After Hiroshima,
“A Moral Code for the Atomic Age”

Jean-Marie Muller*

Austria’s Günther Anders (1902-1992) is considered “the” philosopher of the atomic age. As he wrote in 1982, “I was so stunned by the famous August 6, 1945 radio broadcast that, for many years, nothing I could do or say could extract me from the daze into which I had been plunged.” Not until the early 1950s would he manage to write down a few sentences on the subject. “Yet even then,” he said, “the words I was able to muster ... amounted to little more than a confession of my inability—or rather our inability—to conceive of what ‘we’ had done or produced.” Only in later days would he come to see that “this disconnect between our ability to conceive and our ability to produce is precisely what sets the stage for the possibility of another Hiroshima or Nagasaki.”

Blindness to the apocalypse

Humankind is unable to conceive that the nuclear weapons it has created have introduced into history not just the possibility but the likelihood of humanity’s destruction by technology. To express this situation, Anders coined the expression “blindness to the apocalypse.” People’s ability to make and to destroy infinitely exceeds the capacity of their imagination. It is precisely the unimaginable nature of a programmed extermination that has made it invisible to mankind. How can anyone truly envision millions of deaths, millions of murders, or millions of crimes? Taken literally, such a monstrosity defies comprehension, so much so that it simply exceeds the imagination. The immensity of the destructiveness is blinding. We do not see it. The possibility of such a disaster remains abstract and located beyond good and evil. What is unthinkable appears impossible.

Yet more than ever, a moral imperative remains for all rational people: “It seems to me,” to quote Anders, “that our era is no less responsible than any other for laying down the criteria of what is morally required today, of what we should actually be doing or refraining from doing in our time.” The nightmare of Hiroshima confronts the world with the threat of a self-inflicted apocalypse. “What has come to pass is irreversible; in the future, it will always be

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid. p. 37.
4 Ibid., p. 41.
possible for the same event to be wished for anew and provoked anew.”

By their very existence, even undetonated, apocalyptically destructive nuclear weapons which are kept ready for immediate use compromise the humanity of all those who tolerate this crime against civilization. They erode the very foundations of our moral existence, they oppress the moral existence of peoples. The possibility of the apocalypse is our doing, and as such each of us must be aware of this responsibility and this shared guilt. Even so, we cannot merely resign ourselves to it: such a scandal calls for our revolt. According to Anders, humanity must adopt a “Moral Code for the Atomic Age” that can set down fundamental moral requirements. He refers to the “shame of our time: the shame of what men have been able to do to other men; the shame, too, of what they can still do to one another today—of what we ourselves can do to one another—the shame of also being human.” This is a shame that must be assumed by each and every one of us.

---

5 Ibid., p. 40.
6 Ibid., p. 94.
7 Ibid., p. 155.
The bomb is not a “means”

All moralities are based on the link between the ends and means. However, the atomic bomb cannot be regarded as a “means.” “The bomb’s effect is greater than any conceivable end, for the end will necessarily be obliterated by the effect.” Hence, one of the maxims of the “Moral Code for the Atomic Age” should be that “no one will have me believe that the bomb is a means. Since it is not a means in the same way as the millions of means that make up our world, we cannot allow it to be manufactured.” Thus, reasonable individuals must as a matter of principle reject all discussions on the “usefulness” of the atomic bomb. Any and all discussions must be focused on its utter immorality. “Since the effects of these ‘weapons,’ that is to say the alleged means, would wipe out any possible goal, there is no goal that one would be justified in stating or spreading in order to justify their use.”

The responsible citizen can by no means hand over the decision to have the bomb to the authority of politicians and military leaders. This matter concerns the citizen first and foremost. As Anders emphasizes, “each of us has the right and duty to speak up and sound the alarm. Including you.” Faced with the fundamentally moral challenge posed by the bomb, each of us has the authority to make our voice heard. Each of us is responsible. We must all denounce the moral incompetence—which becomes a political incompetence—of those who make the bomb. And make no mistake, the moral option of disarmament is eminently political, whereas the military option of armament is ideological.

---

8 Ibid., p. 328-329.
9 Ibid., p. 89.
10 Ibid., p. 328.
The “Moral Code for the Atomic Age” therefore requires that each individual be absolutely opposed to his or her nation’s possession of the atomic bomb. For citizens of states with nuclear weapons, it is an imperative moral obligation to demand the unilateral nuclear disarmament of their country here and now. Even if we must strive for the global elimination of nuclear weapons, our decision to protest the bomb must be immediate and total. Refusing the bomb is an existential moral choice that gives meaning to life. In no way does it depend on the decisions of others. The reasonable individual must protest the manufacturing and possession of the bomb—which entails refusing any cooperation in the production and maintenance of means of mass destruction—without waiting for others to do so first.

Whether global disarmament will be achieved within 1 year, 10 years or 30 years—if indeed it is ever achieved—is not, in my view, the right question to ask today. At no time can I consider the sole choice of multilateral disarmament if it implies the temporary possession and hence potential use of the bomb. It would be an impossible ethical contradiction for me to want to maintain national armament while waiting for an unlikely global disarmament. I would in fact be consenting to the apocalypse. To tolerate the bomb is to be “struck with a blindness of the soul” directly akin to a form of cowardice: Anders refers to this as “laziness in the face of the apocalypse.” Refusing unilateral disarmament is not a strategic mistake but a moral failure.

A failure of the spirit.

Some may find these views excessive in their severity, but how can one be tolerant in the face of the utterly intolerable nature of the apocalypse? Anders’ hard line is commensurate with the scandal he perceives.

Even so, history is not a foregone conclusion, and hope is still possible.

* A philosopher and writer, Jean-Marie Muller is the author of Libérer la France des armes nucléaires, La préméditation d’un crime contre l’humanité, Chronique sociale, 2014.

Personal website: www.jean-marie-muller.fr

---

11 Ibid., p. 94.
12 Ibid., p. 42.