

REFLECTIONS ON THE H BOMB

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1. The modern infinite. Faust is dead

If there is anything that modern man regards as infinite, it is no longer God; nor is it nature, let alone morality or culture; it is his own power. *Creatio ex nihilo*, which was once the mark of omnipotence, has been supplanted by its opposite, *potestas annihilationis* or *reductio ad nihil*; and this power to destroy, to reduce to nothingness lies in our own hands. The Promethean dream of omnipotence has at long last come true, though in an unexpected form. Since we are in a position to inflict absolute destruction on each other, we have apocalyptic powers. It is we who are the infinite.

To say this is easy, but the fact is so tremendous that all historically recorded developments, including epochal changes, seem trifling in comparison: all history is now reduced to prehistory. For we are not merely a new historical generation of men; indeed, we are no longer what until today men have called "men." Although we are unchanged anatomically, our completely changed relation to the cosmos and to ourselves has transformed us into a new species—beings that differ from the previous type of man no less than Nietzsche's superman differed from man. In other words—and this is not meant as a mere metaphor—we are Titans, at least as long as we are omnipotent without making *definitive* use of this omnipotence of ours.

In fact, during the short period of our supremacy the gulf separating us Titans from the men of yesterday has become so wide that the latter are beginning to seem alien to us. This is reflected, to take a salient example, in our attitude toward Faust, the hero in whom the last generations of our forefathers saw the embodiment of their deepest yearnings. Faust strives desperately to be a Titan; his torment is caused by his inability to transcend his finitude. We, who are no longer finite, cannot even share this torment in our imagination. The infinite longing for the infinite, which Faust symbolizes, and which for almost a thousand years was the source of man's greatest sufferings and greatest achievements, has become so completely a thing of the past that it is difficult for us to visualize it; at bottom we only know that it had once existed. What our parents, the last humans, regarded as the most im-

portant thing is meaningless to us, their sons, the first Titans; the very concepts by means of which they articulated their history have become obsolete.*

The infinite longing some of us still experience is a nostalgia for finitude, the good old finitude of the past; in other words, some of us long to be rid of our Titanism, and to be men again, men like those of the golden age of yesterday. Needless to say, this longing is as romantic and utopian as was that of the Luddites; and like all longings of this kind, it weakens those who indulge in it, while it strengthens the self-assurance of those who are sufficiently unimaginative and unscrupulous to put to actual use the omnipotence they possess. But the starving workmen who early in the nineteenth century rose against the machines could hardly have suspected that a day would come when their longing for the past would assume truly mythological dimensions—when man could be appropriately described as the Titan who strives desperately to recover his humanity.

Curiously enough, omnipotence has become truly dangerous only after we have got hold of it. Before then, all manifestations of omnipotence, whether regarded as natural or supernatural (this distinction, too, has become unimportant), have been relatively benign: in each instance the threat was partial, only particular things were destroyed—"merely" people, cities, empires, or cultures—but we were always spared, if "we" denotes mankind.

No wonder that no one actually considered the possibility of a total peril, except for a few scientific philosophers who toyed with the idea of a cosmic catastrophe (such as the extinction of the sun), and for a minority of Christians who took eschatology seriously and expected the world to end at any moment.

With one stroke all this has changed. There is little hope that we, cosmic parvenus, usurpers of the apocalypse, will be as merciful as the forces responsible for former cataclysms were out of compassion or indifference, or by accident. Rather, there is no hope at all: the actual masters of the infinite are no more imaginatively or emotionally equal to this possession of theirs than their prospective victims, i.e., ourselves; and they are incapable, and indeed must remain incapable, of looking upon their contraption as anything but a means to further finite interests, including the most limited party interests. Because we are the first men with the power to unleash a world cataclysm, we are also the first to live continually under its threat. Because we are the first Titans,

* For instance, the antithesis between the Apollonian and the Dionysiac principle. The former denoted the happy harmony of the finite; the latter, the intoxication found in exploding the boundaries of the finite. Since we are no longer finite, since we have the "explosion" behind us, the antithesis has become unreal.

we are also the first dwarfs or pygmies, or whatever we may call beings such as ourselves who are mortal not only as individuals, but also as a group, and who are granted survival only until further orders.

