

Theses for the Atomic Age

1. *Hiroshima as World Condition*: On August 6, 1945, the Day of Hiroshima, a New Age began: the age in which at any given moment we have the power to transform any given place on our planet, and even our planet itself, into a Hiroshima. On that day we became, at least "modo negativo," omnipotent; but since, on the other hand, we can be wiped out at any given moment, we also became totally impotent. However long this age may last, even if it should last forever, it is "The Last Age": for there is no possibility that its "differentia specifica," the possibility of our self-extinction, can ever end—but by the end itself.

2. *The Time of the End Versus the End of Time*: Thus, by its very nature, this age is a "respite," and our "mode of being" in this age must be defined as "not yet being non-existing," "not quite yet being non-existing." Thus the basic moral question of former times must be radically reformulated: instead of asking "How should we live?," we now must ask "Will we live?" For us, who are "not yet non-existing" in this Age of

In February, 1959 at the Free University of Berlin, Günther Anders conducted a two-day seminar on "The Moral Implications of the Atomic Age." At its conclusion, the students asked Anders for a short text which could serve them as a basis for further discussion. Anders dictated these "theses," which later appeared as "Thesen zum Atomzeitalter," *Berliner Hefte* (1960), 16-22. The translation here printed is by Mr. Anders.

Respite, there is but one answer: although at any moment The Time of the End could turn into The End of Time, we must do everything in our power to make The End Time endless. Since we believe in the possibility of The End of Time, we are Apocalyptic, but since we fight against this man-made Apocalypse, we are—and this has never existed before—“Anti-Apocalyptic.”

3. *Not Atomic Weapons in the Political Situation, but Political Actions in the Atomic Situation:* Although it sounds absolutely plausible, it is misleading to say that atomic weapons exist in our political situation. This statement has to be turned upside down in order to become true. As the situation today is determined and defined exclusively by the existence of “atomic weapons,” we have to state: political actions and developments are taking place within the atomic situation.

4. *Not Weapon, but Enemy:* What we are fighting is not this or that enemy who could be attacked or liquidated by atomic means, but the atomic situation as such. Since this enemy is the enemy of all people, those who, up to now, had considered each other to be enemies, have now to become allies against the common menace.—Peace actions from which we exclude those with whom we wish to live in peace amount to hypocrisy, self-righteousness and a waste of time.

5. *To Threaten with Atomic Weapons Is Totalitarian:* A pet theory broad enough to be embraced by subtle philosophers as well as by brutal politicians, by Jaspers as well as by Strauss, runs: “If it were not for our ability to threaten with total annihilation, we would be unable to hold the totalitarian menace in check.” This is a sham argument for the following reasons: 1) The atom bomb *has* been used, although those who used it were not in danger of falling victim to a totalitarian power. 2) This argument is a fossil from the “ancient” days of atomic monopoly and has become suicidal today. 3) The catchword “totalitarian” is taken from a political situation which not only

Theses for the Atomic Age

has already fundamentally changed, but will continue to change; atomic war, on the other hand, excludes all chance of such a change. 4) By threatening with atomic war, thus with liquidation, we cannot help being totalitarian; for this threat amounts to blackmail and transforms our globe into one vast concentration camp from which there is no way out. Thus, whoever bases the legitimacy of this extreme deprivation of freedom upon the alleged interests of freedom is a hypocrite.

6. *Expansion of Our Horizon*: Since radioactive clouds do not bother about milestones, national boundaries or curtains, distances are abolished. Thus in this Time of the End everybody is in deadly reach of everybody else. If we do not wish to lag behind the effects of our products—to do so would be not only a deadly shame but a shameful death—we have to try to widen our horizon of responsibility until it equals that horizon within which we can destroy everybody and be destroyed by everybody—in short, till it becomes global. Any distinction between near and far, neighbors and foreigners, has become invalid; today we are all “proximi.”

