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Research article

## Promethean Shame as the Hidden *Instrumentum Redemptionis Humanae*

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### Abstract

This article draws on the terminology of Günther Anders to identify three different forms of crisis in contemporary society: the crisis of freedom, the crisis of humanity as subject of history, and the crisis of shame. The article is composed of three different sections. The first section analyses Anders' early anthropological works to show how freedom has turned into its own negation. The second section examines the other two types of crisis revolving around Anders' notion of Promethean shame and techné. Building on these discussions, the final section offers an open suggestion for re-thinking the possibility of redeeming human action within the technological determinism of our epoch via an Andersian-inspired hypothesis.

**Keywords:** Günther Anders; *Techné*; Promethean shame; Humanity; Machine

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Научная статья

## Стыд Прометея как скрытый инструмент человеческого искупления

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### Аннотация

В данной статье используется терминология Гюнтера Андерса для определения трех различных форм кризиса в современном обществе: кризис свободы, кризис человечества как субъекта истории и кризис стыда. Статья состоит из трех разделов. В первом разделе анализируются ранние антропологические работы Андерса, чтобы показать, как свобода превратилась в собственное отрицание. Во втором разделе исследуются два других типа кризисов, связанных с представлениями Андерса о стыде Прометея и технике. Основываясь на этих обсуждениях, последний раздел предлагает переосмыслить возможность искупления человеческих действий в рамках технологического детерминизма нашей эпохи с помощью гипотезы, вдохновленной Андерсом.

**Ключевые слова:** Гюнтер Андерс; *Techné*; Стыд Прометея; Человечество; Машина

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## I

In *Pathologie de la liberté* Anders wrote “artificiality is humanity’s nature and its essence is instability” (Anders, 2015, p. 55). Such definition entails what a human is: “its freedom before the world, the fact that it is cut out for being undetermined and general” (Anders, 2015, p. 56). Anders applied this depiction of humankind to a specific sub-category of human, the nihilist.

If the essence of man actually consists in his un-determinacy, then, in his propension towards different possibilities he determines himself through his in-determinability which cannot lead him towards a clear mode of being (Anders, 2015, p. 92).

The identity of humanity consists in its not having one; and that humanity is merely an enlarged portrait of a singular human being which is as trustful as it is exaggerating. Humanity thus lives the paradoxical experience of freedom, exactly because it finds itself free, it later ends up discovering itself as not-free, as contingent in a twofold perspective: on the one hand, “it is condemned to itself, it is not auto-produced” (Anders, 2015, p. 57), on the other hand, it sees itself as a somebody which nonetheless is itself (somebody that did not choose to become), as a someone “that is exactly as it is (although it could be different)” (Anders, 2015, p. 58). In other words, humans cannot see themselves as responsible for their own origin and yet they still need to identify themselves with it. This discovery of humanity’s two-folded contingency – which Anders calls the ‘shock of contingency’ – does not diminish when humans deal with the world because at this point the shock of contingency is encountered in everything and everywhere.

‘Contingent’ has a twofold meaning: 1) the lack of an ultimate meaning; 2) the paradoxical situation according to which humanity, exactly because it is capable of exerting its freedom, discovers that it has impassable limits; even if it manifests itself as free, humanity is not determined by itself which means that it is ultimately un-free. The limits of humanity’s freedom emerge when it realises that it is bound to the natural world since humanity is not a product of its own freedom. The possibility of experiencing the shock in every moment of life epitomises the “perfect extraneity existing between humans and world, a person can be anything because she is contingent to herself as much as she is a stranger to any part of the world” (Anders, 2015, p. 60). In the case of the nihilist, this shock would produce at least three reactions, of which the most radical one is suicide. Before suicide come disgust for oneself and shame for oneself. Humans are surprised and ashamed:

exactly when they undertake the realisation that they are not self-caused, they feel, for the first time, that they come from something that is not from themselves: the estranged, irrevocable, transcendent past of their origin. Thus, the shame is, most of all, shame of one’s origin (Anders, 2015, p. 67).

