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## Exam: IPO2021 Essay

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### TOPIC 4

*“The ‘technification’ of our being: the fact that to-day it is possible that unknowingly and indirectly, like screws in a machine, we can be used in actions, the effects of which are beyond the horizon of our eyes and imagination, and of which, could we imagine them, we could not approve—this fact has changed the very foundations of our moral existence. Thus, we can become ‘guiltlessly guilty’, a condition which had not existed in the technically less advanced times of our fathers.”*

*Burning Conscience: The case of the Hiroshima pilot, Claude Eatherly, told in his letters to Günther Anders. Letter 1: Günther Anders to Claude Eatherly. June 3rd, 1959. Rowohlt Verlag GmbH, 1961.*

If humanity is to progress into the next stage of its cultural and technological evolution, the very idea of what a human being is must be rethought. The notion of man as a moral and, above all, rational being capable of thinking his actions through and freely deciding what to do no longer holds much water. Through the liberal use of reason mankind has created something far beyond its control. Because of the wish for comfort, peace and prosperity, human society has created a framework in which the human no longer holds much value in and of himself, but rather only holds value insofar as he is an obedient instrument to the powers that be. Despite his thoughts and actions, he holds partial blame for every disaster and every injustice that occurs anywhere on the globe, for his very existence, his mere activity of staying alive, contributes to a socio-economic system that strips him of any agency and directly or indirectly causes harm to other people. This is what I believe is meant by technification; individuals no longer represent any inherent value but are only valuable as constituent parts in a much larger system. As opposed to other times in human history, when individuals would determine the nature of their system through their actions, nowadays the system acts instead of us while only keeping us around to keep itself going.

In this essay I shall discuss the ways in which contemporary capitalist society devalues the individual and reduces him to someone who consumes. Then, I shall show that there is no solution to the individual's devaluation within the capitalist framework itself. I will examine how this framework emerged from Enlightenment thinking and is a natural consequence of the primacy of reason. Lastly, I propose that in order to save the moral individual, the system must be done away with, and for that, the current notion of the human must be overcome.

To begin with, there is an oft repeated joke that periodically appears on the internet: there is a picture of a toll machine in some parking garage and a sign next to it that says "Pay before

existing." Though obviously a typo (existing instead of exiting), it works as a joke because it puts forth an absurd suggestion, that one should have to pay for the simple privilege of continuing to exist. Funny as it is, the joke does hold some deeper meaning. It is funny because it is, at least on some level, true. Nowadays everything is converted into money, from the food that one eats, to the art one enjoys, to the house one lives in—nothing is free and nothing can be free because our culture is conditioned to think only in monetary exchange. Should something be given out for free, it is either viewed with distrust ("Why is it being given out for free? Is something wrong with it?") or a sort of personal superiority ("What a fool this person must be to give out something without cost!"). Therefore, it is not so much of a stretch to take the next step and simply demand that the very right to existence be hidden behind a paywall. The idea of the market economy, the idea that everything has its corresponding value in capital, is so pervasive that it can even seep into the depths of man's ontology.

In a market economy such as ours, any and all actions are to be thought of in terms capital or material value. Anything can be bought and sold, not just material commodities such as food or drink or clothing. An individual can buy his way into conversation by paying for a stable internet connection, whereas those without funds are left silent due to their inability to access a global audience. One can buy one's way into a position of power by either self-funding one's political carrier or funding someone else's in exchange for influence. Prestige, once awarded only to those who showed great virtues or were renowned for their great acts, can be bought via philanthropy—the philanthropist need only dump millions into a cause he does not believe in or does not care about and be automatically labeled a good, virtuous person. Lastly, even identity can be bought and sold. An individual's identity no longer stems from his heritage or history or genetics or the choices he makes or the things he chooses to devote his time to. His identity is determined by what he spends his money on. For instance, a Russian is no longer thought of as particularly Russian unless he dresses in an Adidas tracksuit, drinks vodka, listens to hard-bass music and the like. It may seem that I am only listing shallow stereotypes (which I am), however the very fact that the above mentioned stereotypes exist is sufficient evidence of the fact that someone, somewhere, for some reason once determined that such and such behaviour is typical of a Russian. Therefore, if someone does not buy such and such commodities, they cannot be truly considered Russian. The same goes for any national, ethnic, sexual or cultural identity. One must always have some sort of commodity with them to prove that they are truly black or gay, that they truly support women's rights or wildlife preservation. What one believes, stands for or is—all this is determined by what one consumes.

