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The Age of Machines: Anders on Work, Alienation and Promethean Gap

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Günther Anders's critical reflection on the human condition in technological modernity, focusing on the central concepts of the "obsolescence of man" and the Promethean Gap. The latter describes the widening disproportion between the productive power of machines and the limited cognitive, moral, and imaginative capacities of human beings. Anders argues that this imbalance generates alienation, disorientation, and even shame in relation to our own creations, as exemplified by the nuclear threat, which vastly exceeds our ethical preparedness to confront its consequences. Drawing on Marx and Heidegger, the article highlights how industrialization and automation have reshaped the sphere of labor, stripping it of creativity and meaning, and transforming human beings into passive supervisors of processes they can neither master nor fully comprehend. Alienation, once limited to the factory, increasingly permeates everyday life, producing a condition in which individuals experience themselves as inadequate when compared with the efficiency, durability, and autonomy of machines. Anders's critique shows that technology is not a neutral instrument, but a social and political force that incorporates logics of domination and subordination, demanding adaptation at the

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cost of freedom and subjectivity. His work also anticipates contemporary debates on artificial intelligence, automation, and ecological collapse, underscoring the urgent need for new ethical and political frameworks capable of guiding human action in a technological age. By exposing the risks of a society that uncritically celebrates technical progress, Anders calls for renewed human agency rooted in responsibility, foresight, and resilience.

Keywords: Promethean Gap; Machines; Obsolescence of Man; Philosophy of Technology

1. Introduction

Günther Anders's thought develops around a radical diagnosis of the human condition in technological modernity, centered on the concept of the obsolescence of man. Anders describes the growing disproportion between the productive capacities of technology and the cognitive, moral, and psychological faculties of the human being. This imbalance, which he terms the Promethean Gap (*prometheisches Gefälle*), reveals a profound rift between what humans are technically capable of producing and what they are ethically and mentally prepared to comprehend, evaluate, and assume responsibility for.

This asymmetry produces significant existential consequences: disorientation, a sense of powerlessness, alienation from one's own creations, and, in extreme cases, shame for having generated devices that escape control and exceed the boundaries of human comprehension. The paradigmatic example of this dynamic, according to Anders, is the nuclear threat: the destructive capacity inherent in this technology radically surpasses our ethical and psychological preparedness to confront its implications.

2. The Promethean Gap: Technology Beyond Human Measure

From these premises, Anders constructs a harsh critique of contemporary philosophy's tendency to retreat into abstract speculation, evading direct engagement with the pressing challenges posed by the industrial-technical world. He denounces the inadequacy of a form of reflection that continues to dwell on classical texts, such as Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, while new realities demand novel forms of ethical responsibility and practical engagement. For Anders, the philosophy of technology must not remain an abstract contemplation; it must instead become a tool for warning—a pre-emptive mode of action capable of guiding human behavior in a society increasingly dominated by autonomous technological systems.

The second volume of *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen* [1], published in 1980, is situated within this theoretical framework, completing the analysis begun in the first volume. Anders offers not only an inquiry into the transformations of the individual and the world in the twentieth century but also an ethical-political call to action. He urges us to confront the challenges of technology hic et nunc, here and now, and to transcend the condition of the "inverted utopians" [2,3]: beings capable of constructing a technological future without the moral resources to inhabit it responsibly.

Anders's reflection compels a radical rethinking of the human-machine relationship. This does not entail a rejection of technology per se, but rather a deep interrogation of how the pace of its development threatens the very foundations of human subjectivity, undermining purposeful action, the dignity of labour, environmental integrity, and the cohesion of ethical and social bonds. In this sense, Anders's work stands as one of the most lucid and urgent philosophical critiques of technological modernity.

His analysis anticipates many of the current anxieties related to artificial intelligence, automation, and ecological collapse. The Promethean Gap is no longer a theoretical abstraction but a lived condition of late modernity. Anders challenges us to develop not only technical safeguards but also ethical and imaginative frameworks to counterbalance our creations. In doing so, he advocates for a renewed form of human agency, one grounded in responsibility, foresight, and moral resilience. His work remains a crucial reference for any philosophy of technology that seeks to reconcile innovation with the preservation of human meaning.

Drawing on a formulation originally expressed by Heidegger, Anders reflects critically on the role of the human being in the technological age, describing modern individuals as *shepherds of our world of products and machines* (*Hirten unserer Produkt- und Gerätewelt* [1]. With this image, Anders intends to highlight a fundamental shift

in the human-technology relationship: the modern subject is no longer an autonomous and active agent, but rather a passive custodian, a mere supervisor who ensures the continuous operation of technological systems that he or she no longer fully understands or controls.

While Anders borrows the metaphor of the "shepherd" from Heidegger, he inverts its original ontological meaning. For Heidegger, the human being bears the singular responsibility of being the *shepherd of Being* (*Hirte des Seins*) [4], a role that involves safeguarding the openness in which Being can appear, acting as a mediator between Being and beings, and enabling this disclosure through language, thought, and care. Heidegger's shepherd is thus a figure of ontological attentiveness and interpretive agency.

