When Idle Talk Is Idealized: Thinking with Heidegger's Existential Analytic in a Time of Neo-Liberalism

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Abstract

Neo-liberalism's greatest strength as an ideological force has been its ability to traverse boundaries, adapt and adopt customs and cultures, and inflect the central premise of individualism, competition, and capital creation into all manner of non-market spaces. In this article, I argue that Heidegger's rendering of "idle talk" furnishes a useful prism for understanding the current conditions of neo-liberal influences in education. I offer two analyses of what it means to be in a time and place that is enframed by discourses of neo-liberalism and the material conditions of capitalism. First, I describe how thrown conditions in education reflect a preoccupation with a limited, neo-liberal view of what it means to care or be concerned. Second, I suggest that alternatives to neo-liberalism are less available because of impoverished conceptions of what it means to understand. I conclude with the argument that, despite the dire ontic conditions, there is much opportunity to contemplate what comes next for exploring alternative educational futures.
Keywords: neo-liberalism, capitalism, Heidegger, ontology

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Résumé

La plus grande force idéologique du néolibéralisme tient à sa capacité à traverser les frontières, à s'adapter aux cultures, à adopter des coutumes, et à infléchir les prémisses centrales de l'individualisme, de la concurrence et de la création de capital dans toutes sortes d'espaces non commerciaux. Dans cet article, j'argumente que l'interprétation rendue par Heidegger des « bavardages » (*idle talk*) constitue un prisme d'exploration utile pour comprendre les influences néolibérales qui s'exercent actuellement dans le domaine de l'éducation. Je présente deux analyses de ce que cela signifie d'être dans un temps et dans un lieu définis par des discours empreints de néolibéralisme et par des conditions matérielles de capitalisme. Tout d'abord, je décris comment la vision néolibérale restreinte de ce que signifie « se soucier » ou « se sentir concerné » se reflète dans le contexte éducatif. Ensuite, je montre qu'il existe moins d'options au néolibéralisme en raison des conceptions appauvries de ce que signifie « comprendre ». En conclusion, je soutiens qu'en dépit de conditions ontiques graves, les occasions sont nombreuses, par l'exploration d'autres possibilités, d'envisager un avenir différent en matière d'éducation.

Mots-clés : néolibéralisme, capitalisme, Heidegger, ontologie

Introduction

Heidegger (2001) posits the human—Dasein—as a unique being among entities in the world, the only being for whom the question of being is at stake. With this singularity in mind, Heidegger outlines an existential analytic that reveals how Dasein moves through their time on Earth with concern for the world and care for others, as shaped by the circumstances of their totality of involvements, and through a flux of thrownness, fallenness, and projection. Heidegger determines neither God nor some traditional metaphysical sense of possibility guides Dasein's inclinations for care; rather, it is the horizon of one's inevitable death that gives shape to one's encounters, choices, moods, and understanding. A person's time is finite, and it is this finitude—as Dasein is thrown into a particular place at a particular time for a temporally-bounded horizon—that begets both the primordial characteristics of Dasein and the conditions for state of mind, understanding, and discourse. Heidegger (2001) also notes that "proximally and for the most part" (p. 210), the

average everydayness of Dasein's encounters with things and with others in the world shapes most of how one's time is spent. Dasein is immersed with the "they," in conformity with others, engaged in discourse, or what Heidegger calls "idle talk."

Taking Heidegger's existential analytic as a prism through which to perceive the constitutive facets of being, I seek to reveal how care is shaped by contemporary influences. In particular, I argue that the last 50 years of neo-liberalism have had a profound effect on the ontic—the actual, material, found—conditions and factical possibilities that shape human life, including the conditions of thrownness, the average everydayness of encounter, and the potentials of projection. Because neo-liberal discourse has had several decades to take root and spread globally, contemporary idle talk is not simply the dominant milieu for encounter, it is also more difficult to disrupt. Economic and consumerist ends dominate the horizon, shaping the conditions for care, concern, and mattering. I also aim to contribute to the literature on phenomenological analysis of education, with a particular view to bringing Heidegger's thinking on thrown projection and discourse into contemporary studies of life of the school and classroom.

I should acknowledge that while Heidegger can be argued as being one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century (Richardson, 2012), there has been controversy about how to engage with his ideas given his abhorrent political affiliations with the Nazis (Richardson, 2012). There have been decades of arguments about whether Heidegger's personal politics contaminate his philosophy in ways that render it unusable (Farias, 1989; Wolin, 1993), particularly around his Völkisch ideology (Karademir, 2013), which comprises concepts like "fate," "the people," and "destiny" (Herskowitz, 2020) and which is not drawn on in this article. In the debate, robust arguments have also been made that Heidegger's personal politics were more a function of his conservative upbringing and the socio-historical currents in Germany at the time than an integral facet of his philosophy (Herskowitz, 2020; O'Brien, 2010; Olafson, 2000). In contemporary philosophy, his insights have commonly been engaged by scholars who are concerned with an ethic of care in education, including Noddings (2005), as well as with a range of other educational questions (Biesta, 2016; Lewis, 2017; Peters, 2000, 2002). My work does not seek to elide Heidegger's loathsome personal politics; rather, it seeks to enliven the terrain of his thinking in the current moment, and toward liberatory ends.

