

Kurt Vonnegut's Novel *Cat's Cradle*: Science Fiction, Thought, and Ethics

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Abstract

The ethical message of Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Cat's Cradle* has often been missed by critics who see the novel as infantile satire and not as an analysis of beliefs that prevent us from developing an ethical perspective. The paper focuses on Vonnegut's criticism of the belief that science is beyond normal understanding, its emphasis on causal order which leads to determinism, and the deification of science as pure knowledge. As Vonnegut's novel points out, these attitudes eliminate the possibility for ethical judgment.

Keywords: *Cat's Cradle*, pure knowledge, religion, science, Gaia.

Resumen

Muchas veces el mensaje ético de la novela *Cat's Cradle*, escrito por Kurt Vonnegut, no ha sido capturado por los crítico, quienes ven la novela como un sátira infantil y no se percata de crítica sobre las creencias que obstaculizan el desarrollo de una perspectiva ética. Este trabajo hace hincapié en la crítica de la ciencia moderna por su mistificación, su énfasis en un orden causal, la cual está relacionada con el determinismo, y la deificación de la ciencia como conocimiento puro. Como nos enseña la novela de Vonnegut, estas tres posturas sobre la ciencia eliminan la posibilidad de una evaluación ética.

Palabras Claves: *Cat's Cradle*, conocimiento puro, religión, ciencia, Gaia.

The New York Review of Books has long had standing as a liberal intellectual publication. Consistently, it has criticized the novels of Kurt Vonnegut. In his 1973 review, Michael Wood (1973) concluded that:

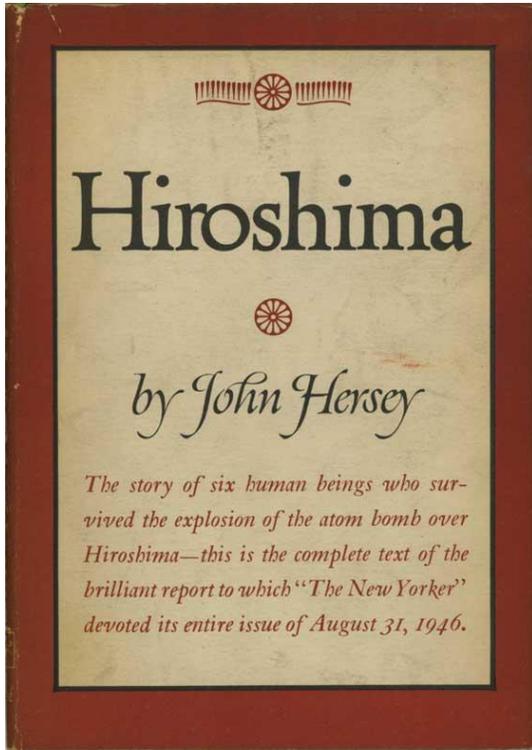
“The novels themselves are not sticky nets of human futility but means of escaping from such nets. *Cat's Cradle* is built around a jaunty, hip, fatalistic gospel delivered mainly in calypsos, and based on the principle that everything that happens has to happen; that a conflict between good and evil, if properly, skeptically staged, is a fine, constructive fiction. It keeps people busy, takes their minds off their moral and economic misery.”

Other reviewers in the *New York Review of Books* reach similar conclusions about Vonnegut's opus. Jack Richardson(1970), called Vonnegut "a soft, sentimental satirist... a popularizer of naughty whimsy, a compiler of easy-to-read truisms about society who allows everyone's heart to be in the right place." Articles about Vonnegut's work in the journal bear titles such as "Mod Apostle" and "Easy Writer," making reference to mad apostle and the movie *Easy Rider*.

Looking further on the Internet, it is easy to conclude that many of Vonnegut's fans share this same concept of his work. His parody of a modern invented religion that will make everyone happy spawns websites for this "jaunty, hip, fatalistic gospel delivered mainly in calypsos." This religion, Bokononism, has generated more interest than the book *Cat's Cradle* itself. But *The Books of Bokonon* are lies mixed with truth.

