



IPO2021 Essay
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Topic of Choice: "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.

I. Introduction

Beckett's Estragon and Vladimir and Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are pitiful souls that had no control over the outcomes of their actions. However, Lucky chose to enslave himself to Pozzo, and Hamlet chose to trust a Ghost he wanted to believe as his father and threw himself into the Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. The idea that the humans' development of technology led to a creation that took over humans' will, is terrifying indeed. What is more terrifying, however, is when mankind begins to blame technological development for the undesirable actions that they had committed with their own consciousness and free will.

Anders' essay is partially true, but quite deceiving in more than one aspect. His words may have consoled the devastated Claude Eatherly after the WWII, but also may have given him nothing more than a means of self-justification. In this essay, I will tackle the quote's arguments on the agent that brings historical change, explore the causes that enable the societal 'technification' of the people of that society, and question the attitude of the writer towards humanity's 'technification' to offer methods in which we can, in fact, oppose such phenomena - through the rise of the intellectual.

Throughout the essay, taken from the source of the quote, I will often employ the example of the pilot working for the Manhattan Project who had dropped the nuclear bomb above Hiroshima. Even if 'the Hiroshima pilot' is not this pilot, he was also one who had entered battle and taken lives on behalf of the cause of WWII (exclusively for his side of the war, of course); thus, the logics in the examples will stand.

II. The Agent of Historical Change: Breaking Down the Quote

The insubstantiated assertions of this quote are that (1) technological development is the primary agent of historical change, and (2) history regresses due to the changes that technological development has brought. The second premise is supported by the attitude of Anders and Eatherly as implied in the quote, rather than the quote itself; this will be dealt with later in the third section of my essay.

At first glance, the stance that Anders is taking resembles that of a historical materialist, or Marx's: by the power of production, history is forced to change along with the new infrastructure and superstructure, and such materialistic changes spur the change in history and the thoughts and life of human beings. Ironically, Marx viewed - in the macro-perspective - that such history led by materials would find progress in the end; on the other hand, although Anders' direct stance on historical flow is not mentioned, his quote suggests that he views the world as becoming more indulgent to violence,

and less autonomous as human beings - thus, regression. The main cause for this divide, is that the premise of the quote itself is wrong.

The quote's premise lies in its devotion to the Hiroshima pilot. If the quote is true and serves its function as a letter to Eatherly, then Eatherly's actions must mirror the premise of the quote: he did not intend the consequences of his actions, and the power of the technology - whether it was the nuclear bomb, or simple weapons attached to a plane during warfare, or any other devastating object that would have led to Eatherly's 'burning conscience' - solely led to the result he dreaded. However, let's address the prominent example of a pilot that dropped the bomb. He may not have expected such a large-scale impact, but he did know that his actions would take lives. He directly took to 'the act', flying all the way to Hiroshima, hovering over the populated island, and pushing the button that dropped the bomb. Thus, the effects were not "beyond the horizon of [his] eyes and imagination."

Another agent of historical change that the quote shows slight relevance to is Hegel's Absolute Spirit - and, in fact, this idea comes quite close to the truth. The quote sets 'technology' and the mindset that it brings as the zeitgeist, which fuels an Absolute Spirit. Although not a deity, this spirit 'manipulates' people to unconsciously take actions that will ultimately lead to goals of its own. One such example is Napoleon, who conquered a large share of the world - and, unintentionally, spread the revolutionary ideas of liberty and equality throughout Europe from his nation of the newly revolutionized France. This idea does explain the deception and manipulation of human beings by an exterior agent, but there are still contradictions. First, technology is created by human beings, when the Absolute Spirit is supposed to be separate from humanity and above it. Second, the ultimate goal of Hegel's Absolute Spirit is liberty and subsequent historical progress, while the quote is highly skeptical on the future. Finally, the most important difference is that Napoleon's conquest had no slightest intention of spreading ideas, while a pilot's actions - though the scale may not be clear - are direct and concise; thus, the free will of the pilot hinders the case from transferring to the blame onto the Absolute Spirit.

Thus, the quote doesn't agree with any of the existing ideas on the agents of historical change. Its mischaracterization of the agent's manipulation hinders any correct speculation, so the quote loses a full value as analysis on views towards history. Then, how is humanity supposed to bring a history of progress rather than regression? This idea will be explored in the later sections, further denouncing the quote as an easy path to the latter consequence in history.

For those who may assert that there must be an agent of historical change that matches the 'technification,' my response is this: perhaps historical materialism is the answer, or the Absolute Spirit, or anything else (though neither can stand under this quote even without the dissenting points mentioned above, and this will be elaborated in my later sections). But the sphere of technological improvement strictly stays within the societal influence on human beings, and is never the main, primary, and exclusive subject that dooms humanity and human morality in such a way as explicated in the quote. Then, how does this societal influence, exacerbated by technology, lead to tragedies?