7. *“The United Generations”*: Not only our horizon of space must be widened, but also that of time. Since acts committed today (test explosions, for instance) affect future generations just as perniciously as our own, the future belongs within the scope of our present. “The future has already begun”¹—since tomorrow’s thunder belongs to today’s lightning. The distinction between the generations of today and of tomorrow has become meaningless; we can even speak of a *League of Generations* to which our grandchildren belong, just as automatically as we ourselves. They are our “*neighbors in time*.” By setting fire to *our* house, we cannot help but make the flames leap over into the cities of the future, and the not-yet-built homes of the not-yet-born generations will fall to ashes together with our homes. Even our ancestors are full-

¹ This formula is taken from the title of Robert Jungk’s book, *Die Zukunft hat schon begonnen*.

fledged members of this League: for by dying we would make them die, too—a second time, so to speak; and after this second death everything would be as if they had never been.

8. *Nothingness—the Effect of the Not-Imagined Nothingness*: The apocalyptic danger is all the more menacing because we are unable to picture the immensity of such a catastrophe. It is difficult enough to visualize someone as not-being, a beloved friend as dead; but compared with the task our fantasy has to fulfil now, it is child's play. For what we have to visualize today is not the not-being of something particular within a framework, the existence of which can be taken for granted, but the nonexistence of this framework itself, of the world as a whole, at least of the world as mankind. Such "total abstraction" (which, as a mental performance, would correspond to our performance of total destruction) surpasses the capacity of our natural power of imagination: "Transcendence of the Negative." But since, as "homines fabri," we are capable of actually producing nothingness, we cannot surrender to the fact of our limited capacity of imagination: the attempt, at least, must be made to visualize this nothingness.

9. *"We Are Inverted Utopians"*: The basic dilemma of our age is that "We are smaller than ourselves," incapable of mentally realizing the realities which we ourselves have produced. Therefore we might call ourselves "inverted Utopians": while ordinary Utopians are unable to actually produce what they are able to visualize, we are unable to visualize what we are actually producing.

10. *"The Promethean Discrepancy"*²: This inverted Utopianism is not simply one fact among many, but the outstanding one, for it defines the moral situation of man today. The dualism to which we are sentenced is no longer that of spirit against flesh or of duty against inclination, is neither

² The elaboration of this category is given in the author's *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, 3rd ed. (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1961), 21-95.

Theses for the Atomic Age

Christian nor Kantian, but that of our capacity to produce as opposed to our power to imagine.

11. *The Supra-Liminal*: Not only has imagination ceased to live up to production, but feeling has ceased to live up to responsibility. It may still be possible to imagine or to repent the murdering of one fellow man, or even to shoulder responsibility for it; but to picture the liquidation of one hundred thousand fellow men definitely surpasses our power of imagination. The greater the possible effect of our actions, the less are we able to visualize it, to repent of it or to feel responsible for it; the wider the gap, the weaker the brake-mechanism. To do away with one hundred thousand people by pressing a button is incomparably easier than to slay one individual. The "subliminal," the stimulus too small to produce any reaction, is recognized in psychology; more significant, however, though never seen, let alone analyzed, is the "supra-liminal": the stimulus too big to produce any reaction or to activate any brake-mechanism.

12. *Senses Distort Sense. Fantasy Is Realistic*: Since our pragmatic life horizon (sec. 6), the one within which we can reach and be reached, has become limitless, we must try to visualize this limitlessness, although by trying to do so we would evidently violate the "natural narrowness" of our imagination. Although insufficient by its very nature, there is nothing other than imagination which could be considered as an organon of truth. Certainly not perception. Perception is a "false witness," in a far more radical sense than Greek philosophy meant when warning against it. For the senses are myopic, their horizon is "senselessly" narrow. It is not in the wide land of imagination that escapists of today like to hide, but in the ivory tower of perception.³

³ No wonder that we feel uneasy in front of those normal pictures which are painted according to the conventional rules of perspective. Though realistic in the ordinary sense of the word, they are actually utterly unrealistic since they ignore the limitless horizon of today's world.