In contrast, Anders's shepherd is no longer the guardian of Being, but the caretaker of a world of autonomous artifacts, a world that eludes human comprehension and moral command. The shift from the *Hirte des Seins* to the *Hirte der Gerätewelt* encapsulates Anders's broader diagnosis of technological alienation; modern humanity, rather than revealing Being, increasingly finds itself subordinated to the opaque logic of its own creations. This metaphor powerfully illustrates the erosion of human agency in a context where machines no longer serve merely as tools but begin to dictate the conditions of life itself. Experiencing the own self in the age of technology entails confronting the Heideggerian *Unheimlichkeit* [5], a state of not feeling at home that is marked less by recognizing oneself as a stranger than by the more radical fracture of being too deeply torn away from that estrangement, in the form of anguished disorientation.

"Shepherds of being" [Hirten des Seins], as Heidegger situated us, in an even Biblical way, that is, anthropocentrically, thus vastly overestimating "man's place in the cosmos" (a cosmos that is not affected in the least by whether we still exist or have disappeared); no, we are certainly not "shepherds of being". We consider ourselves instead to be *shepherds of our world of products and machines*, which, however much more imposing than us they may be, need us as servants (as consumers or owners, for example) [1].

In contemporary capitalism, as Fuchs points out, the human being tends to be reduced to a mere resource: no longer a subject, but an object to be used, calculated, and consumed. It is in this sense that Anders speaks of *homo materia* [1,5], emphasizing how today to be means, first and foremost, to be raw material. Existence itself is thus conceived in terms of its availability and functionality, transforming the human into a component of the productive cycle, on the same level as things [6].

Machines now exceed human beings in power, complexity, and speed. Yet, despite this superiority, they still depend on us, though no longer in the sense of ontological stewardship. Rather than acting as guardians or interpreters of their meaning, we increasingly assume the role of servants. Our subordination unfolds primarily through our position as consumers, constantly compelled to purchase, use, and update technological products. Secondarily, we appear as owners, nominally in control, but in reality subject to the rhythms, demands, and imperatives of the very devices we claim to possess. According to Anders, humans now conform to technology rather than shaping it. He argues that, in contrast to historical totalitarian regimes, which used tactics like mass gatherings to control the population, we now participate in our own subjugation [7]. We do this voluntarily by using personal devices and paying for services that enable constant surveillance, essentially monitoring and controlling ourselves from the comfort of our own homes [8].

3. Inside the Factory: Man at the Service of Machines

The relationship between humans and machines, particularly in the sphere of labor, is thus no longer one of sovereign mastery or Heideggerian guardianship. It more closely resembles, in Anders's view, a servile devotion to an object that has acquired fetish-like status, invoking the Marxian notion of commodity fetishism, in which products are endowed with an almost mystical autonomy, concealing the social relations and forms of domination embedded within them. The industrial revolution marks a decisive rupture in the human-machine dynamic, introducing a logic of mechanization that fundamentally transforms the conditions of labor. In this process, the worker is no longer the subject who commands the tool but becomes a functionary within a larger system, one increasingly defined by automation, standardization, and alienation. In the context of the factory, errors are often attributed to human beings

rather than to the machine itself. Thus, in the attempt to eliminate imperfections and limitations, humans end up being replaced by the technology they created, losing control over what was once their tool [9]. Anders offers a particularly critical perspective on this development, directing harsh critique at the factory system as a site where human individuality is subordinated to technical efficiency and instrumental rationality. Through this lens, technological modernity appears not as a story of human emancipation, but of progressive subjugation, a condition in which we serve the very systems we have created, bound to their logic by consumption, routine, and a loss of existential sovereignty.

Günther Anders recounts his experience of working in a Californian factory, emphasizing that the only thing he saw right before their eyes was the fragment of the product that passed before us and then disappeared; a fragment, he specifies, for the manufacture of which "*we had been gathered there* [1], yet without any possibility or even desire to know more. He insists that curiosity had been eliminated and that they had absolutely no interest in what they were doing, since they were not supposed to have any interest; but rather, they were supposed to work without purpose. Even asking an engineer for clarification would have meant being regarded as eccentric, or, in the climate of McCarthyism, being considered security risks. For Anders, to call that practice labor was false, not to mention granting it too much honor, for it was instead a kind of gymnastics performed daily, consisting of un-free exercises dictated by the assembly line. He accordingly evokes Modern Times by Chaplin, in which the protagonist is no longer able to free himself from those un-free movements and watches his hands dance like some strange species of animal—a condition that Anders ironically calls Chaplinitis. Anders shows how the industrial worker is reduced to a disciplined body performing senseless gestures, cut off from the purpose of his activity and even from the possibility of asking questions, an emblem of a modernity that dehumanizes by transforming labor into blind and purposeless repetition [1].

