

A PROLOGUE ON THOUGHT ITSELF

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In accordance with its purpose, classical metaphysics does not allow thought to be itself, to be what it is in its own independence, its own forms, movements, and relations. This structural restriction of thought is seen most clearly at the beginning. In Parmenides, thought cannot be itself because thought can only be the same as being. The principle 'being is' constitutes the starting point,¹ but this is not merely an inconsequential tautology. In Parmenides' understanding of it, being is *and can only be in an absolute sense*. To be in any way at all is to be in the fullest way possible; otherwise there is only pure nothingness. The presence of the slightest discrepancy, the most minute flaw will reduce being to absolute non-being.² Anything that is multiple, that is both here and there, is nothing; anything that moves, that is now here and then there, is nothing; anything that is born, that once was not but now is, is nothing; anything that dies, that is now but will not be, is nothing.³ In demanding that being is entirely devoid of any internal contradiction, the principle demands that the entire physical world of changeable things is nullified. Being can only be something beyond the world, something non-physical, something incorporeal that is thinkable in the thought to which being is steadfastly present.⁴ Thought is the same as being; it can only be so, for whatever is not being is nothing. Being is both there for thought and that which allows thought to be; for thought to be at all, it can only rely on the absolute nature of a singular, static, eternal, and changeless being because there will never be anything else.⁵ In this way thought is saved from oblivion, but only by virtue of a sameness with being so strict that it denies any other possibility of thought's manifestation.

Within the history of metaphysics, thought has found itself transformed. It can no longer be considered as what it is; it is now considered only as what being is. In this pursuit of being in thought, thought is said to become what is prior to it. To understand thought as the same as the ultimate reality, as what is in the fullest possible way, is to give up the nature that is thought's own. Parmenides represents the most extreme position possible as far as pure nothingness is the only alternative, yet the concept of a unity of thought and being would remain central in the later development of metaphysics; as soon as thought understands itself in terms of a unity with the ultimate, anything else is thereby fundamentally devalued.

But what if there is another relation between thought and being? We must of course say that thought *is*, but must it be entirely defined on the basis of the 'is'? Are we not permitted to see thought as thought rather than thought as being? This forms the principle of the concept of thought itself. But in this independence of thought from being, what is left for philosophy? Are we only left with something vacuous? Does philosophy give up its own nature if it does not restrict thought, if it is not utterly uncompromising towards it? These questions can be

answered by a presentation of the possible structural changes that are generated in the idea of concepts by the movement from thought as being to thought as thought. Within another relationship with being, other conceptual forms may arise, and as these forms develop, the meaning of thought's independence becomes apparent.

The following two essays in this collection – appearing here in shortened forms⁶ – are demonstrations of these structural changes. Firstly, *The Absent World* approaches language and thought in terms of a gap between sense and its referent. Whether this referent is the real understood as the actuality of physical things, or even another sense that is not fully manifest in the present, the two sides of the gap remain distinct aspects of the actuality of the world in general. As we stand in a world which extends beyond our field of vision, the operation of language becomes apparent in the way that the world remains beyond any possible grasp from within linguistic terms. But this is not dismissed as a mere failure; the limitations of language form a fundamental aspect of its use: language involves practical, communal purposes which are not necessarily fulfilled by the criteria of an absolute knowledge, but require the world's unthinkable complexity to be generalised and thereby become operative in thought.

The idea of the concept finds itself in a new terrain. As opposed to the metaphysical universal, the universal in which we understand thought to be the same as the highest reality, a concept of depth, of the ongoing flow of the world beyond us, can be constructed not to bridge the gap between sense and its referent but to explore it as such. Illuminating the relationship between language and the world, this concept prevents the operation of linguistic generalisation from remaining entirely unquestioned. In doing so our understanding of the actuality that extends beyond vision may change. On this basis the essay will show how, by producing other movements of thought in relation to the world, a new understanding can become the ground of subjective and worldly transformation.