13. *The Courage To Fear*: When speaking of the "imagining of nothingness," the act meant is not identical with what psychology imagines to be imagination, for I speak of fear, which *is* the imagining of nothingness "in concreto." Therefore we can improve the formulations of the last paragraphs by saying: it is our capacity to fear which is too small and which does not correspond to the magnitude of today's danger. As a matter of fact, nothing is more deceitful than to say, "We live in the Age of Anxiety anyway." This slogan is not a statement but a tool manufactured by the fellow travellers of those who wish to prevent us from becoming really afraid, of those who are afraid that we once may produce the fear commensurate to the magnitude of the real danger. On the contrary, we are living in the Age of Inability to Fear. Our imperative: "Expand the capacity of your imagination," means, in concreto: "Increase your capacity of fear." Therefore: don't fear fear, have the courage to be frightened,⁴ and to frighten others, too. Frighten thy neighbor as thyself. This fear, of course, must be of a special kind: 1) a fearless fear, since it excludes fearing those who might deride us as cowards, 2) a stirring fear, since it should drive us into the streets instead of under cover, 3) a loving fear, not fear of the danger ahead but *for* the generations to come.

14. *Productive Frustration*: Time and again our efforts to comply with the imperative, "Widen your capacity to fear and make it commensurate with the immensity of the effects of your activities," will be frustrated. It is even possible that our efforts will make no progress whatsoever. But even this failure should not intimidate us; repeated frustration does not refute the need for repeating the effort. On the contrary, every new failure bears fruit, for it makes us vigilant against our initiating further actions whose effects transcend our capacity to fear.

15. "*Displaced Distance*": If we combine our statement about the abolition of distances (sec. 6) with that about the

⁴ It is not Roosevelt's "Freedom from Fear" for which we have to strive, but the Freedom to Fear.

Theses for the Atomic Age

Promethean discrepancy (sec. 10)—and only this combination makes the picture of our situation complete—we reach the following result: the “abolition” of time and space distances does not amount to abolition of distances altogether, for today we are confronted with the daily increasing distance between production and imagination.

16. *End of the Comparative:* Our products and their effects surpass not only the maximum size of what we are able to visualize or to feel, but even the size of what we are able to *use*. It is common knowledge that our production and supply often exceed our demand and produce the need for the production of new needs and new demands. But this is not all: today we have reached the situation in which products are manufactured which simply contradict the very concept of need, products which simply *cannot* be needed, which are too big in an absolute sense. In this stage our own products are being domesticated as if they were forces of nature. Today's efforts to produce so-called “clean weapons” are attempts of a unique kind: for what man is now trying is to increase the quality of his products by decreasing their effects.

If the number and the possible performance of the already existing stock of weapons are sufficient to reach the absurd aim of the annihilation of mankind, then today's increase in production is even more absurd and proves that the producers do not understand at all what they are actually doing. The comparative, the principle of progress and competition, has lost its sense. *Death is the boundary line of the comparative: one cannot be deader than dead and one cannot be made deader than dead.*

17. *Appeal to Competence Proves Moral Incompetence:* We have no reason to presuppose (as, for instance, Jaspers does) that those in power are better able to imagine the immensity of the danger or that they realize the imperatives of the atomic age better than we ordinary “morituri.” This presupposition is even irresponsible. And it would be far more justified to suspect them of having not even the slightest inkling

of what is at stake. We have only to think of Adenauer, who dared to berate eighteen of the greatest physicists of today, telling them that they are incompetent in the "field of atomic armament and atomic weapons questions," and that they should talk shop instead and not "meddle" with those issues. It is precisely by using these vocables that he and his kind demonstrate their moral incompetence. For there is no more final and no more fatal proof of moral blindness than to deal with the Apocalypse as if it were a "special field," and to believe that rank is identical with the monopoly to decide the "to be or not to be" of mankind. Some of those who stress competence are doing so solely in order to disguise the anti-democratic elements of their monopoly. By no means should we be taken in by this camouflage. After all, we are living in allegedly democratic states. If the word "Democracy" has any sense at all, then it means that precisely the province *beyond* our professional competence should concern us, that we are not only entitled, but obliged—not as specialists but as citizens and human beings—to participate in deciding about the affairs of the "res publica." Since, after all, we *are* the "res publica," the reproach that we are "meddling" amounts to the ridiculous accusation that we are interfering with our own business. There has never been and will never be an affair more "publica" than today's decision about our survival. By renouncing "interference," we not only fail to fulfill our democratic duties, but we risk our collective suicide.

18. *Abolition of "Action"*: The possible annihilation of mankind seems to be an "action." Therefore those who contribute to it seem to be "acting." They are not. Why not? Because there is hardly anything left which, by a behaviorist, could be classified as "acting." For activities which formerly had occurred *as* actions and were meant and understood as such by the acting subjects themselves, now have been replaced by other variants of activity: 1) by working, 2) by "triggering."

