Scientific Journal "Newsletter on the results of scholarly work in sociology, criminology, philosophy and political science" | www.sci-result.de
ISSN (Print) 2699-9382 | ISSN (Online) 2699-9005
Volume 5, Issue 1, 40-55, Published: November 28, 2024
DOI: https://doi.org/10.61439/JIHD1403

The End of Neoliberalism? Byung-Chul Han's and Yoko Ogawa's Rediscovery of Contemplation in Accelerated Times

Dr. François Debrix
Virginia Tech, USA
Email: francdeb@vt.edu

Abstract

Several critical theorists have suggested that the way out of neoliberal capitalism is to accelerate it in order to force its collapse. In *The Scent of Time*, German-Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han calls for a different challenge to neoliberalism by way of a rediscovery of contemplation. Han suggests that contemplation can undercut the *vita activa* (or active life), which Han blames for the hyper-active neoliberal ways of being and living, as well for the seeming impossibility to end neoliberal time(s). This article examines Han's thought on contemplation, highlighting his critique of both neoliberal time(s) and acceleration. It expands the scope of Han's analysis by turning to Japanese author Yoko Ogawa's novel *The Housekeeper and the Professor*. Ogawa's novel revolves around time and memory. Ogawa offers a compelling understanding of contemplation that complicates Han's thought. Ogawa's sense of contemplation resists being defined by neoliberal modalities of living even though it often remains stuck in them. This article concludes by asking what it means for neoliberal subjects to allow Ogawa's contemplation to enter their lives, and what critical possibilities it might bring.

Keywords
acceleration, Byung-Chul Han, alculation, contemplation, lingering, neoliberalism, time, thinking, Yoko Ogawa, *vita activa*

Introduction

Of late, several critical theorists have suggested that the only way out of neoliberal capitalism is to accelerate and intensify it so as to force the entire system to collapse. Such a push towards what some have called "terminal acceleration" seeks to develop strategies that can

lead to a "full decomposition [designed] to consume [neoliberalism's] rotting culture" (Noys, 2014, p. 80). Or, as social theorist Steven Shaviro puts it, in order to "overcome globalized neoliberal capitalism, we need to drain it to the dregs," thus hoping that, "by exacerbating our current conditions of existence, we will finally be able to make them explode, and thereby move beyond them" (Shaviro, 2015, p. 2). In a slightly different way, still hopeful of discovering a future beyond neoliberalism, others have called for an "accelerationism of the left" that would "unleash latent productive forces" while somehow "repurposing [neoliberalism] towards common ends" (Williams & Srnicek, 2013). In *The Scent of Time* (Han, 2017), philosopher Byung-Chul Han rejects these accelerationist perspectives, which he believes are obsolete and misconstrue the nature of today's neoliberal times. Han calls for an altogether different challenge to neoliberal capitalist times (as a condition and an epoch) and neoliberal time (as a way of calculating or measuring the time individual subjects spend on various activities). In particular, Han's challenge to neoliberalism takes place through a rediscovery of contemplation or, as he puts it, lingering. Han suggests that contemplation or lingering can undercut the *vita activa* (championed by Hannah Arendt, among others), which Han blames for the continued acceptance of hyper-active and work-intensive neoliberal ways of being and living.

This article explores Han's thought on contemplation as this concept relates to time and duration, particularly in the context of neoliberal capitalism. It highlights Han's critical challenge, via contemplation, to neoliberal times and time, and to the idea of acceleration. But it also expands the scope of Han's critical reappraisal of contemplation by turning to Japanese author Yoko Ogawa's novel *The Housekeeper and the Professor* (2009). Ogawa's novel is centered around time, memory, and concerns with ending. This study suggests that Ogawa offers a compelling understanding of contemplation (albeit in a literary form) that both complements and complicates Han's analysis. While it is still conditioned by neoliberal times, Ogawa's sense of contemplation (developed through her novel's main protagonists) nonetheless resists being defined by neoliberal capitalist modalities of living and by the *vita activa*. This article concludes by asking what it might mean for neoliberal subjects to allow Ogawa's contemplation to enter their lives, and what critical possibilities vis-a-vis neoliberal time (including some left unaddressed by Han) it might bring.

Methods

This essay is an investigation of the notion of contemplation or lingering (and of the mode of thinking that may be associated with contemplation) that is situated at the intersection of critical philosophical and political theoretical analysis (via the work of Byung-Chul Han and his extensive examination of contemporary modalities of neoliberalism) and literary studies (through the novelistic writing of Japanese author Yoko Ogawa). By juxtaposing Ogawa's novel to Han's close critical philosophical reading of thinkers in, texts about, and concepts derived from (mostly) western social and political thought (from Aristotle about the *vita contemplativa* and Arendt about the *vita activa* all the way to contemporary accelerationist scholarship and related scholarship centered around the question of neoliberalism and time), this study follows a trans-disciplinary and intertextual approach (Shapiro, 2012) that brings in contact literatures, genres, and disciplinary approaches — here, Ogawa's novel and Han's philosophical essays — that are typically not associated with one another. The objective of such a critical analytical perspective or method, perhaps more common in humanities scholarship than in social scientific studies, is to take advantage of the theoretical readings and analyses offered by a certain theoretical perspective (for example, Han's critical thought on neoliberalism, accelerationism, and the work of thinkers who have championed the idea of the *vita activa*) while at the same time not taking them for granted or accepting them as given. In other words, the

critical perspective introduced by Han and some of the key concepts he introduces as analytical challenges to neoliberalism and related arguments can be furthered (possibly enriched, but perhaps corrected, nuanced, or even improved too) when they are placed in a textual context (here, a fictional text, a novel, and its own narrative unfolding) where the taken-for-granted dimension of the newly illuminated concepts (for example, contemplation or lingering as challenges to neoliberal accelerated times) and their critical acumen are less obvious. Put differently, when theoretical concepts and perspectives — such as contemplation, lingering, or even thinking, in Han's case — appear in a literary context that is not a priori concerned with philosophical challenges or arguments, additional (and hopefully enriching) insights, and even perhaps supplementary critical possibilities, about these concepts and perspectives may be uncovered thanks to a series of textual techniques or elements (writing style, affective relations among the main characters, narrative structure, genre, plot, etc.) that are proper to the literary work. Once again, in the spirit of intertextual and trans-disciplinary scholarship in the humanities and the social sciences, it is towards these goals that, in this essay, Ogawa's presumably non-theoretical or non-philosophical novel *The Housekeeper and the Professor* is placed in contact with Han's critical philosophical analysis.

