



Existenz

Volume 18, No 2, Fall 2023

ISSN 1932-1066

Transcending Tribalism

Hugh F. Kelly

Brooklyn, New York

hughkelly@hotmail.com

Abstract: Tribalism is perhaps the most salient feature of the contemporary social landscape in the United States, affecting the American sense of community, sense of self, and even sense of truth. Political factionalism dates back to the United States' earliest days, even warranting a warning from George Washington against political factions. Often, our divisions stem from competing understandings of what liberty and freedom mean, disagreements which already surfaced in the colonial era. Karl Jaspers and Hannah Arendt both challenge one to think and act beyond a simplified binary either/or discourse in politics, drawing upon their personal experiences in twentieth-century National Socialist Europe, and Arendt's witnessing of racism in the United States. Rather than accepting a kind of tribalism which insists on dominance regarding one's views, their writings present a challenge to transcend this tendency. Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural address crystallizes such a transcending political vision. I argue that these historical examples still have value today.

Keywords: Arendt, Hannah; Jaspers, Karl; Lincoln, Abraham; Fischer, David Hackett; liberty; factionalism; transcendence; post-truth; politics; race; National Socialist era.

Introduction

Political factionalism is nothing new for the United States of America. Indeed, it is as old as the nation itself and in many ways even older. Not only did George Washington need to warn against political factions in his Farewell Address upon stepping down from the presidency, but also the country's founding documents including the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution needed to be forged on the anvil of compromise. For example, Jill Lapore argues that

the American Experiment rests on three political ideas... political equality, natural rights, and the sovereignty of the people,¹

and she refers to Thomas Jefferson who in a draft of the Declaration of Independence holds "these truths to be sacred & undeniable." For nearly two hundred fifty years the American Experiment has been tested by debate and division, most notably in the events surrounding the Civil War (both the ones before and the ones after) yet also in numerous other deeply felt disputes over the centuries.

Jefferson's ringing assertion,

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness,²

seems to hold primacy of place in the American creed.

¹ Jill Lapore, *These Truths: A History of the United States*, New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company 2018, p. xiv.

² Declaration of Independence, <https://declaration.fas.harvard.edu/resources/text>.

However, in the nascent United States the Constitutional Convention accepted the condition of slavery through its three-fifths compromise. David Hackett Fischer describes the opposition in the southern States against the Declaration, for example when a later governor of South Carolina, James Hammond, explicitly diverged from Jefferson's position:

I repudiate, as ridiculously absurd, that much lauded but nowhere accredited dogma of Mr. Jefferson, that "all men are created equal."³

Among the myriad questions surrounding this topic, one stands out; namely, how can a truth held to be self-evident to one party be not only denied but dismissed out of hand by another? This epistemic conundrum has been very much in the foreground for the past half-decade or more in America's tribal politics. This has brought to the fore a chasm of both theory and practice, which some regard as cataclysmic to the extent of being irreconcilable.

Thoughts on Politics and Truth from Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers

In an effort to frame the conversation, a signal characteristic compromising the discourse regarding truth, both in the general population and at universities, has been the ascendancy of the concept "post-truth."

Vittorio Bufacchi's paper on post-truth turns to an influential essay by Hannah Arendt to elucidate the recurrent collision between the truth and political discourse. Bufacchi argues that Arendt's treatment of "modern political lies" anticipated post-truth as a working category. However, she "didn't have that terminology at her disposal in the 1960s."⁴

It is well worth probing Arendt's thoughts on this matter, as her writing still has the capacity to surprise the reader, sometimes uncomfortably so. Thus, one may be startled to find Arendt in apparent agreement with South Carolina governor James Hammond in contravening the opening line of the Declaration of Independence. Arendt claims that Jefferson posits

"truths to be self-evident," as he wishes that statement to serve as an axiom "beyond dispute and argument," but his very phrasing that the Framers held this position meant that it stood "in need of agreement and consent," that equality "is a matter of opinion" (δοξα) and must be so if it is to be politically relevant.⁵ In Arendt's frame of reference, this is a vital distinction since it places the claim outside the realm of factual truth—which is coercive—and into the realm of opinion. She writes about claims of this nature:

