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Nuclear Echoes The Issue of the Atomic Bomb in Jaspers and Heidegger

Francis F. Seeburger
University of Denver
frank.seeburger@gmail.com

Abstract: This short essay consists of juxtapositions of lines from Karl Jaspers with lines from Martin Heidegger, sets of lines that establish, at least as I hear them, the underlying harmony between what the two distinctly different philosophers had to say on the issue raised by the atom bomb. Between each pairing of what I hear as such resoundingly echoing lines from the two thinkers, I will intersperse some comments of my own, to help guide our ears as we listen to each in turn.

Keywords: Jaspers, Karl; Heidegger, Martin; uncanny change; calculation vs. meditation; understanding vs. reasoning; dangers of technology; conflict and genuine politics; the irrelevance of power.

Introduction

Just what, in the final analysis, is the nucleus of the issue that most deeply concerns us all today – concerns us all both in the distributive sense of each and every rational being, and in the collective sense of humanity as a whole? I will let Martin Heidegger, who is for me personally the greatest teacher of my entire life, sum up the answer I hear echoing forth both from his own works and also from the works of Karl Jaspers.

According to Heidegger:

*The most thought-provoking subject matter in our thought-provoking age is that we are not yet thinking.*¹

What most concerns me in this brief essay itself is not the contrasts that can easily be heard in the remarks of those two great twentieth-century philosophers, Heidegger and Jaspers, on what issues arise from the development and spread of the atom bomb and its successor weaponry, but to draw attention to what resonates in common between their two sets of such remarks. It is easy to focus on the differences between these two thinkers on that matter. However, my primary focus in this paper is tracing how the two echo one another.

A Turning Point in Technology

Both Jaspers and Heidegger believe that with the development of atomic weaponry history has arrived at a turning point where it has become necessary for humanity to modify its dominant underlying approach to thinking as such, if humanity itself is not only to survive but also to continue unfolding. In regard to such a turning point, Jaspers writes:

¹ Martin Heidegger, "Die Vorlesung im Wintersemester 1951/52 mit Stundenübergängen," in *Was heisst Denken?*, Gesamtausgabe Band 8, ed. Paola-Ludovika Coriando, Frankfurt am Main, DE: Vittorio Klostermann 2002, pp. 4-113, here p. 7. [Henceforth cited as *WD*] The translations for this and all other German texts cited in this essay are my own.

The thinking in our time orients itself everywhere toward "doing," even there, where nothing is being left that can be "done." It seeks to find salvation through technological overcoming of technology as if human use of technology might itself be subjected to technical direction...The turn in our fate consists in the consequence of the insight that all technology, all craftsmanship, and all productive capacities, are not enough.

We direct attention to the turning point (or: the reversal, the transformation, the leap) from thinking in terms of external production to thinking as inner behavior, from understanding to reason.²

Similarly, Heidegger cautions:

For, precisely if the hydrogen bombs *do not* explode and the life of humanity on earth is preserved with the atomic age an uncanny change in the world will occur.

Therewith, however, what is genuinely uncanny is not that the world is becoming ever more thoroughly technical. What remains far un-cannier is that humanity is not prepared for this change in the world – that by means of contemplation we are not yet able to adequately address in meditative thinking what truly comes over us in this age.³

The underlying harmony between those two sets of remarks is loud and clear, at least to my own ear. What I hear both philosophers telling their readers in the lines just cited is this: what should most concern humans about the atomic bomb and subsequent nuclear technology has nothing at all to do with technology.

Of course, the various nation-states around the globe can and, I hasten to add, should refrain from any further launching of nuclear bombs on one another—as the United States dropped atom bombs on the two Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to end World War II in the Pacific. Toward that specific end of developing alternative techniques for addressing whatever conflicts arise between two or more countries is certainly appropriate. Perhaps information technology suggests itself as one good

means for countries to keep one another informed about whatever concerns each one and all of them. Or, to mention another possibility, it may be that new, non-nuclear weapons-technologies will be developed that provide ways for countries to destroy one another without risking general global conflagration.

However, even if such new technical alternatives are globally developed, and then employed with the utmost effort and sincerity, what both Jaspers and Heidegger in their remarks above call to one's attention as the fundamental issue raised by the atomic bomb will nevertheless remain unheard, and therefore unaddressed. No such efforts, however successful, will by themselves take humanity to the "turning point" that Jaspers mentions, the point at which at last comes to our attention what Heidegger calls the "uncanny change" in the world all humans share.

