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Article

Rethinking the Neoliberal University through Byung-Chul Han (Second of Two Parts)

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Abstract: In this paper, I engage the neoliberalization of universities using insights from Byung-Chul Han. Specifically, I criticize the neoliberal university's absolute prioritization of what Han calls the *vita activa* (active life) over the *vita contemplativa* (contemplative life). I argue that the emphasis the neoliberal university places on activity or work is crippling its own capacity to think. I begin by expositing Han's insight that thinking and knowledge flourishes during moments of inactivity or leisure, i.e., the *vita contemplativa*. Next, I present a brief sketch of the neoliberal university and, using Han's language, emphasize how work and performance have become its central categories, eventually diminishing the role of inactivity or leisure within its walls. Afterwards, I show that the absolutization of the *vita activa* has crippled thinking within the confines of the university. This atrophy of thought is manifested in various areas, such as the informatization of teaching, the inability to criticize the status quo, the production of superficial and inferior research publications, and the fading of the spirit of community. Finally, this paper ends with an appraisal of the *vita contemplativa* as a counterbalance to the neoliberal strictures on thinking within the university.

Keywords: Han, achievement society, neoliberal university, *vita contemplativa*

The Crippling of Thought in Neoliberal Universities

A decade before the neoliberal onslaught, most American students in the 1960s, when asked what their primary motivation was in attending college, indicated the goal of developing a meaningful

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philosophy, while being well-off financially was just a distant second.[1] Students then still saw education as more of a transformative process and less of a mere stepping-stone for financial success. Five decades later, however, these motivational factors have virtually traded places.[2] Indeed, most students today indicate that becoming well-off financially is their primary reason why they attend college.[3] Most students nowadays view education purely from a standpoint of instrumentality. For some commentators, this is unavoidable in a society where tuition fees are extremely expensive[4] and where an individual's capacity to attain financial stability rests on their possession of certain merits (the university degree being one of the most important documents of merit today).[5] Given this, to increase their profits by maintaining or increasing their student enrollees, neoliberal universities prioritize academic programs that promise quick financial returns and stability to those who take them. Most of the time, these are the programs most relevant to industry, such as the medical sciences, engineering, tech, and so on. Conversely, the liberal arts and the humanities have been gradually disappearing from the university curriculum, leading Frank Donoghue to utter in despair that all hope is lost for the humanities and its professors, that eventually they will disappear altogether from the landscape of higher education.[6] The Philippine government's recent attempt to remove humanities courses from the college curriculum, such as Ethics and Art Appreciation, is only the latest local iteration of this alarming global trend. Once viewed through the neoliberal imperative of work and performance, it is easy to see why this is so: the liberal arts and the humanities simply do not offer the skills and knowledge that are immediately translatable into the skills demanded by the industry or the skills suited for profit-making.

Herein we encounter one of the ways the neoliberal regime leaves thinking within the university anemic. More so than others, the liberal arts

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[1] Daniel Saunders, "The Impact of Neoliberalism on College Students," in *Journal of College and Character*, 8:5 (2007), 6.

[2] Saunders, "The Impact of Neoliberalism on College Students," 6.

[3] A good example here are pre-university students in the Philippines after undergoing the highly contentious K–12 program. Graduates of the technically-based K–12 program "expect larger monetary returns in exchange for shorter education or much higher return for lengthier time spend in college." Gerardo M. Lanuza, "Neo-fascism as the Apparatus of Neoliberalism's Assault on Philippine Higher Education: Towards an Anti-Fascist Pedagogy," in *Kritike*, 16:1 (June 2022), 150.

[4] See, for instance, Frank Donoghue, *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 88. See also, Lawrence Busch, *Knowledge for Sale: The Neoliberal Takeover of Higher Education* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017), 53.

[5] See, for instance, Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (UK: Penguin Books, 2021), EPUB, introduction.

[6] Donoghue, *The Last Professors*, xi.

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and the humanities are courses that offer spaces for critique and reflection. Usually, they invite students to correspond with the ideas of their peers and of thinkers past and present. It is true that they do not offer skills and knowledge that are immediately translatable into profit-making, making them impractical and purposeless from the standpoint of capital accumulation. But this is where their significance lies. If we recall from this paper's part I, for Han, thinking emerges during moments of inactivity, of time free from the demands of work and survival.[7] This is precisely what the humanities and liberal arts courses offer. Their purported impracticality and purposelessness turn them into moments of pause and interruption from the preoccupation for survival and work. In this way, the humanities and liberal arts classrooms become fecund sites for contemplative lingering and reflection, not mere sites for calculating and information gathering. The spaces for thinking to flourish within the university are severely reduced without them. But this is only the beginning. As I will show throughout this paper, once we look closely at the various areas of the neoliberal university, what is revealed is the sad reality that the university today—popularly considered as think tanks, where deep study and reflection are made and encouraged—have become spaces that suffocate thinking.