With paradoxical and acerbic tones, Anders exposes the alienation inherent in modern labour, portraying it as an empty and mechanical routine—a kind of purposeless "gymnastics" performed not out of intrinsic necessity, but merely to stave off social marginalization and existential inertia. In this framework, labor is no longer a means of self-realization or contribution to a shared world, but a compulsory performance that workers are paradoxically forced to defend as a right, even though it depletes them of meaning. What Anders underscores is the internalization of a logic in which the necessity of the superfluous is accepted as inevitable: individuals embrace the obligation to work not because the labor has value in itself, but to avoid the stigma of enforced passivity or economic exclusion. Thus, work becomes a placeholder, a ritual that conceals its own emptiness. It functions less as a site of genuine productivity and more as a strategy to fill time, to escape the discomfort of inactivity in a society that dreads idleness more profoundly than it resents exploitation. In this context, labor assumes the status of a simulacrum, an imitation of purpose and meaning that masks its own futility. Anders's critique exposes a society in which the appearance of activity is elevated over its substance, and where the fear of the void overrides the pursuit of authentic human fulfilment.

Anders radicalizes his diagnosis of modern alienation, extending it from the individual experience to the condition of hundreds of millions of workers who, though reduced to mere meaningless gymnastics, nonetheless regard themselves as fortunate compared to the unemployed and even claim this mechanical repetition as a fundamental political right. The author thus reveals the paradox of an activity which, far from being genuine labor, constitutes only a dissimulated form of doing nothing—a mode of passive consumption of time that translates into biological survival and social conformism. The image of the "daily gruel of time" swallowed by workers underscores the insipidity and emptiness of an existence reduced to routine, in which the only perceived alternatives are social marginalization or television-induced inertia. What emerges is a corrosive critique of industrial modernity, in which labor not only loses its productive and creative function, but is transformed into a mere filler of existence, confirming the profoundly dehumanizing nature of the technological and capitalist system [1].

Anders offers a stark and unsettling portrayal of the monotonous passage of time, the "daily gruel" that accumulates meaninglessly in the life of the modern individual. This image encapsulates a broader critique: while the industrial worker is already entangled in a difficult and alien-

ating relationship with the machine, Anders insists that modern technology extends its grip far beyond the factory walls. It now permeates the entirety of human existence. From the television set in the living room to the increasingly automated rhythms of daily life, the ordinary person lives in an unceasing, mediated relationship with technological devices.

Anders can be seen as one of the most profound thinkers of the 20th century precisely because of his ability to synthesize Heideggerian ontological inquiry with the socio-economic critique of Marx. His thought traverses the existential implications of technology while remaining grounded in the material and social structures it produces. In doing so, Anders unveils a condition in which alienation is no longer confined to the sphere of labor, but becomes a total mode of being.

Already in the 19th century, Karl Marx had diagnosed the transformative and often violent effects of industrialization on human life. For Marx, the relationship between man and machine is not merely technical, but fundamentally political and economic. Machines, far from being neutral instruments, become vehicles through which capital asserts and reproduces its dominance over labour. Their introduction into the production process leads to a redefinition of human work, reducing the worker to an appendage of the machine, stripping labor of its creative and subjective dimensions.

Anders takes up this Marxian insight and radicalizes it: in the age of advanced technology, alienation is no longer limited to the industrial proletariat but is extended to the entire human condition. The machinery of everyday life, cloaked in convenience and progress, ultimately conceals new forms of domination, passivity, and existential disorientation.

According to Marx, the introduction of machines in industry was due not to the fact that using mechanical means to do some of the work could reduce the burden of fatigue for human beings, but to the discovery that a machine can be a formidable means for producing a surplus of goods. It shortens the part of the working day that the worker uses for himself, consequently prolonging the part of the working day that he makes available free of charge to the capitalist [10].

Marx and Anders converge on a critical insight: the progressive marginalization of the worker. For both, the machine embodies and absorbs technical knowledge, reducing the human being to a mere executor of automated processes. This shift not only deprives the worker of agency and creative labour but also strips work of responsibility, purpose, and meaning, marking a profound transformation in the human relationship to production.

The machine, which is the starting point of the industrial revolution, supersedes the workman, who handles a single tool, by a mechanism operating with a number of similar tools, and set in motion by a single motive power, whatever the form of that power may be. Here we have the machine, but only as an elementary factor of production by machinery [11].

The search for meaning in work becomes increasingly tragic for the modern worker. While Marx identifies alienation as a result of capitalist exploitation, Anders locates it within the worker's estrangement from technology itself. In both cases, the traditional ideal that "work ennobles man" collapses, replaced by a sense of futility, disconnection, and loss of dignity in the face of mechanized and dehumanized labour.

