

I Am, But Do I Think? On the Historical and Ongoing Devaluation of Philosophers as a Symptom of Thoughtlessness



"Why is he thinking? Did he lose his smartphone?"

Cartoon by Martha Campbell. © Martha Campbell / CartoonStock.

While the Western philosophical tradition has long characterized human beings as “rational animals” with thinking as our defining feature, “professional thinkers” have been undervalued, even devalued, since before Aristotle’s time and still today, particularly within capitalistic societies where thinking is generally not valued unless it directly produces profit. This paper aims to warn against the concrete dangers of this tendency towards thoughtlessness through a combined historical and future-oriented analysis. Drawing on Christopher Moore’s analysis of the early use of the term philosophos in Ancient Greece, I first trace the origins of this hostility toward philosophers and ‘philosophizing.’ I then trace this devaluation of intellectuals and intellectual activity to the development of a broader culture of thoughtlessness, drawing on Hannah Arendt’s account of the “banality of evil” as rooted in a lack of thinking that facilitates one’s fall into evil by undermining moral judgment. Applying Arendt’s insights on the dangers of thoughtlessness, I then examine how our growing reliance on generative AI risks further eroding our critical thinking and moral judgment skills by increasingly outsourcing thought itself in the name of ‘productivity gains.’ Based on this, I conclude with a defense of philosophy as a way of life that keeps us connected to what makes us distinctively human – our capacity to think – while keeping us away from thoughtlessness and the grave consequences it will have on society if more and more of us fall into it.

To be human is first and foremost to be capable of rational thought. Of course, to be human is also to feel, to love, to belong, to create, and all other meanings — if any — which we may attach to human existence to better situate and orient our existence within this world. Yet none of those characteristics are as distinctively human as our innate capacity for questioning and evaluating the world around us, for speaking and acting not just based on our desires, but on *deliberated* desire in the Aristotelian sense. In that regard, our rational capacities are what distinguishes us from other animals, fundamentally defining us as “rational animals.” Although this definition of human beings has been contested since then, the capacity to think rationally remains one, if not the most, defining aspect of human existence: we may not exercise it all the time and it can certainly be hampered by a multitude of factors including emotions, cognitive biases, and trauma, but the question to which I answer in the affirmative is not *are we perfectly or always rational?* like computers are designed to be, rather *are we rationally competent?* to a higher degree than other species. The “we” in question is also a key part of the answer: while most human characteristics and abilities are not entirely universal — the blind lack the ability to see, amputees lack certain body parts, diagnosed psychopaths lack the ability to feel empathy and guilt — every human being, by virtue of being human, has the capacity for rational thought.

The question then becomes whether, or to what extent, each one of “us” exercises it.¹

Yet do we, as a society, even value rational thinking all that much? If we did, then wouldn't those who dedicate themselves to thinking rationally and mastering its written and oral expression, that is philosophers, be some of the most valued members of society? Wouldn't we, following their example, seek to exercise and improve our rational thinking skills to our highest potential? Quite the contrary: today, those who write or teach philosophy 'for a living' have little to no influence beyond academia, and the more generative artificial intelligence (AI) develops, the more dependent we become on it to 'think' for us. Under a capitalist system, the underlying pressure seems to be that dedicating time and energy to thinking is only valuable, and thereby valued, when these efforts directly produce capital; and if an AI-powered chatbot can do the 'mental' work within

¹ Though the main argument of this paper will be largely based on the idea that our capacity for rational thought is fundamental and essential to our humanity, that is not to say that said capacity is inalienable or that it is necessary for us to have it in order to live: it can be gradually lost as a result of certain degenerative diseases like dementia, significantly reduced by a stroke or stripped away altogether by an accident leading to brain death (though in this case one loses all brain function beyond rational thought and would barely be considered a “living” human being anymore). Hence my emphasis on the “innate” character of this capacity, insofar as all human beings have it by virtue of being human, and one remains “human” even after having mostly lost it (e.g., due to severe dementia) by virtue of having had it before.

seconds, then why go through the effort myself? This logic, I will argue, is actively contributing to the societal problem of “thoughtlessness” as Hannah Arendt called it, of which the devaluation of philosophers, philosophy, and critical thinking as a whole is a symptom.

In examining the relationship between the phenomenon of “thoughtlessness” and this phenomenon of devaluation taken as its symptom, the latter will be termed *sophiaphobia* throughout this paper.² From the Greek words σοφία (sophia) for “wisdom” and Φόβος (phobos) denoting “aversion” or “fear,” *sophiaphobia* refers to a form of anti-intellectualism directed specifically towards the intellectual pursuit characterized by philosophers, that is the search for “wisdom” through independent, critical thought. Such aversion to the activity of thinking itself may stem from one’s prioritization of profit-seeking instead, from one’s fear of engaging in the strenuous effort that profound thinking represents or from one’s fear of the disruption which “professional thinkers” can bring to society (with Socrates as a quintessential example). Whatever the cause of such an attitude in each case, this paper will focus on its consequences: examining what happens when *sophiaphobes* dismiss, mock, or devalue those who dedicate themselves to the activity of thinking, as well as when this devaluation becomes so entrenched in a certain

² Special thanks to my editor, Thomas, for suggesting that I coin such a term as a more context-specific alternative to “anti-intellectualism.”

system or society that it manifests itself in the thoughtless behavior of its members.

Given that it can manifest itself in various forms, sophiaphobia can be explored through different angles. In this paper, I will approach it from a combined historical and future-oriented perspective, beginning with the roots of hostility and mockery towards philosophers in fourth century BCE Athens, around the time when the term *philosophos* was coined as *philosophia* eventually formed into a discipline. The purpose of this historical analysis, based on Christopher Moore's *Calling Philosophers Names: On the Origin of a Discipline* (2019), will be to show that dismissal and mockery of philosophically-inclined individuals is not just a modern-day phenomenon, but one as old as Western philosophy itself (I). Following a brief discussion of how the public perception and societal influence of philosophers have evolved over time, I will turn to a deeper problem, beyond Ancient Greece, tied to the dismissal and devaluation of that which philosophers practice and exemplify that is the activity of thinking itself. In examining what such tendency to de-prioritize critical, independent thought can concretely do to society as a whole, I will rely on Hannah Arendt's analysis of "thoughtlessness" within the context of twentieth-century totalitarianism (II). Based on her analysis of this "absence of thinking" as the root of a particular type of evil which she saw

embodied by Nazi official Adolf Eichmann,³ I will explore the destructive consequences to which thoughtlessness led in the twentieth century, before turning to the consequences that it may have today amid technological advancements and our overreliance on certain forms of technology **(III)**. Keeping in mind Arendt's warnings, I will aim to show why the delegation of thinking to generative AI is an ongoing manifestation of the problem of thoughtlessness and why every member of society – not just philosophers – should actively resist it today. The paper will then conclude with a return to the origin: a Platonic call for more widespread engagement with philosophy as one possible approach to targeting the problem of thoughtlessness at its root and thus staying clear of its potentially destructive consequences – both for oneself and for wider society.

Importantly, the following examination of sophiophobic attitudes aims to establish neither a causal link nor a direct historical connection between such attitudes and the phenomena of thoughtlessness examined in these three distinct historical periods. Rather, the aim of this paper is to show, based on three

³ “[...] no theory or doctrine but something quite factual, the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer, whose only personal distinction was a perhaps extraordinary shallowness” – a type of evil which she called the “banality of evil.” More on this in section II – On the Problem of Thoughtlessness: A Twentieth Century Perspective.”

case studies, how sophiaphobia can go hand-in-hand with a certain embrace of thoughtlessness, insofar as the latter is the basis of the “unexamined life” which sophiaphobes seek to live and entrench in wider society.

