

On Thinking in a Thoughtless Time

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ABSTRACT: As it is a form of thinking, and an especially significant form at that, the question of the contemporary value and significance of philosophy cannot be asked apart from the question of the value and significance of thinking itself. Yet as Martin Heidegger argues, ours seems to be a time in which we are “in flight from thinking” – a time in which, if thinking is seen as valuable and relevant at all, it is only to the extent to which it serves an instrumental purpose – usually a purpose construed in monetary or commercial terms. Such monetized instrumentalism is deeply problematic, not only because of the way it corrodes any real sense of value or undermines even the idea of the instrumental as such, but because of the way it brings with it a loss of any real sense of limit or bound. It is just such a sense of limit or bound that is central to thinking, and so the contemporary “flight from thinking” can also be understood as a flight from limit or bound. Moreover, as thinking finds its own bound, as well as its ground, in truth, so the flight from thinking is also a flight from truth, and a flight, too, from our own humanity.

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If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face, forever' – George Orwell, *Nineteen Eight-Four*.

1. *The flight from thinking*

"Thoughtlessness is an uncanny visitor who comes and goes everywhere in today's world", declared Martin Heidegger in 1955, "For nowadays we take in everything in the quickest and cheapest way, only to forget it just as quickly, instantly... Man today is *in flight from thinking*".¹ At the end of 2016, and in the aftermath of the election of Donald Trump to the Presidency of the United States, Heidegger's comments seems especially apt. Regardless of the merits of his principal opponent, Hilary Clinton, Trump seems to epitomise the triumph of a mode of celebrity culture and populist politics that substitutes the slogan for the idea, braggadocio for strength, and impact for truth – to symbolize a time in which politics has become a reality TV show and public discussion is conducted by Twitter feed and Facebook post.

In such a time, and in the midst of the larger state of world affairs in which deceit seems more prevalent than truth, violence and threat more often employed than persuasion or reason, and in which poverty, oppression, and violence continue to dominate the lives of many, questions about the contemporary relevance of *philosophy* might seem almost beside the point. Yet if the present ills of the world can indeed be seen as symptomatic of a refusal of thinking, which surely implies a refusal of genuine feeling also (especially of that felt thoughtfulness that is manifest in compassion), then philosophy must indeed come directly into the picture, since, no matter its institutionalised forms, the real character of philosophy is surely to be found in its own character as a mode of thinking.

In this essay, my aim is to explore the relevance of philosophy through a consideration of philosophy as it stands in relation to thinking, and through a consideration also of thinking itself. Part of what I shall argue is that the thoughtlessness that underlies so much of what we see around us in the contemporary world (a thoughtlessness that may well be inextricably bound up with the very character of that world) is a forgetting or refusal of what thinking itself is, and that this forgetting or refusal is essentially a forgetting or refusal of

limit or of bound, and a forgetting or refusal of truth. In this, it involves a forgetting or refusal, not only of philosophy, but also of what is essential to the human.

2. From value-in-itself to value-for-money

If philosophy is indeed a mode of thinking, and a particularly important mode at that, then to ask for a reason why philosophy might be relevant today – why it might be relevant even in its institutionalised forms in universities and our schools – is partly to ask after the relevance of thinking itself. This is all the more so when one recognises that philosophy is not just *one* kind of thinking among others, but rather it is that specific *kind* of thinking that also takes thinking (whether the thinking that is philosophy itself or thinking of any other kind) as its object. Philosophy is thus essentially reflective, essentially a form of self-questioning or self-exploration – and this is so even when philosophy looks to understand the world, since such world-exploration is undertaken by philosophy in a way that aims to address both the world and the nature of our exploration of it, and it is precisely this that makes such exploration philosophical. On this basis, to ask after the reason why philosophy might be relevant today is itself to ask an essentially philosophical question – it is to ask the sort of question that already belongs to philosophy.

The way the question concerning the relevance or value of philosophy is taken up in most contemporary public discourse, however, usually pays little or no attention to the philosophical nature of the question, since it typically assumes a view of philosophy as more or else identical with a supposedly narrow and esoteric academic thinking that can be held to account, and should be so held, by what are seen as the practical demands and concerns of everyday life. The critique of philosophy is thus something that is supposed to be possible from a place assumed to lie outside of and apart from philosophy, and that also has priority over it in virtue of its practical origin and embeddedness, unlike philosophy, in the ‘real’ world. What is assumed here is essentially the priority of the practical, and more specifically, the instrumental – the idea that something is valuable, not in itself, but because of what it brings about. Value is essentially, then, a matter of usefulness. The result, almost inevitably, is that philosophy comes to be viewed as lacking in value or relevance precisely because, as a mode of thinking that takes thinking as its primary concern, it remains to some extent apart from any specific practical application or activity.

Yet inasmuch as the questioning of philosophy is taken to involve a questioning of *thinking*, then the idea that philosophy might need to justify or account for itself in instrumental terms should already appear as a strange and peculiar demand. This is not merely because the questioning of philosophy already moves within the domain of that which it questions – so to question philosophy is already to participate in philosophy – but because the idea that thinking itself needs justification, and especially that thinking requires instrumental justification, is itself strange, if not incoherent. Justification arises only as a form of thinking, and depends for its value and significance on the significance already given to thinking.

Even were one to argue that thinking is best understood as an evolved capacity, and so as a capacity that we come to possess because of the instrumental advantages that it has brought in evolutionary terms, still this would not legitimate the idea that the value or significance of thinking is to be assessed primarily instrumentally. To suppose that it was would simply be to confuse the *causal grounds* of thinking with its own *rational* structure – which includes the structure of justification. It would also be to confuse thinking understood purely as a biological and evolutionary phenomenon, alongside many other such phenomena, with thinking as that which enables the inquiry into any and all phenomena. More generally, to suppose that thinking is valuable because of what it is useful for is to misunderstand the way all assessments of value and of use are possible only from *within thinking*. The value and significance of thinking thus has to stand outside of any merely instrumental understanding, since such instrumentalism already presupposes thinking. The value of thinking is a value thinking has *in itself*.

