

The Gordian Knot: Moral Debate and Nuclear Weapons

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We have the power of choice over nuclear weapons. But we do not feel our power. Instead, we feel their power. They are larger than life. They loom over us, seemingly beyond our control, shrouded in myth and dark mystery. Because of their power and our feeling that nuclear weapons are unique, we believe that these weapons require a special set of moral rules, specially tuned to the separate world where nuclear weapons dwell.

Nuclear weapons create a sort of Gordian knot of moral reasoning that appears to lie beyond the boundaries of ordinary moral problem solving. Most moralists agree: nuclear weapons are exceptional and we need exceptional thinking to deal with them. Steven Lee, for example, argues that “nuclear weapons create a fundamental problem for our moral understanding. . . . The fantastic destructive power of nuclear weapons seems to place them beyond our moral world.”¹ Robert Jervis says that “nuclear weapons have so changed our world that much of the truth does not make sense.”² And Jonathan Schell asserts, “Because we are the ones who hold everything that is of worth to be so, the attempt to assign a worth to our species leads us in an intellectual circle. We find ourselves trying to gauge the usefulness of usefulness, the goodness of goodness, the worth of worth, and these are questions that have no resolution.”³ But although many writers, philosophers, clerics, and scholars have addressed the subject of nuclear weapons over the last sixty years, no new moral rules strong enough to bind nuclear weapons have emerged.

But nuclear weapons require no special morality; ordinary morality, it turns out, is good enough. This is because the powers of nuclear weapons have been grossly exaggerated. It is true that nuclear weapons are the most destructive weapons in the history of humankind. And they are certainly the most dangerous

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weapons that have ever been created. But despite their power, they also have limitations that make them quite ordinary. Indeed, nuclear weapons are not awe-inspiring, epochal, or war-winning, nor are they certain instruments of doom. They are clumsy, muscle-bound, expensive, unhandy weapons with little use except as totems of status. They are very difficult to win a war with—even if you have a monopoly on their use. As a result, what we already know about nuclear weapons is sufficient. We simply have to ask ourselves if it is right to kill innocents unnecessarily. The answer to this question will provide all the guidance we need.

We have always imagined that nuclear weapons present the ultimate temptation for those who desire power. We have wrapped nuclear weapons in sixty years of myth and hyperbole, undermining our ability to see the weapons realistically and therefore snarling our attempts to think about them with moral clarity. We have overemphasized their newness and uniqueness and ignored important sources of wisdom in our attempts to deal with them. We have misjudged historical events and the nature and purpose of war, and those two mistakes, one factual and one conceptual, have further tightened the Gordian knot of our moral debate.

Rather than attacking the problem of nuclear weapons as it has been presented, we need to question the assumptions of the entire debate. We will not resolve this quandary with complex and far-reaching moral arguments. We need to closely reexamine the reality of nuclear weapons and rethink their essential nature. Reimagine nuclear weapons, and the moral problems we believe they give rise to melt away. If they are not diabolically tempting because of their enormous power, then the normal moral prohibitions and restraints placed on the use of other types of weapons ought to be enough.

IT'S NOT YOU, IT'S ME

Ironically, when we talk about nuclear weapons the discussion often strays from the topic of weapons themselves. Consider the debate between antinuclear and pronuclear forces in the United States in the early 1960s. The antinuclear forces argued that nuclear weapons had changed everything except our own way of thinking and behaving. We would have to give up war, they said, and the only way to do that was to agree to world government. Anarchy would lead to death. The problem, as they defined it, was the warlike nature of human beings.

The pronuclear advocates agreed that human nature was the problem, but they saw a different flaw in our makeup. They believed that we were too weak-willed to face harsh realities. As U.S. Air Force General Curtis LeMay complained, “I think there are many times when it would be most efficient to use nuclear weapons. However, the public opinion in this country and throughout the world throw up their hands in horror when you mention nuclear weapons, just because of the propaganda that’s been fed to them.”⁴ What is striking about this debate is the extent to which it is not about nuclear weapons themselves. We are too warlike say the antinuclear advocates; no, we are not tough enough to be realistic, say the pronuclear advocates. Human beings need to change who they are, each side says, in order to solve this problem.