Results

The first section of this study reviews and evaluates Han's critique of acceleration and of recent accelerationist perspectives on neoliberalism and time. Among other elements of his

Figure 1. Byung-Chul Han

philosophical critique, Han explains that accelerationists have misunderstood neoliberal time, which they insist on depicting as a matter of increased speed and/or intensity resulting from the operations of neoliberal capitalism when, in fact, according to Han, neoliberal time is about losing control, expanding aimlessly and in all directions, and what he calls "atomization." This critique leads Han to suggest that capturing the nature of neoliberal time (for the sake of enabling a critique of neoliberal times) requires one to look deeper into the historical and philosophical origins of neoliberalism's use and abuse of time, something that Han traces to the modern (and early capitalist) notion of the *vita activa*.

In the second section, relying on philosophical analysis and a close reading of Han's work, the essay details Han's critique of the *vita activa* (active life), its antagonism of the *vita contemplativa* (contemplative life), and its extension into today's neoliberal hyper-active life and hyper-intensive work. It leads to a third section that showcases Han's attempt at recovering the *vita contemplativa* — or what he more commonly calls contemplation or lingering — as a challenge to both the *vita activa* and to today's neoliberal time and times. This section explains Han's connection between contemplation and thinking, and it shows that contemplation's relation to time or "duration" (as Han puts it) is presented by Han as a form of living (and thinking) that needs to be recovered if one wishes to break away from neoliberal hyper-active times and "atomized" time. Yet, a key finding or result of this section — and of this study, more generally — suggests that Han's detailed analysis and, crucially, his desire to see contemplation re-emerge as a way of living differently (and thus of doing away with neoliberal times) fall short as they fail to offer concrete strategies or outcomes.

Thus, in a fourth section of this study, Ogawa's novel *The Housekeeper and the Professor* is introduced both to reflect on Han's challenge to neoliberal time and times via contemplation and to unsettle Han's own argument in order to offer additional perspectives on contemplation and its critical potential. This essay reveals that Ogawa's emphasis on time, lingering, and thinking in her novel, seemingly away from neoliberal times but perhaps still conditioned by them, can nonetheless help us to ask questions about neoliberalism, the *vita activa*, and their use and abuse of time, questions that Han's analysis does not seem to be able or willing to consider. In particular, Ogawa's rendition of contemplation or lingering in *The Housekeeper and the Professor* shows us that contemplation is not just something that may re-emerge if and when neoliberal accelerated or "atomized" times (and the *vita activa* that supports them) are removed, as Han suggests. Rather, Ogawa's novel intimates that, even if it is impossible to do away with the hyper-active life and times of neoliberalism, and even if neoliberalism's times are often hard to bear for the individual subject and may not come to an end any time soon, there may still be opportunities under neoliberal conditions for the (neoliberal) subject to discover and appreciate forms of contemplation or lingering, and to enjoy moments, fleeting and unpredictable as they may be, when thinking (in Han's sense) is still possible. Constrained and conditioned by neoliberalism as opportunities for contemplation may remain, they nonetheless may be able to initiate some critical possibilities for today's neoliberal subjects when dealing with hyper-active life, hyper-intensive work, and the atomization or acceleration of time.

Discussion

Neoliberalism and acceleration

In *The Scent of Time*, Byung-Chul Han diagnoses the contemporary neoliberal condition in relation to what it does to the concept of time. In so doing, Han elaborates upon recent accel-

erationist approaches to the possibility of neoliberalism's end times. Han rejects accelerationist "solutions" to neoliberalism because, as he puts it, "the age of acceleration is already over" (Han, 2017, p. vi). For accelerationists, neoliberal capitalism increases what Han calls the "flow of time," and it augments the speed and intensity at which contemporary social, cultural, and economic operations and transactions take place (Noys, 2014, p. x). In this way, neoliberalism will not just repeat itself over and over. Instead, it will finally crash and burn.

According to Han, accelerationists have misconstrued time under neoliberal capitalist conditions. Acceleration, which accelerationists typically equate to speed or intensification (or both), will not bring an end to neoliberalism. Rather, according to Han, acceleration is merely "an expression of the bursting of the temporal dam" (Han, 2017, p. 2). Put differently, under neoliberal conditions, it is "a general inability to end and conclude" that is "the cause of today's acceleration" (Han, 2017, p. 2). Thus, acceleration is a symptom of the hegemonic force of neoliberalism or, more precisely, of what neoliberal capitalism has done to time. In a neoliberal context, time is running out of control, and it is spreading aimlessly, in all directions, often with much speed and alacrity (which get confused with acceleration), because there is nothing in contemporary modalities of neoliberalism that can anchor time anymore (Han, 2017, p. 2). Thus, "the feeling that [neoliberal] life is accelerating is really the experience of a time that is whizzing without a direction" (Han, 2017, p. vi).

If acceleration "is not a primary process" but only a symptom, or perhaps the "consequence of time having lost its hold" (Han, 2017, p. 19), accelerationists' quest to end neoliberalism and perhaps to surpass it will miss its target since it only deals with symptoms of neoliberal time and does not get at what actually drives it. Instead of accelerated time, Han believes that the contemporary neoliberal condition is about "atomized time." Atomized time "is a discontinuous time" characterized by the fact that "there is nothing to bind events together and thus [to] found a connection, [or] a duration" (Han, 2017, p. 18). In part, for Han, this is because history has given way to information. And information and its technology do not "possess any narrative width," and are "neither centered nor… have a direction" (Han, 2017, p. 17). Information, Han continues, "represents a new temporal paradigm," something that once again he calls "atomized time" (Han, 2017, p. 17). "Atomized time" takes hold of most social practices under neoliberalism. Crucially, social practices that were reliant on "promising, fidelity, or commitment" disappear, and along with them, social meaning gets eroded too. Social practices based on promising, fidelity, or commitment, and the meanings attached to them, were "temporal practices," Han believes, because they tied human subjects "to a future" (Han, 2017, p. 18). Han deplores the fact that, as neoliberal subjects, "we are [now] subject[ed] to a radical loss of space and time, even of world, of being-with," since all we have left to count on is "atomized time" (Han, 2017, p. vii). In particular, a time of and for contemplation, for lingering, and for thinking is what has now been lost.