This atrophy of thought greets us immediately once we look closely at the pedagogical approach the neoliberal university attempts to cultivate. It is a well-known fact that in its quest for transparency and achievement, the neoliberal university has developed the tendency of flattening the "learnedness" of the students into test scores and grades. To my mind, this leads to two problematic outcomes. Firstly, it aggravates the instrumental view of education by conditioning the students to think of classes as only a means to their grades. I suspect that this is a major reason why many universities today actively encourage or require grading students' participation as a way to motivate class engagement,[8] which only implies that students will not be engaged and interested without the reward or threat of a grade. Instead of pursuing their curiosities and exploring an especially difficult theory, we instead hear students grumble and complain: "What does this have to do with my grades?" To this end, classes as moments of contemplative inactivity rarely emerge.

And secondly, this imperative to flatten students into grades underpins the popularity of the "teaching to the test" pedagogy which has transformed education to the force-feeding of correct opinions: "the correct

[7] Byung-Chul Han, *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Lingering*, trans. by Daniel Steuer (Cambridge and Medford: Polity Press, 2017), EPUB, chap. 12.

[8] See, for instance, Cheryl Holly, Sallie Porter, Tracy R. Vitale, and Mercedes Echevarria, "Grading Participation in the Classroom: The Assumptions, Challenges, and Alternatives," in *Teaching and Learning in Nursing*, 19:1 (2024).

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opinions about literature, or history, or science, or mathematics. Hence the universality of the bullet point, delivered in a college lecture, whose temporary memorization is the condition for the above-average grade," Zena Hitz laments.[9] Indeed, a student's memory of a piece of information is easier to quantify and rank than, say, the maturation of their thought or the development of their critical consciousness. But this type of pedagogy, once viewed through Han's lenses, invites little to no thinking. Teaching to the test forces the mind into set and narrow paths that lead toward a set of predetermined correct opinions. What is lost in this pedagogical approach is thinking as open-ended inquiry. As Han himself said in *The Transparency Society*, "[t]hinking does not follow precalculated paths, but betakes itself into the open."[10] As a form of correspondence, it goes to where being or the other leads it. This is why the paths thinking takes cannot be determined beforehand. This accords with his argument in *The Scent of Time* that "[t]hinking is free because its place and time cannot be calculated. It often progresses discontinuously."[11] My argument is that in the neoliberal university the freedom and uncertainty that define the thinking process are tightly controlled so that thought will necessarily arrive at a set of correct pieces of information. Here, instead of progressing discontinuously, the mind is forced to become linear. Instead of being open to the disturbances of the Other, it is forced to retreat to the already familiar. It must ignore the voice of being/Other for it must go towards a pre-determined conclusion. Because of this, thinking, which for Han is supposed to be friendly to the voice of being/Other, cannot emerge. It has become deaf.

Conversely, a thinking classroom may look something like Zena Hitz's description of the classes she had while an undergraduate student:

> Our classes proceeded without agendas, the discussion driven by the living questions that we and our teachers brought to the room. Accordingly, our conversations could flounder in indifference or lack of preparation; they could chug along steadily, building quiet momentum; or they could explode with the excitement of a newly discovered insight. I was enchanted by the honesty of the project: as the books were, as the questions were, as the human beings who participated were, so the discussion went. There was no artificial

[9] Zena Hitz, *Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 192.

[10] Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society*, trans. by Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 30.

[11] Han, *Scent of Time*, EPUB, chap. 12.

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> clarity or forced organization to soften the discomfort of the work of the mind, no cushion between us and the difficulties or dangers of inquiry or the thrill of discovery.[12]

We see here a concrete example of what Hanian thinking could look like inside the classroom. Hitz's description exemplifies Han's important claim that thinking is a form of correspondence. Their classroom discussion shows that their thinking process was not forced and constricted by fixed paths; rather, it was borne along the natural and unpredictable flow of thinking. In a sense, their discussions went to where inquiry led it.

But this thinking classroom, Hitz herself admitted, was inefficient. It was not rare for their discussions described in the above quotation to flounder. This is no longer surprising for us. As I have discussed in part I, thinking for Han is naturally inefficient for it often involves making-pauses and delays.[13] This is perhaps one of the reasons why neoliberal universities, in the effort to improve efficiency, prefer pedagogy that centers on information gathering. We know from Han that aside from its quantifiability, the gathering of information can be accelerated since pieces of information can simply be added on top of one another. Its additive nature implies that little time is needed to jump from one piece of information to the next. I believe that this is especially the case in some neoliberal universities that offer shorter course offerings.[14] Under such conditions, classes need to rush through the course content, leaving little time for contemplating and questioning. Truly, there are many instances during accelerated courses wherein student questions were disregarded because their teachers had so much to cover during their limited class time or are immediately off to their other classes.[15] In this way, the classroom no longer becomes a site for correspondence and listening. The obsession for efficiency, coupled with the lack of time to deliver a course, transforms the class into a process whereby

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[12] Hitz, *Lost in Thought*, 4–5.