2. The proposition, *All men are mortal, has been superseded by the proposition, Mankind is exterminable*

We have just emerged from a period in which for Europeans natural death was an unnatural or at least an exceptional occurrence. A man who died of old age aroused envy: he was looked upon as one who could afford the luxury of a peaceful and individual death, as a kind of slacker who had managed to escape from the general fate of extermination, or even as a sort of secret agent in the service of cosmic foreign powers through which he had been able to obtain such a special favor. Occasionally natural death was viewed in a different light—as evidence of man's freedom and sovereignty, as a twin brother of Stoic suicide—but even then natural death was felt to be unnatural and exceptional. During the war, being killed was thus the most common form of dying: the model for our finitude was Abel, not Adam.

In the extermination camps natural death was completely eliminated. There the lethal machines operated with absolute efficiency, leaving no uneconomical residues of life. There the venerable proposition, *All men are mortal*, had already become an understatement. If this proposition had been inscribed on the entrance gates to the gas chambers, instead of the usual misleading, "Shower Baths," it would have aroused jeers; and in this jeering laughter the voices of the victims would have joined in an infernal unison with the voices of their guards. For the truth contained in the old proposition was now more adequately expressed in a new proposition—"All men are exterminable."

Whatever changes have taken place in the world during the ten years since the end of the war, they have not affected the validity of the new proposition: the truth it expresses is confirmed by the general threat hanging over us. Its implications have even become more sinister: for what is exterminable today is not "merely" all men, but mankind as a whole. This change inaugurates a new historical epoch, if the term "epoch" may be applied to the short time intervals in question. Accordingly, all history can be divided into three chapters, with the following captions: (1) All men are mortal, (2) All men are exterminable, and (3) Mankind as a whole is exterminable.

3. Ecclesiastes's, "*There is nothing new under the sun,*" will be replaced by, "*Nothing ever was*"

Under the present dispensation, human mortality has acquired an entirely new meaning—it is only today that its ultimate horror

is brought home to us. To be sure, even previously no one was exempt from mortality; but everyone regarded himself as mortal within a larger whole, the human world; and while no one ever explicitly ascribed immortality to the latter, the threat of its mortality stared no one in the face either. Only because there was such a "space" within which one died, could there arise that peculiar aspiration to give the lie to one's mortality through the acquisition of fame. Admittedly the attempt has never been very successful: immortality among mortals has never been a safe metaphysical investment. The famous men were always like those ship passengers of the *Arabian Nights*, who enjoyed the highest reputation aboard, but whose reputation enjoyed no reputation, because the very existence of the ship was totally unknown on land. Still, as compared with what we have today, fame was something. For today our fear of death is extended to all of mankind; and if mankind were to perish leaving no memory in any being, engulfing all existence in darkness, no empire will have existed, no idea, no struggle, no love, no pain, no hope, no comfort, no sacrifice—everything will have been in vain, and there would be only that which had *been*, and nothing else.

Even to us, who are still living in the existing world, the past, that which merely *was*, seems dead; but the end of mankind would destroy even this death and force it, as it were, to die a second time, so that the past will not even have been the past—for how would that which merely had been differ from that which had never been? Nor would the future be spared: it would be dead even before being born. Ecclesiastes's disconsolate, "*There is nothing new under the sun,*" would be succeeded by the even more disconsolate, "*Nothing ever was,*" which no one would record and which for that reason would never be challenged.

4. Lack of conscience today is no moral defect, but an objective condition; hence all the more fatal

Let us assume that the bomb has been exploded.

To call this "an action" is inappropriate. The chain of events leading up to the explosion is composed of so many links, the process has involved so many different agencies, so many intermediate steps and partial actions, none of which is the crucial one, that in the end no one can be regarded as the agent. Everyone has a good conscience, because no conscience was required at any point. Bad conscience has once and for all been transferred to moral machines, electronic oracles: those cybernetic contraptions, which are the quintessence of science, and hence of progress and of morality, have assumed all responsibility, while man self-righteously washes his hands. Since all these machines can do is to

