



**Beyond Liberal and Conservative
Freedom, Transcendence, and the Human Condition in Arendt, Jaspers, and Niebuhr**

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Abstract: In this essay, I explore the possibility and desirability of finding a middle ground between the ideologies of liberalism and conservatism as brought to light in the intersection of political theory, philosophical reflection, and Christian theology within the thought of Hannah Arendt, Karl Jaspers, and Reinhold Niebuhr. I argue that only in the opening of such a mediate space of freedom, defined in the relation of human nature to Transcendence *via* the revelatory power of ciphers of being, can human beings discover their own individual and collective meaningfulness and summon the wherewithal to transform the world through communicative action. Within this context, I also reflect on the role of education as a vehicle for actualizing authentic or inauthentic modes of being.



**Liberal and Conservative: Sources of Light or the
Same Black Hole?**

Whenever it attempts any sort of actualization, or concretization, of its potential, in action, the human social condition always seems to find its bearings only by negotiating the middle ground between two monstrous extremes. The bodily image of a torso, legs, and head situated between the left and right arms (or "wings") of a creature that acts in the world implies symbolically the desirability of living "in the middle" while deriving a functional orientation from the outer limits of livable space by reaching out on either side to the extremes in order to navigate the middle course. If we add to these "left" and "right" spatial orientations the color designations common to American political discourse, we further consider the middle ground between liberal and conservative ideologies as a negotiation between blue and red, respectively, which the media commonly throws like a bucket of paint over

entire states (as in our typical election ritual) or even the entire nation (through the modern mythology of "statistical trends"). But the extreme boundaries that limit the actual human sphere of speech and action are not blue and red, but equally colorless vacuities – black holes, empty abysses in which the freedom required for all human flourishing, including political discourse and common initiative, disappear entirely. More to the point, when the respective liberal and conservative ideologies represented by blue and red in our system are pushed to their furthest extremes, they ironically coalesce to form the same black hole of totalitarianism, with communist totalitarianism on the left and fascist totalitarianism on the right.¹

¹ Arendt famously identified the essential sameness of left and right wing totalitarianism in her definitive postwar study of the subject; see Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1968).

The point I wish to make here, if I may be allowed to mix these several metaphors, is that the light necessary for carving out a meaningful space to live without compulsion – *i.e.*, a space governed by freedom – must come from a source that transcends the ideological organizing structural principles at either the left or right ends of the political spectrum. Either extreme, by itself – that is, *qua* ideology – provides only darkness, coercion, bondage, necessity, enslavement, the heteronomy of tyranny. The twentieth century attempt to combine the two extremes has shown itself to be a ruinous solution – an unthinkable, horrifying "final solution" in which light and life are stamped out. To comprehend the nature of the transcendent light that allows the graduated spectrum between blue and red (or any other colors signifying the diversity of human actualization) to appear as genuine possibilities for collective human action, I turn to three key thinkers who understood the necessity (ironically, paradoxically) of the appeal to Transcendence for the conceptualization and actualization of freedom: Hannah Arendt, Karl Jaspers, and Reinhold Niebuhr. They each recognized not merely the need to invoke a programmatic conception of Transcendence as the actuating impetus for human freedom, but this accompanied by a formulation of freedom woven together with a reckoning with human nature, or, alternately posed, the human condition (through which categories we obtain a "dialectical circumscription" of both the inner and outer limitations of humanity).

Hannah Arendt: The Black Hole of Sameness and the Nihilism of *Animal Laborans*

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt characterizes modern industrial society as almost entirely bereft of the potential for speech and action, or even genuine craftsmanship (humanity as authentic *homo faber*, the creative maker who produces works and establishes an enduring world) due to the reduction of all human purposes to an artificial metabolism of production and consumption, a twisted model of the original, organic survival condition of the human metabolic labor-relationship with the surrounding environment of the earth (*animal laborans*). The possibility of transcending the technologized, mechanized, artificial condition of labor and consumption in genuine speech and action (the *vita activa*) becomes an Herculean task in the modern age – far more difficult than the original human struggle of labor with nature, for now the

struggle has become a vicious, self-consumptive, and impersonal cycle of humanity devouring itself. There appears to be no exit from the nausea of this solipsism in which human individuality is leveled, or flattened, to appear "the same." Arendt describes this loss of individuality with military and mechanistic allusions:

The sameness prevailing in a society resting on labor and consumption and expressed in its conformity is intimately connected with the somatic experience of laboring together, where the biological rhythm of labor unites the group of laborers to the point that each may feel that he is no longer an individual but actually one with all others. To be sure, this eases labor's toil and trouble in much the same way as marching together eases the effort of walking for each soldier. It is therefore quite true that for the *animal laborans* "labor's sense and value depend entirely upon the social conditions," that is, upon the extent to which the labor and consumption process is permitted to function smoothly and easily, independent of "professional attitudes properly speaking" [Alain Touraine]; the trouble is only that the best "social conditions" are those under which it is possible to lose one's identity.²

In modern labor society, which has now attained global reach, the only meaningful activities are "jobs" that sustain and perpetuate the totalizing economic machine. The purpose of education is simply to get a good paying job. Knowledge pursued for its own sake, along with artistic pursuits, are little more than frivolous hobbies, parasitic behaviors with respect to the purposes of mass society. The quasi-totalitarian sameness of our labor society is governed by a "communist fiction," as Arendt puts it,³ in which political

² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2d. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 214.

³ Arendt describes the "communist fiction" of modern society in terms that recall Heidegger's famous treatment of *Das Man*, the inauthentic "they-self," in *Being and Time*, which is characterized by "the leveling down of all possibilities of being" [cf., Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Joan Stambaugh trans. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), §27]; Arendt states: "A complete victory of society will always produce some sort of 'communist fiction,' whose outstanding political characteristic is that it is indeed ruled by an 'invisible hand,' namely, by nobody. What we traditionally call state and government gives place here to pure administration – a state of affairs which Marx rightly predicted as the 'withering away of the state,' though he was wrong in assuming that only a revolution could bring it about, and even more wrong when he believed that this complete victory of society would mean the eventual

equality is no longer conceived as "an equality of unequals who stand in need of being 'equalized' in certain respects for certain purposes," such as the farmer and the physician who require a common public sphere in which to join together for common purposes (Arendt cites Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* 1133a16).⁴ Rather, the question of the nature and purpose of humanity (or the "nature and destiny of man," to put it in Niebuhr's terms) is itself suppressed by a systematic deadening of the native drive of human beings to seek out the meaning of their existence – the very drive to question the compulsive illusions of mass society; that is, the questioning that is the only real avenue of escape. Without this deadening, the global economy as we now know it would collapse. The concluding portions of Arendt's *Human Condition* carefully chart the modern path of the collapse of genuine speech and action to the "flat world," (as Thomas Friedman has recently described it⁵), of the mere *animal laborans* (from Galileo's telescope to Marx's communist vision to the relativistic Archimedean point somewhere in the Universe beyond the natural world of the earth and sky of human experience). Although the universalization, or totalizing, of humanity as a mere *animal laborans* began with a complex web of forces in the modern age, too numerous to discuss here,

emergence of the 'realm of freedom' (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 45).

