



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.*

Introduction

In their letter, Gunther Anders seems to make a pessimistic claim about the nature of human life in contemporary human society. They claim that "we" can become complicit in actions that we do not morally approve of without knowing it. They say that this leads to us becoming "guiltlessly guilty," which has resulted in "the very foundations of our moral existence" to change. They describe this whole process as the "'technification' of our being," which arose due to technological advancements.

Let us first clarify and/or question the claims and assumptions put forth by this quote.

1. Being unknowingly and indirectly used in actions that we would not morally approve changes the very foundations of our moral existence.

What does "very foundations of our moral existence" mean, and how did it change? The quote mentions that it is possible for us to become used in actions without our knowledge or moral approval. If we assume that all of our actions are made by our own initiative without the invisible control of external forces, then we would be exercising moral approval/disapproval of our own actions. Behind every decision we make lies our moral approval. By moral approval, I mean an individual's sense of whether something is an acceptable action to make based on their beliefs of right and wrong. In this sense, the foundations of our moral existence is the state where we can morally consider and approve our decisions and actions. However, in the condition that the quote describes, for some actions that we take, the room for our moral approval is deprived of us. Hence, the foundations of our moral existence are eroded. If so, then what are the new foundations of our moral existence?

2. (1.) leads to the state of being "guiltlessly guilty."

As this is an argument that follows (1), we can interpret that being "guiltlessly guilty" is a new moral state that individuals can be in. In this sense, when being used in actions that we would not morally approve of, we reach this new, alternative moral state. "Guiltlessly guilty" is an interesting concept, because the first half ("guiltlessly") focuses more on the intentions behind the action took, and the latter half ("guilty") focuses more on the consequences yielded by the action. In this sense, the concept suggests a split between our intentions and the consequences that we result in the world. Of course, even if our moral approval is behind our actions, we can result in consequences that we did not intend. However, in "guiltlessly guilty," it is a larger discrepancy: we are losing control over how our behaviour and actions are affecting the world. At the same time, the concept of "guiltlessly guilty" contains a potential inconsistency. Its simultaneous focus on intentions and consequences may lead to contradictions of sorts.

3. (1.) and (2.) did not exist in technically less advanced times.

Lastly, Anders claims that the "technification" of our being did not exist in technically less advanced times. I interpreted this as Anders claiming that the condition of being "guiltlessly guilty" arose as technology advanced. Of course, with the advancements of technology, mass production became possible, and some decisions became invisible or hard to see for individuals. However, is the advancement of technology the only factor behind the "technification" of our being? Are there not societal, economical, and political changes that drive the condition as well? Another questions that we could ask is since when we have been subject to the "technification" of our being.

4. The subject of "we."

Anders uses the term "we" to refer to the subject being "technified." Does this refer to human individuals? Or can this mean other entities like communities or nations? Also, if "we" can be used in actions, by what are we used by? Are we used by larger systems, like institutions? I have used the term "we" in my essay as well (for the purpose of the essay, I mean human individuals when I say "we," unless specified otherwise).

In this essay, with respect to point (3.), I will first attempt to uncover various underlying forces that drive or resist the "technification" of our being, in addition to the advancements of technology. After that, I will explore point (1.) in more detail, focusing on the concept of responsibility. I will analyse whether we are held responsible for our actions even if we are "technified" and used like "screws in our machine." Questioning the inevitability of "technification," I will attempt to show that in most cases, we can retrieve control of our moral existence, and hence are subject to the responsibility for actions. In cases where individuals have no means to retrieve control, I will try to suggest potential solutions to regain autonomy of our own decision-making process. Lastly, focusing on point (2.), I will analyse the concept of being "guiltlessly guilty" in regards to the tension it contains between intentions and consequences. Finally, I will conclude.

I: The Underlying Forces that Drive "Technification"

As mentioned in point (3.) of the introduction, Anders attributes the "technification" of our being to the technically more advanced nature of contemporary society, but does not delve deep into the considerations and description of all underlying forces that drive this condition. Understanding the exact forces that drive "technification" is an important step to analyse the plausibility of Anders' whole claim, so let us do just that.

Firstly, of course, technological advancements do play a role in the "technification" of our being. Let us consider a direct example of how advanced technology "technifies" us. If we interpret Anders' quote to be a post WWII reflection, then advanced weapons and technological strategies directly makes us "screws in a machine." Individuals can become complicit in the killing of countless people without being fully aware of the fact. In technically advanced times, fighting between people were more direct and physical. Soldiers came face to face with each other, and killing entailed physical acknowledgement of the fact. However, in modern wars, it is sometimes as easy as pulling the trigger, pressing a button, or throwing something to inflict damage. The advancement of technology is creating and widening the physical and mental distance between an individual and the consequences of the actions that they make.

