

IFS Info 2/1997

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**The Meaning of Hiroshima
and Nagasaki**

About the Author

Dr Hayo Krombach, a philosopher by training, is a lecturer in the Department of International Relations at the London School of Economics. In 1991 he published *Hegelian Reflections on the Idea of Nuclear War: Dialectical Thinking and the Dialectic of Mankind* (London:Macmillan, 1991). In 1995, on the occasion of the Fiftieth anniversary of the atomic attacks on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Hosei University Press in Tokyo decided to translate Dr Krombach's original book into Japanese. This is an extended version of the preface to this Japanese edition.

The Meaning of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

This age, however long it may last, even if it should last forever, is the last age, for there is no possibility that the possibility of our self-extermination can ever end - but by the end itself. Since the time of the end could turn into the end of time, we have to do everything to make the end of time endless.

In countless acts of remembrance during its 50th anniversary in the Summer of 1995 the world paid tribute to the victims of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This commemorative event calls upon us to look at the stark reality of war in terms of both aggrieved and aggriever so as to develop a common understanding of history in which is now inscribed the destiny of mankind.

We have long retreated from the comfort of a confident ancient guiding through transcendent and divine points of reference to the modern factual point where we as individuals and as a species have begun to revolve precariously only about ourselves without orientation and meaning-giving moral principles. But how do we judge - from within the secular world and its seemingly enlightened yet disenchanting reality of history - our life at the cross-roads between its annihilation and unification? And according to what criteria of judgement and justification do we at all reason about it after having - since the development of the bomb - become omnipotent and impotent at the same time? This is therefore the moment, if ever there was one, to raise again the fundamental questions about the meaning of humanity.

What does it mean to be the only nation in the world to have been atom-bombed, to have had the cosmic power of the sun turned against Japan in anger? Many who were there in August 1945 and survived - know. Many of us today who also survived face a harder task: that of imagining and internalising an all-incinerating blast. It is difficult to manage such a mental leap from a distance in

time and space and to preserve in consciousness a sense of guilt but also vigilance against the *summum malum* we were so prone to perpetrate this century. In a way, though, we latter-day survivors the world over are immersed in what happened more than 50 years ago as well, for Hiroshima and Nagasaki have an extraordinary bearing on all of human existence. We are all survivors. We are all *hibakusha*. The bomb affects us all in our need to think adequately about its meaning for the present and the future to come.

The experience of physical and spiritual suffering transcends our usual conceptions of society and history. Yet it is incumbent upon us to translate the suffering of the *hibakusha* into a conscientious reflection on the relationship between the idea of nuclear war and the moral and political dilemmas this very idea poses for human action. For if we do not make this contemplative effort, the idea of war may not be coherent and strong enough to guide us in preventing a nuclear war and consequently turn it into a reality.

In this article, therefore, I wish to illuminate in a critical diction the vexed question of the responsibility of ethical thinking in the nuclear age. I hope thereby to complement, if only in schematic form, the holistic thinking as it unfolds itself in my book *Hegelian Reflections on the Idea of Nuclear War*. There I sought to explicate socio-historical dialectic and phenomenology and to delineate the process of their concept-formation for an understanding of the global organisation of human life. It is in dialectic that we find the immanent principle of all human social activity and movement, while in phenomenology the philosophy of subjectivity grounds this principle in a framework of consciousness, world, and history. And in these two cases it is conceptual pairs such as, for instance, subject-object, being-becoming, consciousness-self-consciousness, or understanding and reason, which connect otherwise isolated facts into contextual meaning. It is only when socio-historical relations are lived through in their reflexivity that we realise the need to respond to the threat to the sources of our existence and thereby become responsible for their protection. The book is a hermeneutic inquiry into

the philosophical implications of the idea of a nuclear holocaust. For this purpose it systematically interprets the thinking of previous philosophers and their question of how it is possible for individuals to comprehend a whole of which they are merely a part.

How has our understanding of the nuclear age changed since 1945? Hiroshima and Nagasaki determined the events after the Second World War in that they transformed from the very beginning the Cold War into the nuclear arms race and the balance of terror. The dropping of the bombs on Japan provided the proof that atomic weapons can be used, which in its consequence threatens all mankind in its future existence. In order to avoid an unparalleled catastrophe we must seek to combine the leap in technology with a leap in ethical consciousness. We must think through the philosophical conditions of human dignity when relating to others. For if we do not live up to the moral precepts that ought to bind us all, tragedy will come upon us.