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 215.

⁵ The "flat world" concept is optimistically championed by *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman in his recent book, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005). Friedman attempts a "glass is half full" approach to the global domination of corporate capitalism. While he shares with Arendt the positive recognition that modern labor society has increased the standard of living of many who formerly lived in abject poverty, Friedman seems oblivious to the nihilistic effects of the corporatization of the entire globe, and accepts the idea that those who have been recently emancipated from their primitive ways of life are indeed bettered by the constant flow of disposable creature-comfort products designed to feed our neurotic obsession with consumption. He thus encourages Americans to work harder at global competition, encouraging more money and effort to be spent educating youth in science and engineering so they can keep up with the universal rat race. This in turn serves to bolster his argument that the corporate offshoring of jobs is a good thing in the long run; however, his faith in this process seems to require a great deal of naivete with respect to the propaganda of corporate leadership, on the one hand, and the purpose of human life, on the other.

significant light can be shed on the matter by considering what are perhaps the two chief external engines driving our modern social addiction to the artificial cycle of labor and consumption: a degenerate, mandatory public educational system and a seductive, all-pervasive visual media driven largely by the hidden agendas of advertising.

Serious consideration should be given to the question of whether the actual functioning of our compulsory, government-run, public school system is in fact closer to the ideology of totalitarianism than to the ideal of free, autonomous, democratic citizenship. It is one of the chief goals of totalitarian institutions to condition the minds and wills of youth to accept and follow predetermined patterns of behavior, thereby stamping out the unwelcome interference of new, power destabilizing social initiatives, which Arendt aptly characterizes as the phenomenon of "natality." The chief goal of public education in America today is not to learn how to think creatively for the achievement of human flourishing – what the Greeks knew as *eudaimonia* – but to train youth in the warped virtues of a labor/consumption society, as well as to acclimate them to the tedium of this nihilistic treadmill. After spending one's entire youth incarcerated in the "cells" conceived by late nineteenth and early twentieth century social planners to fit the needs of the rising industrial economy, the average American citizen can hardly dare to imagine an alternative mode of being. And that is precisely the desired outcome of a labor society whose entire economic system depends on accelerated consumption, which in turn depends on immature, unfulfilled consumers who do not know how to find satisfaction and repose in organic processes, but who now live in the constant attention deficit of sound-bite consciousness and momentary, serial gratification. Advertiser driven television in particular (but reinforced through other media outlets like radio, internet, and popular films) accelerates the process by informing the empty vessels created by the methods of modern schooling of the new needs they are supposed to have and what new products can satisfy those fabricated needs – for the moment. A self-narcotizing cycle is thus perpetuated, with the whole of public education continually adjusting itself to establish and feed it. Contemporary education is not designed to actualize the true native potentiality of unique human *Existenz* (*i.e.*, it does not exist to nurture natality); children are not taught to think for themselves or to actualize their unique potential for the sake of new

constructive initiatives in the world. If they were, one might expect that the entire artificially confining and abysmally ineffectual compulsory school system would collapse of its own weight in a single generation as young people are introduced to genuine encounters with the true wonders of nature, history, the structures of thought, *etc.* – encounters for their own sake and in preparation for future engagement with the world. To what extent the coercive, even tyrannical, nature of our educational institutions and the political forces that support them would allow this remains to be seen. But rather than come to the conclusion that the entire concept of compulsory public education needs to be rethought from the ground up, we are continually inundated by calls from the left for more money to feed the beast and from the right for stricter testing before federal money should be doled out – both of which completely miss the point. The central problem is that the domineering exercise of mental control through coercive manipulation (both subtle and overt) chokes the native quest for truth and meaning and kills, or at least radically disfigures, that inner potential which alone makes us truly human. The free play of "original seeking" which has inspired every philosophy worthy of remembrance is systematically obliterated in children beginning with their earliest educational experiences.⁶

Our contemporary situation is all the more insidious due to the strange condition that "no one" seems to be masterminding this quasi-totalitarian strategy – at least no particular someone, no *Führer*, although perhaps a handful of corporate and government individuals from both the left and the right could be selected for dishonorable mention. But as the inauthentic possibility of hiding one's true involvement

and passing the buck in a bureaucratic system of collective rule allows no one but the occasional scapegoat to be called to account, the system itself runs on like a headless Leviathan demanding both liberal and conservative soldiers of the global economy to feed the machine with the souls of their children and train them to make it grow bigger, run smoother, and consume faster. The resulting "clockwork orange" is a vicious monstrosity that, like the more overt totalitarian monstrosities of the twentieth century, can hardly be recognized by the well-trained herd that cannot bring itself to imagine and actualize an alternative to the self-consumptive frenzy of product consumption.

In "The Crisis in Education" – a crisis now roughly half a century older and considerably more acute – Arendt insightfully describes the problem in American education in terms that mirror her distinction between the public and private realms in *The Human Condition*. She describes the chief problem of American public education as a failure to preserve and protect the development of children within the private sphere necessary for authentic maturation; instead, they are exposed at a defenseless age to a public sphere for which they are developmentally completely unprepared. The result is an abandonment and betrayal of children to the compulsive forces of mass society, where "no one" in particular takes responsibility for the world; processes of labor and consumption dictate the meaning of human existence; preparation for mature thought, speech, and action in the adult world is circumvented and instead a perpetual childhood, or perpetual adolescence, is instituted; a world of mass-produced, consumable toys is then offered to the developmentally stunted adults – themselves the "products" of the system – in place of genuine human interaction and a meaningful engagement with the actual world and its potential. Arendt describes a key step in correcting this warped view of modern education as a sort of dialectical middle ground between conservatism and liberalism – more specifically, between conservatism in education, where the very point is to conserve, or preserve, the world that has been established through the work of *homo faber* and will outlast the individual's sojourn in the world, and on the other hand, liberal progressivism in politics, whereby the natality of childhood can be brought to bear in a fully matured development of its newborn individual potentiality against a conservative preservation of the *status quo*, which continually requires

⁶ John Taylor Gatto, from whose insights on American public education I have rather freely drawn here, is a former teacher and leading advocate of alternative educational possibilities such as "home schooling," "unschooling," or radically reconceived educational situations. He poignantly argues that even the best of teachers is forced through the institutional structure of the public school environment to communicate inadvertently seven chief "lessons" to students, quite apart from any particular subject matter: "confusion, class position, indifference, emotional and intellectual dependency, conditional self-esteem, and surveillance. All of these lessons are prime training for permanent underclasses, people deprived forever of finding the center of their own special genius" [John Taylor Gatto, *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling* (Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers, 2005), p. 16].

revision in order to balance the potential injustices in a society of diverse individuals. Arendt states:

The problem is simply to educate in such a way that a setting-right remains actually possible, even though it can, of course, never be assured. Our hope always hangs on the new which every generation brings; but precisely because we can base our hope only on this, we destroy everything if we so try to control the new that we, the old, can dictate how it will look. Exactly for the sake of what is new and revolutionary in every child, education must be conservative; it must preserve this newness and introduce it as a new thing into an old world, which, however revolutionary its actions may be, is always, from the standpoint of the next generation, superannuated and close to destruction.⁷