Marx argues that with the advent of modern industry, the relationship between the worker and their tool is inverted. In traditional manufacturing, the worker's skill dictates the rhythm and quality of the labor. With the introduction of machinery, it is the worker who must adapt to the constant, mechanical motion of the automaton. The goal is no longer for the worker to use a tool, but for the machine to use the worker. The factory, which is a system of machines, demands a new form of cooperation. Unlike in manufacturing, where each worker was bound to a specific task for life, the use of machinery makes this rigidity obsolete. Since the movement of the system does not depend on the workers but on the machine, workers can be moved from one station to another without interrupting the production cycle. The worker effectively becomes an extension of the mechanism, an interchangeable cog within a larger, impersonal system [11].

It is noteworthy that the quotation in question could be attributed equally to Marx or Anders, as their analyses exhibit a remarkable convergence. Both thinkers emphasize the disposability of the worker within the mechanized labour process. Rather than the machine adapting to human

needs and rhythms, the worker is compelled to conform to the demands and pace of the machine. This dynamic reflects Anders's fundamental assertion that man has become little more than the overseer of machinery, a role marked by subordination rather than mastery.

The human body, as an instrument, primarily coordinated through the interplay of eye and hand, bears inherent structural limitations in terms of precision, strength, and endurance. It relies on relatively modest muscular energy and is susceptible to rapid fatigue. More crucially, its performance is contingent upon subjective and variable factors such as attention, motivation, and intentionality, all of which resist standardization and mechanistic regulation. These human qualities introduce unpredictability incompatible with the rigid demands of industrial production.

Within the capitalist mode of production, therefore, the introduction of machines does not liberate the worker from physical toil but enforces a new form of domination. The worker is no longer an autonomous agent but becomes a mere appendage to the machine's operations. This relationship engenders a profound intensification of alienation: labour is reduced to repetitive, fragmented tasks that negate creativity and agency. The worker's estrangement extends not only to the product itself but also to the production process, which is governed increasingly by the impersonal logic of capital accumulation and technological automation. In this context, technology paradoxically undermines its own promise of emancipation. Far from facilitating human freedom, it enmeshes workers in a system where control is ceded to machines and the capitalist imperative, thereby perpetuating and deepening the very forms of alienation that Marx and Anders alike sought to critique. This critical intersection underscores the urgent need for a re-evaluation of the human-machine relationship within contemporary socio-economic frameworks.

So much does objectification appear as loss of the object that the worker is robbed of the objects most necessary not only for his life but for his work. Indeed, labor itself becomes an object which he can get hold of only with the greatest effort and with the most irregular interruptions. So much does the appropriation of the object appear as estrangement [12].

In stark contrast, within the regulated realm of the "republic of machines," the interaction and cooperation among devices engender a complete standardization of technical activity. Gestures and movements that were once variable and contingent upon the living human body become fixed, repeatable, and uniform. This mechanization of action eliminates the unpredictability inherent in manual labour, transforming skill into a codified sequence of motions. Concurrently, the temporality of production processes contracts: operational stages follow each other with increasing rapidity and precision, accelerating the rhythm of industrial activity. Automation represents the systematic amplification of tendencies already present in individual machines. On one side, the artisanal mastery and nuanced dexterity traditionally required are absorbed and replaced by the rigid, standardized motions of mechanical tools. On the other, the physical effort necessary to power these tools is centralized and supplied by a motor that uniformly distributes energy throughout the entire system. This configuration enables a profound recursive expropriation of human agency, as control over production shifts from the individual worker to an autonomous, serial, and impersonal technical apparatus. Through this logic, technique evolves into an independent force that no longer requires direct human intervention, fundamentally restructuring the role of labor. The human becomes increasingly marginalized, reduced to a mere overseer or maintainer of a system whose complexity and uniformity exceed individual comprehension or influence. This mechanized totality thus exemplifies the culmination of the estrangement that both Marx and Anders critically diagnose: a loss of subjectivity and autonomy in the face of technological rationalization [13].

The industrialization of the 19th century and the technological advances of the 20th century gave rise to a profound social problem. While Marx addressed worker alienation, he had not fully grasped the issue of worker substitutability. From an ontological perspective, Anders argues that human obsolescence reaches such an extent that traditional concepts of space and time become inadequate to capture the depth of this transformation. The acceleration of change, its sheer magnitude, and the constant pressure of ever-new events produce a condition of disorientation that not only makes it difficult to preserve the past but also erodes the very desire to do so. The issue is therefore not merely cognitive but existential: living im-

mersed in a perpetually transforming present fosters the perception of memory as useless or impracticable, encouraging a systematic attitude of oblivion. Anders suggests that such forgetfulness is not the result of individual superficiality, but rather the consequence of a system that, by imposing relentless rhythms, prevents the sedimentation of time and the construction of a conscious historical horizon. The outcome is a condition of collective vulnerability, in which society, deprived of memory, loses the capacity to recognize its responsibilities and to avert the recurrence of catastrophes [1].