The first sentence in the *Books of Bokonon* is a version of Epimenides Paradox. Epimenides, who was a Cretan, said that Cretans always lie. So therefore he must be lying when he says that Cretans always lie. There seems to be no way out of this linguistic maze. The first line of *The Books of Bokonon* is "All the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies." In a sense, the statement is existentialist. Faced with a world without meaning, we are forced to make our own. We are not limited to the meaning we give our lives, but as Vonnegut states as a preface to the novel, quoting a verse from *The Books of Bokonon*. Nothing in this book is true. "Live by the foma* that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy." (Vonnegut, 1998) A footnote defines foma as "harmless untruths." The meaning we should give our lives should make us better people.

Vonnegut's ethical message was lost on the intellectuals of the *New York Review of Books* because of its humor and deceptive simplicity. His irony was lost on his younger audience because they focused on his irreverence. But in part his style and irreverence are part of his message. *Cat's Cradle* is essentially about the moral issues involved in a democratic government using the atomic bomb and how to be really ethical, to think about right and wrong, means that we must dispense with the authorities who tell us what is right and wrong.



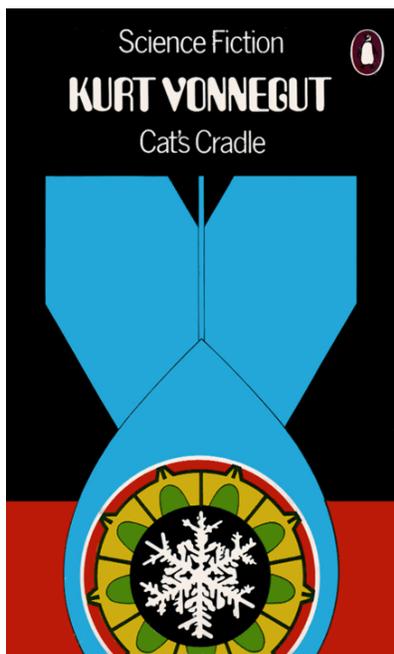
The most popular book about the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima was John Hersey's 1946 book *Hiroshima*, first published as a complete issue of the *New Yorker* magazine. *Cat's Cradle* style comments on John Hersey's book, which uses all the tricks of the novel: irony, cliffhangers, suspense, understatement, drama, vivid descriptions, heroes and heroines. Hersey follows the lives of six survivors of the bombing of Hiroshima from the night before the bomb was dropped to several months later. He switches back and forth from story to story, interspersing information, describing their emotions and struggles. In other words, it has all the

entertainment of a well-written novel.

On the first page of *Cat's Cradle*, its narrator explains, that when he was younger he "collected material for a book to be called *The Day the World Ended*." The book was to be "factual" and tell what "important Americans had done on the day when the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan" (Vonnegut, 1998, p. 1). This is a clear reference to John Hersey's book. But Vonnegut is also making a point: to discuss the ethical implications of dropping the bomb on Hiroshima, one should not look at the victims, but at those who were involved in developing such a bomb and their government. Also facts and history books have a type of deterministic force. History's emphasis on the causal relationship of events conveys a sense of inevitability.

In reaction to Hersey, whose point of view is an omniscient third person, Vonnegut writes what might be called an anti-novel. He undermines suspense. He creates cartoon characters. He has an unreliable narrator who admits that he is telling his story from the point of view of his religion.

The novel also seems to lack seriousness and purpose. The chapter titles are overstatements, haphazard lines or subtle ironies that refer to a small section of the text. The title of chapter 102 is "Enemies of Freedom" and it refers to "targets (that) were cardboard cut-outs shaped like men." The cut-outs have the names of Hitler, Mussolini, Karl Marx, Kaiser Wilhelm, Fidel Castro, and Mao. The arms display, in which they will be attacked by fighter planes, is on the fictitious Caribbean island of San Lorenzo, which is a dictatorship. In part, the meaningless chapter-names are an attack on the use of language to hide motives, to dupe the people, to create meanings that are not going to make people "happy and kind." The short novel has 127 chapters, the last one titled "The End," so it seems more like a pastiche than a novel.