This is puzzling. If you were confronted with a rockslide blocking a road and had to figure out if it was moral to roll the occluding stones down the mountain-side, thus threatening other roads and other travelers, would your first step be to doubt your own character? It is telling that one of the major debates about nuclear weapons is actually about the suitability of human nature to coexist with these weapons, rather than a discussion about whether and in what circumstances their use would be justified.

The prevalence of apocalyptic rhetoric in discussions of nuclear weapons demonstrates the extent to which myth and mysticism obscure our view of these weapons. Associations with apocalypse seemed to spring spontaneously to the minds of those who were first exposed to nuclear weapons. J. Robert Oppenheimer claimed that, as he watched the fireball of the first nuclear test, he was reminded of the words of Shiva from the Bhagavad Gita, “Now I am become Death, the Destroyer of Worlds.”⁵ James Chadwick, a British scientist observing that first test, wrote later, “A great blinding light lit up the sky and earth as if God himself had appeared among us . . . there came the report of an explosion, sudden and sharp as if the skies had cracked . . . a vision from the Book of Revelations.”⁶ Thomas Farrell, Deputy Commanding General and Chief of Field Operations of the Manhattan Project, felt “stunned by what seemed to him the blasphemy of ordinary mortals toying with forces hitherto reserved to the Almighty.”⁷ As Paul Boyer reports in the *By the Bomb’s Early Light*, visions of apocalypse dominated the media reaction to Hiroshima:

Within days of the announcement of the bombing of Hiroshima, thoughts of the end of the world swept through the United States. The *Milwaukee Journal* on August 8, 1945,

published a large map of the city overlaid by concentric circles of destruction. And worse lay ahead. The primitive atomic bombs of 1945, observed the *New York Times* on August 12, were analogous to “the steam engine of James Watt, the telegraph of Morse, the flying machines of the Wrights.” As soon as the atomic bomb was paired up with the guided missile, speculated the *Detroit News* on August 17, the threat to civilization would rise to a “a new pitch of terror.” In an interview with the *New Yorker*, John W. Campbell, Jr., editor of *Astounding Science Fiction*, offered a similar vision of World War II: “every major city will be wiped out in thirty minutes. . . . New York will be a slag heap.”⁸

These ideas have since become embedded in the way we think about nuclear weapons, nuclear war, and nuclear deterrence. Consider how we refer to nuclear war when we do not call it “nuclear war.” We *could* call it “super-science war” because of the highly technological nature of nuclear weapons. But we don’t call it that. We *could* call it “mega-death war” because of the huge number of deaths that are expected in any nuclear war. But we don’t call it that, either. We could even call it by the appalling and whimsical phrase invented by strategist Herman Kahn: “wargasm.” But we don’t. The name we use comes from a hill in Israel that the Bible states will be the site of the Last Battle at the End of Days. When we are not calling it “nuclear war,” we call it Armageddon.

In reality, nuclear war would be far from an apocalypse. There are, after all, 600 million people in the southern hemisphere, where the only nuclear weapons are in the occasional submarine passing through that region. Furthermore, even in the event of nuclear war, no nuclear weapons are aimed toward points in the southern hemisphere. It might be that some sort of climatic catastrophe, triggered by nuclear war, could eventually threaten the lives of people in the southern hemisphere. But Nuclear Winter is a complex speculation involving questions we know little about.⁹

The strong association between nuclear weapons and thinking about the end of the world is clear and irrefutable. What is not clear is why this should be so. Although apocalyptic thinking has appealed to people for millennia, why should these ideas connect so strongly with nuclear war? What do we get from making this military event into a religious myth? What difference does it make that we think about nuclear war as apocalypse rather than, say, simply war fought with bigger, more destructive bombs?