The attempt to construe thinking in instrumental terms readily leads, not merely to misunderstanding, but also to distortion. The way this occurs is partly through the way instrumental desire affects judgment. As various forms of cognitive dissonance show, we are highly prone to favour judgments that are consistent with existing desires, interests, and prejudices. When we frame our thinking in strongly instrumentalist terms, then we also give added strength to such prior desires, interests, and prejudices. Effectively, we reinforce the already present instrumentalist tendencies that are there in thinking anyway. The result is that we tend to value particular outcomes, not on the basis of whether they accord with the demands of thinking, but on the basis of whether they fit with a set of, often short-term, instrumentalist concerns.

The tendency for instrumentalism itself to distort thinking turns out itself to be instrumentally misguided (or can be construed as such), but that is simply a reflection of a more fundamental deficit in thinking that arises from the imposition of external considerations on the process of thinking. This is not something that can be evaded or avoided by declaring that instrumentalism is not so much about *how* we think, but rather concerns that *to which* our thinking is directed. Such a distinction is not only false in itself, but also begs the question in its treatment of thinking as if it were indeed an instrument that could simply be directed to different objects. Moreover, although it is true that all thinking is influenced by prior desires and interests (and one might even say, from a hermeneutic perspective, that this is essential to the very possibility of thinking), such influence operates within a larger structure that demands that we attend also to the structure of thought – to considerations of reason, evidence, integration, and coherence. The prioritization of the instrumental, however, all too readily leads to that larger framework, and the considerations that it brings with it, being over-ridden or ignored, and so diminishing the extent to which it can operate to mitigate the influence of those prior desires and interests.

It is nevertheless the prioritization of the instrumental, and of an instrumental view even of thinking, that is at the root of the antagonism that is nowadays often expressed towards philosophy. Moreover, it is not just that the instrumentalism at stake here is one that prefers the ‘practical’ over the ‘theoretical’ or ‘academic’. It is a much more specific form of instrumentalism than just that – an instrumentalism that operates in a way determined by a narrowly business and commercial orientation (essentially an orientation derived from modern capitalism), that looks to render all value in terms of the common currency of quantity and number, and that in fact assumes, if we are blunt about it, the *monetization* even of utility: the only real ‘value’ is effectively taken to be monetary value and ‘value-for-money’ replaces any sort of ‘value-in-itself’.

In the context of the contemporary university, in which philosophy, and so also thinking, appears in its institutionalized form, this sort of monetized instrumentalism² is evident in the transformation of research and teaching into forms of economic production. In the case of research, the commoditized outputs of such production include publications and grants, both of which are valued in terms of their direct or indirect contribution to income, along with consultancy advice, patents, and other saleable ideas and expertise, but reputation has also become one of the things research ‘produces’, since it is reputation as

measured in university rating and ranking exercises that itself serves indirectly to generate further institutional income (and so also often contributes to the financial betterment of those who occupy the leading managerial positions within universities³). In the case of teaching, it is individuals, trained to meet the needs of industry, who are the primary product, although what the university sells to the individual is a vocational ticket to, supposedly, greater financial wealth and security. The university, once the place where the value of thinking was itself enshrined in the institutionalized commitment to knowledge and education as valuable, not for any instrumental purpose, but in themselves – an idea most famously given articulation in Newman's *The Idea of a University*⁴ – now itself appears as the embodiment of the instrumental transformation of thinking.

The instrumentalist orientation that is evident in the contemporary university is not restricted to the university alone – indeed, its presence even within the university is indicative of how strongly it is present in contemporary society and in its central institutions. The idea of thinking as having a value that belongs to thinking *in its own terms* is almost everywhere, in public and corporate discourse, over-ridden by the idea that there can be only one way of understanding or measuring value, and that the value of anything and everything must therefore be convertible into this single currency. Thinking appears either as mere 'calculation', or as one of the means by which things can be produced for calculation – the contemporary emphasis on 'creativity', 'design thinking', and 'innovation' are themselves examples of this transformation of thinking into a mode of commercial production.

Thinking is not alone in being threatened in this way – all of human life is threatened with such conversion and reduction. In the case of thinking, however, it is especially problematic, since it threatens our very capacity even to see or to analyse what is happening here. In a world in which everything is understood in quantized and monetized terms, how are we to find terms in which to consider alternative positions let alone engage in any effective critique of such quantification and monetization? How is genuine public discussion and decision-making possible when such discussion and decision-making has itself become nothing more than an instrumentalist process geared to certain monetized ends (and so has ceased to concern itself with the real questions of truth and evidence that are otherwise the concerns of thinking)? Is it any wonder, then, that in the face of the dominance of mere 'calculation' over genuine thoughtfulness, any resistance to such calculation or to its effects

either lacks a space to voice its arguments or else becomes manifest in popular form as anger, disillusionment, and alienation?

