
Anders HCI

Prometheus and his Mobile Phone

Christopher Frauenberger

christopher.frauenberger@tuwien.ac.at

HCI Group, TU Wien

Vienna, Austria

ABSTRACT

In this position paper, I would like to discuss the work of Günther Anders, a German-Austrian philosopher whose work revolves around the relationships of humans and their tools and technologies. Anders coined the term Promethean Shame to describe a phenomenon he identified in the narratives that humans construct about their technological lifeworlds. More specifically, he observed how humans increasingly measure themselves against the capacities of their machines and consequently feel increasingly insufficient and ashamed for the imperfections that come with being born, rather than being made. While Anders conducted his work at a time where television and the atomic bomb were live-changing inventions, his work is being (re-)discovered, also outside the German speaking world, as it eerily resonates with descriptions of the close entanglements humans have developed with their digital tools today. In this paper I will sketch the notion of the Promethean Shame, discuss possible interpretations for HCI and point to possible implications for the science and the practice of HCI.

KEYWORDS

philosophy

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¹Literally, Epimetheus translates to “After-Thought”, while Prometheus means “Fore-thought”, pointing to Prometheus’ ability to plan ahead and act strategically

In Greek mythology, Prometheus brings fire to humanity, an act that kick-starts progress and civilisation, for which he is cruelly punished by Zeus. Various thinkers have harnessed this myth as a productive way of thinking about the relationships between humans/humanity and technology. Anders and later Stiegler in *Techniques and Time 1* argue that humans are “born naked” – a clumsy oversight of Epimetheus¹, the not so bright brother of Prometheus – without fur, weapon or bedding and therefore have always and necessarily been defined by the tools they invented for themselves. They argue that this artificiality and unfinishedness means that humans and their tools have always mutually constituted themselves and have co-evolved over time. Humans are, as Anders puts it, foreign to this world (“weltfremdheit” [1]) as they define themselves through the machines they build for themselves.

Christopher John Müller writes in his commentary and translation of Anders’ “Promethean Shame”:

Prometheus opens us to ways of thinking about technology that resist the intellectually comfortable position of mobilising a *false opposition* between ‘humanity’ and ‘technology’ when looking ahead into our digital future [emphasis in the original] [8].

This resonates with descriptions of how entangled humans have become with the digital technologies that we are surrounding ourselves with or indeed implanting in us. Müller quotes Kathrin Hayles who writes about how the lack of a phone signal or an internet connection or a low battery can make us feel “lost, disoriented, unable to work” or even give us the impression that our “hands have been amputated” [5]. Anders, born 1902, lived through both world wars and at times of great inventions that shaped humanity, such as the television or the atomic bomb. He died in 1992 and while the digital age was around the corner, naturally most of Anders’ arguments and examples refer to an analog, non-digital world. However, as Müller argues, his thinking remains eerily relevant. With smart things and smart services in smart environments, our entanglement with the digital tools we build for ourselves becomes ever more evident. The fire Prometheus has brought humanity turns out to be much more powerful than we ever thought and the assertion that we become what we build for ourselves rings truer than ever before.

In *Promethean Shame*, Anders’ analysis goes further and identifies not only the degree of mutual entanglement, but also a certain imbalance in these relationships. He argues that the perfection of the machines humans created, has reached a level that causes many humans to be ashamed for the imperfections that come with only being born, and not being made. While technology races from one version to its updated, improved and re-invented self (“An iPod, a phone and an internet communicator... do you get it? .. Its one device and we call it the iPhone”, Steve Jobs in 2007), we humans are stuck in our own, immutable bodies that have remained the same for thousands of years. We are weak, slow, act irrationally, are emotional and have to die. We experience real, not just

metaphorical shame for our own limited capacities when compared to the powers we bestow on our tools and technologies.