Through the article, I employ a philosophical mode of inquiry, drawing on Heidegger's (2001) rendering of Dasein in *Being and Time* to reveal how and why neo-libe-

ral capitalism expresses itself in facticity and takes on an existential weight. My argument takes up Heidegger's early existential analytic in *Being and Time*, prior to his "turn" (Heidegger, 2009) to less Dasein-centric ontologies. That said, it is useful to note that his later discussions of technology reflect some of the themes that arise in forthcoming analysis. This includes his assertion in the essay "The Question Concerning Technology" (Heidegger, 1977) that society's fixation with the essence of technology produces an ongoing limitation in how we view the world, an "enframing," which fosters an instrumentalist mentality and has us reducing things to resources (Hodge, 2015). In this article, I make the conscious decision to preserve focus on the existential analytic—on the tripartite rendering of the structure of care—as a phenomenological lens for perceiving how an economic worlding affects being.

I begin by analyzing how expressions of neo-liberalism are linked to goals of market efficiency, meritocracy, and the logics of competition. I then furnish a brief overview of Heidegger's rendering of care and his delineation of idle talk to prepare for the main analyses of the article. In the following sections, I draw on Heidegger's thinking to reflect on how a person's life becomes enframed by discourses of neo-liberalism and material conditions of capitalism. These analyses focus on implications for care and understanding. In the first discussion of care, I argue that societies shaped by neo-liberal values have become preoccupied with a limited view of what it means to care or be concerned, with an exploration of what it means to care about one's education. In the second section, I outline the significance of understanding for Dasein's life and future, and relate this discussion to curriculum as a totality of involvements that foregrounds particular (economic) understandings, while foreclosing others. I also suggest that the neo-liberal rendering of meritocracy misrepresents knowledge and belies the complexity of meaning-making in the world. In the final section, I consider what the current conditions might mean for diverse educational futures.

The Facticity of Neo-Liberal Capitalism

In a globalized world shaped by decades of neo-liberal capitalism, the "thereness" in which one finds oneself is at once remarkably similar across the world and, as a function of that similarity, also tragically different. On one hand, as Brown (2015, 2019) notes, neo-liberalism's greatest strength as an ideological force has been its ability to traverse

boundaries, adapt and adopt customs and cultures, and inflect the central premise of individualism, competition, and capital creation into all manner of non-market spaces, including politics, health care, and education. The fullness of the neo-liberal agenda increasingly furnishes a kind of taken-for-grantedness in these spaces and, over time, diminishes the possibilities for alternatives (Brown, 2015). For example, the neo-liberal iteration of capitalism shapes the daily practices, encounters, traditions, and rituals of life in accordance with the demand for capital. The value of a life, in the brief time one has to live it, is dominated by a discourse that presents neo-liberal facticity in an already levelled-down manner. This facticity is not simply mediated by idle talk—as, one could argue, all facticities are—but it has, in the decades of neo-liberal messaging, become a facticity that is globally accepted and endorsed (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2005).

On the other hand, the smoothness of neo-liberal idle talk as a global force elides the complexity of the actual lived conditions of disparity and inequality (Apple, 2006a). This is perhaps most apparent in the ongoing legacy and function of racial, colonial, and imperial capitalism, where neo-liberalism constructs inequality as a narrative where "the poor have only themselves to blame, because of their backwardness, underdevelopment or their inadequacies as economic subjects" (Venn, 2009, p. 207). For people victimized by slavery, resource theft, and climate change, for example, the found conditions of life are inflected by the same pervasive neo-liberal idle talk as the wealthy or the middle class, but amidst cruelly different lived conditions and opportunities (Littler, 2013). Despite the complex pathologies associated with ongoing racist, neo-colonial capitalism, everyone is expected to martial the resources, care, and energies of their lives in keeping with the given construct of a rational, consumer-driven homo oeconimicus (Peters, 2012, 2021) or perhaps a resilient subaltern (Bracke, 2016).

As a term, neo-liberalism is so ubiquitous it risks its own meaninglessness. As a practice, it has become so factically plastic in its adaptability that any discussion of it through a theoretical lens risks dissolving into generalities and opacities. Yet, that very permeability and pervasiveness also renders it a problem well worth engaging, philosophically and phenomenologically. The latest iteration of neo-liberalism relies on a "re-semanticisation of the egalitarian and progressive vocabulary which strips it of its historical legacy and emancipatory potential" (Sardoč, 2022, p. 1728). Recognizing the theoretical and material sprawl of neo-liberalism as phenomenon, it is useful to highlight three particular features that are not only central to its characteristics, but also relevant to this analysis. These in-

clude a focus on economic goals, meritocracy, and an expression of relationality inflected with competitiveness as well as unrelenting pressure to ensure that one's family does not slide down the rungs of socio-economic hardship (Peters, 2021; Tašner & Gaber, 2022).

