

The God Gun

Barrington J. Bayley

It might seem improbable that my friend Rodrick (the spelling is his) could be the perpetrator of the world's ultimate evil. His everyday conduct is neither more nor less reprehensible than the average man's, and indicates no propensity for extreme villainy. Yet philosophically his depravity is profound, and has led him to commit the supreme crime, a crime of such magnitude as even to put him beyond the reach of divine retribution (or so he claims, and I, his only confidant, believe him).

The event of which I speak took place late one summer evening, in the final quarter of this century. It is thanks to Rodrick's vanity that I witnessed the deed - that and our habit of drinking together in various bars in the town where we both live. I believe these meetings are for Rodrick almost his only social activity. For me, they provide the kind of stimulating conversation that is not always easy to come by in a small town. In the course of an evening our discussion might range through particle physics, organic chemistry, metallurgy, magic, magnetism, senology, cosmology, comparative religion, systematics, computer design, and on what would be the proper classification of human types. But always it has been a somewhat one-sided debate, for there has never been any question of my being equal to Rodrick. Always he outdistances me, always I am the pupil being talked to by a master who holds in his memory every fact and idea known to man.

My acquaintanceship with Rodrick has been a long one, and goes back nearly fifteen years. We both lead prosaic lives; I as an accountant and he, with a waste of ability all too typical of him, as a designer in a local television factory. We are, it will be guessed, intellectual dilettantes. But whereas I am strictly an amateur, Rodrick might almost be termed a professional, an avid scholar, and besides that a genuine inventor. The range of his studies is vast. I know, for instance, that he not only keeps himself fully informed as to the state of the physical sciences, but that he has also made a detailed examination of every philosophical and mystical system available. Confronted with the latest X-ray readings from suspected black holes, he is able to add comment derived from some obscure Kabbalistic text. Conversely, to refute a point in some ancient metaphysical doctrine quite unheard of by me, he will cite the discovery of the microwave background radiation

But it would be wrong, I suppose, to describe Rodrick as a genius, for all his mental scope. Genius usually carries with it the capacity for deep feeling, and there Rodrick is, not simply deficient, but actually disabled: he is an emotional imbecile. I have come to know well his dry, arrogant voice, his tight, triumphant smile, his rapidly blinking eyes, symptoms of features in his psyche that are, perhaps, an aspect of our time. Nothing ever engages his attention that is not of a purely intellectual character; he worships, so to speak, the problem-solving intellect, its cleverness, its ingenuity, its facility for making the previously impossible possible. The need for a new type of life-saving surgery, or the interesting but frustrating question of how to achieve controlled nuclear fusion and so supply limitless energy to mankind, is to him no different from the problem of how to arrange the perfect murder, or of how to annihilate a nation.

This manic obsession with means regardless of the morality of ends, this extraordinary shallowness in his otherwise brilliant make-up, may be why so little has come out of Rodrick's efforts. His minor improvements in radio engineering have not been commercially adopted, and though he maintains a well-equipped workshop on the top floor of his house, most of his private inventions have too small a practical application to make them viable. Only the automata with which he has populated his house seem to have proved even moderately useful, dusting and cleaning, finding their way by following white lines painted on the floor, climbing stairs and walls on a system of guide-rails, but leaving large patches of dust and rubbish unattended. And even they are complicated, clumsy, and too expensive to be marketable.

Of late Rodrick has become much absorbed in laser technology. It was to this subject that he first turned on

the evening in question. He told me that he had just finished constructing "a unique device" employing a number of very powerful lasers he had bought recently. When I asked him what this device did, he changed his tack and went on to discuss the incongruent properties of electromagnetic radiation: its constant velocity *in vacuo*, unaffected by the velocity of the observer; its ubiquitous role as a conveyor of energy, and so forth. He said he suspected that laser light, because of the discipline of its coherent vibrations, could be used to disintegrate solid objects "into atoms", as he put it, if only it could be tuned finely enough.

We were drinking in the White Bear, a quiet place lit by shaded lamps. Suddenly breaking off his discourse, Rodrick turned to me and asked abruptly if I believed in God.

The question surprised me. "Not in so far as I've ever thought about it," I said.

"I have thought about it a great deal," Rodrick said airily, "and I'm convinced that God *does* exist. The universe is the result of an act of creation. In other words, we have a maker."

It surprised me a great deal to hear Rodrick talk this way. We had both always taken a materialistic view of things, and although Rodrick is familiar with mystical doctrines, as I have said, I had presumed his interest in them to be for the sake of completeness only. To take seriously the notion of God, to admit religion, seemed to me to smack of superstition, of unreason, of what Rodrick has called "animal belief." I would not have thought it possible, either, for Rodrick to experience the sense of humility that belief in God is supposed to inculcate, and it saddened me, a little, to imagine now that there was a breach in the armour of his hubris.

