

Copenhagen: Introduction

Dr. Owen Griffiths

In our modern world few metaphors contain the explanatory power of indeterminacy and uncertainty. In a world defined by ceaseless change, we find ourselves faced with the perplexing problem of determining where we are while simultaneously trying to figure out where we are going. This relationship between present and future is further compounded by the third variable of the past, so that we frequently want to know where we have been, where we are, and where we are going all at the same time.

With some modifications and used metaphorically, Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle encapsulates this conundrum of modern existence, even though he developed it to explain the micro world upon which our material existence is based. In a 1927 paper, Heisenberg explained uncertainty this way: "The more precisely the position is determined, [he said] the less precisely the momentum is known in this instant, and vice versa." For historians this metaphor is particularly useful because it allows us to more concretely conceptualize the nature of our work, which is to create stories about the past in an ever-changing present. But uncertainty also has applicability for a universe of moral ambiguity, especially with regard to war and the means by which we wage it.

This is the subject and theme of the commentaries that follow, all of which are derived from Michael Frayn's 1999 play *Copenhagen*, a fictional exploration of the "historical mystery" of Werner Heisenberg's covert meeting

with Niels Bohr in 1941, the true content and consequences of which have been lost to us forever. Caught in a dense web of reciprocal suspicions and misunderstandings, Bohr, Heisenberg, and Bohr's wife Margarethe question the motives for Heisenberg's trip against a background of international espionage, the birth of the nuclear age, and the development of the Allied and German atomic bomb projects during WWII. Uncertainty prevails and gives birth to the unimaginable and unpredictable.

When is it acceptable to do evil to combat evil? What is the moral position of the scientist when it comes to the restoration of peace at the cost of millions of lives? How does the average man or woman decide when and under what circumstances violence should be done by them or in their name? These are some of the questions the following student papers seek to address from an interdisciplinary perspective of drama, history, and international relations. They offer no answers only an opportunity to think more deeply about the nature of human conflict and the importance of exploring most rigorously strategies of resistance and resolution to a set of problems common to all humanity.