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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Nuclear existentialism: On the philosophical response to life and death under the bomb

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and under the growing threat of planetary cataclysm, an array of prominent intellectuals grappled with the significance of nuclear war for the human condition and reflected upon the possibilities of escaping its peril. Following on the early interventions of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, the collected thoughts of Karl Jaspers, Hans Morgenthau, and Günther Anders outline a philosophical current of 'nuclear existentialism' preoccupied with the nihilistic 'being-towards-species-death' entailed by the advent of the Bomb. Faced with the apparent negation of reason in bringing about the means of its own destruction through the scientific piercing of nature's innermost workings, the nuclear existentialists end up reaffirming, however precariously, a teleological conception of history in which the apocalyptic fear of the Bomb figures as the necessary condition for the ultimate realisation of human freedom. In the light of the contemporary resurgence of nuclear anxiety, this article surveys and critically assesses the corpus of nuclear existentialism, drawing upon the distinctive existential phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas to trace a potential alternative for thinking life and death under the Bomb.

Keywords: Anders; existentialism; Jaspers; Levinas; Morgenthau; nihilism; nuclear weapons

> One invention still lacking: how to reverse explosions.
> Elias Canetti, 1945[1]

Following a three-decade interval during which the dangers of major nuclear war that defined the Cold War receded from public consciousness, fears of an apocalyptic conflict were abruptly revived with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Vladimir Putin has repeatedly alluded to the potential employment of nuclear weapons to deter Western intervention, with Joe Biden responding that even the use of a single tactical nuke in Ukraine could end in 'Armageddon'.[2] Foreign policy analysts have highlighted the serious risk of a military escalation leading to a nuclear exchange.[3] Unsurprisingly, public opinions polls have registered everywhere surges in nuclear

[1]Elias Canetti, *The Human Province* (London: Picador, 1986), p. 61.

[2]Julian Borger, 'Biden warns world would face "Armageddon" if Putin uses a tactical nuclear weapon in Ukraine', *The Guardian* (7 October 2023), available at: {https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/oct/07/biden-warns-world-would-face-armageddon-if-putin-uses-a-tactical-nuclear-weapon-in-ukraine}.

[3]Jeremy Shapiro, 'We are on the path to nuclear war', *War on the Rocks* (12 October 2022), available at: {https://warontherocks.com/2022/10/the-end-of-the-world-is-nigh/}; Paul Rogers, 'The risk of nuclear war over Ukraine is real. We need diplomacy now', *Open Democracy* (14 April 2023), available at: {https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/russia-ukraine-nuclear-war-threat-crisis-diplomacy-resolve/}.

anxiety to levels unseen since the Cold War.[4] Beyond Ukraine, a new age of nuclear tension is now upon us, with mounting geopolitical frictions, expanding and modernising arsenals, and lapsing arms control.

We have thus been brusquely reminded of the global condition we have inhabited since the mid-20th century in which the meaningful survival of humanity, with all its historical inheritances and potential futures, indefinitely hangs on the sudden release of a tightly coiled machinery of self-annihilation. Having awoken from our nuclear slumber, we are confronted once again with some searching questions. How did we arrive at such a terrifyingly absurd state of affairs? Can we escape from it, and how? And if not, how are we to live in the shadow of a cataclysm that could at any moment obliterate everything we might value and strive towards? To the extent that we allow ourselves to grapple with these questions rather than withdraw from their discomfiting intensity, it is instructive for us today to revisit some of the more profound answers given to them at the onset of the nuclear age.

The bald facts of our situation bear restating. In one of human reason's greatest conquests, the intimate secrets of matter were penetrated by science, harnessing the subatomic processes that fuel the stellar body at the origin of all life on our planet and give rise to most of the elements composing the universe. From this perspective, the ramifications of the Manhattan Project are less historical than properly cosmological. 'Man has become a sun', wrote Maurice Blanchot, '[and] the astral era that is beginning no longer belongs to the bounds of history.'[5] Yet the *Bomb* – its designation in the singular suggesting an embodiment of the very Platonic Ideal of explosives – simultaneously threatens to bring concrete human history to a precipitous end by endowing us with powers of destruction we can neither truly fathom nor be confident of wielding wisely.

This contradiction between rational mastery and radical vulnerability entails a profound crisis in the historical consciousness associated with modernity. Coalescing under the movement of the Enlightenment that followed the Scientific Revolution, a belief in the inherently progressive character of history arose within European societies. The crowning philosophies of Hegel and Marx depicted history as a totality unfolding towards its ultimate resolution in accordance with a rational necessity, advancing fitfully through the tussle of ideas and social forces. The happy denouement of the human odyssey is no longer guaranteed, however, since it can from hereon terminate at any moment in the flash from a thousand suns. With as supreme irony that the unbridled quest for the rationalisation of the real fostered by the Enlightenment brought about the conditions for reason's self-destruction. Any unsullied confidence in the inherent beneficence of reason is henceforth negated. Contrast Kant's injunction that we should 'dare to know' (*Sapere Aude!*) with the lament of the nuclear strategist Thomas Schelling: 'man's capability for self-destruction cannot be eradicated – he knows too much!'[6]

It is in this glaring light that the present article turns to the early philosophical response to the nuclear condition, specifically the engagement of thinkers influenced by the existentialist movement prevalent in the mid-20th century. It thereby participates in the ongoing recovery and reappraisal of the intellectual response to nuclear weapons during the first nuclear age. To date, the most significant contribution to this endeavour is found in Rens van Munster and Casper Sylvest's reconstruction in which they gather four diverse thinkers (Bertrand Russell, Lewis Mumford, John Herz, and Günther Anders) under the label of 'nuclear realism'.[7] Their central claim is that these thinkers converge in their recognition of the unprecedented crisis occasioned by nuclear

[4]Daniel de Visé, 'Americans' nuclear fears surge to highest levels since Cold War', *The Hill* (14 October 2022), available at: {https://thehill.com/policy/defense/3687396-americans-nuclear-fears-surge-to-highest-levels-since-cold-war/}; John Feng, 'More than 4 in 5 Russians fear nuclear war with U.S. – poll', *Newsweek* (21 April 2022), available at: {https://www.newsweek.com/ukraine-invasion-us-russia-china-nuclear-cold-war-1699626}.

[5]Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 266.

[6]Thomas C. Schelling, 'The future of arms control', *Operations Research*, 9:5 (1961), pp. 722–731.

[7]Rens van Munster and Casper Sylvest, *Nuclear Realism: Global Political Thought during the Thermonuclear Revolution* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

weaponry and the corresponding indispensability of a radical transformation of the global political order, *contra* the general acquiescence of contemporary International Relations (IR) realists. While concurring in valuing early intellectual treatments of nuclear weapons for our present quandaries, my focus here will be on the explicitly philosophical questioning of the Bomb over the domestic and international implications drawn from it.

To that end, I will examine a group of thinkers united by a relation to the current of philosophical existentialism that predominated after the Second World War, however complex and ambivalent their respective associations to it may be. Through the comparison and contrasting of their contributions, I will outline a corpus of 'nuclear existentialism' characterised by certain recurrent themes and preoccupations. Although *Nuclear Realism* never explicitly touched upon existentialism, van Munster has since highlighted the 'historical relevance of the nuclear revolution to central existentialist concepts' in a conjoined reading of Günter Anders and J. G. Ballard.[8] Benjamin Zala has also recently examined Sartre's response to nuclear weapons, unfavourably contrasting his uncompromising privileging of the individual freedom to forgo them with Raymond Aron's sober counsel of responsibility.[9] Still lacking however is a more systematic comparative scrutiny of the existentialist themes and underlying philosophical assumptions within an assortment of the most prominent philosophical engagements with the Bomb in the first two decades of the nuclear age. Moreover, through the reconstruction and appraisal of this nuclear existentialism we open up to the possibility of a radical critique of its fundaments and the tracing of a philosophical alternative that may still offer guidance in the present.

Common to all the figures considered under nuclear existentialism is an attempt to make sense of nuclear weapons in the context of a crisis of nihilism whose handmaiden is the relentless advance of science and technology. Anticipation of human civilisation's potential extinction is thus placed on an equal footing to concerns for the prospects of individual freedom and autonomy under a technicist tyranny whose mortiferous tendencies only reveal its true nature. Consequently, the Bomb becomes conceived as a necessary crucible through which humanity will either raise its consciousness to new heights or perish, reaffirming thereby a teleological understanding of history whose totality has been revealed by our thinkers. Despite their varying appeals to reason, they find themselves ultimately drawn to a strategy of salutary fear whereby the propagation of nuclear terror is indispensable in shaking individual consciences from their complacency and denial.

