

# ‘Welcome to the End’

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What follows is the closing address of the general-secretary of the Melbourne School of Continental Philosophy (MSCP) to the conference *Technology Knowledge Truth*, convened by the MSCP in Melbourne in December 2017. The conference had over 150 attendees over three days and brought together a wide variety of thinkers from a variety of locales and disciplines to treat the question of the nexus of technology, knowledge and truth as a question for philosophy, thus as integral to it and as a question for today.

The reason we wanted to hold a conference was because, generally speaking at least, we hate conferences. Perhaps we just haven't been to any of the good ones? Of course, saying this clearly puts me—speaking for the we in question—in a tricky situation. Lacan once said something to the effect that humans are an animal that can get along very well without truth. As a great analyst, he was a great ironist.

What should I say about this conference, why should I say anything? It does seem a bit gratuitous.

I could, of course, just carry on the shallow liturgy of the university discourse, that vapid synecdoche of the totalitarianism inscribing and encircling us, and thus act out the part of that *robotos-slavi-arus-tenurius* who gets up at the end of every conference or seminar to proclaim the robust and singular genius of all present, the beauty of the conference as diversity, and waxes pathological about the sublime *noblesse oblige* of the institution 'who made it all possible'.

Let's face it, the subject of the university discourse is always also both the subject of HR and the subject of the mortgage—that much vaunted academic freedom reduced to the knowledge economy.

So the question is, then, has this not been just another shit conference?

Well, let *me* be the judge.

One thing I'm not going to do is summarise. A couple of us here went to a talk the other week by a serious historian from Oxford at the conclusion of which one of the organisers got up and proceeded to tell us all in new—and I suppose they supposed—simple terms what had just been said, almost paragraph by paragraph. Even if this sort of thing, this reflex, is not unprecedented, it is still odd. After all, the speaker spoke English and addressed her remarks to all and all were capable of receiving it. I say it's odd, or rather I hope it still strikes as odd, but really, it's not that odd—it's a pedagogy, and pedagogy, forever anxious, is conditioned by lack. In platonic terms pedagogy is precisely the technique that does not lack, which is to say, it is the paradigmatic technique of this our so called neoliberal epoch in which all that appears, appears only by the grace of technique and what does not so appear is nothing. As de Beauvoir noted, writing at the scene as it were: one is not born, but rather becomes neoliberal. It is and was a pedagogical project, an in-scription. It was born in the 1930s, was baby-sat by the dictatorships at the behest of Chicago, and came to life, that is to say, became *élan vital* in the 1970s. Despite current obsessions, it is not interested in your body, it comes for your soul.

Let's note that neoliberalism is not capitalism. Capitalism is exploitation—a material effect through and through. But man cannot live on bread alone. To be sustainable beyond its material effect, as our Mt Pelerin founding fathers knew, exploitation needs a knowledge. But this is not a knowledge that exists outside of and distinct in itself from technique, rath-

er this knowledge belongs entirely to the technique itself. The techniques of exploitation—objective in themselves we might say—are the site and orientation of all possible knowledge. Neoliberalism is the pedagogical operation of the transmission of this knowledge. As such it inscribes exploitation at the most foundational of levels—as that of second nature, which is the goal of all pedagogy: to undermine every instance of thought—which is not knowledge—with reflex, with a nature, and thus ‘one shows good technique’.

The knowledge of neoliberalism as pedagogy is that neoliberalism is all there is to know. We learn that it is all there is to learn, that is its end. It’s a true technique such that the subject is not he or she somehow or other otherwise constituted who takes up or is directed to take up for other reasons this technique and deploy it. In neoliberalism, the knowing subject is simply the subject of this technique. We are all neoliberals now, someone once sang, such that it became a chorus and like a chorus in tragedy it speaks for all and it answers itself to itself, naturally. Let’s stop singing the praises of this putative Atlas, the knowing subject.

As noted, pedagogy is the name of the nexus of technology and knowledge—a nexus that does not lack, a nexus that, as such, does not fail to prescribe that which is and, more critically, to proscribe that which *must not be*. There is no neoliberal pedagogy, all pedagogy is neoliberal. Ask the Athenian slave.

What pedagogy does not lack is truth. This is an irony. And an irony, which I’ll come back to, is what its knowledge cannot know. Certainly pedagogy, what I call ‘the neo-liberal sublime’, makes a show of truth—one way or another. A *schein*, I think the German term is. That there is nothing other than this *schein*-ing, neoliberal sublime is, then, the truest form of its appearance. Trilling memorably captured this *schein*-effect of the liberal as: ‘irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas’. To put this another way, the neoliberal subject has no-Idea, and he or she is good.

Less profoundly, but dutifully playing the back beats to this pedagogical old world new order, there are the sophist variants who populate the so called cultural *cum* instructional edifices of this sublime, for whom truth is *soooo* ante-nouveaux (ante as in ante-bellum). For these well-fed apologists of the bureaucracies of flux and flow and property speculation, who are all the more so insofar as they pose opposed to the hand that feeds them at the drop of the nearest research grant, any knowledge but knowledges is totalitarian or worse, *passé*. These new transmitters of technique are so *rive gauche*, *bien sûr*. In the market place of ideas, one never ceases to double dip.

I decided to mix metaphors here as an homage to Heraclitus.

waving, drowning’ pedagogues—slaves who teach to children the discourse of their masters—cloaked in veils of neutral colours, know fuck all, really, about those whose names they sell to the highest bidders. This is the culture industry so beloved of the well-schooled bourgeoisie and so critical for their pro-

jected image. This petit-sophistry, in which every citation is an instance of the lie, sucks the living life-blood out of any possible philosophy and it lives the more, the more it sucks!