What is that turning point, this point at which the uncanny change in our world finally manifests itself? For Jaspers, as referenced above, it is the point at which thinking shifts from understanding (*Verstehen*), by which Jaspers means thinking as the processing of information about whatever one is addressing, to reason (*Vernunft*), by which he means thinking as deliberately and deeply reflecting upon—that is, reflecting in a way that penetrates the mere verbal surface—whatever one is considering.

For Heidegger, in comparison, the uncanny change that confronts humans will become clear only when they move from what he in various places calls *rechnendes Denken* (calculative thinking) to what he calls *besinnliches Denken* (meditative thinking).

The crucial issue posed by lethal technologies does not require the sort of endeavor that strives to solve some problem or cluster of problems, as though all that nuclear technology gives one were some such problem or problem-cluster to solve. The crucial issue such technology poses humans is, instead, the issue of thought as such. What the development of such technology calls upon all stakeholders to do is precisely that—to think deeply and genuinely!

Epistemic Response to Technology's Turning Point

The emergence of nuclear technology epitomized in the development and deployment of the atomic bomb calls for a radical change in our thought. Not thought in the limited and limiting sense of what Heidegger calls mere calculative thinking

² Karl Jaspers, *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen: Politisches Bewußtsein in unserer Zeit*, München, DE: R. Piper & Co. Verlag 1958, p. 6. [Henceforth cited as AZ]

³ Martin Heidegger, "Gelassenheit (30. Oktober 1955)," in *Reden und andere Zeugnisse eines Lebensweges 1910-1976, Gesamtausgabe Band 16*, ed. Hermann Heidegger, Frankfurt am Main, DE: Vittorio Klostermann 1983, pp. 517-29, here p. 525. [Henceforth cited as G]

and Jaspers calls mere understanding, but rather thought in the fullest, most genuine sense of what Heidegger calls meditative thinking and Jaspers calls reasoning. Clearly, it is to just such full, genuine thought that nuclear technology truly calls us to engage in. This incitement to ground oneself in thinking within that fullest meaning of the word is precisely what is prompted by nuclear technology, including but not limited to the atomic bomb and similar weapons of annihilation.

To meditate or reason in the requisite sense does not mean merely to consider the consequences of one's decisions and actions, as Truman did before having authorized the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II. In fact, to meditate or reason in the sense that Jaspers and Heidegger give these terms is to leave all such considerations regarding the consequences of one's decisions behind, and to shift into a way of thinking that lingers with sheer reflection on the very nature or essence of what calls forth human thought.

Thus, at the turning point at which humanity finds itself today, one first needs to ask oneself just what it truly is about modern, nuclear technology that gives humans pause, calling them to disengage from this ordinary round of ceaseless, technologically mediated activity—calling them to ponder this pause-inducting aspect of technology itself, giving food for thought to all humans capable of reasoning, calling forth one's thought, which is to say literally giving voice to one's thought.

Jaspers writes:

This writing aims to contribute to the political consciousness of our time by taking it up into the encompassing realm of the supra-political. Since a politics that withdraws into one area of human activity—as it were into one remit—is unable to solve the question as to whether humanity will remain alive or not.

Philosophical thinking should also be brought to bear upon the inner constitution of the individual in the way it is to be gained from (exerting) reason amid our total peril...

Yet a teacher of philosophy must take a back seat. He raises awareness. In an oftentimes unreflective world, he can occasion reflection by attempting to say the substantial, the simple. But reflection is not already action. He who joins thinking (efforts) can make preparations through acting inwardly, whereas the decisions are made in praxis.

Profound thinking and concrete action should come together in one and the same person, the statesman. In reality, there is mostly a separation between them. The philosopher has responsibility for the truth of what is thought, the effect of which cannot be reckoned; however, he is not tied to the situations arising from day to day. In contrast, the statesman has responsibility for the effect of his deed...Both have their flaw throughout: the philosopher does not act, and the statesman limits his thinking to immediate concerns. Yet philosophy and politics should conjoin one another. [AZ 6-7]

Here, Jaspers appears to suggest that philosophy can shine a guiding light onto human affairs. Again, Heidegger offers a similar viewpoint to the one expressed by Jaspers:

No individual human being, no group of humans, no commission of however eminent statesmen, researchers, and technicians, no conference of leading economic and industrial figures, has the capability to curb or direct the historical process of the atomic age. No merely human organization is capable of seizing mastery thereof.