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt describes the natality that is the potential gift of every child to the adult world – that is, if it is allowed to bloom in the relative protection of the private realm before being faced with the daunting challenges of public life – as a kind of miracle, a gift of Transcendence (and here, she directly invokes Judeo-Christian symbolism). Referring to action in general, but forgiveness (via the symbolism of Jesus of Nazareth) and the ability to make covenants (via the symbolism of Abraham) in particular, Arendt describes this gift of Transcendence as "The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'natural' ruin," and which furthermore is "ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted." It is, she continues, "the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born."⁸ The ontological question thus introduced returns us to the question of human nature, or alternatively, the human condition (*i.e.*, alternate modes of approaching the question of the human essence and its possibilities). Natality is a symbol of the freedom derived from Transcendence. But in what sense is the potential of human freedom innate and to what extent can human goodness be nurtured through education? And why does it necessarily fall short of the goal of perfection? At the close of "The Crisis in Education," where the phenomenon of natality is described as "the fact that we have all come into the world by being born and that this world is constantly renewed through birth," Arendt

suggests a relative optimism concerning the capacity of education to nurture the quasi-miracle of natality; she writes:

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.⁹

In what sense does the middle ground between the rigid ideologies of liberalism and conservatism, or, pushed to extremes, between the black hole sameness of totalitarian communism and totalitarian fascism, depend on something beyond ordinary human capacity? Whence comes the freedom that the education of children is ideally meant to nurture and guide, but does not create, and destroys only at the grave peril of falling headlong into an abyss? For clarification we turn to the thought of Karl Jaspers.

Karl Jaspers: Transcendence and the Light of Freedom

The opposition of liberalism and conservatism in the political realm mirrors the opposition between subjectivity and objectivity in epistemology generally. The former opposition represents the collective expression of the opposition between the self and the world that occurs in the dichotomy of ordinary perception within the world-orientation of the individual (although important differences do emerge in this enlargement of the concept¹⁰). In the final section of his mature work, *Von der Wahrheit* (1947), an excerpt translated into English as *Truth and Symbol*, Jaspers

⁹ Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," p. 196.

¹⁰ A significant example of this is the somewhat controversial, but nevertheless enlightening, fourfold difference between individual and collective guilt proffered by Jaspers in *The Question of German Guilt*. Jaspers there schematizes the problem into four categories of guilt, including (conventional, legal) criminal guilt, (collective, social) political guilt, (individual) moral guilt, and (universal) metaphysical guilt. See Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, E. B. Ashton trans. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), pp. 25–40.

⁷ Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 1968), pp. 192–3.

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 247.

succinctly expresses the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity and explains how the "Encompassing" union of the two brings freedom into being through the opening of Transcendence within ordinary experience. In his own words:

The path of true philosophizing loses neither the subject nor the object in the appearance of Objectivity, but instead grasps Being in their polarity.... In the opposition of the will toward the object and toward the subject it would be a mistake to decide in favor of one side. Polemically both are right in their opposition to the obliqueness of the opposing side, but are wrong in denying its peculiar kernel of truth. The conflict is resolved in the movement out of both sides in the Encompassing.¹¹

The appearance of truth "between" subjectivity and objectivity occurs in the quasi-objective form of ciphers – *i.e.*, the symbols or metaphors in which Transcendence speaks, or "encodes" itself. In this "space" opened up by the cipher-script (*Chifferschrift*) of being, the possible individual being of the unique human subject (*Existenz*) and the possible meaning of the absolute objectivity of being as Other than human subjectivity (*Transzendenz*) is mediated, thus opening individual human beings to the light of the whole spectrum of collective organizational possibilities that exist within the historically particular horizon of collective human needs and ambitions (society/political action).¹²

Jaspers points out that an absolutizing of either the subjective or objective poles of being in world-orientation results in either case in "the consciousness of a groundlessness."¹³ I have characterized this "groundlessness" in the political dichotomy of liberal ideology versus conservative ideology as an abyss, or black hole, of totalitarian sameness. In order that we not fall into such a trap, we are reminded by Jaspers not to

interpret ciphers, on the conservative side, as fixed objectivities, settled dogmas that communicate the truth of human experience once and for all and without constant reassessment and reappropriation. But the equivalent danger occurs on the liberal side if we interpret ciphers as *mere* signs, the ultimate meaning of which is due solely to a hermeneutical investment by the subject.¹⁴ The result of a subjectivization of the cipher-script of being is an ideology that deifies human power structures, thereby "killing God," as in the Nietzschean paradigm, and setting up humanity in God's place. On the other hand, clinging to the objectivity of ciphers as though they constituted empirical knowledge, after the fashion of materialistic positivism, likewise "kills God," as in the paradigm of modern scientific enquiry, and leads to idolatry in religion, legalism in ethics, and fetishism in science (all of which likewise throw human beings back upon their own deified illusions of power). The middle ground that potentially overcomes the groundlessness of either absolutized extreme is to be found for Jaspers in the Encompassing, the authentic transcendent totality that puts every inauthentic finite totality – in politics, "totalitarianism" – in proper check. Here Jaspers locates the metaphysical structure that opens a plurality of epistemic and existential phenomena, appearing in various historical and cultural modes—here we see the plural manifestations of the divine, including the Truth in communicated truths, the *Logos* in meaningful *logoi*, the Torah in peace treaties and social covenants, the

¹⁴ My use of the distinction between mere signs and symbols is informed by Gadamer's enlightening discussion in *Truth and Method*. The following passages speak to the heart of the matter: "[The] extremes of representation are pure indication (*Verweisung*: also, reference), which is the essence of the sign, and pure substitution (*Vertreten*), which is the essence of the symbol.... [A] sign is nothing but what its function requires; and that is to point away from itself.... There is something schematic and abstract about them, because they point not to themselves but to what is not present – *e.g.*, to the curve ahead or to one's page.... A symbol not only points to something; it represents it by taking its place. But to take the place of something means to make something present that is not present. Thus in representing, the symbol takes the place of something: that is, it makes something immediately present. Only because it thus presents the presence of what it represents is the symbol itself treated with the reverence due to the symbolized. Such symbols as a crucifix, a flag, a uniform have so fully taken the place of what is revered that the latter is present in them" [Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall trans (New York: Crossroad, 1992), pp. 152–4].

¹¹ Karl Jaspers, *Truth and Symbol*, Jean T. Wilde, William Kluback, and William Kimmel trans (New Haven: College and University Press, 1959), pp. 31–2.

¹² For a more extensive treatment of the topic see Karl Jaspers' *Philosophie* [3 vols, E. B. Ashton trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969, 1970, 1971)], in which the transition from world-orientation to the freedom of *Existenz* to the encounter with Transcendence is laid out in full systematic detail. For the development of the notion of "the Encompassing" (*das Umgreifende*) beyond its somewhat understated role in *Philosophie*, see Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*, William Earle trans. (New York: Noonday Press, 1955).

¹³ Karl Jaspers, *Truth and Symbol*, p. 24.