3. Money's boundlessness and thinking's limit

It is often argued that the prioritization of the monetary, the commercial, and the financial is itself instrumentally grounded in the fact that, especially in modern societies, all other forms of well-being depend on financial and economic well-being. Ensuring sound monetary and financial management is thus presented as simply prudent, and to do anything else as foolish and irresponsible. Yet this is to overlook or ignore the point already made above: *that it is only on the basis of what we already value that we can determine what is prudent or useful – prudence and utility are both relative to a prior evaluative framework.*⁵

The prioritization of the monetary and the financial not only leaves this point out of account, but it also obscures it, since that very prioritization often brings with it a tendency to treat money as itself the primary locus of value, and similarly, for all forms of well-being to indeed be seen as derivative of and secondary to financial or economic well-being.⁶ When monetary and financial considerations become primary in this way, when what is not properly a value comes effectively to function as one, then other values are either lost or else, if they continue to function, do so in ways that are often hidden. Frequently this means that those values are not subject to broader societal scrutiny or moderation. Self-interest, for instance, is more likely to flourish in a context in which monetary and financial considerations are prioritized, since not only does such prioritization itself tend to reinforce forms of self-interested behaviour, but it can itself allow such behaviour to appear as if it were simply another aspect of the sort of sound monetary and financial decision-making that supposedly benefits all. Self-interest thus becomes covertly – and sometimes, it has to be said, *overtly* – legitimised.

There is a long history that opposes *thinking*, especially in the form of philosophy, and *money* and the pursuit of money, especially in the form of business and commerce.⁷ One finds this in Socrates refusal to take payment from his students⁸ and in Adam Smith's warning against the class of "merchants and master manufacturers" whose interests are only their own and who seek "to deceive and oppress the public".⁹ One might argue that the contemporary suspicion of philosophy is, in some respects, simply, the reverse side of this

long-standing antagonism between philosophy and the monetary or commercial – and in a world in which the monetary and the commercial rule, it is perhaps unsurprising to find philosophy so much under threat. Yet what is different about the contemporary situation is the extent to which the monetary and commercial now dominate even the institutional framework within which philosophy itself is situated as well as the larger framework of public discourse and debate. Indeed, the dominance of monetized instrumentalism threatens the very idea of any form of thinking, whether philosophical or otherwise, that does not take the instrumental and the monetized as primary.

Undoubtedly, instrumentalist thinking constitutes *a kind* of thinking – indeed, as noted above, thinking often has an instrumentalist character, even though such instrumentalism cannot be taken as lying at the heart of thinking. Where such thinking operates in recognition of its character as instrumentalist (which includes some awareness of its own desires and interests), and so in acknowledgment of the prior determination of the ends to which it looks to find the means, then instrumentalism does not present itself as especially problematic. Yet in the form in which instrumentalism is today so widespread – the form in which instrumental thinking, and especially monetized instrumental thinking, is taken to be primary, and in which the only end is the furtherance of monetized instrumentality as such – then it becomes unclear even what sense can be attached anymore to the idea of the instrumental.

Instrumentality depends on ends that lie outside of the instrumental system. As things stand in the contemporary world, however, it is increasingly harder to identify such non-instrumental ends, since properly understood, money is itself valuable solely in its own character as instrumental (in terms of what it enables one *to buy*), and inasmuch money comes to function *as if it were an end*, then so there is no end to be found other than in the instrumentality of money. The very act of monetising what is valuable thus translates such value into a pure system of instrumentality alone, which is to say, a system in which there are no ends but *only* means, but in doing so the system properly ceases to be even instrumental, since the distinction of means from end, of instrument from purpose, is lost. The way this happens mirrors the loss of value that also occurs when financial and monetary consideration are similarly prioritized.

In fact, what we lose touch with when think purely instrumentally – or purely calculatively – is precisely the idea of *distinction*, but so also of *limit* or *bound*. This is evident

in the very fact that an orientation towards the instrumental or calculative alone itself involves a forgetting or ignoring of the particular character of the instrumental and the calculative, which is to say, a forgetting or ignoring of their own bounds and limits. The tendency towards just such forgetting and ignoring of distinction, of bound, and of limit has been one of the main criticisms that philosophers, from Plato onwards, have made against money and the dominance of the commercial. The way money operates in this way is itself at the heart of money's often remarked-upon tendency to corrupt, which is not simply a matter of money having a tendency to encourage greed or avarice, but rather concerns the way in which it tends to distort and obscure the real character of things (including its own character as instrumental).

The latter point appears in the work of Georg Simmel in his claim that money, through its transformation of everything into a system of pure number and quantity, effectively destroys the very possibility of differentiation.¹⁰ The problem at issue here arises because of the way number and quantity lack any basis in themselves for limit or bound – and it is limit or bound that are the basis for differentiation and distinction. This lack of limit or bound can be seen, in the case of money, in the way in which, unlike most other things, money offers neither an upper limit to its accumulation nor any lower limit that would constrain its loss (there is thus neither an upper limit to monetized wealth nor a lower limit to monetized debt¹¹) and this lack of limit is made all the more evident in contemporary societies in which money has become almost entirely abstract – credit cards replace cash, payments are made electronically, and money appears most often in the form of a line of a numbers on a computer screen or print-out.

This absence of limit or bound – which is what really underpins the loss of any sense of genuine ends, and so of real means also, as well as of any sense of proper value – is what sets the monetary and commercial so much against the philosophical, since it is precisely the attentiveness to limit and bound, and their exploration, that is central to philosophy. This is so, not only because philosophy can be construed as an inquiry into the natures of things (and the nature of a thing is determined by the bounds that belong to it), but also because philosophy as just that mode of thinking that takes thinking as its object, and as such, it is essentially concerned with the nature and bounds *of thinking*, and may even be said to have its origin in the very recognition of thinking's own boundedness – its own limitation.

It is thus that Socrates, so often cited as the exemplary philosopher, whether in academic or popular discourse, puts such emphasis on ignorance, and the acknowledgment of ignorance, as the beginning of wisdom. If Socrates is wise, as the Delphic oracle declares, then it is because *he knows that he does not know* – and this is not only a recognition of a lack of knowledge (which otherwise one might suppose can be rectified simply by the gaining of knowledge), but also of the ever-present tendency to error and misunderstanding. We always remain in ignorance, which is why we are always committed to the project of thinking and knowing, because we always remain prone to error, misunderstanding, and misconstrual, and that is why the recognition of ignorance is and always remains so important. This is such a simple point that it is easy to forget or to overlook it, and yet it is with just this point that not only does philosophy have its origin, but so too does thinking.

