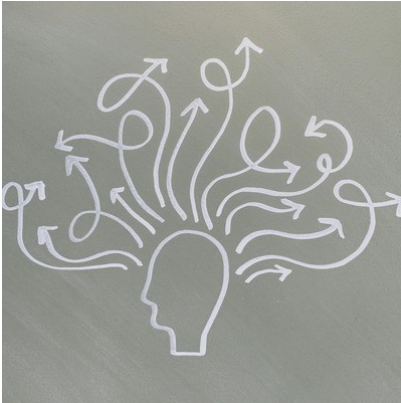


Letter from my uncle

Graeme Maxton

What is this thing called thinking? Part 3



Johann Strauss Gasse 24
Wieden
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Dear Nephew,

Attached are my research notes on the third of the four topics on what is called thinking, on the currency of thinking. Some conclusions are not fully developed, and need a little work.

Is it not fascinating how Western minds have been shaped by systems of thought that are designed to constrain them, limit their freedom, and channel their thinking? Few people seem to be aware of how much their worldview is boxed-in, how their minds have been manipulated. It's hard for them to stand far enough back, I suppose, to see their minds have been herded into a way of thinking that embraces and focusses everything unconsciously.

I look forward to your thoughts.

With much love

Max

* * *

The currency of thinking

What do I mean by the currency of thinking? I mean the framing that boxes-in people's thoughts. I mean the mechanisms, the architecture, the operating system, through which thinking is deliberately or necessarily channelled, the containment that encloses nearly all thought. It is a human

construction, this enclosure. It's a construction that is hard to perceive and even harder to break out from. It is a prison in which thinking is trapped, forced into a life sentence without understanding.

To explain this better, I've examined three thought currencies in Western European history: the thought currency of the Church, the currency of science, and today's thought currency of economics. All are boxed-in, constructed worldviews.

I'll start with the oldest, where traditional values were cleverly inverted, so that one group could take power from another, and transform the structure of society.

Like the other two thought currencies, the framework of thinking created by the Christian Church is a complete system, a *whole* view of the world, with all the elements tied together, each part a strand of an interconnected mesh.

1 - The thinking currency of the Church

Before I begin, there's something important I need to say. When I talk about the Christian Church and the mindset it created, I am not talking about faith, or belief. I am talking about the organisation of the Catholic and Christian Churches, about the thinking they built. I am not talking about God, or any universal consciousness. It is the Church that developed the thinking system which boxed in thought for many centuries, which took power from the monarchies, as many other people have identified. I am not the first to explore this idea. Nietzsche writes about it in detail in *The Genealogy of Morals*.

My research, and everything I have learnt as I get older, has taught me that there is much more to the world, and to the universe, than modern science and our thoughts can explain. What that is, I don't know. I believe much of it is impossible to know, to understand. It is on a scale and across dimensions that is far beyond human ken, and probably always will be. To a large extent, that is what my work here is trying to explore. Personally, I have belief, I have a faith, though it does not fit well with the thought system created by the Church. I believe in a living world, with its own intelligence and momentum, something so vast that humanity cannot even imagine it, something beyond language. In the notes that follow I mean no offence to those who believe in any other God, or any other theory.

* * *

Following the decline of the Roman Empire, until the end of the Dark Ages, European society was mostly led by an aristocracy. It was ruled by kings, lords, and knights who typically owned those who lived on their lands. These people controlled the wealth, with their morality a triumphant affirmation of their own desires. These beasts of prey, always avidly rampant for spoils and victory, proud of their audacious barbarism, rejoiced in their imperishable memories of war, their delight in destruction.

The Church sat on the fringes. Its monasteries and convents were remote, its priests, monks and nuns devoted to prayer, self-sufficiency, and study. This society was relatively closed, with little or no uniformity, because most of the monasteries and convents followed the rules of individual abbots and mothers superior. There were many pilgrims, who travelled widely, even in the 6th and 7th centuries, seeking out these remote holy places, and the comfort of relics.

In writing this, I am reminded of the small town of North Berwick, near Edinburgh, where I went as a child. As well as several good golf courses, which is why my father took us, there are many wonderful sandy beaches. I loved the bracing walks, at least when it wasn't raining. At the shore, near what is now a sea-bird sanctuary, there is a chapel, the last remnant of an ancient church. As early as the 9th century, it was a gathering place for pilgrims who arrived from all over Europe. They would take a ferry, with nuns pulling on the oars apparently, out to the Isle of May, 8km into the blustery estuary, at the mouth of the North Sea. On the island was another church, which became a Benedictine monastery a few centuries later. From there, they would catch a second ferry to Anstruther or Earlsferry, another 8km away, before travelling on to St Andrews, where there were important holy sites. I find it amazing that people travelled so far in those days, and took such dangerous journeys. The sea off the coast of North Berwick is not for the faint-hearted, even in summer. That people knew of such distant places, and had such sophisticated transport networks is fascinating.

Over the course of many centuries, this state of affairs slowly changed. Benedict of Nursia wrote some guiding principles which standardised the church's customs, better meeting the day-to-day needs of monks. This led to the rise of the Benedictine Order, and greater integration. Ireland became one of the truly great centres of monastic life, before other lands were gradually converted, including Scotland, parts of Germany, Switzerland, and today's northern France. The monks in these countries then took their faith to Poland, Hungary, Scandinavia, and elsewhere.