“Foolish,” “Sage-Wannabe,” “Teacher of Misery:” The Emergence of *Philosophos* as a Scornful Label in Ancient Greece

The fact that Athens was a hub of philosophy where quintessential philosophers such as Socrates and Plato gained recognition does not mean that every Athenian was a philosopher, nor that all Athenians were favorable toward these members of its society. In fact, as Christopher Moore argues based on textual and archaeological evidence, the label *philosophos* initially carried a pejorative connotation. Only years later was it gradually redeemed and ultimately reappropriated by those who, united by a shared “love of wisdom,” came to form their own discipline under that name: thus emerged *philosophia*, from the Ancient Greek words φίλος (*philos*) for “love” and σοφία (*sophia*) for “wisdom.”⁴ In that way, according to Moore, Athenian thinkers whom we now remember as some of the first “philosophers” came to regard themselves as such

⁴ Christopher Moore. *Calling Philosophers Names: On the Origin of a Discipline*. Princeton: University Press, 2020, 1.

through a process of reappropriation and ennoblement of a slur – similar to how initially pejorative labels such as “queer” and “Shaker” have been gradually reappropriated and redefined by the targeted groups. Thus, as we will see in this first section, *philosophia* was born within a context where such dedication to critical thinking was not valued or even welcome, especially not when it came anywhere near “corrupting” the elite – a testament to the low regard in which philosophers were held within a society dominated by *sophiaphobia*, which I will argue resembles our societal predicament today.

Given the etymology of the word “philosophy,” we tend to define philosophers simply as “lovers of wisdom,” glossing this as “lacking-but-striving-for-wisdom.”⁵ Yet Moore’s historical reconstruction reveals that this was not what people originally meant by “philosopher,” or **φιλόσοφος** (*philosophos*) in its original Greek form. Back when the term was coined around the sixth and early fifth centuries BCE, the *phil-* (**φιλ-**) prefix which it contains did not designate such “lack:” on the

⁵ Moore, 66. Though Moore does not further elaborate on the terms of this “gloss,” I would clarify that “lack” of wisdom does not entail lack of knowledge or lack of intelligence: one may be considered a “philosopher” by virtue of having already reached a certain intellectual status through demonstrated knowledge and intelligence, while still striving towards the attainment of a more complete form of “wisdom.” In that sense, this “glossed” definition of what constitutes a philosopher implies both lifelong intellectual striving and a certain humility maintained throughout.

contrary, it implied clear or regular presence of the second element's referent.⁶ Based on this finding by scholar Walter Burkert along with further evidence, Moore argues that *phil*-prefixed names (of which Greek has hundreds) were originally pejorative "name-calling names," calling out "excessive activity" related to a social practice designated by the word's second element.⁷ This suggests that *phil*- was generally attached to nouns to form labels used not for congratulations or approval, nor as self-descriptions, but as *other*-applied epithets carrying a "bemused, skeptical or even censorious judgment."⁸ Based on this pattern, Moore's thesis is that calling attention to someone's relation to *sophos* by attaching a *phil*- prefix to it implied that the

⁶ Moore, 66.

⁷ Moore, 6. To take one illustrative example among the many cited by Moore, consider **φιλαίτιος** (*phil* + "legal motions"), which refers to "excessive activity" in lawsuits. In itself, filing legal motions is a normal activity – which Moore suggests is precisely what makes the name pejorative rather than laudatory: "since one's relation to legal motions usually is not a matter of discussion, calling attention to it by creating a name for it implies that the relation is not merely notable: it is worrisome" (Moore, 85). For a more detailed account, see Chapter 3.

⁸ Moore, 84. To add on to Moore's historical analysis, consider how this ancient Greek pattern of insult is still used in modern English, with "[slur]-lover" used, often with racist intent, as an insult towards someone considered excessively fond or protective of the designated group.

relation was ridiculous or problematic in the eyes of the name-caller.⁹

Moore then supports his thesis by exploring the specific connotation of *sophos* as the second element of the *phil-* prefixed name in question. Towards the end of the sixth century BCE, the term referred specifically to the epistemic authority held by the *sophoi* or “sages” – socially elite and influential advisers typified by the “Seven Sophoi” or Seven Wise Men of Ancient Greece. Given this and the aforementioned pattern, Moore suggests that calling someone *philosophos* back then denoted a tendency to act like those respected *sophoi* through “excessive” study and advising¹⁰ while claiming undue epistemic authority.¹¹ Indeed, one traditionally did not train to become *sophos* as a young man;¹² only at a mature age could such a title be earned.¹³ Thus, from an external perspective, young men studying to become *sophos* – which those engaged in deep conversation about life,

⁹ Moore, 6.

¹⁰ Moore, 6.

¹¹ Moore, 93.

¹² It should be noted that, although they constituted a minority and gained pushback from the political elite, these “young men” were typically citizens, meaning that they were themselves part of a certain elite relative to the whole of Athenian society. This social status gave them access to education and other rights that allowed them to circulate in Athenian public life as “wisdom-lovers,” a privilege not granted to female citizens nor to non-citizens altogether.

¹³ Moore, 105.

death, and justice were seen as doing – was an “odd, even risible idea” at best.¹⁴ At worst, it was deemed “hubristic” to try to “shortcut” one’s way to *sophos* status:¹⁵ while most people respected the sages, these wisdom-seeking young men went further – too far – by trying to emulate them. Such deviation from the norm is what earned those who would later be considered “philosophers” a *phil-* prefixed label, in line with the classic social tendency to label those who dare to be different. Thus, following this account, *philosophos* was likely coined as a result of the popular impulse to mock or condemn a group of people for their unreasonably excessive “love of wisdom” and illegitimate aspirations to sagehood.¹⁶

Given the reputation of those to whom it was attributed, *philosophos* was not a term of aspiration, acclaim, or self-identification in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE.¹⁷ It wasn’t until the fourth century BCE that the term started to be redefined, mainly through the figure of Socrates – a man considered the living embodiment of wisdom-loving and

¹⁴ As Moore argues in Chapter 4, these young men were likely the Pythagoreans, followers of Pythagoras (one of the first self-proclaimed *philosophos*), who traveled around the Magna Graeca enough to be seen by many people – not all of whom would have appreciated or understood their studious activity (Moore, 108).

¹⁵ Moore, 105.

¹⁶ Moore, 105-106.

¹⁷ Moore, 45.

wisdom-seeking.¹⁸ Indeed, Socrates was regarded as a *philosophos* within his lifetime for his commitment to practicing and spreading *philosophia* through questioning everything and everyone around him, including the political establishment. Such intellectual audacity earned him a reputation as a “gadfly,” which eventually led to his execution at a time when public opinion around philosophers (*philosophoi*) was already condemnatory: incomprehension and mockery towards Socrates’s unconventional ways turned into animosity when the political elite, seeing how influential he was among their children, set out to stop him from “corrupting” the future rulers of Athens.¹⁹ This accusation of ill intent on the basis of philosophical activities perceived as dangerous for the public may be the most extreme manifestation of sophiaphobia directed against the first Western philosophers. Following Socrates’s execution, his former students Plato and Xenophon sought to redeem his image by making him a central figure of their writings: though they rarely had Socrates’s character explicitly call himself or get called *philosophos* (likely given their awareness of the term’s enduringly pejorative connotation²⁰), they gradually redefined what it meant to be one by portraying Socrates as the symbol of critical thinking, ethical inquiry, and

¹⁸ Moore, 28.