The shame is not a simply emotional condition but a reflective act of self-identification that fails because the ‘I’ identifies and, at the same time, does not identify with itself. The contingency of this constant failure of self-identification exists in two



dimensions: the contingency of time and the contingency of space. The capacity of abstracting the present situation that humans possess reveals, again, their contingency, their lack of freedom, and the fact that their lives are limited from birth and death. Through the forms of space and time, humans grasp the superiority of the world in so far as they are not the ones who put the basis for representing the totality of existence, but the world is. Nihilistic humans try to overcome such inferiority through their ‘will of power’ (“they must possess everything”) (Anders, 2015, p. 76) or, in other words, through the omnipresence in both time and space. Nietzsche’s motto: “if there were gods, how could I stand not to be a god!” (Nietzsche, 2017, p. 65) constitutes the definitive formulation of this painful human condition.

Anders counters the nihilist, whose anti-historic life is characterised by the constant repetition of the endless cycle of contingency, with the ideal type of the historic person who “takes upon herself the burden of her identification” (Anders, 2015, p. 92) and tries to come to terms with her origin. The historic person finds a minimum substratum of self-identity through the application of a Cartesian mnemonic method: I remember; therefore, I am me. In the identification with the ‘past I’, the memory is inserted in concrete living situations, the ‘I’ of the historic person appropriates itself of such life (‘I am me’ becomes ‘I am this life’). “She overcomes the contingency of her own existence through the necessity of her history” (Liessmann, 2002, p. 43). The historic person, by remembering what she has done in the past, dissipates her contingency by identifying herself with the person she was, and no longer feels estranged to herself. This respect towards the past replaces shame; the historic person always finds herself in a context of identification through her past and that of her ancestors.

Yet, this approach of the historic person is unconvincing because, using a renowned Hegelian expression, it turns, *a posteriori*, everything that exists into something ‘rational’ while the historic person herself remains contingent. It is undeniable that such person has the courage to say, ‘this is mine!’ to everything that happens to her, but what has become ‘hers’ is not truly hers since it belonged to her predecessors. The crisis of human freedom is so deep that it has resorted either into nihilism or into historicism.

Anders refutes both the nihilistic and the historical attitude since they represent a total non-identification with the contingent. Both need the identification, both rely on their theoretical reason, and both end up surrounded by antinomies which “can be resolved only by practical reason” (Anders, 2015, p. 63). The question on human’s identity is not resolved through a dialectical synthesis but simply by the *praxis*, through the concepts of ‘task’ and ‘action’. “Only the person who acts finds herself out of the horror of contingency since she does not insist on her past, but rather on the task which transforms the world” (Anders, 2015, p. 93). The example to follow, therefore, is not Hegelian but Kantian:

the self-identification through the *Aufklärung* and the critical attitude is, according to Kant, action; for him the issue is not to observe what is reason (which for Kant equates to what man is), but to construct reason through the operation of a critique (Anders, 2015, p. 95).



This resort to action makes impossible for the philosophical anthropology to produce a positive definition of ‘human’.

What opposes the definition of man is not, therefore, something irrational, but human action, the kind of action through which man constantly defines himself and regularly determines what exists (Anders, 2015, p. 95).

And yet, can we still consider an action inscribed within a deterministic background, such as that of our modern technological world, a free action?

## II

Anders did not renounce the idea of the human indeterminacy, but, in time, he dramatically changed its meaning. Human indeterminacy is no longer a sign of freedom but rather an anthropological presupposition of the new ontological condition of slavery that humanity suffers in a world dominated by the *techne*. This human indeterminacy, its artificiality, instead of being the condition for the creation of new worlds and societies freely shaped by humanity, becomes the ground from which a new determined subject emerges: the *techne*. The *techne* is binding humanity to a unique world from which humanity cannot escape, thus risking the possibility of becoming an outdated form of life. Such world would be able to proceed ‘without us’ and made only of “objects through which humans become superfluous, eliminable, and liquidable” (Anders, 1981, p. 199).