The Church continued to place a heavy emphasis on learning. Many monasteries became important hubs for education, agriculture and economic development, and through these they gradually acquired wealth, influence, and prestige, with abbots granted royal favours and political rights.

In the year 910, the abbots were formally united under the control of the Pope. This was an important step because it greatly reduced the influence of the kings and feudal lords over them.

Over the following centuries, the power of the church continued to grow. It took control of the institution of marriage, and started to direct the activities of the aristocracy, through crusades and by sanctioning their personal relationships. Cathedrals were built, vast otherworldly structures that increased the church's power by directing people's minds towards a God who controls everything, who creates and destroys, who has far more power than any mortal king. Some cathedrals created schools to educate children, and art galleries to bring new thinking to adults. Bologna, and then Paris and Oxford, started universities. In the 11th century, in 1054, the Western branch of Christianity broke away from the Eastern branch, creating the Catholic Church.

All these developments increased the influence of the Church in the minds of the masses. The Church became a direct challenge to the power of the monarchies. As tensions rose, and without swords, soldiers and lances, the Church had to find a way to win this stand-off in a way that did not involve direct physical conflict.

To do this, it created a system of thinking that cleverly inverted reality. It propagated a worldview that greatly weakened the influence of the feudal lords and kings, and made the Church all-powerful.

In the style Sun Tzu, the ancient Chinese military strategist, the Church's system of thinking turned strengths into weaknesses and weaknesses into strengths. It flipped the traditional power structure. Being poor became good while being rich was equated to violence, Godlessness and lust. Poverty and weakness led to saintliness. Being sick, loathsome, and lowly was worthy. The oppressed

became the pious, who deserved to be blessed, while the nobles and lords became symbols of covetousness and greed. Those who did not believe any of this, who opposed the Church, became the cursed and the damned. A terrible afterlife awaited them.

Those pagan traditions that had survived Roman persecution were cleverly assimilated, to drive people away from Gods of nature. People were told to believe that the world and humankind had been created by one God, and that this God had a child with a mortal woman. God demanded people work hard, and adopt a different form of morality and justice from the past, to break from the morality to the aristocracy. People should fear the end of the world. People should fear what happens when they die. They should obey the laws of this God, handed down through priests and the Church. Only then could they avoid God's wrath.

Under the domain of the Church, people's lives became constrained. Everyone's day-to-day existence was dominated by concerns and obligations. Their sex lives were restricted, redesigned for utility alone. This God expected his disciples to drink his blood, and eat his flesh, in a process called transubstantiation. Believers were expected to offer prayers for miracles. Those who respected this God, who obeyed his teachings and set an example to others, had the chance to become saints, long after they died. Older ideas, a belief in the Earth and heavens, and ancient Gods, were to be forgotten. The fertility days and carnival days of old became holy days, holidays.

The Winter Solstice became Christmas Day (according to the Julian Calendar). A day to mark the Roman god of fertility, which involved feasting, carnal activities, and drinking, became the last feast before people were expected to fast for 40 days during Lent. The traditional festival marking the Spring Equinox, which had a hare as its symbol, became Easter. The Goddess of pagan traditions representing the mother, became the Virgin Mary. Brigid, the Celtic Goddess associated with fertility and healing, became Saint Brigid of Ireland. Her feast day closely coincides with the original pagan celebration that marked the first signs of spring, Imbolc.

Believers in past Gods were dismissed as fools and heathens, uncivilised people who were little better than beasts. The new hierarchy had to be respected. The Pope and his priests rose to the top, above the kings and nobles. The poor and the meek stayed at the bottom.

As Nietzsche says, the creation of this thought system was a master-stroke.

The new currency of thinking cleverly took power from the aristocratic class, and gave it to a small minority who could then exercise enormous control over the masses, this box of thinking with its avenging God, universal sinfulness, and threat of eternal damnation. It made people servile. It made their lives empty and colourless. It told people they were blessed, but unworthy.

The Church's control was not only exercised in the royal courts of Europe, but in vast stone buildings, abbeys, cathedrals, and churches where the people listened with anxiety to the priests, who stood with their backs to the congregation and talked in Latin, as if those present were hearing an incantation and some miracle was in preparation. These buildings were intended to reflect power and inspire fear. The great cross always loomed large, a constant reminder of sin, death, and the chance of redemption.

People were told they were in need of salvation, which only priests could provide. They were not to compare themselves with each other, because this would not generate sufficient discontent, but only with this ethereal Being, this God. Every believer had to be distracted and troubled. Everything people did, everything they aspired to, had to be viewed through this God's lens. Every big and

small experience was overshadowed by the risk of angering this God, with the threat of eternal punishment always present. People were imperfect, they were told, their greatest sin was being born. They should live in shame.

Personal freedom was drastically curtailed through this way of thinking, through fear and self loathing. The majority became oppressed by the weight of their real and imaginary sins, and by the belief that only supernatural powers could offer salvation. The demands of this thought system were always impossible to achieve, they were excessive by design, so people could never satisfy them, and never be free. Happiness had a festering malignity, a narrow deadening quietude that could only be briefly attained.