Their validity depends upon free agreement and consent; they are arrived at by discursive, representative thinking, and they are communicated by means of persuasion and dissuasion. [TP 247]

A similar interpretation is offered by James Morone who notes that Abraham Lincoln, in the Gettysburg Address, does not ground the Declaration on a foundation of self-evidence. Instead, he argues the United States was

conceived in liberty and dedicated to the *proposition* that all men are created equal.⁶

Marone thus sees Lincoln as locating these principles in the domain of reason, rather than in the one of observable fact.

To be clear, Arendt's distinction does not reflect a judgment holding that Jefferson's statement was valueless, much less in error. Still less might one impute to Arendt agreeing with the overtly racist position held by Governor Hammond. Rather what she seeks is clarity relating to a matter profoundly relevant to today's tribal disputes: the recurrent tendency of those in the public eye, when caught in an untruth, to assert an untrammelled right to their opinion:

The blurring of the dividing line between factual truth and opinion belongs among the many forms that lying can assume. [TP 250]

Arendt continues her line of thought:

our ability to lie—but not necessarily our ability to tell the truth—belongs among the few obvious,

³ David Hackett Fischer, *Liberty and Freedom: A visual History of America's Founding Ideas*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2005, p. 287.

⁴ Vittorio Bufacchi, "Truth, Lies, and Tweets: A Consensus Theory of Post-Truth," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 47/3 (March 2021), 347-361, here p. 350.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, New York, NY: The Viking Press 1968, pp. 227-64, here p. 246. [Henceforth cited as TP]

⁶ James A. Morone, *Republic of Wrath: How American Politics Turned Tribal, from George Washington to Donald Trump*, New York, NY: Basic Books 2020, pp. 149-50.

demonstrable data that confirm human freedom. That we can change the circumstances under which we live at all is because we are relatively free from them, and it is this freedom that is abused and perverted through mendacity. If it is the well-nigh irresistible temptation of the professional historian to fall into the trap of necessity and implicitly deny freedom of action, it is the almost equally irresistible temptation of the professional politician to overestimate the possibilities of this freedom and implicitly condone the lying denial, or distortion of facts.

...Only where a community has embarked upon organized lying on principle, and not only with respect to particulars, can truthfulness as such, unsupported by the distorting forces of power and interest, become a political factor of the first order. [TP 250-1]

Such a blurred line has, of course, long rankled many a thoughtful person, even within the political sphere. For example, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, an unusually subtle politician, argued four principal points:

First, get your facts straight. Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts. Second, decide to live with the facts. Third, resolve to surmount them. Because, fourth, what is at stake is our capacity to govern.⁷

The first point addresses the importance of upholding evidence in discourse; the second point establishes facts as the basis for a common ground; the third point aligns with Jaspers' and Arendt's description of truth-tellers as ones who think indefatigably and go beyond mere pedantry; the fourth point pragmatically calls upon the key goal in any effort to understand and to act.

Far from sealing off opinion from fact, I believe that both Moynihan and Arendt encompass them in a greater whole, while providing space for varying—even opposed—viewpoints, provided they remain grounded in commonly accessible experience. The dialogue arising from divergent viewpoints requires not only a commitment to the limiting (that is, coercive) acknowledgment of a fact but also to an understanding of the dynamic of human thought and action. This entails moving beyond an understanding of truth that is compelling (that is, obligating mental assent) and instead utilizing truth as a springboard for the life of the mind, and for the body politic.

⁷ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "More Than Social Security Was at Stake," *Washington Post*, January 18, 1983, p. A17.