It is the fidelity to the concept of human indeterminacy that explains what at a first glance might look paradoxical, that Anders, the very person who saw *techne* as a means for enacting a human destiny, thus vanquishing human indeterminacy, later became one of the first and fiercest critics of technology. It is because of this indeterminacy that Anders sees how

the world created *a posteriori* by the *techne* has become so capable of

determining’ humankind that it can reverse the conditions of possibility of the human being, namely, his openness to the world (Dries, 2009, p. 76).

The *techne* acts “as a gargantuan ‘instrument of determination’” (Dries, 2009, p. 76), negating the essence of humanity, which paradoxically does not exist. By adopting the perspective of negative anthropology, such outdatedness of humanity means that humanity’s openness to the world is being robbed by *techne*. Thus, the reason behind Anders’ attempts to “defend an invariable ‘essence’ of humanity against the attacks of the apparatus and the deforming force of modern technologies” (Liessmann, 2002, p. 46) arises from the fact that technology

is definitive and irrevocable [...] And this means that we, the men of today, will remain constant in our (recently acquired) ‘essence’. I say, ‘recently acquired’, because this ‘constancy’ is not of course a property of our human ‘nature’, but an artificial situation, in which we have got ourselves, something that we were only capable of because the capacity to transform our world—no:



not just our world, but the world—and ourselves paradoxically belongs to our ‘nature’ (Anders, 2007, p. 2).

Here Anders tries to put forward the thesis that technology has made such a step forward with the automatization of the productive processes and the unleashed exploitation of nature to render superfluous humanity and outdated its faculties, to the point that humanity almost feels inadequate for the world. For Anders the upsurge of technology to totalising power is the process of overturning the relations between men and their needs, means and aims. In this new era, the means are the only source of justification of humans’ needs and objectives.

If, in the *Pathologie de la liberté*, humanity was ‘open to the world’ and could continuously shift between sets of values, cultures, and civilisations, then, after the emergence of technology, humanity has given up its ‘openness’ in favour of the will to adapt to the machines. However, whereas machines are pre-determined, humans were not. Machines have become the actual producers of reality and humanity adapted to be merely *techne*’s helper, this discrepancy between the two has led humanity to its own demise for it renounces its freedom in exchange for pre-determination.

In the determination of the aprioristic indeterminacy of humanity through the *techne*, the nexus epitomised between the early anthropological character of Anders work and the critical theory of the modern technological condition of humanity; between the freedom of the products and the determinacy of humanity, which appears now moving within a world built by humanity itself with the limitations and the automatisms typical of an animal. Thus, the pivot of Anders’ reflections will not remain that of a ‘person-without-a-world’ who, devoid of a specific world, as active subject still tend to create one that conforms to herself, but rather, that of “the nature (*das Wesen*) of *techne*” (Anders, 1992, p. 105). The *techne* is arranged as a class of entities which alienates humanity from itself. These instruments of the *techne* mediated the transformation of humanity from subject to object and eventually turned humanity into a resource to utilise. Consequentially, the human world, intended as humanity’s bios emerged from its capacity to intentionally create, becomes the world of the machines through the inversion of the relation ‘master-slave’ between humanity and *techne*. In the world-without-people, humanity leaves its subjectivity on the stage in exchange for its material life. However, the further development of the *techne* puts this into question. The world-without-people becomes the possibility of a fully apocalyptic dimension where humanity is reduced to nothing.

The *techne* has become the subject of history and alongside *techne* we are merely ‘co-historical’. Anders de-subjectifies the human being into a bureaucrat and performer of technical maxims. This new ailment represents the contradictory condition of humanity that is dominated by technology, while at the same time, is the only species, if any exists, that can occupy an independent position toward technology.