The vita activa and time

Han blames what he refers to as the *vita activa* for the disappearance of historical time, for its replacement by "atomized time," and even for the turn to accelerationist strategies to try to achieve neoliberalism's end. Han writes: "Not the least cause for today's temporal crisis is the absolute value attached to the *vita activa* [since it] … leads to an *imperative to work*, which degrades the human being into an *animal laborans*" (Han, 2017, p. vii). Different from the way Han typically writes about neoliberal capitalism in many of his books (where he often limits himself to offering harsh but often lucid diagnoses about the contemporary neoliberal condition[1]), in *The Scent of Time* Han seeks to "offer reflections on possibilities for recovery" (Han,

1 See, for example, Han's analyses of various dimensions of neoliberalism in *The Burnout Society* (Han, 2015) or in *Non-things: Upheaval in the Lifeworld* (Han, 2022).

2017, p. vii). What Han wishes to recover here is tied to what, for him, one must first recover from. And what one must recover from is the hegemonic imposition of a *vita activa* that, in Han's view, has controlled modern subjects and their social lives for centuries, and moreover has shaped both liberal and neoliberal subjects, their use of time, and their social actions.

According to Han, the "imperative to work" is the key dimension of the *vita activa*, and this "imperative to work" has been exacerbated in neoliberal times by "the *hyperkinesia* of everyday life, [that] deprives human existence of all contemplative elements and of any capacity for lingering" (Han, 2017, p. vii)[2]. Only contemplation or lingering, or what, going back to Aristotle, Han calls the *vita contemplativa*, is worth living if the neoliberal subject is ever to recover its humanness[3]. Relatedly, only "a revitalization of the *vita contemplativa*" (Han, 2017, p. vii) can provide answers to neoliberalism's end times. Han blames the protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, but even more so Calvinism for the denigration of the *vita contemplativa*, or what Han understands to be a form of contemplative lingering that, from Aristotle to early modern capitalism, had been prized as "an absolute priority" (Han, 2017, p. 86). Even in public settings (not just in private matters), a time or "duration" dedicated to thinking was seen by Aristotle to be crucial "to rest one's mind," to "collect oneself," and to fully engage in "the contemplative consideration of truth" (Han, 2024, pp. 86–87). Work, for Aristotle, while necessary to social activities, to the good functioning of the home (*oeconomia*), and to the proper running of the *polis*, was nonetheless "non-rest" and "un-freedom" (Han, 2024, p. 86). Rest and leisure were not seen as passive activities, but rather as "noble" and "free" undertakings that were crucial to the development of the mind, the growth of the human being, and the well-being of society. Rest and leisure, in the service of time as duration, were dedicated to contemplation and thinking, and they were contrasted to what was "useful and necessary," in other words, to work (Aristotle, 1995, p. 285; Han, 2017, p. 86).

However, during the 16th and 17th centuries, Calvinism inverted the relation between rest or contemplative lingering and work. Work became a supreme value, Han claims, and rest, leisure, and contemplative thinking had to be subordinated to work or adapted to the necessities of work and work-time. While work, according to Luther, was postulated to provide an essential connection to God's "calling upon men" (Han, 2017, p. 89), Calvinists gave work a supplementary yet crucial economic dimension. As Han puts it, "in Calvinism, work is given meaning in the context of the economy of salvation" (Han, 2017, p. 89). To work hard, constantly, tirelessly, without end and without complaint, and to subordinate all of life's actions to work, brings one closer to God, but also guarantees that one's apparent economic and social success (or at least, one's endurance) will become a pathway to divine salvation. As Han writes, for the Calvinist individual, "only success in work is… a sign of having been chosen" (Han, 2017, p. 89). Thus, Han adds, the "care for salvation turns the individual into a *worker*," and this worker "is brought closer to his goal [God's salvation] not by a *vita contemplativa*, but by a *vita activa*" (Han, 2017, p. 89). In fact, from the perspective of the individual subject now turned into a worker, the *vita contemplativa* has to be completely shunned as it becomes "reprehensible" (Han, 2017, p. 89).

Han, like Max Weber before him, traces the economic and social roots of liberal and later neoliberal capitalism to this turn to the *vita activa*. Protestant asceticism becomes a compul-

2 Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams offer a somewhat similar diagnosis when they note that "neoliberalism creates… competitive subjects" and that neoliberalism's "imperatives… drive these subjects to constant self-improvement *in every aspect of their life*." They add that, as a result of the neoliberal condition, "one's personal life is as bound to competition as one's work life" (Srnicek & Williams, 2015, p. 64).

3 In a more recent work, Han uses the term "inactivity" rather than contemplation or lingering. "Inactivity" for Han, similar to contemplation, is what can or even needs to be opposed to active life, for the sake of "being human." Han writes: "The inactivity involved in any doing is what makes the doing something genuinely human" (Han, 2024, p. 2).

sion to work, to produce, and "to accumulate, which leads to the formation of capital" (Han, 2017, p. 90). As Weber wrote, the protestant surrendering of life to work and to the *vita activa* "had the psychological effect of freeing the acquisition of goods from the inhibitions of traditionalistic ethics. It broke the bonds of the impulse of acquisition [and]… it not only legalized it, but [it]… looked upon it as directly willed by God" (Weber, 2014, p. 98). The complete take-over of an individual's life (and soul) by work makes the individual subject (as a liberal subject) into an *animal laborans* [4]. This *animal laborans* is defined by its use of time. Either as a worker or, as Han adds, "outside of work [when] it is at best a consumer" (Han, 2017, p. 100), the liberal subject only "*uses up* time" (Han, 2017, p. 100). Every so often, the liberal subject as *animal laborans* may enjoy a few breaks. But these breaks remain governed by the logic of work, and they are placed to the service of the *vita activa*, not of contemplation, of lingering, or of thinking. In fact, Han indicates, Marx had already explained that "a subject that is formed through or by work will not find a different perception of the world during times that are free from work" (Han, 2017, p. 100; see also Marx and Engels, 1985).