[13] Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. by Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 22.

[14] Many neoliberal universities today offer an array of study options to suit the varied demands of student-consumers. On the menu are fast-track or accelerated degrees, one- to two-year degree options, and trimester systems, among other things. The primary motivation here is money. This strategy enables universities to attract a huge population of students. See, for instance, Igea Troiani and Claudia Dutson, "The Neoliberal University as a Space to Learn/Think/Work in Higher Education," in *Architecture and Culture*, 9:1 (2021), 12–13. See also Anibeth Desierto and Carmela de Maio, "The Impact of Neoliberalism on Academics and Students in Higher Education: A Call to Adopt Alternative Philosophies," in *Journal of Academic Language & Learning*, 14:2 (2020), 153.

[15] Clarissa Davis-Ragland, "Accelerated Courses and Barriers to Persistence for Traditional-Age College Students" (Doctoral Dissertation: Walden University, USA, 2022), 103.

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the teacher passes pieces of information to seemingly mute students, similar to the banking method much criticized by Paulo Freire. We encounter here a twisted scene of thinking as listening. Contrary to its appearance, these students are not listening to the voice of the Other. They have no access to the Other for they have no time to deviate from their pre-curated learning plan. What they are receiving are pieces of information already familiar, of the non-Other. The Other here does not speak. Its voice is drowned by the uninterrupted flow of information from the mouth of the teacher, from the voice of the Same.

I am further convinced that this similar obsession with efficiency is a huge reason why there is a growing trend in neoliberal universities of breaking down complex narratives into manageable doses.[16] Textbooks, for example, have become shorter and demand less from the students.[17] Further, instead of intellectually challenging the students, university courses have been modified to become more "student friendly."[18] It is important to note that this "friendliness" of the courses does not resemble Han's understanding of the term at all. To recall the discussion in part I, friendliness for Han is an act of emptiness whereby the ego divests itself of itself to let the Other speak. This entails certain attitudes, such as slowness and patience, to allow the Other to unfold in its own pace. The "friendliness" of the university courses described above is therefore a grotesque rendering of this notion. For, instead of expressing the slowness and patience that are constitutive of emptiness, the "friendly" course fragments itself into manageable doses all in the name of efficiency and speed. Instead of giving way for the appearance of thinkers in the Hanian sense—thinkers that display the virtues of listening, slowness, and patience, among others—what emerges on the scene are the type of students Sinéad Murphy regularly taught while teaching in a neoliberal university in the UK: "[t]hey are like thinkers on speed: thinking so fast that nothing has time to coalesce into anything like a thought; thinking so furiously that they have flown clean off the handle."[19]

This is why many have argued that the neoliberal university molds students to become mere robots and useful machines.[20] According to Martha Nussbaum, this is by design. Neoliberal elites, she says, think that "[t]he students' freedom of mind is dangerous if what is wanted is a group of

[16] Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 152.

[17] *Ibid*.

[18] See Alpesh Maisuria and Svenja Helmes, *Life for the Academic in the Neoliberal University* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 20.

[19] Sinéad Murphy, *Zombie University: Thinking Under Control* (London: Repeater Books, 2017), EPUB, chap. 2.

[20] Henry A. Giroux, *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), 31.

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technically trained obedient workers to carry out the plans of elites who are aiming at foreign investment and technological development. Critical thinking will, then, be discouraged."[21] Nussbaum captures in this passage the smoothening effect that Han points out as one of the major goals of neoliberalism. For the latter, neoliberalism smooths things out so that capital can flow freely and quickly.[22] The faster capital flows, the more it expands and accumulates. To my mind, the neoliberal university designs its curriculum and courses in such a way that discourages thinking because individuals who can think potentially become speed bumps that delay the movement of capital. Thus, I argue that instead of thinking subjects, the neoliberal university molds students to resemble what Han refers to as "processors." In *The Disappearance of Rituals*, he described processors as "faster than a human being precisely because they neither think nor understand; they only calculate."[23] He dives deeper into this topic in *The Burnout Society* wherein he paints this processor-like thinking as characterized by hyperattention or, in his own words, "[a] rash change of focus between different tasks, sources of information, and processes."[24] This inevitably disallows the processor from thinking of something different altogether since hyperattention has a low tolerance for pauses and boredom, that "profound idleness that benefits the creative process."[25] This, again, is why he thinks that a computer is stupid because it cannot pause. Pausing, for Han, opens up spaces for the thinking of alternatives, for the emergence of the Other. Without pauses, thinking simply "reproduces and accelerates what is already available."[26] For me, students in the neoliberal university are trained exactly to become processor-like. Like processors they are trained to calculate as efficiently as possible, that is, to gather pieces of information and activate them during critical moments, say, during exams. And just like processors, they are enjoined to move as quickly as possible, to cover as much ground as possible in the time allotted, leaving little time for pauses and boredom. Han allows us to make sense of why this is so. Truly, with minimal pauses and delays, students also rarely enter that profound idleness which, for Han, is the space where alternatives emerge.[27] This, in my eyes, is one of

[21] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 21.