What is crucial, in this epistemological shift of paradigm, is the transformation sustained by the concept of shame. Anders gives to this new kind of shame a novel definition: first, shame is a passive act (to be ashamed of), thus implies a ‘failed’ relation with one’s self that can never be resolved because the person who is ashamed of herself finds herself identical and non-identical to herself. Shame is hence a disturbance



of the self-identification. Second, shame contains a twofold intentionality, on the one hand, it implies the intentional object; on the other hand, it is “simultaneously turned towards an ‘authority’ before which the one who is ashamed feels shame. It entails a *coram*” (Anders, 2003, p. 94), that is, somebody before us. Third, it has a ‘negative intentionality’ in so far as it wants to escape from itself. Therefore, Anders defines shame as a passive act in which a person finds herself as what she ‘is not’, and yet as someone she incontrovertibly is. In its shame humanity experiences the limits of its freedom, shame demonstrates humanity’s inability to determine itself in an absolutely free manner as well as its impotence over reality. Shame appears in the contradiction that exists between ability and inability. Where the ‘I’ encounter itself as ‘it’ with which it cannot identify. The ‘it’ of which we are ashamed of is everything that does not derive from the ‘I’, everything that is pre-individual, the ‘ontic gift’, the body, the sex, the family, and the species that one cannot decide.

If until this point the definition of shame is similar to that one examined in the first section, then Anders points out some features of this new type of shame that did not exist before. “I will provisionally call it *Promethean shame* for myself. I understand this to mean the shame when confronted by the ‘humiliating’ high quality of fabricated things” (Anders, 2003, p. 57). This novel shame satisfies the ontological condition common to the previous shame for it means being disturbed by the identification, but, at the same time, it implies something diverse because in this case it is the machine or technical device that is encountered as the ‘it’.

The background of Anders’s analysis has now changed, both humanity’s freedom and historicity are denied and absorbed by the world of products. If Anders previously claimed that the nihilist was ashamed of itself for its origin, for its *natum esse*, then, in this new case it

is ashamed about having naturally grown instead of having been made. He is ashamed because he owes his existence to the blind and uncalculated, the highly archaic process of procreation and birth (Anders, 2003, p. 58).

The Promethean shame is the emotional reaction that humanity feels for its inadequacy and inferiority. From the Promethean shame Anders derives the Promethean gap, that is, the discrepancy between the productive ability (*Herstellen*) of humanity and its capacity of imagining (*Vorstellen*) the consequences of its own producing. The expression imagining (*Vorstellen*) loses its own reason which, through its prefix (*vor*), characterised the planning anticipation proceeding the material creation of every object. Here, on the contrary, we face an inverted-platonic situation in which the realised objects come before their *eidōs*; they appear before they are imagined in their own magnitude and consequences. Thus, the fundamental dilemma of our epoch is: we are inferior to ourselves; we are incapable of making an image of what we have done. In this sense we are ‘inverted utopians’ – while the utopians cannot produce what they imagine, we cannot imagine what we produce. For this reason, the modern person wishes to become a self-made person who

he does not want to make himself because he can no longer tolerate anything that was not made by him, but he too no longer wants to be someone who is



not made. He feels indignant not because he was made by others (God, gods or nature), but because he was not made at all and, as such, he is inferior to all his fabricated things (Anders, 2003, p. 59).

Every shame is a form of perturbation of identification, but in this case the ‘it’, with which humanity cannot identify, is not the pre-individual but the totality of the products of the technological world.

It is the machine or technological device that is encountered as the ‘it’. We are confronted with this ‘it’ while operating machines, a relationship in which humans have to function ‘with’ and ‘alongside’ technological objects, as ‘a part’ of the working machine and as such they no longer encounter themselves as a ‘self’. To demarcate the ‘it’ that manifests in the engagement with machines from the ‘it’ of our previous discussion, we will call it the ‘it of the technological device’ (*das Apparat-Es*) (Anders, 2003, p. 108).

The Promethean shame occurs not from feeling analogous to a machine or to a piece of mechanism in a human world but rather when individuals feel ‘still too-human’ in a world of machines and products. In other words, it refers to the situation when humans have integrated themselves with a machine and strive to be one themselves. Humanity re-encounters its individuality only in the moment in which an obstacle precludes the completion of a job, in other words, when it cannot fully adapt to the machine, when it becomes an antagonistic force of the machine.

The worker’s individuality only become visible because it is a *negatio*. Put even more clearly, the encounter with the self is not the cause of a ‘disturbance of identity’; it is the other way around. This encounter only occurs because there is an interference (Anders, 2003, p. 117).