One could also argue that the point of the apocalypse myth is to make the image of nuclear war so horrible that one would never consider it. But it would

also be a fairly simple task to demonstrate that the reality of nuclear war is horrible enough. Also, important characteristics of apocalypse do not necessarily work to make nuclear war less acceptable to all. For example, for some religious zealots, the notion that a few select, pious people will survive in a world washed clean of sin actually serves to make nuclear war more attractive, not less.

It may seem natural to exaggerate the results of nuclear war because nuclear explosions are so frightening and awe-inspiring, but the real result of thinking about nuclear war as apocalypse is to wash our hands of responsibility. After all, apocalypse is, by definition, something that only God can initiate or prevent. Paradoxically, the practical outcome of thinking about nuclear war as apocalypse is both to make nuclear war more frightening and to discourage people from taking any practical steps to deal with the issue.

CATEGORY DIFFERENCE

The most important myth about nuclear weapons is that they inhabit a new and entirely different category of warfare—so different that none of our past thinking about war applies. They represent such an enormous power that they cannot be conceived of in the way other weapons are. This notion is at the heart of our misunderstandings about these weapons. Herman Kahn expresses the conventional wisdom about these weapons when he argues:

Despite the fact that nuclear weapons have already been used twice, and the nuclear sword has been rattled many times, one can argue that for all practical purposes nuclear war is still (and hopefully will remain) so far from our experience that it is difficult to reason from, or illustrate arguments by, analogies from history. Thus, many of our concepts and doctrines must be based on abstract and analytical considerations.¹⁰

Many moralists follow a similar line of thinking: nuclear weapons are so different that we must, perforce, come up with new ideas and categories of argument. But this seems to me to be unwise. Even if nuclear weapons are entirely new, the human experience of war throughout the ages is still relevant. After all, just because humans employ a new means to accomplish a particular task does not mean that all the previous experience with that task is now worthless. War fought with new technology is still war. Soldiers still require training; leaders need to be able to communicate with one another and with their subordinates; forces need structure; there is a danger that anger and bloodlust will overwhelm good sense; territory can only be conquered with occupation forces of such and such a size;

the desire to seek retribution for cruel acts against civilians still arises; and so on. New technology brings changes, but the human part of the equation remains the same.

These theoretical considerations aside, there is conspicuous evidence that the claims that nuclear weapons establish a profoundly new category are exaggerated. For example, when these weapons arrived on the scene many observers claimed that history would now be divided between the Atomic Age and the Pre-Atomic Age. Oppenheimer reportedly told his friends that the Bomb made war impossible. But the record since 1945 shows that war is still quite possible. Despite many grandiose predictions to the contrary, the nuclear age has turned out to be largely indistinguishable from the nonnuclear ages that came before it. Wars are still fought, threats among nations are still made and ignored (even nuclear threats), and despite Einstein's admonition that, because of nuclear weapons, "a new type of thinking is essential," human beings have not radically altered their way of thinking.¹¹

The category difference argument was and is wrong. Nuclear weapons are implements like other implements (although much more dangerous than most). But even though there is evidence aplenty that nuclear weapons occupy no special category, debates and discussions about them still presume that they do. We still assign them special status that is undeserved.

THE WINNING WEAPON?

The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, followed by the sudden surrender of Japan at the end of World War II, established nuclear weapons as "miracle weapons." Some claimed that they could succeed to end war where other means failed. No other event established the special status of nuclear weapons as much as Hiroshima. If nuclear weapons were a religion, Hiroshima would be the first miracle. It is sobering, therefore, to discover that over the last twenty years historians have uncovered convincing evidence that the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had little or no impact on Japan's decision to surrender.¹² Rather, Japan surrendered because the Soviet Union declared war on Japan in August 1945. Japanese leaders *said* the Bomb forced them to surrender because it was less embarrassing to say they had lost to a miracle weapon than because of the prospect of an unwinnable war against the Soviet Union. Americans wanted to believe Japan's stated reason for surrender, and the myth of nuclear weapons was born.

