
The Hocking Primer

Chapter Seven:

Realities of the International Scene

The problem in defense is how far you can go without destroying from within what you are trying to defend from without. ~Dwight D. Eisenhower

The Russians launched Sputnik on October 4, 1957. One could see it cross the sky at night like a giant advertisement for nuclear war. Downtown, USA became ground zero. My neighbor built a bomb shelter. The government advised doing so. No place was safe. The threat is no less today, perhaps more, although we have become better at turning away. But there is a price.

Hocking writes about the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. The names have changed, but the conflict has not. Substitute Terrorism for the Soviet Union and we find the same process. Hocking says it is perhaps this era's responsibility to plumb the expanse of human potential, from the most civilized to the most destructive. Hopefully, we can do that without living the experience.

Chapter seven is short, but this will be a long review. The more one looks at it, the more one sees. It gets into the basics of human interaction, which has become more problematic as our technology improves. It used to take weeks to destroy a city. Now someone can do it in an instant.

There is no substitute for reading Hocking himself. But for this chapter I shall quote much of his writing. Not wanting to miss anything, I will simply comment as we go along.

He begins:

If the words “communism” and “capitalism” fail to touch the central problem of our time, the words, “socialism” and “individualism” also fall short. To discuss matters of economic system or degrees of democracy in government as if these were the primary issues confronting humanity today is to hide our heads from the facts of life—from realities which are equally facts of death. It has become the fate of this moment of world history to confront the Worst, the blank end of things. To see the Worst as actual possibility, to see it steadily and not retreat—this is our particular call to adequacy, perhaps to greatness.

It is hard to avoid the Worst. Perhaps we can catch the atmosphere on fire in a nuclear holocaust. We have enough nuclear weapons to blow every major city away several times. There seems to be no limit to the increase in weaponry, as though we might need to keep launching. The arsenal exists. There is no turning back.

Hocking does not think this would be so bad if we did not also suffer a moral deficit. We can not only blow ourselves up. We can do it with indifference, or worse,



with determination. If the Universe means nothing what difference does it make? But is that not worshipping Nothingness? We cannot pretend to be merely quarks and gluons. Our identity is defined by purpose, not composition. If we blow ourselves up by accident it is a disaster. To do it pretending to be cool is pathetic. We are pretending to be ruled by indifference to prove ourselves worthy to indifference. God in a laboratory flask.

The Worst is the union of this dead end with a moral reversion to pre-barbarism: the extinction would take place at a moment of rejected human dignity, as if the meaning of all human history were, to date, a

cipher. For it is the appalling fact of our time that man—not alone under Hitler and Stalin—has so far slipped away from civilization as to resort again to torture to compel a political result or extort a falsehood convenient to the occasion, and to reject all morality—including truth, good faith, justice, mercy—for the sake of a supreme end. The triumph of reason has become a triumph of something called “objectivity,”

in which humanity itself is to be held at arm's distance to determine its engineering qualities, its durability, elasticity, its response to temperatures and pressures, the "strength of materials." Morality must submit to this same test. The summit of rationality has proved itself capable of reaching the summit of what was once called criminality but it is criminality no more: for if Nihil is our creed and Annihilation our ultimate outlook, morality becomes an irrelevant weakness in carrying out the Great Resolve."

Nothing is more destructive than a Great Resolve, for everything else becomes subordinate.

To be in command of the technical means for total destruction of humanity would not in itself be a peril, if this were not at the same time an era in which mass murder is accepted as possible factor of progress, a perhaps-necessary means to the social consummation. The hard-won sanctities of human life which since Grotius have limited the ferocities of war have lost much of their deterring force with the arrival of total war, for human death in vast numbers benumbs the sense of personal tragedy. Humanity has claim only where life has meaning; and how, in view of the mass reckonings pressed on us by events and by the spirit of history, can human life retain individual dignity, not to speak of "sacredness"?

So there is accident and intent, second degree annihilation and first degree annihilation. Perhaps it makes a difference somewhere, but either way we are gone.