Following an introduction of the key existentialist themes of the nihilistic death of God and the confrontation with mortality, I review the early interventions of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre for their initial rendition of the aforementioned tropes. I turn thereupon to Karl Jaspers's prominent account of the Bomb as a nihilistic crisis to be overcome through the galvanising effect of an enlightened fear that will elevate individuals to a new state of human freedom. Under the influence of Jaspers but also led by his own existentialist leanings, Hans Morgenthau draws specific attention to the implications of nuclear war for the meaning of death and the transformation of individual consciousnesses it entails. For his part, Günter Anders rejects existentialism as another expression of the same nihilism that underlies the Bomb yet still endorses the amplification of nuclear fear as the means to awaken consciousnesses and salvage human freedom. In the final section, I review the main features of nuclear existentialism, querying the progressive teleology implicit in casting the Bomb as a trial necessary for the true realisation of human freedom and reason. The central role accorded to a conception of salutary fear is also questioned, along with the propensity towards an ontological individualism. It is in this context that we finally turn to the work of Emmanuel Levinas for the radical challenge it opposes to the philosophical primacy afforded to self, freedom, and autonomy, thereupon reconceptualising the meaning given to both death and

[8]Rens van Munster, 'Nuclear weapons, existentialism, and international relations: Anders, Ballard, and the human condition in the age of extinction', *Review of International Studies*, 49:5 (2023), pp. 813–31.

[9]Benjamin Zala, '"No one around to shut the dead eyes of the human race": Sartre, Aron, and the limits of existentialism in the nuclear age', *Review of International Studies*, 49:5 (2023), pp. 795–812.

fear and tracing a potential path out of the impasse to which nuclear existentialism appears to lead.

By the Bomb's early light: Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre

Existentialism designates a heterogeneous intellectual constellation encompassing a broad range of thinkers primarily concerned with the question of the meaning and purpose of human existence. Its origins lie in the 19th century, commonly associated with the writings of Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Feodor Dostoyevsky, reaching its apogee in the mid-20th century through the chief figures of Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus. Since it is impossible to provide here a full exposé of all the themes and nuances to be found within existentialism, I will limit myself to highlighting two key notions that are most pertinent to the philosophical challenge posed by the Bomb.

The first is the problematique of the death of God famously introduced by Nietzsche. Indeed, Sartre would later define existentialism as 'nothing else than an effort to draw all the consequences from a position of consistent atheism'.[10] Following Nietzsche, this means confronting the all-encompassing crisis of nihilism that accompanies the loss of theistic belief. For the death of God does not merely signify the abandonment of religious faith within increasingly secular and scientific societies. Anticipating the later disillusionment with progressivist narratives of history, Nietzsche intuited that what was being undercut was all metaphysical guarantees of a moral and rational ordering to the world. Nietzsche's oracular writings thus spoke of a nihilistic tide sweeping Europe, occasioning the 'devaluation of all values' and, not coincidentally, 'wars such as there have never yet been on earth'.[11] The second, related aspect is the rediscovery of death 'as a philosophical idea and problem' in the 20th century. Indeed, for the existentialists, 'a proper understanding of, and right attitude toward, death, one's own death, is not only a *sine qua non* of genuine experience, but also of gaining any illumination about the nature of the world'.[12] Heidegger famously made the individual's inexorable 'being-towards-death' into the cardinal source of anxiety in human experience.[13] In the absence of any religious or metaphysical consolation, the awareness of our finitude and the insignificance of our fleeting presences in a meaningless universe threatens to engulf us in an overwhelming sense of absurdity and despondency. Yet, for the existentialists, embracing this seemingly hopeless condition can illuminate the path towards a truly authentic existence. If meaning and values can no longer be assured by an otherworldly order, individuals are now compelled to imbue their lives with a more radical freedom than ever before, the disavowal of which can only be the sign of 'bad faith'.

The public unveiling of the Bomb in August 1945 would resonate deeply with existentialist philosophy. The terrible triumph of scientific rationality it heralded, capping the horrors of industrial war and the death camps, spoke directly to a growing loss of faith in a moral order underpinned by either religion or Enlightenment rationalism. The great novelty of the nuclear age, however, was its inauguration of a horizon of 'being-towards-species-death' that would be realised by the suicidal act of humanity turning its now-godly powers against itself. The challenge presented to existentialism would be to make sense of this self-inflicted universal death, inform the popular anxiety it occasioned, and devise the grounds on which a purpose for life might still be found and some hope for the future salvaged.

In a short, unsigned editorial published two days after the Hiroshima bombing, Albert Camus pens the first philosophical response to the event. The piece evokes a 'mechanical civilisation' having reached its 'ultimate degree of savagery'. Scathing of the early coverage's celebratory tone,

[10]Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (Paris: Editions Nagel, 1966), p. 94 [my translation]. Even within the Christian strains best represented by Kierkegaard, existentialism is typically associated with an acknowledgement of the inherent uncertainty of religious faith and more or explicitly construed as responding to the modern challenge of nihilism.

[11]Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 89.

[12]J. G. Gray, 'The idea of death in existentialism', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 48:5 (1951), pp. 113–127 (p. 114).

[13]Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Stambaugh (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996).

Camus points instead to the new, potentially 'terminal', 'anxiety' emanating from this latest innovation in organised murder. It is now urgent that a choice be made between 'collective suicide' and the 'intelligent use' of scientific discoveries. Humanity is being offered nothing less than its 'last chance' to 'definitively choose between hell and reason'.[14] This simple appeal to reason for steering humanity away from its prospective self-annihilation contrasts with a darker outlook on its hegemonic role in Western modernity articulated in a subsequent 1948 essay. Here, Camus stresses the abyss that separates contemporary Europeans from the Ancient Greeks whose rationalist legacy they claim. For the Greeks always sought to balance reason with the sacred, acutely aware of the nemesis that would strike down those who overstepped themselves and violated this harmony. Europeans, in contrast, enthroned reason alone, 'conquered, moved boundaries, mastered heaven and earth' until they ruled over but a desert.[15] While Ancient Greece imposed limits upon action and thought, Europe is characterised by 'disproportion' and the 'pursuit of totality'. Only one glory is now admitted, that of the 'future rule of reason'.[16] With the death of God and the disintegration of any transcendent values to which reason would have to submit, 'we have come to put the will's impulse in the very centre of reason, which has, as a result, become deadly'.[17] Nature constitutes a last, unconcerned, bulwark to human hubris 'until the atom, too, catches fire and history ends in the triumph of reason and the agony of the species'.[18]

Jean-Paul Sartre's own initial response to the atomic bombings appears in October 1945 in an article whose title 'La fin de la guerre' can be alternatively read as referring to the end of the Second World War, to the end of war per se, or to the telos (the 'ends') of war, the secret necessity behind the historical escalation of humanity's powers of destruction. All three interpretations are permitted by the text. Sartre begins by underlining the frightful prospect of a sudden 'absurd end' to life that would deny us the possibility of finally overcoming human conflict, the riddle of history left forever unsolved. The 'little bomb' that killed a hundred thousand will tomorrow slaughter millions, threatening Earth itself with annihilation. We now wake every morning at 'the eve of the end of times' and the 'radical indistinction' in which it would plunge us. 'When one thinks of it, everything seems futile', sighs Sartre. Yet 'humanity had to be one day in possession of its death', he continues, for 'until now it was pursuing a life that came to it from who knows where'.[19] In acquiring the capacity for its own suicide, humanity has simultaneously gained the power to refuse it. With a new anxiety comes a 'purer' freedom that humanity will exert in choosing to live on this 'booby-trapped' planet. After the 'death of God', we are witnessing the 'death of man', since this radicalisation of freedom is synonymous with the end of the human species. 'The community that made itself the guardian of the atomic bomb is above the natural kingdom since it is responsible of its life and death: every day, every minute, it will need to consent to living.'[20]

It is striking that both Camus and Sartre immediately saw in the Japanese bombings the forewarning of species suicide. In practice, it was not until the thousand-fold increase in explosive power unlocked by the thermonuclear bomb and the subsequent mid-1960s establishment of parity in Cold War armaments that such a scenario became conceivable.[21] The philosophers were however foremost concerned with the Bomb in its most abstract sense, namely as the signifier of

[14] *Combat*, 8 August 1945 [my translation].