Sentiments of older people blaming themselves when wrestling with the latest smart phones serve as good examples of how this shame expresses itself in daily life. *Digitalisation*, in government, education, industry, media consumption or any other part of our lives, is the much hyped goal of politicians and societal elites. The narrative being endlessly repeated is that we need “to get fit” for this new age, which is enforced upon us as a given. We need to “take advantage” of what is coming and “face the challenges” in a changing world and who refuses to “go digital” will go under. Never do we hear that Digitalisation is a life-world that we create for ourselves and, in principle at least, have collective control over. We happily subordinate ourselves to the rule of machines, not because they are taking over the world in a dystopian coup-d’etat, but because we measure the worthiness of our own existence against the features of the machines we create. Few trends symbolise this as openly as the Quantified Self market. We literally quantify aspects of our life for them to become comparable in ways that we usually had reserved for machines. Sleep patterns, steps or social interactions are counted, monitored and charted just like the energy consumption of smart homes or the traffic flow in smart cities. Even our sex lives are being re-conceptualised as a digital market place. Tinder’s tag line states “Make every single moment count. Tinder is more than a dating app. It’s a cultural movement”. Notably, moments must not only “count”, but be count-able. Swiping left or right is designed to make dating as efficient as possible. Conversely, studies show that there is a trend towards a sex recession with most young people having fewer sex partners and suffer from the emotional detachment from others ².

²<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/12/the-sex-recession/573949/>

This resonates with Anders’ assertion that humanity is planning its own obsolescence. By framing our own existence in terms of the modern ideas of rational thought, efficiency and performance, we discover that we can develop machines which deliver on these measures of success much better than we can ever hope to do so - not within the evolutionary update cycles our bodies are subjected to, anyway. For some, the logical conclusion to be drawn here leads to the idea of trans-humanism, to the idea that humans need to evolve quicker than by evolution by ontologically merging with machines all together [6]. Anders, as expected, dismisses these (more precisely, older versions of these) ideas as the ultimate surrender to any notion of being human - we “become the products of our products” as Anders writes. The most fundamental trait of human existence, our finitude, is being abolished in favour of becoming a machine.

It is easy to simply cast Anders as a technophobe who would prefer humanity to go back to its cave. However, while his analysis is brutally exposing rather worrisome and dark trajectories, the reframing also offers alternatives. Human artificiality, its “nakedness in the world”, will always mean that we are defined by what we create for ourselves and naturally, there are many good reasons for humans to lean on technology for doing things that technology is better at. Stiegler elaborates on the

example of us relying on our mobile phones to remember contact details and the fact that the more we do so, the less we exercise our own memory. But Anders also reminds us, “what exists, does not have to be” and it is Promethean trickery that allows technology to appear as natural, invisible and given. The trouble of our times seems to be that we are “Inverted Utopians - while ordinary Utopians are unable to actually produce what they are able to visualise, we are unable to visualise what we are actually producing”

To point this, rather compressed version of Anders’ argument towards HCI means taking a progressive step back and to critically reflect on what the things we create tell us about who we want to be. And conversely, if we can find ways to formulate who we want to be in ways that can drive technological innovation. Anders himself suggests that “imagination needs to become an empirical method” and HCI may be a rather suitable field to take this to heart. I argue that we first need to develop a theoretical position that allows us to acknowledge and conceptualise the entanglement between humans and digital technology. This concerns both the agency of things in ordering power, as well as the fundamental ontological relationship between things and humans. To this end, HCI would benefit to further investigate theories of relational ontologies as a framework, e.g. Post-phenomenology, Actor-Network Theory [7]. The Agential Realism of Barad also seems a very promising candidate that acknowledges the ontological uncertainty in making the cut between humans and technology [2]. Methodologically, the thoughts of Anders clearly point towards a deep and productive engagement with imagining alternative futures for us humans as being defined through the things we surround ourselves with. A key challenge for HCI will be to bridge such discourse with designing and making things. Valuable work in Participatory Design has shown how this can be operationalised [4]. In particular, the notion of Agonistic Design seems promising as it recognises that both, the imagining and the making of alternative futures are inherently political activities which can only unfold in productive ways in arenas that scaffold agonistic conflict [3].

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