III. "Technification" in Social Context: Thoughtlessness in a Morally Degraded Society

Industrialization led to the mechanical organization of labor. Technology undermined the power of humans' memories, active thinking, and imagination. By the end of the WWII, absurdist fiction dominated theatres and bookstores, confirming the global loss of faith in human reason - how can an army of rational individuals eradicate villages and turn cities into flaming pits of hell?

As the quote suggests, technology itself has irrefutably led to problems that soon infiltrated the world. However, it was the society's response to technology that had led to devastations, rather than technology itself.

No man is an island; the beloved author's beloved quote is true. But it is not always positive. Human beings are narrative beings that identify themselves through the communities they are part of.

Rejecting the social norms, becoming an 'outsider,' makes them an anomie - a cruel fate that Durkheim concludes with death, either an egocentric or altruistic suicide, but suicide nonetheless and none for their own good. If a moral man gets placed in an immoral society, which Niebuhr argues as the state of much of humanity, the result will be not much different from Durkheim's. But this explanation is not enough: effects "we could not approve" are those that will be denounced once done. Thus, the cases that the quote concerns are not simply every tragedy that happens in society, but those that are clearly immoral even in the eyes of "us" who are subject to the social criteria of morality.

In order for clear misconduct acknowledged by society to happen unintentionally, thoughtlessness of the subject of the action must be added on the basis of a society immoralized (by aspects of which one is technological development). A Hiroshima pilot that dropped the atomic bomb 'without being conscious of the consequence' is not comparable to Napoleon, but is quite comparable to Eichmann that served the Nazi - although the scale of destruction may not be as similar. He knew that his current action would directly kill people, maybe even by an uncountable number - but didn't realize that he was doing wrong. Such consequences arise when the individual is 'told to do something' by society, especially the authorities, and follows the order without thinking by oneself, why one is doing such an act. It is not the atomic bomb technology, nor the gas-creating methodology, that led to catastrophies, but the pilot and Eichmann's failure to use their reason and make an active, rational choice.

Thus is why, in any case, such justification in this quote cannot exist - even if Eatherly was not the bomber, but had merely been a civilian plane that made a wrongful choice in the threatening heat of the war and sacrificed several civilians only. Whatever choice is the subject of discussion, a human being is not simply 'narrative,' and one still holds the ability to use reason and emotion to make a decision actively. Borrowing Aristotle's words from Nicomachean ethics - if a wrongdoing was done under threat of a worse result (such as a family member's execution, as Aristotle put *philia* over all other values), 'such a choice is understandable, but not perfectly justifiable'; if a wrongdoing was done *without the knowledge of the individual*, 'the individual is dysfunctional, the pure ignorance is impossible to an alert individual, and it is the individual's fault' unless a truly problematic circumstance led to the individual involuntarily not having any context of the situation nor ability of rational thinking.

Still, I acknowledge the possibility of dissents, on the basis that 'there may be a supreme will that causes the bombing of Hiroshima; the pilot had been a doll, without power over their actions' - just like the idea of the Absolute Spirit. First of all, this is impossible: the pilot is a human being; all human beings have the senses and reason; thus, the pilot would have heard and understood the implications of his acts. Secondly, if in fact the bombing was predestined, there is no coherence between the atomic bombing of Japan and the further development of technology (which I imagine would be the motivation for technology's decisions as an agent of historical change, because manipulation without any goal or end result is simply absurd). The Manhattan Project, leading up to the actual bombing by the pilot, was based on the utilitarian idea that a quick end to war would lead to less soldiers dying and the nationalistic stance that United States would no longer need to sacrifice soldiers in a fight against Japan; thus, there were humans' clear objectives based on philosophy/economic idea and self-interested patriotism behind the action, and technology itself is not to completely blame, because such nationalism and value on economy were intrinsic instincts of human beings long before the advent of a wheel.

IV. Questioning the Powerless Attitude of the Quote: Philosophical Suicide and Its Dangers

The quote, in short, "states" what it sees of its contemporary society: technology led to the moral degradation of humanity, and they are not guiltless for the guilty actions they have taken. Not only is

its assertion of such a technification being 'fact' false, but the acceptance of such an idea is very dangerous. The quote treats technification as an agent that surpasses human will, that will lead to its own conclusions whatever actions we may take against its direction. This idea that human actions will not lead to their intended results is, in short, a philosophical suicide. Sartre's idea of philosophical suicide was believing in religion, and accepting the idea that human beings are not free in whatever they do because they are either predetermined to take actions or powerless to change the future. This quote is very similar to the idea, in that human beings are not free to bring any change to a society that technology has a hold on. Under this concept, there is no use taking actions for one's value system, so individuals are highly tempted to abandon thought, value, and morality. When individuals realize that they are ultimately fated to death, Sartre asserts, individuals are "completely free" in a negative aspect: they are without restraint, and can do whatever immoral or meaningless act they wish to do, because nothing they do will change a concrete future. At least under religious devoutness, one can be restrained by a tenet; at least under an existentialist society, one tries to define oneself with the actions one takes. This quote illustrates the worst kind of society: a fatalistic society (which is pretty much every society, because human beings are born with the concept of death) without any possibility of making the slightest result one intended. Even Camus' illustration of Sisyphus has the knowledge of what his future and the unintended results of his actions would be; these human beings are wholly ignorant. The quote is the worst-case scenario life of an existentialist.