[22] Han, *Transparency Society*, 2.

[23] Byung-Chul Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, trans. by Daniel Steuer (Cambridge and Medford: Polity Press, 2020), 82.

[24] Han, *Burnout Society*, 13.

[25] *Ibid*.

[26] *Ibid*.

[27] On a sidenote, Han has a sinister warning when it comes to the reduction of humans into processors: they only know acceleration and have no access to inactivity or rest. This, inevitably, leads to burnout and depression. This, again, recalls Han's gloomy depiction of 21st

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the effective mechanisms neoliberalism employs to secure the students' obeisance: leaving them without downtime to contemplate other possibilities outside of the neoliberal purview.

One may object that the issues mentioned above can be easily rectified by the teacher if they adopt certain pedagogical techniques and approaches that cultivate thinking. Martha Nussbaum, for instance, proposes the Socratic dialogue precisely for this purpose. But what is also true is that the neoliberal university has made it ever more difficult for the teacher to implement these approaches. For instance, in the effort to cut costs, classes in neoliberal universities have ballooned in size. In the Philippines, for example, it is not uncommon for an instructor, especially in state universities and colleges, to have 50 students or more in one class. Imagine then the difficulty of effectively implementing Socratic dialogue in a class of more than 30 students. This difficulty compounds in fast-tracked or shorter courses where the speed required to cover an entire semester's content in a span of, say, three months or less may inhibit the teacher from inviting open-ended inquiry which may take them into paths far from their course content. This is even impossible to conduct in neoliberal universities that offer massive open online courses (MOOC) were there is no live interaction between teacher and student.[28] Thus, despite the promise held by pedagogical approaches like Socratic dialogue, implementing them becomes a daunting task within the neoliberal university where conditions appear to be hostile to thinking.

The conditions are not much different outside the classroom. The heavy workload demand of neoliberal universities condition the students' body and mind to focus primarily on quantitative and qualitative task delivery even after their classes.[29] On top of this, the rising costs of education in neoliberal universities force many students to work part-time jobs to pay

century society in *The Burnout Society*: excessive tiredness and exhaustion, due to lack of breaks and intervals from work, generates burnt-out individuals that could no longer perform properly, individuals that are "are no longer able to be able." It is here where, according to Han, depression erupts: "It erupts at the moment when the achievement subject is *no longer able to be able*." No wonder then that the burnout and depression rates among university students in past decades have skyrocketed. Han, *Burnout Society*, 10. See also Han, *Scent of Time*, EPUB, 83.

[28] I acknowledge the practicality of online courses. However, if we look at them from Han's angle, they do little in the cultivation of thinking. Firstly, they isolate people. This is especially the case with asynchronous class setups advertised to have the student learn at their own pace. But what is lost here is the correspondence that is so important to thinking. And secondly, in my eyes, an instrumental view pervades online learning. Most people take them not to contemplate but to procure certificates needed for promotion or work. At the end of the day, it has been totalized into the neoliberal regime.

[29] Troiani and Dutson, "The Neoliberal University as a Space to Learn/Think/Work in Higher Education," 14.

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off their student loans.[30] Furthermore, at the college level, "students are dazzled with a blitz of spaces that now look like malls, while in between classes they are endlessly entertained by a mammoth sports culture."[31] Truly, in the neoliberal university, students are constantly engaged and stimulated. Henry Giroux has often bewailed that pedagogy in the neoliberal university does not enable the students to connect their private troubles with public issues.[32] I do not disagree with Giroux's observation. But what he failed to point out is that aside from the failure of pedagogy, students simply have less downtime and inactivity to build this connection themselves. I surmise that due to the absence of inactive moments, it is difficult for the students' thought to enter the contemplative mode. As Han would have us believe, if one only had the power to do something and think something, it would be impossible to think back and reflect.[33] In much the same way, if the students always have something that seizes their attention, be it course requirements or university entertainment, they have less downtime where the pieces of information drilled into them can percolate and weave themselves into a narrative, where they can relate what they have learned to their private troubles and broader social issues.

Academics are not immune from these effects. Their mountainous workload, coupled with the pressure of losing their positions if they fail to meet performance indicators, has led to high levels of exhaustion and burnout throughout the academic ranks. This is the kind of exhaustion that debilitates thinking, similar to what the distinguished psychoanalyst and self-proclaimed former "achievement subject" Josh Cohen experienced when he was just starting his career in the academe. Reflecting on his early academic career through Han's conception of a burnout society, Cohen shared:

> In the scarce hours outside of those duties [teaching, marking, and committee meetings], I'd return to work on an article and quickly realise that I needed to comb a dozen more sources before I could begin to write it. Abruptly, I became aware of how tired I was; able neither to work nor refrain from it, I'd lie suspended in a state of weary wakefulness. That hollowed-out

[30] Busch, *Knowledge for Sale*, 52. See also Desierto and de Maio, "Impact of Neoliberalism on Academics and Students in Higher Education," 152.