1) WORK: SUBSTITUTE FOR ACTION: The employees in Hitler's death factories did, so to speak, "nothing," thought

Theses for the Atomic Age

they had done nothing, because they had done "nothing but work." By "nothing but work" I mean that kind of performance (generally considered to be the natural and only type of operation today) in which the *eidos* of the end-product remains invisible to the operator—no, does not even matter to him—no, is not even supposed to matter to him—no, ultimately is not even permitted to matter to him. Typical of today's work is its seeming moral neutrality; *non olet*; no work-goal, however evil, can defile the worker. Nearly all jobs assigned to and performed by man today now are understood as belonging to this universally accepted and monocratic type of operation. Work—the camouflaged form of action. This camouflage exempts even the mass murderer from his guilt, since, according to today's standards, the worker is not only "freed" from responsibility for his work, but he simply *cannot* be made guilty by his work.

Consequence: once we have realized that today's fatal equation runs, "All action is work," we have to have the courage to invert it and to formulate: "*All work is action.*"

2) "TRIGGERING"—SUBSTITUTE FOR WORK: What is true of work applies even more to "triggering," for in triggering, the specific characteristics of work—effort and consciousness of effort—are diminished, if not nullified. Triggering—the camouflaged form of work. As a matter of fact, there exists hardly anything today which cannot be achieved through triggering. It can even happen that one first push of a button sets in motion a whole chain of secondary triggerings—till the end-result—never intended, never imagined, by the first button pusher—consists of millions of corpses. Seen behavioristically, such a manipulation would be considered neither work nor action. Although seemingly no one would have done anything, this "doing nothing" would actually produce annihilation and nothingness. No button-pusher (if such a minimum-operator is still required at all) feels *that* he is acting. And since the scene of the act and the scene of the suffering no longer coincide, since cause and effect are torn apart, no one can perceive what he is doing—"schizotopia" by analogy with "schizophrenia."

Evident again (see above): only he who continuously

tries to visualize the effect of his doings, however far away in space or in time the scene of his effects may be, has the chance of truth; perception "falls short."

This variant of camouflage is unique. While formerly it had always been the aim of camouflaging to prevent the prospective victim from recognizing the danger, or to protect the doer from the enemy, now camouflaging is meant to prevent the doer himself from recognizing what he is doing. Therefore today's doer is also a victim. Eatherly⁵ belongs to those whom he has destroyed.

19. *The Deceitful Form of Today's Lie*: The examples of camouflage teach us something about the present-day type of lie. For today the lie no longer needs to dress itself in the costume of an assertion; ideologies are no longer required. Victorious today is that type of lie which prevents us from even suspecting that it *could* be a lie; and this victory has become possible because today lying no longer needs to assume the disguise of assertions. For whereas until now, in "honest hypocrisy," lies had pretended to be truths, they now are camouflaging themselves in a completely different costume.

1) Instead of appearing in the form of assertions, they now appear in that of naked *individual words* which, although seemingly saying nothing, secretly already contain their deceitful predicate. Example: since the term "atomic weapon" makes us believe that what it designates may be classified as a weapon, it already *is* an assertion, and as such, a lie.⁶

⁵ See *Burning Conscience, The Case of the Hiroshima Pilot, Claude Eatherly, Told in His Letters to Günther Anders* (New York: Monthly Review, 1962).

⁶ For a discussion of why the atomic bomb cannot be classified as a weapon, see the author's *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, 247 ff., *Der Mann auf der Brücke* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1959), 95 ff., and *Off limits für das Gewissen* (Rowohlt, 1961), 30 (English edition: London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962, p. 15). The main argument runs: a weapon is a means. Means are defined by dissolving in their ends, ends by their surviving the means. This cannot be applied to atomic weapons, since there is no end which could survive the use of those weapons and no end conceivable which could justify such an absurd means.

Theses for the Atomic Age

2) Instead of appearing in the form of false assertions, they appear in that of *falsified reality*. Example: once an action appears in the disguise of "work," its action-character becomes invisible; and so much so that it no longer reveals, not even to the doer himself, that ultimately he is acting; and thus the worker, although working conscientiously, enjoys the chance of renouncing conscience with a clean conscience.