Thinking always arises out of something that calls us to think – perhaps some perplexity or problem, something that requires decision or action, something that provokes or reminds us, something that simply calls us to listen and respond. Thinking thus always stands in relation to something – something that thinking is turned towards, that thinking is ‘about’ – and this is so even when our thinking is confused or vague and even when our thinking has a more contemplative character. What calls for thinking is that to which thinking itself has to respond and to which it must attend. Thinking falters when it forgets or loses sight, not only of that which calls for thinking, but also when it forgets or loses sight of the ground on which thinking already stands – when it ignores the prior judgments out of which it emerges and ceases to be mindful of the way in which its approach to its objects always depends on the inevitable particularity and partiality of thinking’s own standpoint.¹²

When we think, we do so *from* somewhere and in relation *to* something, and this is already indicative of the necessary boundedness of thinking. That boundedness is not what prevents thinking, but is actually what enables it (one cannot think, no matter what is sometimes claimed, from nowhere at all – which is the hermeneutic point briefly noted in the discussion earlier), since it gives thinking an orientation and direction, as well as an object. The very distinction between thinking and what is thought about already indicates the way bound and limit are involved here, since *distinction* itself depends on bound and limit – for there to be a distinction is for there to be a mutual boundedness. One might say, in fact, that thinking arises only in the ‘between’ of thinking and what is given to thinking. It is in that ‘between’ that is opened up a space for thinking – and so for attending, responding,

questioning, judging, deciding, connecting, identifying, inferring, hoping, desiring, believing and so on – in relation to something that is at issue in thinking. It is in the openness of this between that both ignorance and knowledge are possible, both error and veracity, since it is precisely the space that separates what we think from the reality of that which we think about. Inasmuch as thinking always presupposes this ‘between’, and with it a sense of the ‘other’ that calls upon thinking, so our own being as thinkers is a being ‘in’ the world that is nevertheless also ‘apart from’ the world. This being ‘in’ and ‘apart’ is what underlies the strangeness of human being – a strangeness that involves being both at home and not at home, in closeness and distance, on the earth and under the sky, in the midst of life and in the face of death.

There can be no thinking – nor anything *to be thought* or anyone who thinks – without bound or limit. To be bounded, to be limited, is also to be *placed*, and so when we talk of the essential relation between thinking and bound or limit we are also talking of the essential relation between thinking and place. It is in being-placed, which is to say being in the world in a certain way, here and now, that thinking is oriented, and it is in being oriented that thinking is opened to the world – and so is opened to that which calls upon thinking, opened to that which calls thinking into the world, opened *to that which calls us into thought*.

Moreover, when thinking is itself turned towards thinking, when thinking takes the form of a genuine philosophizing, then thinking must also turn itself to its own bound and limit, and so to its own place, and its relation to that place. Perhaps one might even say that this is what the most essential thinking actually is: just the thinking of the place of thinking which is also the thinking of our own place – which is to say, of that wherein we find ourselves, of the bounds and limits of our own being in the world. Of course, when we forget the place of our thinking, or when we try to think in a way that ignores the being-placed character of thinking, then, in all sorts of very ordinary ways, we tend to think ‘badly’ – to become ‘thoughtless’ – we over-generalise, we jump to conclusions, we become dogmatic, we ignore indeterminacies and ambiguities, we may even overlook the inadequacies and failures to which our thoughtlessness leads. In contrast, genuine thinking is also always alert to its own limitations, its own tendency to error and failure – which is also why genuine thinking so often takes the form of both a questioning and listening.

From this perspective, Heidegger’s talk of the contemporary “flight from thinking” can be taken to refer to a flight from the engagement with our own bounds and limits, a flight

from the very place in which we ourselves are, a flight from that in which our own being is grounded, and, indeed, this is just the way Heidegger himself takes it. The flight from thinking is itself tied to a seeming loss of connectedness to those places in which our lives are supported and nurtured, and at the very same time, a loss of any sense of, or of any capacity to engage with, the wider expansiveness of the world.¹³ The flight from thinking and into thoughtlessness is thus also a flight into homelessness and worldlessness.

This flight from thinking is one that Heidegger argues is itself inextricably bound to contemporary technology. Yet in talking of technology, Heidegger is not concerned with particular devices or mechanisms, but instead with what the rise of what he himself calls “calculative thinking” and with the systems of organization that are part of it. Monetization, and the dominance of the financial and commercial, is an essential element in the forms of calculation and organization at issue here – and so contemporary technology has become deeply enmeshed with the structures of contemporary capitalism.¹⁴ It is monetization, as a mode of pure quantification in which everything is rendered the same, that both enables and also drives the flight from thinking. Monetization erases any proper sense of the bounds within which human being is constituted and within which difference arises. It is thus that even the bounds within which the monetary itself operates – as a phenomenon that emerges out of and on the basis of human being – are obscured and forgotten, and by means of which the illusion of a generalised boundlessness is erected and maintained.

4. Thinking and the primacy of the non-instrumental

Although it may present itself as instrumentalist, the monetized instrumentalism of the contemporary world is indeed such that it has ceased to function, in any genuine sense, as instrumental. This is partly because its refusal of boundedness or limit is a refusal of the boundedness that constitutes even the instrumental itself – the instrumental being constituted through the contrast between the instrumental and that with respect to which it is instrumental. The result, however, is that, for all that the contemporary emphasis on, for instance, efficiency, economy, or ‘value-for-money’, it is arguably the case that there is now greater waste, greater dysfunctionality, greater difficulty in meeting even the most basic of goals.