This over-enveloping system of thinking ensured the intellectual energy of people was redirected, away from the feasting and pleasure of pagan rituals, towards regret, and a guilt for sinfulness that could never be assuaged, that was dispiriting. The souls of people became filled with resentment, their minds populated with dark corners, tortuous paths and sealed-doors. Actions were led by prudence not desire.

The old morality of kings and nobles had enhanced their ambition, and pushed them to ecstatic bursts of rage, love, reverence, and gratitude. The Church's ideas redirected this energy. They made everyone cautious, afraid for their fate. The old ruling aristocracy had not taken itself, nor its enemies, disasters and misdeeds, very seriously for any length of time. The new way of thinking bred small-mindedness, a sense of meanness, enmity, bitterness and a desire for revenge that could be passed down generations, a bubbling cauldron of unsatisfied anger fed to every grandchild.

I am reminded here of the centuries of problems in Ireland, in Britain's eternal distrust of Europe, and England's relationship with Russia. Centuries of loathing carried down the generations. For what?

I find it impressive in some ways, that human minds created this thought-box, this dangerous bait, with its corrupting influence on thinking. The old lords and masters were pushed aside, while the morality and fears of the vulgar and uneducated triumphed, controlled through a crude and greedy institution. It created a poison that ran through the veins of European society, through the whole of humankind, for centuries. Much of it remains.

The worldview of the Church enslaved people. It encouraged them to reject all those who were outside. Anyone who was different, an unbeliever, a believer in a different God, was an enemy. While the morality of the older aristocratic class developed and expanded spontaneously, at least among the ruling class, the new approach constricted thinking for everyone. It shortened perspectives and redirected ambition.

This system of thinking remained dominant for centuries and, as I've said, it still has tentacles embedded inside the modern Western mind today. Eventually though, the thinking of science rose to challenge the ideas of the Church. Science became the next dominant currency of thought, the next thought system. It is the second currency I will examine.

2 - The thinking currency of science

I have written about this already, when I looked at the ethereal aspects of thinking. I will try not to repeat myself too much. You have my notes.

Like Christianity, science is a complete system of thinking, a *whole* view of the world, with all the elements tied together, a reality-philosophy that manifestly believes in itself alone. It has the courage to be itself, without the need for any support.

Science is a closed-minded system of thinking, unable to conceive of the notion that another way of thought might exist, or be superior. It has little useful to say about much that matters, and yet denies the possibility of any other approach. It mocks other worldviews as unworthy. It fails to consider the interconnectedness of all things. Science is a hiding place for disbelief, a mindset without morality. It excludes all it does not like, that cannot be examined in the language it defines, with a shake of the head, closed ears and eyes tightly shut.

You've said that my views are uncommon here, and that my concerns about science are overstated. What was it Nietzsche said about scientists? I think he sums it up perfectly. "*With all their noisy agitator-babble*", these "*trumpeters of reality are bad musicians*"¹.

Still, perhaps you have a point. I do not deny that science has brought humanity a great deal that is positive, or that it has a vital role to play. My concern is that science has taken too large a place in human thinking, far more than it should. I find the closed-mindedness of so many scientists hard to take, their unquestioning belief in their own methods, their own designs, their shutting out of everything that really matters. It doesn't take much thought to see that there is much that science can't explain, that it turns away from, or ignores. Its failure to understand consciousness, or thinking, for example. The universe is vast and complex, and there is so much that is not understood, that cannot be understood this way. Why do we all have to believe science can explain everything?

Science replaced the thinking system of the Church, at least in part. Rather than one God, and a belief in the supernatural, its thinking is framed around proofs and the petty examination of the smallest things. In its efforts to explain everything in a different way, much that is important is lost. Science moves humanity forward in one direction only, because the scientific approach doesn't have any understanding of the nature of everything, not even a credible theory.

The approach favoured by scientists seems almost designed to prevent them from seeing anything but their own version of reality. It's a self-administered anaesthetic for the mind, just like the worldview of the Christian Church.

It's all so inconsistent. All this hiding of results, faking, doctoring, abridging, omitting, suppressing, inventing, falsifying and re-interpreting of reality repudiates any common sense. Science wants to inveigle its way into everything, even into places where it detracts from good thinking. Its theories and hypotheses are too often adopted as facts before they are tested, then changed when the evidence proves them wrong.

Many years ago I read a book² by an American journalist, Bill Bryson, on the history of everything. Have you read it? He's not a scientist, he's a journalist, and a very good writer. He explains great swathes of scientific discovery extremely well.

While it's a fascinating book, it's also an infuriating one. Every section follows the same formula, whether its about the size of the universe, the history of geology, the causes of earthquakes or why mass extinctions happen. It first introduces the topic and then reviews past thinking before

1 Nietzsche, F., *The genealogy of morals*, Third essay, What is the meaning of ascetic ideals?, Chapter 23, page 3

2 Bryson W, (2004) *A short history of nearly everything*, Black Swan, London.

explaining current thinking. In every case, it encourages readers to laugh at past thinking, to be amused by how stupid previous generations were, and to be thankful to modern science for finally finding the right answers. At no point does he wonder if the current answers are the correct ones. It is amusingly tautological. He shows how past science got it completely wrong and yet believes current science has somehow got it completely right. He shows us that science constantly updates its worldview, and then ignores that fact.

