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From *Genus Mortalium* to *Mortal Genus*: Anders' Monster

Filippo Ursitti

In this piece, I explore how the philosopher Günther Anders declines the concept of 'monstrous' through the atrocities of the extermination camps at Auschwitz and the atomic bombing at Hiroshima. According to him, these dramatic events are related to and connected by mediality, which de-responsabilises the agents committing such barbaric actions. The piece is structured in the following manner: First, it presents a short introduction to the concept of mediality and its role in both Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Second, it focuses on the atomic bomb as the best example of today's 'monstrous' through the epistolary exchange between Anders and the Hiroshima pilot Claude Eatherly. Third, it will present the anthropological consequences of the bomb as described by Anders himself.

I

Horkheimer and Adorno write, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that both the 'theoretical and practical tendency toward self-destruction has been inherent in rationality from the first moment, not only in the present phase but when it is emerging nakedly.'¹ And yet, after World War II (WWII), this identification between the *ratio* and domination seems to need further analysis. The Frankfurters changed their perspectives on the monstrous atrocities of the twentieth century until Auschwitz turned from the inevitable outcome of the totalitarian destiny inscribed in the Western *ratio*—or in capitalism—to a catastrophic blackout between the *deutscher Geist* and the historico-political development of Germany. Of a different opinion is G. Anders—German-Jewish intellectual and anti-nuclear militant—who maintains the idea of the persistence of the social conditions which produced the twentieth-century barbarism even after the end of the Cold War. In his 1964 book *We Eichmann's sons*, Anders identifies two roots of the term 'monstrous': Auschwitz and Hiroshima, which, for the author, indicate the institutional

¹ In this sense, Auschwitz was not caused by the decline of reason but by the hypertrophy of instrumental reason. See Max Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. xix.

and industrial extermination of people.² What shocks Anders the most is the awareness that what has happened can happen again today unless we fundamentally change the assumptions on which our society is built. But unfortunately, today's norms dramatically resemble these of yesterday's barbarism. The two roots identified by Anders are strictly connected,³ in fact, even though they run parallel historically, they intersect on one fundamental point: *mediality*. Under this concept, both the administration of a country and the jobs of its population lose their *telos* (purpose) and become a form of 'collaboration' or 'conformism' deprived of any responsibility or consciousness for the sake of the apparatus.

Anders uses the image of the 'factory' (*Betrieb*) for explicating the model of the medial activity. The medial principle of conformism is present in every factory, in the big mechanised one as well as in the small one. The factory is, therefore, the place where the 'medial' man without a conscience is created.⁴ Thus, mediality refers to the transformation that the concepts of 'work' and 'action' undertook in the modern era, of their blending together under the same camouflaging net. Under mediality, the worker does not even need to know what she is producing; in truth, it is this exactly this expropriating her of this piece of knowledge that prevents her from having consciousness in the first place. Hence, while the worker is held responsible for the efficiency of the product she is producing, she is also not responsible for the product's purpose. This is one of the most frightening characteristics of our epoch: whatever the product of our work is, this is 'beyond good and evil'.⁵

As already mentioned, the notion of 'action' underwent a similar transformation to that of 'work', so that its morality, within an organisation or a factory, is replaced by efficiency. What does the term 'action' imply? If 'acting' presupposes, together with a free choice, the ability to judge the effect of its consequences, then, by eliminating these—such as in the case of the division of the tasks typical of the working chain in a factory—we cannot speak of 'actions' or 'agents' anymore. Under the limitless mediation of our working processes,⁶ mediality produces monsters. Auschwitz, as the symbol for the

² See Günther Anders, *Noi Figli Di Eichmann* (Firenze: Giuntina, 1995), p. 24.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴ Anders, *L'uomo e Antiquato* Vol 1 (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1992), p. 297.

⁵ Anders, 1992 p. 297, and Günther Stern, *Die Atomare Drohung: Radikale Überlegungen* (München: C. H. Beck, 1981), p. 82, 145.