Even if we leave to one side the environmental breakdown that now appears directly linked to our current economic system (it is surely no accident that the environmental is so often set against the economic as if there were some sort of choice to be made between them¹⁵), it is commonplace to find talk of the contemporary breakdown in good governance (especially within the public sector), of increasing social and political alienation and discontent, of heightened levels of inequality and loss of social cohesion, of a greater inability to manage economic and financial systems in the face of their volatility and unpredictability, of an increasing incapacity, in spite of higher wealth and productivity than ever before, to meet the basic health, education, and welfare needs of the majority of the world's population. The 'public good' seems to have been overtaken by commercial interest, which now appears to drive even public institutions – if they have not already been marginalised, privatised, or simply disbanded.¹⁶ There is one line of argument that would suggest that, in fact, this sort of dysfunctionality is itself part of the way modern capitalism must function – that it depends on a constant process of destruction and destabilization for its own maintenance.¹⁷ Yet even if this were so, what is seems simply to reaffirm is precisely the extent to which the system of which modern capitalism is an expression or which it embodies – namely, the system of monetized instrumentality – is a system that no longer operates instrumentally in the usual sense, since any instrumentality it has is now entirely internalised.

When thinking operates only instrumentally, then it already has a tendency to ignore its bounded character – and this is simply because the instrumental tends to lose itself in the focus on the instrumental relation itself and so on the relation between means and a particular end. Yet so long as the instrumental does indeed operate in relation to some such end that is outside of the system of the instrumental, then the narrowness of instrumental thinking is not necessarily problematic. In effect, the boundedness of instrumental thinking is operative in such thinking, whether implicitly or explicitly, by the ends to which the instrumental is subordinated. What then becomes important are the ends that are at issue – and especially the relation between different ends and so the way the entire system of ends may constrain instrumental decision-making.

The monetization of instrumentality is problematic precisely because of the way it obliterates the distinction between instrument and end, and the very idea of there being different, distinct, and sometimes incommensurable ends. Neither as instrument nor as end does anything within the structure of monetized instrumentality appear as open to question,

and so the legitimacy of that structure cannot be questioned without, as it were, already standing outside of the very structure that grants legitimacy to any question. When that structure appears to fail, then that failure is either not recognised or else it is seen as a function of some other interruption to its normal functioning – thus not even the global financial crisis of 2008, and whose repercussions are still being felt, led to any radical and genuine change in the system of monetized instrumentality. If anything, that system is even more entrenched today than it was then. There simply is no space – no ‘between’ – that the system of monetized instrumentality allows within which its own operation, its own bounds and limits, can be brought to salience, and so opened to any genuine inquiry; there is no ‘external’ perspective, because there are no external ends, from which it can be examined and perhaps found wanting.

The ‘dysfunctionality’ of the system of monetized instrumentality is not a dysfunctionality that appears within that system itself. It appears only if one allows that there may indeed be another standpoint from which that system can be viewed – most obviously, the perspective afforded by the human context in which that monetized instrumentality remains embedded and out of which it originally arose. From this perspective, the monetized instrumentality of the present – and, with it, the radicalised form of capitalism that it embodies – is itself *instrumentally* dysfunctional. Yet although this dysfunctionality is indeed connected with the way in which it has dissociated itself from any genuinely human ends, this dissociation is itself more a symptom than a cause. The dysfunctionality of the system of monetized instrumentality does indeed have its origin in its refusal of its own properly instrumental character, its inability to recognise the inadequacy of the monetary to operate as a genuine end, in its blindness to its own bound and limit, in its essential thoughtlessness.

It is characteristic of genuine thinking that it is always failing – always being brought up short, always finding itself confounded by the things to which its attention is directed and yet which always exceed thinking – and this failing gives rise to the characteristic dynamic of thinking as a movement to and fro in that ‘between’ that is essential to thinking – that ‘between’ that lies between thinking and its objects, between the thinking and the thinker, between the thinker and other thinkers, between thinking and the world. The movement of thinking is a constant movement within and across various limits and bounds, and the movement of thinking is also a movement that looks to integrate at the same time as it also differentiates. Where the movement of thinking begins is with thinking, and the thinker’s,

own being placed within the world, both the world of things and the world of ideas, and in relation to other thinkers and other things, living and non-living, and so also with the fact of essential plurality and the thinker's own finitude in the face of that plurality. It is just such plurality and finitude that is effectively refused or ignored by the emphasis on forms of monetized instrumentality. Yet since that plurality and finitude remains an unavoidable feature of the world and of our own mode of being in it, so to refuse or to ignore it is to open oneself to even greater failure and breakdown than is ordinarily the case – and in such a way that the very fact of failure and breakdown will not itself be able properly to be addressed. The emphasis on the monetary and the instrumental thus turns out itself to be instrumentally dysfunctional.

One might be tempted to say, at this point, that what has actually been revealed, in spite of what might have been said earlier about the non-instrumental character of thinking or about thinking as 'an end in itself', is precisely the instrumental value and significance of thinking. Thinking matters, and philosophy with it, one might say, because it allows us to recognise and explore the conditions under which thinking, and everything that follows from thinking, including even instrumental thinking, must operate, and so there can be no viable instrumental thinking without thinking in this broader sense – such broader thinking is itself *instrumentally valuable* even though it is *not instrumentally oriented*.