It's this scientific worldview that has brought us here, to this place where humanity thinks it can control nature. Thanks to science, humans have been persuaded to think they can have all the answers, or at least that they will soon have all the answers. It makes people believe that humanity knows what it is doing and where it is going, that invented technologies can fix every problem. It's as dangerous a way of thinking as I can imagine because it is leading humanity blindly astray.

As I said, look back to my previous notes on this as you wish, on the way science likes to fake it.

The third currency of thinking I want to explore is economics. It is really your area of expertise and you will see that my notes have borrowed heavily from some of your books, as well as our conversations.

3 - The thinking currency of economics

When it refers to the monetary system, modern economics likes to talk of hard currencies and soft currencies. Adapting this thinking, we might say that economics is a hard currency of thought, harder than Christianity. It is stronger, harder to penetrate and oppose. Because it is the dominant system of thought in the West today, it is very hard for most people to perceive and understand. It is hard to see. It's like being aware that you are dreaming. It's hard to do. When it comes to economics, it's difficult to stand far enough back, mentally, to see the entire way of thinking objectively, as if from a distance. It's like asking a cell to work out for itself that it's part of a living being.

Like the Christian religion, economics is based on a set of beliefs. Followers have to *believe* what they are told, not question it. As with the Church, many of the claims made by economists are elaborate mental constructions that are impossible to prove. As with the Church, followers of modern economic thinking are followers of a faith.

While modern economics, or neoliberalism, is often attributed to Adam Smith, this is not really justifiable. There has been a great deal of reinterpretation of what he intended, and a great deal of invention and development in thinking since his time. Smith was not an economist. He was a moral philosopher and historian. There's a big difference. Smith's objective was to improve living standards and reduce poverty. Increasing output would help achieve this, he said. Modern economics has taken this basic idea and extrapolated it, warping it in the process.

Like science and Christianity, modern economics is an interconnected system of thought, a *whole* worldview, another reality-philosophy that manifestly believes in itself. Like Christianity, it demands a belief in one God. The economic God is the free market, which is an ethereal, invisible, mysterious power too. Unlike a religious God, it is possible to regulate the economic God, to manage it quite easily. Thanks to its otherworldly status however, people are told this not possible, or certainly very unwise. Market intervention is regarded as heresy. Yet, it *is* actually a choice, despite what Western economists say. Business activities could be regulated in some way, or they can be left to the market, unhindered by intervention. It's a choice modern economics says should not be made.

For true believers of economic thought, the free market is the wonder of the age. It propelled America and the West to global dominance, and allowed hundreds of millions of people in China and elsewhere to prosper. It won the 20th century.

None of this is true, of course. But just as it is hard, and often dangerous, to persuade true believers that wine does not turn into blood, or bread into flesh, wars have been fought over such beliefs, with millions slaughtered. Were not all those violent regime-changes sponsored by the World Bank and the United States in South-East Asia, Africa and Latin America in the 1960s not just Crusades by another name?

* * *

Let's first review the key pillars, the foundations of this constructed temple of thought.

1 - The first, and most important pillar of economic thinking is that growth is the goal. This idea has become so embedded that it almost seems to have become the *de facto* objective of modern societies, of human existence. Any slowing in the rate of growth generates front-page headlines.

Part of this idea is that growth creates work, employment. Accepting this idea however, is to misunderstand how economists calculate the rate of growth. Growth is *not* an increase in consumption. It's not a result of people buying more stuff. Growth comes from a rise in productivity. It comes from increasing output for the same, or a lower, level of inputs, from making more cars with the same number, or fewer, people and machines. Economic growth is about improving efficiency, and one of the best ways to achieve this is through mechanisation. It is achieved through replacing people with machines, or artificial intelligence. Growth does not always mean more jobs. It often results in lower employment. The thought that it creates jobs is a *belief*.

The focus on endless growth also runs directly counter to reality, to the boundaries of chemistry and physics. On a finite planet, there cannot be infinite growth in production and resource use. That's just logic. But economists have chosen to ignore this fact, and persuaded their flock to believe a cancer-cell philosophy. Endless growth is another *belief*.

Anthropologist Gregory Bateson points out that the focus on growth is also monotonic. When the same thing occurs in biology, in mechanics, and in social phenomena, it destroys the system. The species dies out, the machine breaks down, or the society deteriorates and disappears. Sustainable monotonic processes are absent in nature, from cells to complex organisms. Life casts them out.

Monotonic processes only exist in the mind of an economist.

I know this is an area of great frustration for you. People's minds have been carefully nurtured so they deny this. They've been manipulated. I have often had the same experience as you. Whenever I suggest to people that there is no need for economic growth, that it is possible to live in a steady state, in balance, in harmony, I am met by looks of disbelief. When I point out that the growth philosophy runs counter to history, common sense and simple logic, people start to dismiss everything I say, as if to question the validity of this tissue-paper pillar of economic thinking is unthinkable. They are not thinking, and they are certainly not thinking about *life*. Yes, the poor world needs a better standard of living. But that can be achieved in other ways. It doesn't require economic growth. It can be achieved through redistribution, for example. But economists have persuaded people that growth is the only way.

In striving for this endless economic growth, the planet is being scraped clean of resources at an accelerating rate. While some raw materials will last for centuries, others will not. At some point, as they are continuously exploited, humanity will hit a wall. The costs and the energy required to extract them will one day exceed the gains they bring.

