



Hubris Versus Wisdom

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Abstract

The world has shed over 50,000 nuclear weapons since the mid-1980s, but some 17,000 nuclear weapons still remain, primarily in the arsenals of the United States and Russia. This is far more than a sufficient number of these weapons of mass annihilation to end civilization and cause the extinction of most forms of complex life on the planet. This article explores the tension between hubris and wisdom in relation to nuclear weapons and the human future. Hubris says that these terrible weapons are subject to human control, while wisdom says that humans are fallible creatures, subject to error, miscalculation and irrationality. Examples of wisdom are provided in the form of perspectives of three leading 20th century thinkers: Albert Camus, Mohandas Gandhi and Albert Einstein. The article concludes that the Nuclear Age demands that humanity conquer hubris with wisdom and achieve Nuclear Zero, the only acceptable number of nuclear weapons to assure the future of humanity and other forms of complex life.

The steadfast commitment of the people of Nagasaki and Hiroshima to nuclear weapons abolition for nearly seven decades is both admirable and honorable. Along with many millions of other thinking and caring people throughout the world, I share with you the hope and goal that Nagasaki will remain the last place on Earth where nuclear weapons are ever used in warfare.

It is evident that there is only one way to assure this goal, and that is to abolish nuclear weapons. To do so will require leadership and a massive demand from people throughout the world. As one who has worked toward this goal for more than four decades, I know that this is an extremely difficult challenge, but I also know that we are making progress.

In 1986, there were over 70,000 nuclear weapons in the world. Today there are just over 17,000. It is progress that the world has shed some 53,000 nuclear weapons in roughly the past quarter century, but we still have far too many. To assure that there are no more Hiroshimas or Nagasakis will require achieving a world with Zero nuclear weapons.

1. Hubris Versus Wisdom

In the Nuclear Age, humankind must not be passive in the face of the threat posed by nuclear weapons. The future of humanity and all life depends upon the outcome of the ongoing struggle between hubris and wisdom.

Hubris is an ancient Greek word meaning extreme arrogance. Wisdom is cautionary good sense.

Hubris is at the heart of Greek tragedy – the arrogant belief that one's power is unassailable. Wisdom counsels that no human power is impregnable.

Hubris says some countries can hold onto nuclear weapons and rely upon them for deterrence. Wisdom says these weapons must be eliminated before they eliminate us.

Hubris says these terrible weapons are subject to human control. Wisdom says that humans are fallible creatures, subject to error.

Hubris repeats that we can control our most dangerous technologies. Wisdom says look at what happened at Chernobyl and Fukushima.

Hubris says the spread of nuclear weapons can be contained. Wisdom says that the only sure way to prevent the spread or use of nuclear weapons is to abolish those that exist.

Hubris says that political leaders will always be rational and avoid the use of nuclear weapons. Wisdom observes that all humans, including political leaders, behave irrationally at times under some circumstances.

Hubris says we can play Russian roulette with the human future. Wisdom says we have a responsibility to assure there is a human future.

Hubris says that we can control nuclear fire. Wisdom says nuclear weapons will spark wildfires of human suffering and must be eradicated forever from the planet.

2. The Necessity of Wisdom

In the Nuclear Age, wisdom is the best antidote to hubris. I want to go back in time to the horrific opening of the Nuclear Age and explore the wisdom of three men who understood clearly that the creation and use of atomic bombs changed the world. These men were Albert Camus, Mohandas Gandhi and Albert Einstein. Their responses to the use of atomic weapons were very different from that of then-President of the United States, Harry Truman, who, when he heard of the bombing of Hiroshima, is reported to have said, "This is the greatest thing in history." He also thanked God that the bomb had come to the United States and not to its enemies.