[15] Albert Camus, 'Helen's exile', in Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 168.

[16] Ibid., p. 167.

[17] Ibid., p. 169.

[18] Ibid., p. 170.

[19] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations, III: Lendemains de Guerre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p. 68 [my translation].

[20] Ibid., p. 69.

[21] Although initial destruction from a nuclear war would be concentrated among the belligerents, the hypothesised second-order effect of a 'nuclear winter' through the injection of soot into the atmosphere from ensuing firestorms would entail catastrophic crop failures and famine across the world.

a new threshold beyond which humanity was now endowed with the power to annihilate itself. If the actual capability for self-extinction did not yet exist, the path to its realisation was now traced, calling forth a searching interrogation of its profound implications and the responses it necessitated.

In the event, neither Camus nor Sartre returned to a substantial philosophical engagement with the Bomb after their early interventions.[22] If the French figureheads of the existentialist movement made an early mark, it is among Germanophone intellectuals that the themes of nuclear existentialism were most comprehensively elaborated. Thus we turn to the writings of Karl Jaspers, Hans Morgenthau, and Günther Anders for the fullest body of reflections on what brought humanity to its nuclear impasse, how the prospect of universal death raises the nihilist crisis of meaning to its zenith, and why the only path to salvation lies in intensifying the existential fear of the Bomb.

Karl Jaspers on the future of mankind

Following his original contribution in psychiatry, Karl Jaspers turned his attention to philosophy in the 1920s, developing a distinctive corpus that established him as a foundational figure alongside Heidegger within the emerging current of German existentialism. Although Jaspers was ambivalent about the association, his self-proclaimed *Existenzphilosophie* and its primary concern with themes of individual freedom and authenticity are of an unmistakeably existentialist persuasion. While he remained a lifelong Christian, Jaspers was nonetheless influenced profoundly by the problematique of nihilism, as evidenced in his writings as early as 1919 and his unwavering appreciation of Nietzsche's insight.[23] Nihilism would appear to him as a necessary movement in both thought and history upon which depended a salutary countermovement of philosophical truth and deeper self-consciousness, simultaneously a 'transition to a profounder assimilation of historic tradition' and 'the acid in which the gold of truth must be proved'.[24] As Andrén explains, Jaspers's understanding of nihilism as a historical condition was informed by his experience of Nazism and the Second World War, conceived as an intensification of modern tendencies. Drawing on Max Weber, he saw its ascent as a correlate of the extension of technology in human life, manifest in 'a society in which the machine has taken over and people are resigned to serving it'. From this perspective, the atom bomb would become 'the ultimate expression of nihilism'.[25] This meant, as Jaspers asserted in a 1950 lecture, that 'such terrors as the atom [are] only a consequence and therefore a mere symptom' of a wider spiritual crisis.[26] Yet, as we shall see, the Bomb could also become the very lever of an existential awakening, since 'the freedom of the European seeks extremes, the depth of conflict. The European goes through despair to reborn confidence, through nihilism to a grounded consciousness of being; he lives in fear as the sting of his seriousness.'[27]

Jasper's most definitive statement on nuclear war came with the 1958 publication of *The Future of Mankind*. In the work, Jaspers is keen to impress on his readers the need to confront squarely the 'brutal new fact' of not merely the possibility but the probability of humanity's self-annihilation.[28] While admitting that the 'terminal situation' to which this fact points may be deferred by the

[22] Sartre did address the problem of nuclear war in subsequent speeches but almost solely in terms of its political significance as an antithesis to the anti-colonial people's war he supported. See David Lethbridge, 'Constructing peace by freedom: Jean-Paul Sartre, four short speeches on the peace movement, 1952–1955', *Sartre Studies International*, 18:2 (2012), pp. 1–18.

[23] 'Nietzsche expressed the historical situation of the epoch in one phrase: God is dead.' Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*, trans. William Earle (New York, NY: Noonday, 1955), p. 30.

[24] Karl Jaspers, *The Perennial Scope of Philosophy*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Routledge, 1950), p. 166.

[25] Mats Andrén, 'Nihilism and responsibility in the writings of Karl Jaspers', *European Review*, 22:2 (2014), pp. 209–216.

[26] Karl Jaspers, 'Das Gewissen vor der Bedrohung durch die Atombombe', in *Rechenschaft und Ausblick: Reden und Aufsätze* (Munich: R. Piper & Co. Verlag, 1950), p. 375.

[27] Karl Jaspers, *Europa der Gegenwart* (Vienna: Amadeus-Edition, 1947), p. 20.

[28] Karl Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, trans. E. B. Ashton (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 12.

restraining effect of terror and self-preservation (as mobilised by strategic deterrence), the ratiocinations of the 'mere intellect' cannot indefinitely save us from it.[29] Whether through miscalculation, desperation, or collective suicide, the war truly to end all wars will eventually come unless war is first abolished altogether. Yet the political concord and international institutions implied by this goal must remain an idle hope without a preliminary change in the 'suprapolitical element' corresponding to the 'ethical ideal' humanity chooses to make its own.[30] Such an 'inner change' to be freely realised within each individual cannot be 'the object of a new politics: it can only be the prerequisite of a new politics'.[31] The only path to averting extinction therefore passes through a transformation of the 'moral-political condition of man' in accordance with a higher conception of universal reason.[32]

Central to this ethical ideal is a steadfast commitment to sacrifice as 'the foundation of true humanity'.[33] For it is in 'reaching beyond life' that humans, whether in ultimate success or failure, are most faithful to their fundamental nature and exercise their innate freedom.[34] 'Life in the sense of existence – individual life as well as all life – can be staked and sacrificed for the sake of the life that is worth living.'[35] This primacy given to sacrifice is an extension of Jaspers's resolve that human life must above all be an affirmation of its highest aspirations and cannot be a matter of mere survival. This point becomes especially salient when considering the nuclear peril alongside the coincident struggle against totalitarianism, the twin threats bearing over the human condition. Drawing explicitly on Hannah Arendt's famous analysis,[36] Jaspers sees totalitarianism in both its Nazi and Soviet guises as the very negation of the human potential for freedom.[37] He therefore categorically rejects any notion that surrendering to totalitarian domination could be an acceptable price to ward off the nuclear peril, weighing their dangers equally. Quite simply, the Bomb cannot be eradicated 'at the cost of eliminating a truly human life'.[38] Freedom is the elemental condition of possibility for an authentic existence, without which all that remains is a pallid biological persistence. 'Man either grows in freedom, and maintains the tension of this growth, or he forfeits his right to live. If he is not worthy of his life, he will destroy himself.'[39]

For Jaspers, the transformation of being mandated by nuclear weapons can only be realised within the sphere of reason, 'the philosophical thinking that is innate in all men, but buried in most'.[40] Reason is counterposed to the 'mere' intellect, the purposive rationality deployed by the scientist in humanity's domination of the natural world but also incarnated in the detached calculations of strategists and realpolitik statesmen. For the intellect 'places the objects of thinking – things and people – at a distance where the thought no longer involves the thinker'.[41] Reason, in contrast, implicates the thinker fully in reality and the historicity of existence, allowing him to be 'fully present as what he is and will be' while still making practical use of a subordinated intellect.[42] Yet, when faced with the 'dead end' to which the solitary 'self-secluding' intellect ineluctably leads,

[29] Ibid., p. 60.
[30] Ibid., p. 23.
[31] Karl Jaspers, 'The atom bomb and the future of man', *Evergreen Review*, 2:5 (1958), pp. 37–57 (p. 50).
[32] Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, p. vii.
[33] Ibid., p. 66.
[34] Ibid., p. 189.
[35] Ibid., p. 169.
[36] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1951).
[37] 'Mere life as such, under consummate total rule, would not be the life of animals in the abundance of nature; it would be an artificial horror of being totally consumed by man's own technological genius.' Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, p. 167.
[38] Ibid., p. 173.
[39] Ibid., p. 183.
[40] Ibid., p. 188.
[41] Ibid., p. 207.
[42] Ibid., p. 208.

many shrink from the 'reversal of thinking' demanded by the nuclear condition and are all too prone to 'plunge into irrationality instead of rising to reason'.[43]