Secondly, *Content and Operation* provides an account of the structure of thought in general for the purpose of understanding creative thought. This structure is composed of the contents that thought thinks and the operations that constitute what thought does. By focusing on its operations, thought can reflect upon and question its movement within creation itself; by bringing these operations to expression, they can become the basis of the movement towards the new: when we outline thought's operation, this in itself creates the conditions wherein other contents arise. As the conceptual duality of content and operation is developed, we are sent towards the spaces left open for thought in its independence from being. Thought does not pass away when being is not fundamentally determining it; thought continues to move, not through the pursuit of being, but through the properties that belong to itself. The duality of content and operation forms the basic structure of this movement; the essay will show the

possibilities that open for thought when its movements are not purely defined by what is other or external to it.

In its independence from being, thought may not only limit itself to what is purely subjective, the merely personal thought of a single individual. It is not only *my* thought, or what *I* think, but thought itself. This means that there is a universality that appears in the exploration of it, but this return to thought is not purely abstract. Abstraction may belong to thought, but it is not its primary form. The universality of thought appears in the world; it is a sense that arises among the real. Thought creates things, it is operative in the world; it belongs first of all to the contexts which unfold therein.

In its independence from being, thought itself is not something merely psychological. Other purposes are available for its concepts beyond a pure empirical knowledge of the *psukhē*. For the concept of depth in *The Absent World*, the aim is the possible subjective and worldly transformation based upon a reimagining of what goes beyond present experience. For the conceptual duality developed in *Content and Operation*, it is the creation of the new based upon the way that the vision of thought's fundamental structure can become operative within creative thought itself.

The so-called end of philosophy might only be the end of a particular purpose for it. As we pursue a critique of certain forms of thought, there is no need to silence thought once the critique has been completed. As an area closes, new ones are lit up. The more subtle sources of light become discernible when an all-encompassing brightness is removed. Under the fullest weight of being, thought can only be visible by virtue of being's visibility. Thought's own image of itself is obscured; it can only find an image of itself as *an image of being*. But when their relationship turns from sameness to independence, another image becomes visible. The basic position is that we can still create concepts outside the metaphysical unity of thought and being, that language can still operate without touching anything absolute. We are not aiming for the highest things imaginable through the boldest abstractions; we are aiming for a philosophy whose fundamental purpose is to be operative for the movement of sense and the real that is found in the actual world. However the meaning of being is construed, the meaning of thought must be entitled to its own ground, its own relation to a real that is not purely abstract. Thought can be expressed in language in a myriad of ways; although metaphysics has introduced forces in which this expression is shaped, the forces that belong to thought are also capable of movements of their own.

The results of these movements are not subject to the same problems that traditionally arise in metaphysical speculation. In order to avoid losing its traction upon the actual world, thought can remain grounded by its own vision of itself. As a concept of thought itself develops, it

does not remain blind to the reshaping it undergoes according to the influence of its own aims and requirements. Its ground is the vision of its own movement, the effects it creates, and those that affect it. Yet we must not reduce thought to the banality of a purely descriptive realism. Concepts are *created*, not merely described. In the creation of concepts, we can express the visibility of thought's movement beyond description; as thought creates, it can remain aware of itself while continuing further into unknown spaces. The result of this creation grounded in vision is a reimagined concept of the nature and functioning of conception itself. A concept is that which is developed, that which we connect with and to, that which grows, which operates on ideas. It is a content that has unique aspects of operation. It is a content that shifts terrains of thought, creating movements of organisation, trajectories wherein possibilities of thought form. A terrain of thought is produced around it; it becomes a guiding thought through which certain states of momentum are made.

Notes

¹ Fragment 6, line 1.

² Fragment 8, line 11 and lines 32–33.

³ Fragment 8, lines 3–9.

⁴ Fragment 4, line 1.

⁵ Fragment 8, lines 34–38.

⁶ The full-length versions, both of which were originally published in 2017, are available from www.andrewmilward.net. Another shortened version of *Content and Operation* was published in 2018 by the ZenoMagazine.