[31] Giroux, *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education*, 36.

[32] *Ibid*., 68.

[33] Han, *Burnout Society*, 24.

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> achievement self, 'at war with itself', was all too familiar.[34]

Cohen's anecdote demonstrates a major implication of the absolutization of the *vita activa* in neoliberal universities: the academic achievement subject becomes too tired to think. More seriously, this pressure to excel and produce has actually destroyed the health of many academics, even ending in the suicides of some.[35] Indeed, Han's depiction of depression as auto-aggression seems to be true here.

Aside from excessive tiredness and exhaustion, the neoliberal university constricts the academics' freedom of thought by restricting the mind from taking certain paths, particularly lines of thought that contradict the edicts of neoliberalism. Cases of suspension and firing of professors and instructors for giving off "negative vibes," for actively participating in unions, and for voicing their criticisms against capitalism and the neoliberal policies of their respective universities have become quite frequent across many neoliberal universities.[36] Hence, it might not be an exaggeration to posit that academics in neoliberal universities do not have real freedom of thought. The cases above show that if academics want to keep their jobs, they have to constrain their own thinking and accept that there are certain paths or topics that they simply could not broach. Here, Han's depiction of thinking as correspondence with the Other is clearly crippled. Indeed, for Han, neoliberalism persistently bars the mind from accessing the Other, that is, the non-neoliberal. This is why, across a number of books, he depicts the neoliberal regime as the hell of the Same.[37] This expulsion of the Other plays well in the hands of neoliberal capitalism. As Han wrote in *The Expulsion of the Other*, "[i]t is precisely where the Same encounters the Same that this circulation [of information, communication, and capital] reaches its highest velocity."[38] For me, this explains why many neoliberal universities cannot tolerate divergent thinking academics. Their operations accelerate if everybody buys into the neoliberal model.

Academic thinking is further ruined by the fact that tenureship and promotion in the neoliberal university is largely determined by research

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[34] Josh Cohen, "The Winter of Civilisation: Byung-Chul Han's Relentless Critiques of Digital Capitalism Reveal How This Suffocating System Creates Hollowed-out Lives," in *Aeon* (28 February 2025), <https://aeon.co/essays/thought-tinkering-the-korean-german-philosopher-byung-chul-han>.

[35] Maisuria and Helmes, *Life for the Academic*, 27–29.

[36] *Ibid*., 27.

[37] Han, *Disappearance of Rituals*, 44. See also, Byung-Chul Han, *The Expulsion of the Other: Society, Perception and Communication Today*, trans. by Wieland Hoban (Cambridge and Medford: Polity Press, 2018), chap. 1.

[38] Han, *Expulsion of the Other*, chap. 2.

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productivity. Whipped by this publish or perish culture, exhausted and time-pressed academics are forced to produce hastily written papers to, at the very least, survive in the academe. Surely, in this setting, thinking, which for Han requires a time for maturation, cannot truly flourish. This is evidenced by a noticeable drop in the quality of research publications today. As Jerry Muller speculated, "[r]eally important books may take many years to research and write. But if the incentive system rewards speed and volume of output, the result is likely to be a decline in truly significant works."[39] Indeed, since quantity is incentivized over quality, it is all too common among researchers to publish a slightly different version of the same research paper or split potentially strong papers into multiple different publications where the strength of the argument is spread thin. This has also given birth to a grotesque practice: publishing in predatory journals. Without rigorous scientific scrutiny, the published papers in such journals are usually hastily written and of poor quality, articles which, as one editorial puts it, "threaten to pollute the pool of scientific evidence with poorly conducted research and pseudoscience."[40] All in all, the outcome of this culture, as Muller observed in Great Britain, is the production of "a great stream of publications that are both uninteresting and unread."[41]

Yet, the production of bad quality papers due to haste and acceleration is, I believe, only the surface of the issue. I think that a more fundamental issue here, which Han's insights helped me to pinpoint, is the transmutation of thinking into work. If we can recall from the discussions in part I, work for Han is the domain of processuality and practicality, as something individuals must do to fill a lack, reach a goal, or to survive. In contradistinction to this, thinking as *vita contemplativa* is the domain of the useless and the purposeless, of the end-in-itself. Given this distinction, I contend that by tying research productivity to tenureship and promotion, the neoliberal university transforms thinking into a means to an end. Academics must "think" in order to produce a publishable paper, in order to hold onto their jobs, and in order to advance in their careers. Thinking, in this manner, becomes a type of work. But, as Han reminds us, "[w]ork … takes away freedom, because it is subject to the coercive force exerted by the necessities of life."[42] It is this loss of freedom that, in my analysis, greatly impairs academic thinking. By making research production so important that it makes or breaks an academic's career, the mind also loses real freedom to think.