⁶ Anders, 1995, p. 30.

extermination camps realised by the Nazis, is, according to Anders, the result of a process directed by mediality itself. The employees of the *lager* did not act but work.⁷ The mediality explains why common men with common lives and irreproachable past behaviours could have been the perpetrators of such infamies. Moreover, mediality explains the indignation of such ‘workers’ before the judges who considered them guilty of such brutality. They felt that to describe them as dehumanised and monstrous was wrong: if they were not capable of feeling remorse or shame, this was not *because* they collaborated, but rather because they *only* collaborated: they never felt themselves to be directly perpetuating the horrors. Anders notices that for the Germans, it is impossible to recognise and perceive the atrocities as theirs as well as identify themselves with the Nazi criminals that they were, because between them and the fact there is a distance; they were ordered to do so. Also, they did not commit these murders as the individuals they are now—i.e., citizens of a democratic Germany—but in quality of Nazi soldiers, lieutenants, doctors, etc., which leads to a renewed distance since they are not Nazis anymore.⁸ Even in the case in which they do not fail to recognise themselves, they profess that they did not *directly* kill anyone, but that the *Zyklon B*⁹ did. Finally, for decades the Germans never talked about their crimes, and, as Anders notes, ‘what is not discussed today is forgot tomorrow and maybe it never happened the day after tomorrow’.¹⁰ We are at the beginning of a new era, where the previous systems of morals cannot work anymore since they never postulated the fact that one could be found in the position of continuously transporting masses of corpses to a crematorium.¹¹ Anders sees this same behaviour—‘exusation’ (*Unschuldhaltung*) for having ‘only collaborated’—in the pilots responsible for the atomic bombing on Japanese soil at the end of WWII. These pilots, simple members of a highly mediated apparatus which acts through a chain of decisions and segments of actions, view themselves as having ‘only collaborated’ without knowing what they were actually doing. They did not feel any guilt or shame for the actions committed. Only Claude Eatherly behaved differently.

⁷ Anders, 1992, p. 299.

⁸ Günther Anders, *Dopo Holocaust*, (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1979), p. 49.

⁹ The poison used in the gas chambers.

¹⁰ Anders, 1979, p. 50.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

II

Between 1959 and 1961, Anders had a long epistolary exchange with Claude Eatherly,¹² the pilot of that scouting aeroplane which, on the 6 August 1945, gave the signal that led to the bombing of Hiroshima. Destroyed by the sense of remorse, Eatherly tried to assuage his guilt by committing crimes and seeking arrest,¹³ attempting suicide, and finally by taking part in the pacifist movement against the proliferation of atomic weapons. Beyond the truthfulness of Eatherly's remorse,¹⁴ what is important is the meaning that Anders gives to such a figure who is depicted as the symbol of the 'innocently guilty' (*schuldlos schuldig*):¹⁵ innocent because he did not know the monstrous potential of the bomb, and guilty for becoming cog and accomplice of the crime¹⁶. Eatherly is, therefore, a precursor to the symbolic figure of an era in which we are 'innocently guilty'. The exceptionality of his figure resides in his comprehension of his complicity (even though necessarily useless) and his repentance for something he collaborated to unleash; the fact that he felt morally and emotionally responsible for an action he did not directly commit¹⁷ makes him—for Anders—an instructive figure for the modern age.¹⁸ Eatherly shows us that even when we are remotely connected with a terrible event, we should consider ourselves responsible for its consequences, for we have helped it happen.

Auschwitz and Hiroshima represent two dramatic and monstrous examples of an intrinsic tendency of the modern society that expresses itself in two different manners: first, the transformation of the war into a process of annihilation that surpasses the scopes of any war,¹⁹ and second, through the

¹² Published as *Off limits für das Gewissen. Der Briefwechsel zwischen dem Hiroshima-Piloten Claude Eatherly und Günther Anders*.

¹³ 'Fake' robberies of banks during which he would not harm anybody or take the money but patiently wait for the police to arrest him.