Such would then the human being of the atomic age be defenseless and helpless at the mercy of the inexorable superior power of technology? This would be so if today's human beings renounced to bring meditative thinking into the decisive game, it being the opposite of merely calculative thinking. It would be so, if man today abandons any intention to pit meditative thinking decisively against merely calculative thinking. If meditative thinking becomes awake, then reflection must be put to work unceasingly and at the most inconspicuous opportunity...For, in the atomic age, it allows us to consider something that is notably under threat: the groundedness of human works. [G 525-6]

For Heidegger, this soil in which human works are rooted is thought itself. Not thinking in the limited and limiting sense of what he calls mere calculative thinking and what Jaspers calls mere understanding, but rather thought in the fullest, most genuine sense of what Heidegger calls meditative thinking and Jaspers calls reasoning. Furthermore, it is just such a full, genuine thought that nuclear technology truly is appealing to humankind. The call to root human action in thinking in that fullest sense is precisely what issues from nuclear technology, including but not limited to the atomic bomb itself.

Today, almost a quarter century after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rest of the Eastern Block of nations, the risk of global nuclear warfare has

all but vanished, as the basic reality of the globe as a whole has become the capitalist market system, whether in the form of so-called free enterprise, as in the United States, or the form of state capitalism, as in contemporary China. However, this fact does not in the least mean that we humans in our collective humanity have at last realized how void of thought we have for so long been—that is, it does not mean that we have realized what Heidegger suggests is most thought-provoking today, which is that we still are not thinking. It does not mean at all that we have finally heard the call to step back and listen to the call to learn to think at last, so that we might hear that call and heed it. Indeed, if anything we have become even less open to hearing that call, uprooting ourselves ever more completely from all genuine thinking as we lose ourselves ever more completely in our preoccupation with all our techno-devices—thereby losing ourselves in endless tasks in the servitude of technological devices; as I wrote elsewhere,

the devastation that holds sway everywhere today hides itself behind the twin masks of global prosperity and consumer variety.⁴

Thus, the travesty of so-called politics remains no more than politics as usual, which means no genuine politics at all, which must, as both Jaspers and Heidegger note in the citations with which I opened this section of my paper, always conjoin itself deeply with genuine thinking. Politicians have become even more thoughtless in the contemporary renditions of nationalism and statecraft than the world has ever been in the days when the threat of global nuclear war was thought to have been at its greatest.

May we someday reawaken at last to politics as the building of a truly human home, and to dwelling together with one another in that home.

⁴ Frank Seeburger, *The Irrelevance of Power*, San Jose, CA: Juxtapositions Publishing 2020, p. 36.

Answering Technology's Call

Just what is it, then, that is so deeply and truly thought-provoking about modern technology, especially as manifest in nuclear technology? Both Jaspers and Heidegger set an environment for addressing this question. Jaspers writes:

Practical insight and transcendence are carried out in the space of reason. What becomes of the human being depends on the reversion from the habitual, self-sufficient mode of thinking of the intellect to that of reason. [AZ 298]

In contrast, Heidegger's suggestion reads:

Releasement toward things and openness to mystery give us the prospect of a new rootedness. This might even one day be suited to call back in a transformed form the old rootedness that is now rapidly vanishing. [G 528]

The call that nuclear technology and the entire technological system to which it belongs persistently issues to humankind is precisely the call to step back at last and to listen, dwelling in releasement (*Gelassenheit*), as Heidegger calls it, or in my words, hearkening to whatever speaks itself to the attentive listener's silence, so that one may hear and heed it.⁵ In such releasing hearkening one can hold oneself open to hearing the call that gives itself to be heard—the call to root human intellects in reason, and all human calculations in meditation.

In closing, I return to Heidegger's Winter 1951/52 lecture where the philosopher brings attention to this subtle observation:

What withdraws itself from us thereby draws us right along with it, whether we notice it at once or not at all. [WD 11]

⁵ Frank Seeburger, "Hearken, Hear, Heed," <https://www.traumaandphilosophy.com/blog-1/2021/5/24/hearken-hear-heed>.