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[39] Jerry Z. Muller, *The Tyranny of Metrics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 79.

[40] Hester Gail Y. Lim, "Predation in Publishing," Editorial in *Journal of the Philippine Dermatological Society*, 33:1 (May 2024).

[41] Muller, *Tyranny of Metrics*, 79.

[42] Han, *Scent of Time*, EPUB, chap. 12.

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Consumed by the need to churn out research papers for survival, many academics are forced to work on narrow research topics and are discouraged from exploring new domains or projects where a publication is not a guaranteed outcome. This was exactly what happened to Zena Hitz whose capability to think was greatly crippled by too much pressure to publish:

> I had lost much of the ability to think freely and openly on a topic, concerned lest I lose my hard-won position in the academic social hierarchy. I worked busily on narrow research projects and did not allow myself the time to read and reflect broadly.[43]

Hitz's experience, much like what Han is insisting, shows what happens when thinking becomes a type of work. When it is tied to survival in the academe, I argue, thinking becomes narrow and superficial. As Han quips, "[t]he *mind* that works would be a contradiction."[44] This is why, for him, the life of a thinker is anything but work. It is only when the mind is free from the clutches of the *vita activa* that it can contemplate deeply and broadly.

Finally, the atrophy of thinking in neoliberal universities is aggravated by the slow decline of the spirit of community within their walls. "*Community is listenership*," Han says in the final chapter of *The Expulsion of the Other*.[45] In his view, the capacity to listen is the precondition for the binding of individuals into a community. Hence, we can rightly say that, for Han, the demise of the community signals the atrophy of thinking given that thinking, as mentioned throughout this paper, is listening to the Other. With this in mind, I argue that the neoliberal university impairs thinking by dismantling most traces of the community within the university. I contend that instead of cultivating its subjects' capacity to listen, the neoliberal university enjoins them to become narcissistic egos thinking primarily of their next achievement, prestige, their grades and evaluation results, economic incentives and awards, and so on. The Other, in this context, is no longer perceived as someone who speaks. Rather, it is recast into a mere competitor of the ego. However, as Han warns us, thinking as listening is only possible when individuals empty themselves so that the Other has space to be, something which the narcissistic ego, who is incessantly hyperactive in the pursuit of endless achievements and optimal performance, is incapable of doing.[46] We can see how this negatively impacts thinking within the neoliberal university in very literal scenarios. For example, we can surmise

[43] Hitz, *Lost in Thought*, 16.
[44] Han, *Scent of Time*, EPUB, chap. 12.
[45] Han, *Expulsion of the Other*, chap. 12.
[46] *Ibid*.

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that when students become hypercompetitive, less collaboration between them also arises. This could hinder them from learning from one another or from helping each other grasp a challenging topic or lesson. This is even more prominent in the academic field where the increased competition between individual researchers, scientific fields, and departments has encouraged the splintering of academia into various self-enclosed silos that rarely collaborate or talk to each other.[47] Because more resources are allocated to individuals and departments that perform or publish well, researchers and disciplines see themselves as competitors in the ruthless game of metrics. This, undoubtedly, is a hindrance to thinking in general. For instance, the lack of interdisciplinary discourse and collaboration is a real hindrance to the expansion and development of knowledge as a whole. No doubt, specialization is important for the deepening of knowledge. However, gaining a more comprehensive understanding of reality, say, the human condition, necessitates a multi-disciplinary approach, one where the sciences, liberal arts, and the humanities work hand-in-hand. In my view, this, along with all the points mentioned above, gives me the confidence to posit that thinking has indeed been ruined within universities that have shamelessly kowtowed to the neoliberal machine.

Conclusion: The Inactive University as a Thinking University

Given the battered state of thinking in the neoliberal university, this paper now seeks to tackle an important question: What is to be done? If we ask Han, his answer may not be as optimistic as we hope. According to Robert Wyllie, Han seems to have a pessimistic view of the university owing to the fact that Han, across all of his works, never turned to education as a fecund site for critical alternatives to neoliberalism.[48] Indeed, Wyllie seems to indicate that for Han university education simply is a tool for the neoliberal regime to populate the entire globe with achievement subjects.[49] In fact, Han's relative reticence when it comes to the critical potential of education signifies a broader issue with his philosophical outlook in general: he has oftentimes been criticized for failing to produce viable ways out of the neoliberalism he so strongly condemns.[50] This is the point in the paper where I will attempt to deviate a little bit from Han's reticence and lack of alternatives.

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[47] See, for instance, Naomi Ellemers, "Science as Collaborative Knowledge Generation," in *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 60:1 (2021), 1–28.

[48] See Steven Knepper, Ethan Stoneman, and Robert Wyllie, *Byung-Chul Han: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge and Hoboken: Polity Press, 2024), 27.

[49] *Ibid*., 16.

