

# Technification and moral responsibility

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Practice essay on the IPO 2021 prompt

Developed sections only. Outline notes and unfinished sections have been omitted.

## TOPIC 4

“The ‘technification’ of our being: the fact that to-day it is possible that unknowingly and indirectly, like screws in a machine, we can be used in actions, the effects of which are beyond the horizon of our eyes and imagination, and of which, could we imagine them, we could not approve—this fact has changed the very foundations of our moral existence. Thus, we can become ‘guiltlessly guilty’, a condition which had not existed in the technically less advanced times of our fathers.”

Burning Conscience: The case of the Hiroshima pilot,

Claude Eatherly, told in his letters to Günther Anders.

Letter 1: Günther Anders to Claude Eatherly. June 3rd, 1959. Rowohlt Verlag GmbH, 1961.

An incredibly ethical technician is hired via a mobile application to fix the broken propeller mechanism for a war drone. He comes in and is shown only the propeller, unaware of the end of the machine it is a part of. He fixes the propeller and leaves as the drone takes off, killing more than a hundred people in a nearby town.

Through this quote, Günther Andres highlights precisely this problem. Introducing the term ‘technification’ to refer to the idea of humans being employed for increasingly specific means to ends that they can’t know, he makes us ask if unethical ends imply that such an actor is unethical as well.

Through this essay, I shall argue that (A.1) the technician is guiltless according to the moral code, as they are used as a mere “screw in a machine,” unaware and unapproving of the ends, whereas (A.2) they might condemn themselves of being guilty without ever having a way to predict the ends of their action, causing cognitive dissonance, or rather a “burning conscience.” This way, I will elucidate the radical change in the foundations of our moral existence that Eatherly talks of.

I shall also argue, taking this quote from Andres’s letter as a starting point and agreeing with it, that (B) such cases of beings being ‘guiltlessly guilty’ are a modern phenomenon emerging as a result of our modern-day technology, akin to the mobile application and the modular parts of the drone in the story.

## **The landscape of Technicification**

As a majority of the world has accepted the sociopolitical system of capitalism, optimizing for consumption has become a likely consequence. To optimize for this level of increased consumption, efficient production became a necessity, requiring increasingly specialized jobs. Since it is in the best interests of the higher management to ensure every “screw in this machine” keeps to their own tasks, they lack knowledge of the system as a whole. Because of the design of the system, it is in the interest of the workers to get increasingly specialized and efficient because that is what they are rewarded for. This force from either side results in a historically incomparable degree of myopia, as all people are stuck to some level in this system and are unscrupulous in analyzing the world outside of their specialized task. It is not hard to see how this is similar to one of humanity’s most brutal regimes: A clerk signs a paper, a mason lays the bricks for a gas chamber, and an engineer fixes the pipes for the transport of the gas; none of them directly commits murder, but murders of millions happened this way. But, while the latter system was engineered for efficient killings, technification wasn’t. It is just a consequence of the high degree of specialization that such cases as that of the technician who fixes the war drone are common, making the problem of distribution of guilt in such cases increasingly relevant. To this end, I side with the quote on that “guiltlessly guilty” is an apt framework to categorize such cases and I will explain further in part A of my argument with the example of a pilot during Hiroshima.

It is also the case that technological advancements have made it such that now, a very blown-up proportion of people stand in the balance for decisions or actions taken by these “machines.” With an influence so great, technocracies are now not a far-off possibility. I shall discuss this implication along with Part B of my argument.

## **The Machine**

### **Examination and Culpability**

The technological advancements of today have made it easier for a person from anywhere in the world to become an unyielding and unknowing indirect accomplice to a crime with far-reaching consequences. A programmer can be recruited from 1000s of kilometers away and be made to crack a specific firewall under the pretense of getting access to one’s own personal domain in an operation that leads to a theft of millions of dollars without the programmer ever knowing the scale of the issue. This is a problem similar to that of the technician fixing the propeller. If led in under a false pretense, which would make the actor think as if they are doing nothing unethical and assume zero guilt, only to be a screw in a machine killing hundreds, has on the part of the actor, no guilt. I argue that since the actor was essentially tricked into performing the task they are specialized to regularly perform in society, but to ends that are far more damaging, it does not make them guilty if they did their fair share of analysis about the consequences of their action. Thus, the guilt here lies on a spectrum. The more examination an actor does of the potential future consequences of their action relative to what is possible, the less culpability they carry. This is to say that if an actor is reckless in thinking through the most basic reasoning to identify that their actions cause greater harm than good, and then conducts that action, they are guilty of a lack of scrupulous examination.