Yet even though it is true that thinking has instrumental value, the value and significance of thinking does not rest *primarily* in its instrumentality. It is characteristic of an instrument that it can be taken up or put down as the need serves. Yet thinking cannot be taken up or put down in this way, and this is so even though it may be true that there is a contemporary 'flight' from thinking. Thinking belongs to our very character as human, so much so that we might say that the 'between' that thinking opens up is precisely the space in which human being finds its own place. The flight from thinking is thus an impossible flight – a flight from what we already are, a denial of that to which we are already committed. This is why the monetized instrumentality that has occupied so much of this discussion, and that dominates so much of contemporary discourse, turns out itself to be dysfunctional and contradictory: it operates in a way that is inconsistent with that in which it is itself grounded, in a way that fails to accord with the very bounds and limits by which it is constituted. As Heidegger points out, only that which can be a ground for growth can lie fallow, only those

who have a capacity for hearing can be deaf, only those who have been young can become old, and only those who have a capacity for thinking, can be thoughtless.¹⁸

5. Thinking, Truth, and the Human

The rise of Trump seems to characterise the contemporary “flight from thinking” in a particularly powerful way. Yet one might argue that part of what has driven Trump’s rise to power is popular reaction against the effects of exactly the monetized instrumentalism that has been at issue in the discussion here. In that case, does Trump’s rise mark the decline of that instrumentalism? – If so, might it even mean, strange though such a suggestion might be, a stop to the flight from thinking? The seeming perversity of the latter idea, at least where Trump is concerned, ought to make us very cautious in our consideration of the former.

In fact, Trump’s rise should *not* be taken to indicate that the sort of monetized instrumentalism at issue here is now itself in flight. It remains the case that the same structures that embody and reinforce the monetized and the instrumental remain in place around the world, and there is nothing that suggests Trump is likely to contest those structures in any essential way (free trade is perhaps the one area of exception). Moreover, Trump is himself dependent upon, and a contributor to, the very same economic and financial order that is so much bound up with the contemporary dominance of the instrumental and the monetized. Ironically, much of Trump’s support comes from those who have themselves been disadvantaged by that very order, but this merely shows that the system of monetized instrumentalism at issue here does not operate in ways that are entirely consist or indeed entirely functional, and that it may also operate through ideas or commitments that may, in terms of their content, even be antagonistic to it – and one might note that this seems an almost inevitable consequence of its instrumental character.

In fact, this latter point, brings us directly back to the way in which the contemporary dominance of monetization and instrumentalism, including its manifestation in a figure such as Trump, is indeed tied up with the flight from thinking. When thinking itself becomes merely instrumental, then the very processes of thinking come to appear as themselves determined by that same instrumentalism – in its public forms, in public discourse and decision-making, thinking becomes simply a way of advancing or realising an already

identified outcome. What matters, then, is not consistency, which can be simply ignored (as Trump himself shows), nor truth or evidence as such (the significance of which depends on a prior commitment to truth and knowledge, and so to thinking, as important in themselves and not merely as instrumentally valuable), but simply the ability to get approval of or commitment to an outcome, and nothing more. If truth and evidence count all, it is only as they are themselves instrumental, and instrumentally, at least so far as gaining approval and commitment is concerned, all one needs is the *appearance* of truth and evidence. As monetization and instrumentalization tends to erase bounds, limits, and distinctions, so it erases or obscures even the distinction between good evidence and bad, between truth and what is taken to be truth, between truth and lie. So we find ourselves in a world of 'spin', a world of 'alternative facts', a world that is 'post-truth'. Amidst this 'confusion', it is not surprising that a figure like Trump, who should perhaps properly be to be seen as the enemy of the dispossessed and the disempowered, might be taken for their champion.

Significantly, the era of 'post-truth' did not begin in 2016, with the ascendancy of Trump (or even with Brexit), but instead has its origins in earlier shifts in media, management, and organization that are not only part of the larger history of modernity,¹⁹ but are also evident in developments over the last thirty to forty years. The undermining of professional authority, seen as a key instrument in public service reform beginning in the United Kingdom in the 1980s²⁰, itself meant the establishing of the dominance of instrumentalist over other considerations, but it also implied a genericization of judgment and expertise. Questions of truth and evidence became part of the same instrumental calculation more reliably undertaken by a manager or administrator than anyone with more specialized capacities (who would anyway be liable to be distracted by concerns particular to their specialization). The attack on science that has been part of the conservative opposition to attempts to combat climate change over the last decade or so²¹ – an opposition that itself derives largely from the prioritisation of a set of narrow economic interests and is funded by them – has further contributed to the corroding of truth and the loss of any genuine sense of what constitutes knowledge, objectivity, or expertise. The concentration of power and authority – whether in the commercial sphere through the increasing dominance of large corporations, or in the governmental and public sphere through the erosion of institutional independence (partly through the use of audit and compliance mechanisms to ensure centralised control) – has resulted in both the increased capacity to 'manage' information at

the same time as it also made such 'management' more and more instrumentally important. It is no accident that the role of the 'media advisor' has become so prominent in governments and corporations, and increasingly so, from at least the 1990s onwards. The 'media' has itself become a domain driven by the need to manage, control, and also to commercialise what is now generically understood as 'information' – with such 'information', and the media generally, more and more subject to manipulation and control by individuals and organizations according to their own agendas and interests. The rise of new forms of media has enhanced the capacity for management, control, and commercialization of information, but it has also hugely proliferated information at the same time as the overall quality and reliability of information has been degraded. Distinctions between what is 'real' and what is 'constructed', between the 'factual' and the invented, between 'news' and entertainment, have all contributed to the loss of truth or of any commitment to truth that seems to characterise the present.²²

The instrumentalist dismissal of philosophy in contemporary public discourse – whether directed at philosophy in its institutionalised forms or more generally – is almost always couched in terms that presuppose a form of monetized instrumentality as the basis on which any possible justification of the value or relevance of philosophy would have to be mounted. Such instrumentalism is not, however, merely directed at philosophy (or other forms of humanistic inquiry) in its institutionalised instantiation alone, nor even at the idea of thinking as that which philosophy exemplifies. It is effectively directed at the very idea of truth or of knowledge as that which properly stands outside of the system of monetization and of instrumentalization, and that, in standing outside in this way, demonstrates the limit of such monetization and instrumentalization.