The focus on economic goals is evident in a commitment to market efficiency and measurability in non-economic fields, and an imposition of marketplace value onto various contexts for meaning. Consider K–12 and higher education, where neo-liberalism has changed the shape of desired outcomes. As Giroux (2016) notes in his analysis of the neo-liberal university, higher education has oriented itself increasingly around economic ends, making classrooms available to corporate interests and drawing on employability metrics to transform programs into a "job preparation service" (p. 38) that treat students as clients. In K–12 education, where the most common manifestations of accountability show up as centralized curricula and standardized testing (Apple, 2006b; Peters, 2012), a school that prioritizes dynamic experiential learning may spend less time endorsing test preparation and rote learning. Using neo-liberal measures, this school may be deemed a failure, with the richness of its pedagogy hidden from view amidst the uncountable. The drive to measure, to turn all ways of being into marketplace behaviours, and the consequent demand to count all outcomes forces an ongoing temporal rationing. Put more simply, in this account of life's value, one's time becomes the resource most determined by neo-liberalism. In the examples above, the commitment to the economic pathologizes all time spent outside measurable labour in service to the goal of efficiency as wasteful.

Meritocracy shapes how an individual makes sense of successes and failures, as well as the role of their agency amidst complexity. In a world of neo-liberal facticity, liberal individualism that is meant to be rooted in ideals of freedom and autonomy is perverted into an alienation of our selves and an outsized sense of personal control (Sandel, 2020; Tašner & Gaber, 2022). Meritocracy suggests that any success is attributable to an "essentialized conception of intellect and aptitude" (Littler, 2013, p. 54) and failure rests solely with a person's deficiencies or shortcomings. This inhibits people's ability to see themselves within a web of relations or to perceive systemic structures that are acting upon the material conditions of their lives. In this way, it becomes difficult to both recognize coherent forces of neo-liberal oppression and seek support in solidarity or community. In this marketplace of ideas, of mastery, and of false equality, there is no need to grapple with systemic inequalities or oppression. There exists only an individualist sense of having earned what one deserves (Littler, 2013). In addition, a person's participation in

the world and their opportunities for the future become contingent upon the performance of success according to economic measures. Over time, a life that is not maximally economically productive diminishes not only in public perceptions of success but also in how much social capital, or influence, one has. In a meritocratic world, one's license to speak is based on their history of entitlements and the accomplishments pursuant to those entitlements (Sandel, 2020).

Further, neo-liberal idle talk constructs care for one another, or relationality, through competition for capital. That is, neo-liberal facticities invariably shape societies' determinations of who to care about and how to express that care. Apple (2017) describes this consumerist relationality, noting that "the world becomes a vast supermarket, one in which those with economic and cultural capital are advantaged in nearly every sector of society. Choice in a market replaces more collective and more socially responsive actions" (p. 149). In the first, a person is drawn into their role in the *oikos* in a particular way. Their early relations, with family, partners, and children, cannot help but to be constituted, at least in part, by the pressure to compete in the economy and to provide financially. With a growing emphasis on economic contributions, care is construed in capitalist terms. For example, from an early age, children are taught to think about their time in school as a pathway to economic futures that, as discussed above, rely on the strength of the child's merit (Tašner & Gaber, 2022). That child, completing their homework, participates in labour today that holds a promise of their future earning potential. The drive to accrue endless capital also inflects relations outside the *oikos*, one's sociality (Peters, 2021). Because a capitalist society understands wealth as a zero-sum game, and because of the competitive discourses inherent to neo-liberal facticity, its participants are compelled to possessiveness (Peters, 2021) to secure access to surplus capital and, beyond this, a legacy through future generations' access to capital. This economic competitiveness is pervasive. It emerges in intersubjective engagements with neighbours and friends, and in the everyday parlance of outcompeting rising economic threats posed by citizens of other countries (Littler, 2013). Once relationality is developed along these lines, interactions that exist outside the conventions of capital and value serve as impositions or distractions.

Heidegger's Existential Analytic and the Problem of Neo-Liberalism-in-the-World

In his seminal work, Heidegger is primarily concerned with articulating a framework for how a human being, Dasein, comes to experience their being-in-the-world. The human, Heidegger (2001) argues, is unique amongst other beings since they are the only being for whom being is a question. That is, humans are inherently able to grapple with the question of what it means to exist in the world, amongst other entities and amidst other humans. The question of being is immediately confronted by the inevitable prospect of non-being: death, or the temporal finitude of one's life. Given this implacable horizon, Heidegger determines that Dasein comes to make meaning in the world, or comes to care about certain aspects of the world, through a tripartite arrangement of temporal encounters (Richardson, 2012). First, Dasein makes meaning through ongoing exposure to the given conditions of their birth, which is described as a historically constituted *thrownness* into a particular place and time not of their own choosing, which affects their attunement or mood. Second, Dasein makes meaning through engagement with the world by interacting with ready-to-hand things (tools or equipment phenomenally encountered) and, secondarily, through the scientific or more theoretical frame of present-at-hand entities (Critchley & Schürmann, 2008; Richardson, 2012). In this temporal present, Dasein encounters the *fallenness*, or average everyday circumstances of their life with others, through discourse or idle talk. Third, Dasein makes meaning by coming to understand the possibilities for their future by moving in and out of moments of authenticity that disrupt the inauthentic mode of fallenness, and with a sense of futural *projection*. In this analysis, I am most concerned with the implications of care and the phenomenological experience of understanding as related to projection.