Jaspers insists that the future remains radically open, that humanity's fate lies in our constitutive freedom to decide.[44] Nevertheless, our present juncture of unprecedented existential peril comes as the culmination of a historical development that confronts us with the urgent necessity of 'thinking to the very roots of human existence'.[45] On the one hand is the steady advance of science and technology, synonymous with an accelerating process of rationalisation that extends itself through all spheres of existence.[46] On the other is a countermovement in which reason affirms itself as the directed self-realisation of humanity in accordance with its true essence such that 'in the past, the movement of history was dispersed and unconscious; now it has become one global, conscious process of mankind'.[47] Thus, the Bomb marks a critical threshold in humanity's awakening in which 'we become newly conscious of our basic human condition'.[48]

Although Jaspers refrains from spelling this out explicitly, the Bomb evidently possesses for him the virtue, perhaps even the historical necessity, of confronting humanity with the inescapable choice facing it and thereby with its true nature. Human beings are, however, liable to withdraw from this challenge, to seek the instructions of the intellect without commitment or responsibility, to shun any questioning or 'jeopardising of self-assurance', to 'remain aloof' and seek a place where they are 'untouchable' – in other words, to avoid being authentically themselves.[49] Jaspers therefore calls for 'increasing the fear of the people' inspired by the Bomb, to let it grow to the 'overpowering force' of 'an enlightened fear' that will raise individuals out of their complacency, resignation, and detachment. Serving as 'a catalyst for the emergence of freedom', 'the great fear of mankind can be a creative fear' that will instil the realisation that 'it is up to every individual himself what will be and what will become of mankind'.[50] To enact the desired political upheaval, this inner change will have to occur on a mass, global scale but will necessarily begin with but a few that set off the 'wave' of 'rational will' that will realise the 'conversion' of the many.[51]

Through its apocalyptic lifting of the veil, the Bomb gives us no alternative other than taking 'the unlimited risks of knowledge and fear if we want to remain truly human'.[52] Yet the transformation longed for by Jaspers can never reach a stable end-point for a being that is 'always in a state of transition'.[53] Even if universal disarmament is achieved, the spectral presence of the Bomb and the everlasting potential for self-annihilation will for evermore remain the guardian of our authentic existence. 'From this time onward, the danger of mankind perishing by human action will always be with us – it will never vanish again. It will have to be met and surmounted afresh, and it is under this pressure that man can rise to his highest potentialities.'[54]

The Future of Mankind sets out unambiguously the stakes of nuclear war from an existentialist perspective. The threat of a nuclear apocalypse can only be met through the reacquaintance of human existence with its innate capacity for radical freedom, including over whether to choose life over death. Indeed, Jaspers pointedly allows for a chosen death to be more meaningful than an inauthentic life. Yet the Bomb denies even this, explains Hans Morgenthau, since nuclear war forecloses the very possibility of a meaningful death by destroying its posterity.

[43] Ibid., pp. 206–7.
[44] Ibid., pp. 267–8.
[45] Ibid., p. 12.
[46] Ibid., p. 191.
[47] Ibid., p. 330.
[48] Ibid., p. 187.
[49] Ibid., p. 206.
[50] Ibid., pp. 327–9
[51] Gregory J. Walters, *Karl Jaspers and the Role of 'Conversion' in the Nuclear Age* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), p. xvii.
[52] Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, p. 329.
[53] Ibid., p. 102.
[54] Ibid., p. 182.

Hans Morgenthau on nuclear death

As is now widely appreciated, the summary image of Hans Morgenthau within the broad-brush disciplinary accounts of IR obscures a rich, ambivalent, and evolving thought that reaches back into the intellectual ferment of Weimar Germany.[55] Nowhere is this truer than in his vital engagement with nuclear war and the existential sensibility he brought to bear upon it. We know, for instance, that Morgenthau was influenced profoundly by Nietzsche, far beyond any simplistic appropriation of the 'will to power'.[56] Channelling the diagnosis of European nihilism, he wrote in *Politics among Nations* that 'carrying their idols before them, the nationalistic masses of our times meet in the international arena, each group convinced that it executes the mandate of history, that it does for humanity what it seems to do for itself, and that it fulfils a sacred mission ordained by Providence, however defined. Little do they know that they meet under an empty sky from which the gods have departed.'[57] Moreover, the ultimate focus of Morgenthau's philosophy was, perhaps surprisingly, not the state or any collective but rather the individual, particularly in its modern subjectivity. The fundamental condition of man is one of 'existential loneliness' which compels him to seek out political and interpersonal relations with others[58] but without ever being able to escape the 'solitary individuality' of consciousness.[59] For it is that 'human thought, insofar as it is oriented toward truth, must be oriented toward death' and that living consciously in the knowledge of one's death threatens 'absurdity'.[60] Indeed, this existential solitude is compounded by the death of God, having deprived the individual of 'even the illusion of a remedy outside himself'.[61] As with Jaspers, the paramount human value for Morgenthau remains that of individual freedom, even as it is being imperilled by the advances of science and technology.[62]

Initially, Morgenthau's view of nuclear weapons was of a merely quantitative extension of the means of military destruction available to nation-states that did not fundamentally upend strategic rationality. Concerned with combating Soviet expansionism, he advocated American nuclear armament throughout the 1950s, vocally supporting the development of the hydrogen bomb and intercontinental ballistic missile. Wary that the Eisenhower administration's threat of massive retaliation lacked credibility, he contemplated a limited war strategy that could navigate the twin perils of suicide and defeat.[63] It is all the more remarkable then that, by the following decade, he had transmuted into an implacable opponent of 'conventionalisation', arguing for the remainder of his life that nuclear weapons could not be treated as regular military means. Rejecting the notion that nuclear war could ever remain limited, Morgenthau insisted that the Bomb had radically untethered war from the rational dictates of state policy since it could only ever serve as 'an instrument of

[55] Michael C. Williams (ed.), *Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans J. Morgenthau in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[56] Ulrik Enemark Petersen, 'Breathing Nietzsche's air: New reflections on Morgenthau's concepts of power and human nature', *Alternatives*, 24:1 (1999), pp. 83–118; Christoph Frei, *Hans J. Morgenthau: An Intellectual Biography* (Baton Rouge, LA: University of Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

[57] Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), p. 196.

[58] Hans J. Morgenthau, 'Love and power', *Commentary*, 33 (1962), pp. 247-251 (p. 247), available at: {https://www.commentary.org/articles/hans-morgenthau/love-and-power/}.

[59] Hans J. Morgenthau, 'Thought and action in politics', *Social Research*, 38:4 (1971), pp. 143–165 (p. 626).

[60] Ibid., p. 629.

[61] Unpublished essay, cited in Greg Russell, 'Science, technology, and death in the nuclear age: Hans J. Morgenthau on nuclear ethics', *Ethics and International Affairs*, 5:1 (1991), pp. 115–134 (p. 12).

[62] Hans J. Morgenthau, *Science: Servant or Master* (New York, NY: New American Library, 1972), p. 3.

[63] 'The United States must prepare for, and fight if necessary, a limited atomic war, with the atomic ingredient carefully adapted to the challenge to be met; strong enough, at the very least, to avoid defeat but not so strong as to provoke all-out atomic retaliation.' Hans J. Morgenthau, 'Has atomic war really become impossible?' *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 12:1 (1956), pp. 7–9 (p. 9).

suicide and genocide'.[64] Most surprising of all was his conversion to world government as the only means to escape the peril of nuclear annihilation. As Campbell Craig has argued, this stance was at complete odds with his earlier political writings that had affirmed the permanence of power politics and war.[65]

What explains this dramatic about-face? Morgenthau's immersion in the febrile debates within nuclear strategy may well have played its part in dispelling any initial faith in the rational containment of nuclear power, as can be seen in the blistering criticisms he eventually formulated.[66] However, as has been noted by Scheuerman, it seems likely that his change of heart was shaped decisively by the encounter with Jaspers's work.[67] His 1961 review of *The Future of Mankind*, entitled 'An Atomic Philosophy', leaves no doubt as to the singular impression the book made upon him. Identifying 'a work of major importance' by 'one of the greatest living philosophers', Morgenthau heralds it as 'the only systematic undertaking to integrate the fact of atomic power into a philosophic system, providing an over-all view of the human condition, and to draw radical philosophic, moral, and political conclusions from that fact'.[68] In view of Morgenthau's reputation as a hard-headed political analyst, it is worth underlining his praise for Jaspers's 'sharp and revealing political judgments', deemed 'doubly persuasive since they appear as conclusions from general philosophical premises'.[69]

