

Castelli A, Gatta G, Latini M and Raschi F (2025) *Four Philosophers and the Bomb: Russell, Aron, Jaspers and Anders on Atomic Warfare*. New York: Routledge

LUCA G. CASTELLIN

Four Philosophers and the Bomb is an erudite, incisive and timely contribution to the intellectual history of the nuclear age. Alberto Castelli, Giunia Gatta, Micaela Latini and Francesco Raschi provide a rich and nuanced study of how four influential twentieth-century thinkers – Bertrand Russell, Raymond Aron, Karl Jaspers and Günther Anders – confronted the unprecedented threat posed by atomic warfare. Despite its brevity, the volume succeeds in delivering both a rigorous historical reconstruction and a compelling theoretical analysis of philosophical responses to nuclear weapons.

The introduction frames the reflections of these thinkers within the “gloomy, frightening atmosphere” of the post-1945 era – a period in which the fear of “the race towards self-destruction” permeated public consciousness. Castelli (2025: 1) stresses that the nuclear question “has not disappeared at all”; rather, it has shifted into a more complex and multipolar global landscape. He argues that the threat’s diminished visibility is not the result of reduced danger, but of what he terms an “atomic unconsciousness”, a kind of geopolitical amnesia shaped by decades of distraction, compartmentalisation and misplaced optimism. This interpretative framework prepares readers to appreciate why revisiting these thinkers is both intellectually and morally urgent. Castelli (2025: 2–3) describes the present moment as a “partial return of the repressed” in the context of renewed geopolitical tension.

Castelli’s chapter on Bertrand Russell offers a lucid and persuasive account of one of the most prominent philosophical voices warning against nuclear catastrophe. Even before 1945, Russell argued that modern warfare – marked by aerial bombardment and mass civilian casualties – rendered war not merely barbaric but politically futile, since industrial societies would be “quickly reduced to chaos” (Castelli, 2025: 6). After Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he

became convinced that only supranational institutions could forestall global annihilation. His celebrated appeal to “remember your humanity, and forget the rest” captures his view that the nuclear age required the transcendence of nationalism and partisan alignments (Castelli, 2025: 13).

Castelli clearly reconstructs Russell’s central claim that nuclear weapons possess “no utility except as deterrents” and are “useful only if not used” (Castelli, 2025: 13). This paradox lay at the heart of Russell’s lifelong activism, including the Russell–Einstein Manifesto and his leading role in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Castelli’s contextualisation of Russell within the broader British peace-thought tradition – alongside figures such as Harold Laski, Norman Angell and Leonard Woolf – is particularly illuminating. Russell held that reason, accurate information and public education could counter the “fanaticism” and “collective self-glorification” driving states towards war (Castelli, 2025: 16–18). Castelli aptly concludes that Russell exemplifies the philosopher-intellectual who wields the strength of reason to counter “the reasons of strength” (Castelli, 2025: 20).

Francesco Raschi’s chapter on Raymond Aron provides a valuable counterpart to Russell’s normative pacifism. Aron, a leading theorist of international relations, approached the nuclear age through the prism of strategic realism. Although nuclear weapons dominated the strategic landscape of the post-war era, Aron maintained that it remained possible – indeed imperative – to preserve the key role of politics and prevent war from escalating into apocalypse. Politics, he argued, cannot abolish the destructive power of nuclear and thermonuclear weapons – a largely illusory ambition – but it can interrupt the chain of decisions that might lead to their actual use.

As Raschi (2025: 31) notes, Aron believed that, “even during the Cold War era”, “politics continued to have its own margin of autonomy and over-ordination”. He famously argued that the atomic age produced a condition of “impossible peace and improbable war”. Rather than viewing deterrence as a prelude to catastrophe, he held that conflicts could remain limited so long as political aims themselves remained limited (Raschi, 2025: 28–30). Within this framework, the chapter offers a sober critique of U.S. nuclear

strategies, ranging from Eisenhower's policy of massive retaliation to Kennedy's flexible response.

Raschi shows that Aron's realism was a genuine effort to think politically in a nuclear context. As articulated in *Peace and War Among Nations*, Aron recognised the inescapability of power politics. He therefore urged a rejection of comforting idealisms and encouraged prudent judgement in international affairs. The chapter captures Aron's characteristic balance between moderation and analytical clarity – a combination that retains considerable relevance today.