Anders highlights the increasing disparity between humanity's ability to produce advanced technologies and its limited capacity to fully understand or ethically engage with their consequences. Although humans invent powerful and autonomous machines, they remain psychologically and morally ill-equipped to confront the outcomes of their creations. This disconnect fosters a novel form of alienation, where individuals experience a sense of inferiority toward their own technological offspring. This condition is encapsulated in Anders' concept of Promethean shame, not because humanity has stolen fire from the gods, but because we are no longer capable of mastering the fire we have ignited ourselves. *Half a century later, Anders perceives a mass malaise implicitly driven by the desire to become substitutable, in the face of commodities that exist as so many mute witnesses to our own insufficiency* [14]. For Anders, existence itself is deeply enmeshed with technology. The modern individual is embedded within a technical system that reduces them to an unconscious cog in its machinery. Rather than acting as a fully aware and autonomous subject, the person functions primarily as a functional element within broader systemic processes.

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 [15].

Anders proposes a novel concept of ethical guilt, one that exists independently of awareness or intent. This is a guilt without deliberate fault, without conscious participation, yet it remains genuine because the harmful consequences are real and stem from our actions. In today's technological civilization, responsibility becomes fragmented and diffused across complex systems, undermining traditional ethical frameworks grounded in intention, will, and direct involvement. This shift recalls Anders' earlier critique of Aristotelian ethics, highlighting its inadequacy in addressing the moral challenges posed by modern technology.

Anders reflects on the existential consequences of a profound internalization and transformation of shame. The individual becomes disengaged from the world, not merely indifferent, but effectively excluded from meaningful participation: the *world is no longer offered to him* [16]. This withdrawal is twofold: through callousness, which hardens the subject against emotional engagement, and through an abstracted "purity," which elevates detachment to a moral or aesthetic stance. In denying the contingent and arbitrary nature of his own entrance into existence, the imposture of worldliness, the individual attempts to distance himself from the randomness and vulnerability inherent in human life. Anders presents this as a form of self-imposed exile, where the refusal to confront the world's contingencies and imperfections leads to a moral and experiential isolation. The excessive internalization of ethical or existential ideals, without recognition of human contingency, can alienate the individual from the very reality in which he is embedded, producing a life of estrangement and diminished agency [16].

Man has lost the capacity to feel shame for his actions, or inactions, in the world, effectively repressing this fundamental moral sentiment. This shift reflects the postmodern or post-technical condition, where emotions like shame and guilt no longer find a clear space to emerge or be confronted. Rather than engaging with these feelings, individuals increasingly distance themselves from them, adopting a detached, abstracted stance. Consequently, man becomes a mere spectator of the world around him. This detachment is rooted in the relationship with the machine in the factory, the pivotal moment when man first assumes the role of observer rather than active participant in the unfolding reality.

Humans now acknowledge the superiority of things,

bring themselves into line with them, and welcome their own reification. This also means that non-reification is condemned as a shortcoming [17,18].

Anders acknowledged the formidable power and capabilities of machines, especially within the contexts of industrialization and the proliferation of automation. He recognized their significant role in enhancing human productivity, efficiency, and comfort. Nonetheless, Anders issued a cautionary critique regarding the uncritical acceptance and pervasive reliance on technological apparatuses, emphasizing the potential adverse social and ethical consequences. Similarly, Marx conceptualized the machine as a pivotal instrument through which capitalists seek to augment relative surplus value by minimizing necessary labor time and maximizing productivity. This process, however, occurs at the profound expense of the worker's dignity and subjectivity. Consequently, technology under capitalism cannot be regarded as neutral; rather, it functions as a mechanism of exploitation and capital accumulation, embedding social relations of power within its technical structure.

An American air force instructor teaches his cadets that humans, in their natural state, are 'faulty constructions' when measured against the tasks they face. Regardless of whether the instructor was joking or serious, a better attestation of the 'desertion' in question could not be thought up. Humans can only be considered constructions, 'faulty' ones even, once they are classed as machines. Only when the category 'machine' has become universally applicable and is deemed all-inclusive, can that which was not constructed be reinterpreted as a 'faulty construct' [17,18].

Traits historically regarded as inherent human vulnerabilities, such as physical fatigue, limited sensory acuity, susceptibility to pain, emotional volatility, and the challenge of maintaining sustained cognitive performance, are increasingly targeted for regulation and enhancement. However, this drive toward optimization does not constitute a true affirmation or celebration of the human condition. Instead, it often results in the reconfiguration of individuals in accordance with a mechanistic ideal, rendering them progressively analogous to artificial systems that already exceed human capacities in numerous specialized functions. This process raises critical questions regarding the implications of such transformations for human identity and agency within technologically mediated contexts.

'When I call us humans "faulty constructions," I do so precisely because we are rigid and unfree in comparison to things!' […] It is morphologically constant; morally speaking: unfree, stubborn and unaccommodating. Seen from the perspective of machines, it is conservative, anti-progressive, obsolete and un-changeable: a dead-weight in the rise of machines. In brief: we must invert the relation between freedom and unfreedom. Things are free and human beings are unfree [17,18].