To men whose experience has brought direct knowledge of the newer refinements of purposive torment, whether in war or in police control, or of the inhuman strains of underground resistance, these dimensions of inflected suffering tend to combine with the apparent indifference of High Heaven to recommend a posture toward the Whole far different from "accepting the universe." We too weakly call it Atheism; and to call it Nihilism leaves out its positive core of refusal to pay reverence. This temper which cancels insight into the possible meaning of historical suffering, and rejects as myth the traditional consolations of groping mankind, may still understandably cling with desperation to a material Utopia born of revolutionary excess, consonant with a political scheme apparently anesthetic to moral appeal, yet in subconsciousness hoping for recognition and some shred of fraternity—wanting to belong! It is a weakness of the USA in this juncture that its relative normality gives it so little sympathy with the temper that has begotten the war and revolutions of our time.

He expresses the idea that we can't help being ourselves. We are more than chemical reactions. We are purposeful beings, and pretending to be stuff just to attain coolness changes nothing—except our ability to survive.

Mankind purchased efficiency at the expense of purpose. We traded God for Science. We can worship God but not Science. Science is indifferent. It does not care. That sounds like us. Are we becoming like our God?

We had purpose with a belief in higher power. It is nice that we can treat infections with antibiotics rather than prayer, but is that enough? Objectivity works with objects. That is how it got its name. But people act by purpose, not cause. And purpose is often determined by deduction, not induction. Science is induction. We are apparently going to need some system that offers the aphorisms from which to make these deductions. (One has to deduce from something which operates as a given.) We need an ultimate at the top of our algorithm. That probably needs to be a higher power.



We need to find a balance between observation and belief. Observation only leads us by our nature to worship Nihilism. We cannot escape being ourselves—although we can cease being ourselves. And while living we will worship something, secular or otherwise.

I am winging it here. This is simply a primer on Hocking. Although of course it cannot stay that way. He expects more than that. He expects us to meet challenges even if they are (or appear to be) impossible. And the biggest challenge he sees facing mankind is finding some balance before the nuclear stalemate blows up. We have some time, he thinks, but not forever.

So I shall not trash my above speculation simply because it is tentative. We are seeking new answers, not proselytizing old ones. We discarded God for science and now worship science. We either try harder to get rid of God (boom) or find purpose in something other than anthropomorphisms.

Hocking talks of torture not only under Hitler and Stalin. That now includes us. Most Americans did not think that was possible here. But things are different now. We are fighting terrorism, and nothing is too good for that fight. A lofty goal indeed, and as Lenin said, “you must break a few eggs to make an omelet.” But Eisenhower believed that the problem in defense is how far you can go without destroying from within what you are trying to defend from without. Perhaps we shall find out.

The message of today might be that the end justifies the means. Perhaps intercontinental ballistic missiles change us, even if we do not realize it. For sure the United States has violated its philosophy with a preemptive war and foreign entanglements. Entanglement is a soft word for invasion. Invasion is simply a brazen way to obtain oil (if you want to keep it simple), or preserve our reserve currency (if you want to get it right.)

How did we change? Most people admired us and emulated the United States. Then we went off and invaded a country and alienated the world, for no apparent reason. Is that just the natural course of things? Perhaps not. September 11 was a tragedy. But we compounded it. More of our own have died from our response. And of course there are the Iraqis. Are they so different than us? There is nothing proportional about our response. Proportionality is characteristic of reasoned response. Annihilation is not. Invading armies always kill hundreds of civilians for the loss of one soldier. We are not breaking new ground here.

But perhaps behind the Twin Towers lies the shadow of nuclear attack. We are never safe anymore. A missile can lift off in Vladivostok and turn Seattle into cinders fifteen minutes later. Where do we hide? More disturbing are suitcase nukes. The world changed irrevocably July 16 1945, at Alamogordo, New Mexico when we detonated the first nuclear device. There is no going back. Robert Oppenheimer, the lead scientist stated, “I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” He should know.



There is no defense against nuclear attack. One person with a suitcase nuke can destroy a city. With the means and the will nothing can guarantee protection. We can hide behind heroes, but they will disappear like the rest of us. Hocking says:

“Security, once a first-rank treasure for men and nations, no longer exists. But why worry over security? If meaning has vanished, death is no longer a calamity. Death merely close the account books on bankruptcy—blacks out the worthless remembrance of times past. Better not to survive” for willingness to survive in Hell would be a proof of deserving it.”