Vonnegut has an important predecessor for his method of distancing readers in Bertold Brecht's epic theater. Brecht agreed with Aristotle that the catharsis of tragedy is an emotional cleansing. But to Brecht, this meant that our intellect has shut down. In Hersey's book we share the desperate, hectic, overwhelming and numbing feelings that the characters experienced as victims of the bomb and we are carried along by the story. On the other hand, Vonnegut and Brecht seek distance so our minds and not our emotions are involved. We look at the situation and do not confuse ourselves with pity and emotion or leave somehow refreshed after having a good cry.

The narrator and fictitious writer of *Cat's Cradle* is a fool whose moral outrage seems to be awakened only at the end of the story he is telling. The villains are quirky and banal. There is no dramatic tug of war between good and evil. The text seems simple, almost childish at times. But almost every line is ironic. Unfortunately, many fans and critics missed his most serious irony, which deals with ethical behavior.

The original title of this paper was “Kurt Vonnegut’s Novel *Cat’s Cradle*: “Science Fiction, Thought, and Ethics.” Perhaps it would be better to say “Science’s Fiction.” In a sense science is fiction. Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* was not the first work to point this out. Science is another existential attempt to make meaning out of meaninglessness. “In his Rothschild Lecture at Harvard in 1992, Kuhn remarked that it is hard to imagine what can be meant by the phrase that a scientific theory takes us “closer to the truth”(Weinberg,2007). It invents explanations or fictions for empirical data. As our fictitious writer Jonah says, quoting Bokonon, “All the true things are shameless lies.” (Vonnegut,1998)

For those of you who have not read *Cat’s Cradle* or read it recently, here is a summary.

Cat’s Cradle tells the story of Felix Hoenniker, one of the fathers of the atomic bomb and his new invention ice-nine, which brings the end of earth as a functioning ecosystem, leaving instead an inert surface and ravaging tornadoes in the sky. The story follows a writer who begins a book on what famous Americans were doing on the day the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Through his investigation, he makes contact with the orphaned children of Felix Hoenikker: Newt, a midget and college dropout and Angela, a gawky horse-faced woman married to a handsome philandering arms manufacturer. The third child Frank is a refugee from justice. Hoenikker’s children, unbeknownst to the writer, possess a seed of the crystal ice-nine, which if released into a body of water, will result in the water of the world freezing, since its melting point is 114.4 degrees.

The writer, who tells us to call him Jonah, though his real name is John, goes to the Caribbean island of San Lorenzo to work on a story and also drawn by a photograph he saw in the newspaper of Mona Aamons Monzano, the adopted daughter of the dictator, Papa Monzano. On the plane, he meets Newt and Angela, who are on their way to Frank’s wedding where he is to marry Mona. Frank has received the title of Major General, Minister of Science and Progress. Jonah eventually learns that the three have used their chip of ice nine. Newt has a short affair with a Russian circus midget

who is really a spy. Angela has used her chip to buy her philandering good lucking husband. Frank has given his to Papa Monzano, the dictator of Haiti-like Republic of San Lorenzo in exchange for his appointment.

When Papa Monzano is dying in horrible pain, he takes *ice-nine* and kills himself. Jonah, the writer of the story, goes with Frank, Angela and Newt to clean up the mess. Besides the frozen body of Monzano is the body of his doctor, who had frozen when he tried to taste *ice-nine* and then fell to the floor. They clean up the mess and plan to burn Monzano's body. Before they can burn the body, a pilot, who has been performing for the celebration of the One Hundred Martyrs for Freedom, crashes into the palace with his burning plane and Monzano's body slips into the ocean and all the water of the world becomes frozen and the world turns into a desert and the sky fills with tornadoes.