## **Intentionality implies Culpability**

To further characterize this problem, I find it apt to talk of the issue with respect to which the quote has been chosen: The case of the Hiroshima Pilot. It is quite clear that an American pilot tasked with dropping nuclear bombs during the Hiroshima bombings knew that his act of doing so would certainly be the cause of death for several hundred Japanese, and perhaps that was a degree he could justify to himself. However, it can be reasonably assumed that he was unaware of the nuclear fallout that would follow and the impact that lasted several generations after the detonation. It is also reasonable to assume that there was no way in which they could predict the true scale of this, as even Robert Oppenheimer, the architect of the bomb, was way off in his estimates of the true harm and faced mania because of this difference.

In this case, it is quite clear that both the actors knew that there was going to be some loss of life, say,  $X$ , because of their actions. However, it is the opaque system that led to the harm being a larger amount, say,  $Y > X$ . So, our traditional system of ethics, both consequentialist and deontological, tells us that the actors deserve the culpability for that part since they could have predicted it in advance and still chose to undertake an action that would cause a loss of life. In these cases, the actor carries  $X$  guilt for their intentionality, whereas the remaining  $Y - X$  can be attributed with a similar line of reasoning as in part i.

A counter-argument I anticipate for the first part of (ii.) is that switching to an alternate ethical system that relies on fulfilling one's duty doesn't cause these problems to arise e.g., the ethical system of Dharma, which dictates that it is the duty of the warrior to obey the orders of their superior, and to not do so is to be unethical. In this system, the ethics is adherence to the orders of the machine. This is especially a relevant counter-argument because the ethical doctrine of Dharma was designed for/born out of an old Indian society that believed highly in specialized jobs and made it a part of the social order.

I would like to respond to this counter-argument as follows:

In cases where the impact is so far removed from the action that it is impossible to predict what one's action would cause, then, I would argue that sticking to the Dharma, if it is a choice with no clear unethical harm, is the ethical choice.

However, if it is discernible that or already a given that the job causes loss of life or other harm, then, it is not a right Dharma, because it is an innate ability for reason that distinguishes all human beings from other creatures and it is this reason that one must safeguard and to bow down to a system ("machine") and take an action that does not respect nor recognize other people's capacity for reason, is to be unethical (Kantian Human Formula)

## **The guilty in “guiltlessly guilty”**

Returning to our example of the Hiroshima pilot, having shown their innocence with respect to the excess guilt because of not understanding the true scale of the effect, we can see how they could hold themselves accountable for more guilt than they actually have. Since they did not have additional knowledge about the true scale, their situation is akin to the actor in a neo-Frankfurt case who is given the choice to choose between two options, but at the same time, a chip in their mind hinders them from fully knowing the consequences of what could happen if they chose either. The choice they make at such a time isn't a free choice. Thus, they cannot be culpable for that additional guilt because of having killed more people in the present and hurting many more in the future. However, despite lacking full knowledge before making the choice, they might feel liable when they see the whole event unfold after the impact manifests. This is a psychological phenomenon. It is easier to connect the dots when looking back at something than when looking ahead. This is because there are uncountable possibilities for ways to reach the future, whereas when looking back, one has to merely track a path back.

In this way, the pilot, the technician, or Oppenheimer might hold themselves to be more guilty than they are. This excess guilt is what can be termed as causing them to be “guiltlessly guilty” as they suffer the mental baggage that looking back at their actions carries. They suffer cognitive dissonance as their values do not align with the actions they facilitated. This is why many of them, after being such critical screws in these operations, require Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) therapy and are also more likely to engage in self-harm, giving us real-world proof for the phenomenon of being “guiltlessly guilty.”

Having explained the manifestation of the feeling of being “guiltlessly guilty,” I shall now analyze why this is a phenomenon more common to today's advanced technological era.

## **Technological Advancements to The Machine**

### **Tools of War**

Wars used to be because of local tensions or conquest efforts. But today, the possibilities of remote warfare not merely through long-range missiles but also local naval and air bases that are maintained by powerful nations around the world make it such that any conflict around the world has the potential to turn global instantly, bringing in a lot more people into the balance for every ethical choice made thereafter. This increases the stakes for all of these decisions, and thus there's a larger burden on every screw in the machine. However, what's perhaps more important is that the ability for modern technology to be employed universally allows for complex systems to be constructed where the tasks are so specific that no one person can imagine the role of the complete system. This has great implications in organized crime, where now more than ever, people have been joining remotely to serve functions such as calling in fake tips to distract the police, delivering letters and parcels, the contents of which they are unaware of, for purposes they don't fully understand, etc. Of course, one might recognize that this action seems suspicious, the prospect for quick economic gain is coupled with the opacity of the machine, making these tasks common “unethical” entry-points.