Anders' portrayal of the factory worker, who struggles even to keep pace with the unrelenting conveyor belt, serves as a poignant metaphor for the dehumanizing effects of industrial labor. Unlike the machine, which operates continuously without rest, the worker is compelled to contend with physical exhaustion and the constant struggle for brief moments of respite. This dynamic is vividly illustrated through Anders' reference to Charlie Chaplin's 1936 film *Modern Times*, which functions as a satirical critique of industrial society and the alienation engendered by mechanized labour. The film follows the experiences of the iconic "Little Tramp," who is overwhelmed by the relentless tempo of the assembly line and the relentless drive for efficiency. Through a blend of comedic elements and poignant scenes, Chaplin exposes the erosion of human dignity in the machine age, while simultaneously portraying the protagonist's persistent efforts to retain hope and a sense of self amid economic and social adversity. This cinematic depiction encapsulates the broader existential challenges faced by workers within technologically dominated production systems, a central concern in Anders' philosophical critique.

Anders distances himself from Chaplin's portrayal in *Modern Times* [19]*;* there is, he argues, no human being who, with horror and a sense of alienation, becomes aware of having turned into part of a machine and continues to perform involuntary movements even away from the assembly line. On the contrary, "modern man" is disturbed because a residue of subjectivity still persists in him, whereas he ought or even wishes to be reduced to a mere cog. It is precisely the friction between human corporeality and mechanical rhythm, the inability to keep up with the conveyor belt, distraction, or even the simple need to scratch an itch, that reveals the difference between man and ma-

chine. Anders clarifies this contradiction through the comparison with the musician, the violinist, through practice, integrates the instrument into his own body, expanding their expressive capacity and remaining fully active in the learning process. The worker, by contrast, experiences the absolute inversion: he does not incorporate the instrument, but is himself required to become an organ of the machine, to be ingested into its processes. The paradox lies in the fact that he must actively strive to transform himself into a passive part of the productive system. In this way, Anders highlights the fundamental aporia of industrial labor: the adaptation required is not an enhancement of subjectivity, but its self-suppression—a process of internalizing passivity that reveals the profoundly dehumanizing essence of technological modernity [17,18].

Babich invokes the image of Fritz Lang's [20] *Metropolis* robot to argue, in line with Anders, that the film should not be understood solely as a metaphor for class struggle, but rather as a warning against the human desire to adopt the very qualities of machines: perfection, efficiency, and emotional detachment. From this perspective, she interprets the work as anticipating a process of "robotization" that no longer belongs merely to the realm of science fiction, but that materializes in everyday life through our increasing dependence on smartphones and social media [21].

4. From Alienated Labor to Alienated Being

A central concern in Anders' thought is the alienating effect of machines on human relationships and the consequent erosion of authentic experiences. He contended that the increasing predominance of technology in everyday life undermines meaningful connections, with oneself, with others, and with the broader world. The relentless emphasis on speed and efficiency inherent in the technological sphere curtails opportunities for contemplation, critical reflection, and genuine interpersonal engagement, thereby impoverishing the quality of human existence.

We can, in a sense, picture the human being – and this is now truly only an image – as clamped between two brackets, as if constrained by two forces that both challenge the 'self': on the one side the human is constrained by the 'natural it' (by the body, sex and species, and so forth) and on the other side by the 'artificial' (bureaucratic and technological) 'it of the technological device' [17,18].

According to Anders, humanity is increasingly burdened by its own technological creations, nuclear weapons, industrial machinery, and mass media, that have irrevocably transformed the world in ways that exceed human comprehension. He argues that our cognitive and emotional capacities have failed to evolve in tandem with the rapid advancement of technological power, resulting in a profound disjunction between human faculties and the existential challenges posed by these innovations. In contrast, Marx envisions an emancipatory potential wherein, freed from the dominion of capital, machines could alleviate human labor and serve as instruments of liberation, thereby affording individuals the temporal space for the full realization of their humanity. Yet, Anders poignantly observes the tragic inversion whereby man, having fashioned the machine as a servant, ultimately finds himself subjugated by it. In a desperate and almost grotesque attempt, humanity endeavors to regain mastery over its own creation, but from a fundamentally subordinate position. This analysis presciently anticipates contemporary philosophical debates surrounding automation, artificial intelligence, and the posthuman condition, highlighting the critical issue of human sovereignty in the technological era.

Anders reinterprets Hegel's master–slave dialectic in the context of the technological era, suggesting that the dynamic of domination and subordination can be understood through the relationship between humans and machines. In his ironic adaptation, the machine, once conceived as the obedient slave, becomes the new master by relegating its human creator or operator to the subordinate position (*The truth of the independent consciousness is accordingly the servile consciousness of the bondsman*) [22]. The paradox emerges when this new slave, the human reduced to dependency, attempts to reassert mastery over the machine, seeking to reclaim dominance over what has already surpassed him. Anders thus dramatizes the inversion of roles between humans and technology, exposing the risk of a new form of humiliation: the instruments designed to serve us acquire functional primacy, reducing humans to a marginal, secondary role. His reflection is not merely speculative but serves as a warning about the dialectical instability inherent in technological development: what begins as a

relationship of utility may evolve into subjugation, where the human aspiration to mastery is undermined by its own creations [17,18].

