

Commandments in the Atomic Age

by

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Your first thought upon awakening be: 'Atom'. For you should not begin your day with the illusion that what surrounds you is a stable world. Already to-morrow it can be 'something that only *has been*': for we, you, and I and our fellow men are 'more mortal' and 'more temporal' than all who, until yesterday, had been considered mortal. 'More mortal' because our temporality means not only that we are mortal, not only that we are 'killable'. That 'custom' has always existed. But that we, as *mankind*, are 'killable'. And 'mankind' doesn't mean only to-day's mankind, not only mankind spread over the provinces of our globe; but also mankind spread over the provinces of time. For if the mankind of to-day is killed, then that which *has been*, dies with it; and the mankind to come too. The mankind which *has been* because, where there is no one who remembers, there will be nothing left to remember; and the mankind to come, because where there is no to-day, no to-morrow can become a to-day. The door in front of us bears the inscription: 'Nothing will have been'; and from within: 'Time was an episode'. Not, however, as our ancestors had hoped, an episode between two eternities; but one between two nothingnesses; between the nothingness of that which, remembered by no one, will have been as though it had never been, and the nothingness of that which will never be. And as there will be no one to tell one nothingness from the other, they will melt into one single nothingness. This, then, is the completely new, the *apocalyptic* kind of temporality, *our* temporality, compared with which everything we had called 'temporal' has become a bagatelle. Therefore your first thought after awakening be: 'Atom'.

Your second thought after awakening should run: 'The possibility of the Apocalypse is our work. But we know not what we are doing'. We really don't know, nor do they who control the

Apocalypse: for they too are 'we', they too are fundamentally incompetent. That they too are incompetent, is certainly not their fault; rather the consequence of a fact for which neither they nor we can be held responsible: the effect of the daily growing gap between our two faculties; between our *action* and our *imagination*; of the fact, that we are unable to conceive what we can construct; to mentally reproduce what we can produce; to realize the reality which we can bring into being. For in the course of the technical age the classical relation between imagination and action has reversed itself. While our ancestors had considered it a truism that imagination exceeds and surpasses reality, to-day the capacity of our imagination (and that of our feeling and responsibility) cannot compete with that of our *praxis*. As a matter of fact, our imagination is unable to grasp the effect of that which we are producing. Not only our reason has its (Kantian) limits, not only *it* is finite, but also our imagination, and even more so our feeling. At best we can repent the murder of *one* man: more our feeling does not perform; we may be able to imagine *ten*: more our imagination cannot perform; but to destroy a hundred thousand people causes no difficulties whatsoever. And that not only for technical reasons; and not only because the acting has been transformed into a mere 'acting with' and into a mere releasing, whose effect remains unseeable. But rather for a moral reason; just because mass murder lies infinitely far outside the sphere of those actions which we can visualize and towards which we can take an emotional position; and whose execution could be hampered through imagination and feelings. Therefore your next insight should be: 'The more boundless the deeds, the smaller the hindrance.' And: 'We humans are smaller than ourselves.' This last sentence formulates the raging schizophrenia of our days; that is: the fact that our diverse faculties work independently of each other, like isolated and uncoordinated beings, who have lost all contact with each other. But it is not in order to state something final or even something finally defeatist, that you should pronounce these sentences; rather, on the contrary, in order to make yourself aware of your limitedness, to terrify yourself by it, and finally in order to break through this allegedly unbreakable frontier; in order to revoke your schizophrenia. Of course, as long as you are granted the grace to continue living, you can lay your

hands in your lap, give up hope and try to resign yourself to your schizophrenia. However, if you don't want that, then you have to make the daring attempt to make yourself as big as you actually are, to catch up with yourself. Thus, your task consists in bridging the gap that exists between your two faculties: your faculty of *making* things and your faculty of *imagining* things; to level off the incline that separates the two: in other words: you have to violently widen the narrow capacity of your imagination (and the even narrower one of your feelings) until imagination and feeling become capable to grasp and to realize the enormity of your doings; until you are capable to seize and conceive, to accept or reject it—in short: your task is: *to widen your moral fantasy*.