“It is evident that the situation cannot be met by reiterating the pieties of Christendom or the Geneva Conventions or Woodrow Wilson’s principles of international order. We cannot abandon them; we cannot compromise; we cannot appease. But we cannot persuade. We may, however by an immense effort achieve an understanding, and a course that creates a new footing. Let us try.”

Post-traumatic stress disorder is the inability to face an experience in the usual manner. It gets shoved off somewhere but continues to influence our behavior. Where have we placed the fear of nuclear annihilation? Does it make us lose ourselves when it ghosts the twin towers? Have we changed our moral code to accommodate its presence? Does everything wrap around this fear? Today’s philosophy is non-philosophy. Live for the moment for tomorrow we die. Morality is seen as relative and one person’s view counts the same as anyone else’s—they all mean nothing. So what if it all ends in a bright flash? This is a new dimension in our lives. There is a missile pointed at every major American city today. Anywhere, USA is ground zero. And by the way, that is not true of Switzerland. Why is that?

Hocking does not think a solution here lies with superior power. He sees no hope in that direction. This is about contract versus coercion, and one nation is not likely to gather enough power to coerce other nuclear powers, let alone defend itself against suitcase bombs. If one believes security is a matter of power, then both sides start



stockpiling. But 20,000 nuclear devices do not protect. They are simply matched. And more is not better. They can be stolen, or, worse, used. Danger has always been present in life. Now it glows in the dark.

Today one person can change the world. A nuclear explosion in Birmingham or Baltimore would alter history. The fear would be intense, the effect worldwide, and our nation’s reaction is likely to be more destructive than the blast. We can plan for this or simply react. Mankind will either tear itself apart or pull itself together when the next bomb goes off. We are capable of both. And it will happen. We need to get this right.

“The most hopeful fact among present realities is that, as of today, neither America nor the Soviet Union has the will either to suicide or to vast human destruction: the

minimal fraternity implied in this mutual self-restraint—seldom spoken of—is a reality of the first importance.

The most ominous fact, for the continuance of this fraternity, is that the USSR has an inherited mandate, with the compelling force of an ideological goal, for world revolution.”

The USA viewed the Soviet Union as a threat because of its will to expand, and because we then viewed socialism as pernicious they saw us as a threat to its own existence. Capitalism must be destroyed because, for capitalism, socialism must be destroyed. The appropriate stance being one of mutual fear—mother of suspicion, deceit, intrigue—each must reserve from the other the healing act of trust. For trust involves risk. And risk, for those who still hug the phantom of a vanished security, is felt as treason to those who still value life. An act of trust committed with conscious acceptance of risk, based on the valid judgment that a life hagridden by fear and suspicion “is not worth living by a man,” and which carries the bare chance of eliciting an answering trust—such an act could be the ultimate greatness; and for it individuals may indeed be ready: but individuals—even governing individuals—cannot assume to commit a nation, not even to a creative risk.

This tense situation can be held for a time in the unstable equilibrium of the tightrope walker. But not forever. And while the time holds out, it is the part of wisdom to ask whether the mutual fears are themselves realities, or whether they are dependent on judgments partly fallacious and therefore alterable.

Anger can be a defense against fear or grief. Resolve either and the anger disappears. Westmoreland said war is fear wrapped in courage. Then perhaps we can face the fear and skip the war. Soldiers typically avenge rather than mourn. But they can address the loss and revenge loses its purpose. Anger of that type is secondary; reducible to something more basic. Perhaps human beings are not killer bees by nature. Perhaps there are alternatives to extermination.

“The situation is intrinsically absurd: socialism must be destroyed because, for socialism, capitalism must be destroyed; and vice versa, capitalism must be destroyed because, for capitalism, socialism must be destroyed! The most vicious of vicious circles. Shall we simply dismiss it as the reverse of reality—a nightmare? But there it is!”

The situation has changed between the United States and Russia. Russia has renounced its occupied territories, withdrawn its tanks behind their own border and

let them rust. This was part of a mutual agreement to leave Eastern Europe, Russia's buffer zone against western aggression, neutral. Russia has honored that agreement, but the United States has not. NATO expanded right up to their border. With the planned missile systems in Poland and Bulgaria, Russia reached its limit. They will target those sites. Can anyone be surprised?



