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EPISTEMIC ANXIETY: FROM THE BANALITY OF EVIL TO THE BANALITY OF NOT THINKING

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the hypothesis that contemporary anxiety, widely described as “the disease of the century,” is not merely a clinical symptom but a side effect of an epistemic regime that rewards the speed of responses at the expense of the quality of judgment. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's concept of the banality of evil, understood as the absence of critical thinking institutionalized by bureaucracy, the text proposes the category of the “banality of not thinking” to describe the uncritical use of generative artificial intelligence in higher education and professional practice. Engaging with Hannah Arendt, Byung-Chul Han, and the epistemology of testimony, it argues that delegating cognition to machines, combined with pressure for productivity, generates structural anxiety that does not paralyze individuals but accelerates them toward increasingly unreflective decisions. It concludes that the university, by confusing textual fluency with intellectual competence, has become an accomplice to the crisis it should have diagnosed.

Keywords: Epistemic anxiety. Banality of evil. Artificial intelligence. Critical thinking. Higher education teaching.

“We judge an act by the consequence it produces, not by the truth on which it rests, and thus absolve the actor who portrays Homer without ever having commanded an army.”

I. INTRODUCTION

We live under the facile diagnosis that anxiety is “the disease of the century.” The phrase is repeated in medical offices, classrooms, corporate reports, and social media posts, almost always as though it were an epidemiological inevitability unrelated to any collective responsibility. This article rejects that explanatory comfort. It argues that much contemporary anxiety is not a cause but a consequence of a silent collapse of critical judgment, a collapse accelerated, although not initiated, by the indiscriminate and unreviewed use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in academic and professional settings.

The central thesis is uncomfortable and deliberately clear: it is not the use of AI that made us anxious; it is the absence of critical thinking that preceded it. Hannah Arendt, analyzing the trial of Adolf Eichmann, coined the expression “banality of evil” to describe not a monster but a mediocre bureaucrat, incapable of thinking for himself, who hid behind obedience to orders (ARENDT, 1999).

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This article argues that the contemporary university has been producing, on an industrial scale, a mild and seemingly harmless variation of that phenomenon: individuals who produce knowledge without thinking about it, validate information without checking it, and teach without reviewing, all mediated by tools that return plausible answers as quickly as they erode the patience needed to doubt.

The purpose of this study is therefore threefold: (i) to recover Arendt's concept of the absence of thinking and propose its extension to contemporary practice; (ii) to connect that extension to Byung-Chul Han's diagnosis of the achievement society and the society of fatigue; and (iii) to situate the problem in higher education teaching, where the haste to produce has replaced the slowness of understanding.

Methodologically, this is a theoretical-critical essay grounded in a literature review, without claiming empirical exhaustiveness but with a deliberate intention to provoke intellectual discomfort.

II. THE BANALITY OF EVIL AS THE ABSENCE OF CRITICAL THINKING

In Eichmann in Jerusalem (1963), Hannah Arendt does not portray a person ideologically committed to extermination but a diligent official, obsessed with deadlines and reports, whose principal moral characteristic was precisely the absence of moral deliberation (ARENDT, 1999). As secondary literature on the work observes, Eichmann “never made autonomous decisions; he merely carried out all the orders he was given with rigor” (BRASIL PARALELO, 2021). In this account, evil requires no conviction: only obedience and the absence of reflection.

It is crucial to note that Arendt does not treat evil as a metaphysical category but as a political and historical phenomenon that manifests itself only where it finds institutional space. Banality does not reside in the act itself but in the structure that exempts the individual from thinking about what they do.

In Arendt's own words, Eichmann “never realized what he was doing”; his collaboration with the machinery of extermination “was sheer thoughtlessness” (ARENDT apud REPOSITÓRIO UFAL, 2013, pp. 310–311).

The question Arendt leaves open is also the question this article retrieves, moving it from the field of genocide to everyday life: “could the nature of the activity of thinking [...] condition people not to do evil?” (REPOSITÓRIO UFAL, 2013). If Arendt's answer points to critical thinking as an antidote, what happens when an entire society outsources that exercise to a system that simulates thought but merely predicts the statistically most probable word?

This is not to equate the use of generative AI with extermination; that would be as dishonest as it would be useless. Rather, it is to recognize the same formal structure: the replacement of autonomous judgment with an automated process that produces results “correct enough” and “effective” enough to escape questioning.

Contemporary banality does not kill Jews in railway cars; it silently kills the capacity to doubt. When the consequences of evil were exposed, there was no room left for doubt and judgment; but once converted into productivity, there is no longer time for review.