Hannah Arendt famously sought to rehabilitate the *vita activa* by trying to free it from its connection to work, productivity, and accumulation (Arendt, 1998). Yet, according to Han, Arendt failed, in part because she sought to blame the *vita contemplativa* for what she saw as the relegation of the *vita activa* to mere work. Arendt argued that there are many forms of *vita activa*, and that a compulsion to work and a constant need to "use up" time are only one, negative, form of it. According to Arendt, the *vita activa* is first and foremost "a life which is determined to act" (Han, 2017, p. 102). And a life that acts is a life that, heroically, seeks to "begin something altogether new" (Arendt, 1998, p. 247). The *vita activa* for Arendt is related to, as she puts it, "the miracle of natality," or the "miracle that saves the world." "The faculty of action," Arendt claims, "is ontologically rooted" in natality, in "the birth of new men, … and [in] the action they are capable of by virtue of being born" (Arendt, 1998, p. 247). According to Arendt, the will to act, the determination to create new beginnings, or the desire to start new things is unique to humans, and it is ultimately what makes political action and public life possible. Without the *vita activa*, the human being is nothing more than an *animal laborans* (or a *homo laborans*, as Arendt prefers to call it). Thus, it is in fact *the vita contemplativa*, Arendt asserts, that is truly responsible for turning the human being into a *homo laborans*, and not the *vita activa*. As she notes: "my contention is… that the enormous weight in contemplation in the traditional hierarchy has blurred the distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa* itself" (Arendt, 1998, p. 17). In other words, western thought's undue emphasis on contemplation since at least Aristotle, Arendt believes, has not allowed humans to appreciate the various ways in which an active life can be experienced and, furthermore, it has relegated active life to the economic domain or to a life dominated by the necessity of work and productivity. In this configuration, the so-called *vita activa* (the life and actions of *homo laborans*) ends up degenerating into a passive life, something that is anathema to Arendt's belief in action, natality, or what she sees as the unique ability of humans to perform new beginnings.

Han's rediscovery of contemplation

Han disagrees with Arendt's assertion that contemplative life (that she can only comprehend as passive life) is responsible for the *vita activa*'s turn to compulsive work. Han writes: "Arendt erroneously believes that what is really new owes its coming about exclusively to a heroic subject that is determined to act" (Han, 2017, p. 103). Han explains that "events which form the world and culture rarely derive from the conscious decision taken by a subject that is determined to

4 Or, as Han puts it in another text, "human existence is [now] fully absorbed by activity, and thereby becomes exploitable" (Han, 2024, p. 1).

act" (Han, 2017, p. 103)[5]. It is even less so when the subject who is ready to act and to create new beginnings is caught in the routine of work time, a routine that leaves precious little moments for thinking, for contemplating, and for coming up with new creations. Han suggests that so-called events or actions that may change the world are actually more likely to result from leisure, rest, or "play free from compulsion" (Honig, 1993, p. 103).

Moreover, while Arendt is intent on blaming the *vita contemplativa* for the modern degradation of active life, Han asserts that there is actually little left of contemplation in contemporary liberal or neoliberal modes of social and economic organization, when human beings have become and are expected to be laboring and consuming subjects, and when their "free time" (which can be plentiful, but not necessarily restful or contemplative) is a mere extension of work time. Thus, in Han's reading, Arendt is unable or unwilling to "recognize that the franticness or restlessness of modern life has a lot to do with the loss of the contemplative faculty" (Honig, 1993, p. 104). Han concludes that "being cannot be reduced to being active" (Honig, 1993, p. 105) since today "being active" is something that actually "impoverishes [one's] experience" (Honig, 1993, p. 104). Again, Han deplores that "making the *vita activa* an absolute value drives everything out of life that is not act or activity" (Honig, 1993, p. 109).

Ultimately, Arendt's rehabilitation of the *vita activa* seeks to take control of time. According to Han, this is very much in line with the take-over of contemplative time (or life as lingering and dedicated to thinking) initiated by the protestant Reformation and exploited by liberal capitalism. All modalities of active life, Han suggests, and perhaps even more so in contemporary neoliberal times, are obsessed with making use of time, taking hold of it, measuring or calculating time as a series of acts and activities, and preventing it from drifting away (as if being active was driven by a fear of becoming passive). Han's call for a rediscovery of contemplative life in the face of the *vita activa* demands that the human subject let itself be dominated by time, or that time as duration, as lingering, as leisure, or, as Han also intimates, as "hesitation from action" (Honig, 1993, p. 105) take hold of the subject's actions and, perhaps more importantly, of its thinking.

Han affirms that "[f]orms of the *vita contemplativa* are… modes of being" too, and such modes of contemplative being and life like "hesitancy, releasement, shyness, waiting, or restraint" are not passive (Honig, 1993, p. 93). Rather, they are "modes of duration" that enable thinking as a creative pursuit. Thinking is "a contemplative activity," Han writes (Honig, 1993, p. 106). It is a mode of rest and leisure, a way of letting time or duration take possession of one's being. Thinking does not "dictate to time." Rather, it is "time that dictates to thinking" (Honig, 1993, p. 108). But for time to "dictate to thinking" in a way that keeps the human subject free, time must be released from the *vita activa*, from work, from use or utility, from productive activity, from calculation, from restlessness, and from acceleration. Han states: "Thinking is free because its place and time cannot be calculated" (Honig, 1993, p. 109).