¹⁹ Moore, 166.

²⁰ Moore, 158.

intellectual courage that we still remember and study today – especially as modern-day philosophers who, for many of us, strive to live by his example amid various forms of pushback from *sophiaphobes*.

Among ancient writings about Socrates and his philosophical activities, Plato's dialogues most significantly contributed to the redemption and revaluation of the term *philosophos* by showing how *philosophia*-style conversations can lead to virtue and flourishing.²¹ A central component of this redemptive project was his depiction of Socrates not just as a symbol, but as an "ideal."²² In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates denies the charges brought against him and exposes his accusers' ignorance around what it really is to 'philosophize,' that is "'to live [...] examining [one]self and others.'" In the *Charmides*, Socrates presents *philosophia* as a conversation towards self-improvement.²³ In the *Phaedrus*, while dialoguing with his interlocutor Lysias, Socrates explicitly gives a laudatory connotation to *philosophos*, describing the latter as someone with the ability to make speeches based on knowledge rather than mere opinion and to defend those speeches while recognizing their limited value.²⁴ Here, the condemnation is not just

²¹ Moore, 29.

²² Moore, 190.

²³ Moore, 223.

²⁴ Moore, 231.

countered but reversed against non-*philosophoi* like Lysias, depicting them as the ones at fault while suggesting that one should aspire to be like the *philosophoi* instead.

As Moore notes, this move reflects a second dimension of Plato's redemptive project: beyond just reappropriating a previously scorned activity for the purpose of redeeming its practitioners, he sought to ennoble *philosophia* as a "beneficial conversational-educational activity"²⁵ for *all* – subliminally telling each of his readers, "Whoever you are, and whatever your current goals, you *should* philosophize!"²⁶ With this two-fold "mission" advanced in his dialogues and spread through the latter's timeless popularity, Plato can be credited not just with contributing to the revaluation of *philosophos* as a proudly embraced identity marker among those who already identified with it more quietly, but also with expanding *philosophia* to a wider audience beyond said group of self-proclaimed *philosophoi*. Accepting the charge that Socrates "philosophized," Plato set out to advance the *universal* value of "philosophizing" by showing why Socrates's example *should* be followed rather than scorned. As Moore puts it, a practice beneficial to some *as humans* – in this case, "talking about fundamental issues necessary for improving oneself and others"²⁷ – is a practice

²⁵ Moore, 257.

²⁶ Moore, 259 (italics added).

²⁷ Moore, 257.

actually beneficial to all *as humans*;²⁸ by making this idiosyncratic practice “normative,” the practice “loses its idiosyncrasy.” Thus, the call to philosophize becomes normative not just for some, but for all²⁹ – including the sophiaphobes.

Did Plato’s reappropriation and revaluation of *philosophia* succeed in the face of Athenian *sophiaphobia*? Though his redemptive project may not have convinced all of his contemporaries, the fact that Socrates’s legacy has since been that of an example rather than a malicious influence or unreasonable “sage-wannabe” may be taken as a measure of success. Beyond redeeming Socrates’s reputation and the *philosophos* label altogether, Plato is generally thought to have “spearheaded” the formation of Western philosophy as we know it, with “self-consciously philosophical” practitioners.³⁰ The discipline has evolved quite a bit since the fourth century BCE, with considerable influence exerted over politics, social institutions, and intellectual debates over the centuries: Aquinas helped

²⁸ Moore, 258 (italics added).

²⁹ Moore, 259. I follow Moore’s Universalist interpretation here, while acknowledging that it may not reflect exactly *who* Plato himself had in mind when suggesting that one should aspire to be like the *philosophoi*. In fact, it should be noted that he believed not everyone was born with the ability to become a “philosopher,” at least not in the way he presented the title in the *Republic*. At the same time, he did allow not just philosopher kings, but also philosopher queens to rule his ideal *polis*, which legitimizes somewhat broadening the normative scope of a Platonic call to philosophize.

³⁰ Moore, 190.

shape the foundations of Christian doctrine, Machiavelli's advice continues to influence rulers to this day (such as President Macron), Rousseau's ideas inspired those who went on to lead the French Revolution just as Locke directly influenced those who founded the United States, Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* became the blueprint of second wave feminism – to name just a few in the Western tradition.

Yet despite Plato's efforts and the subsequent contributions of self-proclaimed philosophers, it appears as though we have fallen back into an era of dismissal (at best) and devaluation (at worst) of philosophy as both a discipline and a lifestyle – comparable to the pre-Socratic period described by Moore. If Plato's vision of philosopher kings and queens in the *Republic* was already idealistic at the time, it seems almost inconceivable today in the absence of any philosopher as culturally prominent and socially influential as Plato and Socrates were. Indeed, the fact that Socrates was sentenced to death is but a testament to the amount of influence he held; today, how many philosophers are sitting on death row or getting publicly executed for "corrupting" a wide audience? Fortunately for current-day philosophers, very few, if any.³¹ Today, those who identify as philosophers generally hold

³¹ In fact, if one looks through famous philosophers' causes of death over the centuries, some historical tendencies come to light: several ancient philosophers were murdered or executed, several Renaissance philosophers as well, and several Modern

little influence beyond academia, while those who study philosophy are often met with incomprehension, mockery or genuine concern: that this degree is useless and will leave us unemployed, that it is a waste of money... And should we decide to pursue philosophy beyond our studies, then we might be met with variants of Callicles's criticism in *Gorgias*: that philosophizing has its charms for the youth but makes adults incapable of facing the hard facts of political life, that we ought to 'act' instead...³²

I would like to argue that this tendency to dismiss and devalue *philosophia*, its students and its practitioners is a symptom of a larger societal problem, one that we might qualify as disinterest towards the activity of thinking itself. One could attribute this to our economic system, wherein an activity only has value if it can be quantified in terms of income or profit. Insofar as studying philosophy teaches students how to make a

philosophers too but only under authoritarian regimes that espoused anti-intellectualism (e.g., Gustav Shpet in the USSR, Kurt Grelling in Nazi Germany). Aside from that, the second leading cause of death among famous philosophers since the end of the Cold War, after disease, has been suicide. I mention this not as commentary on the number of suicides among modern philosophers but as one possible measure of the decline in philosophers' influence over time, insofar as the execution of philosophers in the past usually meant that they were considered influential enough to pose a legitimate threat to political power through their ideas and status in society. (Cf. "Deaths of Philosophers." *Wikipedia*. Last modified January 2026.)

³² As paraphrased by Moore, 134.

‘good life’ over how to make a ‘good living,’ a philosophy degree does not lead to a stable income as directly as other degrees might – which, to those who see philosophy primarily as a college degree or class, might make philosophical practice seem useless altogether. This “commercial” view of *philosophia* actually predates capitalism: back in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*, one scene features the sophist Antiphon mocking Socrates’s poverty and painting the philosophical lifestyle as ridiculous. “I thought that those philosophizing had to end up flourishing more,” he remarks sarcastically. “But you [Socrates] seem to me to have won the opposite from *philosophia*... After all, you are poor and do not charge tuition...”³³ According to Antiphon (who fruitfully charged his own students³⁴), philosophy is reducible to

³³ Xen. *Mem.* 1.6.2–3. Quoted in Moore, 180.