[50] Jason Morgan, "Ritual and Otherness in Human Relations: The Human-Person Philosophy of Byung-Chul Han," in *Studia Gilsoniana*, 12:2 (April–June 2023), 317.

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To my mind, the point is not to abandon the university, much like what Han's reticence seems to indicate. Rather, I argue that Han's insights, particularly on thinking and its inextricable relationship with inactivity, can be used as guiding principles in rethinking the university so that it becomes a fecund site for the emergence of the Other and alternatives to neoliberalism. To this end, I argue that instead of an active university, it should be reformed to become what I call an "inactive university."

To be clear, what I envisage is not the total expulsion of work or activity from the realms of the university. The university of today certainly cannot revert to the ancient Greek ideal of education as *scholē*, which literally means leisure. What I argue is that in order for the university to reinvigorate its capacity to think, it must not give absolute priority to the *vita activa* to the detriment of the *vita contemplativa*. Borrowing Han's suggestion for society in general, I contend that that the university must place these two poles in an equal footing. Work is essential for the survival of the university. But pockets of inactivity—of the useless and the purposeless, of play free from compulsion—within its day-to-day and annual operations are also equally essential. This is not something new. In fact, the balance between the *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* have long constituted the spirit of the university. This, according to Stefan Collini, is one of the university's great strengths, that is, that it has always been practical (e.g., providing the church with its personnel or state bureaucracies with its staff) while simultaneously providing "a supportive setting for the human mind's restless pursuit of fuller understanding."[51] Below, I offer simple suggestions as to how the contemporary university can attain this balance by pointing out some key areas where it can invite inactivity. However, it is important to keep in mind that the suggestions I will outline below do not and should not exhaust the possibilities of what an inactive, that is, a thinking university might be like.

Contemporary experiments with inactivity in an educational setting have proven to be effective in allowing thinking to flourish. We can see this in educational settings where gradeless learning is applied. The grading system, which I showed earlier as a concrete manifestation of the neoliberal imperative of transparency and achievement, has, time and again, been shown to increase the psychic maladies of students, reduce their intrinsic motivation for lifelong learning, and discourage critical and creative thinking.[52] In opposition to this, gradeless learning, or the practice of substituting traditional numerical or letter-based grades with qualitative

[51] Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), EPUB, chap. 1.

[52] See, for instance, Heather J. Leslie, "Research on Effects of Grading," in *Learning Design Center: Staff Scholarship* (2021), <https://digital.sandiego.edu/ cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1007&context=ldc-scholarship>.

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feedbacks and pass-fail assessments, has shown to not only increase the well-being of the students, but that it also induces a deeper understanding of lessons and topics, increases motivation for learning, and encourages students to take more difficult and intellectually challenging subjects.[53] Gradeless learning, I contend, converts the classroom into a haven of inactivity, one where students are not overburdened by the necessity to fill a lack or reach a numerical goal, one where they can freely contemplate and reflect without the asphyxiating pressure from a grading system that counts and measures their every movement. Indeed, this has the potential of shifting our view of classroom learning from a means to an end into an end in itself.

A similar result on academics may be reached by removing research incentives and reducing the impact of article publications in their careers. This endeavor decouples research and work, making the former a distinct form of non-work, or inactivity in the Hanian terminology. In other words, it could help transform research into something done for its own sake and not for the sake of survival in the academe. Interestingly, the burgeoning field of neuroscience helps us articulate just how this contributes in the flourishing of thinking. A quick glance at the literature reveals what we intuitively know all along: that constant stress and pressure impair cognitive function, memory retrieval, and creativity.[54] In the context of academic writing, this is especially relevant given the fact that writing something which meaningfully contributes to the development of human knowledge and civilization requires, among other things, creativity, a strong memory, and a vigorous cognitive faculty. In the blunt words of Stefan Collini: academics are more likely to do fruitful work if you do not say to them "Be creative or I'll beat the hell out of you."[55] Sadly, this constant threat of being beaten up, of being sacked, is what academics in neoliberal universities today face day in and day out, as if the mind could function more efficiently under constant stress and pressure. Such approach is not only misguided but clearly antithetical to the endeavor of thinking. On this account, it is best to leave academics to the free play of their minds if they are to produce meaningful and quality publications. This is why it is better for academic life in the field of research

[53] See, for instance, Annemette Kjærgaard, Julie Buhl-Wiggers, and Elisabeth Naima Mikkelsen, "Does Gradeless Learning Affect Students' Academic Performance? A Study of Effects over Time," in *Studies in Higher Education*, 49:2 (2024). See also Jeff Cain, Melissa Medina, Frank Romanelli, and Adam Persky, "Deficiencies of Traditional Grading Systems and Recommendations for the Future," in *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 86: 7 (2022).

[54] See, for instance, Susanne Vogel and Lars Schwabe, "Learning and Memory under Stress: Implications for the Classroom," in *npj Science of Learning*, 1:16011 (2016). See also Oshin Vartanian, Sidney Ann Saint, Nicole Herz, and Peter Suedfeld, "The Creative Brain Under Stress: Considerations for Performance in Extreme Environments," in *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11:585969 (2020).