III. FROM FATIGUE TO PERFORMANCE: ANXIETY AS AN ENGINE, NOT A BRAKE

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If Arendt explains the absence of thought through totalitarian bureaucracy, Byung-Chul Han explains its contemporary version through the logic of performance. For the South Korean philosopher, the disciplinary society of "you must not" has been replaced by the achievement society of "everything is possible," which does not repress from outside but exploits from within, making individuals entrepreneurs of themselves, demanding of themselves the productivity formerly imposed by an external employer (CARCASA, 2026).

This shift is decisive for understanding why contemporary anxiety does not paralyze: it accelerates. The anxious individual in the achievement society does not stop to think but produces more, faster, and with less verification, precisely because stopping feels like competitive failure (the discomfort of idleness). Generative AI finds the perfect host in this environment: it does not create the haste; it satisfies it. Lawyers who generate pleadings without reviewing case law, teachers who prepare classes without checking sources, and students who produce dissertations without understanding their own arguments all operate under the same logic that quick delivery matters more than considered delivery.

The "disease of the century" is, to a large extent, the emotional price of a cognitive economy that despises slowness as a synonym for incompetence.

We are not anxious because we think too much; we are anxious because we think less and less while producing more and more, and the abyss between production volume and depth of understanding generates a discomfort unable to name itself, so it is called "anxiety," as though it were strictly a psychiatric rather than a structural problem.

IV. THREE STEPS REMOVED FROM REALITY

The epistemology of testimony had already discussed, before generative AI became popular, the limits of epistemic trust: under what conditions is it rational to accept secondhand information without direct verification? The qualitative difference introduced by generative AI is that it does not present itself as a fallible witness. It presents itself as a ready-made, fluent, grammatically impeccable answer, devoid of any visible sign of uncertainty. When an error occurs, its form is indistinguishable from a correct answer; only the content differs, and only someone who already knows enough to doubt can recognize it.

Generative artificial intelligence occupies in contemporary society precisely the role Plato assigned to the imitative poet in Book X of The Republic: a producer of appearances who presents himself as a producer of knowledge. For Plato, the tragic poet, like the painter, neither creates nor masters the thing itself; he merely reproduces its perceptible image, "three steps removed from reality" (PLATO apud REDALYC, 2006, 597e–602a).

The imitator, he insists, "possesses neither knowledge nor correct opinion regarding the beauty or defects of the things he imitates," being a "maker of illusion" rather than a knower (REDALYC, 2006). He copies the appearance of the craftsman, who in turn copies the Form; along this chain of distance, the poet "does not know how to make, but only imitates" what others have actually produced and understood (SEMINÁRIO PPGLM, 2009).

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This is exactly the position generative AI occupies today, with one perverse difference: the Platonic poet at least visibly assumed his condition as an artist, an enchanter of audiences; generative AI presents itself as a source, as an authority, as though it were the original possessor of the knowledge it merely reworks statistically.

All the knowledge it "returns" fluently was produced by humans, researchers, writers, and teachers who thought, tested, erred, and revised; the machine merely recombines this production without ever understanding it, just as Plato's poet "speaks of Homer and war without ever having commanded an army" (PLATO apud REDALYC, 2006, 599b). There is therefore a tragicomic civilizational reversal: humanity has come to venerate as an oracle of knowledge the very echo-image of what it itself produced, a simulacrum Plato had already condemned for leading the spirit away from truth toward mere appearance (SEMINÁRIO PPGLM, 2009).

This is the heart of the perverse inversion that the article proposes to call "qualified error": university-educated professionals trained to verify sources, and teachers with decades of experience, begin reproducing AI-generated content not through ignorance but through convenience disguised as efficiency. The creators of knowledge have voluntarily become actors performing their own plays.

V. COGNITIVE DELEGATION AND THE SPREAD OF QUALIFIED ERRORS

Just as Eichmann concealed the absence of moral judgment beneath the veneer of bureaucratic efficiency, the contemporary professional conceals the absence of verification beneath the veneer of productivity.

Because lies, errors, and professional incompetence do not result in a holocaust, they become excusable. The result is a horizontally distributed chain of misinformation: error no longer comes from obscure sources or malicious actors but from the center of the system, from people with institutional badges, résumés, and professorial chairs. This is qualitatively more serious than the misinformation found in the margins of the internet because it carries the institutional weight of authority without the effort that should legitimize it.

In On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense (1873), Nietzsche describes the genesis of concepts as a process of successive translations that move language away from the thing itself: first a nerve stimulus is transposed into an image, then the image into a sound, and only then is the word born, so that "word and thing do not correspond" (NIETZSCHE apud ON TRUTH AND LIES IN A NONMORAL SENSE, 1873).

