

## CONCEPTUALISING THE PROCESS OF PHILOSOPHY (1.0.0)

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### Abstract

The presentation will involve an overview of two of the presenter's essays, *Content and Operation* and *Instinct and Intelligence*, to show how the process of philosophy can be the subject matter of philosophical works. The first essay concerns a distinction within thought according to what it thinks (i.e. its content) and what it does (i.e. its operation): its connecting, its fabricating, its reduction and expansion, its joining and separating. In developing this duality, the duality itself creates changes—that is to say operates—within thought itself: it guides us towards the pursuit of philosophical work, not only through the creation of a new content (a new idea, concept, or theory), but also towards the pursuit of operations, i.e. the movements of thought that will allow us to prepare the ground for the creation of new content.

The second essay also discusses the nature of creative thought, where instinct concerns the intuitive formation of ideas that appear as the results of unconscious thought processes, and intelligence concerns our conscious questioning and judging of these ideas. In relation to the first essay, instinct and intelligence are forms of thinking in which operations occur: both connect, fabricate, reduce and expand, join and separate, but the former has its own intuitive, expansive quality, while the latter has its own direct, critical quality. This second essay provides a way to understand how instinct and intelligence combine within creative work, how different approaches to philosophy are possible on the basis of

their combined form, and how our understanding of their nature can affect the results we are aiming for.

In these examples of conceptualising the process of philosophy, the process itself has become the content of the work: these essays are, we may say, *made of* process rather than only being *formed through* process. This change in approach allows an exploration of the value of process, of what difference an understanding of it can make. It concerns a conceptualisation that allows the structural forms of thought to go beyond their usually implicit nature, bringing them out of their silence and into speech. In making these forms explicit, we are left with an image of thought that can guide us towards making changes within the actualisation of thought's process, a process that can be formed and reformed within the developmental movements that are made according to our creative purposes.

## 1

The first essay to discuss is *Content and Operation*. Here the term 'content' refers to the specific word or phrase or idea in language, and 'operation' refers to the effect that these contents have within thought, the way they create movements and changes in thought's terrain. The initial section that describes this distinction reads as follows:

Two modes of expressing thought are the expression of thought's content, and the expression of thought's operation. The first expresses a thinking focused on itself, not in a critical self-reflexivity, but a thinking distracted from itself with itself. In its purest instances it is the unquestioned moment of thinking that simply happens, a thought focused on its own content, its own imagination, its own belief, its own outcome. The second mode, the expression of thought's operation, is the expression of what thought does. It is thought turned back on itself, focused not only on its content, but on its own movement: its connecting, fabricating, reduction and expansion, joining and separation. Thought's operation belongs to the situation in which content becomes possible. It is the relationship between thoughts, the forms of influence they exert over each other. In expressing these relationships we depict a vision, not of the content of thought but of how thought moved. The first mode is to think without regarding what thought does. The second is to notice, to recognise, to think again a happening from within thought. It is a realism of thought's irrealism, aiming not to present a truth behind the veil of thought's appearance, but a vision and understanding of the irreal movement, a vision of thought itself rather than thought in-itself.<sup>1</sup>

This distinction between thought itself and thought in-itself shows the critical

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<sup>1</sup> *Content and Operation* (2017). Available from: <https://www.andrewmilward.net/files/content-operation-1.0.0.pdf>, pp. 2–3.

nature of these modes of expression: they bring philosophical thought back down to earth, relating it to our actual finite thinking rather than to something speculative and transcendent. In general thought itself is simply our immediate experience of thought, the experience we have in our everyday dealings with language and the physical world. Thought in-itself would only concern a hidden essence beyond appearances, beyond both our experience of thought and the reality of worldly things.