Unfortunately, neoliberal time as accelerated time or, better yet, as atomized time does not allow today's life any gains in time or duration. Neoliberalism's accelerated or atomized time only has space and time for endless and often repetitive action, for frantic work, for hyper-activity (and hyper-active modes of so-called leisure), for restlessness in seeking to be productive, innovative, calculating, and competitive. Han concludes his diagnosis of the current state of contemplation with Nietzsche's famous aphorism: "From lack of rest, our

5 It should be noted that Han's reading of Arendt's concept of the *vita activa* is not shared by several other prominent theorists. For example, Bonnie Honig writes that, for Arendt, action is *not* necessarily a "conscious decision taken by a subject determined to act," as Han claims. Action, Honig suggests, "does not derive its meaning from the intentions, motives, or goals of actors" and, in fact, it is action or the deed itself that "produces or gives birth to the actor or performer" (Honig, 1993, p. 78). Thus, Honig continues, through Arendt, one may actually see "the consequences of action [and of the *vita activa*] as 'boundless', uncontrollable, irreversible, and unpredictable" (Honig, 1993, p. 80).

civilization is ending in a new barbarism. Never have the active, which is to say the restless, people been prized more" (Nietzsche, 1984, p. 172).

Sadly, Han's attempt at finding a way out of *hyperkinesia*, his desire to restore the time of the *vita contemplativa*, never yields much of a solution. Han repeatedly demands a "revitalization" of the *vita contemplativa*, but his plea is short of practical answers. Han's call for a return to the *vita contemplativa*, for giving time to thinking, or for lingering remains stuck in the neoliberal capitalist time and its various modalities of (hyper)active life. Han does provide important clues about neoliberal times and their possible aftermath. Ending neoliberal time and times, Han makes clear, would require surmounting the *vita activa* and reviving a *vita contemplativa* to which Han gives a rich philosophical history. But the crucial issue that Han remains unable to address is not *what* could replace the (hyper)active neoliberal times, but rather *how* to do away with neoliberal capitalism and *how* to give time a future (or better yet, a duration). One suggestion offered by Han, all too briefly, only in passing, is a hint at the possibility of a hesitation or a doubt that might arise in the day-to-day labors or tasks of the neoliberal subject and in the otherwise routine and repetitive movements of the subject's body while at work. Evocatively, via Martin Heidegger's metaphor of music and dance (1977), Han writes that, when the music stops and the dancer pauses, a "moment of hesitation" in the repetitiveness of the dancer's movements and in the restlessness of its body emerges, and this hesitation can become "the condition for the beginning of an altogether different dance" (Han, 2017, p. 113). But Han does not go beyond this provocative intimation about the moment of hesitation of the subject's body. Absent any further elaboration on hesitation (or any other possible temporal challenge to hyper-active neoliberal times), Han's hoped-for return to contemplation or lingering remains a matter of wishful thinking, or perhaps a nostalgic longing for an Aristotelian revaluation of thinking over work and action in the conduct of life and the purpose of being.

Contemplation in Ogawa's The Housekeeper and the Professor

Despite Han's inability to offer an answer to neoliberal capitalism's times and to a hyperactive mode of life that seeks to keep the atomized time of the neoliberal subject hyperproductive, hyper-competitive, and hyper-calculated, Han's attempt to retrieve the notions of contemplation and lingering and to explore if they can offer resistant (or, perhaps, hesitant) possibilities for a different way of thinking and living is intriguing. Han's eagerness to revive contemplation and lingering is worthwhile. But I suggest that these notions can be thought more expansively and creatively by perhaps not placing them primarily in opposition to the *vita activa*, or perhaps by taking them outside of the domain of Western thought where they tend to remain primarily tied to concerns about being and about living the good life. Japanese author Yoko Ogawa's novel *The Housekeeper and the Professor* (2009), I argue, can give us a different context (and a different textual, conceptual, and perhaps critical domain) where lingering and contemplation and, with them, the sense of time, duration, and the future in relation to neoliberal times, may be further examined.

Several of Ogawa's novels and stories are centered around the question of time, memory, the future (or its impossibility), and the anxiety about concluding or arriving at an end point. Often, a sense of lingering or contemplation (in Han's sense) with regards to how time is spent seems key to Ogawa's characters and perhaps to her writing too. *The Memory Police* (Ogawa, 2020), perhaps Ogawa's best-known novel, features the themes of memory, oblivion, and disappearance in the context of a near-future society where (somewhat reminiscent of Orwell's *1984*; Orwell, 1949) an authoritarian police force seeks to maintain control over time by preventing individuals from accessing thoughts and recollections about the past and about things that are no more or have disappeared. In *The Housekeeper and the Professor*, the

passing of time, the dialectic between absence and preservation of past thoughts, activities, and feelings, the loss of memory, but also the enjoyment of uncalculated moments, situations, and encounters are all crucial to the novel's plot.

The *Housekeeper and the Professor* revolves around three main characters. First, there is the Professor, a former mathematics university professor who, as a result of a car crash many years ago and the traumatic head injury he suffered in the accident, now lives with only 80 minutes of short-term memory (his long-term memory from before the accident remains intact). Every 80 minutes, his brain "reboots," and the memory of what happened earlier in the day, last week, or a few years ago gets erased. The Professor experiences everything anew every 80 minutes. His only way of trying to keep some sort of coherence in his day-to-day living is to write vital information (his address, where his clothes and shoes are located, when he has to take his medicine, the name and physical description of his current housekeeper, and of course the fact that his memory only lasts 80 minutes at a time, among other things) on many notes that he tapes onto his clothes, his body, and throughout his small house. If things change in his daily routine, he must alter the notes, scratch the old information, and handwrite a new text before he forgets to do so. The Professor spends his days reflecting, looking on, staring at the sky, and solving and even writing complex math puzzles. Often, having limited short-term memory, he repeats himself, and he replicates the same motions, actions, statements, and thoughts that he had earlier in the day or the day before. Yet, for the Professor, these actions, statements, and thoughts are always new (unless they have been recorded on the notes). Much of the Professor's time is devoted to fondly and intensely looking at numbers and equations.

Ogawa Yōko
Photo credit: uzaigaijin
(CC BY-SA 2.0)

Figure 2. Yōko Ogawa

The Housekeeper is the woman (a single mother in her thirties) in charge of caring for the Professor on weekdays from morning to evening. On weekends, the Professor's sister-in-law tends to his basic needs as she lives in the main house nearby (the Professor's dwelling is a small cottage in the backyard of the sister-in-law's house). The sister-in-law hired the Housekeeper for the Professor, as she did with all the previous housekeepers, most of whom quit or were let go since it is a daunting task to take care of a person whose memory gets erased every 80 minutes. But the Housekeeper, whose name is never mentioned, and from whose perspective the story is told, manages to stick around for a good while, and in due time, a genuine caring and even loving relationship develops between the Housekeeper and the Professor (a bond that remains, although not as intensely, for years after the Housekeeper is no longer in charge of the Professor's care and as the Professor is eventually sent to a long-term facility).