³⁴ Beyond the characters of Socrates and Antiphon, this scene displays a confrontation between two approaches to ancient Greek intellectualism which they respectively embodied: *philosophoi* on one hand, sophists on the other. Though some argue that the distinction was less clear-cut in reality, Plato sharply distinguished philosophers from sophists, of whom he was particularly critical (namely for their profit-seeking approach to teaching). Sophists had their own criticisms in return, at least as presented in Plato’s and Xenophon’s writings. Yet it should be specified that this does not fall under what I have termed “sophiaphobia:” while involving scorn towards philosophical activity, criticism of philosophers by sophists only targets the manner of execution of such activity, not the activity itself. In contrast, “sophiaphobia” involves a certain aversion or at least rejection of the very activity of thinking by those who (unlike sophists) do not identify as ‘intellectuals’ themselves.

a pedagogical profession and can only make one “flourish” through payments from students. Yet Socrates stood as a living rebuttal to both certitudes: because he spread and sought wisdom for free and did not construe “flourishing” in material terms, he could not be valued as any more than a “teacher of misery” by people like Antiphon.³⁵ This is but one manifestation of the fundamental tension between wisdom-seeking and money-orientedness: as Socrates was misunderstood and scorned back then, anyone who dedicates themselves to prolonged thinking without directly seeking financial compensation out of it, and while not necessarily having other funds to rely on either, may well be misunderstood and scorned today.

Thus, disinterest towards the activity of thinking – when not directly for the sake of compensation – might stem from our society’s money-orientedness. While this discussion of causes could be pursued further, I would like to focus the rest of this paper on a discussion of consequences instead. Indeed, the stakes of this problem extend far beyond whether philosophers get the respect and attention which I think they (or we) deserve: that with which we must reckon more universally is what the societal devaluation or de-prioritization of the kind of activity exemplified by philosophers – thinking critically for oneself – can do to society as a whole. We saw the consequences of this

³⁵ Xen. *Mem.* 1.6.2–3. Quoted in Moore, 180.

phenomenon in ancient Greece, where politically upheld sophiaphobia first manifested itself as scorn towards those “excessively” dedicated to philosophical practice and later culminated in the killing of Socrates for having dared to philosophize, or question, too far. Such contempt and fear of wisdom-seeking can be regarded as a certain embrace of the opposite activity: underusing one’s critical thinking skills and embracing “thoughtlessness.” As I will show in the following section based on Hannah Arendt’s analysis of this phenomenon, “thoughtlessness” – like sophiaphobia – can be deadly when embraced at a political or wider societal level. It therefore must not be underestimated, especially as society becomes more and more reliant on technology and less on human capacities.

On The Problem of Thoughtlessness: A Twentieth Century Perspective

If, as I posited earlier, our capacity for rational thinking is what makes us distinctly human, it follows that the less we exercise that capacity, the more we alienate ourselves from our humanity. In other words, the less we think, the more we reduce ourselves to acting like non-human animals or machines – neither of which have a developed moral compass, if any. Indeed, “thoughtlessness” is not just an intellectual problem but an inherently moral one: beyond blocking one’s engagement with what we have characterized as a universally beneficial intellectual practice – that is “talking about fundamental issues

necessary for improving oneself and others,”³⁶ as Moore puts it – embracing thoughtlessness also means letting go of one’s crucial capacity for moral reasoning. In Kantian terms, this necessary connection between the capacity for critical thinking and the capacity for moral reasoning may be articulated in terms of “autonomy” and “moral agency.” Autonomy, as Kant understood it, refers to the capacity of rational agents to make their own choices based on reason, free from external influences or coercion. Far from an abstract philosophical concept, autonomy is a cornerstone of Kant’s timelessly applicable moral framework: insofar as to act autonomously is to exercise one’s capacity for rational thought and moral judgement in accordance with moral laws that one rationally ‘legislates’ *for oneself*, autonomy is essential for moral agency.³⁷ In other words, if I am to consistently make sound moral decisions, then I must actively exercise my rational capacities. It follows by *modus tollens* that if I stop exercising my rational capacities, then my capacity to consistently make sound moral decisions will thereby be eroded – from which the most unreflectively immoral actions may follow.

³⁶ Moore, 257.

³⁷ This reconstruction of the connection between autonomy and moral agency in Kant’s moral framework was borrowed from “The Influence of Kantian Philosophy on Today’s World.” *Philosophy Nest*, November 18, 2025.

While such conclusions may be dismissed as merely hypothetical or alarmist philosophical musings, Hannah Arendt gives us all the more reason to take them seriously. As both a German-born Jewish woman forced to flee Nazi Germany and a political philosopher significantly influenced by Kant, Arendt dedicated much of her life to grappling with the crucial political events of her time and demonstrating their impact on our moral judgement — namely with regards to the horrors of totalitarianism.³⁸ Within this context, she paid particular attention to the nature of *evil*, initially describing the evil committed by totalitarian regimes as “radical,” using Kant’s expression.³⁹ That is, until she distanced herself from this Kantian analysis after witnessing the trial of Nazi official Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, to which she was drawn out of curiosity as to what someone having committed “radical evil” might look like: there as a reporter, what she found was not a “monster” as expected, but an “ordinary, commonplace” man displaying “a curious, quite authentic inability to *think*.”⁴⁰ Such “total absence

³⁸ Tatjana Tömmel and Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves. “Hannah Arendt.” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2025 ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman.

³⁹ Tömmel and Passerin d’Entrèves. “Hannah Arendt.”

⁴⁰ Hannah Arendt. “Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture.” *Social Research* 38, no. 3 (1971): 417–446, 417.

of thinking,"⁴¹ she later argued, lies at the root of evil – hence her subsequent conceptualization of “thoughtlessness” as a *moral* problem.

Thus, it was the Eichmann trial that not only redirected Arendt’s understanding of the nature of evil but also sparked her interest in the phenomenon of thinking,⁴² laying the ground for her later writings on the moral significance of thought and judgement. What struck her while watching this man who had managed the deportation of Jews to death camps for years was the lack of “wickedness, pathology or ideological conviction” displayed during his trial: the deeds were monstrous, but the doer apparently was not.⁴³ In fact, his “only personal distinction was a perhaps extraordinary shallowness”⁴⁴ displayed through his reliance on “clichés” and “stock phrases” as well as his “adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct” throughout the trial.⁴⁵ Absent demonstrated characteristics of an “evil” character or clear affirmation of hatred toward Jews, the only explanation Arendt found for Eichmann’s evil deeds, aside from his “law-abiding” devotion to

⁴¹ Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture,” 418.

⁴² Hannah Arendt. *The Life of the Mind*. Harcourt Inc., 1981, 6.

⁴³ Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture,” 417.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture,” 418.

“the Führer,” was his “thoughtlessness”⁴⁶ – a characteristic displayed not just during the trial, but just as much during the preceding police examination and during his years as a Nazi official prior.⁴⁷ Thus, Arendt claimed, “it was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed [Eichmann] to become one of the greatest criminals of that period.”⁴⁸ Following the trial, she coined the concept of “banality of evil” to account for the discordance between Eichmann’s “moral and intellectual shallowness”⁴⁹ on one hand, and his evil deeds on the other.