In another aspect, the world was already such a society as explained by this quote. Technology works on calculative reason only, similar to the part of human reason used only to calculate the optimal economical choice. Borrowing Adorno's ideas from his *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, human history regressed due to humanity's change in its minds: in the Hellenistic periods, Aristotle had deemed significant pleasure and pain, sympathy, reflective reason (mirror quality), and calculative reason in making decisions, but by Kant, the only desirable means of decision-making had become calculative reason. From that moment, an entity had all the reasons to drop a bomb to lessen potential deaths without the pilot's concern for those who would die in the bomb's dropping point. Without emotions and reflective reason that gave humane qualities to humanity, no decision can be sound enough to lead to the desired positive effect. Thus, the "technification" that the quote so blames may be mis-accused, when it is the technification of the human mind that is to blame.

Because we have now learned that the problem lies with humans, and that history will not take a linear progressive nor regressive path by some exterior factor, the quote's choice of philosophical suicide is even more harmful - especially because the quote itself suggests that humans are now taking a regressive curve in history. As it has been checked that humans can actively change the society as they intend, the final step is to find how.

V. Education and Action: The Significance of Producing Intellectuals in an Immoral Society

The main problems besides technological development that had demoralized humanity had been human beings being narrative beings, and losing all other sects of the mind except for calculative reason. Both can be solved in steps through active learning, and taking action.

Philosophers of the Eastern world and the Western world had been on consensus on the significance of education since forever. Confucius emphasized that "learning without thinking leads to doom, while thinking without learning leads to devastation"; Neo-Confucianists such as Wang Yang-Ming stressed the idea that "learning is not enough; one must act; and when one studies, one must doubt, and ask, to learn well (Wang Yang-Ming)." Such ideas are synonymous to the Western idea of the 'intellectual.' In order to become an individual that can think for oneself, members of society must actively question societal knowledge and ideas to reject thoughtlessness. They must enlighten themselves to the point where they are able to view their objects from a detached, or a global, perspective. These intellectuals are not narrative beings whose logic is limited to their

societal fence, but are now representatives of the general, universal will who can discern what is truly ethical and desirable.

These individuals, once they take their knowledge and apply it to their actions, can even change the society. They are the ones in society who can evaluate the problems that underlie their society, since the rest of their community will still be subject to social norms and tradition. As Marx asserts, it was always the general class that had brought change to the society, such as the bourgeoisie that toppled the corrupted French Old System. When the intellectuals, with their understanding of the general will, internalize the status of their society, and externalize what they think would be needed to improve it, circumstances would be much better for everyone within the society, and the society itself would be elevated. Because intellectuals use historical precedents and philosophical methodologies around the globe in their Hegelian internalization and externalization process, they would most likely succeed, and their results would be what such processes would bring as expected by Hegel - a wider liberty, and thus greater space for members of society to expand their minds. It is also the intellectuals' duty to enlighten the others who are yet illusioned.

In order to create such intellectuals, education in society must be more diverse, incorporating perspectives and histories of not only the subject community but around the world. There also needs the basic understanding that one's society is not in its optimal state and can be improved, and the following endeavor to look for ways in which that society needs enlightenment.

VI. Conclusion

To resolve conflicts within the society, and prevent anomies or alienated moral men's sacrifice in an immoral society, Durkheim and Niebuhr suggested religion and politics. However, when the institution itself is incomplete, and society as holistically viewed seems problematic, educated individuals are the solution. Although I beg to disagree with some contents of the quote, it ultimately implies the real causes of moral degradation and (current) historical regression of humanity - thoughtlessness of the individuals, and their submissiveness to the problem - and leads to the solution of active education and enlightenment. Because the unwritten pages of humanity's future history lies solely on the humanity itself, such efforts are especially crucial for a new Greco-Roman Golden Age of our kind.

Those under illusion, like the writer of the quote, wait for Godot or embrace absurdity. If it were the only option, being an absurd hero is okay; but if the solution clearly exists, and the whole world is turning immoral instead of oneself having to roll a boulder up the hill, doing nothing is a foolish act. Intellectuals can, and must, turn the absurd heroes into actual ones that bring change.