Let us look at the facts. The United States bombed sixty-eight cities in Japan in the summer of 1945. If you look at a graph of the number of people killed in those sixty-eight attacks, you might expect that the number of people killed at Hiroshima would be off the charts because that is the way the history is always presented. In fact, however, Hiroshima ranks second. The bombing of Tokyo, a conventional attack, killed more people. If you graph the number of square miles destroyed in those sixty-eight attacks, Hiroshima ranks sixth. If you graph the percentage of the city destroyed, Hiroshima ranks seventeenth. Clearly, in terms of its end result alone, Hiroshima was not exceptionally destructive. It was not outside the parameters of attacks that had been going on all summer long. Hiroshima, then, was not militarily decisive.

The Soviet Union's declaration of war, on the other hand, fundamentally altered the strategic military situation. Adding another great power to the war created insoluble problems for Japan's leaders. It might be possible to fight against one great power attacking from one direction, but anyone could see that Japan could not defend itself against two great powers attacking from two different fronts.

Two important conclusions flow from this: 1) nuclear weapons are less impressive than we thought, and 2) nuclear weapons are less effective—less politically and militarily intimidating—than we thought. This reduction in their practical value has important implications for the moral arguments that surround them.

DESTRUCTION VERSUS WINNING WARS

Nuclear weapons are the most destructive weapons humans have ever invented, but that does not necessarily make them the most useful weapons. The biggest hammer is not necessarily the one you need for a job (especially if it is so big you cannot lift it). Because we are generally horrified by the slaughter and destruction of war, particularly when the slaughtered are innocent civilians, we sometimes imagine that the point of war is slaughter and destruction.¹³ This misapprehension is widespread. For example, British philosopher Michael Dummett argues that “Every so often, a large body of human beings abandon their normal conduct towards some other large body of human beings, and, instead, employ every means, or almost every means, within their power to kill and mutilate the others in large numbers, to destroy their cities, and their economy.”¹⁴ The goal of war is not, however, slaughter and destruction. War is about

defeating the other side's military forces. Destroying cities does not win wars. Had the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with nuclear weapons actually forced Japan to surrender it would have been the first time in history that this had happened. Throughout six thousand years of history, no war has ever been won as a result of the destruction of a city. No military has ever captured a city, destroyed it, and seen the other side surrender as a result. As long as soldiers are armed and willing to fight, the war will go on. It is worth remembering that the siege of Leningrad in World War II led to the death of more civilians than the bombings of Hamburg, Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki combined, yet the Russian soldiers defending Leningrad did not surrender and the city did not fall.¹⁵

Of course, the destruction of a major city may help to weaken the war-making capacity of your opponent. But it is important not to confuse destruction with winning. The two are different. Winning means beating the other side's military. If you forget the purpose of war it is possible to imagine a gigantic role for nuclear weapons—an all-powerful role. If you keep the definition of war in mind it becomes clear that nuclear weapons are not decisive.

THE LIMITATIONS OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Nuclear weapons are ideal weapons for slaughtering civilians and destroying cities. They can wreak enormous destruction in a matter of hours. But they are not very useful for winning wars. It is hard to use nuclear weapons against enemy troops without irradiating the battlefield and harming your own troops. Even when used against targets far behind the lines, they have drawbacks. In order to destroy an installation in a city, for example, you have to destroy three quarters of the city to do it. We tend to think of nuclear weapons as awesome. But it would be equally possible to think of them as clumsy, bull-in-a-china-shop weapons. For instance, as Douglas P. Lackey argues,

In the case of wars in progress, nuclear weapons have not been introduced in many cases because they cannot be effectively deployed relative to overall military objectives. The Israelis cannot use nuclear weapons on the Golan for fear of polluting the Kennerit, the Iraqis could not use them against Jerusalem without destroying the mosques they seek to liberate. The United States could not use nuclear weapons in South Vietnam without contaminating the countryside of our own allies; the Soviets could not use them against Prague and Budapest without destroying the industries they seek to exploit.¹⁶

Of course, the strongest proof that nuclear weapons are not war-winners is the fact that the two greatest nuclear powers both suffered humiliating defeats despite possessing enormously impressive nuclear arsenals. The United States in Vietnam and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan both found that their nuclear weapons could not help them win. Both suffered serious damage to their self-confidence and world reputation because it turned out that nuclear weapons do not guarantee victory in war.