Holy Spirit in the hearing of the gospel and receiving of the sacrament, the cross of Christ in human acts of forgiveness, and, to recall Arendt's central cipher, the Virgin Birth in the creative potential of every child to mature and enter the adult world with something new and transform it through speech and action (natality). Generally speaking, it is "the Holy" in mundane transactions whenever those actions transcend the cyclical necessity of nature and attain the status of *free* acts.¹⁵ It is the potential *freedom from* the ideological totalitarianism of liberalism or conservatism and potential *freedom for* new initiatives that break through the lulling stupor of the tyrannical grip of the *status quo* in our labor/consumption society. But this freedom has its limits.

Just as no attempt to transcend the finitude of the subject-object dichotomy and attain the fullness of Being-in-itself is ever wholly successful, no attempt to transcend the left and right poles of the political spectrum and attain a utopia wherein all of the opposing ambitions of collective life are mutually satisfied is ever even theoretically possible. The upshot of this fact of worldly existence is that the closest we can come to a "just" political determination is to attain a

situation where nearly everyone is relatively content with the outcome, but wherein no one is fully satisfied, since *justice* itself is a cipher of philosophical faith, an ideal given in encompassing Reason that is never fully actual. The idea of the full satisfaction of all the participants in a political collective is simply a "communist fiction" that pretends to an Objectivity of the good that it can never in principle obtain. Such a "state" (whether ontological or political) is obtained only through a false fixing of the conditions of human life (as, for example, in the warping of human natality into the strait-jacketed existence of a labor/consumption society). Jaspers affirms that "To declare any reality of man as essential reality itself signifies a neglect of the Encompassing"¹⁶ – and hence, a loss of the possibility of human freedom *qua* *Existenz*. Putting it more starkly, he declares in no uncertain terms that "There is no absolute, permanent reality of man."¹⁷ What are the implications of this when faced with the daunting challenges of contemporary life, such as our capacity to destroy not only ourselves, but the earth itself? Our capacity for destruction (the result of an evil will) seems to have multiplied exponentially through the technological "advances" of the twentieth century; can our capacity for good match this negative possibility? The question of human nature takes on a new urgency in this context.

In *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man*, Jaspers sets forth a provisional vision, so to speak, of a solution to the immense danger of the human capacity for self-destruction in the nuclear age. He stresses that any "final solution" would be a totalitarian illusion. However, appealing "from reason to reason," Jaspers believes that "If we grow sure of our freedom, and thus of our responsibility, there is a chance for the change, and thus for salvation."¹⁸ This confidence in human freedom is only possible through an appeal to Transcendence, but the actualization and enactment of freedom seems nevertheless, for Jaspers, to be a human achievement, an actualization of a collective cipher-script that willingly chooses a better future. Perhaps this is stated too one-sidedly in the light of Jaspers' own "hovering" (*schwebend*) description; but an alternative emphasis which stresses the long tradition of "original

¹⁵ It is characteristic of Jaspers to avoid identifying a single, central religious cipher. Ricoeur criticized the tendency in Jaspers to avoid the scandal of particularity involved in the commitment to a particular religious tradition as spiritual Don Juanism. Although Ricoeur's criticism does carry some weight, especially with respect to the issue of existential commitment so central to Jaspers' own appropriation of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Jaspers nevertheless makes up for it rather substantially (how much remains an open matter for existential debate) by taking up the mantle of philosophical faith and post-war humanitarian conscience with fervent, self-committed authenticity. Ricoeur presents a very insightful criticism of his former teacher, revealing of both the close connection between their respective positions and some essential differences, in Paul Ricoeur, "The Relation of Jaspers' Philosophy to Religion," in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, Paul Arthur Schilpp ed. (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1957), pp. 611–42. Here Ricoeur intimates that Jaspers' philosophical faith and traditional religious faith should not be viewed as mutually exclusive, as Jaspers' seemingly sharp separation between reason and catholicity might suggest, but should rather remain a duality in tension. In the conclusion of this article, Ricoeur writes, "Perhaps it is because philosophy and theology never face each other openly, but rather behind the masks of their specific bondages – libertarian on the one hand, authoritarian on the other hand – that the contrast between them appears fatally to be 'not' polar, but mutually exclusive," as Jaspers said vigorously of the contrast between 'reason' and 'catholicity'" (*Op. cit.*, p. 642).

¹⁶ Jaspers, *Truth and Symbol*, p. 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Karl Jaspers, *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man*, E. B. Ashton trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. vii.

sin," stemming from St. Paul and Augustine, seems nevertheless to push Jaspers further to the left than he himself would perhaps like to go. This can be seen, for example, by contrasting the later Heidegger's quasi-Augustinian lack of hope in human nature (which links up, significantly, with his earlier quasi-Augustinian treatment of "fallenness," or "falling prey," [*Verfallen*] in *Being and Time*; §38) with Jaspers' more optimistic point of view (shall we call it quasi-Pelagian by contrast?). In the 1966 "Spiegel Interview,"¹⁹ Heidegger indicates a definite lack of hope in humanity's potential to extricate itself from its technological "enframing" (*Gestell*); he writes, for example, "A decisive question for me today is how a political system can be assigned to today's technological age at all, and which political system would that be? I have no answer to this question. I am not convinced that it is democracy."²⁰ In another instance he states his lack of confidence with tragic-romantic flair:

Philosophy will not be able to bring about a direct change of the present state of the world. This is true not only of philosophy but of all merely human meditations and endeavors. Only a god can still save us. I think the only possibility of salvation left to us is to prepare readiness, through thinking and poetry, for the appearance of the god or for the absence of the god during the decline; so that we do not, simply put, die meaningless deaths, but that when we decline, we decline in the face of the absent god.²¹

In contrast to Heidegger's famous proclamation that "only a god can still save us," Jaspers suggests that only through the mutual recognition of our collective responsibility in the free exercise of communicative reason can we deliver ourselves from the danger that lurks in the technologization of humanity. But a this-worldly, political salvation through world peace, an always tenuous and fragile possibility, is, for Jaspers, no mere external task that can be accomplished through the bureaucracy of laws and treaties. Rather, he insists, "If mankind's existence is in question, man's total essence must be summoned to provide the answer."