The concept, the philosopher insists, arises precisely from the "omission of the particular and the real": to call something a "chair," one must forget all concrete, particular, unrepeatable chairs and retain only an abstract schema. Thus, the more fluently we use a word, the further we move from the sensory experience that originated it. Nietzsche summarizes this distance through the famous image of a worn coin: "truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions, worn-out metaphors that have lost their sensory force, coins that have lost their imprint and are now considered merely metal" (NIETZSCHE apud A LEITORA CLÁSSICA, 2024).

It is this structural forgetting, already present in human language before any machine, that generative artificial intelligence does not inaugurate but industrializes at scale. If the ordinary person already operates three steps

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away from the “chair” (stimulus, image, sound/word), the unrestricted user of generative AI operates through an additional translation: the machine. It delivers the concept already processed, already metaphorized, already a “coin without an imprint,” without the user having gone through any of the stages of abstraction that at least required some experience of the particular. The result is an individual who “no longer sees the idea, only an example of it,” and, in this case, not even the example: merely a statistical paraphrase of the example, generated by a system that has never had sensory contact with any particular thing.

This triple distancing, from the thing, from the idea of the thing, and now from the machine-mediated paraphrase itself, has a direct ethical consequence: today we judge wrongdoing almost exclusively by the visible consequences of acts, rather than by the judgment that originated them. A technical error committed through failure to verify a legal opinion, a medical report, or an academic article is systematically relabeled a “mistake,” a word suggesting accident, unpredictability, or force majeure, when it should be named for what it structurally is: professional incompetence, that is, failure to exercise competently a function one was duty-bound to perform rigorously.

The difference between the two words is not stylistic but moral: “mistake” absolves the individual of responsibility for the process that led to the error; “professional incompetence” holds the individual accountable precisely for failing to complete the verification steps required by the role.

This generalized euphemism is itself an effect of Nietzschean distancing taken to an extreme: if we no longer see the idea of the thing but only its tool-mediated example, we cease to see the defect in the conduct and analyze only the effect. When the result “satisfies” despite the structural error, it becomes acceptable.

Arendt had already warned that the absence of thinking is the true antechamber of banal evil. What is added here is that the absence of precise vocabulary to name error is the antechamber of the moral impunity of that same evil, increasingly remote, increasingly anonymous, increasingly distant from any concept.

VI. HIGHER EDUCATION TEACHING: THE UNIVERSITY AS ACCOMPLICE

At this point the argument becomes most uncomfortable for its reader: the university is not a passive victim of this process but an active agent of it. Teachers who grade assignments with automated tools without reading the resulting content; examination committees that approve projects with generic methodologies generated in minutes; and departments that celebrate productivity indicators, the number of articles rather than the quality of arguments, reproduce exactly the bureaucratic logic Arendt identified in Eichmann: completing the formal procedure dispenses with substantive judgment.

Students, in turn, quickly learn the lesson taught by the institution: what matters is an approvable form, not defensible thought. Papers that are “impeccable” in structure but empty in thesis; coherent but never original answers; texts that sound correct because they were statistically calibrated to sound correct, not because anyone ever thought them through. Assessment, which should measure critical judgment, begins to measure proficiency in operating tools, in a kind of silent outsourcing of the teaching function itself.

Student anxiety, so often treated as a mental health problem isolated from the curriculum, lack of recognition, and low remuneration, is also a symptom of this inconsistency: originality is demanded in a system that

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rewards speed and uniformity; critical thinking is demanded in a system that rarely models, in teaching practice, what it means to think critically in the face of a tool promising ready-made answers.

In most cases, the anxious person is not someone who thinks too much but a student caught between rhetorical demands and the material structure that discourages meeting them.

VII. TOWARD A PEDAGOGY OF DOUBT

It is not enough to prohibit or permit the use of AI, a shallow debate that consumes most contemporary curricular discussions. Assessment must be redesigned to reward precisely what AI cannot simulate without human supervision: the process of doubt, the articulation of reasoning, the oral defense of an argument, and the capacity to identify one's own errors.

This requires of higher education teaching something that the achievement society makes rare: time. Time to provide unhurried guidance, time to ask questions in class, time to tolerate an incomplete answer from a student who is genuinely thinking rather than applaud the complete answer of someone who has merely copied well. The university that prides itself on the speed of its scientific production should ask how much of that production would withstand an audit of genuine thought.

The AI tool undoubtedly has value: it enables research, unrestricted access to materials in any language, continuous availability, and the possibility of asking questions without the judgment or embarrassment that often inhibit questions in class. Yet it is necessary to recover a fundamental concept, now almost forgotten through overfamiliarity: the concept of technology.