The bombs grew out of history, yet they threaten to end history. Hence, they are a nemesis of all human intentions, actions, and hopes. Realising that the unthinkable is thinkable, we must learn to conform our actions to this truth or die. For this reason Hiroshima and Nagasaki are of fundamental historical significance. They point towards and are a picture of what our world is from now on always poised to become - a field of ashes without a Phoenix ever to rise again. This fact of evolutionary severance should humble us in our expectations. There is no evidence that any species, once extinguished, has ever evolved again. While death cuts off life, extinction cuts off birth. Being only part of life how can we at all step back from it and assess the disappearance of life as a whole?

The origin of the peril of human extinction seems to lie not so much in any particular social and political circumstances or the conflictual power constellations within the system of states. These situations are historically contingent. While for the time being a nuclear threat let alone attack is highly improbable, no prediction is possible as to future conflicts whose reasons may lead to their

escalation into crises, and these, in turn, may cause the outbreak of war and the use of nuclear forces. Though the rise and fall of power dynamics are subject to constant change and geographic shifts, in and of themselves they do not threaten the human species in its survival. The danger lies rather in the attainment by mankind as a whole, and after millennia of scientific and technological progress, of a certain level of knowledge of the physical universe and in our ability to utilise its forces for the construction of nuclear weapons. This knowledge now belongs of necessity to all places and to all times. But what we do not know is whether we have the psychological and philosophical maturity to live with the bomb for all eternity.

The nuclear age is therefore incommensurable with all of its antecedent history. Notions such as peace, freedom, and victory, when seen in global perspectives, have changed their meaning. In addition, deterrence, which is the mainstay at all levels of strategic relations, presupposes the preparedness to use the bomb as the weapon of last resort. But there is no guarantee that deterrence will always hold in all circumstances, or that the bomb will never be used should deterrence fail. With such uncertainty the question arises as to the mode of ethical reasoning about nuclear weapons once we know that the possibility of war is an inevitable dimension of the reality of human life.

We are faced with an antinomy which cannot be overcome. On the one hand, there is the understandable argument that nuclear weapons should be eliminated. On the other, there is the fearful insight that such a goal of duty can never be achieved. For even if it were politically and technically possible to dismantle all nuclear weapons systems, a residuum of the knowledge of how to build and deploy them would always burden our conscience. Our reflections, then, are caught in the antinomy between what is and what ought to be. An antinomy makes a choice possible. But in the case of nuclear weapons, which cover both sides of the antinomy, we cannot decide between the two expectations because each option confronts the other with irreconcilable

consequences.

The indelible lesson of the bomb, therefore, is that it sharpens the scepticism about the strength of our moral consciousness and the very foundations and conditions of the ethical perspective of human life. This perspective has in the nuclear age been permanently extended from local to global dimensions. This situation makes it therefore imperative that the parameters of our thinking are no longer to be restrictively determined through political polarities. They are to be opened up and broadened in terms of the inescapable interconnectedness of international socio-historical phenomena whatever their ideological character.

From this follows that the principle of part-whole relation between individual states and mankind makes it furthermore necessary that human actions and aims are seen as legitimate only if they obey the imperative of impartiality and if the judgement of motivation for action is enlarged from the mere correctness of individual interests to the truth and validity of global concerns in which these interests are embedded. We must rise to the intentional consciousness that it is the whole that conditions and necessitates the parts and not the other way around.

Earlier philosophical traditions allowed for a plurality of ethical systems in the cultures of the world because the violation of any of them in the past did not affect the whole of humankind. But the idea of pluralism makes sense only if there is a conceptual unity that brings the manifold kinds of self-expression into closer proximity to one another. The planetary context of nuclear arsenals makes it plainly paramount that we become and remain forever sensitive to the need of an integrative ethics. We cannot content ourselves with mere pluralism in the light of possible wholesale destruction. What, then, are the origin and categorical conditions of a universal ethics?