Before we build off of Arendt’s conclusions, it would be intellectually dishonest not to nuance the portrait of Eichmann which she proposed. Granted, her judgements of his character and motives were based on a limited scope of first-hand observations, whose only object was the questionably honest behavior and statements of a man on trial. Recognizing the contingency of her claims, Arendt explicitly noted that “the banality of evil” which she derived from Eichmann was meant

⁴⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 149.

⁴⁷ Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture,” 417.

⁴⁸ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 288. As clarified later in her introduction to *The Life of the Mind*, what Arendt means by “stupidity” here is the “inability to comprehend.”

⁴⁹ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Introduction by Amos Elon, xiii.

to denote not a general “doctrine” or “theory” of the nature of evil, but only what she had observed as “undeniably factual” about Eichmann’s personality.⁵⁰ Yet evidence released years after her death reveals that her assertions on Eichmann’s personality were actually undeniably mistaken: while she saw only “shallowness” and Eichmann himself claimed that he had only followed orders based on a Kantian definition of duty,⁵¹ recently discovered tapes from 1957 reveal that he was actually a committed ideologue. Dubbed the Eichmann tapes, these recordings of an interview with a Nazi journalist in Argentina, four years before the trial, feature Eichmann bragging about his role in the Final Solution and stating that he would have been “satisfied” if “millions” more Jews had been “exterminated.”⁵² Given this, the idea that only Eichmann’s “thoughtlessness” could explain his evil deeds cannot be reasonably upheld anymore.

What do these revelations entail for Arendt’s concept of “banality of evil,” given its tie to Eichmann’s example? Some

⁵⁰ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 4.

⁵¹ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 136. For Arendt’s analysis and deconstruction of Eichmann’s stated adherence to “Kantian precepts,” see VIII: Duties of a Law-Abiding Citizen.

⁵² For more on these revelations, see Chakrabarti, Meghna and Kotsonis, Stefano. “The Eichmann Tapes and the Comforting Myth of the ‘Banality of Evil.’” *On Point* (WBUR), July 15, 2022.

may want to reject her insights altogether, like many did, especially among Jewish circles, amid significant controversy following the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*,⁵³ in fact, some of her critics at the time may have been right to accuse her of portraying an anti-Semitic monster as a mere bureaucrat. Along those lines, the concept of the banality of evil may become nothing more than a “comforting myth.”⁵⁴ Others may want to retain the concept insofar as it can still be applied to lower-level bureaucrats unreflectively obeying orders. Along these lines, my position is that we should continue to uphold Arendt’s “banality of evil” as a timelessly relevant conceptual framework to help us identify, understand, and ultimately prevent gradual descent into thoughtlessness and immorality amid temptations to stop thinking independently from the systems and institutions⁵⁵ in which we are embedded. Indeed, however factually misled they

⁵³ Tömmel and Passerin d’Entrèves. “Hannah Arendt.”

⁵⁴ Chakrabarti and Kotsonis, “The Eichmann Tapes and the Comforting Myth of the ‘Banality of Evil.’”

⁵⁵ By “institutions,” I refer not just to physical organizations founded for a given collective purpose (including educational “institutions” like York University), but also to established social practices and customs that structure our lives and behavior (e.g., family, marriage, legal systems). Taken in this broader sense, “thinking independently from institutions” means exercising our capacity to critically evaluate, challenge, and form moral judgements (i.e., “philosophize”) on questionable matters that may be presented as “just the way it is” in these institutional structures (e.g., certain marriage norms, certain unjust laws), and doing so despite sophiophobic attempts to quiet our questions.

might have been, Arendt's observations during the trial led her to a conclusion extending beyond Eichmann's case, even beyond the context of totalitarianism which she studied: that any "ordinary" human being who simply stops thinking critically about what he or she is doing can come to carry out the worst forms of evil without even realizing it, or without the moral reasoning skills left to care. Hence the question she posed a few years later: "Might the problem of good and evil, our faculty for telling right from wrong, be connected with our faculty of thought?"⁵⁶ The answer, with or without Eichmann's case as corroboration, remains yes.

By drawing this connection between the faculty of thought and the problem of evil, Arendt's analysis of one criminal became a universal warning about the danger, destruction, and death that may eventually result from something as seemingly innocent as *doing* without *thinking*: that is, gradually weakening our rational capacities by living unreflectively, and living unreflectively as a result of weakened rational capacities. Considering the level of immorality that we may easily attain through this vicious circle, the previously mentioned call to philosophize appears as urgent as ever – hence the enduring public utility of philosophical practice. Such practice may take various forms – from Socrates dialoguing in the *agora* to Arendt critically reporting on a courtroom trial to Moore and myself

⁵⁶ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 5.

building on their contributions in writing – as long as it involves actively exercising one’s critical thinking and moral judgment skills against whatever pushback may come from sophiaphobes. In pursuing this lifestyle, philosophers may be regarded as both examples and advisers: similar to how Moore interpreted Plato’s redemptive project as including the injunction, “Whoever you are, and whatever your current goals, you should philosophize!”⁵⁷ we may interpret Arendt’s account of thoughtlessness as telling us, “Whoever you are, and whatever your current goals, do not stop thinking!” Indeed, the final (posthumously published) book she wrote suggests this injunction in the form of an open question: “Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass [...] be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually ‘condition’ them against it?”⁵⁸ As she develops in her analysis, the answer, again, is yes. In other words, if the absence of thinking is a possible cause of evil-doing, then active thinking is one of the simplest, yet most fundamental safeguards against the latter.

And yet as simple as active thinking may seem compared to other “activities,” here we are in need of a reminder as to why we not only should, but *must* give it more of our time and attention: to form healthy communities of reflective, perpetually

⁵⁷ Moore, 259.

⁵⁸ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 5.

self-improving individuals, but more consequentially to protect human society from the possibly deadly consequences of “thoughtlessness” writ large – of which totalitarianism, upheld largely by “thoughtless” low-level bureaucrats, is one example. The stakes are high, yet we still tend to let “the absence of thinking” take over: it is “so ordinary an experience in our everyday life,” as Arendt observes, “where we have hardly the time, let alone the inclination, to *stop* and think.”⁵⁹ In the following and final section, I will draw on this observation to explore how such “ordinary” thoughtlessness manifests itself today, a few decades after Arendt’s writings, within an increasingly technologically advanced context. Focusing on the development of generative AI and our growing reliance on it, I will argue that we are increasingly not just weakening, but losing the inclination to “*stop* and think” at the core of a reflective, moral life. Keeping in mind Arendt’s warnings about “thoughtlessness,” I will then aim to show why this *delegation* of thinking, beyond the “disinterest” considered earlier, is a problem that every member of society – not just philosophers – should care about and actively resist today. The paper will then conclude with a return to the origin, presenting a Platonic call for more widespread engagement with philosophy as one solution to the problem at hand.

⁵⁹ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 4.

On The Problem of Thoughtlessness: A Twenty-First Century Perspective

*"While I like to think of myself as a decent writer, at this point, I often believe that LLMs can explain things better than I can."*⁶⁰

At first glance, this comment found on an online forum may seem like nothing more than the commenter's humble perception of their own writing. Yet, it struck me as something more harmful than that. Judging by their active participation on this forum, it can be reasonably inferred that said commenter is a relatively knowledgeable person who knows how to write and does not *need* "LLMs" (as in Large Language Models, the basis of chatbots like ChatGPT⁶¹) to formulate their thoughts for them. Yet, judging by this comment, they seem to have convinced themselves that they do – an expression of our generation's increasing surrender to generative AI. As I will argue, this phenomenon runs counter to the previously established call to philosophize, or simply to think for *oneself*, and is thereby contributing both to thoughtlessness and to an increasingly normalized form of sphiaphobia.