Man has become fundamentally ill-suited to the world he has himself constructed. His technical capabilities have outstripped not only his imaginative and ethical faculties but also his emotional capacities, rendering him a being disproportionate to his own creations. This tension lies at the core of Anders's concept of "Promethean shame", a profound sense of inadequacy experienced in the face of artifacts that surpass human efficiency, durability, and power. The terminology Anders employs, such as "fitting badly" ("*schlecht passend*") and "inappropriate" ("*unangemessen*"), is deeply symptomatic of this existential mismatch. Furthermore, Anders's critique remains strikingly relevant, as he confronts the prevailing discourse of his time with unrelenting irony and bitterness. He exposes how any critique of technology is systematically delegitimized by being branded reactionary, regressive, or anti-progressive, a rhetorical strategy that effectively immunizes technological development from ethical scrutiny. In this way, Anders highlights the critical need to reclaim the space for ethical judgment within technological discourse, challenging the assumption that technological advancement is synonymous with unequivocal progress.

Today, even the most dreadful machine can be successfully justified and defended if its critics are suspected of being Luddites. And since nothing is easier, this always succeeds [17,18].

The reflections of the German philosopher reveal a profound interweaving of philosophical inquiry and social engagement, underscoring the impossibility of formulating a purely abstract philosophical theory detached from interdisciplinary perspectives. His work persistently oscillates between incisive critique and rigorous philosophical analysis, refusing to treat the dominance of technology as a mere fact to be accepted. Rather, Anders elucidates how, in order to endure within a technologically mediated world, human beings increasingly assimilate mechanical modes of behavior themselves. This internalization manifests in the embrace of values traditionally associated with machines, efficiency, predictability, adaptability, and obedience, marking a voluntary and profound process of self-dehumanization. Through this lens, Anders's thought exposes the dialectical tension whereby the subject not only confronts external technological forces but also actively incorporates their logic, thereby complicating the ethical and existential dimensions of human existence in the modern technological epoch. Anders notes that *after all, to be like a machine is what they desire, and the task they have set themselves* [17,18].

He adds:

> Although humans are less malleable than their products, humans are also shorter lived, more mortal. It is impossible for humans to compete with the durability – yes even the 'immortality' – they can give to their products if they want to [17,18].

This paradox lies at the very heart of Anders' philosophical inquiry: the finite and fragile human being has produced objects whose durability surpasses his own existence. Anders terms this phenomenon "Industrial-Platonism" (*Industrie-Platonismus*) [18], an inversion of classical Platonism wherein the archetypal forms no longer reside in a transcendent realm of ideas but are instead instantiated in industrial artifacts, endlessly reproducible and standardized models. These technological objects outlive their creators, embodying qualities such as permanence, efficiency, and replicability that remain inaccessible to the human subject. Thus, Anders highlights a fundamental ontological and existential disjunction: while man is bound by finitude and fragility, his technological creations manifest an enduring presence that both transcends and eclipses human temporality and agency.

For the man who is flush with cash, each thing can reincarnate itself in a new one. And this prospect of reincarnation only ends when the 'idea' of the thing also dies, that is, when its make is dropped in favour of another one. The thousand copies produced from the blueprint of that particular make, of course, then also gradually disappear. […] Here too, what counts is only our own disadvantage: only the fact that we cannot share the virtues that we bestow on our products [17,18].

This dynamic gives rise to a profound ontological frustration, which Anders conceptualizes as Promethean shame. As man confronts the realization that he cannot attain the technical perfection embodied by the objects he has fashioned, he experiences a sense of inferiority and

existential displacement. Rather than passing away as a subject endowed with intrinsic value and meaning, he is reduced to mere raw, unformed matter, contrasted starkly with the artificial, manufactured objects that appear to possess a form of superior, enduring existence. This inversion destabilizes traditional conceptions of human exceptionalism and foregrounds the crisis of subjectivity in the technological age.

In this state of shame, the light of his life went out. And because he could not ascend to the Mount Olympus of manufactured goods, but plunged into the Hades of raw material, he ended-up more destitute than all the fabricated things he had valued during his lifetime [17,18].

Anders articulates this condition as a profound double failure: firstly, humans have become increasingly incapable of addressing their own challenges, as machines surpass them in calculation and problem-solving capacities; secondly, they lose the ability to even identify as "problems" those phenomena that elude quantification and algorithmic calculation. This dual incapacity signals the erosion of human autonomy, wherein individuals are not merely subjected to technological instruments but are fundamentally subordinated to the impersonal logic that governs them. Thus, Anders reveals a critical dimension of the human condition under technological dominance—a submission not only to tools but to the systemic rationalities embedded within them. Alvis notes that human beings have become disconnected from an imaginative engagement with their quotidian activities, resulting in what Anders terms an apocalyptic blindness and a form of optimism grounded in abstraction rather than concrete understanding [23].