Your next task runs: widen your sense of time. For decisive for our to-day's situation is not only—what everyone knows—that the space of our globe has shrunk together, that all points which only yesterday lay far apart from each other, have to-day become neighbouring points. But also that the points in the system of our *time* have been drawn together: that the futures which only yesterday had been considered unreachably far away, have now become neighbouring regions of our present time: that we have made them into 'neighbouring communities'. This is as true for the Eastern world as for the Western. For the Eastern, because there, the times to come, to a never before dreamed of extent, are planned; and because times to come that are planned are not 'coming' futures any longer, rather products in the making, which (since provided for and foreseen) are already seen as a sector of the living space in which one is dwelling. In other words: since to-day's actions are performed for the realization of the future, the future is already throwing a shadow on the present; it already belongs, pragmatically speaking, to the present. And that is true secondly—this is the case which concerns us—for the people of the Western world, since they, although not planning it, are already affecting the remotest future. Thus deciding about the health or degeneration, perhaps the 'to be or not to be' of their sons and grandsons. Whether they, or rather we, do this intentionally or not is of no significance, for what morally counts is only the fact. And since this fact of the unplanned 'working into the distance' is known to us, we commit criminal negligence when,

despite our knowledge, we continue to act as if we were not aware of it.

Your next thought after awakening should run: don't be a coward. Have the courage to be afraid. Force yourself to produce that amount of fear that corresponds to the magnitude of the apocalyptic danger. For also fear, fear above all, belongs to those feelings which we are unable or unwilling to realize; and the thesis according to which we are living in fear anyhow, much too much so, even in the 'age of fear', is a mere cliché, which, even if not fraudulently propagandized, is at least ideally suited to suppress the breaking out of a fear commensurate with the threat, and thus to make us indolent. The truth is rather the contrary that *we live in the 'Age of inability to fear'*, and that we confine ourselves to allowing the development to take its course. For which fact, not considering the 'limited nature of our feelings', there is a whole series of reasons impossible to enumerate here. *One* reason, however, which through events of the immediate past has gained a special actuality and a special prestige should be mentioned: our *competence-craze*; our conviction, nourished by the division of labour, that every problem belongs to *one* specific field of competence with which we are *not permitted* to meddle. Thus, the atomic problem allegedly belongs to the competence-field of the politicians and the military. Naturally the '*not being permitted*' to meddle immediately and automatically turns into a '*not having to*', even into a '*not needing to*'. That means: the problem with which I am not permitted to concern myself, I *need not* concern myself. And fear is spared me, because it is 'dealt with' in another field of competence.

Therefore say to yourself upon awakening: 'It is *our* business.' This means two things: 1, it is *our turn* to worry about it because it can *turn* on us and 2, the monopolistic claims for competency raised by individuals are unjustified because we all, as human beings, are equally incompetent. To believe that where the possible end of the world is at stake, greater or smaller competencies could still exist, that those men who as a consequence of division of labour and the alleged division of responsibilities, accidentally happened to become politicians or military men and in this quali-

fication have more and more directly to do with the production and the exploitation of the fatal thing—that *they* are more competent than *we* are—to believe that, is simply folly. Those who try to talk us into that—whether they are those allegedly more competent people themselves or third parties—only prove their own moral incompetency. The climax of unbearability, however, is reached when those allegedly more competent persons (who are incapable of seeing problems other than as tactical ones) try to make us believe that we have not even the *right to fear*, not even the right to have a conscience. Whereby they silently imply that conscience presupposes responsibility and responsibility is *their* business, just the business of those with qualifications in that department; and that we, through our fear, even through our pangs of conscience, overbearingly usurp a department which is not ours. This immoral situation cannot be allowed. In no case can 'Clerics of the Apocalypse' be recognized; no group which arrogates to a monopoly of competency for actions that could become the end of the world. Each of us has the same right and the same duty to warningly raise his voice. You too.

Not only are we incapable of imagining, not only are we incapable of feeling, not only are we incapable of answering for the 'thing'; we cannot even conceive it. For under whatever category we might think of it, we would think of it wrongly, because once pigeon-holed into a class of objects, it would be made 'one amongst others' and be bagatellized. Even if many samples of it exist, it is unique; not belonging to any genus; thus a monster. And as we can only paraphrase what it is *not*, we have to make use of the precautionary methods of 'negative theology'. Tragically it is just this monstrous fact of its not belonging to any definite class of objects which induces us to neglect or even to simply forget it. When confronted with things we cannot classify, we like to deal with them as if they did not exist at all. If however one does speak of the object at all (incidentally not as yet in private everyday conversation from man to man) then one usually classifies it (because this is the logically least troublesome way) as a 'weapon', more generally as a 'means'. A means, however, it cannot be, since a means is defined by its running into and dissolving in its end, as the way disappears into its destination. In this case, however, that doesn't hold true. On the contrary: the effect of the