And so, he adds, "We become newly conscious of our basic human condition."²² Technology and the present state of peril it reveals, thus shows human beings "both chances"²³ which define humanity *qua* possible *Existenz*. One "chance" is the genuine possibility of meeting and transcending the challenge of the danger humanity has created for itself. The other is the possibility of becoming enslaved or destroyed by our own devices. The biblical cipher of the *imago dei*, stamped, as it were, upon the pinnacle of creation in Genesis 1 (vv. 26–31), holds these two "chances" together in a paradoxical suspension. This symbol, perhaps above all others (at least within the Western tradition), reveals the potential of humanity as *homo faber*, the ability to be "like God," to "know" both good and evil through creative action, including the use of technology (from the invention of "natural tools" to the discovery and weaponization of atomic energy), as well as through the communicative action that seeks to control this immense, potentially self-destructive power. For Jaspers, the reason why human beings must be acknowledged to have the possibility to master even the most destructive of forces is that, in his words, "man is fundamentally incomplete. He is Nietzsche's 'still undetermined animal.'"²⁴ The essence of humanity, for Jaspers, is not fixed; it is underway. It is responsive to the range of possibilities given to it by both the natural world and the world that is created by humanity itself (the work of *homo faber*). In response to these daunting challenges, the human essence itself must change or be destroyed: "[Man] will either change or he is unworthy of life and will, against his will, destroy himself by his technology."²⁵

To save ourselves from ourselves and transcend the monstrous machine we have created, Jaspers stresses that the "new way of thinking" now demanded of us all requires us to rise above the mere calculative thinking of the intellect to embrace encompassing Reason. And this returns us to the same problem of education that we saw emerge with Arendt. Jaspers points out that the scientists who invented the atomic weaponry that got us into the particular peril of our age cannot be looked to for an answer to the problem, for the sort of specialized scientific thinking that invents

¹⁹ The Spiegel Interview with Heidegger was conducted on September 23, 1966 and published May 31, 1976, upon his death.

²⁰ Martin Heidegger, "Der Spiegel Interview with Martin Heidegger," in *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism: Questions and Answers*, Gunther Neske and Emil Kettering eds (New York: Paragon House, 1990), p. 54.

²¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 56–7.

²² Jaspers, *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man*, p. 187.

²³ *Op. cit.*, p. 194.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

bombs has no clue what to do with them once they have been produced. He writes:

Science – as the progress of the cogent knowledge of nature – cannot understand its own meaning and can never adequately account for its own necessity. Therefore, it cannot show us the way out of doom, either. Today, its bearers frequently lack that high philosophical impulse; they take up science as a sort of brainwork that can yield a livelihood, position, and prestige like any other vocation.²⁶

Homo faber must transcend to the plane of speech and action, the *vita activa*, or else perish. But our educational system promotes such mere brainwork rather than aspiring to the cultivation of the full range of human possibilities and virtues; it is primarily designed to reinforce the "personality split between profession and conscience," as Jaspers puts it.²⁷ The escalating psychosis required to maintain our ever increasing labor/consumption cycle requires people who avoid personal responsibility for the collective whole by conceiving of themselves as mere cogs in the machine. And so, the fact that our society does not deem it necessary to teach our children how to think about the meaning of being-human, but instead teaches them that the highest aspiration is to get a high paying job so as to consume more products, perhaps more than any other practical factor hinders a solution to our most pressing technological and political dangers. "The public is content," writes Jaspers, "all it wants is calm and a flourishing economy, a high standard of living and oblivion in pleasure."²⁸

For Jaspers, as with Arendt, education is essential for developing the practice (like the physician's "practice" which is never a finished state of affairs) of reasonable thinking which is required to save us from ourselves. But such thinking must be further distinguished from the sort of moral indoctrination currently practiced in our public schools. The "political correctness" that we typically find taught today in both schools and universities as the liberal corrective to perceived forms of conservative power manipulation is in fact a form of indoctrination into dogmatic modes of thinking, which in practical effect promotes the same sort of slavish orientation as fundamentalist-conservative religious or political ideology (*cf.*, the

coercive strategies of anarchist protesters, PETA activists, environmental terrorists, *etc.*). Such attempts not to nurture, but to control, the thinking of the succeeding generation seek to rig the game by determining a fixed outcome. Even though certain outcomes may be admirable in theory, such as world peace, indoctrination can never attain the goal, since the meaningfulness of the goal, and hence the inner drive to actually make the sacrifices necessary to accomplish and maintain it, are sought from a heteronomous (but not transcendent) source. The youth of each generation must be allowed to discover the true meaning of their own humanity and thereby come to take responsibility for the world. This cannot happen through compulsion, and it certainly cannot be tacked on as an addendum to the central purpose of education today, which is merely to get a job.

So what educational model would accomplish the sort of cultivation of reason called for by Arendt and Jaspers? I suggest a return to the classical model, although the current system would likely have to collapse entirely before giving way to such a course of action on a grand scale. The classical Western curriculum known as the trivium was designed to awaken free and creative thinking, based on traditional knowledge and wisdom rather than mere functional instrumentality, by leading students through the three successive stages of grammar (first through fourth grades; basic acquisition of facts, including reading and writing skills), logic (fifth through eighth grades; analysis and assessment of factuality), and finally, rhetoric (ninth through twelfth grades; the ability to externalize the previous, largely internal development). Through this development, partly student directed, partly mentored, but always knowledge and wisdom based, a well-cultivated mind is allowed to fashion autonomously the rational tools necessary to confront the world in speech and action, and hence enter the public sphere not as a mere worker, but as a fully prepared human being fit to confront the challenges of the adult world (including, but not limited to, engaging, meaningful work).²⁹ Such a curriculum,

²⁹ A full plan for such a curriculum can be found in Susan Wise Bauer and Jessie Wise, *The Well-Trained Mind: A Guide to Classical Education at Home*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004). This general model is being used with considerable success, but on a small scale, in some private and charter schools, modeling themselves as "classical academies." Perhaps the greatest success of this model, however, is emerging among the homeschooling movement. This is likely due to the fact that in such a

²⁶ *Op.cit.*, p. 201.

²⁷ *Op.cit.*, p. 198.

²⁸ *Op.cit.*, p. 212.

further, has the great benefit of self-correction, since the young are trained to think for themselves at an early age, not for the sake of some external agenda *per se*, but for the sake of the development of their own humanity in dialogue with the human development of the entire world. The impetus to act can thus emerge naturally through the cultivation of concern for the world which they have come to care for – not simply been told they ought to. The current system, by not permitting the logic phase to begin essentially until college – which becomes simply the "thirteenth grade" for most – promotes a delayed adolescence of intellectual passivity and mental slavishness by stretching out the (predominantly passive) grammar phase to fill the entire twelve years of the public system. But by this time, the true formative period of awakening to life's possibilities and seeing the authentic potential beauty of human existence within the world has been squashed in all but a few who manage to recover it and break through to a new way of thinking, seemingly against all odds.