The expression of the operation of contents is described in the quote above as a realism of thought's irrealism. We could also say that another form of this realism, expressed as thought itself, was captured by James Joyce in *Ulysses*: there is a certain obscurity in the trains of thought that we find there; thoughts occur with tenuous or apparently inexplicable connections, with unknown causes producing unforeseeable effects. The passages in the novel that were written as interior monologues appear as sequences of lost thoughts between comments spoken by companions, as happenings in the flow of the everyday world, as those thoughts that occur to us in the darkness of the early hours. But what do these thoughts mean? A Joycean scholar could investigate their meaning and connections, uncovering the hidden allusions that Joyce may have had in mind, but this is not the literary effect that they have in the process of reading the book. The expression of thought itself here belongs to the realism of the irreal: the difficulty of understanding the connections represents the chaos of thought's own movement. But it remains a realism because it concerns an obscurity that we can immediately find in thought itself. In Joyce thought itself is given a narrative form: if we ask 'what are these thoughts?', we can say they are the thoughts of certain characters in the novel *Ulysses*. If we ask the same question for the thought that appears in a work such as *Content and Operation*, we can say that it is where thought itself is given a conceptual form, allowing us to document it in the abstract rather than in the form of a particular narrative moment. In this we are not trying to rationalise thought: here the realism of thought's irrealism means that the possibilities of thought's chaos are included in the conceptualisation itself, a conceptualisation that is grounded in the expression of what is immediately there.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For an example of a realism of thought's irrealism in a conceptual form, there is the extremity of pure opposition. (See *Opposition* (2022). Available from: <https://www.andrewmilward.net/files/opposition-1.0.0.pdf>.) This is where the concept of opposition conceptualises a chaos inherent to a particular habitual form of reason within thought (see *ibid.*, p. 3).—We can also contrast the presence of thought's irrealism in philosophy with the idea that logic constitutes a general theory of thought (such as the one we find in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*): rather than removing the irreal from thought to uncover a pure, crystalline logic that underpins all of language, the content and operation distinction allows the irreal to remain. (See also how the content and operation distinction recoils from a pure form of reason. *Content and Operation*, p. 5.)

Through expressing the duality of content and operation, the aim is to conceptualise the basic structure of thought. And the reason that we make this structure visible is to change the terrain in which thought operates:

It is the questioning of what thought does that makes it stand out, that makes it become visible rather than lost in the sense of content. Understanding operation does not simply change one particular thought; it does not counteract or oppose a specific content. It is not only another terrain, but the understanding of terrains as such. Within it we understand how the habitual speaks of its process; the operational nature of contents, the way in which they act as guiding thoughts; the structures of movement that form the foundations of thought. Awareness of operation changes the environment in which content can operate: certain deceptive movements are hampered; other movements become understood as conducive to our purposes.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, if we conceptualise the operational processes of thought, we are given a way in which we can point them out through the provision of a language by which we can demarcate them. We then notice what thought is doing rather than only being aware of the content itself. The conclusion of the essay explains that in the conceptualisation of content and operation there are

attempts to create a free thought that looks into the fundamentally new spaces that lay ahead as unknowns, that looks into the void to see if it can outline a space within it. To create the new is a distinct process opposed to the recreation of the pre-existing. But how is it that the relatively unconstrained operations of the latter appear simpler and thereby more free? The point about freedom here is not the process, but the freedom of possibility for the end result. This freedom involves extreme difficulty. It does not create within the well-worn terrains already available to it, but attempts to create new directions, new turns, that cultivate the possible. To find the new is to constantly search. But this is not merely a search for a content. It involves the search for a thought that creates the situation for its own happening, that prepares the ground for itself as something to be found in thought's exploration. It is a search for the operations that allow the new to form, the operations of instinct rather than habit, the operations that force their way through difficulty rather than relying on what is present at hand.<sup>4</sup>

The point this section makes about process is that if we are aiming to go beyond the reproduction of existing things, we must seek a difficult process rather than an easy one. Concerning the operation of combining two things, there is the example of Spinoza's combination of early modern metaphysics with the geomet-

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 7–8.

rical method of presenting ideas. In this case we can find an interesting distinction: on the one hand, Spinoza created his own original work entitled *Ethics*, but he had also created a commentary on Descartes' system, which used a similar geometrical method, entitled *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy*. The difference here is between a relatively straightforward operation of combining two pre-existing things in the latter case, and an operation of combining a pre-existing method with something fundamentally new in the former. If Spinoza had only written the commentary on Descartes, he would not hold the same stature as he does today. This is why Spinoza's work remains important after hundreds of years: he fully embraced the extreme difficulty of the processes involved in writing the *Ethics*.