His next words, however, were reassuring. "And if God exists, the next question is, how may he be contacted, influenced, forced, even injured."

"It's not possible," I answered. "Believers are unanimous on that score. He is impalpable, transcendent."

Rodrick looked at me intently, with that small, tight smile of his that meant he was leading up to something. "They are quite mistaken," he said firmly. "What you are quoting is the shoddy superstition of the worshipper, the cringing obeisance he adopts towards the creator. The point is, I have never yet studied an account of the creation, whether mythical or metaphysical, that managed to do without some connection between the creator and the created. Since the universe is physical, it follows that this connection must, necessarily, be of a physical kind."

He swallowed his rum and coke before continuing. "Do you see where I am leading? It all means that God shares some of the properties of matter. Not that he's material in the same sense that we are—though one sect, the Mormons, teach that he is—but he must possess *some* material characteristics. Substantiality without extension, perhaps, or not even substantiality as such, but, at any rate *something*, otherwise he wouldn't have been able to arrange for the creation of a physical universe."

Rodrick prodded a finger at me. "And as you know, there's no such thing as a purely one-way physical arrangement. If he was able to create us, there must be some way *we* can hit back at *him*. God can be killed, even."

I snorted. "Preposterous!"

For reply Rodrick indulged in one of his theatrical gestures I often find irritating. He rose abruptly to his feet, without a word to me, and strode for the door, leaving me to trail along after him.

He was already some yards up the street before I caught up with him. I asked, somewhat annoyed, where we were going.

"To kill God," he answered doggedly.

His pace did not falter and I, weakling that I am, fell in step beside him.

Certain impressions of that evening remain in my memory. The warmth of the night, the vanished sunset that still left a lingering after-glow. Rodrick's half-timbered house, like a dark mass; Rodrick's lean face, wolf-like in the light of shaded cresset lamps as we mounted the staircase that led to the upper floor. One of Rodrick's cleaning robots had fallen from its guide-rails and lay broken on the tiling below. It was ignored by its brothers, who continued to purr clumsily about their business.

Rodrick kept up a constant expatiation during the short walk. "You see, our space-time must be in contact with the creative principle at all points. That principle must in turn emanate directly from the deity. Discover that principle and learn to control it, and you have a weapon to which God is susceptible, and which can be aimed from any point within the creation."

"Are you *serious*?"

"Perfectly."

Either Rodrick was joking or he was paranoid, I decided. But I asked: "If you were to destroy God, wouldn't the universe disappear?"

"Ah, you stand revealed as a pantheist!" Rodrick declared dryly. "You subscribe to the Vedantic view that the universe is an aspect of Brahman, or God, and is indistinguishable from him. I'm fairly sure the cruder, Christian view is the correct one. The universe is distinct from God, produced by an act of will, and therefore is capable of an independent existence." He waved a hand. "Just as those buildings have outlasted the men who built them."

Now we were in Rodrick's laboratory, and I gazed around as he switched on the lights. An elaborate framework had been constructed on the main workbench. A number of lasers—presumably those Rodrick had mentioned purchasing—were bracketed into it, in a manner that suggested a carefully conceived pattern. Distributed through the framework, like the fruits of a bizarre tree, were mirrors, lenses and prisms.

Beyond the windows there seemed to stretch an endless menacing abyss. It struck me how sinister was the atmosphere of the workshop, with its timber rafters and clumps of grime (the house automata were not admitted here). It was more like the laboratory of a mediaeval alchemist than of a twentieth-century man of science. The apparatus was modern, of course, but the dim lamps created countless dark corners, and it struck me that Rodrick could have arranged the lighting better.

"All right," I said, "granted for the moment there *is* a physical principle by which one might gain access to God, supposing him to exist, how would you ever locate such a principle?"

"Perfectly simple, as it happens," Rodrick said blandly. "That information has been available for at least three thousand years. 'And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.' Book of Genesis, verse three. And a remarkable insight on the part of the writer, if I may say so."

Rodrick moved around the workbench to examine the lasers from all angles and began to check the alignments of his contraption with a digitized micrometer. While working he kept up a continuous low-toned monologue. "It's obvious, once you think about it. The tool God used to construct solid matter, to unroll space and time, was *light*. That's why it has such peculiar properties—why its velocity is constant for all observers, contrary to the expectations of Michelson and Morley, and also why it's the basis of all energy exchange. But we don't want the ordinary light that just goes zipping endlessly through space; that's no good to us at all. We

need light that can reverse its direction, as it were, that can become intense enough to implode, so to speak, and cross the threshold back into the pre-creation state ... At this point we come to the fact, which is very interesting, that while the velocity of light is constant for all observers, it is not constant for all *media*. Inside a material environment it slows down. In diamond, for instance, its velocity is a mere seventy-seven thousand miles per hour—a bare two-fifths of its velocity *in vacuo*. What velocity, I asked myself, would light adopt in a medium *composed entirely of light*? The answer is that it would have no velocity at all, since it would only have itself to measure that velocity by."