bomb is greater than any conceivable end, for this end will necessarily be destroyed by its effect. Every end will be destroyed together with the entire world in which 'ends and means' had existed. After all, that a thing which by its very existence invalidates and annihilates the scheme of 'ends and means' cannot be a means, should be evident. Therefore your next maxim should run: I won't be talked into believing that the bomb is a means. Since it is not a means as the millions of means that make up our world, you cannot permit that it be produced as though it were a refrigerator, tooth paste, or even a pistol, about the manufacture of which no one consults us.

As little as you should believe those who call it a means, should you believe those more cunning seducers who try to persuade you that the thing serves exclusively as a deterrent: that means that it is manufactured solely in order *not* to be used. Articles, the usage of which exhaust themselves in their non-usage have never existed. At best, articles which sometimes were not used, for instance, when the mere threat proved sufficient. Besides we must, of course, never forget that the thing already (and that with no adequate justification) has been used in fact—at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Finally, you should not tolerate that the object, the effect of which surpasses all imagination, be classified by honest sounding, 'keep smiling' labels. The baptizing of a certain H bomb explosion as 'Operation Grandpa' was not only shockingly bad taste but intended fraud.

Furthermore you should resolutely contradict those who believe that they can confine themselves to a 'purely tactical' discussion of the monster. Such discussion is absolutely inadequate, because the idea that atomic weapons could be brought into play tactically presupposes the concept of a political situation which exists independently of and apart from the fact of atomic weapons. That is, however, utterly unrealistic, because the political situation—the expression 'atomic age' is legitimate—defines itself through the fact of atomic weapons. It is *not* the atomic weapons which 'also' occur within the political scene; but, on the contrary, it is the *individual events* which are taking place *within the atomic situation*: and most political actions are steps within that situation. The attempts to make use of the possible end of the world as a pawn amongst pawns in the political chess game are, whether

artful or not, signs of blindness. The time for artfulness is past. Therefore it should be your principle: sabotage all discussions in which people are trying to deal with the fact of the atomic menace from an exclusively tactical viewpoint; and therefore, make it your rule to channel the discussion into the only valid direction—the menace mankind has hung over its own head by creating its own Apocalypse—and do that even if you run the risk to become a 'laughing stock' and to be derided as politically immature and unrealistic. It is, in fact, the 'nothing but tacticians' who should be called unrealistic—because they see atomic weapons only as a means; and because they fail to grasp that the ends which they allege to seek are being forfeited by the very use of their means.

Do not be seduced by the statement that we are (and perhaps always will be) only in the laboratory stage, the stage of experimentation. Just a phrase. A phrase not only because we already *have* dropped A-bombs (which fact an astonishing number of people seem to have forgotten); so that the age of earnestness has started well over ten years ago, but—and this is fundamentally more important—because in this case the use of the word 'experiment' is out of place.

Your next rule should run: however successful the experiments may prove, those who are carrying them through are failing in making experiments; and failing because one is justified to speak of experiments solely in those cases in which the experimental undertaking does not leave or burst asunder the isolated walls of the laboratory; and because here this condition is not fulfilled any longer. On the contrary, it belongs to the essence of the thing, and to the desired effect of the majority of the trial explosions, to increase to the maximum the explosive force and the fall-out area of the weapon; thus, however paradoxical this may sound, to try out how far it is possible to overstep every experimental limitation.

One may object that to-day the main effort, or at least one of the main efforts, concentrates on the production and improvement of the so called—excuse the dirty term which is not mine—'clean' bombs. It goes without saying that in the very moment of an atomic war, one would use them *only* because one knows that for the last decision one has the dirty weapons at one's disposal. It is to them that the main effort is being devoted. Therefore the effects of these alleged experiments no longer belong to the class of

experimental results, but to the sphere of reality, to that of *history*—to which, for example belong the contaminated Japanese fishermen—and even to the sphere of future history since the future, for instance the health of future generations, is already affected, since ‘the future has already begun’, as Jungk’s philosophical title formulates it. Completely delusive is, therefore, the pet protestation of to-day that the decision to use the ‘thing’ has not as yet been taken. True is rather that the die, through the so-called ‘experiments’, has already been cast. Thus it belongs to your tasks to discredit the illusion that we are living in the ‘pre-atomic age’, and to call a spade a spade, an atom bomb an atom bomb.