## 2

The final paragraph of *Content and Operation* also refers to the operations of instinct. This is a reference to the second essay, *Instinct and Intelligence*, which primarily concerns the process of writing philosophy. In the ancient Greek world, instinct would have been understood as the voice of the Muses, as concerning those thoughts and ideas that appear to us in thinking as if from somewhere else; in modern psychology instinct would be understood as the results of unconscious thought processes. Regarding the creative process in general, the essay describes instinct as follows:

Instinct absorbs its surrounding world, of sense and the real interwoven, the internal and the external feeding its possibilities of connection. It is where new directions and areas are given in results that are often beyond expectation. We are in some way free to shape instinct, but our suggestion is only the beginning of an unseen process. For this process an idea is needed which is able to enter instinct with force and energy, which is capable of assuming an instinctive form. And so often the idea is given from instinct itself to thought, which in turn sends it back, the former going over it again before it surfaces once more, further developed and open to the next possibility of direction.<sup>5</sup>

Here instinct is not something that is purely unconscious, but concerns the back and forth of ideas from the unconscious into consciousness. And fundamental to this back and forth movement is intelligence. In general, intelligence concerns our conscious questioning of ideas and things: it is the questioning thought that we have in the circumstances of everyday life where, for example, we are trying to find our way in an unfamiliar city; it is also where we critique the ideas we have formed in our creative process, attempting to strengthen and solidify them.

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<sup>5</sup> *Instinct and Intelligence* (2020). Available from: <https://www.andrewmilward.net/files/instinct-intelligence-1.0.0.pdf>, p. 1.

The essay describes intelligence as follows, referring to the results of instinct within the creative process:

Intelligence examines the results. It asks questions of them. It forces thought to understand its own instinct, to express itself clearly to itself. It repairs difficulties, focusing on the progress made to determine areas of weakness. Intelligence is the force that drags an idea in the direction of its eventual completion. It is the sustained pressure we must consciously exert. It remains present, occupied with the space in which thought is visible. But when intelligence pushes, its movement often vanishes into instinct. As they unfold together, the two form opposing directions: intelligence as a movement from presence into absence, instinct from absence into presence.<sup>6</sup>

Instinct and intelligence are present in human thought in general, but the writing process—especially in philosophy—pushes them to extremes. These extremes are most apparent at the beginning of the writing process in the case of instinct, and at the end in the case of intelligence. Instinct is fundamental when we are seeking the initial idea and the first movements to organise its connections. Intelligence is fundamental when we aim to refine and strengthen the work, pushing as far as needed for it to reach completion. In other forms of creativity, different combinational relationships between them will occur, but in philosophy we could say that a certain balance is needed.

This combined work belongs to all creativity in general. Instinct is the source of creative thought itself; in the case of intelligence, in even the most free-form works, there can be at least a glance at the result to question whether the desired effect has been achieved. But even without this, even in works created in the purely improvised moment, intelligence precedes the instinctive stream of thought that constitutes them, silently engrained within this moment through the discernment needed to learn the craft. In philosophy, however, the fundamental process requires a balance. If the weight shifts too far in the direction of instinct, there may result a certain obscurity without substance; if it is too far in the direction of intelligence, there may be a certain lifelessness directed by a dominating conformity to precision. In the former, the work remains fluid but dark; in the latter, it remains sharp and bright but only at certain points, lacking a subtlety that runs through the work as a whole.<sup>7</sup>

By understanding the duality of instinct and intelligence, we begin to understand how we can affect them for our own purposes. And as instinct is the source of creative thought itself, the differences we aim to make with it will be funda-

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

mental: to some extent the unconscious is moved according to what we put into it; if we keep our purposes pure, the results of our instinct will be pure as well. If our concern is with profit or prestige, these will become operative within our instinctive thought, but if we are focused only on the ideas themselves, this purity of instinct will be reached.