All this leads us to the point that in order to be who we are, we must buy that which we are. No longer can we be considered real in and of ourselves, we are only truly real insofar as we spend our money appropriately. We only exist in the way we do if we pay to exist in the way we do. Being now equals consuming and consuming equals being. Consumption is the only category of human existence and action that really matters in the modern world, therefore what we consume and the way we consume it is, whether we like it or not, our primary influence in the world.

It is in this way, via consumption, that we may act without truly acting. For instance, buying groceries at our local store is something so common, so banal, that we simply do not think of it. It is second nature for us to go in, pick out what we want and then leave, without so much as a thought passing through our minds. However, all is not as it seems. In our picking out of certain products over others, we have indirectly financed the company that produces them and refused

to finance the other available companies. In so doing we inadvertently support whatever methods the company used to produce those products, even such things as worker abuse and the destruction of nature. Furthermore, we legitimize the company's very right to exist. As long as we continue to financially support it through our purchases, which may be necessary for our own survival, we support the very idea that a company should exist and have a monopoly on the production and selling of certain goods, instead of having such things be run, for instance, communally. By acting in a totally ordinary way, by simply doing the minimum to continue our existence, we contribute to any and all injustices that may be perpetrated by the seller of the commodities that we buy. Thus, we become, as Anders notes, guiltlessly guilty. We did not commit an injustice ourselves; an injustice was committed on our behalf as an unavoidable consequence of our day-to-day living.

Such a reality has been true for about half a century, at least since the advent of globalization and the propagation of a laissez-faire capitalism. What is new in our digital epoch is the lengths to which everything has been commodified or technified. We no longer even need to pay to support the socio-economic system. Paying is already a given, that is why what is now most valuable is metadata. Information itself is now the most sought after commodity, not because of some Enlightenment belief that knowledge is the most valuable thing in the world, but rather because information allows for better marketing. Buying and selling are inescapable and so in order to maximize the profits of our consumption, our every desire, will, whim and interest is tracked in the present so that it may be better sold to us in the future. It is because of this that we as individuals in a society no longer live for ourselves because we simply are, rather we live only as a screw in a much larger machine known as neoliberal capitalism. We are tracked from birth to death, being sold appropriate products all the while in between and our very being, insofar as it can even be recognized as being, is driving the cycle forward—is supporting this status quo. It is very cliché to use the phrases "just another cog in the machine" or "just another brick in the wall", however there is no simpler way to put it. And what is worse, there may very well be no way to become anything greater than a cog or a brick.

As I have stated above, in the present we can only really conceptualize value in the form of capital. Whether it be the clothes upon one's body or the soul within it, it is always instinctively judged based on its material value, based on how much money it is worth. Such has been the nature of capitalism since its inception, however the more striking thing is that this capitalist nature has become our own nature. We instinctively think in terms of money and assume that it has always been so. Because such thinking is so common, we automatically assume that that is the only natural way of thinking. We can no longer ascribe value in any other way than via its worth in money and the very idea of such a conception seems alien or even impossible. The fact is, however, that for most of human history, capital was not seen as a determiner of value. In feudal times, the land in itself, nature in itself was seen as valuable. It was not valuable because it could be used for the purposes of farming or building or any such thing. It was valuable because that was the way it was. It was God's gift to humanity, a form of splendour that could not be equaled. It was not wonderful because of what it could become but it was wonderful because it even existed. The fact that it existed was why it was valuable. This idea seems ludicrous now. One does not buy land for the sake of having it and making sure it exists. One buys it so that one can exploit it or sell it on to someone who will exploit it. Exploit it for what? For its raw materials and space which can eventually be converted into profit. All this seems natural and any alternative seems silly. We, as a species, have got to a point where we can only think in terms of monetary value and disregard any other type of valuation. We cannot