But in all of these considerations, we must not forget the central issue of whether and to what extent we are truly capable of accomplishing these grand ideals from out of our own nature, incomplete as that may be. We must not be seduced into false utopian visions, for the transformation of humanity that Jaspers calls for is realistic about the fact that history displays the repetitive tendency of humanity to fall into patterns of self-seeking inauthenticity, the tendency of human beings to "fall away" from themselves. Poor educational patterns are not the only problem, although they

setting, where children do not have to face the pressures of the public sphere too early, they are able to avoid the constant onslaught of mass mentality thrust upon them in a school setting (no matter how "good" or "bad" the school may be deemed to be). Hence, they have a fighting chance to develop their own unique humanity as "a gift to the world," to recall Arendt's language, and even to develop the "new way of thinking" – the embracing of encompassing Reason – called for by Jaspers. This is, of course, only a possibility, since some parents who choose to homeschool may do so primarily for ideological reasons, like replacing the simplistic indoctrination into the Darwinian cipher of human origins (met with in the schools) with mere indoctrination into the biblical creationist cipher of human origins (neither of which allows the cipher to reveal new creative possibilities for thought). But at least there is hope in this direction that the lack of societal coercion will give way to a discovery and cultivation of freedom of thought in both children and their parents, as two generations break the cycle of alienation from each other and seek to comprehend and confront the world together.

certainly exacerbate and drive the problem to new levels. Good education can be considered good only to the extent that it brings us to ourselves; as such it is merely a vehicle. We must still wrestle with ourselves when we get there. We must wrestle with our apparently innate tendency to avoid responsibility, for ourselves and the world. Jaspers comes rather close to describing something akin to the cipher of original sin when he says, "There is within us an unconscious urge to fight any contact with our innermost being, which we consider obscure, incalculable, and therefore profound."³⁰ Instead, "Man wants to be able to follow instructions without having to commit himself. He wants to remain aloof and not to expose himself."³¹ Good education does not fix this problem; it merely creates the conditions of an awakening to it. In order to comprehend this particular phenomenon of being-human – the inherent tendency to fall into patterns of inauthentic behavior, the tendency to hide from ourselves, to not be what we know we ought to be – we must engage our thought with the religious tradition of the West that has developed this notion as the cipher of "original sin." In so doing, it is hoped that we may glimpse an encounter of Transcendence with *Existenz* that may shed light on the nature of the human condition *qua* freedom.

Reinhold Niebuhr: The Human Condition as Freedom and Fall

For Jaspers, the human essence (*Existenz*) is not a fixed objectivity, nor is its potential *vis-à-vis* the challenges of worldly existence; hence, the outcome of human action in the world is not a fixed certainty, a definite Fate. From the standpoint of finite human existence, we simply do not know whether we will destroy ourselves or transcend this danger to some new collective possibility. Bringing Christian theology to bear on this situation, Reinhold Niebuhr, who is relatively close to the existentialist neo-Kantian thinking of Jaspers and Arendt, reminds us of the potency of specific traditional symbols – like that of "original sin" – that stress the inherent evil in human nature as the ostensible inevitability of humanity to fail to overcome its own self-centeredness for the sake of collective peace. In *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr identifies the paradoxical tension at the heart of the traditional

³⁰ Jaspers, *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man*, p. 207.

³¹ *Op.cit.*, p. 206.

Christian interpretation of human nature, explaining that "The Christian doctrine of sin in its classical form offends both rationalists and moralists by maintaining the seemingly absurd position that man sins inevitably and by a fateful necessity but that he is nevertheless to be held responsible for actions which are prompted by an ineluctable fate."³² In Romans, Paul identifies human self-glorification as "without excuse" before God, since, apparently, humanity corrupted its own freedom by turning away from God through its own act of volition (Rom. 1:20-21). But on the other hand, the corruption of sin seems to be an inevitable defect, stemming from the sin of the first man, Adam (Rom. 5:12). Niebuhr concisely states the absurdity as follows:

Original sin, which is by definition an inherited corruption, or at least an inevitable one, is nevertheless not to be regarded as belonging to his essential nature and therefore is not outside the realm of his responsibility. Sin is natural for man in the sense that it is universal but not in the sense that it is necessary.³³

With the formula that sin is *inevitable* (i.e., universal), but *not necessary* (i.e., human freedom and responsibility must be maintained), Niebuhr seeks to interpret the central cipher of the Christian formulation of human nature in a manner that does not reduce it either to the objective, "conservative" pole in which a meaningless "freedom" of human volition is consumed by the all-encompassing Sovereignty of a God who capriciously predestines some to salvation and some to perdition, nor to the subjective, "liberal" pole which reduces Transcendence to a mere sign in which human beings take the position of God as the absolute determiners of their own destiny. As Jaspers points out repeatedly, for a symbol, or cipher, to be meaningful, and hence a vehicle for the actualization of *Existenz*, it must not be reduced to a mere sign, for then Transcendence evaporates. Niebuhr thus seeks a theological middle ground between liberal, subjectivizing, Pelagian doctrines and the conservative, objectivizing views favored by literalist Augustinian interpretations of human nature. He may perhaps be thought of as an Augustinian existentialist.

For Niebuhr, original sin is not an objective designation of the human condition in the same way

that, for example, one has hands and feet. His approach to the problem is phenomenological and existential. For instance, "original sin" gathers together in one symbol, understood as revelatory of a transcendent source or meaning, the paradox of human existence *qua* freedom, which inevitably fails to actualize the good that it knows it should and is ultimately responsible for. Instead human freedom attempts to descend below its authentic possibilities, seeking refuge in sensuality, or attempts to rise above its authentic possibilities, seeking refuge in pride, arrogance and self-love, in either case avoiding a genuine confrontation with one's self and the mutual claims between self, others, and the world that come to light in that encounter. It is precisely because human beings are free (not bound to necessity), but nevertheless anxious about that freedom, not wanting to confront the responsibility it implies, that temptation to sin emerges and inevitably occurs. Niebuhr summarizes the point succinctly:

The temptation to sin lies...in the human situation itself. This situation is that man as spirit transcends the temporal and natural processes in which he is involved and also transcends himself. Thus his freedom is the basis of his creativity but it is also his temptation. Since he is involved in the contingencies and necessities of the natural process on the one hand and since, on the other, he stands outside of them and foresees their caprices and perils, he is anxious. In his anxiety he seeks to transmute his finiteness into infinity, his weakness into strength, his dependence into independence. He seeks in other words to escape finiteness and weakness by a quantitative rather than qualitative development of his life.³⁴

Here we see the very problem Jaspers identified as the incapacity of scientific, calculative thinking (or quantitative thinking) to solve the inevitable problems into which it necessarily falls. And yet, the qualitative leap that transcends quantitative thinking can never become a permanent accomplishment, fixed once and for all, although it may be provisionally "grasped" (or we might say, inspired by Jaspers, *gegriffen aus dem Umgreifenden*) through the introduction of other ciphers of Transcendence, which in turn resist objectification. Nevertheless, human beings inevitably fall back into fixation upon their finite needs and goals and glorification of themselves as they master particular dimensions of their limited worldly existence. This

³² Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: Volume 1. Human Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), p. 241.

³³ *Op.cit.*, p. 242.

³⁴ *Op.cit.*, p. 251.

leads, according to Niebuhr, to the ultimate paradox that "the final exercise of freedom in the transcendent human spirit is the recognition of the false use of that freedom in action." And so, Niebuhr declares, "Man is most free in the discovery that he is not free."³⁵ We use our freedom to relinquish our freedom.