To begin with, the principle of utilitarianism in international relations and the imposition of individual state interests even in the name of deterrence are conceptually one-sided and hence do not fulfil the criteria of ethical considerations commensurate with the human predicament. The will towards holistic political reason must instead

recognise the duty to reflect upon international relations in the context of their global implications. Such reflections alone perhaps can effect the overcoming in practical terms of the self-interest of states and their right to self-defence. The right to defend oneself does not justify the escalation of a war of defence into a war of a nuclear offence against humanity. It does not justify the risk of annihilation. In other words, the principles of just and unjust wars need to be examined from the point of view of their moral and legal validity when applied to the question of what is at stake in the nuclear age. Philosophical reflection leads clearly to the insight that the right of a part does not constitute a right against the whole which already for logical reasons underlies it as its very presupposition. Accordingly, the ethical standpoint of humanity is the only adequate standpoint of a substantive critique which suspends all world-immanent decisions.

At the same time we must also recognise that both the scientific knowledge of nuclear processes and the historical availability of nuclear weapons are irrevocable. Hence, it is meaningless in the strict sense to assume that we can ever live in a nuclear-free world. We are intellectually entitled to seek to understand the laws of nature out of which we have evolved historically. In fact, a ban against the bomb may even amount to a verdict against nature and history alike in which after all the rationality of man was once set free. This rationality, though, we can employ in a regulative and caring or in a dogmatic and subversive way. It may guide us towards making political judgements with caution and in global perspective or mislead us to believing that only because we have the technical capability to do something we also ought to do it irrespective of the risk such action entails.

The consequences of the possibility of the collapse of deterrence relations only once is disproportionate to the apparent positive result of such situations in the short term. But the apparent positive results can never be proved, because we can never know what it is that makes deterrence in the end work. Deterrence presupposes a close interrelationship between deterrer and adversary. It involves a responsive element and hence is a

subjective mental process. No transcendent arbiter is therefore available that could allow us to judge objectively the exact requirements for deterrence to function within the change of increasingly complex times and the uneasy prospects for nuclear weapons proliferation. All perceptions of deterrence relations are contingent and hence exposed to the possibility of misinterpretation and the concomitant failure then to engage in dialogue. In addition, the alleged benefits of deterrence are based on the morally reprehensible threat to use weapons, and thus make the very idea of nuclear peace questionable and pernicious. The risk of deterrence failing, however, grows with extending time spans into the future. This, again, suggests the necessity for the elimination of weapons of mass destruction. But, because of the availability of nuclear weapons in principle, such a task can never be totally and confidently achieved. Can our ethical sensibility develop and overcome this unbearable *aporia*, this tragic dilemma?

In general, a rule of action can be adequately judged only in relation to the motivation which underlies and directs the action. And motivation itself must be determined through the principle of neutrality or impartiality in order to enable it to include the other into the self. Thereby alone does it lay the ground for truly reciprocal or interconnected relations between and among agents. For where there is no dialectically formed relation - in the sense that actors become conscious of being mutually dependent upon one another socially and historically - there is only dichotomy and fragmentation. But, given the specific reference to the nuclear age, our reflections on motivation must now also consider the implications and consequences of the action of particular agents not only in relation to one another but likewise in relation to mankind as a whole. This part-whole relationship establishes from within its natural and socio-historically mediated organic structure an *a priori* rule for perspectival thinking. That is to say, the motivation that informs the external morality of individual state agents and their self-interest must transform itself into the ethical consciousness of internal world relations.

This categorical imperative in the nuclear age,

then, involves an irreversible *Gestalt* shift in our paradigmatic thinking from centre to context. The context itself is intended by usually state-centric policy considerations that now should go beyond the boundaries of self-interest. How this context appears to the consciousness of agents is the subject of phenomenology. There cannot be mutually binding ethical norms without a reasoned awareness of their absolute contextual conditioning. In this sense, planetary goals need to be fused into the political decisions of those present and future states that boast of nuclear weapons capabilities. Political purposes which in their reach encompass all of humanity are accordingly not only morally right but ethically necessary. And this is so because when a particular mode of thinking has reached its own limits, it is dialectically driven to transcend itself and reflect on wider horizons from which it first of all derives its meaning. This thinking, however, is never an isolated act; it is always socially mediated and, hence, dialectical. We have to realise, for instance, that the right of a state to defend itself is not unlimited. After all, the plurality of states has emerged historically. But it is this history for whose continuity the society of states is now teleologically responsible. It is the call of history, as it were, to which we must purposefully respond.