Giunia Gatta's chapter on Karl Jaspers is philosophically rich and conceptually sophisticated. Jaspers, long wary of mass politics, regarded the atomic age not merely as a geopolitical danger but as a crisis of human freedom. For him, the danger of the bomb lies not only in the scale of possible physical destruction but also in the erosion of freedom – an essential element of human existence. A central motif of his thought is the thin line humanity now walks between destruction by nuclear weapons and subjugation under totalitarian systems.

As Gatta demonstrates, Jaspers believed the nuclear dilemma could not be resolved through institutional solutions alone; it required a "spiritual and cultural revolution" capable of transforming human self-understanding (Gatta, 2025: 47). In *The Future of Mankind* (1958), Jaspers argued that the prospect of annihilation should jolt us out of complacency. Fear of the bomb should not be suppressed but embraced as a catalyst for radical ethical transformation. Only an inner revolution capable of reawakening "reason" against technological cynicism can save humanity (Gatta, 2025: 54). For Jaspers, freedom cannot be reduced to mere biological survival but involves the ability to give meaning to one's existence even in the face of potential annihilation. Gatta explains with clarity how, for Jaspers, renouncing nuclear weapons risks geopolitical subordination, while maintaining them risks destruction. This double bind reveals Jaspers as a thinker for whom existential philosophy must inform political judgement – a point Gatta develops with considerable subtlety.

Micaela Latini's chapter on Günther Anders stands out as one of the strongest in the volume. It offers an incisive account of perhaps the most radical and uncompromising of the four philosophers. In *The Outdatedness of Human Beings* (1956), Anders introduces the notion of the "Promethean discrepancy", which denotes the gulf

between humanity's technical capabilities and its capacity for imagination and moral feeling. Our imaginative and moral faculties, he argues, lag behind the world we have created. This gives rise to what he calls "blindness towards the Apocalypse": an inability to truly envision the abyss we have opened. As Latini notes, Anders thus diagnosed in modern humanity a profound incapacity to imagine the consequences of its own technologies (Latini, 2025: 73–76).

Latini revisits Anders's claim that the atomic age has engendered a world in which human beings have created tools that exceed both their political capacities and moral imagination. The notion of a "world without human beings" captures the unsettling possibility that humanity has become inferior to its own technological products (Latini, 2025: 63–67). Latini also examines Anders's later, more controversial reflections, including his defence of counter-violence after Chernobyl, demonstrating how he forced philosophical inquiry to confront the extreme moral challenges inherent in technological risk (Latini, 2025: 79–81).

A key strength of *Four Philosophers and the Bomb* is its refusal to synthesise Russell, Aron, Jaspers and Anders into a single theoretical framework. Their approaches, the authors acknowledge, are diverse and at times incompatible – yet it is precisely this diversity that renders their juxtaposition so illuminating. Each thinker offers a distinct mode of confronting nuclear peril: rationalist humanism (Russell), strategic realism (Aron), existential humanism (Jaspers) and apocalyptic phenomenology (Anders).

The volume demonstrates that the nuclear question remains inseparable from philosophical reflection. By revisiting canonical texts with clarity and scholarly precision, the authors offer not only historical insight but valuable conceptual tools for rethinking the enduring threat of nuclear catastrophe. The book stands both as a scholarly achievement and as an ethical provocation. With more than 12,000 warheads still in existence across nine nuclear powers, and large-scale warfare returning to the borders of Europe and the Middle East, the atomic age is far from over. The duty of remembrance today must therefore be paired with critical thought. At a time when the nuclear threat is once again becoming a tangible reality, philosophical and political reflection on life in apocalyptic times is more essential than ever. Reflection on nuclear power provides no

certainties; instead, it compels us to think, to feel, and to choose – to look not away from the abyss, but directly into it, not to fall, but perhaps to discover a new way of being human.

Luca G. Castellin is Associate Professor of History of Political Thought at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (Milan, Italy). His research focuses on the history of international thought in the modern and contemporary age. He is the author of *Ascesa e declino delle civiltà. La teoria delle macro-trasformazioni politiche di Arnold J. Toynbee* (2010); *Il realista delle distanze. Reinhold Niebuhr e la politica internazionale* (2014); *Società e anarchia. La “English School” e il pensiero politico internazionale* (2018); and *Sotto un cielo vuoto. Il realismo politico nella storia del pensiero internazionale* (2022).
Email: luca.castellin@unicatt.it