[55] Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, EPUB, chap. 6.

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to resemble Han's depiction of Aristotle: "Aristotle was born, did *not* work, and died."[56]

Moreover, a university that decides to embrace inactivity may look at reforming its understanding of sabbatical leaves. At present, most neoliberal universities grant sabbatical leaves to tenured faculty members with the expectation that those who go on leave, say, for one academic year, would have an output (e.g., a book) to show after the aforementioned period. This again typifies the absolutization of the *vita activa* within the neoliberal university. In this way, the sabbatical leave does not become a genuine interruption from work; only the capacity to work anywhere and anytime. I contend that it would be better for the flourishing of thought to make a sabbatical leave a genuine site of inactivity. Here, there are no projects to complete. It is a total break from work, a time for reflection and intellectual exploration.

Finally, the restoration of inactivity in the university may also lead to the cultivation of thinking in a more indirect manner: the formation of the university as a community. The previous section pointed out that, for Han, a community presupposes listenership, which is constitutive of thinking. With this in mind, I contend that the formation of the university into an inactive university converts its subjects, especially academics and students, into Han's listening, and thus thinking, subjects. We can see this in a couple of ways. For instance, gradeless learning has been shown to de-escalate competition among students and improve their collaboration.[57] It conditions them to think that they are not each other's enemies but are in the process of learning together. The same effect may also take hold among academics without league rankings and publication incentives. Perhaps the elimination of these neoliberal apparatuses may encourage individual and inter-disciplinary collaboration all in the hopes of expanding and developing knowledge for its own sake.

The suggestions I outlined above might elicit some panic. Neoliberal ideologues might say: "But if academics are not compelled to be active, to produce a constant stream of research, to be constantly audited and managed, they will become useless and mediocre." But this is not necessarily true. Let us keep in mind that the compulsion to publish is a recent phenomenon. Frank Donoghue traces it to the 1970s, coinciding with the birth and gradual takeover of neoliberalism over the whole of society.[58] But let us take note of the multitude of books, essays, monographs, articles, etc., that have significantly shaped human civilization produced before the neoliberal

[56] Han, *Scent of Time*, EPUB, chap. 12.

[57] See, for instance, Kjærgaard, Buhl-Wiggers, and Mikkelsen, "Does Gradeless Learning Affect Students' Academic Performance?," 338.

[58] Donoghue, *The Last Professors*, 51–52.

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period, that is, before research publication has become frantic and compulsory: the brilliance of an academic's work is not contingent on the "publish or perish" culture that seemingly engulfs today's neoliberal university. To be sure, not all will reach the heights of brilliance if we simply eliminate the pressure to produce. However, what is also true is that neoliberalism's attempt to ensure academic productivity does not guarantee the production of works that would serve any meaningful purpose to the intellectual life or to society at large. Rather, as I have shown in this paper, when academics are whipped to be active all the time, the quality of their work is actually significantly compromised.

The same ideologues might also say: "But if students are not constantly evaluated and pressured to be active, we cannot ensure the production of quality graduates." But what type of graduates do we actually want to produce out of our universities? If we want to produce highly skilled workers who find it difficult to think for themselves, then the neoliberal setup is the way to go. But university education could do so much more. Aside from molding students to become mere cogs in the neoliberal machine, education, among other things, can also cultivate conscientious democratic citizens with a heightened sensitivity to issues of social justice. And this, I contend, requires the embrace of the *vita contemplativa*. Inactive moments allow the mind to think back and reflect, to connect the dots. It opens up a free space for the students to connect their private troubles with public issues. Thus, the fear that inactivity in the university would lead to inferior graduates is a fear that stems primarily from a particular group: those who have nothing to gain should the neoliberal status quo be upended.

By paying close attention to Han's insights on thinking, we can rethink the neoliberal university in a number of ways. He allows us to expose some of the pathologies that have proliferated within the walls of the neoliberal university, particularly those that relate to the university's incapacity to think. He also allows us to rethink the organization of the university so that thinking could flourish within its walls. Most importantly, Han's insights lead us to the important realization that we need to rethink the university's relationship with neoliberalism. As the neoliberal regime continues to flatten the globe to ensure the quick and efficient circulation of capital, we need, more than ever, spaces of resistance where alternatives could emerge. The university, as a place populated by people who devote themselves to thinking, holds the potential of becoming such a place. But for the university to become a bulwark against the neoliberalization of the planet, it must somehow keep neoliberalism at arm's length. The university must become a site of negativity, a form of interruption from the mad and furious dance of capital. Many of the university's primary stakeholders, especially the thinkers that populate its hallowed halls, already know this. Many, after

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all, have already bewailed and deplored, in writing and word of mouth, neoliberalism's bastardization of the university. I guess, then, the proper formulation of the problem at hand is this: What are we prepared to do about it?

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