Plato famously says in the *Republic* that the philosophers "are those who love the truth",²³ and although Plato contrasts the philosopher in this regard with those who love honour (soldiers) or money (merchants and traders), there is a sense in which we are all committed to truth, even if we may not all be its 'lovers'. The commitment to truth derives, in part, from certain simple facts about the relation that connects truth and thinking, but that also connects both to human life. Truth is that which is the ultimate concern of thinking as well as that which constrains it (it is thus both its ground and its limit). It is truth, and the concern with truth, that orients thinking in the space 'between' in which thinking resides. 'Truth' here does not name some eternal or unchanging transcendence, but rather the

everyday sense at issue when, to paraphrase Aristotle, we say of what is that it is and of what is not that it is not.²⁴ Our own being as human is bound up with our character as *thinking* beings, and so also is it bound up with a commitment to truth. To be human is to find oneself in the space of thinking, in a space oriented towards truth, and it is in this space, this *place*, that we also find the possibility of *freedom*, of *self*, and of *commonality* that are themselves essential to a properly human mode of existence.

In Orwell's *1984*, a work that has acquired a new-found popularity with Trump's ascendancy, the triumph of Big Brother involves *both* the assertion of Big Brother's control over truth itself *and* the destruction of any genuine humanity. In Orwell's novel this is brought together in the use of the torture *which appears as both a violation of the human and a violation of truth*. The idea that "2 + 2" should equal whatever the Party or Big Brother says it equals and the vision of the future that Winston's torturer O'Brien presents as "a boot stamping on a human face"²⁵ are thus intimately connected²⁶ – as indeed the history of totalitarianism in the twentieth century demonstrates. Donald Trump's own endorsement of torture, reaffirmed in his first television interview as President in January 2017, is thus both chilling and, perhaps, unsurprising. The flight from thinking is a flight from truth, and it is also a flight from the human – as such, it is a flight, not only into thoughtlessness, ignorance, and lie, but into violence and horror.²⁷

The value and significance of philosophy is, indeed, not found primarily in any instrumental and monetised end to which it may contribute. The value and significance of philosophy, as with all of the humanities, as with science, with knowledge, with truth, lies in its intimate relation to our own human being. To refuse thinking, to refuse the bounds and limits with which thinking is itself engaged, to refuse truth, is to refuse that which makes us what we are. Moreover, since the value and significance of philosophy stands alongside the value and significance of questioning, of attending, of listening – all of which are at the very heart of thinking – so the denigration of philosophy, whether in its institutional or other forms, is also a denigration of just such questioning, attending, and listening. What have we become, one might ask, when we cease to question, cease to attend, cease to listen. Perhaps there is no question here – or at least it is a question to which we already know the answer all too well. What we become is what we see too much of in our contemporary world, what we have seen over too much of over the last one hundred years: we become deceivers as well as deceived, oppressors as well as oppressed, victims as well as executioners. The real

question is not whether there is value or significance to be accorded to philosophy – or to thinking, truth, or the human. The real question, and the question that is most urgent, is whether we can regain a proper sense of the value and significance that philosophy already has; whether the contemporary world can be other than as determined by the instrumental and the monetized; whether we can restrain the flight from thinking, and so return to thinking, to truth, and to ourselves.

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¹ Heidegger, 'Memorial Address', in *Discourse on Thinking. A Translation of Gelassenheit*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 45.

² Elsewhere I have referred to it as 'economism' (see my "'Good Government Starts Today": On the Death of the Public, the Triumph of Private Interest, and the Loss of the Good', forthcoming), and one might also take it to be closely related to what is commonly referred to as 'neo-liberalism', although the latter has both a more specific usage at the same time as it is often used quite indiscriminately.

³ See Michael Burawoy, 'The Neoliberal University: Ascent of the Spiralists', *Critical Sociology* 42 (2016), 941-942.

⁴ See Newman, *The Idea of a University*, ed. Daniel M O'Connell (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1927).

⁵ This does not mean that we can simply assume our values, since they themselves can and ought to be subject to scrutiny, but rather concerns the fundamental point that the question of the end is always prior to the question of the means.

⁶ So, for instance, inequality of distribution is often justified on the grounds that it nevertheless enables increases in wealth overall or for a significant part of the population. Whether this is factually

correct can be disputed, but more problematic is the underlying assumption that it is wealth as measure in monetized terms that is important there, and the tendency to ignore other effects besides those that relate simply to monetized wealth or income.

⁷ See Marcel Hénaff, *The Price of Truth: Gift, Money, and Philosophy*, trans. Jean-Louis Morhange (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), for an account of some of this history.

⁸ See D. C. Schindler, 'Why Socrates Didn't Charge: Plato and the Metaphysics of Money', *Communio: International Catholic Review* 36 (2009), pp.394-426.

⁹ *The Wealth of Nations*, ed. A. Skinner (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), p.359.

¹⁰ G. Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. T. Bottomore and D. Frisby (London: Routledge, 1978), 272.

¹¹ This lack of limit is particular to monetary wealth – it does not apply in the same way to forms of wealth that are based in commodities, not only because supplies of commodities are always limited, but also because, land aside, most commodities need to be stored, and so there are spatial constraints on the capacity for commodity accumulation, and because some commodities cannot be stored beyond a certain point without spoilage or loss. This can present problems when commodity wealth is understood only in monetized terms, since such monetization can itself obscure the limitations of the commodity or commodities at issue. Thus even though commodity wealth can be monetized, there is still an important difference between monetary and commodity wealth – although it is worth noting that this doesn't operate in quite the same way in respect of debt, which is not restricted, even if understood in commodity terms, by any considerations of limit that derive from issues of supply, storage, or spoilage. Indeed, when the notion of debt is coupled with the idea of interest on debt, so that debt (and so too wealth) becomes self-generating, then the possibility is opened up of forms of debt that constantly increase and so also of forms of debt that can never be discharged. Interest is itself facilitated by monetization, and one might argue, as does David Graeber, that debt and money themselves go together, since debt depends on the abstract quantification that money allows – see Graeber, *Debt: the First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2011), Chapt.2.