evaluate profits and losses, they implicitly make the loss finite, and hence justifiable, although it is precisely this evaluation that destroys us, the evaluated ones, even before we are actually destroyed. Because responsibility has been displaced on to an object, which is regarded as "objective," it has become a mere response; the Ought is merely the correct chess move, and the Ought Not, the wrong chess move. The cybernetic machines are interested only in determining the means that can be advantageously used in a situation defined by the factors $a, b, c \dots n$. Nothing else matters; after all, the continued existence of our world cannot be regarded as one of the factors. The question of the rightness of the goal to be achieved by the mechanically calculated means is forgotten by the operators of the machine or their employers, i.e., by those who bow to its judgment the moment it begins to calculate. To mistrust the solutions provided by the machine, i.e., to question the responses that have taken the place of responsibility, would be to question the very principle of our mechanized existence. No one would venture to create such a precedent.

Even where robots are not resorted to, the monstrous undertaking is immensely facilitated by the fact that it is not carried out by individuals, but by a complex and vastly ramified organization. If the organization of an undertaking is "all right," and if the machines function smoothly, the performance too seems "all right" and smooth. Each participant, each intermediary, performs or has insight into only the job assigned to him; and certainly each works conscientiously. The specialized worker is not conscious of the fact that the conscientious efforts of a number of specialists can add up to the most monstrous lack of conscience: just as in any other industrial enterprise he has no insight into the process as a whole. In so far as *conscientia* derives from *scire*, i.e., conscience from knowledge, such a failure to become conscious certainly points to a lack of conscience. But this does not mean that any of the participants acts against his conscience, or has no conscience—such immoral possibilities are still comfortingly human, they still presuppose beings that might have a conscience. Rather, the crucial point here is that such possibilities are excluded in advance. We are here beyond both morality and immorality. To blame the participants for their lack of conscience would be as meaningless as to ascribe courage or cowardice to one's hand. Just as a mere hand cannot be cowardly, so a mere participant cannot have conscience. The division of labor prevents him so completely from having clear insight into the productive process, that the lack of conscience we must ascribe to him is no longer an individual moral deficiency.

And yet it may result in the death of all mankind.

5. The effect transcends both the cause and the end

The "action" of unleashing the bomb is not merely irresponsible in the ordinary sense of the term: irresponsibility still falls within the realm of the morally discussible, while here we are confronted with something for which no one can even be held accountable. The consequences of this "action" are so great that the agent cannot possibly grasp them before, during, or after his action. Moreover, in this case there can be no goal, no positive value that can even approximately equal the magnitude of the means used to achieve it.

This incommensurability of cause and effect or means and end is not in the least likely to prevent the action; on the contrary, it facilitates the action. To murder an individual is far more difficult than to throw a bomb that kills countless individuals; and we would be willing to shake hands with the perpetrator of the second rather than of the first crime. Offenses that transcend our imagination by virtue of their monstrosity are committed more readily, for the inhibitions normally present when the consequences of a projected action are more or less calculable are no longer operative. The Biblical "They know not what they do" here assumes a new, unexpectedly terrifying meaning: the very monstrousness of the deed makes possible a new, truly infernal innocence.

The situation is not entirely unfamiliar. The mass exterminations under Hitler could be carried out precisely because they were monstrous—because they absolutely transcended the moral imagination of the agents, and because the moral emotions that normally precede, accompany, or follow actions could not arise in this case. But can one speak here of "agents"? The men who carry out such actions are always co-agents: they are either half-active and half-passive cogs in a vast mechanism, or they serve merely to touch off an effect that has been prepared in advance to the extent of 99 per cent. The categories of "coagent" and "touching off" are unknown in traditional ethics.*

Let us sum up the main points of our arguments. Shocking as this may sound, the murder of an individual is a relatively human action—not because the effect of an individual murder is quantitatively smaller than that of a mass murder or a total extermination (for deaths cannot really be added; the very plural form of the noun "death" is absurd,

* This is not to be interpreted as a justification of the German crimes. The concept of collective guilt was morally indispensable: something had to be done to prevent these crimes from being quickly forgotten. But the concept proved inadequate because the crime in question transcended the ordinary dimensions of an immoral act; because a situation in which all perpetrators are merely co-perpetrators, and all non-perpetrators are indirectly perpetrators, requires entirely new concepts; and above all because the number of dead was too great for any kind of reaction. Just as men can produce acoustic vibrations unperceivable by the human ear, so they can perform actions that lie outside the realm of moral apperception.