2 - This mindset alone, this push to unthinkingly exploit the world's natural resources, as well as the pollution it causes, will make life hard for future generations. It runs completely counter to the ideas of Adam Smith, and classical economics. In modern economics, the consequences of all the plastic waste that's generated, the air pollution, the melting icecaps, and the oil spills, for example, are completely ignored. Modern economists dismiss it all as unwanted side-effects, and call them externalities. This is the second pillar of thought and it too runs completely counter to the ideas of classical economics. Again, followers have to *believe* that these unwanted consequences don't matter, when they do.

3 - As well as focussing on growth, businesses are expected to maximise short term profits. This is the third pillar of economic thought. It is what the market demands, ever-higher quarterly returns. A failure to boost profits is punished with a decline in the value of firms, with the bosses replaced. The market's wrath descends.

Another consequence of modern economic thinking is widening inequality, though followers are expected to *believe* the opposite, that the system reduces inequality. By design, the rewards of the system accumulate in the pockets of the rich. It is how the system works. The profits go to those who have enough money to invest in businesses, or to lend to others. To try and explain this away, economists talk about the trickle-down effect, like tears on the statue of a saint, a miracle. They claim that wealth filters down into the pockets of the poor, thanks to the magic of the free market. The fact that this doesn't happen in reality, the fact that the rich get ever richer, is ignored. The trickle-down effect is another *belief*.

4 - A fourth pillar is the notion of free trade. Poor countries are told to *believe* in open markets, to sell their resources and labour without restrictions. In reality, this is mostly a cloak for exploitation, because this makes it impossible for poor countries to industrialise. Without trade barriers, they can't compete with the scale and technology of rich countries. All they are able to do is sell their raw materials and labour cheaply to the rich world. Free trade thinking condemns the poor world to stay poor forever. Only China managed to escape this trap, by cleverly ignoring the fourth commandment. It protected its local industries from imports, and gave them time to develop. It also blocked the sale of many raw materials. For almost every other country however, free trade has been colonialism by another name.

5 - The fifth pillar is that modern economic thinking demands little or no regulation. Again, this is a belief. People have to believe that this will produce the best long term outcome for most people. In reality, a lack of regulation allows the finance sector to manipulate markets leading to financial bubbles, and businesses to exploit people and nature. It allows businesses to make false claims and produce harmful goods, such as foods or medicines with long term side-effects. Some countries have even signed secret trade deals³⁴ that make it possible for businesses to sue governments for lost profits in closed-door courts if they introduce legislation that constrains their activities.

3 <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/jun/10/obscure-legal-system-lets-corporations-sue-states-ttip-icsid>

4 <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/mar/07/private-investors-ability-to-sue-governments-is-a-form-of-legal-terrorism-ending-this-system-is-imperative-aoe>

6 - A sixth pillar is the idea of creative destruction. It is another belief. Creative destruction is when businesses rationalise, relocate or close, leaving thousands of people stranded without work. While the economic priests say this destruction is healthy, and that it promotes growth, it is rarely very creative, nor beneficial to those affected. Cities that industries once underpinned and built are left to decay when the tide turns, when the factories are moved elsewhere to boost profits, their citizens abandoned.

Economists are clever like this, as clever as the Church. They use clever words and smart expressions like the "free market", "externalities", "the trickle down effect" and "creative destruction", to cloak reality, to disguise injustice, to allow the high-priests to increase their wealth without most people being aware of what they are up to.

Economists have also reinterpreted Herbert Spencer's idea about the survival of the fittest, to suggest it means only the strong survive. This re-imagining is useful: it encourages competition and dismisses cooperation, while suggesting that economics is somehow underpinned by the laws of nature. It is a zoological approach to human development, based on the idea that the strong should destroy the weak (who are no longer blessed). In the economic thought system, it is the rich who are good, saintly⁵, sacred, and admired, while the poor are feckless, lazy welfare scroungers.

As you know, this is not what Spencer meant by the term "the survival of the fittest" at all. He meant that those creatures which "fit" their environment best, those best suited to their circumstances, are those that survive. He was talking about living in balance with the environment, not striving to eradicate others in a fight to the top.

More broadly, this idea that everything in life is a battle, helps justify much of the West's aggressive behaviour. It favours war, conflict, takeovers, attacks, mergers and acquisitions, whether or not this is of long term benefit to most people. It encourages the strong to use their feral power, validating their behaviour, like a conflict between carnivores and herbivores, a form of entertainment, a spectacle to satisfy animal instincts. It equates aggression with progress, with feeding the "blond beast", as Nietzsche puts it. All this divides, and blocks human thinking. It makes any hope of sensible development, any hope of understanding, harder.

There are other pillars in this economic system of thought. We have discussed them often enough.

Do I overstate my case? Perhaps a little. I happily acknowledge the free market has merits, as does the thought system of science. Both have helped humanity achieve great things. The free market allocates resources more efficiently, most of the time. It strives to make everything in the business world leaner, to drive prices lower. This can often boost living standards in the short term. An expanding economy encourages investment and innovation. The system is also flexible, with the ability to respond to changes in supply and demand.

But economic thinking has hard limits, and these are often ignored.