Another way technological advancements promote the deprivation of human moral initiative is the way the technological advancements change and shape societal and economic structures. In technically less advanced times, the origin and effects of an individual's actions and work were highly visible. Products were often created by individuals from beginning to end, and goods were exchanged in a visible manner. However, since industrial times, this is no longer the case. The new prospect of mass production made some decisions less accessible to individuals and alienated some jobs. For example, with the over specialisation of jobs, many working class individuals were only given the choice to work without acknowledging the end impact of their work. They were literally the "screws in a machine." Whatever impact the end product had on other individuals, the individuals who worked did not really have room for moral approval of their actions in relation to their job. We have shown that technological advancements change societal and economic structures that use individuals in actions that in knowledge they would not morally approve. If this is the case, when exactly did the "technification" of our being originate? What exactly does technically less advanced times refer to? Early hunter-gatherers gradually formed groups, communities, and villages. At this

point, a power hierarchy had already formed between and within communities, largely based on the amount of resources individuals owned. Since some individuals are given orders by their superiors, if they blindly follow, they can be considered to be used in actions that they would not have taken if they had full moral autonomy. Therefore, at this point, some individuals were already subject to the "technification" of our being. This means that any kind of civilisation already satisfies the conditions for the "technification" of our being to take effect. However, it is true that during early civilisation, the consequences of actions are predictable and visible in comparison to more modern civilisations. In this sense, we can conclude that the societal and economic structures that developed following technological advancements have made the consequences of our actions less visible and predictable.

We have explored how technological advancements and societal and economical structures intertwine to develop the "technification" condition. Are there any forces that resist this condition? I find one example to be literary works, which are directly and actively involved in the development and cultivation of societal structures. Some literary responses hold the power to rewind the effects of our "technification." For example, cynical war writers criticised or raised an alarm towards the war effort, such as poems written by Wilfred Owen during WWI. In this case, the writer uncovers and makes visible the reality obscure to individuals. This act of spotlighting underrepresented aspects of reality drive individuals to make moral responses towards them (if they were not already encouraged to do so), which resultantly rewinds our "technification" (by making us acknowledge the effects of us being complicit to actions that we are used in). Some Romantist and Gothic texts that expressed their fear towards the alienation of humans in face of technological advancements, such as *The Signal Man*, serves a similar purpose. They uncover the effects of technological and societal changes and allows individuals to reflect on their actions and the influences that they are under without their knowledge. Therefore, some literary works and responses are capable of making visible the invisible, which counters the "technification" of our being.

However, it is true that some literary works (in turn) reinforces the "technification" of our being. In contrast to those like Wilfred Owen, some nationalist writers celebrate the war effort that individuals of their countries are making. This, in their perspective, may be a simple pride they hold for their country. However, in reality, their texts hold the power to reinforce the war effort by making individuals believe that they should continue engaging in it, which consequently (relatively) masks the harsh reality of the war front. In this case, the writer is used in actions (to promote the inhumane war effort) without knowing the harsh reality that if they had known they would probably not morally approve. In this sense, some literary works reinforce the "technification" of our being that new societal structures developed by technological advancements presented. Therefore, the effect that a literary work has largely depends on writers and how much they acknowledge the influences that they and contemporary society are under. However, we can argue that as long as we gain the opportunity to acknowledge the ways in which we are unknowingly used in potentially inhumane actions, whether it be through insightful literary works or other means, we have the ability to resist taking those actions and thus retaining the foundations of our moral existence.

To summarise, we have seen that technological advancements do not only directly promote the "technification" of our being. They also largely affect the development of societal and economic structures which (with rising complexity) uses and alienates individuals in taking actions that if they knew the effects of they would not morally approve. We have delved into the effects of individual responses to technological advancements and resultant societal and economic structures. We saw that while some responses reinforced our "technification," some insightful ones that uncovered the underlying influences that we are under and the consequences of our actions functioned to rewind the

"technification" of our being. They do so by encouraging other individuals to realise the effects of their daily subconscious actions and to morally reflect on them. Hence, we see that the condition of "technification" is not outright inevitable but rather possible to rewind depending on our responses to contemporary society.

II: Where Does Responsibility Arise?

Now that we have clarified the forces that underlie the "technification" of our being, and established that the condition is not entirely inevitable, I would like to move on to the concept of "responsibility." The central question of interest here would be if we can really escape the responsibility of our actions by labeling them as unconsciously and inevitably controlled. To frame it differently, when humans are born into the current world, are they subject to the responsibility to understand and approve the motivations behind our actions, however difficult that may be?

Technological advancements also entail increasing accessibility of information. Many individuals in contemporary society are given the opportunity to know about what is happening on the other side of the world. If information about societies of the world are easily accessible, then we cannot escape our responsibility of attempting to understand all influences that we are under and all motivations behind our actions. A possible issue that arises from this thread of argument is the differences in information literacy among individuals. Some sources of information may be purposefully censored or altered, operating to confuse us and veil some aspect of reality. However, this is not really relevant to the condition of "technification." The condition arises when some of our actions are controlled by external forces unknowingly and without being given the opportunity to make moral judgements by ourselves. Therefore, as long as we attempt to resist this "technification" process and proactively try to make moral judgements and reflections of our actions, we can retain the foundations of our moral existence. Also, the passing of time means that more history is produced. This means that there are more references in the past to learn lessons from, which reinforces the idea that we have the responsibility to resist the "technification" of our being.