It should not, perhaps, surprise us that nuclear weapons have proved so unhandy in war. The whole trend in war is away from large, destructive weapons toward precise, intelligent, small weapons. Drones that fire small, accurate missiles have been heavily used over the last thirty years. Precision-guided munitions have played crucial roles in various wars. Large, clumsy weapons like nuclear weapons have sat idle.

The moral problem that nuclear weapons pose is relatively simple: Is it right to kill large numbers of innocent civilians when making war? Since nuclear weapons kill such large numbers of civilians and deliver so little strategic benefit, their use is obviously morally problematic. Our past difficulties arose from our certainty that state leaders would be tempted to use nuclear weapons because they were so awesomely powerful. But it is possible to cleave the Gordian knot of nuclear reasoning in two. Rather than trying to “gauge the usefulness of usefulness, the goodness of goodness, the worth of worth,” we have simply to slice through our false notions about nuclear weapons. The knot of our reasoning is tangled because the premises of the question are false. Nuclear weapons are not the temptation of ultimate power, testing our moral reserves beyond their strength. They are simply bad weapons: clumsy, too large, too expensive, and too messy for almost any conceivable purpose.

NOTES

¹ Steven P. Lee, *Morality, Prudence, and Nuclear Weapons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 34.

² Quoted in Lee, *Morality, Prudence, and Nuclear Weapons*, p. 1.

³ Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* (New York: Knopf, 1982), p. 129.

⁴ LeMay was the pugnacious and unapologetic commander of the air force units that mercilessly bombed Japan in the summer of 1945, and later one of the strongest advocates of nuclear weapons as the U.S. Air Force representative on the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Curtis E. LeMay and MacKinlay Kantor, *Mission with LeMay: My Story* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965).

⁵ It turns out that this is not a very good translation of the original Hindu text. See M. V. Ramana, “The Bomb of the Blue God,” *South Asian Magazine for Action and Reflection*, no. 13 (2001).

⁶ Ronald W. Clark, *The Greatest Power on Earth: The International Race for Nuclear Supremacy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 199.

- ⁷ Robert Jungk, *Brighter Than a Thousand Suns* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, Inc., ca. 1958), p. 201.
- ⁸ Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), pp. 14–15.
- ⁹ The weather components of the theory have been recently confirmed and strengthened. See, for example, Alan Robock, "New Models Confirm Nuclear Winter," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 45, no. 7 (1989), pp. 32–35. However, the estimates about how much soot would be created by burning cities is harder to get without actually burning cities.
- ¹⁰ Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (New York: Praeger, 1965), p. 134.
- ¹¹ "Atomic Education Urged by Einstein," *New York Times*, May 25, 1946.
- ¹² For more detailed arguments and scholarly references, see ch. 1, Ward Wilson, *Five Myths About Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).
- ¹³ I have often heard U.S. soldiers say that their job is to "kill people and break things."
- ¹⁴ Michael Dummett, "Nuclear Warfare," in Nigel Blake and Kay Pole, eds., *Objections to Nuclear Defence: Philosophers on Deterrence* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 28.
- ¹⁵ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), p. 160.
- ¹⁶ Douglas P. Lackey, "Missiles and Morals: A Utilitarian Look at Nuclear Deterrence," in Charles R. Beitz, Marshall Cohen, Thomas Scanlon, and John A. Simmons, eds., *International Ethics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 111.