¹⁴ In the preface of *Hiroshima ist überall*, Anders refers to two texts, the first of Friedrich Torberg (see *Günther Anders. La guerre froide et l'Autriche. A propos d'une polémique entre Günther Anders et Friedrich Torberg*) and the second *The Hiroshima Pilot* of William Bradford Huie, which aimed at accusing Eatherly of being a liar and a lunatic who used the circumstances in which he found himself only to fulfil his ego.

¹⁵ Günther Anders, *La Coscienza Al Bando Il Carteggio Del Pilota Di Hiroshima Claude Eatherly e Di Gunther Anders* (Torino: Einaudi: 1962), p. 21.

¹⁶ Günther Anders, *I Morti Discorso Sulle Tre Guerre Mondiali* (Treviso: Linea d'Ombra, 1990), p. 79.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

¹⁸ Anders, 1962, p. 22.

¹⁹ A definition of war requires resistance to be possible: Hitler did not declare war against any inmates of the extermination camps, he was simply 'annihilating' via technical means. This same principle was applied in Hiroshima, both were crimes of the same kind. See Günther Anders, *Essere o Non Essere. Diario Di Hiroshima e Nagasaki* (Torino: Einaudi, 1961), p. 115–116.

transformation of ‘massacring’ into ‘working’. Both the extermination camps and the atomic bombings are examples of the reification of death, realised through the *techne*. In this way, death can be hidden behind the appearance of a job well-done or even as heroic deeds. These killings were misdeeds and atrocities which were assigned as jobs to those who had to perpetuate them. As nephews of the industrial era, we learnt that working does not *olet* (stink); it is an activity that produces outcomes that are not related to us or our consciousness. It is exactly *via* this lesson that the workers under capitalism become the best kind of people to commit mass murders since the realisation of what they are actually doing is ‘off limits’ for their awareness.²⁰ Since mediality does not simply direct the modern organisation of the working place, but has been further radicalised, it remains the main reason for monstrous crimes. ‘Monstrous’ is the outcome that might proliferate from mediality, the possibility of taking part in mass murder and not even realising it. Hence, Anders refutes the optimistic hope of the nineteenth century where the development of the *techne* would automatically increase human understanding.²¹ We live in a world so dark that we cannot see how dark it is. If we live in an irrational world, it is because we live in a system where an extreme division and rationalisation of working corresponds with an instrumental irrationalism.²²

In so far as a philosophical concept, the bomb is a completely unknown being,²³ a *terra incognita*. This is why Anders borrows from negative theology the categories to examine such a being. As soon as we try to approach it, we realise how abnormal it is: it is an object *sui generis*, that is, the only exemplar of its species.²⁴ The need for negative theology which classifies entities only by enumerating all the attributes they do not possess shows why we should, *mutatis mutandis*, utilise this method to discover what the bomb is not.²⁵ The reason for doing so is immediately explicit as soon as we try to ascribe to the atomic bomb conventional categories such as that of ‘weapon’ or ‘means to an end’. Considering the bomb according to the ‘means-end’ perspective is totally inadequate because the concept of ‘means’

²⁰ Günther Anders, *L'uomo e Antiquato* Vol II (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003), p. 153.

²¹ Anders, 1995, p. 31.

²² Anders, 2003, p. 373.

²³ Anders, 1992, p. 247.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 259–60.

implies the idea that it is a means for an end, and that in this end, the means would disappear once it reaches its scope.²⁶ But this is not the case of the bomb, because the usage of the bomb would produce an escalation of events bigger than any other political or military purpose, putting on hold even the usage of further means, thus nullifying the principle of ‘means-end’ as such.²⁷