It tends to be wasteful, forcing companies to make goods that fall apart, so more can be sold. It also works less well in the long term. It works less well with basic infrastructure, in providing roads, railways and energy, for example. It rarely works well when it takes control of universal services, such as schooling, healthcare and defence. It fails completely when it's faced with problems like climate change, micro-plastics in the environment, or disasters like Fukushima, where there is a 60

5 See Any Rand, the concept of Objectivism

year clean up, life threatening risks, and little hope of any profit. The system dumps the costs of these externalities, and so many others, on society.

Economic thinking brushes nature aside, allowing forests to be chopped down, seas to be emptied of fish, and species to be entirely wiped out, because the free market allocates them no meaningful economic value. It frequently destroys lives, in the name of efficiency.

In the 19th century, factory workers came together to fight exploitation and oppression. Doing that is harder today, and it seems to me this is deliberate. People are being brazenly exploited by this system, throughout the world, and yet because everyone has been persuaded to think they must act as lone individuals, their focus is atomised. The endless talk of growth is dogma.

The social divisions this thought system creates are powerful, and often hard to see. It is a racist system, especially in Europe and the US. There is an inbuilt bias in favour of the Coca-Cola culture of white people, especially white men, the old warrior class, and in favour of Western culture, which is viewed as intrinsically better than other cultures. The rules and values of the rich world are portrayed as universal laws: democracy, the free market, capitalism, individualism, science, human rights, the sacredness of private property ownership, and unlimited technological progress. Christianity is in there too, as is a claim to equality of opportunity which is never intended to manifest itself in reality. There is an inbuilt nostalgia for war and conflict, coupled with a belief that the present is always better than the past. The role and dignity of those who lived before, of people's ancestors, is dismissed as unimportant.

People are separated according to wealth, and the levels of progress the system defines. Being rich and materially obsessed is regarded as good. Those who follow another God, who want state intervention, and refuse the blessings of the free market, are viewed as enemies; the Russians, the Chinese, the Cubans, the Venezuelans, the North Koreans and others.

Modern economics becomes fate.

The focus on the individual undermines the chance for any collective identity too - ethnic, cultural, religious, and national, for example - which, paradoxically, impedes awareness of individuality. It leaves people without any anchor to define themselves. People are left to work out what their identity means for themselves, and often struggle. The push for individual liberty, which is labelled as freedom, can be a prison.

The system expects people to work out themselves what their nominal freedom is actually *for*. They are told there is freedom *from*: from state intervention, from constraints on their behaviour, from common responsibility, from ethnic or cultural attachments, from restrictions on what they say. They *believe* this freedom is real. The reality is that the state still wields enormous influence over their lives, as do large corporations. People are not free to act, nor to say what they want. They *are* free from many interventions that would be to their benefit; they are free from any meaningful wealth redistribution, they are liberated from the chance of collective action, and they are released from real equality of opportunity.

Nor are they truly free within their minds, which is what freedom was originally supposed to mean. Their minds are imprisoned by this economic worldview. Everything is contractual and technical, with the economy as destiny.

Nothing in the system explains what this constructed freedom is *for*. For most, it doesn't appear to be for anything much. They have the freedom to buy the latest mobile phone, to travel to places overrun with other tourists, to eat food that gives them diabetes and heart disease, to watch videos, to destroy nature. They have the freedom to be dutiful undemanding consumers of whatever makes the best profit for the wealthy, regardless of the long term social and environmental consequences.

The economic way of thinking, the economic way of living, has become "common sense", in Gramscian terms. It has become so normal and accepted that no one thinks about it. The values of the economic system of thinking are taken for granted, accepted as natural, as if they are universal.

Of course, these values, the push for endless growth, for individualism, the arrogant belief in "being the greatest force for good the world has ever seen", and all the rest, are not eternal nor universal ideas at all. They are the thinking of just one culture, at one time.

For decades, the West has been doing everything it can to impose this thought system on everyone else. This is a source of considerable irritation to the peoples of Russia, China and the Muslim world. They believe the West is denying them their right to sovereignty, their right to live by their own systems of thought and development. This feeling has already brought conflict. It's what the war in Ukraine was partly about.

It appears hard for people in the West to understand that not everyone wants to adopt the Western way of thinking, the neoliberal economic thought system. Others see it as homogenised, lifeless. To other cultures, the West's behaviour suggests it believes they are inferior, that other peoples are imperfect. They feel that they are being told to modernise and standardise as the West dictates, and they don't want to. They think the West wants uni-polarism, uni-culturalism, universalism. They fear it means neo-colonialism.

Again, it seems to me that these other cultures may have a point.

In my first set of notes, I wrote about the notion of Being, about the essence of existence, and whether or not this could be equated with thinking. Seen through the eyes of other cultures, Western economic thinking looks more like a form of human entropy, the ultimate oblivion of Being. It comes across as that midnight, where nothingness seeps through the walls. Because people are not thinking, they cannot Be. They are endlessly washed along by tides of emptiness, grasping for something to hold on to, a web of alienation expressed through technology, with nothingness on the throne.

Heidegger seems to agree. Neoliberalism is the "source of the calculative thinking" that lies at the heart of "Western nihilism", he said.

Thankfully, escape from this thought system is not too difficult. It only requires an awakening, for people to see that their minds have been held captive. Everything else is fixable. I'll come back to this at the end.