1. The competence of humans to resolve their problems themselves, because in comparison to the machine their ability to calculate and work things out equals zero.
2. The problems themselves if they cannot be evaluated and computed by a machine [17,18].

Man's aspiration to freedom is absolute, non-negotiable, but also pathological [24], because it does not reckon with limits. Man wants to be entirely himself, totally free, but in the hyper-technological world, this aspiration is constantly frustrated by an impersonal, programmed order [25]. Freedom thus becomes an unresolved remainder, a drive that finds no space within the mechanical order [24].

The aspiration to freedom by its very nature knows no scale and is without measure: to be partially free is not enough. The self (das Ich) does not only want to be itself now and again; the individual does not only want to be individual as an attribute. The self, rather, desires to be absolutely free, individual through and through, nothing but itself. This overstretched aspiration is 'pathological' [17,18].

Anders maintained that humanity has attained the unprecedented capacity to annihilate itself, and potentially all life on Earth, through its technological innovations. Yet, he contended that this formidable power has not been matched by an equivalent development of wisdom or ethical responsibility necessary to govern and control such technologies prudently. This perspective resonates deeply with Ortega y Gasset's tragic reflection on the human condition. In the complex and estranged relationship between man and the world, particularly in the context of technology, humanity confronts the critical choice identified by both thinkers: the imperative to save itself amidst the very forces it has unleashed.

This consciousness, which does not precede life but coincides with it, is the one that allows Ortega to understand analyses very close to those of Heidegger. The understanding, in Ortega, is not something optional, but what accompanies intrinsically to live: «living, in its root and implies themselves, consists in a know and understand...». And in the world we meet and know ourselves as something strange. It is about the heideggerian's Geworfenheit, of being like thrown. Ortega gives him marine terminology: Life is in itself and always a shipwreck. Or also: «the life is to realize me, to know that I am your merged, castaway of an element strange to me». We are living in a problematic circumstance. Hence a requirement: to save oneself, to do everything possible to survive in spite of the difficult [26].

Ortega's analysis of consciousness as inseparable from living resonates deeply with Heidegger's notion of *Geworfenheit*, emphasizing the human condition of being thrown into a strange and problematic world. This image of shipwreck highlights existential precariousness and the ongoing need for understanding to face the inherent uncertainty of our circumstances. The imperative to save oneself becomes an ethical and vital call to action amid

difficulty. Thus, Ortega, Heidegger, and Anders invite us to acknowledge this condition in order to responsibly confront the challenge of human existence in an increasingly technologized and complex world. This reflection is crucial for grasping the urgency of a philosophy committed to concrete life and its risks. In this paradoxical condition, in which human beings appear diminished and disproportionate in relation to their own creations, Anders identifies the crucial issue of the twenty-first century. He sees in this the great problem of our time, a dilemma that can only be addressed by rediscovering a form of moral imagination capable of reconnecting what we produce with what we are able to imagine and represent [27].

5. Conclusion

Günther Anders's philosophy offers one of the most radical and lucid critiques of technological modernity. By introducing the notions of the obsolescence of man and the Promethean Gap, he uncovers the existential disproportion between what humans can produce and what they are capable of understanding and controlling. This asymmetry reveals itself not only in the factory but in every domain of life, shaping a pervasive condition of alienation, disorientation, and shame toward our own creations. His analysis, in dialogue with Marx and Heidegger, exposes the non-neutrality of machines, which embody logics of domination and subordination. At the same time, Anders anticipates many of today's challenges, from artificial intelligence to ecological collapse, urging us to face new technology. Far from proposing a rejection of technical progress, his thought demands the development of new ethical, political, and imaginative frameworks to preserve human agency.

As artificial intelligence advances in specific tasks, individuals tend to delegate decisions and evaluations to these technologies, thereby jeopardizing their sense of relevance. Anders emphasized that the primary danger of technology does not lie in its capacity to destroy, but in the gradual erosion of human purpose. This phenomenon often fails to provoke horror, as the constant consumption of convenience and algorithmic guidance leaves little room for critical reflection. In this context, reliance on the judgment of machines undermines the individual's capacity to engage in meaningful and conscious action [28].

In this way, Anders's legacy remains an urgent call for responsibility, foresight, and resilience in a world increasingly shaped by autonomous systems. What his philosophy ultimately invites us to do is not to turn away from technology, but to learn how to inhabit it differently. He reminds us that our survival depends on cultivating an ethical imagination capable of seeing beyond the promises of progress, of questioning the infrastructures that silently govern our lives, and of accepting the limits that make us human. Rather than seeking to compete with machines on their own terms, Anders urges us to recover a slower, more reflective relation to the world, one that resists the cult of efficiency and keeps open the fragile spaces where freedom, responsibility, and meaning can still take root. In this sense, his thought does more than diagnose a crisis; it gestures toward the possibility of a renewed human presence within the technological age.

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