In this case the ‘I’ becomes conscious and encounters itself but only in so far as it is measured by the intransigent yardstick of the machine. The ‘I’ sees itself not only as outdated and underdeveloped, but also as forced in an intricate relation to its body; instead of the Cartesian division of the ‘I’ and the ‘body’ (*res cogitans* and *res extensa*) which once played such a fundamental role, now the division between the ‘I’ and the ‘it of the technological device’ has lost all its significance.

In fact, the difference has become so irrelevant that the two seem to represent one unified formation. Instead of the rift between the machine and the old residue. This residue is made up of body and self in an undifferentiated manner. (Anders, 2003, p. 118)

It is in the reality of the modern productive world that one can experience the Promethean shame which reveals the extent to which the reification of humanity has moved forward. Humans do not consider shameful being a thing, but rather, the non-



reification is condemned as a shortcoming.<sup>1</sup> The paradox is that humans act in accordance with their will to be reified and thus strive to adapt to the machines. They do not try to compensate this feeling of inferiority by recovering what once was considered typically human (imagination, emotions, and responsibility), they aim at suppressing their human residue through adapting to machines:

moral demands are now also transferred from the human to the machine. What is 'due' now also becomes what one 'ought to be'. The maxim 'become who you are' is acknowledged to be the valid maxim of the machines. Human purpose in life is now limited to guaranteeing the success of this machine-maxim. (Anders, 2003, p. 71)

The innovative element of the Andersian critique is not in refuting the human adaptation because this idea damages the 'metaphysical concept' of human:

It is not the alteration as such that we deem 'vile'. Anyone who hears in our argument a hidden, 'metaphysically conservative' voice would misunderstand its meaning. Nothing is further from my mind than assuming the position of a 'metaphysical moralist' who regards the existent as 'good'. I am not an ethicist who puts the morality of humans into the framework of what 'is as it is and must so be'. Nor am I someone who infers what is allowed and forbidden from the given order of things. (Anders, 2003, p. 77)

It is not the proclamation of an unmodifiable mode of being of humanity that Anders assumes as the meaning of 'being human', but the suspicion that the *techné* is trying to oppose human indeterminacy, its openness to freedom, by binding the former to the latter's *dictat*.

No, the alteration of our body is not fundamentally new and vile because we are abandoning our 'morphological destiny' or transcending the assigned natural limitation of our capabilities. It is despicable, rather, because we are undergoing this transformation of the self for the sake of machines and because we employ these as blueprints and models for our own modification. We hence relinquish ourselves as humans and with this gesture we either restrict or give up our freedom. (Anders, 2003, p. 78)

For Anders such human behaviour is arrogant self-degradation and hubristic humility because "to the injury from above, to hardship, illness, ageing and death, humanity now masochistically adds a further one: self-reification" (Anders, 2003, p. 79). The object of this process of adaptation to the machine is mainly the body which is the essential reason of inferiority, in so far as it is faulty, rigid, obtuse, and "too emphatically defined to keep up with the daily changing world of machines; a world, which makes a mockery of all self-determination" (Anders, 2003, p. 67). If, the human is changeable from the point of view of social institution, then, this is not the case for

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<sup>1</sup> In *Kafka, Pro e Contro* Anders (1951) writes as "nature becomes 'still nature' the next person becomes a mere 'thing', what seems 'inhuman' is not because of an 'animalistic' nature but because it has regressed to the function of a thing" (p. 25).



the singular individual: “my own self will stay behind unreplaced and unreplaceable” (Anders, 2003, p. 85).

To obviate the first deficiency, i.e., the lack of adaptation, humans undertake strenuous physical and spiritual exercises as well as transform their body through genetic engineering and surgery. They are “the initiation rites of the robotic age” (Anders, 2003, p. 73)<sup>2</sup>. A method to escape from the second shortcoming – which is at the same time an irrefutable proof of its existence – is the obsession of images, the ‘icon-mania’, with which humanity tries to overcome its individual unity through the reproducibility of the human image (be it by photo, video, or any other media). Images realise the link between the serial-world of the products and humanity which, through the production of icons, corrects its unbearable unicity. The growing usage of ‘visualisation’, in both culture and society, generates in Anders the need for an iconoclastic dialectic, of a critique as fecund as it is precarious, of the visual experience in the form of a refusal of a mass culture of images.