* * *

As with science, the economy is only one part of human existence. Like science, it offers nothing to guide us in what matters, except for the hollow notion that we should profit from every activity. Economics has grabbed a far more dominant role in our lives than it should, by taking over almost

every element of thought. Everything is a competition, everything is a market, everything must yield a financial gain.

The worst outcome of this system is climate change. Economics' puffed-up unidirectional thinking is the direct cause of climate change. As you have said so many times before, it is the endless push for increased output that causes the problem.

For the economy to grow, more goods and services need to be produced. To power the factories, to provide the lighting, heating, computing and cooling, requires energy. Even today, after so many years of investment in renewables, more than 80% of this energy comes from fossil fuels. Even in 2040, according to forecasts by BP⁶, more than 70% of the energy used in the world will still come from fossil fuels. Burning these fossil fuels creates air pollution, greenhouse gases. This traps some of the sun's heat in the upper atmosphere. This causes climate change. The push for ever-higher output, the demands of this economic mindset, are the direct cause of global warming.

This makes economic thinking much worse than scientific thought or the religious-based system. The consequences of science or religion can be tragic, but rarely for everyone. Modern economic thought is suicidal for all. Unless societies can break free, unless they can learn to think differently, everyone's fate is sealed. We are knowingly heading for a catastrophe, and yet most people cannot see it is their thinking that is the cause.

How did this happen? By accident? Was modern economic thinking an inevitable consequence of a seed planted by Adam Smith 250 years ago?

It is not.

The system of thinking that dominates the Western world is the work of smart architects, spin-doctors and public relations experts. It is the result of a "thought collective", deliberately set up "to change the minds of people⁷".

The process of changing Western thinking began after the Second World War, when a group of neoliberal economists formed the Mont Pelerin Society (MPS). Its goal is to spread free market ideas, and what the group claims are the central values of civilisation. The founders were some of the 20th century's best-known economists, including Friedrich Hayek, Karl Popper, Ludwig von Mises, and Milton Friedman. It still operates today.

The MPS wants everyone to believe government and the welfare state are dangerous.

With generous funding from big businesses and wealthy individuals, the group came to popular attention in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan took power. Of President Reagan's 76 economic advisors, 22 were members of the MPS. In the UK, Prime Minister Thatcher's chief economics advisor, as well as many other economists close to her, were members of the MPS too.

Most economists in the Mont Pelerin Society are closely aligned to what is known as "The Austrian School of Economics", so named because the founders' families had roots in the Austro-Hungarian

6 BP Energy Outlook 2018

7 Mirowski, P., & Plehwe, D. (Eds.). (2009). *The Road from Mont Pèlerin*. Harvard University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13x0jdh>, Introduction

Empire. Originally, the term was intended as an insult, because mainstream economists saw their ideas as obscure and provincial.

Propaganda specialist Edward Louis Bernays, whose family also came from Austria, and who is better known as "the father of spin", played an important role in the development of the MPS too. His part was to encourage a sense of individualism, and promote an unthinking belief in what is called democracy⁸. Both concepts are central to Austrian School thinking. Individualism is easy to sell and undermines social cohesion. It reduces the chance of collective action. Democracy hands power to those who can influence the outcome of elections most: not politicians, but the media, big corporations and the rich. It is called democracy and there are regular elections, which gives the people the illusion of participation. But the real voice of the people is kept weak while the role of the rich is enhanced.

There are people of influence outside the West who take this notion further, who believe Western democratic thinking is like a self-generating virus. When it's applied to traditional societies, it destroys them, causing them to descend into chaos. This is what the West intends, they say. The West's promotion of democracy is a cynical ploy, with deep, dark motives. It is a weapon used to extend imperialism, to divide other cultures, weaken them and then assimilate or exploit them.

They may have a point here too.

Still, these people, mainly from the BRICS countries, don't claim to be anti-Western, which is interesting. They say they are "non-Western"⁹.

The MPS has established a large number of pro-free market publishers and think tanks, to spread its ideas. These offer employment to past-politicians, bankers and journalists, people of influence who are selected because they are expected to encourage the spread of neoliberal thought. The group is also responsible for changing the way economics is taught in universities and schools. Rather than learning about a variety of economic ideas, many students are only taught about one, the neoliberal system. This encourages them believe that neoliberalism is universal. It encourages them think of the free market as a common sense approach to life, neoliberalism as the natural order.

The MPS has also cleverly sought to influence the views of respected people who are not economists: doctors, scientists and lawyers for example, so these people become secondary carriers of neoliberal thought. Through targeted articles, documentaries and news reports, these people become unthinking advocates of neoliberal ideas. Because their real expertise lies elsewhere, and because they respect the scholarly qualifications of the MPS' economists, they don't challenge the underlying assumptions of the system.

Do you remember Chien-Yi, that brilliant professor in Taiwan? Didn't you meet her in Taipei a few years ago? She wrote a book about the MPS. It's excellent. I especially love this quote:

“Immeasurable amounts of time, energy and talent have already been wasted on engaging [in] sincere debate with neoliberals as if they were honest theorists, thinkers, scholars, think-tank experts, or statesmen when actually, the core feature of neoliberalism is deceit¹⁰.”