And of course, allied to the sophists at the base, though opposed at the level of its superstructure, and still hanging by the shreds of some golden thread, are the wheeler dealers in superstition, for whom truth is out there but it's not for the likes of us. So much the better as this requires the knowledge of the prophets and profiteers to set us to rights, to set us free, no less, and, moreover, this do-over is eminently sustainable—to use again a popular, thoughtless term—precisely because the knowledge of what is impossible to know is infinite, potentially speaking. Imagine, the prophets and profiteers, masters of the lack of truth, masters of this lack *as* technique, technique as knowledge itself, forever. Infinitely, they have nothing to lose but our losing our chains.

'Nothing without our knowledge'—this is the knot of this thread of the neoliberal sublime: what it stages, what it teaches as what is essentially sacred to it. It proselytises the inaccessible, the inexplicable for us: not the impossibility at the heart of all knowledge, but the knowledge of impossibility itself. It teaches impotence in the face of what there is.

But this *nothing* keeps on insisting. What is impossible to know as knowledge is truly the impasse of the sublime. That's to say, this impossibility—that something has come to lack in its knowledge—is what it reproduces in order to be knowledge as such and this impasse or dead-end, which we could also call a contradiction, is the site of its weak power, its true lie. It is thereby the point of intervention and reorientation. This point can be formalised but it can't be known. There is a truth of this impasse but no knowledge of it.

Did the conference not insist on this not knowing? Does this not point to the work of this conference form? A *re-commencement*. The insistence on the *form* of the relation. Of transmission subtracted from pedagogy?

Un-know thyself! This is the irony of a truth, I'd say, and this is what I would have said: That if it were possible, philosophically speaking, to propose a technique of truth (a horrific confection) then it can only be irony. What is irony, what does irony do? It is structural. It marks or points to the place in knowledge which is not it. Philosophy, which must recommence every time as an unknowing, is not a dinner party, not at Mr Rorty's, nor anywhere else. '[I]t is not so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous.' An irony is an insurrection, an act of violence by which thought overthrows the lack of another. Irony is not the pose or the drama. It is not a technique of language or a meta-language game. Irony is the orientation to knowledge that any thought of truth must take. Every truth must become so and this despite becoming itself, and we know from Rousseau that no honours are bestowed on such production. Philosophy, the form the thought of truth takes, must die. Or at least it must be what *makes* die.

The thing about truths—note that shift of register—is that they don't take sides. For any possible truth, both choices are always worse. To come down on one side or other presumes knowledge after all, when it's knowledge precisely which is at stake: subject to technique or subject to truth, we might say. The former, in Jean Genet's memorable conceit, embodying itself in the Police Chief, 'that prick of great stature', is forever; the latter is for each and every epoch and is in fact the marker of its time. One is a partisan of the truth of one's time or one is an adjunct of whatever is the same old new prick in town.

Conferences can't 'turn the world upside down', to use a phrase well known to the English revolutionaries, the ones we often forget about. Of course, it's also an accusation Callicles, the great Gorgian, throws at Socrates: 'if things as are as you say Socrates, the world would be turned upside down.' The magnificent retort is that it's because Callicles lacks geometry that he thinks such a thing impossible—more revolutionary irony, and thus Plato confirms Athens did what was technically correct. But also implicit in Callicles' accusation is something common, that the philosopher is all fancy talk, which Hegel sort of famously re-said as philosophy always comes too late. We could counter, so what, and pose all analytically as above the fray which is one of the great historical misreadings of the place of the philosopher in Plato's *Republic*, still prosecuted by experts in philo-sophistical technique today.

But more dialectical, surely, is to mark the place of the philosopher as that which configures, reconfigures or configures anew the subject as not subject to the temper of the times, to its knowledge of itself as knowledge as such, but as that which thinks its time as subject to the orientation it brings to lack. Philosophy brings to what is nascent, what is not yet born in any set of social relations, the form of its possibility or perhaps, it gives form to what is impossible, thus making it no longer so. It makes what is impossible into its Idea—which is both a question and a problem. What does Plato finally say about that city, established in discourse *here and now*? It is 'no-where visible but not impossible'. To quote from the Levellers retort to a critic from the party of order ... 'not impossible that this Hetergenerall body, these severall parts, so diversified by light and darknesse, good and evil, should be concentrick, as to joynt pursuance of publique ends'.

Public ends. For the pedagogy of neoliberalism, the public must not exist. Its critical theory is that the public must not be known. We must have no public schools, no public services, no public welfare, no public good, no public ends. We must have no *idea* of the public which is to say, we must not know to constitute a public. The public, after all, is another name for the Good—a claim on the collective, the universal.

Known knowledge will not save us from the totalitarian banality of pedagogical technique but then again we don't need saving: 'there where the danger grows...' and all that rubbish. Being saved is a ludicrous confection, a metaphysical comfort, as Nietzsche said, but it won't stop doing the rounds so

long as we don't stop not knowing our geometry. Perhaps then, all that is romantic will melt into air...

There are truths which are not knowledge, every philosopher has said so. Not knowledge because as today it is finally too susceptible to its demon twin, too in thrall to what it can do, too in thrall to immediacy, to the power of technique over time. And such knowledge, finally, requires a *type* of subject, an *identity* already typified which is, by the way, always already inclusive of the attributes our sophists mistake for identity itself. Imagine, under all that celebrated difference and diversity, a terrible repetition of the same old, same old—a logic! What irony. Knowledge, oriented by technique, will every time give in to the encirclement.

The best thing about truth, that desire of philosophy, is this: Whatever we determine it to be of what is, it will always be that which does not give a fuck about you. It will be the determined unknowing of you, the Good of you. That's the desire of thought: a *re-public*, if you like, a discipline of transmission. That is the *end* of a conference.

Thank you all for being here and now.

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