Though Heidegger does not, in *Being and Time*, explicitly engage with the question of politics, I argue that his rendering of the existential analytic offers facets through which to better perceive the phenomenological conditions and ontic implications of neoliberal facticity, as it is experienced by human minds and bodies at a certain time and in a particular place. Despite the limitation of Heidegger's rather universalist rendering of the world as a place encountered without examination of questions of power and injustice, Marxist scholars like Goldmann (1977) and Marcuse (2005) have recognized the relevance of Heideggerian phenomenology as a practical way of engaging with the material

conditions of the world. Here, I contend that it is important to examine the structure of the existential analytic to better interpret the characteristics of ready-to-hand interactions that are produced through neo-liberalism's given meaning-making schema. As such, this article contributes to work that brings Heidegger into engagement with the neo-liberal hegemony in novel and critical ways including, for example, Joronen's (2013) analysis of neo-liberalism as ontological enframing, which "shows how neoliberalisation is a process of *ontological violence*" (p. 357, emphasis in original), and Curtis's (2013) discussion of the relationship between neo-liberal knowledge production and anxiety.

Care's Formation Amidst Neo-Liberal Idle Talk

Heidegger justifies his project in *Being and Time* by noting that the question of being has not been properly philosophically examined, but rather elided or obscured. He writes, "what stands in the way of the basic question of Dasein's Being (or leads it off the track) is an orientation thoroughly coloured by the anthropology of Christianity and the ancient world…[and their] inadequate ontological foundations" (Heidegger, 2001, p. 74). As such, as Heidegger articulates the framework of his existential analytic of Dasein, he rejects normative, religiously constituted renderings of ideas of care or concern; rather, he determines, it is not an afterlife and the promise of its rewards that determines the objects of care, but the phenomena of existing in-the-world amongst others. Care is the expression of Dasein's purpose and it is shaped by the awareness that human life is temporally finite. The horizon of death is indisputable, and it is this inevitability that impels Dasein to care or have concern for their life. Critchley (Critchley & Schürmann, 2008) summarizes that Heidegger's rendering of care is a process always unfolding amidst others, as Dasein is not given, but is encountered and modified through everyday life. Richardson (2012) determines that Heideggerean existential care does not exist in isolation of a person's beliefs or intellect, but that it is pervasive in inflecting their intentions and aims. Put in its most simple terms, care is the way in which anything in a person's life comes to matter to them (Lumsden, 2014).

How does one come to care? Dasein comes to care through "the ontological interconnections of care, worldhood, ready-to-hand, and present-at-hand (Reality)" (Heidegger, 2001, p. 228). That is, one comes to care through ongoing participation in the circumstances of the average everydayness of life, through the use of the tools and

equipment ready-to-hand to achieve objectives, and through ongoing hermeneutical interpretation of the "totality of involvements" (Heidegger, 2001, p. 118) one encounters in-the-world. Care, then, is emergent. It is both constituted by and constitutive of a life's experiences. Care becomes a fundament for such phenomena as desire, will, wish, and urge. Notably, care is contingent upon interpretations of a person's experiences in the world with others and is enframed through a kind of dominant discursive guiderail, "idle talk," which reflects the zeitgeist of the time and place as expressed generally by the "they" or *Das Man*. Heidegger (2001) describes the process of coming to care in relation to the "they" and in coherence with "idle talk" in the following way:

> As something factical, Dasein's projection of itself understandingly is in each case already alongside a world that has been discovered. From this world it takes its possibilities, and it does so first in accordance with the way things have been interpreted by the "they". This interpretation has already restricted the possible options of choice to what lies within the range of the familiar, the attainable, the respectable—that which is fitting and proper. (p. 239)

Dasein comes to care and be concerned about aspects of the world through encounter, but also through a kind of mediated experience that is both historical and ongoing—a levelling down into the dominant discursive and practical understandings of the world as determined by the collective. Dasein also comes to learn about and envision the possibilities for their future through not simply the phenomenological experiences of encounter, but also through the prism of that encounter as brokered by governing norms. In addition, Heidegger (2001) points out that the authority of the "they" is contextual, acknowledging, "the extent to which its dominion becomes compelling and explicit may change in the course of history" (p. 167). This suggests that not all moments of idle talk carry the same persuasive weight, ontically. There are, in other words, particular moments in history where the pull of the "they" is more influential in the development of care, concern, and solicitude. The Heideggerean approach to care has been influential for subsequent thinkers, who have drawn from it to highlight care's relational qualities (e.g., Noddings, 2005), responded to and revised it (e.g., Levinas, 1989), and who have sought to explore it in relation to educational contexts (e.g., Hodge, 2015; Mortari, 2016; Quay, 2013).

In this article, I argue that to ask the question of how care develops in the contemporary moment is to recognize that it is difficult for a person to forge a sense of care

outside the influence of neo-liberal capitalist influences, which permeate not only the economic context of labouring, but also seep into the social, cultural, and political conditions of life. Capitalism powerfully expresses itself at the nexus of phenomenal encounter through both discursive and material circumstances. On the one hand, the average everydayness of life is inflected by the vocabulary, norms, and values derived from neo-liberal discourse. Neo-liberalism-as-common-sense (Biesta, 2019; Giroux, 2007; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) permeates idle talk, which then shapes how one perceives not simply the ends or objectives for care, but also how one encounters the ready-to-hand. If both human care and capitalism rely on the values expressed in the socio-historical and contemporary context of the world, then it is clear that care cannot be constituted in isolation from capitalism. It also follows that capitalism inflects meaning in ways that encourage a limited view of what it means to care or be concerned.