⁶⁰ From the comment section of William MacAskill's "EA: A View from the Inside" posted November 17, 2020, on the *Effective Altruism Forum*.

⁶¹ Lisa Lacy, "LLMs and AI Aren't the Same: Everything You Should Know About What's Behind Chatbots," *CNET*, May 31, 2025.

Generative AI can be defined as a type of artificial intelligence that *generates* new content such as text, images and videos in response to inputted prompts from a user.⁶² Rather than being trained only to make predictions based on a specific dataset (which is what AI originally came down to), the particularity of generative AI is that such models are trained to *create* new data resembling that on which they were trained.⁶³ This generative aspect is central to my argument insofar as it mimics the human faculty of thought: one which distinguishes itself from the thought of other beings by virtue of the distinctly human capacities to judge, evaluate, and then draw novel conclusions based on that ‘data.’ In Kantian terms, such cognitive activity is permitted by the “power of judgment” (*Urteilstkraft*) or “faculty of judging” (*Vermögen zu urteilen*): this spontaneous and innate cognitive capacity is that through which one makes judgments that are essentially “propositional cognitions;” from this it follows that rational human beings are “propositional animals.”⁶⁴ Only humans have such capacities in Kant’s view; yet what about those machine-learning models which now *present* themselves as equal to humans in this

⁶² “What Is Generative AI?,” *Coursera*. Updated on April 18, 2026.

⁶³ Adam Zewe, “Explained: Generative AI,” *MIT News*, November 9, 2023.

⁶⁴ Robert Hanna, “Kant’s Theory of Judgment,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2022 ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta. This theory of cognition is mainly developed in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*.

propositional regard? Since the “generative AI boom”⁶⁵ which brought chatbots such as ChatGPT into the hands of anyone with access to a browser (and a VPN where needed), we now have a third entity to turn to other than ourselves and other humans when it comes to making “propositions,” that is the content of judgments.⁶⁶ Although, for Kant, propositions can only be “generated” through psychological processes, thus by “judging animals” with the same cognitive makeup, AI chatbots can now “generate” them just as well – perhaps even better than oneself, following the aforementioned commenter’s reasoning. Given this, and considering how easy it is to use these chatbots compared to how long and mentally strenuous it can be to draw one’s own conclusions, and how others may not always be available to help, the temptation to resort to generative AI to judge and formulate ideas *for us* is certainly understandable. Yet the more we let it think for us, the less we think for ourselves – which is where I think the harm comes in.

⁶⁵ Zewe, “Explained: Generative AI.”

⁶⁶ As Hanna explains based on selections from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, “a proposition is the logically well-formed and semantically well-composed, truth-valued, unified objective representational content of a judgment; and more generally it is “what is judged” in the act of putting forward any sort of rational claim about the world [...] In this way judgments for Kant are *essentially* propositional cognitions, in that the primary function of the faculty of judgment is just to generate these logically well-formed, semantically well-composed, truth-valued, intersubjectively shareable, rationally communicable, unified objective representational contents.”

To be clear, this is not to say that generative AI is *inherently* harmful; like any tool, it is only as harmful as the user makes it. Moreover, what I see as harmful is not our reliance on it to *help* us in our thinking: just as any tool may help us perform a given task or activity, chatbots can help us better understand certain ideas and test our own ideas through a simulation of dialogue, while helping us perform certain inherently unreflective tasks more efficiently (such as gathering references under the same citation style). What I do see as harmful is our reliance on its ‘judgment’ *rather than* on our own when it comes to generating ‘new’ ideas or content.⁶⁷ In that capacity, generative AI becomes more than just a tool or piece of “equipment” in the Heideggerian sense – hence why it must be distinguished from other technological advancements:⁶⁸ when

⁶⁷ While proper consideration of the following points lies beyond the scope of this paper, it should be noted that there are reasons to regard generative AI as “harmful” *by design*: one being its irreversible environmental impact, another being its designers’ wide-scale theft of intellectual property for the sake of training these models (which tech companies like OpenAI have been accused of doing). Regarding the latter, this basis of largely stolen content should make us all the more cautious when characterizing AI-generated content as ‘new’ and, worst of all, presenting it as our own work; but anticipating that both will continue to be done, AI disclaimers should make their way into all kinds of content creation to mitigate that harm.

⁶⁸ In terms of tools born out of technological advancements, consider the electronic calculator: at its birth in the 1960s, the device was met with some of the same worries and controversies as AI today regarding the fate of human knowledge and our reliance on

the tool takes, or is given, the role of the thinking user, then it does not merely *help* do the work, it *does* the work. The role of the human user is then reduced to copy pasting, rewording or restructuring at most, as the “generative” or creative part of the work has already been taken care of. This may seem harmless when the “work” or task in question is just writing an email; but what about essays? Cover letters? Speeches? Given that its outputs are often satisfactory, reliance on AI to generate the work just once can easily evolve into an overreliance, until we find ourselves not writing anything without it anymore. By that point, no wonder even “decent writers” come to regard themselves as less capable and therefore in *need* of AI, which only further entrenches the dependence. Beyond disinterest towards the activity of thinking (considered in Part I), sophiaphobia has reached its paroxysm in the age of generative AI as those disinterested in thinking for themselves can now *delegate* the activity altogether – a possibility which more and more users are regularly seizing upon, at the detriment of both the quality of

technology. Yet a calculator can only *help* us do the calculations – it cannot solve the whole problem for us. Consider the Internet as well, which sparked similar fears as it became increasingly accessible at the turn of the twenty-first century. Yet the Internet only *helps* us access information. In contrast, generative AI can both 1) help us do calculations or find certain information *and* 2) solve the whole math problem or produce the whole essay, report, etc. that we were to produce ourselves with the help of that information.

their work and the sharpness of their own, decreasingly exercised mental capacities.

One may dismiss these concerns by pointing out the productivity gains offered by generative AI, especially when it comes to writing. I will call this the productivity argument. Indeed, why spend time writing something as formulaic as an email when it can be written for me within seconds? Why spend hours crafting this essay for some required course in which I have no interest when I can have it produced for me, and then make that text my own with some edits? If I have dozens of cover letters to write, why not give the chatbot my resume along with the job description and have it write more or less what I would have written in each case? Similarly, consider a lawyer who has been working on a case all day and is set to present on another case in court the next morning: why would they not use the generative tool at their disposal to prepare a more persuasive speech than the one they might have written themselves under such conditions? Granted, these are all valid lines of reasoning if we focus on opportunity costs: given limited time, and especially within capitalist systems wherein “time is money,” one must constantly choose between different activities based on their relative “value.” Construed in monetary terms, no “value” is directly gained from writing an email, essay or cover letter. Construed in terms of other benefits such as pleasure or knowledge, one hardly gains any “value” from writing an email or a cover letter, nor from a required essay or speech in which one has little interest. Under this framework, one could argue that generative AI actually facilitates our thinking in matters of

concern to us: allowing us to dedicate more time and brainpower to those matters by efficiently generating all kinds of other work that would have “cost” us considerable time to think through.

This argument may appeal to anyone looking to optimize their own time and accomplish those matters of lesser concern (such as formulaic emails) as efficiently as possible; in that sense, each one of us may have reasons to ask ChatGPT, Claude, and the like to do the thinking for us in certain contexts and thereby save ourselves time overall. Yet that does not mean that we should; in fact, I maintain that there are moral reasons why we should not, lest we allow thoughtlessness and sophiaphobia to be normalized on a wider scale than ever before.

