every action I perform" (120).

In attempting to conceptualise the body and the ownership thereof, Esposito follows the tradition of Roman Law in not ascribing literal 'self-ownership' to people, considering the human body, at least in part, as belonging to the whole of humanity. Viewing the body through a self-ownership optic invariably reduces the body to the status of a thing. If we are to reject the traditional implications of the person-thing distinction, the body must not be a mere thing to be held by persons; we must move beyond the framework of people possessing and exercising dominion over things. The body, hence, must be seen as belonging to the category of that which is not held in private, but that which is held in common (*res communes*).

Finally, Esposito discusses the notion of the political body and the role of bodies in society. Esposito sees in the recent tendency toward mass demonstrations (such as the Occupy movement, or the Arab spring) evidence of an incipient revaluing of the body in political action. Esposito reads these movements as implying that, in order for politics to exist, we need a public sphere which is not empty but "filled with living bodies united by the same protests or by the same demands" (147).

Esposito's *Persons and Things* is an attempt to conceptualise the role of the body in opposition to the notions of things and persons, a project of gargantuan proportions. In this, extremely brief, monograph Esposito is destined to give us a partial explanation of his theory and the implications thereof. The implications of conceptualising the body as *res communes,* for the ethics of transplantation for example, deserves a more detailed explanation. It is unclear from Esposito's discussion whether considering the human body as *res communes* would imply, for example: (i) that organs can be taken without the consent of the person after they have died or (ii) that an opt-out system of organ donation is morally acceptable, or (iii) that the patenting of gene sequences is immoral; to name a few of the possibilities.

In undertaking such a radical and speculative project in such a small book Esposito was also condemned to be partial in his interpretations of the history and development of the notions of *person* and *thing* across time and between cultures. For this reason, some of the justifications for the claims Esposito makes are not completely clear, at least not from the text as a self-contained piece. He quickly moves from topic to topic in language which is highly literary, making searching for the premises and conclusions to his arguments a daunting prospect. There are numerous occasions throughout the book in which the arguments move too quickly over highly contested terrain, inevitably overlooking important distinctions and leaving questions unanswered. Esposito, for example, doesn't explain why conceiving of the body as *res communes* implies the body is not a *thing*; nor does he adequately justify the claim that valuing objects according exchange values inevitably leads to reducing some persons to the status of things.

The complexity of the language, as well as the speed with which Esposito moves from idea to idea

sketching a picture which draws on a vast amount of philosophers, makes this book inappropriate for (most) undergraduates.

However, merely to judge this book as too short to achieve its aims, requiring more justification, and including only a partial interpretation of the history of the terms Esposito discusses would be a mistake. If read as an eloquent, literary, and thought provoking piece of philosophy, one can appreciate the virtues of this short book. It is not an attempt to justify every assertion, to hold every idea up to criticism, to judge the validity of an insight in logico-formal terms; it is an impassioned plea for a re-conceptualization of politics in the body's terms. Whilst *Persons and Things* is not a ground-breaking (in as far as Merleau-Ponty preceded Esposito in placing the body at the centre of his philosophy) it does do something novel; it weaves insights taken from other authors and a historical overview (and critique) of the person-thing distinction with Esposito's own insights into a concise, yet thought provoking, piece of philosophy.

Having said this, there are problems with Esposito's book which cannot be put down to space constraints. In his argument Esposito claims that once personhood (and the normative status that is implied by the term) is denied, the door to slavery, oppression and injustice is opened. Contra Esposito it could be claimed that, whilst this may be true, the rationale for not attributing full personhood to those who would not be 'competent to consent' is not the same as the rationale of slavery: not attributing personhood is a requirement of justice and can be seen as a way of satisfying the vulnerable person's entitlement to protection. Esposito seems to claim that it is almost inevitable that, once we establish 'grades' of personhood, we will tend towards the destruction of 'non-valuable lives'; not giving due consideration to the interests of those we have denied full personhood to. Esposito reinforces his claim by stating that this is, in fact, how we *currently* treat the human foetus. Whilst it may be true that it is possible that denying full personhood will lead to abuse, this is not necessarily true. It is equally true that wrongly ascribing full personhood to people can lead to abuse, as it would involve holding these people to standards they cannot plausibly reach, which would also constitute a grave wrong.

Furthermore, in taking the destruction of the foetus as an example of how we treat non-persons, Esposito fails to take into account the distinction between beings that are *no-longer-persons* and beings who have *never-been-persons.* In standard bioethical accounts the limits of what a medical practitioner can do to a being who *was* (but no longer is) a person are different to the limits of what one can do to a being that has never been a person. An example of how this ontological difference is morally relevant can be seen in cases involving the (non-consensual) treating of adults born with severely impaired cognitive functions. It is commonly considered acceptable to treat these individuals (who are unable to consent) only if the treatment accords with the best interests of the patients. Contrast this to the treatment of non-persons who were persons: Non-consensually treating a similarly impaired adult who *was* a person (e.g. dementia patients) must be justified in terms of advance directives or judgement by an appointed surrogate decision-maker who takes into account the patient's values and previously expressed wishes.

Notwithstanding these problems, Esposito's critique of the person-thing distinction is not to be ignored. During the first two decades of the 21st century we have seen an increasing merging of the thing and the person in the form of implants, transplants, and recently developed sophisticated technological options. Bodies now include artefacts, may be maintained by artefacts and, on occasion, bodies (including parts thereof) get reduced to the status of things. The tensions between this contemporary

paradigm and the traditional thing-person dichotomy which Esposito identifies are important and merit critical attention. Refocusing on the body, and how it interacts with power structures, may prove to be a valuable tool for conceptualising the normative issues surrounding our increasing use of biotechnology and the increasing weight of bio-power in our lives. Whether these goals are best achieved by refocusing on the body through Esposito's terminology and conceptual framework is an open question. To conclude I offer one suggestion why alternative frameworks may prove to be more fruitful: Esposito's framework seems to lack a clear action guiding principle which, in a world which changes so rapidly (especially in the areas of biomedicine), is undoubtedly necessary.

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