Cat's Cradle uses *ice-nine* to reveal what Vonnegut feels are the ethical causes of Hiroshima. Not all of them are related to science. Xenophobia, nationalism, elitism, and religious determinism are also attacked. But the tool for the world's destruction is produced by science.

The criticism is concentrated on Felix Hoennikker and the General Forge and Foundry Company, where he worked in the Research Laboratory. The three points Vonnegut's novel makes that are discussed in this paper are:

1. Science has set itself up as a mystery beyond the capacity of most human understanding. It has created a sense of false consciousness so normal people do not believe they are capable of judging science.
2. Science sees itself as producing knowledge or pure research, which is disassociated from any consequences. Related to this is the idea that scientists are involved in the pure search for knowledge so they are disconnected from life and humanity.
3. Science has become a new religion and scientists have become saints. Therefore they are above criticism and have assumed a paternalistic role.

Science is a great mystery of which most people know nothing. When Jonah, the fictional writer of *Cat's Cradle*, visits the General Forge and Foundry Company to interview its director about Felix Hoenikker, he meets the secretary of one of the research scientists.

“Ech,” gurgled Miss Pefko emptily. “I take dictation from Dr. Horvath and it’s just like a foreign language. I don’t think I’d understand—even if I was to go to college. And here he’s maybe talking about something that’s going to turn everything upside-down and inside-out like the atom bomb.” (Vonnegut,1998)

“When I used to come home from school Mother used to ask me what happened that day, and I’d tell her,” said Miss Pefko. “Now I come home from work and she asks me that same question and all I can say is—“ Miss Pefko shook her head and let her crimson lips flap slackly—“I dunno, I dunno, I dunno.” (Vonnegut,1998)

To Miss Pefko and most of the non-researchers at the company, science has an unknowable, unexplainable quality. They do not understand what they are typing or transcribing. They feel as if they have false consciousness about the world and therefore are not able to make ethical judgments about science.

Miss Pefko refers to a science display as magic, which with its bells and smoke and bubbling liquids seems to be its intention. When Papa Monzano is dying he tells Jonah that “science is magic that *works*” (Vonnegut, 1998, p.218). When Asa Breed scolds Miss Pefko for calling the display magic, he says, “...we don’t want to mystify. Give us credit for that.” (Vonnegut) Vonnegut is, of course, showing us that science does want to mystify.

Magic mystifies. It is the word we use for phenomena we cannot explain, when we are unable to understand reality.

And Ada Breed expects the non-scientist to not understand. The Girl Pool, the secretaries who work in the basement and listen “to the faceless voices of scientists on Dictaphone records--records brought in by mail girls” (Vonnegut,1998, p.38) come in to

sing Christmas carols and Dr. Breed remarks, "They serve science too...even though they may not understand a word of it." (Vonnegut)

In an earlier episode in the novel, Jonah has been in a bar. The bartender mentions that he read that science had discovered "the basic secret of life." Science uncovers secrets, but for most people the scientists seem to keep their secrets well. The bartender finally remembers what the secret to life was in the article, "protein." He takes science's ridiculous claim at face value, not questioning whether science can really answer the philosophical question of the secret of life. He accepts that the secret of life is protein. By the way, if you look up on the Internet today for the secret of life and DNA, you will find 83 pages of entries that refer to DNA as the secret of life.

But science as it is practiced at the Research Laboratory of General Forge and Foundry is also disconnected from human experience. Asa Breed becomes furious when he feels that Jonah's questions have insinuated that "scientists are heartless, conscienceless, narrow boobies, indifferent to the fate of the rest of the human race, or maybe not really members of the human race at all" (Vonnegut, 1998, p.39). Jonah points out that this is exactly the description he has received from Felix Hoenikker's son Newton.

In defense of Felix Hoenikker, Asa Breed explains what "pure research" is (Vonnegut, 1998, p.40). "When most other companies brag about their research they're talking about industrial hack technicians who wear white coats, work out of cookbooks..." (Vonnegut, p.41). Breed goes on to explain that "Here, and shockingly few other places in this country, men are paid to increase knowledge, to work to no end but that."