On the other hand, capitalism constrains the material possibilities for a person's development of care. It does this in two ways. First, the purpose and value of the things one encounters in the world as ready-to-hand are constrained by society's limited focus on capital accrual. Second, care is constrained by the material inequality of what is available as ready-to-hand. The material difference in access to ready-to-hand resources is a function of decades of capitalism, and is a phenomenal inequality often obscured by the neo-liberal construct of meritocracy. In another article, I explore the hypocrisy of meritocracy for migrant and refugee children who are expected to acculturate into Global North environments (Parker, 2025). I argue that, as an expression of neo-liberalism, meritocracy makes a lie of the differences in the material ready-to-hand circumstances of rich and poor people. It cultivates an understanding for that difference as a function, not of cruel inequalities inherent to capitalism, but of the individual's failure to make use of impoverished tools to project more economically successful futures (Littler, 2013). This kind of difference between the found and phenomenal encounters of being-in-the-world and the ready-to-hand produces a deep sense of alienation as a person struggles to make meaning and reconcile their experience of the world with the narratives accepted in idle talk.

Education, as an expression of the social context of life-in-the-world and existential care, reveals the influences of neo-liberal capitalism through a growing adoption of economic ends. This is evident in the material conditions of schooling as well as how people talk about education. Biesta (2009) notes, for example, that the actual practices, policies, and curriculum of schooling have taken on the valence of "learnification" (p.

36), which is exemplified by the way learning is centred on economic progress. Learnification is evident in both higher education and K–12, as universities have transformed their educational purpose from one of broad-based intellectual growth to explicit support of the economy (Brown, 2011; Olssen & Peters, 2005) and K–12 education has increasingly rationalized policy reforms and curricular revisions by their contributions to labour, workforce, and global competitiveness (Janzen & Heringer, 2023; Parker 2020, 2023; Säfström & Månsson, 2022). Learnification prevents the things of school, the ready-to-hand, from being encountered as open potential, with a full range of possibilities for care. Rather, learnification directs the aims of the objects and spaces of encounter to the particular economic ends of the moment. An interesting temporal tension exists here: even if one embraces the economic ends of learnification, the way one encounters the learnified object is already outdated. That is, it is quite difficult to predict the economic (Gardner, 2010) and educational (Gerver, 2014) needs of the future. As such, learnification prevents care from forming against the full potential of the object; it damages not simply the conditions for care outside the economic but, in an ironic twist, also hampers the full scope of innovation needed to aim for economic futures that cannot be anticipated.

Learnification results not just in constrained material conditions for learning but also influences idle talk about education. Average everyday discourse about educational purpose is shaped by the demands of marketization, commodification, and consumption. For a parent who is concerned about the well-being of their child, idle talk about education normalizes school as a pathway to economic success (Savage, 2017; Yoon, 2020). For children, doing well in school becomes an individual task, based on merit and competition (Wilkins, 2012). For families sending their children to primary school using language about "elite daycares" and "good schools," school choice becomes about economic maximization and class (Apple, 2006b; Savage, 2017; Yoon, 2020). Because of learnification's prevalence in idle talk, economically privileged families see education choice and competition for the best schools as an opportunity to secure or expand their economic and social capital. School choice discussions shaped by competitiveness and the premise of scarcity continue into college and university selections, as higher education institutions contribute to neo-liberal idle talk by succumbing to the "competition fetish" through widely published rankings (Enslin & Hedge, 2024). This produces a cut-throat battle for legacy admissions, breeds resentment for policies like affirmative action (Park et al., 2022), and fosters a culture of institutional marketization and client-orienta-

tion that belies other prospects for learning (Olssen & Peters, 2005; Yosef-Hassidim & Sharma, 2019). For families of lesser economic means, while school choice is not usually an option, increased schooling is understandably viewed as a pathway to upward socio-economic mobility. In this way, the learnification of education is particularly cruel. It has promulgated a discourse of educational progress toward social mobility in a time of eroding material conditions for the middle class (Stiglitz, 2025). This era has led to growing inequality (Lazonick, 2015) in spite of higher levels of education (Carnoy, 2011). The phenomenal structure of care is such that idle talk is not a failure of meaning-making, but rather a function of it. As such, if the phenomena one encounters are largely coherent in their meanings, and if alternative meanings are few, then disruption of neo-liberal capitalism as a global project becomes an increasingly demanding existential task.