The experience of the twentieth century has tragically and in many different ways taught us that the idea that one can change the world according to a theory of what ought to be has become unpracticable and hideously dangerous. However, in the light of the availability of nuclear weapons, one project as the good for humankind needs to be kept alive: situations should be created in which people are not harmed on the basis of these situations. This is not a utopia since no fulfilled life is promised; nor does it envisage a future where there would no longer be any evil, privation, and conflict. The existence of nuclear weapons thus leads to a change in consciousness away from naive and rather emotion-laden ethical precepts to realistic but more enlightened reflections on the ever-present possibility that we turn reason against ourselves. We have to balance with one another what is possible, feasible, and desirable.

Nuclear weapons use forces which are of a cosmic and not planetary nature. Such forces compel us to consider that what has become theoretically possible is never actually to happen. We now live under conditions which can be compared to a self-destructive mechanism in the sense that this mechanism operates according to laws which are not established by man and which cannot be controlled by man. What allows mankind to destroy itself is that which as a cosmic process makes life on earth possible in the first place. With a nuclear war human rationality eliminates the very basis of its life.

It is difficult to believe that the bombs which were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki will remain the only ones ever to have been used in the whole history of mankind. This means that the possibility of the self-destruction of mankind can never be ruled out or its probability totally eliminated. Hence, there is no alternative to trying with as much institutional reliance as possible to regulate the weapon most carefully and to do so from generation to generation - and this for ever. The motivation to install and use nuclear weapons must be regarded as always latent. There will never be a guarantee that the destructive possibilities of these weapons will not one day be released from rational control. But should this ever happen, it will then have happened because the automatic feedback loop of technological innovation and computerised weapons systems will have relegated the human factor to obsolescence and the human sovereignty of reason to a science which does not think.

The natural law of nuclear weapons and the dialectical or social development of human history follow unchangeable patterns whatever their specific content of social life at any-given time or place. But whatever the historically differentiated and sophisticated self-descriptions of man may be, nature in the end is indifferent to all such forms of rationalisations. Natural law ultimately subsumes human history under it, it is the ultimate determinant of life on earth. It therefore teaches us in no uncertain terms that in the event of a nuclear war nature would withdraw the highest product from its evolutionary process. To argue, as some

do, that it only might do that as a possibility and that we have no means of gauging its necessity is the prerogative of cynics alone and of lazy and myopic thinkers. It does not reflect intellectual circumspection. Nor does it demonstrate political wisdom and an attentiveness to the dangerous risks we create with weapons of mass destruction.

Secular life is small in comparison with the cosmic dimensions around us. But even though conscious life in the universe is marginal and peripheral from our planetary point of view, it is necessarily connected to the inner meaning of its transitory and contingent existence. It is the confrontation with contingency that makes human action at all possible. This immanent relationship suggests that though life on earth will disappear it is for that reason not ephemeral. Its essentiality lies precisely in this contingency which alone makes human life authentic. If everything were already created to perfection, there would be no need for purposeful action, either horizontally, that is, in relation to other individuals, nor vertically in relation to our generic source in socially and historically grown humanity. In other words, contingency is the necessary precondition for there to be essential life. Cosmic law is the condition for the emergence of human and conscious life. Not only is human life by cosmic standards finite, such a finality mankind can also inflict upon itself.

But do we have to engage in such nihilistic action only because we know of the finality of human life? Do we have to destroy humanity only because it will disappear anyway? How can we care for a life that will fade away sometime in the far future through natural forces or much earlier by human fiat? Only an education that leads us out of the insistence on parochial interests and motivates us into a holistic perspective of life on earth can help heal the wound of severed consciousness and create the conditions of circumspective peace with dignity and worthy of respect. This education must be of a philosophical nature if the quest for the truth of thinking as the human *summum bonum* is to be upheld and protected. And moreover, such an education is to accompany every new generation and become part of its learning of how to live with its natural and human environment without ever intending or

wanting to cause the evil of their ruin.

It is the change of attitude from part to whole, from individual to mankind, that initiates new forms of moral and ethical consciousness. Not only must we become familiar with the dialectical or interrelated structure of socio-historical phenomena as I have tried to teach in my book. We must also be willing to understand these relations in such a way that our cognition of them can be integrated into our policies that are to guide the destiny of mankind. For there can be no moral conduct of individual and state agents in the nuclear age without an awareness of an ethics in global contexts. It is the perennial task of philosophy to comprehend these connections and to explain their eternal meaning for our actions beyond the time of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

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