For a decade and a half after the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Hans Morgenthau struggled to come to grips with the novelty of nuclear weapons. His early postwar work is characterized by a tragic worldview whose insistence on the inescapable and undecided struggle of politics left him ill-equipped to confront the novelty of the nuclear threat. However, in the early 1960s, his writings shifted dramatically. Turning away from tragedy, Morgenthau began not only to acknowledge the stark novelty of the nuclear age, but also to resist what he took to be dangerously complacent and optimistic scenarios of nuclear attack. I argue that this later work harnesses and redeployes the narratives, images, and understandings about the end of the world that emerged in postwar America. Against dangerously optimistic scenarios of nuclear war, Morgenthau offers a terrifying account of an apocalypse without worldly redemption. In the face of the novel threat of nuclear annihilation, tragedy is not enough. We must imagine the apocalypse in order to prevent it.

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