He switched on an oscilloscope. "Well, the next step is to arrange this special environment: an environment of pure light. It should be possible, I reasoned, to bring about a self-reflecting pattern of coherent light which would reinforce itself indefinitely, and that would transcend the space-time barrier. I admit I made some use here of certain mystical diagrams such as the Kabbala, which incidentally also describes existence as proceeding from out of light—'limitless light'. The enneagram, an old Sufi symbol, was even more useful; it possesses cybernetic properties the Kabbala lacks. Be all that as it may, I can now announce the problem to be essentially solved. I have light that can hurtle back to its original source—very special, very dense light. You find the adjective incongruous? To us, of course, light is the most tenuous of substances, but to God it must seem solid and palpable. It is, after all, what he used to manufacture everything else. And if it comes to that, natural light only seems tenuous to us because it is constantly dispersing. Do you know there are lasers now that can produce a light pressure of two and a half million atmospheres? The ray gun is already with us."

Having delivered this feverish lecture and finished his adjustments, Rodrick straightened and stared at me triumphantly. "I calculate that this device will produce a rod of radiation which will strike God like a bolt of hardened steel. What we have here is also a ray gun of sorts, Harry. The ultimate gun!"

Believing that I was only humouring Rodrick in his little fantasy, I asked: "But why should anyone want to do such a thing?"

Rodrick's lips quirked. "Because it's never been done, perhaps? No, that's being facetious. Perhaps, it's to end the fawning ingratiation towards God one sees in people. The universe should exist on its own, should be independent. I'll feel better knowing it's broken free of the father-figure. I am by inclination, you see, emphatically an atheist."

Rodrick said this light-heartedly. But suddenly, to my bewilderment, his tone changed and his expression became a sneer. "No, I'll tell you why it is," he said quickly. "It's because God is far from being the source of all that's good in the world, if you want my opinion. Life is a sordid business, all pain, frustration, disappointment and misery. What chance has anybody got to accomplish anything? Just look around you—children dying of cancer ... everything going wrong. ... I'll tell you something: this world's been put together like a Mickey Mouse watch! It's a shoddy, botched-up job! I tell you, He deserves everything He's going to get!"

This outburst, so astonishing from my point of view, was the first hint I had ever received that Rodrick felt so bitter about the moral aspects of existence, or indeed that he functioned on the level of feeling at all. He thrust a pair of goggles at me and told me to put them on. When I had done so he switched on his machine and the lasers began to discharge.

Even through the darkened shades the intricate display they projected was dazzling. The maze of light grew brighter and brighter as the beams traced out their endlessly returning path. The glow seemed to expand, to slowly engulf the mirrors and prisms that bent and reflected the light. For a while it all grew hazy, like a picture of a distant star cluster. Then it seemed to become more strongly defined, to solidify, until finally it became so bright that I could no longer bear it and I turned away.

When I looked again, the apparatus was dead. Later Rodrick was to explain that a fuse had blown. But at the time, he merely whipped off his goggles and spoke in a flat, cracked voice.

"It's done. God is dead."

I laughed, though without enthusiasm. "Really, Rodrick, how preposterous," I said, removing my own goggles. Then I saw his flat and lifeless eyes, and I knew that the mistake was mine.

Not in Rodrick alone do I notice the difference. I see it in everything and in everyone, including myself. Conversation these days is mechanical and repetitive, and one has but to look into people's eyes to realize that they are all dead inside. Life continues in a fashion, of course: the machinery of the universe grinds on. But the days and nights have a blankness about them, a tedious emptiness. There are sunsets, dawns, the phases of the moon, the procession of the seasons, but all unenlivened by that majestic ambience that formerly shone through them.

What did God supply, after all, when he was alive? He supplied the beauty, the meaning and the mystery, with which the physical world was then imbued. This was what theologians meant, perhaps, when they said that the creation was continuous. But now it is all gone. There is no beauty, no inner life. Even colours have become flat and dull.

And so I can report that the Satanic rebellion succeeded one July evening in a small English town, and that God, not quite omnipotent as it turned out, is dead. I will ask no one to verify this event for themselves as for many, of course, it will have passed unnoticed. As for Rodrick, I grow tired of his stale utterances, of his dead mackerel eyes, of his increasing lethargy. Though we still meet for our customary talks, he repeats himself now in a manner that once he would simply not have permitted himself. Often he will simply sit and repeat like a parrot, "God is dead. God is dead. We are alone." It is a long time now since I heard anything original from him.