The third key character is Root, the Housekeeper's young son (around 10 years old), who cements the affective bond between the Professor and the Housekeeper, and who helps to make the trio into a family and home of sorts. Although it is against the rules (both those set by the sister-in-law and those of the agency for which the Housekeeper works), Root spends more and more time with his mother and the Professor, in the Professor's cottage first, and eventually on a few outings too (shopping, walking to the park, and even going to a baseball game), whenever Root is not at school. It is the Professor who insists on making sure that the Housekeeper brings Root to the Professor's house after Root is done with school for the day as the Professor is adamant that it is not safe for a young child to walk home by himself and wait there for his mother. Root is actually the name that the Professor gives to the child as the top of the child's head reminds the Professor of the square root sign.

The *Housekeeper and the Professor*'s narrative unfolds over a period of about one year (with the last chapter of the novel jumping a few years ahead). Over the course of this year, the growing affection of the main protagonists for each other, their unusual familial bonds, and the daily challenges faced by each of them (mostly by the Professor, as his condition worsens and the 80-minute short-term memory window eventually narrows to nothing) are delicately recounted by Ogawa via the narrator/Housekeeper. The difficulties they encounter, the inevitable multiple repetitions, and even the mini-crises — for example, when the Professor wanders off, or when he gets frazzled without his notes, or when he expresses (although rarely) frustration at his condition (at not recognizing Root and the Housekeeper without his notes, for instance)—are never presented as obstacles to overcome. Rather, they are part of the rhythm of life, of the flow of time that the three of them spend, and often enjoy, in the company of each other. Even the Professor's initial trauma, the injury that forced the Professor and, by extension, during the year they lived together, the Housekeeper and Root to have to reassess the meaning of time, of duration, of past, present, and future, and indeed of life itself is never expressed as an impediment, or as a bitter twist of fate that somehow has to haunt the present moment, or as a burden that everyone in the household must bear. It is not until the latter part of the novel that a few clues about the Professor's trauma as a result of his accident are given. It is also not until then that it is revealed, almost in passing, as if this was only tangential to the story, that the Professor used to have a very active life as a world-renowned math scholar, that he also was romantically involved with his sister-in-law, and that it seems that the two of them were planning for a future together when the accident occurred.

The passing of time, time's duration, and moments of reflection, contemplation, and hesitation are important to all three characters, particularly when they are together. Although they are active, they have routines, they have daily chores, and they plan events and even outings, when they are together, time does not seem to matter much. Their time together is not exactly restful, nor even particularly leisurely (the Housekeeper labors around the house

and sees to it that the Professor's basic necessities are met and that he is comfortable; the Professor works on math problems, sometimes for many hours at a time; and Root diligently does his school homework), at least in the way that rest and leisure are measured and understood in relation to work (in other words, as breaks from work). But the time or duration of their life together, which still involves activities, is not work either. Put differently, even with the challenges resulting from the fact that the Professor only has 80 minutes of short-term memory, each of the three characters' time is rarely calculated.

Calculation, Han explains, is antithetical to contemplation or lingering. According to neoliberal accelerated or atomized time, calculation prevails. Calculation defines the time of the neoliberal subject. It takes hold of the neoliberal subject's life as calculating ensures that the subject performs its work effectively, productively, intensely, and competitively. According to Han, calculation is a degradation of thinking caused by the *vita activa*. As Han puts it, calculation is "what can be accelerated at will" (Han, 2017, p. 109). Whereas thinking is often discontinuous, meanders, takes a "detour or a step back," and "looks around," calculating seeks "a precise location" and often demands an outcome (Han, 2017, p. 109). Calculating, in other words, does not take the time to wander and linger, and instead it must find ways to "use up time" (Han, 2017, p. 113). Thus, in neoliberal times, when thinking is reduced to calculation, "thinking [also] assimilates itself to labor" (Han, 2017, p. 109), that is to say, to work, to a task that must be accomplished, to a period that has been set in advance, to a timeframe or a schedule with chunks of time that are supposed to be finite (at least, if the task is to be productive and successful).

It is ironic that, in their life together, the Professor, the Housekeeper, and Root are able to create a space and a time where and when calculation no longer matters since, as was mentioned above, a great deal of the Professor's time is dedicated to math problems, to equations, to numbers, and, literally, to calculations. The Housekeeper and Root are also invited to enter the Professor's space and time of reflection and contemplation built around numbers and mathematics. As the Professor talks about what he calls the "beauty" of numbers (prime numbers, numbers in a series, combinations of numbers, etc.), the shape and appearance of them, or the simple clarity in the presentation of some equations, the Housekeeper is drawn into the Professor's work, or better yet, into his way of thinking (she even starts to spend time on a few math problems, and every so often she too stares at numbers and equations). And Root becomes fascinated by the way the Professor explains to him how to think through, and possibly resolve, some math problems that are part of Root's homework. In a way, the Professor, the Housekeeper, and Root manage to flip around the relation between calculation and thinking in neoliberal times (as Han understands it). Indeed, for the Professor, but also for the Housekeeper and Root, numbers and calculations become an opportunity to think, to meander and wander, to take detours, and to linger. While the Professor still seeks to solve math problems, he is equally, and often, more interested in posing new problems and devising new puzzles. He does not put much emphasis on the outcome, the result, the end point of the thought process, or the termination of the duration (he clearly no longer cares about professional success either). Because he sets aside outcomes and results, he is able to see the "beauty" of numbers, of math problems, and even of calculation, a beauty and sense of wonderment that are also potentially unending (despite his own condition and his repetitive life), that depend on allowing numbers and their mysteries to run their course, and that allow the Professor's life (despite the fact that it is carved up in 80-minute segments) to be open to thinking and lingering.