¹² This is a key point in hermeneutics – although it is usually expressed in terms of the dependence of understanding on some prior understanding (the essence of the 'hermeneutic circle'). I have argued elsewhere that this is a phenomenon itself best understood in terms of the placed character of thinking and understanding. See Malpas, 'Placing Understanding/Understanding Place', *Sophia* 55 (2017).

¹³ See Heidegger, 'Memorial Address', pp.47-55. The language Heidegger uses here can all-too-easily be read as simply the invocation of a backward-looking and conservative clinging to tradition and native belonging. Yet the 'Address' can also be read in a way that goes beyond this, and such a

reading is supported both by Heidegger's emphasis on the growth beyond one's native ground alone and on his argument for the importance of the notions of 'releasement' (*Gelassenheit*) and openness. Both of these, I would suggest, involve exactly the sense of attentiveness to place and to bound, and one own being given over to these, that I have emphasised here. For more on the idea of releasement as it might be thought in relation to place, see my 'From Extremity to Releasement: Place, Authenticity, and the Self', in Hans Pedersen and Lawrence Hatab (eds), *The Horizons of Authenticity: Essays in Honor of Charles Guignon's Work on Phenomenology, Existentialism, and Moral Psychology* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015), pp.45-62 and also 'What is architecture for?', *Wolkenkuckucksheim/Cloudcuckooland – An International Journal of Architectural Theory* 22 (2017) – <http://www.cloud-cuckoo.net/intro/>.

¹⁴ In diverse ways, new technologies have themselves enabled, among other developments, greater concentrations of wealth, the increased dominance of globalised corporations, the rise of unpaid work, de-skilling, and the disempowerment of labour. In their effect on financial and other systems, new technologies also contribute and are themselves reinforced by the rise of monetized forms of thinking and operation.

¹⁵ When properly understood the economic – the domain of the *οἶκος*, of the proper management, as one might say, of the immediate domain in which we live – must itself demand attentiveness to the environmental. The economic and environmental thus do not stand apart from one another, and it is only a narrowed down conception of the economic – one that is indeed tied to the monetised instrumentality of that has been the focus for the discussion here – that would suggest otherwise.

¹⁶ The imposition of monetized and commercialised systems of management and operation onto public institutions is effectively a way of bringing about a result similar to that which could have otherwise been achieved through privatization, but without the public outcry that such privatization would typically have provoked.

¹⁷ Such an idea echoes the Marxian notion, developed at length by Joseph Schumpeter, that capitalism depends essentially on processes of creative destruction – see esp. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper & Bros, 1942). Schumpeter saw such creative destruction as eventually leading to capitalism's own destruction, but others have seen it merely as part of the continuing process by which capitalism maintains itself – globalization being the latest instantiation of this process of destructive self-maintenance.

¹⁸ *Discourse on Thinking*, p.45.

¹⁹ It is just such a history that Heidegger sketches in his own critique of technology so that although his talk specifically of the 'flight of thinking' dates from 1955, the developments with which he connects it go back much earlier. What we see now is the further radicalization of trends and

tendencies that have long been in play – trends and tendencies that may even be seen, as Max Weber pessimistically saw them, as tied up with the very nature of the human world in which we live, and so as trends and tendencies that cannot be avoided.

²⁰ See, for instance, Max Travers, *The New Bureaucracy: Quality assurance and its Critics* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2007).

²¹ Attacks that nevertheless have an important precedent in the vitriolic and often *ad hominem* criticisms levelled against Rachel Carson and her ground-breaking book *Silent Spring* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1962) in the 1960s.

²² Heidegger warns of the ‘flight from thinking’ in 1955, and the phenomenon that constitute the ‘flight from truth’ are clearly at issue in his own discussion, but his concern with the issues at stake here, especially as connected with modern technology, goes back much further. Many other thinkers have identified similar trends and tendencies, including those that relate to truth, in the rise of modernity itself. What we see now is thus the further radicalization of developments that have long been in play, developments that may even be seen, as Max Weber saw them in 1918, as inextricably tied up with the very nature of the human world in which we live – see Weber, ‘Science as a Vocation’, in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 129-156.

²³ Plato, *Republic*, 4475e.

²⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1011b1

²⁵ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1949), pp.214-5.

²⁶ See my discussion in ‘Truth, Politics and Democracy: Arendt, Orwell and Camus’, in Andrew Schaap, Danielle Celermajer, and Vrasidas Karalis (eds), *Power, Judgment and Political Evil: In Conversation with Hannah Arendt* (Franham: Ashgate, 2010), pp.133-145.

²⁷ One might argue, perhaps by setting against Orwell’s 1984 Aldous Huxley’s dystopic *Brave New World* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932) in which a paternalistic state retains control through the effective drugging of its population, that the ‘flight from thinking need not a flight into violence or horror. There are different forms of violence and horror, however, and not all are immediately evident as violent or horrific – it is thus a moot point whether we should view Huxley’s world as indeed free from either violence or horror. Moreover, the argument Orwell advances is that the connection between violence to truth and violence to truth is so deep and fundamental that there will always be a form of inhumanity that accompanies any denial or denigration of truth – even if it may sometimes be covered over or hidden. Although it may not be an inhumanity that will be experienced the same way by all, it will be an inhumanity nonetheless. In any case, truth and humanity are both

also at issue in Huxley's novel, and, one might say, in similar ways even though by means of a very different narrative presentation.