Albert Camus was a great French novelist and existentialist who, during World War II, edited the underground French Resistance newspaper, *Combat*. Twelve years after the war, in 1957, he would receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. After learning of the bombing of Hiroshima, even before the second bomb had been dropped on Nagasaki, he wrote:

"Our technical civilization has just reached its greatest level of savagery. We will have to choose, in the more or less near future, between collective suicide and the intelligent use of our scientific conquests. Before the terrifying prospects now available to humanity, we see even more clearly that peace is the only battle worth waging. This is no longer a prayer but a demand to be made by all peoples to their governments – a demand to choose definitively between hell and reason."

Camus recognized instantly that, after the atomic bomb was created and used, peace needed to be elevated to the top of our hierarchy of values and goals. It needed to be pursued actively, that is *waged*, with the same strategic thinking, discipline, commitment and courage

as for waging war. For Camus, the new circumstance of nuclear weapons in the world required *the people to wage peace and to lead their leaders*.

Gandhi was the great proponent of *satyagraha* (truth-force) and non-violence. He was leading India to independence from the British when the atomic bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Gandhi recalled his reaction to the bombs: "I did not move a muscle when I first heard that the atom bomb had wiped out Hiroshima. On the contrary, I said to myself, 'Unless now the world adopts nonviolence, it will spell certain suicide for humanity.' Non-violence is the only thing the atom bomb cannot destroy." For Gandhi, *the violence of the atomic bomb could only be overcome by the nonviolence of humanity*.

Albert Einstein, the great scientist and humanitarian, wrote, "The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking and thus we drift toward unparalleled catastrophe."

Einstein saw that the old ways of thinking were a trap and that people must learn to think in new ways. I believe the most important new ways of thinking that are needed are species identification and solidarity, that is, we must think like members of one race, the human race. In doing so, we will learn to settle our differences peacefully and not through violence, and we will build institutions, such as the United Nations, that will support these ways of thinking. For Einstein, the critical factor brought about by atomic weaponry was *the need for new modes of thinking if humankind is to avert "unparalleled catastrophe."*

Three great men: three powerful expressions of wisdom.

3. Ending the Nuclear Threat

The only number of nuclear weapons that makes sense is Zero and that must be our goal: a world with Zero nuclear weapons. This world is only as far away as our imaginations, our determination and our perseverance. To achieve Nuclear Zero, we must wage peace, take nonviolent actions, and change our modes of thinking to identify as members of the human species. The Nuclear Age demands that we conquer hubris with wisdom.

We must never give up on seeking the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons. We can follow wisdom and live together as humans, seeking solutions to our common problems; or we can follow the path of hubris and perish together stuck in our apathy, our ignorance and our national allegiances.

The most important next step on the journey to a peaceful and non-killing world is ending the nuclear weapons era. This can be accomplished by the negotiation of a Nuclear Weapons Convention for the phased, verifiable, irreversible and transparent elimination of nuclear weapons. Progress is being made toward this goal, but it seems unbearably slow.

Civil society and non-nuclear weapon states must bring more pressure to bear upon the existing nuclear weapon states to negotiate the elimination of their nuclear arsenals. I would also encourage countries to begin negotiations, with or without the nuclear weapons states, for a legal ban on the manufacture, possession, use or threat of use of nuclear weapons. The process must begin and it must be approached with a sense of urgency.

Having identified the problem – that nuclear weapons endanger the human species and much of complex life – we should move rapidly toward eliminating the threat. In doing so, we will free up scientific and financial resources to deal with other pressing global threats, including climate change, development of renewable energy resources, pollution of the oceans and atmosphere, scarcity of potable water, food insecurity and loss of forests, biodiversity and arable land. For the future of humanity, we must also move forward to eliminate war as a human institution.

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4. A Few Simple Truths

I will end with a short poem that I wrote earlier this year. It is titled “A Few Simple Truths.”

A FEW SIMPLE TRUTHS

Life is the universe’s most precious creation.

There is only one place we know of where life exists.

Children, all children, deserve a full and fair chance.

The bomb threatens all life.

War is legitimized murder with collateral damage.

Construction requires more than a hammer.

The rising of the oceans cannot be contained by money.

Love is the only currency that truly matters.

One true human brings beauty to the earth.

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