The Professor willingly shares this love for thinking and spending time with numbers in an unmeasured, uncalculated, and unproductive way with the Housekeeper and Root. As the story unfolds, they too allow themselves to be possessed by this reversal of calculation, by this way of lingering with numbers, and by the kind of leisure that math brings to their life.

Leisure, as Han noted, is not "relaxation" (Han, 2017, p. 87). Indeed, the Professor, the Housekeeper, and Root work for hours on math problems, on thinking about and with numbers. For them, leisure spent with numbers, when calculation is no longer a concern (or, rather, when calculation is no longer tied to measuring progress in reaching outcomes, to work, or to production), "does not serve the purpose of distraction," but rather "of collecting oneself" (Han, 2017, p. 87). As Han clarifies, this "collecting oneself" is never a purely intellectual endeavor. Thinking as lingering is not just a way for the mind to wander away for a while, or to escape the pains and trials of physical labor. Rather, "lingering presupposes a gathering of the senses" (Han, 2017, p. 87). Once again, this is how the time spent with numbers, the duration of their collective life when lingering or contemplation takes hold of their daily activities, is experienced by the Professor, the Housekeeper, and Root. The leisure of lingering/contemplation that takes hold of their life in the household also opens up spaces of affective closeness, kinship, intimacy, shared joy, and peacefulness, for each of them, at least for as long as they are allowed to stay together (which means for as long as the Professor's 80-minute at-a-time memory cycles, his system of notes, and the acceptance of the Professor's unique condition by the Housekeeper and Root remain more or less intact).

The apprehension of time and the appreciation for contemplation or lingering, away from calculation and work, in Ogawa's novel seem to offer compelling literary illustrations of Han's arguments about contemplative life and thinking, and about the importance of finding ways to revitalize them in neoliberal times, when calculation, atomization, and acceleration have taken away leisure, pleasure, and the "gathering of the senses." However, *The Housekeeper and the Professor* introduces an important but troubling element in any celebration of a return to contemplative life in neoliberal times. Han does not seem to recognize or perhaps does not want to accept the possibility of this troubling element. Indeed, in Ogawa's novel, it is mainly *because of* an initial accident, of an aberration, and of a trauma that the main protagonists are able to create and enjoy a time and space when and where lingering becomes possible and contemplation, at least for a while, can interrupt the frantic pace of neoliberal time/times. Outside of (and before) the home and family that, by chance, they create, with a life of contemplation built around the beauty and wonderment of numbers, of puzzles, and of thinking, each of the main characters remains a fairly typical liberal or neoliberal subject, and each is caught within the logic of the social and economic needs and requirements imposed by the *vita activa* and the (neo)liberal capitalist system that active life supports.

The Housekeeper, a single mother, is always desperately seeking new jobs, working for a housekeeping agency where employees come and go, where being let go from one job means hoping that another housekeeping opening elsewhere will materialize, and when any small mistake on the job can lead to termination and having to look for another mode of employment, if any is available (these worries about social and economic precarity are expressed a few times by the narrator/Housekeeper in the novel). Root is a Japanese schoolboy for whom the pressures of getting good grades, of studiously doing homework, and of solving the math problems his teacher gives him can become intense daily concerns, even if he enjoys spending time with the Professor and thinking with him about math puzzles. Finally, the Professor was a rather typical (neo)liberal subject (and academic) before his accident. While the novel does not tell us much about the Professor's life before his injury, the bits of information we collect across the story suggest that he was an active, successful, and well respected professor and researcher at a top university who was working on a theorem that brought him global recognition and, more than likely, led him to travel quite a bit, go to conferences, give lectures at various universities, and have his work published and read widely (and outside Japan too, since we know that he had exchanges with fellow mathematicians in languages other than Japanese). The novel also tells us that he had a romantic affair with his sister-in-law, that he had a brother (we do not know much about him and why he is no longer around), and that

the Professor and the sister-in-law were worried about keeping their romantic relationship away from the public eye (to this day, the sister-in-law tries not to mention anything about it and she only refers to the Professor as her brother-in-law). All in all, the Professor appears to have had an extensive and full (perhaps even complicated) *vita activa*, centered around his work (and scholarly success), and complemented by an active private and intimate life that probably required quite a bit of daily management too.

Thus, when time as lingering arrives for the Professor (and, by extension, during the year they spend with him, for the Housekeeper and Root, too), it is only *after* the trauma has happened, and, in fact, *as a result of* the trauma. Lingering, contemplation, thinking, and duration spent with and around numbers and math problems are never completely intentional, willed, or even a life choice for the Professor. While the Professor, through thinking as lingering and his relinquishing of the *vita activa*, finally enjoys "peacefulness" (as the novel's narrator often notes, being "peaceful" or living "peacefully," including finding "peace" in the contemplation of numbers, is now what the Professor values most), this peacefulness of thinking, of contemplative life, is also not something he has sought to cultivate throughout his life. In this way, contemplation or lingering here is significantly different from the Aristotelian *vita contemplativa* that Han eagerly wishes to resurrect. In Ogawa's *The Housekeeper and the Professor*, the peacefulness of lingering with numbers is the traumatic outcome of a forever open wound, of some previously (and still) lost time (the time when the Professor was a math scholar, the time he used to spend with his sister-in-law/lover), of a flaw in the Professor's now severely damaged brain, and of an unresolved crisis in several individuals' lives.