All these postulates and prohibitions may be condensed into a single commandment: ‘*Have and use only those things, the inherent maxims of which could become your own maxims and thus the maxims of a general law*’. This postulate may appear strange; the term ‘maxims of things’ sounds provocative, but only because the fact designated by the term is strange and provocative of itself. What we mean is solely that we, living in a world that consists exclusively of instruments, are now being dealt with by instruments. Since, however, on the other hand, we are, or seem to be the users of those instruments, since we deal with mankind by means of those instruments, we treat our fellow men not according to our own principles and motives, but according to the mode of treatment incarnated in those instruments; thus, so to speak, according to *their* maxims and motives. What the postulate demands is: be as scrupulous and unsparingly severe in front of those maxims and motives as if they *were* your own (since pragmatically speaking they *are* your own). Don’t content yourself with examining the innermost voices and the most hidden motives of our own soul (a luxury lacking consequences) but do examine the secret voices, motives, and maxims of your instruments. This should be the only required ‘motivational research’ of to-day. If a high official in the atomic field would examine his conscience in the traditional way, he would hardly find anything particularly evil. If, however, he would examine the ‘inner life’ of his instruments, he would find herostratists and even herostratism on a cosmic scale, for it is in an herostratic way that atomic weapons are treating mankind.

Only when this new moral commandment ‘look into your “instrument hearts”’ has become our accepted and daily followed principle shall we be entitled to hope that our question ‘to be or not to be’ will be answered by: ‘to be’.

Your next principle is: ‘Don’t believe that once we have succeeded in making the *first* step: in stopping the so-called ‘experiments’ everywhere, the danger will be over and that then we will be entitled to rest on our laurels. The end of the ‘experiments’ neither implies the end of further production of bombs nor the destruction of those bombs and those types of bombs which already have been tried out and which lie ready for the eventuality. There are diverse possible reasons for stopping experiments: the State can do it, for instance, because further experimenting proves superfluous: this means: because either the production of the tried-out types or even the amount of stored bombs already suffices for every case of which one could think, in short because it would be meaningless and uneconomical to make mankind ‘deader than dead’.

Don’t believe, furthermore, that once we have succeeded in our *second* step: in stopping the further production of A- and H-bombs, or even in our *third* step: in having all existing bombs destroyed,—that we would be entitled to cease worrying. Even in a thoroughly ‘clean’ world (whereby I understand the situation in which there *doesn’t exist* one single A- or H-bomb, in which we seem to ‘have’ no bombs) we still *would* ‘have’ them because we know how to make them. There doesn’t exist, in our epoch of mechanical reproduction, the non-existence of any possible product, because it is not the actual physical objects that count, but their type, or the type’s blueprint. And even after the destruction of all physical objects pertaining to the production of A- or H-bombs, mankind still could fall prey to the still existing blueprints. ‘Therefore,’ one may conclude, ‘the thing to do is to destroy the blueprints.’ This, however, is unfeasible, for the blueprints are indestructible like Plato’s ideas: as a matter of fact, they are their diabolical realization. In short: even if we should succeed in physically eliminating the fatal objects and their blueprints, and thus saving our generation, such a salvation would be hardly more than a respite or a postponement. The physical production could be resumed every day, the terror remains and so should

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your fear. From now on mankind will always and for eternity live under the dark shadow of the monster. The apocalyptic danger is not abolished by one act, once and for all, but only by daily repeated acts. This means: we have to understand—and this insight shows fully how fatal our situation actually is—that our fight against the mere physical existence of the objects and against their construction, their try-outs, their storage, turns out to be utterly insufficient. For the goal that we have to reach cannot be *not* to have the thing; but never to use the thing, although we cannot help having it; never to use it, although there will be no day on which we couldn't use it.

This, then is your task: make mankind understand that no physical step, no elimination of physical objects will ever be an absolute guarantee, but that we have to have the firm resolution never to take the step although it will always be possible. If we, you, you and I do not succeed in saturating the soul of mankind with this insight, we are lost.