### 3

Put together these two dualities concerning the processes of thought result in a structure where the content and operation distinction can belong within instinct or within intelligence. The tendency is that the operations of instinct will have their own intuitive, expansive quality, while the operations of intelligence will have their own direct, critical quality. Yet fundamentally both concern the same operational forms: both connect, fabricate, reduce and expand, join and separate.<sup>8</sup>

When describing thought itself in its most immediate form, we can include moments where the expression is in some way poetic rather than strictly formalised.<sup>9</sup> However, reasons for formalisation will arise when we apply aspects of thought itself to the process of conceptualisation. In philosophy we do not remain with a purely descriptive-poetic expression of our thinking because we are creating concepts in order to affect thought. In the process of conceptual development, the formalisation results in a certain completion, a certain push towards limits, that can result in a change in our thinking through the concept's use as a concept.<sup>10</sup>

To conceptualise process is to understand process. The content and operation distinction can alter the terrain of thought; our understanding of instinct and intelligence can alter the way we promote and cultivate them. What the outcome of these processes may be, however, is a separate matter; we can outline general operations, but the driving force of actual creativity depends on the creative purposes of the individuals involved. Foucault once discussed the limitations of

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<sup>8</sup> See *Content and Operation*, p. 2 and *Instinct and Intelligence*, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> For example, in the list just provided, there is no clear and distinct division between connecting and joining.

<sup>10</sup> The limit of the duality of concept and operation is where the one becomes the other (see *Content and Operation*, p. 6); the limit of the duality of instinct and intelligence is where they are applied from the beginning to the end of a work in accordance with their conceptual purpose, i.e. to conceptualise the creative process (see *Instinct and Intelligence*, pp. 4–6).—Yet for instinct and intelligence, when one becomes the other we lose sight of them (*ibid.*, p 4). Why does the merging of operation into content represent their completion as a conceptual duality, whereas the merging of instinct and intelligence does not? The limits of a concept are not chosen arbitrarily; they are grounded in an actual pragmatic of thought, i.e. the way in which they can be used in practice determines the form and nature of their limits.

intellectuals in terms of how they cannot tell people what to do but can outline the structural terrain of political action or, in his own words, provide a “topological and geological survey of the battlefield”.<sup>11</sup> At the level of thought itself, we could rephrase this to say that philosophers shouldn’t tell people the content of what to think but can outline operations of thought. In terms of the conceptualisation of the creative process, this appears acceptable, but as we move into other areas the need for content will appear. Without advocating the reduction of philosophy to a pure focus on operation, we can create contents that do not only involve the conceptualisation of operations. But these contents can nonetheless be used for their own operational properties: grounded in our understanding of operation, as we develop philosophical ideas, certain contents can be brought in to fulfil certain needs in accordance with their operational natures. In this way concepts of philosophy can be used to make changes to our own thinking and the world that surrounds us, changes that rely on a general understanding of operation just as much as they rely on specific purposes that act as our fundamental aims.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Pouvoir et Corps’ in: *Quel Corps?* (September/October 1975). Translated by Gordon. C. as ‘Body/Power’, in: *Power/Knowledge* (1980). New York, Pantheon Books, p. 62.

<sup>12</sup> The concept of depth in *The Absent World* and the guiding idea of human fraternity in *Opposition* are examples of content in my work that are made use of for their operational properties: the former sends the gap between sense and referent to its limit; the latter prohibits the extremities of pure opposition and pure non-opposition.