Among the many views on visual culture, Anders’ perspective seems apparently pessimistic since it would recognise today’s global flow of images as a form of post-literary illiteracy. In Anders’ view, images function as instruments of systematic stupefaction – the more they show to humanity the less they tell. Too many images exist in the world, so many that they even begin to live a strange and peculiar existence which mocks and rules their original counterpart. The media that generate such images are treated as a cognitive-emotional *a priori*. The media produce the consumeristic idiot who conforms himself to the system, the mass hermit alienated from the world, a general bourgeoisie domestication, and a passive behaviour leading to an infantilisation of thought. Thus, the world would become ontologically ambiguous and one-dimensional, a phantom and a matrix. In this manner the media create the perfect illusion – the ‘iper-realism of simulation’ – where thoughts and actions are already preformed and scripted. Without such infinite number of images there would be nothing. Is there a way out?

### III

We can picture Anders’ image of humanity as clamped between technological determined defeatism and a-logical luddism. The situation is thus enclosed within a negative and hopeless picture frame where to be free one must be able to act outside the technological determinism but, for acting in such manner, one should be free. This dilemma portrayed by Anders’ philosophy seems to lead to a vicious and desperate circle which offers no way out, in so far as one considers the soft totalitarianism of technology a *fait accompli*. According to this perspective even the consciousness of seeing the inevitability of technological determinism and its consequent un-freedom is already a disheartened form of privilege. It is difficult to tell whether we can solve such impasse or not, but we surely can attempt to hypothetically turn this malicious cycle

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<sup>2</sup> As an example of this self-reification Anders mentions the use of make-up through which people renounce their organic life for the impression of looking ‘industrially’ made. ‘Today is not the undressed body that is considered naked but rather the one that is not ‘made’ (Anders, 2003, p. 64). Yet, *contra* Anders, the antiquity of such practise seems to disprove Anders’ argument.



into a virtuous one by drawing some conclusions from Anders' discussion. The option of a burst of action such as a luddite destruction of machines is untenable for, unlike the luddites, we are not enraged merely because what we used to produce by hand is now made by machines. We oppose the *techne* because of the determinism entailed by the *techne* itself. If the path of action is maybe impractical, and I say maybe, then, we can consider a different option based on another fact: that is, our being still here. Considering that we, as a species, are still alive, and this is our datum, we could try to oppose the technological determinism by re-framing the object of our responsibility to an attempt to preserve and re-think the possibility of free action for as long as the Anthropocene lasts. Let us try to critically re-evaluate our dilemma by utilising a hypothesis. If we want to be responsible and freed from *techne*'s determinism, and we do, then we must postulate that what we are aiming for is somehow possible, at least inasmuch as it is possible to advocate for its possibility, because its alternative would be pure defeatism. Since the brute action is, as we said, ineffective, then, we can postulate that a dialectic opposition could be fruitful; otherwise we would remain optionless and nullify our own premise concerning the possibility of our hypothesis. Thus, we must hypothesise that there is still a residual space free from technological determinism which is inseparable from that of a logical and fruitful usage of *logos* which, however small, will have to suffice. Therefore, if we have such space, and according to our hypothesis we do, then we can admit that in such confined free space it is possible to juxtapose a theoretical possibility with a practical counterpart.

To conclude, is it still possible to call a human action a free action under *techne*'s determinism? What insight do we gain from our description of the three crises and Anders' Promethean shame? The answers to these two questions are: 1) Yes, but not in a conventional manner. 2) A possibility – a possibility of a space in which humanity holds on to freedom before technology, a space which should not be considered defective because of its hypothetical nature, on the contrary, should be regarded as a valuable insight in so far as it tells us that there are still places in which *techne* and its determinism cannot, and maybe will never be able to, penetrate. In this sense, we can agree with Hölderlin (1990) and say that “where danger threatens that which saves from it also grows” (p. 257).

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