A few months later, Morgenthau aired his own philosophical treatment of nuclear war in a brief but striking text on 'Death in the Nuclear Age'. While its analysis owes much to Jaspers, it nonetheless distinguishes itself through its emphasis on the specificity of nuclear death and its nihilistic implications. First and foremost, 'the nuclear age has changed man's relations to himself … by giving death a new meaning'. Articulating a central existentialist theme, Morgenthau asserts that the awareness of our mortality is the 'great scandal' of human experience as the ultimate negation of being and the constant reminder of our fugitive temporal presence. Yet, by the same token, death represents a source of profound individual meaning since 'what we make of life is shaped by what we make of death'.[70] And it is precisely this fount of existential meaning that is threatened by the prospect of nuclear holocaust.[71]

Humanity has learnt to grapple with the anxiety attached to knowledge of death's inevitability by transcending its apparent finality through the pursuit of various forms of immortality, explains Morgenthau. The oldest and most universal path has been adhesion to a religious faith in a persistent ego or enduring life beyond death, but this solace is foreclosed to modern secular societies that have 'lost faith in individual immortality in another world'.[72] A second approach consists in exerting a degree of mastery over death through the active choice of its occasion and purpose. A partial 'triumph' over death is achieved through suicide or, more pointedly, 'sacrificial death' in which the individual offers their life, 'on the battlefield or elsewhere', in the service of a freely adhered cause. Finally, humans chase secular immortality through the social and technological artefacts that will outlast them and the associated cultural practices of remembrance. The most eminent among us

[64]Hans J. Morgenthau, 'The fallacy of thinking conventionally about nuclear weapons', in David Carlton and Carlo Schaerf (eds), *Arms Control and Technological Innovation* (Croom Helm, 1977), pp. 255–56.

[65]Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003).

[66]Hans J. Morgenthau, 'The four paradoxes of nuclear strategy', *The American Political Science Review*, 58:1 (1964), pp. 23–35.

[67]William E. Scheuerman, *Hans Morgenthau: Realism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), p. 146.

[68]Hans J. Morgenthau, 'An atomic philosophy', *Saturday Review* (18 February 1961), p. 18.

[69]Ibid., p. 19.

[70]Morgenthau, *Science: Servant or Master?*, p. 149.

[71]Hans J. Morgenthau, 'Death in the nuclear age', *Commentary*, 32 (1961), available at: {https://www.commentary.org/articles/hans-morgenthau/death-in-the-nuclear-age/}.

[72]Morgenthau, 'Death in the nuclear age'.

can aspire to survive in collective memory while lesser mortals can find comfort in being remembered by their relatives and proximate descendants as well as sharing anonymously in the enduring achievements of civilisation.[73]

Nuclear war negates all these secular consolations through its threat of a wholesale destruction of human societies and their inheritances. Every possible meaning invested in one's own death – and thus life itself – becomes senseless when entire civilisations can be turned to radioactive ashes at the push of a button. 'Nuclear destruction destroys the meaning of death by depriving it of its individuality. It destroys the meaning of immortality by making both society and history impossible. It destroys the meaning of life by throwing life back upon itself.' Sacrificial death can no longer serve as an individual expression of human freedom when it is subsumed in the simultaneous slaughter of innocents by their tens of millions. Immortality through collective memory is likewise denied by the comprehensive incineration of societies and their cultural legacies.[74]

In the face of such a nihilistic plight, the only natural response is to 'despair'. Yet few have truly faced the true existential significance of the Bomb, writes Morgenthau. 'In spite of what some of us know in our reason, we continue to think and act as though the possibility of nuclear death portended only a quantitative extension of the mass destruction of the past and not a qualitative transformation of the meaning of our existence.' Tragically, it is this very 'backwardness of our consciousness' and the corresponding inadequacy of our social and political responses to this new condition that makes the likelihood of nuclear death all the greater. Renouncing the solace of a 'thoughtless optimism' in the non-occurrence of nuclear war, humankind will for its survival require nothing less than 'a radical transformation of its thought and action'.[75] Unfortunately, this transformation cannot be accomplished merely by 'an act of will' or any 'conscious effort'. The required 'new man' will have to 'create himself step by step' through a deepening understanding of the novel circumstances he finds himself in and the necessity to overhaul correspondingly his modes of thought and action.[76]

Alison McQueen has argued that Morgenthau's account of nuclear death was intended to contribute to this fledgling consciousness by cultivating among his readers a 'salutary fear' that would shake them out of their denial and complacency.[77] While Morgenthau is not explicit about such a rhetorical strategy, it is evidently congruent with Jaspers's own exhortation. Moreover, when it came to the 'supranational political order' that he saw as the only political response commensurate to the nuclear peril, he was keen to locate the motor of its emergence in the very elemental human drive for survival to which he had previously attributed the perennial strife of international relations. Indeed, the longing for the political unity of humankind 'in times past mainly a spiritual or humanitarian impulse, in the nuclear age has been greatly strengthened by the desire, innate in all men, for self-preservation'.[78] In the light of 'Death in the Nuclear Age', the human impetus for persistence manifestly extends beyond the mere drive for biological endurance to an obstinate need for transcending our individual demises. From this perspective, awakening consciousnesses to the nuclear menace and stoking the existential fear it elicits is a precondition to establishing a new global political order that would not fall foul of the idealist illusions Morgenthau had previously decried. Crucially, the fundamental lever to realise this change is located in the freedom of individuals to change their minds and from which all political action derives: 'with the consciousness of the individual the consciousness of an epoch is changed, and that new consciousness brings forth new deeds that change the empirical world'.[79]

[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Morgenthau, *Science: Servant or Master?*, p. 153.
[77] Alison McQueen, 'Salutary fear? Hans Morgenthau and the politics of existential crisis', *American Political Thought*, 6:1 (2017), pp. 78–105.
[78] Hans J. Morgenthau, *The Restoration of American Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 175.
[79] Morgenthau, 'Thought and action in politics', p. 632.

Morgenthau's principal contribution to the philosophical reflection on the Bomb lies in his elaboration of the radical transformation in the meaning of death, and by extension of life, when it takes the form of human extinction. It would fall to the last of our nuclear philosophers to detail the mutilated existences of the beings living in the historical wake of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, stamped by the grotesque disjuncture between our biblical powers of destruction and our derisorily meagre capacities for imagining their consequences and exercising moral responsibility for them.

Günther Anders and the Promethean gap

In Günther Anders, we encounter another figure deeply embedded in the intellectual life of pre-war Germany. The son of prominent psychologists, a cousin of Walter Benjamin and one-time husband of Hannah Arendt, a student under Husserl and Heidegger, Anders eventually distinguished himself through an acute critique of technology's impact on human existence and a considered reflection on the remaining possibilities for freedom and solidarity. While much of his post-war work was concerned with the deficiencies of Marxism in truly understanding the technocratic source of economic alienation,[80] it was inseparable from an unremitting preoccupation with the omnicidal potential of technology.[81]

Significantly, Anders did not count himself as an existentialist, and he was quite scathing in his assessment of the French post-war movement and its inheritance from Heidegger, a figure to whom he was also indebted but whom he eventually broke with, not least for his Nazi collaboration. He likewise marked his difference with Jaspers, including over nuclear weapons.[82] Yet the affinity with existentialism is simultaneously undeniable, as manifest through his shared concern with the primacy of human freedom, the threat of its extinction by technology, and the promise of harnessing fear of the Bomb to radically overhaul individual consciousness and collective existence. The substance of his critique of existentialism is also instructive, notably in his attribution of a common kinship with nuclear weapons to nihilism.

Hiroshima's atomic bombing marks for Anders the beginning of a 'New 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'.[83] This seemingly unrestricted power of destruction signals the realisation of the ancestral 'Promethean Dream of omnipotence' but has come with a deadly sting in its tail, since we are simultaneously rendered utterly vulnerable to it.[84] Our new-found omnipotence is twinned with a total impotence. The 'completely changed relation to the cosmos and to ourselves' heralded by the Bomb may have 'transformed us into a new species', but this novel state of being is decidedly Janus-faced.[85] As 'cosmic parvenus, ursurpers of the apocalypse', we are simultaneously the 'first titans' and the 'first dwarves',[86] 'smaller than ourselves' in our intellectual and moral inadequacy to the cataclysmic powers we have stumbled upon.[87]

[80] Jason Dawsey, 'Marxism and technocracy: Günther Anders and the necessity for a critique of technology', *Thesis Eleven*, 153:1 (2019), pp. 39–56.