for each individual death is qualitatively unique), but because the individual murderer still can react to his crime in a human way. It is possible to mourn one victim of murder, not a million victims. One can repent one murder, not a million murdered. In other words, in the case of an individual murder, man's emotional, imaginative, and moral capacities are congruent or at least commensurable with his capacity for action. And this congruence, this condition in which man is more or less equal to himself, is no doubt the basic prerequisite of that which is called "humanity." It is this congruence that is absent today. Consequently, modern unmorality does not primarily consist in man's failure to conform to a specific more-than-human image of man; perhaps not even in his failure to meet the requirements of a just society; but rather in his half-guilty and half-innocent failure to conform to himself, that is to say, in the fact that his capacity for action has outgrown his emotional, imaginative, and moral capacities.

6. *Our incapacity for fear marks the freezing point of human freedom*

We have good reason to think that our fear is by far too small: it should paralyze us or keep us in a continual state of alarm. It does not because we are psychically unequal to the danger confronting us, because we are incapable of producing a fear commensurate with it, let alone of constantly maintaining it in the midst of our still seemingly normal everyday life.

Just like our reason, our psyche is limited in the Kantian sense: our emotions have only a limited capacity and elasticity. We have scruples about murdering one man; we have less scruples about shooting a hundred men; and no scruples at all about bombing a city out of existence. A city full of dead people remains a mere word to us.

All this should be investigated by a Critique of Pure Feeling, not for the purpose of reaching a moral verdict, but in order to determine the boundaries of our emotional capacity. What disturbs us today is not the fact that we are not omnipotent and omniscient, but the reverse, namely, the fact that our imaginative and emotional capacities are too small as measured against our knowledge and power, that imaginatively and emotionally we are so to speak smaller than ourselves. Each of us moderns is an inverted Faust: whereas Faust had infinite anticipations and boundless feelings, and suffered because his finite knowledge and power were unequal to these feelings, we know more and produce greater things than we can imagine or feel.

As a rule, then, we are incapable of producing fear; only occasionally does it happen that we attempt to produce it, or that we are overwhelmed and stunned by a tidal wave of anguish. But what stuns or panics us at such moments is the realization not of the danger threat-

ening us, but of the futility of our attempts to produce an adequate response to it. Having experienced this failure we usually relax and return shamefaced, irritated, or perhaps even relieved, to the human dimensions of our psychic life commensurable with our everyday surroundings. Such a return, however pleasant it may be subjectively, is of course sheer suicide from the objective point of view. For there is nothing and there can be nothing that increases the danger more than our failure to realize it intellectually and emotionally, and our resigned acceptance of this failure. In fact, the helplessness with which contemporary mankind reacts—or rather fails to react—to the existence of the superbomb bespeaks a lack of freedom the like of which has never before existed in history—and surely history cannot be said to have been poor in varieties of unfreedom.

We have indeed reached the freezing point of human freedom.

The Stoic, robbed of the autonomy of action, was certainly unfree; but how free the Stoic still was, since he could think and feel as he pleased!

Later there was the even more impoverished type of man, who could think only what others had thought for him, who indeed could not feel anything except what he was supposed to feel; but how free even this type of man was, since he still could speak, think, and feel what he was supposed to speak, think, and feel!

Truly unfree, divested of all dignity, definitively the most deprived of men are those confronted with situations and things with which they cannot cope by definition, to which they are unequal linguistically, intellectually, and emotionally—ourselves.

7. *The crucial task—the development of the moral imagination*

If all is not to be lost we must first and foremost develop our moral imagination: this is the crucial task facing us. We must strive to increase the capacity and elasticity of our intellectual and emotional faculties, to match the incalculable increase of our productive and destructive powers. Only where these two aspects of man's nature are properly balanced can there be responsibility, and moral action and counter-action.