Human freedom is beyond the closed, systemic dualities of the natural world, governed by natural necessity. The paradox of original sin thus lies beyond the binary, calculative categories of modern analytical logic. It requires a cipher of Transcendence that holds the opposition together in one image, or concept, that nevertheless expresses not a fixed objectivity of the past (an historical "Fall" that is inherited bodily), nor a fixed objectivity of the future (a particular Fate, such as a this-worldly or other-worldly conflagration), but rather the phenomenon of what actually happens at every moment of the present when human beings are faced with the anxiety of the freedom into which they have been thrown by virtue of being born.³⁶ The "Fall" as an historical event is unthinkable, but not because it did or did not happen. The question is not whether it happened; the point is to see that it *happens*. And recognition of this happening opens humanity to a vertical dimension with God, from Niebuhr's perspective of Christian theological faith, or Transcendence, from Jaspers' perspective of philosophical faith. For this reason, Niebuhr finds (consistent with the Pauline cipher, but understood *qua* cipher, not objectification) that "Jesus' injunction, 'Therefore I say unto you be not anxious' contains the whole genius of the Biblical view of the relation of finiteness to sin in man."³⁷

If we do not fall into objectifying, conservative interpretations of human nature as ontologically fallen or subjectifying, liberal interpretations of human nature as basically good, despite massive historical evidence to the contrary, we may see that the biblical tradition itself preserves an element of the original goodness of humanity in the cipher of the *imago dei* of Genesis 1. The original perfection of human nature, however, likewise cannot be sought as an objectified state existing within time, before an objectified Fall; nor can the destruction and deformation of the ideal of a sinless human nature be found as an objectified state after an objectified Fall.

³⁵ *Op.cit.*, p. 260.

³⁶ *Op.cit.*, p. 269.

³⁷ *Op.cit.*, p. 168.

Rather, Niebuhr contends that the loss of virtue and destruction of the proper function of human nature can only come about by human beings availing themselves of one of the elements central to being-human, namely freedom.³⁸ Thus, for Niebuhr, the concept of a *justia originalis* ("original righteousness") that can never be wholly obscured, even through the self-destructive abuse of freedom, balances the concept of original sin, which nevertheless drives us to seek a vertical relationship with Transcendence, pressing humanity to look beyond its own resources for salvation from its own self-destructive tendencies — including both dimensions: temporal political salvation in world peace and supra-temporal soteriological redemption in "the peace of God, which passes all understanding" (Phil. 4:7).

The Christian interpretation of human *Existenz* by means of the cipher of original sin, or fallenness, becomes meaningful only in relation to its counterpart-cipher in the dimension of Transcendence proper — *i.e.*, through the cipher of the transcendent revelation of the meaning of humanity in the person and work of Christ (*i.e.*, "God with us" as Savior, Redeemer, and hence as Exemplar). Just as the meaning of humanity is obscured when the cipher of original sin falls to the liberal, subjective pole or the conservative, objective pole, so the cipher of Christ as divine Savior of fallen, sinful humanity is obscured in the following ways. If the cipher of Christ becomes a mere sign, something *less* than a true cipher, we are left with an empty "ought," an ineffectual moralism that tells us how we should live, but fails to ground the moral imperative in anything beyond ourselves; so if we fail in the task, we are left hopeless, and if we succeed, we are left with no check on our tendency toward self-glorification. On the other hand, if the cipher of Christ is turned into a literal object of knowledge, and hence becomes something *more* than a true cipher, then all other dimensions of meaning within religious consciousness become subordinate to an all-pervasive soteriology, resulting typically in one of two distortions in either the political or individual sphere: moral complacency or moral obsessiveness *qua* legalism. In fact, it is not uncommon to find these extremes bound together in one ideology, as in the medieval Christian Church's combination of a corrupt papacy together with a policy of inquisition and severe punishment of heresy, or in the strikingly similar contemporary example of Islamic

³⁸ *Op.cit.*, p. 270.

fundamentalism, which justifies the breaking of all moral norms, including the killing of innocent children through terrorism, in the service of a supposedly purist interpretation of the tradition of Jihad. The extremes, when pressed, turn into the same groundlessness (our "black hole" metaphor) of empty, self-glorifying moralism. In this vein, Niebuhr comments in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* that "Religion draws the bow of life so taut that it either snaps the string (defeatism) or overshoots the mark (fanaticism and asceticism)."³⁹ The solution is to cultivate the tension that, ironically, is the essence of peace.

When viewed from the standpoint of politics and the collective self-transcending required to overcome our current technological peril, this groundlessness takes the form of fatalism on either side. On the left, we are given empty utopian fantasies, as in the social gospel of liberal Christianity or in Marxism, but no real hope to expect that a vision of collective human freedom will be actualized. The promise appears hollow when faced with the record of history. The result is a tragic vision of humanity, ending in nihilism and despair (a mood felt throughout Europe since the late nineteenth century and in America at least since the Vietnam era) – with little to help but the coping mechanisms of stoicism, cynicism, hedonism, *etc.* – once the harsh *Anstoß*, or "check," of reality finally shakes the sleepers awake from their Polyanic dreaming (unless, of course, they remain asleep in blissful ignorance until it is too late). On the right, however, as in radical Protestantism, excessive deference to the sovereignty of God and the hand of Providence in historical affairs can likewise rob humanity of a real hope for human flourishing in this life. The Christian cipher that transcends and holds in tension both of these extremes is the symbol of the kingdom of God, understood as already here, "within you," and yet to come, "from above." This is the dual-*parousia* of Christ, which reveals the ultimate Christian interpretation of being, in which cipher of *presence* is reconciled past and future, humanity and God, time and eternity, finitude and infinity, and fallenness and world peace. It is the reconciliation, the absolution, of all things within one cipher of the Absolute. The political problem of world peace, itself a universal concept, or cipher of totality, as raised by Jaspers, comes into fruitful dialogue with the cipher of the

kingdom of God at this point and will also return us to the question of education.

"World peace" and the "kingdom of God" on earth, are complementary philosophical and religious ciphers, the quasi-objects of philosophical faith and religious faith. Arendt, Jaspers, and Niebuhr would all agree that such a state is not realizable as any sort of finished product, a thing to be accomplished and from which we could then get about the business of other affairs. Rather, such ciphers direct the meaning of life itself and clarify its fundamental condition as always unfinished, imperfect, striving and failing, but transcending limits, always to find new ones. Also, such ciphers open humanity to a revelatory dimension of experience that provides hope for peace and an encompassing Reason to keep working together, despite the despair that should necessarily engulf us when we calculate the probabilities of destroying ourselves. These ciphers, by their inherent power to lift us out of the despair of ideological extremism and organize us in the direction of a reasonable policy of moderation, stimulate a realistic perspective concerning human existence in a world that continually falls into cycles of violence and consumption. Jaspers' middle position in politics has been called "conservative liberalism," or alternately, "cultural Republicanism," either of which suggests the attempt to forge a middle course between the left and the right.⁴⁰ In a similar vein, Niebuhr adopted the

⁴⁰ In his recent apologetic directed against the undervaluing of Jaspers' thought for addressing contemporary philosophical and political problems, Chris Thornhill astutely defines the tension between the left and right in Jaspers' political orientation of conservative liberalism: "The defining position in Jaspers' political ideas throughout the Adenauer era remains an essentially Kantian republicanism, which also contains Weberian elements of elite-democracy, and a transcendent(al) doctrine of cultural humanism. On the basis of these disparate liberal ideas, he insists repeatedly through the late 1940s and 1950s that the most pressing political objective is to protect what he identifies as the democratic-humanist specificity of the Western European cultural tradition from the anti-humanist influence of Soviet communism. The recurrent argument in the works of this period is therefore that the potentials for reasonable existence are always inherent in European culture; this tradition is 'a form of educational consciousness' which in certain variations 'runs through the whole of European history up until today.' Indeed Jaspers argues that the legitimacy of democracy as a political form resides largely in its ability to provide the only possible context for the concrete expression of human reason and human culture, as they are embodied in the Western tradition. The expression of humanity, reason and culture presupposes tolerance, absence of coercion, and the

³⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), p. 71.

designation "Christian realism" as a label for his attempt to navigate a middle course between the, (in his view *unrealistic*), pacifist tendencies of the liberal social gospel and the militaristic totalitarianism that threatened the twentieth century in the forms of communism and fascism, and continues to threaten the world in the form of terrorism, both conventional and nuclear. In the face of the destruction of humanity, hard practical choices must be made based on particular circumstances, including the call to war. The ciphers of world peace and the kingdom of God, when juxtaposed in a mutually revelatory hermeneutical circle, provide a transcendent source of light that suspends in tension encompassing Reason and divine revelation, providing us with a dual grounding principle of "love and justice"⁴¹ that makes possible transcending, "saving" judgments in the face of seemingly insurmountable individual and collective will to power. Niebuhr sums up the historical relation of justice to love in the following insightful passage:

[T]he Christian conception of the relation of historical justice to the love of the Kingdom of God is a dialectical one. Love is both the fulfillment and the negation of all achievements of justice in history. Or expressed from the opposite standpoint, the achievements of justice in history may rise in indeterminate degrees to find their fulfillment in a more perfect love and brotherhood; but each new level of fulfillment also contains elements which stand in contradiction to perfect love. There are therefore obligations to realize justice in indeterminate degrees; but none of the realizations can assure the serenity of perfect fulfillment.⁴²

Good education, always to be distinguished strongly from mere indoctrination, is one of the most important means of nurturing and cultivating the ciphers that lead us beyond ourselves and inspire us to

existence of areas of public discourse which are not absolutely regulated by technical imperatives. Democracy, he thus explains, is legitimized as an institutional system based on 'the promotion of reason in the common thinking and acting of a people and of peoples amongst themselves'" [Chris Thornhill, *Karl Jaspers: Politics and Metaphysics* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 179.

⁴¹ Many specific examples of Niebuhr's socio-political application of the dialectic of love and justice can be found in Reinhold Niebuhr, *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, D. B. Robertson ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957).

⁴² Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: Volume 2. Human Destiny* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), p. 246.

make difficult, sacrificial choices for the sake of fellow human beings and the preservation rather than destruction of the world. On the side of philosophy, the cultivation of ciphers of encompassing Reason inspire a love of humanity as part of an overarching love of the very structures of being, the way being manifests itself and provides open possibilities for repose, contentment, beauty, tranquility, and inspiration for individual and mutual creativity. However, whereas the ground of self-sacrificing love does not ascend through philosophy to absolute status as it can in religion, philosophical reflection nevertheless can serve to ground human respect for justice (as we see particularly in the legacy of Kantian thought). On the side of religion, the cultivation of ciphers of Transcendence proper inspire a love of humanity through archetypes of divine self-sacrifice, revealing the love of God for a fallen, sinful humanity, thereby inspiring us to love one another "as God first loved us" and to "take up our crosses" and sacrifice ourselves for our fellow human beings and for the sake of externalizing the kingdom of God that has already come and reigns within the recipient of grace. In neither case can education force an appropriation of ciphers; the result being groundless ideology. Rather, they must be preserved in a "conservative" model of education, as Arendt has argued, that nevertheless allows them to be brought forth in ever new practical situations to allow for a progressive transcending of the *status quo*. Tradition must therefore be preserved, but must not become a rigid fixation. Rather, Ricoeur's wise aphorism at the conclusion of *The Symbolism of Evil* - "the symbol gives rise to thought"⁴³ - ought always to orient the transition from fixed traditional metanarratives (ethnic myths, ecclesiastical dogmas, etc.) to the practical political sphere which demands a transcending of the special interests of particular cultural collectives such as those organized around particular myths or dogmas. On the side of religious observance, mention may be made of the significance of liturgy and traditional ritual reenactment for preserving the symbols of the past, so long as this preservation does not degenerate into empty recitation disconnected with the day to day lives of practitioners, a situation resulting in Nietzsche's identification of churches as the tombs of the dead God of Western society. In the realm of education, I have recommended

⁴³ See Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, Emerson Buchanan trans. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), pp. 347-57.

the classical trivium model precisely because its emphasis on historical knowledge (typically forfeited in the public schools for the sake of moralizing "social studies") promotes a preservation of the lessons of the past on a universal, cross-cultural scale toward the end of human cultivation in general, but also toward practical thinking in the present. And further, its emphasis on the interconnected theoretical and practical skills of logic and rhetoric (almost completely neglected in our current system, even at the college level) promotes a transition from mere knowledge acquisition, *i.e.*, preservation, to an actualization of new possibilities in light of the needs of collective humanity (the *vita activa*).

Conclusion

As the Democratic and Republican parties today become increasingly polarized, both ironically becoming the advocates of "big business" interests — on the right, the big business of corporate and military expansionism, and on the left, the big business of government expansionism through social programs, it is easy to become disillusioned by the lack of creative solutions on either side, or the ability of either party to identify the depth of the central problems of the age. And so we are tempted to withdraw from the public sphere, relegating the fundamental responsibilities of democratic life to someone else — perhaps "they" will take care of it. But the imperative to transcend the ideological fixations of liberalism and conservatism does not necessarily imply that we should seek to opt out of the fray by taking refuge in some extreme form of libertarianism. Libertarian alternatives that seek a simple retreat from the left and right ideologies of mass society can indeed provide a limited chance of acquiring more authentic possibilities of genuine community, places where human beings meet each other face to face with mutual claims of responsibility. But they can also become escapist refuges that likewise rely on "someone else" to solve the big problems of global society, such as the threat of nuclear terrorism. Thus, they tend to appear as romantic, stoic, or perhaps even parasitic enclaves—odd lumps on the flattened, leveled off world where everyone becomes the Same sort of impersonal working animal. We have considered this "sameness" at either extreme as the essence of the quasi-totalitarian spirit now driving the economic engine of globalization and seeking to crush the freedom of the human spirit by retarding its growth

in the earliest stages of our educational system. And so, although it does not provide a simple solution (there is no *simple* solution, and this is precisely the illusion of libertarianism), so long as it does not turn into escapism, the libertarian model provides an important point of negation to the dialectic of left and right ideologies, an orientation point of authentic communal spirit, impracticable as an easy fix to the clash of the dominant ideologies, but nevertheless a crucial point of reference for attaining pockets of authenticity within a global network that, we may presume, will always be too big to become anything more than an impersonal, functional network. But perhaps by seeking out such places of genuine community, authentic substructures within the necessarily inauthentic global totality, we can find opportunities to discover and nurture the genuine humanity within ourselves and our "neighbors" as a possible ground for engaging humanity on a universal, global scale — which we must do if there is to be any hope for "saving" the world.