8 <https://taz.de/Oekonomien-ueber-Meinungsmanipulation/!5585707/>

9 <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3302460/brics-not-anti-western-must-unite-against-external-shocks-chinese-think-tank>

10 Lu Chien-Yi, *Surviving Democracy- Mitigating Climate Change in a Neoliberalised world*, Routledge 2020, Introduction, P2

Despite this truth, the MPS has been very successful. Even environmental activists now frame their proposals in neoliberal terms. They offer market-based solutions to environmental problems because they have completely swallowed the idea that businesses should lead change, and that fixing the planet should yield a profit. They rarely make calls for regulation any more, because they have accepted the idea that market freedom is sacrosanct. It's quite comical, were it not so tragic.

Thanks to the pervasiveness of modern economic thinking, some environmentalists have even suggested nature should be treated as a financial asset. They want to give the forests, clouds, and the summer rain a monetary value, just like a factory or a machine. They call this “natural capital”.

This monetisation of nature is pure neoliberalism. It is based on the idea that all decisions should depend on the economic value that will be lost or gained. If a cattle farm offers a better financial return than the “ecosystem services” a rainforest provides, it should be chopped down and burnt, goes their thinking. Environmental neoliberalism views the world as a commodity. Worse, it thinks humanity is qualified to decide nature's fate.

* * *

I plan to finish my lecture on this topic with a quote from Guy de Maupassant's short story "Suicides".

"We are the eternal toys of foolish and charming illusions, which are always being renewed".

If people understood how much their illusions are deliberately renewed by others, by those who have an agenda to profit from them, and control them, to change the way they think for their own benefit, most would surely be concerned.

Doesn't everyone like to think their mind is their own?

* * *

Before I put my notes in an envelope and send them to you I have one additional observation.

Having studied the ways thought has been deliberately manipulated for some time, I conclude that while it is relatively hard to change the views of one person, it appears easier to modify the thinking of crowds. Berneys was a master craftsman at this, the original father of spin, though I am not sure his legacy is one to be proud of.

As you know, I read news articles from a wide range of different sources. I seek out the views of other cultures and read what is said in other languages, to see how much unity of thinking there is, and how little. It's clear, I think, there is manipulation of thought at the macro level. There seems to be a lot of micro-level channelling too.

A couple of examples to illustrate what I mean.

In the UK, for more than 30 years, from the 1980s onwards, the local media drip-fed a message critical of the EU. It was frequently mocking. *The Sun*, *The Times*, and *The Daily Telegraph* newspapers were especially active, and particularly unbalanced, in this. Their framing, their narrative, was quite subtle at the beginning, but became less subtle. Whenever there was a difficult

political or economic challenge, the EU was somehow to blame. While other European countries were critical of the EU at times, they stopped short of the kind of criticisms published in the UK. Many accusations levelled against the EU were completely false, downright lies. Boris Johnson was one of those who invented the damning stories that were complete nonsense,¹¹ but which shaped British thinking.

Unlike the UK, most other EU governments made considerable efforts to explain the benefits of EU membership to their citizens.

At the start, the UK's activities appeared relatively harmless, amusing even. Over the decades however, the consequences of this drip-drip narrative grew until the balance of popular opinion changed. It played a large part in Brexit, in Britain's decision to leave the EU. Even today, in 2025, much of the UK media remains anti-EU partly, I suspect, to try and justify what happened. They claim the EU is on the verge of a crisis, and that other countries want to leave too.

That is not the message I get from reading the European press. Some countries are critical of the EU but none are considering leaving. They see Britain's decision as a mistake, which objectively, from an economic and cultural perspective, it surely was.

What I am trying to say, is that one side was led to believe something and the other side believed something different, but only one side knew this. The British were fed one way of thinking. They were not properly informed about opinions elsewhere, in Germany, Italy or France, for example, and they were not given objective information by their own government, to help them form a balanced view. The British had one-sided thinking. This was not the case in the rest of Europe. People outside the UK knew what the British press was saying. They had the full picture.

Something similar has happened over recent decades concerning Russia and China. In the West, a message has been drip-fed to people that says Russia and China are hostile nations, a danger.

What is almost never discussed is what Chinese and Russian people think.

Of course, they see the situation quite differently. They believe the West doesn't understand them, that the Western media misrepresents them. They think it is the West that is being unreasonable, and aggressive. They believe the West wants to force a system of economic thinking on them they do not like, and do not want. They fear the West's push for conformity, for assimilation and homogenisation. They see it as an assault against their cultures. They fear, and rightly in my opinion, the West's colonial mindset, its belief that it knows better.

I have read books and articles published in the Chinese and Russian media that explain both sides of this story. The Chinese and the Russians are able to read about the views of people in the West. They know too, that at some point there will need to be compromise, or there will be conflict. There will need to be discussions to correct this imbalance before the situation gets out of control. They know too, that they will have an advantage if they understand the thinking of both sides. Those in the West are again being herded by one-sided thought. It will make compromise hard to achieve.

The West still behaves as if China and Russia are bad children who need to be trained to behave. They seem to think the Russians and Chinese need to learn to think like the West, to have Western democracy, Western notions of freedom, and adopt Western free market ideas.

11 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jul/14/boris-johnson-brussels-bashing-stories-shaped-politics>

The West is not thinking.

* * *

Thank you again for the comments on the first two sets of notes I sent. They are extremely useful. I will send you the fourth set of notes on how language influences thought soon.

In the meantime, enjoy your trip to Brussels.

Much love

Max

Image: Tara Winstead