The specter of communist world revolution has become irrelevant. Even national dreams respond to revision. Communism proved inefficient. People understand that. And every society, no matter what it calls itself, is actually a mix of socialism and capitalism. It has always been a question of degree. Capitalism

lets individuals decide; socialism lets the state decide. Russia now has a flat income tax of 13%, whereas the United States takes almost 50%. Tax is socialistic. Russia is becoming more capitalistic. Moscow is now the most expensive city in the world.

But we find a new enemy and continue the fight. Terrorism takes over for the Soviet Union. Does this happen by chance or design? Government gains enormous authority when a country comes under attack or government claims it to be under attack. People are more easily controlled by deception than force. They gladly surrender liberty for security. Herman Goering claimed it was easy to control the population:

Naturally the common people don't want war; neither in Russia, nor in England, nor in America, nor in Germany. That is understood. But after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine policy, and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy, or a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship. Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is to tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in any country.

Julius Caesar said the same thing. Both careers ended badly.

So today Hocking's concerns about Russia are somewhat moot (although we are doing everything to revive them), but we have the same concerns with the war on terror.

Fear is the motivator, and this leads to be big question. Does safety lie in force or contract? Perhaps that translates into the illusion of omnipotence versus the danger of trust?

“Yet, to accept it as reality renders the practical problem insoluble, a fact of which we have also daily proof. Nothing is more fruitless than the continued confrontation of diplomats each of whom believes the other a disguised blackguard committed to his destruction—all black against all-white. There are such diplomats, on both sides; their middle name is Futility.

Ostensibly they are the true Defenders of the Faith, the loyal expounders of the hidden reality. Citing facts and scriptures, they remind us that the USSR is, under whatever mask, out for world conquest; and that nothing but our superior force checks its persistent advance. What we have to deal with, we are told, is a long-range struggle to destroy the way of life of the free countries of the world. And if it is true, as a very on-the-spot book authoritatively assures us, that “The soviet Union is at work with the West right now, we can do no less—and little more—than stand on guard and keep our nuclear press-buttons handy. These voices are not to be discounted.

But could it be possible that the USSR is of divided mind, speculating on our intent, while we speculate on theirs. Blowing hot and blowing cold, because (a) the circle is there; and because (b) the circle is palpably irrational and hopeless and must—by some inconsistency—be broken. For us, the relieving reflection is that the aims and fears of nations are not solid fixtures, but living growths.

Hocking favors contract. Aggression begets aggression, and so on ad infinitum. Force can work, the Roman Empire lasted several hundred years. That is probably sufficient for most of us. Then again, the Third Reich could not make it to twenty. Nuclear power evens the playing field, as did firearms. Everyone takes a hit in war. That hit has now become bigger.

A major problem with force is that it must always be maintained. Suppressing another country is a full-time job. Bush declared victory in Iraq in May, 2008. Now the generals are now talking about being there another forty years. When does this country get back to the business of actually making anything? We have something called a trade deficit.

And external aggression always demands internal suppression. Liberty is sacrificed to coordinate national effort. The Patriot Act, for example, puts the President above the law. He is the law. And remember, you are either “with him or against him”. When we surrender our liberty, just what are we defending?

But contract is no picnic either. It involves trust, and trust can be misplaced. If representatives meet on open ground under white flags, but one carries a gun, negotiation will not go well. But neither will events go well without negotiations. Rock and hard place. We must choose.

“I have become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” Perhaps we have not adjusted to that reality. Maybe we cling to the security of overwhelming force. Holding all the cards (nuclear weapons) is the only way to come out unscathed, although the internal price is significant. But that genie is out of the bottle. Our security is gone. We must live with insecurity—or die trying to regain it. How can one improve the chances for trust? It seems to be the only option. Hocking counts on understanding.

It may be of use to remember that fear, in the political world, is engendered by ideas. And great fears have their sources, together with great aims, in ideas wrapped in imagination—the hope or apprehension of things to come. The Marx-Engel’s Apocalypse with its suggestion for world overturn in violence has, in its aspect of hope, the advantage to its believers of bringing a spirit of moral warfare into the grim historical process, even while that process is deemed materialist and inevitable, clothing the horror with a shimmer of justice and achieved Fraternity. It is this dream, alluring to one side, that terrifies the other.