The Professor's discovery of contemplation and the pleasure and peacefulness he now draws from it and that he shares with those around him are accidental. Contemplation here is the result of an accident in the Professor's life, but also, in a way, the product of an accident in the life and time(s) of neoliberal capitalism and its support by the *vita activa*. It is *because* the *vita activa* has been violently and unexpectedly interrupted for the Professor, *because* his life as a neoliberal subject has been upended, that he now can encounter contemplation and enjoy math problems and numbers as a matter of thinking, and no longer as objects of and for calculation. One might even suggest that, if it had not been for his prior hyper-active life as a neoliberal subject and academic before the accident, if it had not been for his taking his life into overdrive by ceaselessly seeking to do more, and perhaps faster (in other words, by seeking to accelerate his life, work, academic success, and productivity), the accident and trauma may not have happened, and thus the professor's eventual opening to time as duration and to thinking as lingering may not have been possible. One might also generalize this point and surmise that it is perhaps *only* as a result of the burnout of the neoliberal subject in accelerated or atomized times that the rediscovery of contemplative life, of lingering, is feasible. If that is the case, the possibility of lingering or contemplation is always limited and contained. In such a configuration, contemplation is always conditioned by the (hyper)active life characteristic of neoliberal times, something that Han seems unwilling to accept. As for Root and his mother, their partaking of thinking as lingering, their own opening to contemplation via numbers and math, is always going to be only a brief episode in their otherwise busy and active lives of labor, a pleasurable and peaceful episode for them too, but one that nonetheless ends when the Professor is sent to a long-term care facility (the Housekeeper and Root continue to visit the Professor at the facility, and for many years until his death, but they can only spend a short amount of time with him each time they visit).

Concluding thoughts: Contemplation as peaceful loss?

Might it be that it is only after one has been traumatically dispossessed of one's active life, or after one has lost both one's past (or at least, crucial parts of it) and the possibility of one's future

(of planning for future times) that one can finally live the present as a matter of lingering or contemplation? In a way, this is what Ogawa's novel appears to tell us. If this is so, contemplation is never really the challenge to neoliberal atomized or accelerated times that Han thought it could be. And yet, while lingering or contemplation in *The Housekeeper and the Professor* is accidental, results from a trauma, and leaves one with an insurmountable loss, it is also never completely reducible to the accident, the trauma, or the loss. Contemplation/lingering is not a flight away from them. And it is not a way of forgetting or coping with the tragedy either. Rather, one might argue that, born out of an initial trauma, contemplation is (as Han might put it) a detour or a hesitation, one whose time or duration is not pre-determined nor calculated, and crucially one that may still be able to appear in a life that is no longer what it used to be, but that nonetheless (and perhaps precisely because it is no longer what it used to be) still offers opportunities for thinking, contemplating, wandering, and appreciating "beauty," which can be numbers or math problems (as was the case for the Professor) or anything that provokes thinking in a non-calculated and non-productive way. Contemplation after or even as a result of the trauma may thus still offer a life for the subject that does not need to be defined by the trauma or the accident, nor by anything that preceded and possibly led to it.

As Ogawa shows us, there can be pleasure and peacefulness in experiencing a form of contemplation that might arise from trauma or loss, but also that *does not let itself be possessed by it*. Could this form of contemplation or lingering be available to today's subject in atomized or accelerated hyper-active and hyper-calculated neoliberal times? Could this be the pathway for the neoliberal subject out of the impasse that the *vita activa* and its insistence on work, productivity, and competition have left us with, and that neoliberal capitalism continues to take advantage of? Could a life of lingering resulting from trauma (including the traumas caused by neoliberal capitalism) but oblivious to it, either through memory loss (as with Ogawa's Professor), or because the burned-out neoliberal subject no longer has anything to lose in turning its back to its hyper-calculated life, be a better option when attempting to end neoliberal times than terminal modes of acceleration? Or, if not a better option, could it be at least a more pleasurable pathway for the individual subject, who may continue to live with neoliberal capitalism's trauma, but who also can look for ways to not let its life be constantly defined by it? And might this form of contemplation evoked by Ogawa's novel be an answer to Han's call for a recovery of time as hesitation, doubt, detour, or wandering? Answering these questions is beyond the scope of this article, and probably beyond the scope of Ogawa's novel too. But perhaps more importantly than seeking to answer these questions, it is crucial that they be posed or, better yet, that there remain in today's accelerated neoliberal times some critical literary and/or theoretical spaces (such as those provided by Ogawa's writing, and perhaps by Han's theorizing at times too) for contemplation and lingering so that they may be given an opportunity to be meaningful to life again.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Arendt, H. (1998). *The Human Condition*. University of Chicago Press.
Aristotle. (1995). *Politics*. Oxford University Press.
Han, B. C. (2015). *The Burnout Society*. Stanford University Press.
Han, B. C. (2017). *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Lingering*. Polity Press.
Han, B. C. (2022). *Non-things: Upheaval in the Lifeworld*. Polity Press.
Han, B. C. (2024). *Vita Contemplativa: In Praise of Inactivity*. Polity Press.
Heidegger, M. (1977). *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Harper & Row.
Honig, B. (1993). *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*. Cornell University Press.
Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1985). *The Communist Manifesto*. Penguin.
Nietzsche, F. (1984). *Human, All Too Human*. University of Nebraska Press.
Noys, B. (2014). *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism*. Zero Books.
Orwell, G. (1949). *1984*. Secker & Warburg.
Ogawa, Y. (2009). *The Housekeeper and the Professor*. Picador.
Ogawa, Y. (2020). *The Memory Police*. Vintage Books.
Shapiro, M. (2012). *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn*. Routledge.
Shaviro, S. (2015). *No Speed Limits: Three Essays on Accelerationism*. University of Minnesota Press.
Srnicek, N., & Williams, A. (2015). *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*. Verso.
Weber, M. (2014). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Angelico Press.
Williams, A., & Srnicek, N. (2013, May 14). #Accelerate Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics. *Critical Legal Thinking*. https://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/05/14/accelerate-manifesto-for-an-accelerationist-politics/.

Author Biograthy

Dr. François Debrix is a Professor of Political Theory in the Department of Political Science at Virginia Tech. He is the former Director of the interdisciplinary and theory-oriented ASPECT program at Virginia Tech, a position he held for over 11 years. Professor Debrix has authored, edited, and co-edited eight books on topics ranging from biopolitical theory, the politics and theory of violence and horror, critical approaches to neoliberalism and the body, representations of global politics, the critical geopolitics of terror, media and visual studies, language and politics, and critical perspectives on international humanitarianism and world order. He is also the author of over 50 articles and essays that have appeared in a range of journals and publications, such as (more recently) *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, *Fast Capitalism*, *New Formations*, *International Political Sociology, Society and Space*, *Spectra*, and *Baudrillard Now*. Additionally, he has translated several of French critical social theorist Jean Baudrillard's works into English.