Of course, when questioned why a company would want to spend so much money to create knowledge, he tells Jonah that it "is the most valuable commodity on earth. The more truth we have to work with, the richer we become." (Vonnegut, 1998) There are two ironies here. The first is that a pursuit of knowledge is really a pursuit of money. The second is that the atomic bomb was

produced in part by the pure research, knowledge, and increased truth. But the illusion that the research is pure, cut off from humanity, focused on knowledge only, supposedly removes it from the sphere of ethics.

Earlier in the bar, the bartender tells Jonah about the day that the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Asa Breed's son came into the bar. "Another guy came in, and he said he was quitting his job at the Research Laboratory; said anything a scientist worked on was sure to wind up as a weapon, one way or another. Said he didn't want to help politicians with their fugging wars anymore" (Vonnegut, 1998, p.26). There is an ethical decision that is possible for someone who is able to see the connection between this "pure research" and "new knowledge" and the human consequences. Knowledge is a human product and therefore has human implications. It is never pure knowledge. Vonnegut shows us how carefully science hides its fiction.

Felix Hoenikker does not connect his discovery of knowledge to its effects on humanity. Vonnegut compares Felix Hoenikker parental obligations as father of the atom bomb with his behavior to his own children. Newt tells us that on the day that the nuclear bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Father "tried to play with me. Not only had he never played with me before; he had hardly ever even spoken to me" (Vonnegut, 1998, p. 12).

It is Newt Hoenikker who tells us that his father "was one of the best-protected people human beings who ever lived. People couldn't get at him because he just wasn't interested in people. I remember one time, about a year before he died, I tried to get him to tell me something about my mother. He couldn't remember a thing about her" (Vonnegut, 1998, p. 14). As Newt said in one of his letters, "People weren't his specialty" (Vonnegut, p. 17).

Felix Hoenikker's lack of involvement with others, or his lack of interest in what the philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt defines as ethics "ordering relationships with others," leads him to a complete lack of any ethical considerations for his actions. He is incapable of seeing the "contrast between right and wrong, and with the grounds and

limits of moral obligation.” Unlike Asa Breed’s son, Felix Hoenikker does not connect his actions with the bombing of Hiroshima. When he watches as they “first tested a bomb out at Alamogordo” another scientist said, ‘Science has now known sin.’” Hoenikker replies, “What is sin?” (Vonnegut, 1998, p. 17)

When Frank Hoenikker convinces Jonah to replace him as the president to be, Jonah realizes that he is following in Felix Hoenikker’s footsteps.

“And I realized with chagrin that my agreeing to be boss had freed Frank to do what he wanted to do more than anything else, to do what his father had done: to receive honors and creature comforts while escaping human responsibilities. He was accomplishing this by going down a spiritual oubliette.” (Vonnegut, 1998, p. 225)

This escape from human responsibility is what Vonnegut sees as unethical in science’s attempt to disassociate itself from its consequences.

Vonnegut also sees science’s role as the new religion as an obstacle to ethical action. Felix Hoenikker is treated as a god. When asked by Jonas if he had been Hoenikker’s supervisor, Asa Breed answers, “If I actually supervised Felix, then I’m ready now to take charge of volcanoes, the tides, and the migrations of birds and lemmings. The man was a force of nature no mortal could possibly control” (Vonnegut, 1998, p. 21). Asa Breed sees Felix Hoenikker as superhuman. He is beyond the control of mortals. There are similar reactions to him by his daughter. Angela when she screams at Newt that their father “is one of the greatest men who ever lived. He won the war today! Do you realize that?...” (Vonnegut, p. 16).

Vonnegut emphasizes Hoenikker’s apotheosis when Jonas visits his laboratory.