I have a little bit of trouble with this but think it relates to the idea of over determination. An apt metaphor says a lot with a little. In this explanation, the idea wrapped in imagination crystallizes the purpose of society and expresses it in a way everyone can grasp—in ten words or less.

Quite apart from the anti-Bolshevik campaign, fear, as a sense of being on the defensive, lies in the very nature of revolution. As an outbreak of violence, no purely observing nation can sanction it. As social decapitation, much of the most precious to all men is alienated or destroyed. To the revolting masses, indeed, revolution replaces the intolerable—anything is better than the slavery, tyranny, arrogance, misery that has gone before. But no one else could judge it necessary, no one who had not been co-sufferer of that special evil and sustained by the special vision that, do the doers,

justified the fearful deed. In short, revolution in its nature expects the condemnation due from sympathizers with, or apologists for, the decapitated regime; this expectation is its own bad conscious—and every conscientious revolution will have a bad conscience. If its revolt is against, not solely a particular tyranny, but against an ism—say capitalism—it will further expect the hostility of all who incorporate that ism; it will even court that hostility through the mission involved in its act—that of the world-spread of its principle, if not of its rule and indeed no revolution can be justified unless for a cause thought to be in principle universal. To this extend, for the USSR a fear of the West including the USA lies in thin the nature of the case.

The end may sometimes justify the means, but not without regret and guilt. Best to try peaceful means, but that is not always an option.

This fear is further justified by a certain incapacity on the part of the USA to credit the original dream of the USSR—say the dream of a classless society—as a genuine ideal, entertained by sincere and devoted human beings. Seeing little more in the notion of a classless society than a perverse version of equality and fraternity, and largely ignorant of East European history, we are impressed chiefly by the continued inhumanities of the USSR's struggle for stability. We cannot believe that the Soviet Union has a genuine faith. Yet—and I speak to my own skepticism—we must know that an unrelieved picture is a false picture.

An unrelieved picture must be a false picture—not because the leaders of a revolution, whether American or French or Russian, must necessarily be men of lofty principle and patriotic mould, free from the conspiratorial and sadistic tempers, but because we are dealing not with leaders and theories alone but with the slowly focused response of a great people to an altered direction of their living.

To give the Soviets credit in our own minds, not for having “the right answers” to anything, but for “a belief they are willing to die for,” may well be a step toward making “coexistence” a realizable stage in which competition and persuasion—wholly free of compromise—may relieve the disastrous pressure toward an unattainable military security.

And with this degree of understanding, it becomes possible also to dispose of a fatal postulate, which seems to poison much of our foreign policy, that all steps toward this stage of peaceful rivalry proposed by the USSR are covers for sinister designs; and that the most admirable triumph of our intelligence is to detect and expose the cheat. The vanity of the sleuth destroys the statesman. A failure of due caution would indeed be inexcusable; caution has a role even when security has vanished. But how

much more deadly a failure to be so far “dupe of our own distrust’ as to refuse an open mind to possibly honest tentatives toward breaking the vicious circle!

We face the riddle that has been before us throughout: motives are invisible. What evidence can there be for those whose conscience and responsibility forbid indulgence in credulity? What we have to note is that for an answer we are not dependent on guess work, or on mind-reading. For there are objective realities which create necessities for thinking men everywhere. Chief of these is the dread of all peoples, not of statesmen alone, of the suicidal character of war; and next, the incompatibility of war with any economic planning.

He makes the case that all people share existential realities. Psychosis may go unrelieved but most other beliefs likely remain subject to revision. Do not plan on revision but consider the possibility. To be trapped in one’s own cynicism leaves little option. The goal here appears to be substituting competition for combat and persuasion for coercion. And his qualifier, “wholly free of compromise”, seems both essential and possible. We should live our lives that way, and do sometimes in games. We should be smart enough to be able to live together in a way both sides find acceptable. What prevents this most often is asking for more than life allows. We ask for heaven on Earth and in the process end up with neither Earth nor heaven.

Finally, in the area of trust, he essentially pays more attention to what one does than what one says. There is logic to living and goals common to everyone. Deduction from sound premises will allow one to validate trust. People act their own interests. That is not necessarily bad and can be counted on. So trust, but verify.