Its origin goes back to the Greek techné, which designated not an object but a form of know-how, “proper conduct in a specific activity, subordinated to a body of knowledge acquired through education” (VARGAS apud OLIVEIRA, 2008). Technology, in the strict sense, is any organized body of knowledge produced by humans to expand their capacity to act upon the world, never to replace the agent who created it, but to extend that agent's reach (OLIVEIRA, 2008).

The cartwheel was once innovative technology; today it has given way to tires and suspension systems. Pen and paper gave way to the typewriter, which gave way to the computer, which now gives way to generative AI. Each stage is a tool for optimizing human potential, never an ontological substitute for the being who created it.

As the literature observes, science and technique together produce technology as “knowledge is power” (VARGAS apud OLIVEIRA, 2008), the power to do more and better, not to stop doing. Analyses and data compilations that once required hours of manual labor now take seconds; questions once constrained by limited classroom time can be explored in depth at any hour, on any subject, without curricular or temporal limitations or even the limits of the teacher's own knowledge. In this technical sense, generative AI is currently the most valuable technology in contemporary society.

The decisive point, however, is that the tool itself is neutral with respect to its use, although Heidegger already warned that defining technology merely as an instrumental means to human ends is “correct but not true”

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regarding its essence (SCRIBD, 2019; RHET.UVANET, 2016). For Heidegger, the danger does not lie in the technical artifact, machines, computers, or AI itself, but in the way human beings relate to it, in the risk that the logic of technology comes to govern human thought itself, reducing everything, including thinking, to a "standing reserve" to be exploited in a calculable and automatic manner (RHET.UVANET, 2016).

It is not the existence of the wheel that eliminates walking, nor the typewriter that eliminates handwriting, nor the mobile phone that eliminates conversations in the street. It is the social choice to abandon an alternative out of convenience rather than necessity that produces the loss.

Technology, therefore, does not trivialize critical thinking; society does so when, upon encountering a tool capable of condensing and organizing data with unprecedented efficiency, it chooses to confuse the availability of answers with the dispensability of reasoning. The question that arises is not whether we should abandon generative AI, which would be as absurd as abandoning the wheel, but why we collectively decided to stop exercising thought simply because technology became part of the process.

The answer, as suggested in the preceding sections, lies not in the tool but in the absence of an institutional requirement, especially an educational one, that the use of technology be accompanied by, rather than substituted for, the exercise of judgment.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article does not intend to offer comfort, an answer, or a solution. On the contrary, it seeks to argue that contemporary anxiety, treated as an isolated epidemic, is also, and perhaps primarily, the symptom of a civilization that exchanged thinking for responding, argument for fluency, and judgment for delivery.

This article emerges from an old, almost forgotten practice: profound questioning. It seeks neither merit nor a conclusion, only criticism. How else might one provoke the complacent individual except through a deliberately unfinished idea? An argument woven by natural intelligence, articulated through concrete examples, surrounded by problems, and devoid of any conclusion? A text that deliberately refuses to rise to the typical endpoint of generative construction, the kind that resolves everything, aligns every idea, and in so doing impoverishes everything.

History has taught us that the pursuit of perfection is not always the most fruitful path. Plato devoted years to conceiving The Republic, a supposedly "perfect" society that was never realized, because the very essence of life had already changed during the time required to complete the work. Centuries later, however, the pendulum swung to the opposite extreme: complacency with imperfection took hold, abandoning classical discourses on Beauty, Morality, Ethics, and Perfection in favor of resigned acceptance of reality, without prospects, without tension, without genuine interest in transforming it.

Extending Arendt's concept of the banality of evil to the epistemic field is not a mere rhetorical exercise: it is a warning that the absence of criticism, even when it does not directly kill anyone, corrodes the foundation on which any democratic society and any minimally serious university should stand.

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Living as the actor who portrays Homer without ever having commanded an army is not an innocent failure of representation; at its deepest structural level, it is a form of spreading falsehood, and falsehood, when normalized, is only one step below the banal evil Arendt identified.

Society has grown accustomed to applauding the performer, confusing the fluency of the copy with the authority of the original. But this does not transform performance into truth. Impunity does not purify the act; it merely postpones the day when someone asks who will actually command the army, only to discover, too late, that no one is capable of doing so.

Artificial intelligence is not the villain of this story; it is the mirror that reveals, with uncomfortable clarity, how eager we were to stop thinking before any algorithm existed. Higher education teaching is left with the hope of reversing this scenario through the university's oldest task: teaching people to doubt.

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