A purple cord had been stretched across the doorway, and a brass plate on the wall explained why the room was sacred:

“IN THIS ROOM, DR. FELIX HOENIKKER, NOBEL LAUREATE IN PHYSICS, SPENT THE LAST TWENTY-EIGHT YEARS OF HIS LIFE. “WHERE HE WAS, THERE WAS THE FRONTIER OF KNOWLEDGE.” THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS ONE MAN IN THE HISTORY OF MANKIND IS INCALCULABLE.” (Vonnegut, 1998, p.56)

The irony of the final statement on the plaque is yet to be realized, since his invention of *ice-nine* will mean the total destruction of earth.

A whole vocabulary related to holiness is connected with Felix Hoenikker: “sacred” (Vonnegut, 1998, p. 56), “unknowable” (p. 34), “force no mortal could control (p. 21), and “truth” (p. 34). Even one of Hoenikker’s detractors, Asa Breed’s brother Marvin Breed, who makes and sells tombstones, says, “The little Dutch son of a bitch may have been a modern holy man...” (p. 69). Felix Hoenikker has the authority of God so he is not accountable. As he is dying, Papa Monzano tells Jonah, who has just been named president of San Lorenzo, to teach the people science. He says, “Science is magic that works” (p. 218). The statement both emphasizes the common feeling that science is miraculous and holy, and that it is incomprehensible.

As Simon Blackburn (2001) stated about religion’s threat to ethics, “We have God’s authority for dominating nature, or for regarding them—others different from ourselves—as inferior, or even criminal” (p.18). Science as the new religion is above condemnation. When Breed is explaining to Jonas the history of Ilium, he mentions the hanging of a man who had killed twenty-six people and marvels at how the man had no sense of guilt. The unstated irony is that the atomic bomb at Hiroshima killed 100,000 people and Asa Breed himself has no sense of guilt.

Towards the end of the novel Vonnegut shows us in a gruesome manner how a sense of scientific superiority leads to a sense of God-like entitlement. Jonah writes:

I recalled a thing I had read about the aboriginal Tasmanians, habitually naked persons who, when encountered by white men in the seventeenth century were strangers to agriculture, animal husbandry, architecture of any sort, and

possibly even fire. They were so contemptible in the eyes of the white men, by reason of their ignorance, that they were hunted for sport by the first settlers..." (Vonnegut, 1998, p.282).

Just as Blackburn (2001) pointed out about religion, scientific knowledge, even in its crudest form, allows us to regard "them—others different from ourselves—as inferior, or even criminal."

Of course, Vonnegut's novel is ridiculing the idea that science has anything holy about it. Hoenikker is an asocial, irresponsible, immoral human being. He abuses and exploits his own children. He is responsible for putting the means for the destruction of the world in the hands of children. Jonas towards the end of the novel has this thought. "What hope can there be for mankind," I thought, "when there are such men as Felix Hoenikker to give such playthings as *ice-nine* to such short-sighted children as almost all men and women are?" (Vonnegut, 1998, p. 245)

Vonnegut's novel is not so simplistic as to put all of the blame on science. Nationalism, elitism, capitalism, and religion are given blame for their inability to create what Blackburn calls an ethical climate. Ethics is not rules, but as Blackburn points out "Thinking that will itself be a something that affects the way we live our lives" (Vonnegut, 1998, p. 3)

But Vonnegut's conclusions concerning science are that by thinking of it as inscrutable, or as pure knowledge unconnected to human reality, or as our new religion, we surrender to its authority and cannot make ethical evaluations that lead to action.

What we should have learned in the novel was the meaning of the preface, "Live by the foma* that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy." In other words, we may not be capable of knowing what the truth is, but we are able to make choices about what we will believe and those choices, if they are wise, can make us "brave and kind and healthy and happy."

In reference to Gaia, the belief that the earth functions as a self-regulating entity that human can bring into dangerous imbalance and to which they have an obligation to protect, may be the type of foma that will make us “brave and kind and happy and healthy,” as opposed to the idea that science is pure holy knowledge unconnected to humanity or to the non-human earth.

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