First, what I find harmful behind the productivity argument, as with the comment above, is the logic of resignation behind it. Indeed, to place the task that I must complete into the “hands” of a chatbot and to then present the output as my own is to trust the chatbot’s “judgment” and writing abilities more than I trust mine; to resign myself to the supposed inferiority of my own intelligence and surrender to the superiority of *artificial* intelligence. This might seem harmless if done once, but anyone who uses generative AI or sees it used around them will know that it is never just once: as seen earlier, the line between reliance and overreliance is thin when outputs are deemed satisfactory, even more so given opportunity costs. Considering that such reliance thus tends to be repeated, resignation becomes entrenched more and more deeply each time: from ‘I don’t know what to write, let me see what ChatGPT or Claude comes up

with' to 'why spend time figuring out what to write if ChatGPT or Claude can write something better anyway.' By relying more and more on these LLMs, we gradually convince ourselves that we *need* them, when really we are perfectly capable of writing, creating, and simply thinking without them. LLMs may "explain things better than I can" in some respect (insofar as no human intelligence can compete with the breadth of an AI's "knowledge"), but that does not mean that I don't know how to explain things myself. In fact, bringing in one's unique human perspective and style will make the explanation richer and ultimately more valuable;⁶⁹ the same goes for all of the written works considered above. I would encourage each of us to hold on to this logic of self-sufficiency rather than surrendering to the logic of resignation, lest we devalue our own intelligence to the point of barely ever using it anymore.

Second, the productivity argument assumes that it is a waste of time, all things considered, to dedicate oneself to tasks and assignments that an LLM can accomplish quicker and better. Having addressed the latter issue, let us now address the former. What I find harmful here is not the idea that LLMs are quicker "thinkers," as that is factual by design: just as no human can

⁶⁹ This echoes some of the arguments for why AI-generated "art" cannot be considered real art, or why the latter can only emerge from a (human) creative *process*. The literature defending this position is plentiful and certainly worthy of attention as further grounds to reject the logic of resignation.

compete with the breadth of an AI's "knowledge," it is physically impossible for even the most quick-thinking human to "generate" quality content at the same speed as an LLM. What I do find harmful here is the positioning of efficiency as an end in itself and the justification of all means towards it. Indeed, painting time management as the only concern leads to teleologically justifying the repeated use of generative AI for *anything* that involves even the least amount of critical or creative thought: given that such thinking requires dedicated and extended time, indulging in it goes against the logic of "time is money" and its emphasis on speed for the sake of efficiency. In fact, philosophy runs counter to that logic by definition: in a means-end framework, "wisdom" is the end which philosophers seek, and the means to that end may not be the fastest nor the most efficient from a "time is money" perspective; such "means" may include spending years completing a PhD for the sake of knowledge, perhaps dedicating oneself to an underpaid teaching position, but most of all, spending incalculable amounts of time thinking problems through. If the active exercise of one's rational capacities is crucial for staying connected to our own humanity and namely to our moral compass, then philosophers are best positioned in that regard. Conversely, those who adhere to the productivity argument are worst positioned: that is, most likely to alienate themselves from their own humanity and moral compass by prioritizing "productivity gains" and thereby taking less and less time to think *for themselves*. Thus, the productivity argument amounts to a form of sophiaphobia insofar as it is based on the devaluation of *independent*, rational thought when

it comes to creating original work. The call to think *for oneself* appears all the more urgent against the risk of settling into the kind of thoughtlessness we may reach by having LLMs “think” for us wherever prolonged thinking is involved.

At this point, one may present another objection to my concerns: that I am exaggerating the scope of the issue – that most people still write the bulk of their own work themselves and that having an LLM quickly generate one’s formulaic emails is not nearly as dramatic as I have presented it in terms of “sophiaphobia” and “thoughtlessness.” With regards to that last point, I concede that AI-generated emails are not the problem; however, I maintain that they are a significant symptom of one. Indeed, if the problem is our tendency to rely on LLMs to think for us rather than thinking for ourselves, then aren’t AI-generated emails proof of how pervasive the problem has become? That one would even have the inclination to delegate email-writing to an LLM is a testament to how reliant we have become on these chatbots, their “judgment” and their capacity to do our own work for us: productivity argument aside, if a person cannot even formulate relatively short written communication without the “help” of AI, then no wonder they will struggle with formulating their thoughts in longer, more complex pieces of writing such as essays or cover letters – hence the temptation to delegate the thought-formulation in those cases as well. In that sense, AI-generated emails reveal a particularly pervasive and normalized form of “sophiaphobia” fueled by the logic of resignation: one that involves fleeing the activity of thinking before even engaging in it, which is anticipating the mental effort

ahead and preemptively delegating it to a chatbot under the presumption that it will produce a “better” result anyway.

That most people still write the bulk of their own work themselves, as my opponent retorts, is an idea that would require empirical analysis to be confirmed or disproved. Yet whatever the findings may reveal, I would still maintain my warning as I do now, no matter how “exaggerated” it may seem: that to rely on LLMs to generate our written work and communications for us is to embrace thoughtlessness both in ourselves and in others. Indeed, it isn’t just about myself as a lone user – applying Kant’s principle of universalizability to my own overreliance on AI would be to will a world in which *everyone* relies on AI to that degree: a world in which everything we write to each other would be ‘authored’ by AI; where no essay, cover letter, or speech would carry the voice of its supposed human author; where everything would be mediated by AI insofar as we would all collectively surrender to the superiority of its “intelligence” over our own. In fact, it is not impossible to imagine a future where generative AI becomes so developed and pervasive that it allows us to never have to think anymore. Even the more reticent individuals may be forced to give in lest they fall behind – a phenomenon which we already see happening today: indeed, like the commenter above, I may see myself as a “decent writer,” yet become discouraged when I receive lesser results than others for my work compared with technically flawless, *artificial* work. In this way, we may *all* be persuaded that having AI think for us is to embrace “better” work and higher productivity – which is why my warning

would remain of utmost urgency even if reliance on LLMs were still a rarity.

Thus, to those who may still think I am overstating the potential effects of generative AI, my advice would be to stay aware and critical, while keeping Arendt's insights in mind. Indeed, though her portrayal of Eichmann was factually incorrect, her conclusions drawn from his behavior should not be discarded if we take them as a 'cautionary tale' of what can happen to someone who truly does embrace thoughtlessness. Following this 'tale,' let us consider what we may learn from "Arendt's Eichmann" and from applying the "banality of evil" to AI-powered thoughtlessness today.⁷⁰ Unlike Hitler, Arendt's Eichmann did not become one of the major organizers of the Final Solution by way of explicitly evil motives. Rather, he reached that point through a gradual process of alienation, away from his own humanity and into the role of a "desk murderer"⁷¹ who went to work, did what he had been hired to do, went home, and repeated the same routine the next day — without ever stopping to think through exactly *what* he was doing and *why*. In

⁷⁰ For another way in which the "banality of evil" may be considered an enduringly relevant concept in the age of generative AI, particularly with regards to the harmful or immoral "advice" that chatbots can output when prompted, see Bess Kalb, "ChatGPT is the banality of evil," *The Grudge Report*, March 6, 2026.