Understanding and the Neo-Liberal Curriculum

While Heidegger does not grapple with the question of learning in *Being and Time* as he does more directly in later work (e.g., *What Is Called Thinking?* [Heidegger, 1968]), he engages with the "problem of knowledge" (Heidegger, 2001, p. 171) in how he constructs Dasein as a being-in-the-world-with-others. For this analysis, it is useful to get a sense of how Heideggerean understanding operates as a facet of care (and its relation to Dasein's making of the future through projection) and to delineate the limits of curiosity, which function alongside idle talk as a distraction. In the chapter "Being-in as Such" Heidegger describes the primordial characteristics that undergird being-there in the world (that is, in a particular place and time) and experiencing things with others. Among these characteristics is what Heidegger describes as understanding, which is a complex web of processes that include being-there as understanding; understanding and interpretation; and being-there, discourse, and language. Pertinent to this analysis is how understanding, as an existentiale, involves not simply being-in-the-world, but a constant experience of the world as (non)disclosure of what is possible for Dasein's future projections. Heidegger (2001) writes "Dasein always had understood itself and always will understand itself in terms of possibilities" (p. 185). This suggests that understanding operates as a fundament to interpretation, which is the "working out of possibilities projected in understanding" (p. 189). It is a function of how we encounter the ready-to-hand (in the present moment of doing things in the world) *and* it orients the self toward its possibility for the future insofar as it shapes the toward-which of care.

If understanding helps forge a sense of Dasein's futurity, then curiosity and idle talk are a matter of the present moment, of the average everyday that obscures some aspects of the future's possibilities. Heideggerean curiosity is a way of encountering entities outside one's foundational interactions with things ready-to-hand. It is a way for a person, when not engaged in labouring toward their ends, to think in a kind of limited or superficial manner. Heidegger (2001) writes,

> When curiosity has become free, however, it concerns itself with seeing, not in order to understand what is seen (that is, to come into a Being towards it) but just in order to see. It seeks novelty only in order to leap from it anew to another novelty. In this kind of seeing, that which is an issue for care does not lie in grasping something and being knowingly in the truth; it lies rather in its possibilities of abandoning itself to the world. (p. 216)

This suggests that curiosity presents worldly phenomena as novelties and distractions, skimming superficially through encounters without engendering deeper reflection. In this way, curiosity is also linked to idle talk:

> Idle talk controls even the ways in which one may be curious. It says what one "must" have read and seen. In being everywhere and nowhere, curiosity is delivered over to idle talk. These two everyday modes of Being for discourse and sight are not just present-at-hand side by side in their tendency to uproot, but either of these ways-to-be drags the other one with it. (Heidegger, 2001, p. 217)

Idle talk and curiosity function as characteristics of Dasein's falling—through the present, pre-occupied with immediate concerns, and distracted by novelties rather than possibilities. This "falling" through the present is a natural feature of Dasein's ontological composition, yet it is also emblematic, for Heidegger, of a state of inauthenticity. To come back to the question of a neo-liberal understanding, then, I suggest that possibilities for futural interpretations that are not inflected with economic understandings are made rarer today because of an impoverished scope of encounter. To explore what a person understands in a neo-liberal world, it is perhaps most useful to consider interpretation, curiosity, and idle talk in the context of two engagements with knowledge: first, through a look at what constitutes knowledge by examining what is taught in schools; and second, through an analysis of the structure of what it means to come to know or learn in a meritocracy.

Curriculum can be thought of as one expression of a totality of involvements. It comprises and gives shape to the ready-to-hand of what students encounter in schools, furnishes a web of relations which becomes the prism for sense-making, and constructs stories about the present that become informative for student futures. In this way, curriculum also mediates projections or possibilities for the future. Consider the spate of curricular reforms shepherded in by neo-liberal and neoconservative governments and organizations over the last few decades (Di Giovanni & Parker, 2024, 2025; Lee, 2024). These curricula are explicitly tied to the economic demands of the nation and job outcomes for students. The curricular choices are not value-neutral; rather, as Lee (2024) argues, they are guided by neo-liberal aims even as they adopt more outwardly humanistic language. They prioritize ready-to-hand tools and classroom experiences that will lead to the strongest prospects for a state's economic growth. Take, for example, the way revisions to STEM curricula emphasize inter-state competition (Di Giovanni & Parker, 2024, 2025; Morales-Doyle & Gutstein, 2019; Weinstein et al., 2016) or the way sports education reveals a "prevailing colonization by economic imperatives" (Mertel, 2020, p. 480). In addition, they come at the cost of encountering other types of ready-to-hand learning, including robust arts programming and substantive experiential education. Neo-liberal priorities shape ready-to-hand offerings through curriculum; curriculum also serves neoliberalism by reinforcing an overarching narrative, or discourse, that forms each rationale for learning and, ultimately, for living, into a story about economic service and labouring. The economic prism builds a rationale, an understanding, of economic value as a necessity in education, such that learning to play musical instruments, paint, garden, or hike through the wild are construed as fruitless or marginal endeavours. In addition to the way the classroom orients the ready-to-hand to the economy, so too does it increasingly draw out tendencies for consumption or edutainment (Norris, 2006; Yacek & Jonas, 2019), which can be thought of as appeals to a person's curiosity. New curriculum content, such as units on coding and financial literacy, serve the dual function of appealing to the novel, to the distractions of curiosity, while also relating the efforts of learning to ostensible rewards of future employment.