Thinking Radically: A Return to Our American Roots

Disputation is not only integral to politics but also to thought itself. Sean Wilentz argues that partisan disputation has not arrested American development but has provided the energy driving it forward. The argument runs in his words:

We deplore partisanship. We want government conducted in a lofty manner, without adversarial confrontation and chaos. But more than two hundred years of anti-partisanship has produced nothing... all of the great American social legislation, from the Progressive Era to the New Deal to the Great Society, has been achieved by and through the political parties.⁸

A too-easy glossing over of differences betrays the search for truth that may lie beyond obvious and tangible mere facts. Discourse does not accord identical value to contrary opinions, still less the acceptance of assertions that fly in the face of verifiable evidence. Yet, at the same time, the discipline of thinking requires attention to the views of others, precisely because those views consider phenomena from a standpoint other than one's own. Such views can, and should, enlarge one's perspective. The challenge of other viewpoints sharpens our acuity by insisting on consistency in one's thought processes. Arendt often cites Socrates' self-critical admonition in this context:

It would be better for me that my lyre or a chorus I directed should be out of tune and loud with discord, and that multitudes of men should disagree with me rather than that I, *being one*, should be out of harmony with myself and contradict me (*Gorgias*, 482c).⁹

Arendt's dissertation advisor and life-long intellectual and spiritual colleague, Karl Jaspers, stressed the dialogical path toward truth. Here is what Jaspers writes in Volume I of *The Great Philosophers*:

Conversation, dialogue, is necessary for the truth itself, which by its very nature opens up to an individual only in dialogue with another individual. To achieve clarity Socrates needed men, and he was convinced

⁸ Sean Wilentz, *The Politicians & the Egalitarians: The Hidden History of American Politics*, New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company 2016, pp. xiii-xiv.

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: One / Thinking*, New York, NY: Harcourt 1977, p. 181. [Henceforth cited as LM1]

that they needed him: above all, the young men. Socrates wanted to educate.

What he meant by education was not some casual operation that the knower performs on the unknowing, but the element in which men, communicating with each other, come to themselves, in which the truth opens up to them. The young men helped him when he wanted to help them. He taught them to discover the difficulties of the seemingly self-evident; he confused them, forced them to think, to search, to inquire over and over again, and not to sidestep the answer, and this they could bear because they were convinced that truth is what joins men together.

...The untruth of the present state of affairs, regardless of whether the form of government is democratic or aristocratic or tyrannical, cannot be remedied by great political actions. No improvement is possible unless the individual is educated by educating himself, unless his hidden being is awakened to reality through an insight which is at the same time inner action, a knowledge which is at the same time virtue. He who becomes a true man becomes a true citizen.¹⁰

When Jaspers refers to an "untruth of the present state of affairs," he has in mind the conditions of Europe and the world in the 1950s, yet this situation applies perhaps even more so now in the twenty-first century. One might object that shifting the time and place of this discussion to Athens, circa 425 BCE, takes the reader too far afield in considering the urgent contemporary nature of this topic. Not so. Both Arendt and Jaspers were intimately, even passionately, engaged in the politics of their era and such engagement is equally relevant to understanding today's tribalism. They both refused to take an unhistorical stance in their thinking, believing that the tradition of the West was a living lineage. Furthermore, philosophy itself should be thought of as a fully human enterprise and therefore embedded in the world of experience, spanning across time. Rather than viewing a return to the West's political roots as an exercise in abstraction, Arendt and Jaspers were intensely cognizant of the costs of detaching from those roots, costs that each of them were intimately familiar with from the experience of the ascendancy of the Nazi regime in Germany. Jaspers wrote:

A glance at the history of mankind leads us...into the mystery of our humanity.¹¹

By 1947 Jaspers had published his book *Die Schuldfrage*, in which he specifically addressed the challenges of the Nazi era in Germany for politics and for philosophy.¹² In candid, unsparing language—that sparked years of sometimes bitter controversy—Jaspers examined in a discriminating way the levels of guilt: criminal, political, moral, and metaphysical. No wonder many readers took offense! But Jaspers was insistent that

Political liberty begins with the majority of individuals in a people feeling jointly liable for the politics of their community...It begins when [the individual] knows, rather, that politics looks in the concrete world for the negotiable path of each day, guided by the ideal of human existence as liberty. In short: without purification of the soul there is no political liberty. [QG 121]