[81] This section will necessarily only provide a cursory summation of Anders's voluminous work on the nuclear question. For a fuller critical account of both its philosophical character, including its complex relation to existentialism, and enduring value to IR, readers should turn to van Munster, 'Nuclear weapons, existentialism, and international relations' and Rens van Munster and Casper Sylvest, 'Appetite for destruction: Günther Anders and the metabolism of nuclear techno-politics', *Journal of International Political Theory*, 15:3 (2019), pp. 332–48.

[82] Anders notably deemed unconscionable Jaspers's invocation of 'sacrifice' to justify choosing nuclear war over totalitarianism, since volunteering millions for collective suicide ought not to be construed as anything else than 'murder'. Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 107.

[83] Günther Anders, 'Theses for the atomic age', *The Massachusetts Review*, 3:3 (1962), pp. 493–505 (p. 493).

[84] Günther Anders, 'Reflections on the H bomb', *Dissent*, 3:2 (1956), pp. 146–155 (p. 146).

[85] Ibid., p. 146.

[86] Ibid., p. 147.

[87] Günther Anders (ed.), *Burning Conscience: The Case of the Hiroshima Pilot, Claude Eatherly Told in His Letters to Günther Anders* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1962), p. 12.

The 'New Age' is also de facto the 'Last Age', since the 'possibility of our self-extinction' that defines it can only be ended 'by the end itself'.[88] We necessarily live from hereon in the 'Time of the End' even if we happen to succeed in deferring indefinitely the 'End of Time'.[89] Our capacity for self-annihilation cannot be forsaken; even if we destroyed every single nuclear bomb and shredded every blueprint, the latent power to bring about the apocalypse would remain as long as humans endure. Accordingly, 'the goal that we have to reach cannot be *not* to have the thing; but never to use the thing, although we can't help having it; never to use it, although there will be no day on which we couldn't use it'.[90] Our collective existence is now that of a life under a suspended death sentence.

The Bomb itself appears to us as a 'monster' in the sense of a *sui generis* object that is both 'unclassifiable' and 'ontologically unique'.[91] Any attempt at conceptualising it through the use of existing categories such as, for example, the frame of yet another weapon, necessarily falls short. Referencing the school of negative theology that wilfully restricts itself to speaking of God in terms of what He is *not* on the premise that the divinity is fundamentally unknowable, Anders endeavours to approach the definition of the Bomb in a similar fashion.[92] Above all, he contends, the Bomb is not a 'means'. Anders points here to the radical disjuncture between the destruction entailed by the employment of nuclear means and any conceivable political or military end. The effect of the Bomb 'would not only be greater than its alleged end but in all likelihood would call into question any further positing of ends and hence any further use of means; we would be done with the principle of means–end as such'.[93] The apprehension of the Bomb as a means is thus senseless for all ends other than the explicit goal of bringing about the 'end of all things'.[94] And yet this senselessness is not the guard-rail against catastrophe it might appear to be, for 'this incommensurability of cause and effect or means and ends is not in the least likely to prevent the action; on the contrary, it facilitates the action'.[95]

Gesturing towards the abominable crimes of the Holocaust, Anders finds in the contemporary organisation characterised by the specialisation and division of labour a mass of individuals that do not contribute to setting its goals – indeed, they do not even need to know or reflect upon them – and as such no longer have any need for any 'moral conscience'. In fact, if there exists any 'good conscience' in these organisations, 'it is only as a paradoxical satisfaction – or even pride – at having succeeded in completely disconnecting one's own moral conscience' from one's activity.[96] This condition deprives the individual of any capacity to either take responsibility for the consequences of their activity or even project themselves into the future and, by extension, into the possible disappearance of the future. 'All the elements of the instrumentalised existence conspire to prevent him from understanding what the bomb really is. Thus he journeys towards his end, both febrile and indolent, without even understanding the meaning of the word "end"'.[97] Stripped of their agency within modern societies, human beings are reduced to the status of mere 'collaborators' and correspondingly 'blind to the apocalypse'.[98] Or, as van Munster and Sylvest put it, history has given way to 'the post-human stage of total instrumentality'.[99]

[88] Anders, 'Theses for the atomic age', p. 493.
[89] Anders (ed.), *Burning Conscience*, p. 137.
[90] Ibid., p. 20.
[91] Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen: Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution* (Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1956), p. 254 [my translation].
[92] Ibid., p. 248.
[93] Ibid., p. 249.
[94] Ibid., p. 251.
[95] Anders, 'Reflections on the H bomb', p. 151.
[96] Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, p. 289.
[97] Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, p. 294.
[98] Ibid., p. 286.
[99] Van Munster and Sylvest, *Nuclear Realism*, p. 94.

Anders thus insists upon the nihilistic character of nuclear weapons. Indeed, the possessors of the nuclear fire, in that the effect of their potential action is annihilation, must be deemed 'guilty of nihilism on a global scale … the lords of the Bomb are nihilists in action'.[100] Anders goes on to coin the term of 'annihilism' for the conjoining of nihilism and annihilation first realised by the Nazis. Moreover, he identifies a strand of reactionary philosophical nihilism of which he makes Heidegger the inheritor. For Anders, Heidegger's existential analytic promotes an 'extreme, voluntaristic individualism' which recognises no collectivity or group solidarity.[101] This critique extends to the post-war existentialist movement whose brand of 'French nihilism' constitutes with annihilism a singular 'syndrome' in the guise of a contemporary structure of belief that alternatingly invokes 'the existence of the bomb as a testimony to the meaninglessness of existence' and 'the meaninglessness of existence as a justification for the existence of the bomb'.[102]

For Anders, the fundamental condition of our times is the 'Promethean gap' that has opened up between our capabilities and our ability to represent to ourselves (i.e. imagine) their consequences, to accord our feelings to them, and to exert the commensurate responsibility. Put simply, '[man's] capacity for action has outgrown his emotional, imaginative, and moral capacities'.[103] Whereas in the pre-technical past the human capacity for imagination exceeded anything that humanity could realise in the world, the effect of our praxis can now summon realities we are unable to fathom and therefore command responsibly. Our measly moral imaginary is such that the resistances we spontaneously experience at the prospect of killing a handful of individuals evaporate when it considers the annihilation of a hundred thousand, allowing us collectively to prepare for nuclear holocausts with barely a second thought. 'Not only has imagination ceased to live up to production, but feeling has ceased to live up to responsibility.'[104]

In 1959, Anders entered into a transatlantic correspondence with Claude Eatherly, a guilt-ridden pilot who had participated in the Hiroshima bombing and was subsequently in and out of psychiatric hospitals, in between multiple suicide attempts and various attention-seeking petty crimes. In a lengthy exchange of letters eventually published as *Burning Conscience* in 1961, Anders explained to Eatherly that, far from the manifestation of psychiatric illness, his gnawing feelings of culpability and rejection of the hero status society sought to bestow on him were the 'proof of his moral health'.[105] As such, he distinguished himself as 'the model and the incarnation of conscience' in a world in which individuals are enjoined to contribute through their work but never reflect upon its effects.[106]

For Anders, our very humanity is at stake, over and above our physical survival. For 'this gulf between our emotional capacity and our destructive powers … makes us the most divided, the most disproportionate, the most inhuman beings that have ever existed'.[107] If we are to thaw 'the freezing point of human freedom' that has been reached, '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'.[108] Restoring this desired balance thus passes through both reason and feeling, Kant's Critique of Pure Reason necessitating a complementary 'Critique of Pure Feeling'. Anders indeed bemoans that 'our fear' of the Bomb is still 'too small': '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

[100] Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, p. 296.
[101] Jason Dawsey, 'Ontology and ideology: Günther Anders's philosophical and political confrontation with Heidegger', *Critical Historical Studies*, 4:1 (2017), pp. 1–37 (p. 17).
[102] Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, p. 305.
[103] Anders, 'Reflections on the H bomb', p. 152.
[104] Anders, 'Theses for the atomic age', p. 497.
[105] Anders, *Burning Conscience*, p. 4.
[106] Ibid., p. 138.
[107] Anders, 'Reflections on the H bomb', p. 154.
[108] Ibid., p. 153.

life'.[109] Our numbed faculties mean that we are in fact living in an 'Age of Inability to Fear' such that the imperative to expand the capacity of our imagination is synonymous with increasing our 'capacity to fear'. 'Don't fear fear', Anders exhorts his readers quasi-biblically, 'have the courage to be frightened, and to frighten others, too. Frighten thy neighbour as thyself.'[110] The order of the day is no longer *sapere aude* but rather *timere aude*, a bold upending of Kant's original injunction but one that nonetheless still hinges on a residual hope in the promise of the Enlightenment.