Curriculum not only foregrounds economic contributions but also makes omissions that permit neo-liberal capitalism to go unchallenged. For example, humans' enduring exploitation of planetary resources is directly rooted in contemporary economic structures, but if climate change is noted in the curriculum, it often functions as a call for

temperance rather than revolution, or emphasizes individualist notions of how to "save the planet" rather than wholescale reforms (Nxumalo et al., 2022). Another area that is directly implicated in the modern economy is Big Tech. Despite how young people are themselves exploited as producers and consumers, or how the planet's resources are further eroded to support technology's energy demands (Strubell et al., 2019), curriculum often fails to foreground Big Tech as a problem of capitalism. Instead, teaching about technology generally focuses on issues of privacy, "digital literacy," and proficiency (Buckingham, 2020; Smith & Parker, 2021). And, given the mandate to sustain the status quo in countries with a strong capitalist system, possibilities for socialism and communism are treated as synonymous with historical experiments in fascism or authoritarianism (Le Blanc, 2008), with little attention given to these alternative systems of organizing economies and power in mandatory curriculum (Neumann, 2012). It is also notable that in some recent curriculum revisions, implicit inculcation into neo-liberal idle talk is no longer sufficient (Giroux, 2023). Rather, as is the case with the current government in Florida, the state explicitly seeks to inculcate American exceptionalism and the merits of capitalism (Di Giovanni & Parker, 2025; Sokol, 2021).

When reflecting on how neo-liberal curriculum constricts the ready-to-hand and inflects idle talk, one can also perceive how Heidegger's phenomenological approach troubles the assumptions of neo-liberal epistemology. In keeping with the in-the-world conditions for how Dasein comes to know or understand, there is no isolating knowledge from the phenomenal conditions of experience. This stands in contrast with the neo-liberal rendering of knowledge as a set of skills to be mastered and translated into competitive advantage or used as a means of curious distraction. In neo-liberalism, the individualist notion of knowledge is given further expression through the concept of meritocracy, which establishes a lie at the heart of existence: meritocracy, founded upon the autonomous individual's economic victories, belies thrown projection. It ignores not only a person's conditions for making meaning but also the import of the conditions into which they were born, their totality of involvements and their thrown facticity. As noted in the discussion of migrant and refugee children (Parker, 2025), the question that emerges in the context of thrown projection is how can one's projections evolve in isolation of one's affordances? First, if children are thrown into unequal circumstances of poor access to public education or into a family life marked by poverty, then they cannot help but to construct the terms of their future with spare imaginings. Second, if the marketi-

zation, commodification, and privatization agendas of neo-liberal capitalism enact their inevitable sorting into haves and have-nots, the material inequalities of children's circumstances become immediate concerns in the average everydayness of their lives. That is, the thrown projection of their ready-to-hand difficulties become obstacles not only in the futural sense of limited prospects but, more pressingly, immediate preoccupations for daily survival. Third, after decades of neo-liberal hegemony that promotes a smooth kind of standardization in ontology and in language, even if one's material conditions are not economically underprivileged, the diversity and possibility of this era's inheritance of meanings is diminished. The "constellations of intelligibility" (Thomson, 2002, p. 127) needed to reveal possibilities for historical truth and for future projections are impoverished, with few alternatives to the neo-liberal delineation of a person as individualized, alienated labourer. Over time, this results in a world thinned of resources for understanding and fewer opportunities for diverse futural projections.

Educational Response: Thrown Projection, Idle Talk, and What Next?

In this analysis, I have outlined the challenges of being amidst a world infused with capitalist meanings, particularly as they arise in education. I described the experience of thrownness in the context of a neo-liberal institution of schooling, as systems of education move toward marketization, meritocracy, and competition. I explored how curriculum can be thought of as a totality of involvements that both foregrounds capitalism and elides alternative possibilities for care, with neo-liberalism dictating what should be brought into view. In education, as in adult life, the coherence of these phenomena comes at a cost. The near-frictionless congruence of neo-liberal capitalism-in-the-world, the false interruptions that eventually fold back into the whole, are produced at the expense of better futures and better ways of being. These are futures that are increasingly challenging to envision—so bereft are the grounds for projection.

And yet, despite the efforts of governments spanning these last five decades, education's purpose is not a foregone conclusion. Even amidst the saturation of a powerful and global "they," education has much to both critically rethink and generatively offer. As Heidegger's focus on finitude and phenomena reveals, Dasein's time on Earth is both sharply constrained by the certainty of death and also amplified through care. Perhaps dwelling at the nexus of thrown projection invites education to take seriously the historic and

contemporary material conditions of children, while also attending responsibly to systemic tendencies toward idle talk. The foregoing analysis, I hope, will provoke contemplation about the role idle talk plays in a neo-liberal environment. It also invites further thinking about the phenomenon of schooling, three aspects of which I offer for consideration.