In this sense, the atomic bombs work in an ‘anarchic’ manner in regard to our epoch, and its other objects, which admit only means. This characteristic explains why the bomb is often classified as means in order to minimise its monstrous power, interpreted as a weapon among other weapons. But the fallacy of this way of reasoning is displayed by the proliferation of atomic armaments. The only reason for producing more weapons is to keep them updated and destructive, but since the number of atomic bombs is already enough for killing the entire human race, the development of atomic bombs appears futile. We cannot increase the effect of global scale annihilation. Moreover, Anders finds another reason for the impossibility of seeing the atomic bomb as a means: it denies the distinction between potential and actual usage, which constitute a fundamental aspect of every means. On the one hand, the bomb is constantly used as a means of oppression, owning one is already a form of oppression towards all the other nations who do not possess it; on the other hand, it appears as blackmail turned into an actual object.²⁸ In this way, even the difference between good owners and bad owners of the bomb fades away. Does not every single controller of such a device become, for the only fact of controlling it, a criminal?²⁹ A new form of global blackmail emerges, boundless both in time and space,³⁰ so powerful that it turns its omnipotence into a flaw.³¹ The bomb either blackmails everyone or nobody.³²

The fact of escaping every possibility of conceptual or perceptive understanding turns the bomb into an ontological *unicum*. In the past, the entities that could not be defined were called ‘monstrous’

²⁶ Ibid., p. 260.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 261.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 267.

²⁹ Anders, 2003, p. 310.

³⁰ The effects of radiation are longer than human life itself.

³¹ Every owner of the atomic omnipotence not only can completely destroy the other owners but can himself be destroyed by them. He is as omnipotent as he is powerless. See, Stern, *Die Atomare Drohung: Radikale Überlegungen*, (München: C.H. Beck, 1981) p. 17, and Anders, 1995, p. 268.

³² Anders explicates this concept using the formula: *Habere=adhibere* (to have=to deploy). The non-usage of atomic bombs is a non-sense. See, See, 1981, p. 181. This is why owning one is so attractive for third world countries and terroristic organisations, see, Konrad Paul Liessmann, *Günther Anders* (München: C. H. Beck, 2002), p. 123.

for they were *monstra*, that is, they were entities that, despite being outside the natural domain, existed. Such is the case of the atomic bomb: it exists although it has an indeterminate nature that keeps us with bated breath.³³ Thus far, we have seen how the bomb is something that goes beyond our perception, for it defies our attempts to describe it or define it. But is it not what Kant defines as ‘sublime’? Is it possible to juxtapose the ‘sublime’ to the ‘monstrous’ atomic bomb? Kant discusses our capacity of perceiving immeasurable large objects while discussing the sublime in the *Critique of Judgment*. Anders, interested in this analysis, tries to refute its conclusion by using Kant’s theory to approach the atomic bomb. In the analytics of the sublime, Kant defines ‘sublime’ as what, for the only fact that we can think of it, demonstrates how the human mind can go beyond the human senses.³⁴ According to Kant, the inability to perceive the sublime in its grandeur and infinity, the flaw of human awareness proves nonetheless that human beings possess a faculty that goes beyond the phenomenal perception, that they are owners of a noumenic ability that counterbalances their inadequacies.³⁵ Thus, when we admire the sublime, we are implicitly admiring ourselves, for the sublime is not in the objects but this human faculty.³⁶ That is why, according to Kant, we feel proud of ourselves, despite the ‘displeasure’ that the terrible or the immeasurable produce in us, this frightful perception becomes a feeling of pleasure that excites us.³⁷

Anders witnesses the inapplicability of the Kantian theory nowadays for two reasons: first, we are dealing now with human actions or human products and not, as Kant pointed out, with ideas. Second, the gap that we are facing now is not between ‘reason’ and ‘imagination’ but between ‘action’ and ‘imagination’. What is immeasurably large now is not the sublime but rather the horrible and the

³³ Anders, 1992, p. 265.

³⁴ Günther Anders, *Discesa All’Ade* (Bollati Boringhieri, 2008), p. 43.

³⁵ Anders, 2008, p. 43.