The impasse of nuclear existentialism: A Levinasian alternative

A common set of themes emerges clearly from the above reflections. The advent of the Bomb is a cardinal event in human history, perhaps its most consequential, as our species attains the means of its own annihilation through the very mastery of nature granted by science and technology. A nihilistic shroud threatens to envelop us with the brooding horizon of nuclear apocalypse not only imperilling our physical persistence but also negating the existential meanings we invest into our fugitive lives. We turn away from this unbearable truth only at the terrible price of a dehumanisation and loss of authenticity that makes us complicit in the universal cataclysm to come. Accordingly, the lone path out of our dire predicament passes through the unflinching confrontation with the significance of the Bomb that can still induce a general existential awakening and accession to a higher state of human freedom. For there is no decisive escape to be found in the chimeras of international cooperation or nuclear disarmament. The latent potential for self-annihilation unlocked by reason's piercing of nature's elemental secrets will always remain. So long as modern civilisation persists, there can be no turning back of the atomic clock. The salutary change must come in the form of a new turning of being to be realised in each and every individual conscience.

In spite of their common recognition of a general 'disenchantment of the world' and the central role of scientific rationality in the constitution of our nuclear predicament, the philosophers of the Bomb nonetheless reaffirm, albeit to differing and inconstant degrees, a certain Enlightenment concept of reason. For Camus, the choice before 'mechanical civilisation' is between 'reason and hell'. Jaspers similarly establishes a sharp distinction between 'rationality' as instrumental, abstract intellect and 'reason' as a morally grounded and historically attuned faculty oriented towards the realisation of human freedom. Rejecting the 'dead end of the intellect',[111] he insists that 'our salvation hangs upon the rule of reason'.[112] In his earlier writings, Morgenthau had formulated a stinging indictment of an illusory faith in the power of reason to resolve the ills of human society.[113] Yet, following his encounter with Jaspers, he would repeatedly stress the irrationality of both nuclear strategy and the continuing arrangement of the world into independent sovereign states and call for a more lucid recognition of how political arrangements must be realigned with individual and collective interests under our new conditions. As for Anders, his interest in the case of Claude Eatherly stemmed from his conviction that it was modern society that was truly mad, invoking the 'raging schizophrenia' that afflicts our divided selves.[114]

As noted by van Munster and Sylvest, a 'conceptual binary of sanity and insanity' that served to indict the nuclear status quo was a much wider trope within the anti-nuclear movement in both its intellectual and activist circles.[115] Bertrand Russell made particularly frequent use of this opposition through his various appeals to common sense and sanity. A failure to contend seriously with

[109] Ibid., p. 152.

[110] Anders, 'Theses for the atomic age', p. 498.

[111] Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, p. 206.

[112] Ibid., p. 336.

[113] Morgenthau finds rationalist philosophy wanting for 'its general inability to deal with the problem of death', which it treats merely as a negation of life to be averted and postponed as much as possible but devoid of any existential significance. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1946), p. 177.

[114] Anders, *Burning Conscience*, p. 12.

[115] Van Munster and Sylvest, *Nuclear Realism*, p. 57.

the nuclear peril, yet alone seeking rationally to master it to one's strategic and political ends, was from this point of view an indisputable mark of insanity. In the starkest possible terms, Russell expressed the notion that 'the world is faced with a race between death and reason'.[116] For van Munster and Sylvest, 'nuclear realists' were engaged in an 'attempt to go beyond rationality and recover reason and sanity'.[117] Or, as they also put it, these thinkers were part of a 'nuclear enlightenment' for the salvation of humanity.[118] Yet one could equally say that they were engaged in an effort to salvage the Enlightenment itself through their insistence on extricating reason's promise of a progressive history from the scientific rationality threatening to void it of meaning.

A specific trait of nuclear existentialism is the advocacy of fear to spur the necessary revolution in consciences. If humanity has yet to undergo the required existential transformation, it is because the 'creative fear' of nuclear war is being curbed, be it through unfeeling intellectualisation, a deficit of imagination, or simple denial. In other words, the threat of the Bomb can only be reliably contained by fully internalising into our being its terrifying world-ending powers. This resort to 'salutary fear' is all the more peculiar since most of the 'nuclear realists' opposed a 'politics of fear', concerned with its effects on both international politics and democracy.[119] Russell notably championed the 'conquest of fear' since the emotion 'degrades' individuals and leads them away from reason, a classical Enlightenment perspective.[120]

Further than this, one can read in these writings a more or less explicit affirmation of a grand teleological necessity to the Bomb as an inevitable historical development that will constitute the ultimate test of humanity's self-realisation. Existentialism's original diagnosis had identified inauthenticity and disavowal of freedom in the face of finitude as the bane afflicting the modern human condition. From this perspective, the being-towards-species-death signified by nuclear war holds the virtue of impressing upon humanity the indisputable necessity of an existential awakening as nothing else could conceivably do so. In this way, faith in a purpose to human history, in a cunning of reason that leverages the fear of extinction for its completion, is restored, however precariously. Nuclear existentialism posits the Bomb as a crucible in which humanity will either fulfil its destiny as the agent of historical progress or perish. Crucially, however, this does not lead to a tranquil end of history in which the Bomb is definitively banished once it has served its function as the midwife of existential maturity. It will forever remain, at the very least as a spectral presence standing for humanity's unrelinquishable powers of self-destruction, permanently installing a necessary tension, insecurity, and residual fear at the heart of being.

In raising the stakes of the nuclear menace to that of an ultimate trial between the disappearance of humanity and its decisive historical awakening, the existentialists end up saturating the prospective end with metaphysical, if not outrightly theological, meaning. Despite the role of the Enlightenment in the scientific pursuit of knowledge and power that delivered the Bomb, they remained wedded to a theodicy of reason and its promise of realising human freedom in history. Faced with the profound crisis in the modernist conception of history, our philosophers seemingly cannot resist the urge to rescue purpose and meaning from the wreckage, reaffirming a new totality in which the Bomb is figured as indispensable.[121]

A final feature of nuclear existentialism is a propensity towards an ontological individualism reflected in its focus upon the solitary encounter of the self with the challenge of the Bomb and the

[116] Bertrand Russell, *Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 53.

[117] Van Munster and Sylvest, *Nuclear Realism*, p. 41.

[118] Ibid., p. 7.

[119] Ibid., p. 74.

[120] Bertrand Russell, 'What desires are politically important?', Nobel Lecture, 11 December 1950, available at: {https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1950/russell/lecture/}.

[121] It also bears pointing out in this context that the constant invocation of 'man' and the casual 'we' that accompanies it is vulnerable to the charge of unthinkingly upholding a particular, quintessentially Western and male, universal within the unfolding of this total history.

necessity of political change being grounded in individual transformation. Such a disposition naturally flows from existentialist concerns with the individual's confrontation with their own finitude and the emphasis placed on the subject's radical freedom. Consequently, the problem of collective nuclear death is apprehended in the first instance through the prism of individual subjectivity. Following Morgenthau, the specific existential crisis of the nuclear age is that the mortal individual is denied the consolation of posterity through the disappearance of any other humans that might remember them or build upon on their legacy. In accordance with the primacy granted to human freedom and autonomy, the collective response to the Bomb must also necessarily pass through an individual existential awakening to be replicated en masse through a proselytism of fear. Let us recall that Jaspers insists that 'it is up to every individual himself' to realise the necessary turning of being, while Morgenthau invokes a 'new man' who will 'create himself step by step'. Although Anders does for his part take issue with the 'extreme, voluntaristic individualism' he detects in existentialism, he does not completely escape this tendency due to his shared preoccupation with freedom and autonomy, as evidenced by his investment in Claude Eatherly as the model of private conscience to which all should aspire.