First, there is a possibility, given the nature of idle talk, to enlarge streams of discourse about schooling and education with and amongst the public. This would entail more commonplace discussion about how neo-liberal discourse and capitalist economic constraints affect the material conditions of schooling—not simply in scholarly literature, but in ways that, ironically, become part of the average everydayness of idle talk. Although there is robust critique of both neo-liberalism and capitalism in education in scholarly circles, there is less explicit conversation about these phenomena in the field and in the work of public intellectuals working across educational contexts. By consequence, both educators and the public are sometimes unaware of how economic austerity underpins contemporary education challenges. For the former, there is a need for more robust learning about the historical, material, and contemporary political contexts of education in both teacher education programs and in professional development offerings for experienced teachers. For the latter, academics often speak in ways that cleave their disciplinary interest apart from considerations of political economy, which renders these influences less visible to the public. There could be reasonable arguments made that discussions of curriculum and policy reform would do well to acknowledge the macropolitical forces that shape these endeavours. For example, when school boards were tasked with responding to a recent report on reading acquisition in Ontario (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022), it would have been useful to note that economic conditions structure the issue for both schools and families—that is, reading development is tied to a family's class (Bhattacharya, 2010) and funding cuts that increase class size and reduce monies for school librarians and libraries limit holistic reading supports (Ecalle et al., 2006). And yet, disciplinary silos often mean that academics and public intellectuals don't raise factors of political economy in their critique, and instead remain focused on in-domain arguments about best practices (i.e., "science of reading" versus "whole language" debates). It also means that education issues become reliant on capitalist solutions, such as the proliferation of private-sector education companies and their commercial synthetic phonics–based reading programmes (Soler, 2016). If one accepts Heidegger's contention that idle talk is inherent to existence, then it is important for academics to give shape to

discourse through ongoing engagement with educators and the public. As Giroux (2011) argues, "to speak truth to power is not a temporary and unfortunate lapse into politics on the part of academics; it is central to opposing all those modes of ignorance, whether they are market-based or rooted in other fundamentalist ideologies" (pp. 167–168). In other words, for every time someone casually links "good schools" with test scores or educational purpose with the economy, there ought to be a robust set of voices—in the field, at the dinner table, at the school board meeting—arguing alternative perspectives.

Second, the Heideggerean phenomenological lens permits a clear focus on the experience of schooling and generates rich questions and conversations about what classrooms do and can cultivate in the ready-to-hand. It may prove powerful to extend arguments for experiential learning by exploring what it means to encounter the world through the opportunities furnished in school. There is the potential to expand research exploring environmental and sustainability education, as is taken up by Irwin (2015), Peters and Irwin (2002), and Stickney (2020), with a particular emphasis on how the material conditions of what is available to-hand in schools undergirds the formation of care. While there is some work on Heidegger and arts education (Oberhaus, 2015; Schumacher, 1990), there is an opportunity to further explore what arts education requires and fosters in the ready-to-hand space of the classroom and time of the school day. If there is a reciprocal movement between what a person encounters in the average everyday and their imminent sense of care and concern, then the materials and curriculum of the classroom become a vital inflection point in the development of one's sense of being and in answer to the question of how one spends one's time. Having books, musical instruments, gardens, hiking trails, athletic equipment, and toys ready-to-hand can cultivate a ludic space of experimentation that by its very nature is open to discovery for new directions of care and concern. Alternatively, not having these entities ready-to-hand limits what one could be concerned about to the rudiments of economic survival. It is this intersection—the Heideggerean nexus between material conditions and care—that further education research should explore, particularly at a time when neo-liberalism erodes material conditions through funding cuts that, amongst other things, reduce the availability of arts and experiential programming (Hill & Kumar, 2009).

In recent work on perspectival reasoning, Biesta (2024) draws on Heidegger to reveal how the human has a capacity to learn as a being who "stands out in the world rather than having its unique gaze on the world from its particular standpoint" (p. 8). One ques-

tion Biesta (2024) asks is "how 'Dasein' might be able to judge what to be receptive to, what to 'let in', what to take care of, and where and when to say no" (p. 8). In this vein, I suggest that the third avenue for further exploration is the opportunity for further educational research that examines the child's experiences through the prism of Heidegger's existential analytic, and the implications for schooling as a site characterized by neo-liberal capitalism where the average everyday encounter is played out. Some questions that may be of scholarly interest include: What might Heideggerean authenticity mean for educational purpose in this context? What kinds of pedagogies foster being-amidst-others as an interaction that considers intersubjectivity and sociality more centrally? I suggest there is productive space to engage both philosophical and empirical research that employs a phenomenological approach to better see and hear students' lived experiences with the ready-to-hand, with idle talk, in their average everyday life in the classroom. In addition, it would be generative to further the field of philosophical research at the nexus of phenomenology of education and political economy. Although an evolving body of work exists in this area (Hill, 2013; Smyth & Westerman, 2022), there is a constant need to keep tracing the lines and permutations of how capitalism, and the neo-liberal iteration of capitalism in particular, manifests in contemporary life and to offer historically, philosophically, or creatively informed alternatives for educational futures.

Imaginations cannot help but to falter in the face of seamless idle talk, presented in a unified rhetoric of commerce, proximally and, for the most part, across the world. The challenge of neo-liberal capitalism is not simply that it so completely vanquishes its historical ideological foes, but that its adaptability draws a long, obscuring curtain across the possibilities of the future. Without interventions in school and beyond, it becomes challenging for a child thrown into the conditions of the neo-liberal world to imagine what lies beyond the conventions of their era. The work of education, then, is to take seriously the implications of a child's thrownness, to challenge idle talk where possible, and to offer experiences that foster projection for non–neo-liberal futures. It is work that calls for education to give space and time for the appearance of a totality of involvements that offers reprieve from the univocality of the contemporary "they."

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