Whether we can achieve such a balance, is an open question. Our emotional capacity may turn out to be limited a priori; perhaps it cannot be extended at will and *ad infinitum*. If this were so, and if we were to resign ourselves to such a state of affairs, we would have to give up all hope. But the moralist cannot do so in any case: even if he believed in the theoretical impossibility of transcending those limits, he would still have to demand that they be transcended in practice. Academic discussions are pointless here: the question can be decided

only by an actual attempt, or, more accurately, by repeated attempts, i.e., spiritual exercises. It is immaterial whether such exercises aim at a merely quantitative extension of our ordinary imagination and emotional performance, or at a sensational, "impossible" transcending of our *proportio humana*, whose boundaries are supposedly fixed once and for all. The philosophical significance of such exercises can be worried about later. What matters at present is only that an attempt at violent self-transformation be made, and that it be successful. For we cannot continue as we are.

In our emotional responses we remain at the rudimentary stage of small artisans: we are barely able to repent an individual murder; whereas in our capacity for killing, for producing corpses, we have already entered the proud stage of industrial mass production. Indeed, the performances of our heart—our inhibitions, fears, worries, regrets—are in inverse ratio to the dimensions of our deeds, i.e., the former grow smaller as the latter increase. This gulf between our emotional capacity and our destructive powers, aside from representing a physical threat to our lives, makes us the most divided, the most disproportionate, the most inhuman beings that have ever existed. As against this modern cleavage, all older spiritual conflicts, for instance, the conflict between mind and body or duty and inclination, were relatively harmless. However violently the struggle may have raged within us, it remained human; the contending principles were attuned to each other, they were in actual contact, neither of them lost sight of the other, and each of them was essentially human. At least on the battlefield of the contending principles man preserved his existence unchallenged: man was still there.

Not so today. Even this minimum of man's identity with himself is gone. For the horror of man's present condition consists precisely in this, that the conflicting forces within him are no longer inter-related: they are so far removed from each other, each has become so completely independent, that they no longer even come to grips.* They can no longer confront each other in battle, the conflict can no longer be fought out. In short, man *as* producer, and man *as* a being capable of emotions, have lost sight of each other. Reality now seems attributable only to each of the specialized fragments designated by an "as." What made us shudder ten years ago—the fact that one and the same man could be guard in an extermination camp and good father and husband, that *as* the former he could be so radically different from himself *as* the latter, and that the two parts he played or the two fragments he was

* Strikingly enough, the very phrase "inner conflict," which only a generation ago was taken for granted, even among the young, today sounds stale, pompous, and implausible.

did not in the least stand in each other's way because they no longer knew each other—this horrifying example of guilelessness in horror has not remained an isolated phenomenon. Each of us, like this schizophrenic in the truest sense of the term, is split into two separate beings; each of us is like a worm artificially or spontaneously divided into two halves, which are unconcerned with each other and move in different directions.

True, the split has not been entirely consummated; despite everything the two halves of our being are still connected by the thinnest of threads, and the producer half, by far the stronger, drags the emotional half behind it. The unity is not organic, it is that of two different beings meaninglessly grown together. But the existence of this minimal connection is no comfort. On the contrary, the fact that we are split in two, and that there is no internal principle integrating these halves, defines the misery and disgrace of our condition.

Translated by Norbert Guterman

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

Compiled by Ned Polsky

McCarthy Defines "Fact"

Senator Joseph R. McCarthy charged today that the National Labor Relations Board harbored a "Communist cell." ... He called on the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations to act at once to determine whether the "facts" he presented were "true."

ABC of Economics

It is up to the American advertising business to keep the country's economy moving upward this year, Robert A. Sarnoff, president of the National Broadcasting Company, said today...

"The reason we have such a high standard of living is because advertising has created an American frame of mind that makes people want more things, better things and newer things."

—N. Y. Times, February 24, 1956

Things We Never Knew

A would-be F.B.I. agent must combine the toughness of an army ranger with the mental capacity of an atomic scientist. ... This is the essence of the big law enforcement agency's recruitment policy as framed by Director J. Edgar Hoover.

—N. Y. Times, February 13, 1956

The Religious Life

What is unusual about the new ground-observer post recently set up 12 miles southwest of Dubuque, Iowa?

It will be operated by 60 monks on top of a building in the New Melaray Monastery.

—"Quiz 'Em," *This Week*, February 19, 1956