see anything different in the future and we can no longer conceptualize a past where it was different. The market economy and its rules of exchange have entrenched themselves so far into our minds that we cannot help but project them onto every facet of existence. We live in what philosopher Mark Fisher called capitalist realism, a world in which only capitalism can exist. There can be nothing beyond capitalism, because any post-capitalism is unthinkable within the capitalist framework. The future, as he says, is cancelled; there can only be the present state of things for eternity. In much the same way, the past has also been erased. It is as though all that ever was, is and will be is the current capitalist state of things. It is even easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

We now see that we as individuals are locked within a system in which our very existence is commodified. Our actions, too, are only actions within a specific socio-economic framework which does not let us do what we may want, but instead acts for us while we merely exist. Our daily struggle to continue existing inadvertently legitimizes and stimulates the system that is currently giving us so much trouble. We are merely screws in its machine and because the machine is so pervasive, we cannot even so much as think beyond or before it. As it were, the screw does not see itself as a screw unless it is a part of a larger machine.

But let us take a step back and see where all of this has come from. Günther Anders makes mention of a less technically advanced time, in which there was no global capitalist machine because the technology to uphold it was not yet available. What was this world like?

Firstly, what allowed capitalism to attain the global reach that it now has? Simply put, technology: the advancement of computing machines, telecommunication and cheaper, safer intercontinental travel. Were it not for these achievements, the market could not have extended itself over the globe. What, then, made these advancements possible? Again, the answer is quite simple: human reason. Computers, radio, aeroplanes etc. are nothing but the products of reason made manifest. There is nothing in them but numbers and cold hard facts.

Secondly, where did this reason emerge from? The human animal sets itself apart from the others by fact that it can reason. It is a natural human trait, a natural consequence of human evolution, however it was only in the Age of Enlightenment that reason attained such a dominant position. In Mediaeval Europe, reason was viewed as a useful tool and certainly one of the many benefits humans had over other animals, however it was often cast aside in order to make room for faith. Faith in God was seen as having true value, whereas reason was simply an added bonus. When the Enlightenment came around, faith was discarded and reason was seen as the ultimate good. This allowed the thinkers of the age to discarded previously held beliefs that they deemed backwards. Man was no longer shackled in his obedience to God, rather he became master of his world. Since there was no longer a God to determine what was right and wrong, man had to do it himself and he saw the answer in the ability to reason. Here emerges the individual who is, due to his reasoning ability, able to tell right from wrong and also able to recognize his free will to do either right or wrong. This is a responsible, moral, reasonable agent that is only guilty if he does something wrong. His actions, not the mere fact of his existence, is that which determines him.

Now at last may we see the irony in the Enlightenment's legacy. In its struggle to free man from all forms of authority other than his reason, it set in motion his very enslavement to reason. Reason, viewed as the only authority that needed to be listened to, is that which reduced every

quality to a quantity; everything was distilled down to a money valuation. Anything and everything was only good insofar as it was useful for production and profit. Since there was no longer any God, any transcendent arbiter of good and bad, reason had to take its place. And what is reason better at than crunching numbers? It is self-aware enough to disregard any feeling or impulse that would halt it in its effort to calculate the most beneficial possible outcome. It is no coincidence that the Age of Enlightenment coincided with the beginnings of capitalism and industrialization. As this new budding economic system was just stretching its legs, along came an intellectual movement that was willing and able to make it bloom. The concept of the human as an individual independent of the society that birthed him allowed the capitalist to answer to no one but himself. Since there were no longer any transcendent values or spiritual authorities that needed to be taken into account, the capitalist's reason was the only possible agent that determined if something was to be done or not. And when reason calculated that something was beneficial, it was determined to follow through with it, all other concerns be damned.

