The Fate of the Earth (1982)

by Jonathan Schell

To say that we and all future generations are threatened with extinction by the nuclear peril, however, is to describe only half of our situation. The other half is that we are the authors of that extinction. (For the populations of the superpowers, this is true in a positive sense, since we pay for extinction and support the governments that pose the threat of it, while for the peoples of the iron-nuclear-armed world it is true only in the negative sense that they fail to try to do anything about the danger.) Like all those who are inclined to suicide, we approach the action in two capacities: the capacity of the one who would kill and that of the one who would be killed. As when we dream, we are both the authors and the sufferers of our fate. Therefore, when we hide from ourselves the immense preparations that we have made for our self-extermination we do so for two compelling reasons. First, we don't want to recognize that at any moment our lives may be taken away from us and our world blasted to dust, and, second, we don't want to face the fact that we are potential mass killers. The moral cost of nuclear armament is that it makes of all of us underwriters of the slaughter of hundreds of millions of people and of the cancellation of the future generations—an action whose utter indefensibility is not altered in the slightest degree by the fact that each side contemplates performing it only in "retaliation." In fact, as we shall see, this retaliation is one of the least justified actions ever contemplated, being wholly pointless. It is another nonsensical feature of the nuclear predicament that while each side regards the population of the other side as the innocent victims of unjust government, each proposes to punish the other government by annihilating that already suffering and oppressed population. Nor is there any exoneration from complicity in this slaughter in the theoretical justification that we possess nuclear arms not in order to use them but in order to prevent their use, for the fact is that even in theory prevention works only to the degree that it is backed up by the plausible threat of use in
certain circumstances. Strategy thus commits us all to actions that we cannot justify by any moral standard. It introduces into our lives a vast, morally incomprehensible—or simply immoral—realm, in which every scruple or standard that we otherwise claim to observe or uphold is suspended. To be targeted from the cradle to the grave as a victim of indiscriminate mass murder is degrading in one way, but to target others for similar mass murder is degrading in another and, in a sense, a worse way. We endeavor to hold life sacred, but in accepting our roles as the victims and the perpetrators of nuclear mass slaughter we convey the steady message—and it is engraved more and more deeply on our souls as the years roll by—that life not only is not sacred but is worthless; that, somehow, according to a "strategic" logic that we cannot understand it has been judged acceptable for everybody to be killed.

As it happens, our two roles in the nuclear predicament have been given visual representation in the photographs of the earth that we have taken with the aid of another technical device of our time, the spaceship. These pictures illustrate, on the one hand, our mastery over nature, which has enabled us to take up a position in the heavens and look back on the earth as though it were just one more celestial body, and on the other, our weakness and frailty in the face of that mastery, which we cannot help feeling when we see the smallness, solitude, and delicate beauty of our planetary home. Looking at the earth as it is caught in the lens of the camera, reduced to the size of a golf ball, we gain a new sense of scale, and are made aware of a new relation between ourselves and the earth: we can almost imagine that we might hold this earth between the giant thumb and forefinger of one hand. Similarly, as the possessors of nuclear arms we stand outside nature, holding instruments of cosmic power with which we can blot life out, while at the same time we remain embedded in nature and depend on it for our survival.

Yet although the view from space is invaluable, in the last analysis the view that counts is the one from earth, from
within life—the view, let us say, from a bedroom window in some city, in the evening, overlooking a river, perhaps, and with the whole colored by some regret or some hope or some other human sentiment. Whatever particular scene might come to mind, and whatever view and mood might be immediately present, from this earthly vantage point another view—one even longer than the one from space—opens up. It is the view of our children and grandchildren, and of all the future generations of mankind, stretching ahead of us in time—a view not just of one earth but of innumerable earths in succession, standing out brightly against the endless darkness of space, of oblivion. The thought of cutting off life's flow, of amputating this future, is so shocking, so alien to nature, and so contradictory to life's impulse that we can scarcely entertain it before turning away in revulsion and disbelief. The very incredibility of the action protects it from our gaze; our very love of life seems to rush forward to deny that we could do this. But although we block out the awareness of this self-posed threat as best we can, engrossing ourselves in life's richness to blind ourselves to the jeopardy to life, ultimately there is no way that we can remain unaffected by it. For finally we know and deeply feel that the ever-shifting, ever-dissolving moments of our mortal lives are sustained and given meaning by the broad stream of life, which bears us along like a force at our backs. Being human, we have, through the establishment of a common world, taken up residence in the enlarged space of past, present, and future, and if we threaten to destroy the future generations we harm ourselves, for the threat we pose to them is carried back to us through the channels of the common world that we all inhabit together. Indeed, "they" are we ourselves, and if their existence is in doubt our present becomes a sadly incomplete affair, like only one word of a poem, or one note of a song. Ultimately, it is subhuman.

Because the weight of extinction, like the weight of mortality, bears down on life through the mind and spirit but otherwise, until the event occurs, leaves its physically
undisturbed, no one can prove that it alters the way we live. We can only say that it hardly stands to reason that the largest peril that history has ever produced—a peril in which, indeed, history would swallow itself up—should leave the activities of life, every one of which is threatened with dissolution, unaffected; and that we actually do seem to find life changing in ways that might be expected. Since the future generations are specifically what is at stake, all human activities that assume the future are undermined directly. To begin with, desire, love, childbirth, and everything else that has to do with the biological renewal of the species have been administered a powerful shock by the nuclear peril. The timeless, largely unspoken confidence of the species that although each person had to die, life itself would go on—the faith that all earth life was somehow favored, which found one of its most beautiful expressions in Christ's admonition "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these"—has been shaken, and with it the also largely unspoken confidence that people had in their own instinctual natures has been upset. It seems significant that Freud, who pioneered our century's self-consciousness in sexual matters, should have been one of the first observers to warn that humanity was headed down a path of self-destruction. In the last paragraph of "Civilization and Its Discontents," published in 1930, he wrote:

The fateful question for the Human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction. It may be that in this respect precisely the present time deserves a special interest. Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man. They know this, and hence comes a large part of their current unrest, their unhappiness and their mood of anxiety. And now it is
to be expected that the other of the two "Heavenly Powers," eternal Eros, will make an effort to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary [death]. But who can foresee with what success and with what result?

It is as though Freud perceived that the balance between man's "lower," animal, and instinctual nature, which had historically been so much feared and despised by religious men and philosophers as a disruptive force in man's spiritual development, and his "higher," rational nature had tipped in favor of the latter-so that now the greater danger to man came not from rampant, uncontrolled instinct breaking down the restraining bonds of reason and self-control but from rampant reason oppressing and destroying instinct and nature. And rampant reason, man found, was, if anything, more to be feared than rampant instinct. Bestiality had been the cause of many horrors, but it had never threatened the species with extinction; some instinct for self-preservation was still at work. Only "selfless" reason could ever entertain the thought of self-extinction. Freud's merciful, solicitous attitude toward the animal in our nature foreshadowed the solicitude that we now need to show toward the animals and plants in our earthly environment. Now reason must sit at the knee of instinct and learn reverence for the miraculous instinctual capacity for creation.