The problem attendant to this ontological individualism lies in bridging the gap with the collective arena in which political and social change can be effected. De facto, it places an inordinate weight on the salutary effect of existential fear in transforming individual consciousnesses one by one, holding out the hope that the aggregation of new beings will somehow culminate in revolutionary change through a mechanism that remains unspecified. One can certainly question how effective this appeal to self-preservation could ever be when nuclear strategy concurrently claims to ground survival and security in its own mobilisation of fear through the permanent threat of nuclear war. Moreover, in the absence of any tangible leverage to enact radical social change, is the response of the average citizen confronted with the terrifying certainty of nuclear death not liable to be fatalism and paralysis? As such, the general persistence of denial or solipsistic hedonism constitutes a perfectly understandable psychological coping mechanism. Certainly, the exertions of our philosophers to foster existential awakening during the Cold War did not have the large-scale effects hoped for. Indeed, public denial of our nuclear condition is arguably only more deeply entrenched today, comforted by the non-occurrence of nuclear war for eight decades.

At the present juncture, in which concerns over nuclear war have been dramatically rekindled, the reflections gathered here under the heading of nuclear existentialism unquestionably bear revisiting in any engagement with the most profound implications for human existence from the persistent threat of self-annihilation. The common underlying diagnosis that only a profound transformation in the conditions of individual and collective life can hope to avert, or at least indefinitely defer, catastrophe remains wholly pertinent. Yet the identified attachment to historical teleology, reliance on salutary fear, and propensity towards ontological individualism also stand as possible objections, or at least points of critical interrogation, to be raised against any simple reactivation of nuclear existentialism in the present nuclear age. Moreover, we can find in the thought of a contemporary the potential resources for reconsidering the philosophical problem of human existence under the Bomb in a manner that resists and upends all of the aforementioned dispositions. Indeed, following his personal confrontation with death through his detention in a Stalag during the Second World War, Emmanuel Levinas devised a singular existential phenomenology born from a dialogue with the thoughts of Heidegger and Sartre but which stakes markedly distinctive conceptions of freedom, death, and fear. As such, Levinas's vital contribution lies less in an explicit philosophical prescription for confronting the Bomb – his direct references to it are scarce – than it is in unsettling the fundaments of Western philosophy unthinkingly perpetuated by nuclear existentialism, thereby clearing the path for a renewed engagement.

According to Levinas, the tradition of Western philosophy has systematically privileged self rather than other, freedom over justice, and autonomy over heteronomy. Underlying their proclaimed pursuit of truth, philosophers have affirmed the fundamental 'freedom of the investigator'

and through it the prospect of 'the conquest of being by man over the course of history'.[122] In so doing, any encounter with radical otherness that might alienate and restrict the autonomous subject is foreclosed and systematically recast as yet another iteration of the same. 'When, in the philosophical life that realises this freedom, there arises a term foreign to the philosophical life, other – the land that supports us and disappoints our efforts, the sky that elevates us and ignores us, the forces of nature that aid us and kill us, things that encumber us or serve us, men who love us and enslave us – it becomes an obstacle; it has to be surmounted and integrated into this life.'[123] From this perspective, Heidegger's thought does not constitute the break with post-Socratic philosophy it claims to be since it still upholds the tradition in which 'freedom, even the freedom that is identical with reason, precedes justice'.[124] Levinas extends this charge to subsequent existentialisms with a pointed barb directed at Sartre: 'existence is not condemned to freedom, but judged and invested as a freedom'.[125] Modern political theories that have since Hobbes all made individual freedom their central axiom also share in the same unquestioned postulate. Furthermore, this philosophical disposition harbours within it an innate potential for violence through its inability truly to recognise otherness and its corresponding drive to assimilate. In contrast, Levinas's radical submission is that ethics precedes ontology, whereby ethical consciousness constitutes 'the concrete form of a movement more fundamental than freedom, but does not lead back to violence'.[126] We are always face to face with a pre-existent Other that cannot be integrated but instead opens up a perpetual ethical questioning and foregrounds the problem of justice over freedom. Crucially, this turn to ethics does not seek to ground itself in any absolute transcendent order of values, the possible foundations of which have been exploded by the dynamite of nihilism, but rather in the inexhaustible phenomenology of the face of the other.[127]

This Levinasian perspective further invites a re-evaluation of the question of death and individual finitude so central to existentialist concerns in Heidegger's wake. For if our own death is phenomenologically inaccessible to us (we can only approach it since its advent necessarily happens in our absence), it must be that our knowledge and experience comes in the first instance from the death of others: 'we encounter death in the face of the other'.[128] In this way, Levinas questions the equation made between the individual's relationship to their own death and death in general. In the final instance, this challenges the meaning given to death as 'the end of being-in-the-world, as annihilation'.[129] 'Death is not identical to nothingness', insists Levinas.[130] Rather than starting from the individual's confrontation to finitude to make sense of collective death, Levinas proposes instead to ground our understanding of death in the primary experience of the other's demise. This has the effect of installing an ethical horizon at the outset through an originary opening onto otherness rather than a putative nothingness: 'the death signified by the end could not measure the entire significance of death without becoming responsibility for another – by which one becomes oneself in reality: one becomes oneself through this untransferable, undelegatable responsibility'.[131]

Levinas also approaches fear in a distinctive fashion, once again displacing the individual, solipsistic perspective typical of existentialism. For ethical responsibility finds as a correlate a 'fear for

[122]Emmanuel Levinas, 'Philosophy and the idea of infinity', in Emmanuel Levinas (ed.), *Collected Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Springer, 1987), pp. 47–59 (pp. 47–8).

[123]Ibid., p. 49.

[124]Ibid., p. 53.

[125]Ibid., p. 58.

[126]Ibid.

[127]As Messina points out, Levinas's God not merely 'cohabits' with but even 'solicits' Nietzsche's death of God insofar as it is conceived as an irreducible 'Outside' antithetical to any regression to onto-theology. Aïcha Liviana Messina, 'Levinas's Gaia scienza', in Jill Stauffer and Bettina Bergo (eds), *Nietzsche and Levinas: After the Death of a Certain God* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 199–213 (p. 200).

[128]Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 105.

[129]Ibid., p. 36.

[130]Ibid., p. 55.

[131]Ibid., pp. 42–3.

the other' occasioned by our very own 'being in the world', conceived as the 'usurpation of places that belong to the other man who has already been oppressed or starved by me'.[132] If our existential experience begins with the relationship to the other, it is accordingly not the fear of our own death that should guide our conduct but responsibility for the death of the other, be they friend or enemy. The challenge of nuclear death is thereupon not foremost that of the individual's fear over the meaninglessness of their personal demise in the absence of posterity but rather the boundless responsibility that the prospect of human extinction places on each of us.

Finally, embracing the radical open-endedness of the encounter with alterity and resisting the impetus towards assimilation of the other into the same precludes self-contained systems of thought that strive to comprehend the world in its 'totality'. Yet this is precisely what nuclear existentialism falls prey to in its fashioning of a universal history whose denouement turns on humanity's capacity to master the Bomb and accede to a higher state of freedom. Against it, Levinas puts forward a conception of 'infinity' according to which the world always exceeds the grasp of totalising knowledge, imposing upon us the limitless experience of alterity and ethical responsibility.[133] In particular, he conceives of nuclear weapons as an eruption of the natural forces that human civilisation had learned to dominate over millennia but which have now prised away the 'march of the real' from human volition.[134] Against all the philosophies of history, 'social problems and the struggles between humans do not reveal the ultimate meaning of the real' in the nuclear age, since any 'end of the world' brought about by a nuclear escalation of such conflicts 'would lack the final judgement' of history. Rather than yet another obstruction to be surmounted and integrated into a totalising worldview, the Bomb constitutes an abyssal opening onto infinity, an emissary of the 'forces without faces' that humanity believed it had escaped and now rise up again, threatening to swallow us whole. It is precisely at this juncture, when politics appears supplanted by a 'cosmopolitics that is a physics',[135] that it falls to us not to abdicate our responsibility by attempting to marshal these forces to geopolitical ends or by embracing the soothing balm of historical fatality. Instead, we are called upon to turn once again towards the inexhaustible demands of the face and the ceaseless task of learning to live and die together under the shadow of extinction.

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[132]Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre-Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 130.

[133]Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2011).

[134]Emmanuel Levinas, 'Sur l'esprit de Genève' [my translation], in Emmanuel Levinas (ed.), *Les Imprévus de l'histoire* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1994), p. 141.

[135]Ibid., p. 144.

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