I believe it was Immanuel Kant who once remarked how the advancement of human reason, the advancement of technology and the evermore liberal use of reason in the public sphere would lead to a tightly-knit global community, wherein an injustice performed against one was an injustice performed against all. Such a tightly knit community did in fact arrive and we are currently living in it, however with a twist: we are not a global community that cares for its individual members, protects them from some external injustice; rather, we are a community that, through our very being, causes injustices to our individual members, while we ironically feel an ever greater distance between us and them. Truly, has there ever been a more lonely and unjust epoch than our own? The current world system brings us together so that we may unknowingly and unwillingly act upon one another, while at the same time feeling alienated from each other. We are united in perpetuating injustice and alone in feeling guilty and distressed.

So, what is to be done? Certainly the achievements of Enlightenment thinkers and the technological marvels being created each year do not need to be cast aside. Their uses are, after all, undoubtable. For a brief period in history, there seemed to be real progress on every level. From about 1850 to 1914 it seemed as if things could only get better. Society was progressing into what it deemed was a bright future. The politics of the time, at least in Europe, seemed reasonable. The arts and sciences were flourishing and all this thanks to the Enlightenment. There is no reason to deny the many good things it brought about, however we must also recognize that the destruction of the two world wars and the distressing state of the world today are also at least partially consequences of it. Reason, it seems, is not an adequate guiding force if it can get us into so much trouble and I still maintain that reason is the very thing that is causing all this trouble. By its very nature, reason wishes to reduce, simplify, turn complex phenomena into numbers—as a matter of fact, it wishes to turn everything into numbers so that it may better conceptualize it and understand it. Reason wants to know as much as possible, as seen in the fact that it always feels satisfied when it learns something new. Reason must always know, even if what it knows is in truth wrong. Here is where all the modern conspiracy theories come from. If a person's reasoning ability deems something to be true, then it must be true for that person, no matter how ridiculous it sounds. And if reason is the only thing worth listening to, then nothing and no one can dissuade anyone from believing anything, so long as their rational mind sees it worthy of belief.

The problem of being guiltlessly guilty, of being only a screw in a larger machine, is a problem of

contemporary capitalism. In it, the individual has no real place for himself. He cannot exist within it without being a part of it because his very existence affirms the actions of the system. How is this so? Because in order for him to live, to continue existing, he must engage with the market (at the very least to buy his necessities etc.) and therefore financially support some people over others. The very fact that he engages with the system at all is also a sign of him affirming it, even if he does not wish to. Lastly, for him to be as he is, to have the identity which he has, he must consume the appropriate products, he must buy his identity, once again financially supporting the system that is burdening him. These three facts are unavoidable and inescapable within the confines of modern capitalism. How then can we overcome them? By overcoming capitalism, however such a task is made much harder by the fact that due to capitalism's pervasive influence in our ways of thinking, we can no longer conceive of a system that is not capitalism itself or at the very least capitalistic. In order to do away with late capitalism, we must attack it at its foundations. These lie in the Enlightenment. Its propagation of reason as the main human force is still an integral part of capitalist logic and the very thing which is destroying the rational individual and making him guiltlessly guilty.

In order for humanity to overcome its current predicament, I believe it must stop rationalizing everything. This does not mean that reason itself should be thrown away, only its leading role should be taken away or reduced. In order to stop the technification of society, as Anders calls it, a new concept of the human must be found out—a concept where reason no longer reigns as chief among humanity's traits. It should under no circumstances be abandoned, only limited by humanity's other traits, perhaps their emotions, virtues and will, all of which seem unreasonable. Should reason be dethroned, a new society can perhaps be constructed, where people would be able to look beyond the lense of money and a new future could be constructed, as well as the true past regained. In order for us to save the moral human being who is not guilty simply by virtue of existing, we must construct a new foundation upon which the species homo sapiens can stand. In so doing, we may overcome the species itself.