⁷¹ Robert Merrihew Adams, "The Concept of Evil," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified February 23, 2023.

psychological terms, Arendt's Eichmann began to act thoughtlessly when he stopped exercising his brain: indeed, studies show that the human brain has muscle-like qualities, such as the need to exercise it in order for it to work properly. The more a person uses their brain and challenges it with reasoning-based tasks, the better it will be at thinking.⁷² Conversely, if a person stops challenging their own brain due to laziness, 'lack of time' or a logic of resignation, and thereby lets LLMs do all the thinking for them, then their brain will gradually become weaker. This might make us more likely to mindlessly accept unethical tasks from our employer, or immoral policies and social arrangements imposed by the ruling class – until, before we know it, we fall into a routine of organizing or contributing to the deaths of faraway people from the comfort of our own desk, without ever really stopping to think about what we are doing.

As a possible safeguard against the problem of thoughtlessness and its grave moral implications, I will conclude with a call to "return to thinking itself," to repurpose the famous rally cry of the phenomenological movement; that is, a call to philosophize. As Wittgenstein once wrote, "philosophy is not a theory but an activity."⁷³ Indeed, far from being just an academic

⁷² "Is the Brain a Muscle?" *Your Heights*.

⁷³ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated by C. K. Ogden. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1922, 70.

discipline or a university department, philosophy is a daily practice and an active outlook on life: it is to always examine and question the world around us, to never accept things uncritically, to never stop “talking about fundamental issues necessary for improving oneself and others”⁷⁴ as Moore put it. In that sense, to philosophize is to “*stop and think*,” to use Arendt’s formulation. Contrary to what rigid academic boundaries suggest, philosophizing is not reserved for philosophy students: on the contrary, I exhort every individual to engage in philosophical practice in some way, whether it be by reading the classics, taking a course, or cultivating that critical outlook on the world, never shying away from those ‘deep’ conversations with others and with oneself. By maintaining this critical mindset, we protect ourselves from falling into thoughtlessness and the evil-doing which it can facilitate. Similar to how Plato presented Socrates as an ideal at a time when *philosophoi* were hardly respected, I argue that we should all follow the example of philosophers – in terms of constantly exercising and holding on to our capacity for critical, independent thought – to “condition ourselves” against evil-doing, following Arendt’s insights.

Conclusion

⁷⁴ Moore, 257.

In his treatise on the nature of education relative to the nature of man, Rousseau exhorts every instructor to give their young “pupil” the space to learn and think for themselves: “Put the questions within his reach and leave them to him to resolve,” he advises. Only then, by drawing on their natural capacities to examine the world and think through problems themselves, shall the pupil become an enlightened individual – guided by reason, and free from external influences and coercion. Conversely, Rousseau warns the instructor: “If ever you substitute in his mind authority for reason, he will no longer reason. He will be nothing more than the plaything of others’ opinion.”⁷⁵ Having explored what can happen when one’s rational capacities are de-prioritized or delegated altogether, it should now be clear why the substitution of reason is indeed a danger to be avoided and actively resisted.

Based on this understanding of human beings as fundamentally capable of rational, independent thought, the aim of this paper has been to show how the de-prioritization of this fundamental capacity is harmful not just to the individual, but possibly to society as a whole. What may begin as one’s own disinterest in taking the time or making the effort to think critically, may evolve into the delegation of that capacity whenever another “thinking” authority is at one’s disposal; in

⁷⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, trans. A. Bloom (Basic Books, 1979), 168.

the meantime, such attitude towards the value of thinking as an activity may manifest itself as scorn or even animosity towards those who dedicate themselves to said activity above all else. Hence the connection which I have drawn between the devaluation of critical thinking and the devaluation of philosophers and philosophy as a whole, all gathered under the term “sophiaphobia.” To show the concrete manifestations and consequences of sophiaphobic attitudes towards both thinkers and thinkers itself, I have analyzed such attitudes in three distinct contexts similar in one aspect: the wide-scale or high-level embrace of “thoughtlessness” on the basis of a certain form of sophiaphobia. Through this historical analysis, I have attempted to trace the roots of the problem of thoughtlessness by returning to the origins of sophiaphobia in the West, which I have identified as the birth of the activity and discipline to which sophiaphobia is fundamentally opposed. I then examined the moral weight of thoughtlessness in light of Arendt’s analysis, in order to present it as a problem not just for self-proclaimed philosophers, but for all individuals who may either fall into thoughtlessness or be caught in the potentially destructive consequences of systems built on the banality or banalization of evil. Building on Arendt’s cautionary account, I then argued that thoughtlessness is manifesting itself more and more today with our increasing reliance on artificial intelligence rather than on our own mental capacities – a problem which I maintained as such against objections such as the productivity argument. Having previously established thoughtlessness as a fundamentally moral problem, I ultimately aimed to show why

it is crucial for each one of us to actively resist falling into such “absence of thinking” – lest we risk losing ourselves and our humanity within evil structures that no sound moral judgment based on critical thinking could ever justify.

Against this risk of alienation from ourselves as rational, moral agents, and considering the ever-evolving nature of generative AI, the call to think for oneself is as urgent as ever. Insofar as to think for oneself is to embrace the kind of critical, independent thinking to which philosophers dedicate themselves, this call can also be understood as a call to philosophize – a resounding *Sapere Aude!* or “Have the courage to use your own reason!” as Kant articulates it in his essay “What is Enlightenment?” (1784) Indeed, within a societal context where sophiaphobia is politically and socially upheld – from the scorn and hostility towards the *philosophoi* in Ancient Greece to the widespread embrace of generative AI today – to use one’s own reason and resist its substitution for another “authority” is, indeed, a form of “courage” – especially considering how, both then and now, *philosophoi* and philosophically-inclined people altogether constitute a minority. To be “enlightened,” in such contexts, is to recognize the value and moral urgency of exercising one’s own rational capacities, as time-consuming and mentally strenuous of an effort as it may be. Conversely, if we tell ourselves that we do not have the time, the energy or even the capacity to “stop and think” for ourselves, then we gradually lose the “inclination” to do so in all areas of life. Before even thinking a thought through, it becomes increasingly tempting, almost automatic, to resort to the “authority” of LLMs – thus

devaluing our own intrinsic “faculty of judging” in favor of these chatbots whose judgment is just as artificial as their overall “intelligence.” From there, if we cannot even think a thought through without turning to them, then no wonder we resort to these chatbots so automatically, almost like an extension of ourselves, when we have essays or speeches, even emails, that is *anything* moderately complex to write. Yet if we fall into such a habit, then *when* will we ever think or reason independently anymore? When will we exercise that capacity which keeps us distinctly human, cognitively alive, and morally sound? To avoid falling into this level of thoughtlessness (which each one of us can fall into, even those more philosophically-inclined, in the age of generative AI), I advance the call to philosophize as a moral precept to which we should *all* commit – not just within a class, a term paper or one particularly ‘deep’ conversation under the influence, but as a lifelong *modus operandi* – for the sake of living an “examined” life while collectively forming a healthy, reflective, more human society.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Though it has been significantly revised for publication in *The Oracle*, whose editorial board I sincerely thank for their guidance and patience, this paper would perhaps never have existed at all without the open-ended term paper assignment which sparked my crafting of this topic in Winter 2025. Having originally written this paper for that course, I would like to thank its professor, Dr. Oran Magal, for the creative freedom which he encouraged through that assignment and for his guidance during the brainstorming process: in particular, for having introduced me to Moore’s book referenced throughout Part I, and for his help in structuring my ideas around thoughtlessness into Parts II and III

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