3) Instead of appearing in the form of false assertions, lies appear in that of *things*. In the last example it is still man who is active, although he misinterprets his acting as working. But even this minimum can disappear—and this, the supreme triumph of lying, has already begun. For during the last decade action has shifted (of course through human action) from the province of man to another region: to that of machines and instruments. These have become, so to speak, "incarnated" or "reified actions." Example: through the mere fact of its existence, the atom bomb is an uninterrupted blackmailing—and that blackmailing has to be classified as an "action" is, after all, indisputable. Since we have shifted our activities and responsibilities to the system of our products, we believe ourselves able to keep our hands clean, to remain "decent people." But it is, of course, just this surrender of responsibility that is the climax of irresponsibility.

This, then, is our absurd situation: in the very moment in which we have become capable of the most monstrous action, the destruction of the world, "actions" seem to have disappeared. Since the mere existence of our products already proves to be action, the trivial question, how we should use our products for action (whether, for instance, for deterrence), is an almost fraudulent one, since this question obscures the fact that the products, by their mere existence, already *have* acted.

20. *Not Reification but Pseudo-Personalization*: One cannot adequately interpret the phenomenon by giving it the Marxian label of "reification," for this term designates exclusively the fact that man is reduced to a thing-function. We are stressing,

The Massachusetts Review

however, the fact that the qualities and functions taken away from man by his reification are now becoming qualities and functions of the products themselves, that they transform themselves into pseudo-persons, since, through their mere existence, they are acting. This second phenomenon has been ignored by philosophy, although it is impossible to understand our situation without seeing both sides of the process simultaneously.

21. *The Maxims of Pseudo-Persons*: These pseudo-persons have rigid principles of their own. The principle of "atomic weapons," for example, is pure nihilism, because, if they could speak, they would say: "Whatever we destroy, it's all the same to us." In them, nihilism has reached its climax and has become naked "Annihilationism."⁷

Since action has shifted from man to work and products, examination of our conscience today cannot confine itself to listening to the voice of our heart. It is far more important to listen to the mute voice of our products in order to know their principles and maxims—in other words, the "shift" has to be reversed and revoked. Therefore, today's imperative runs: have and use only those things, the inherent maxims of which could become your own maxims and thus the maxims of a general law.

22. *Macabre Abolition of Hatred*: If (sec. 18) the scene of action and the scene of suffering are torn apart—if the suffering does not occur at the place of the act, if acting becomes acting without visible effect, if suffering becomes suffering without identifiable cause—hatred disappears, although in a totally delusive way.

Atomic war will be waged with less hatred than any war before: attacker and victims will not hate each other since they will not see each other. There is nothing more macabre than

⁷ Even this climax of nihilism has been surpassed, for the principle of the neutron bomb would run: "Whomever we destroy, it's all the same to us. The world of objects, however, has to remain sacrosanct. *Products should not kill other products.*" As a matter of fact, this is the most radical perversion of moral principles which has ever existed.

Theses for the Atomic Age

this disappearance of hatred which, of course, has nothing to do with peacefulness or love. It is striking how rarely, and with how little hatred, Hiroshima victims mention those who have caused their suffering. This, however, does not mean that hatred will play no part in the next war: since it will be considered indispensable for psychological warfare, the production of hatred will, no doubt, be organized. In order to nourish what a perverted age calls "morale," identifiable and visible objects of hatred will be exhibited, in emergency cases invented—"Jews" of all kinds. Since hatred can bloom only if the objects of hatred are visible and can fall into the hater's hand, it will be the domestic scene from which one will choose scapegoats. Since the targets of this artificially manufactured hatred and the target of the military attacks will be totally different, the war mentality will become actually schizophrenic.

I HAVE PUBLISHED THESE WORDS in order to prevent them from becoming true. If we do not stubbornly keep in mind the strong probability of the disaster, and if we do not act accordingly, we will be unable to find a way out. There is nothing more frightful than to be right.—And if some, paralyzed by the gloomy likelihood of the catastrophe, have already lost courage, they still have a chance to prove their love of man by heeding the cynical maxim: "Let's go on working as though we had the right to hope. Our despair is none of our business."