³⁶ Kant writes:

We observe that whereas natural beauty (such as is self-subsisting) conveys a finality in its form, making the object appear, as it were, preadapted to our power of judgement, so that it thus forms of itself an object of our delight, that which, without our indulging in any refinements of thought, but, simply in our apprehension of it, excites the feeling of the sublime, may appear, indeed, in point of form to contravene the ends of our power of judgement, to be ill-adapted to our faculty of presentation, and to be, as it were, an outrage on the imagination, and yet it is judged all the more sublime on that account. [...] For the sublime, in the strict sense of the word, cannot be contained in any sensuous form but rather concerns ideas of reason, which, although no adequate presentation of them is possible, may be excited and called into the mind by that very inadequacy itself which does admit of sensuous presentation.

See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911), p. 245.

³⁷ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p. 245.

monstrous, that is, the boundless crime that we fail to morally understand.³⁸ For Anders, while Kant believed in being proud of the fact that we try to acquire more than we can normally get from our imagination, thus finding that we were capable of going beyond our phenomonic existence and of aiming at the noumenic, we, modern human beings, do not have any right to this pride. It does not matter what the gap between our actions and imagination means anymore, the only crucial question is: what are the consequences of such a discrepancy? These consequences have nothing to do with the noumenic unless we want to apply them to the ‘monstrous’. The fact that we are incapable of foreseeing the effects of our products being monstrous and frightening makes us capable of committing crimes *ad libitum* without realising it.³⁹

III

Now that we have seen the methodological implications of Anders’ negative theology of the bomb, we can now focus on the meaning of its historico-philosophical and moral consequences for comprehending the new position of mankind in the cosmos. Through the bomb, according to Anders, mankind has jumped into the absolute by becoming omnipotent, although in a negative sense.⁴⁰ For representing the contradictory essence of our new historical age, Anders utilises the metaphor of the titan who belongs to a new species, the lords of the apocalypse, but desires, because of the danger implied in his omnipotence, to regress to the previously existing human form.⁴¹ But what makes this dream impossible is the irrevocability of our technoscientific knowledge. This leads Anders to write that we do not live in the era of materialism, but rather in a second platonic epoque, for we are capable of producing things that are beyond our understanding. In 1945 we did not enter the atomic era because we created three atomic bombs, but because we possessed the formula for making plenty more of them.⁴² No matter the effort to block atomic proliferation, mankind will still know how to produce atomic bombs. Thus, this era we are

³⁸ Anders, 2008, p. 44.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 44–45.

⁴⁰ Stern, 1981, p. 11.

⁴¹ Anders, 1992, p. 253.

⁴² Anders, 2003, p. 30.

living in is the last one because its intrinsic feature, that is, the possibility to annihilate humanity, will never come to an end unless it actually exterminates us all.⁴³ Through this fundamental observation, Anders can affirm that the possibility of passing from one age to another ended in 1945, for now, we do not live in an era which will anticipate others but rather in an indeterminate period before a deadline (*Frist*) during which our own existing cannot be other than a 'just-being-here', because the danger we have unleashed *via* our product can never end if not with the end itself.⁴⁴ Instead of the proposition 'all men are mortal', after the monstrosities of the twentieth century, we should have adopted the proposition 'all men are disposable', which is further changed by the atomic bomb to 'humanity is disposable'⁴⁵: from the *genus mortalium* to the mortal *genus*. The essence of our time has become the essence of time itself, that is, caducity (*Vergänglichkeit*).⁴⁶ In this sense, even history is turned into something else: if normally it means the story of something that is not anymore, with the bomb and the possibility of the annihilation of mankind, it has turned into nothing itself. It cannot be identified with what we usually call the 'past' since it will deal with what will be no more and, therefore, has never been.⁴⁷ Instead of the Solomonic motto: whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before, we should use 'whatever is has never been' because there will be nobody to remember what once has been;⁴⁸ the past would disappear together with mankind. If *monstra* were entities impossible to define but yet existing, then the bomb has turned everything into one undistinguishable monster.

⁴³ Anders, 1961, p. 201.

⁴⁴ Anders, 2003, p. 14.

⁴⁵ Anders, 1992, p. 254–255.

⁴⁶ Stern, 1981, p. 60.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁴⁸ Anders, *L'uomo e Antiquato* Vol I, p. 256.

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