We have established that with access to increasing amounts of information and history entails the responsibility for individuals to use these resources to acknowledge the influences that they are under. This responsibility arises precisely because doing so protects our "very foundations of our moral existence," which is a profound aspect of our existence. As one of the aspects of existence unique to human, the responsibility to retain that humanness naturally arises.

If resisting the "technification" of our being is generally a responsibility for individuals, are there any cases in which there is absolutely no choice to the individual and hence their "technification" is completely inevitable? This possibility is viable and actually occurs in contemporary society. For example, suppose a child is brought up in a community that heavily indoctrinates a certain belief, or in a community that educates the child for the sole purpose to make them a soldier. In these cases, individuals are conditioned to believe certain ideologies as unquestionable truths, and are not given the opportunity or experience to reflect on and make moral judgements on their actions that they are conditioned to make. In this case, it is highly difficult for these individuals to escape the effects of "technification." Here, other individuals in more privileged circumstances are in knowledge of the existence of "technification" and individuals that cannot escape from them. Here, I mean privileged as being able to be aware of the existence and effects of "technification." Consider the case that individuals in more privileged circumstances ignore the situation of those who are less privileged. Ignoring is an action that these individuals take which indirectly makes them complicit in allowing and reinforcing the suffering of less privileged individuals. Therefore, by ignoring this situation, we

succumb to the "technification" of our being. It follows that the responsibility to help individuals who cannot escape "technification" on their own arises to those who are in more privileged situations.

In summary, we have explored the concept of "responsibility" in the face of the "technification" of our being. Generally, with increased access to information and history, we have concluded that the responsibility to use these resources to become aware of influences and motivations behind our actions arises. In extreme cases where individuals cannot resist "technification" in this way, we have shown how the responsibility of more privileged individuals to make efforts to protect the moral existence of less privileged individuals arises.

III: The Tension Between Intentions and Consequences

Lastly, I will question the feasibility of the concept of "guiltlessly guilty," touching upon the context in which Anders made this claim. I am doing so in order to highlight the fact that the "technification" is not inevitable and that individuals are subject to the responsibility to resist it. Considering the time period (1959) and the title (*Burning Conscience: The case of the Hiroshima pilot, Claude Eatherly*), we can deduce that Anders' quote is a post WWII reflection on the war.

In WWI, all nations were more or less complicit in the mass slaughter of humans. However, most guilt was placed on Germany. If, as mentioned in point (2.) of the introduction, "guiltlessly guilty" means that one takes part in guilty actions unknowingly that one would not have morally approved, then all nations participating in WWI can be described as being in the state of "guiltlessly guilty." Most individuals in all nations were more or less "screws in a machine" and "technified." Some leaders in each nation could have been "guilt-fully guilty," meaning that they intended to make their actions, but that applies to all nations. Therefore, we can describe all nations in WWI closest to being "guiltlessly guilty." Even then, Germany was basically subjected to all the blame and victors demanded compensation. Contrarily to WWI, in WWII, the atomic bomb was dropped, which most would agree is an inhumane act that "could we imagine them, we could not approve," but the United States were not held subject to any punishment. There is clearly an inconsistency in the treatment of nations in which most inhabitants were "guiltlessly guilty." The treatment of Germany focused on the consequences more than the intention. The first half of "guiltlessly guilty" was disregarded and the loss and the fact that they lost were the only factors that decided their treatment. On the other hand, the treatment of the US focuses on the intention rather than the consequences. Rather than the latter half of the "guiltlessly guilty," the focus was placed on how individuals (and on extension, the nation as a whole) could not be blamed for their war efforts because of the inevitability of the "technification." In this regard, we can interpret the concept of "guiltlessly guilty" serving the purpose merely to defend the actions that the US took in the war. If this is true, then the inevitability of "technification" of our being and the new moral state of "guiltlessly guilty" becomes shaky and loses its credibility.

If we apply the conclusion we reached in Chapter II, individuals have the responsibility to resist "technification." If all individuals in a nation are subject to this responsibility, this means that on extension, the nation as a whole are subject to this responsibility. This entails that there is no difference between being "guilt-fully guilty" and "guiltlessly guilty" and that they are equally morally guilty. This is because if an individual is "guiltlessly" being used in actions that result in "guilty" actions, they have the responsibility to escape from this condition. Therefore, being in the condition of "guiltless guilty" means that the individual has not followed their responsibility. Hence, they cannot escape any responsibility of any actions that they take, even if they claim that they did

not have room to make conscious moral decisions. On top of this, ending up in a state of "guiltlessly guilty," as mentioned before, will erode the foundations of our moral existence. With eroded autonomy in making moral decisions for our actions, we become less human.

Conclusion

In this essay, we have clarified the causes of "technification" of our being and searched potential paths to resist it, hence refuting its inevitability. Upon this ground, we then acknowledged the responsibility individuals hold to protect not only their own but also others' foundations of moral existence by using information and historical resources to resist the effects of "technification" and gain a better self-understanding and awareness of the decision-making process (including influences that individuals are under). Lastly, I questioned the consistency and credibility of the concept of "guiltlessly guilty" in context of war guilt, highlighting the open possibility to resist "technification" and the responsibility to gain control over the intentions of our actions.