Arendt's correspondence with Jaspers was interrupted by World War II, but resumed intensively in 1946 and thereafter. While Jaspers was reflecting on a collective guilt of Germans, Arendt took aim at the phenomenon of totalitarianism, with particular attention to the recurrent influence that antisemitism played in the rise of totalitarian regimes in Western Europe. She underscored the deliberate ideology of racism in these regimes:

It goes without saying that the totalitarian regimes, where the police had risen to the peak of power, were especially eager to consolidate this power through the domination over vast groups of people, who, regardless of any offenses committed by individuals, found themselves anyway beyond the pale of the law.¹³

Perhaps her own experience in Germany sharpened Arendt's sensitivity to a racism she believed to have found in America, which Jaspers had named "lucky America," when she writes:

There really is such a thing as freedom here and a

¹⁰ Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers: The Foundations*, transl. Ralph Mannheim, New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World 1962, pp. 16-7.

¹¹ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, transl. Michael Bullock, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1953, p. xiii.

¹² Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, transl. E. B. Ashton, New York, NY: Capricorn Books 1961, p. 28. [Henceforth cited as QG]

¹³ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & Company 1979, p. 288. [Henceforth cited as OT]

strong feeling among many people that one cannot live without freedom. The republic is not a vapid illusion, and the fact that there is no national state and no truly national tradition creates an atmosphere of freedom or at least one not pervaded by fanaticism.

And yet, Arendt cautions:

The fundamental contradiction in this country is the coexistence of political freedom and social oppression.¹⁴

The development of Arendt's political thought in America was not without its controversies. Her determination to keep her thinking engaged with politics, however daring, embroiled her in controversy from time to time. The uproar over her diagnosis of the banality of evil in writing about the trial of Adolf Eichmann is probably the most notable of these instances.¹⁵ Eichmann was not a monster in Arendt's eyes, but a guilty functionary who was more conformist than psychopathic. For those seeking the show trial of a powerful villain, Arendt's more measured evaluations of Eichmann's deeds lit a bonfire of opposition.

More pertinent to the scope of this essay on tribalism, however, is one of Arendt's earlier publications that she mentions in a letter to Gertrude Jaspers:

But something that will perhaps give your husband pleasure: I told him about the big squabble I had here last year over my heretical views on the Negro question and equality. I said, I think, that none of my American friends had agreed with me and that very many of them were really angry. Now out of the blue an American foundation has given me an "award"...of \$300 for this very article. Presumably because it was so unpopular! That is very typical of this country.¹⁶

Arendt refers here to her no-less-controversial essay

"Reflections on Little Rock,"¹⁷ based on the notorious desegregation of Little Rock, Arkansas Central High School, which saw the state's governor mobilize the National Guard to prevent nine black students from entering the school in September 1957, years after school segregation had been deemed unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, KS. President Dwight D. Eisenhower then federalized the Guard—taking it out of the governor's control—and sent one thousand regular army troops into Little Rock to enforce the school integration effort.

Arendt's thinking ran afoul of two treacherous political pitfalls. First, she sought to draw her philosophical arguments—with their stress on mental clarity—too strictly in an arena where both emotional power and ethical ambiguity exerted considerable force. Second, she too facetly applied her experiences in Germany to differing conditions in the United States while overstating the American constitutional protections as applied in fact, seeing issues of legal theory (such as checks and balances) when significant asymmetry existed as to the application of the rule of law.

As far as the first pitfall is concerned, Arendt sought to delineate three conceptually separate spheres: the political, the social, and the private. While mentally separable, those spheres are at least substantially overlapping in lived experience. Being insensitive to this interpenetration I consider to be a shortcoming in Arendt's analysis, as both her initial critics and later on even a largely sympathetic commentator, namely Richard Bernstein, candidly objected.¹⁸ In framing her Little Rock commentary, Arendt sought to safeguard individuals—concentrating on children and families—against an incursion of government power, especially in the government's monopoly on the legitimate use of force. She further sought refuge in a kind of subsidiarity principle, looking to both the explicit Constitutional stipulation, in the Bill of Rights 10th Amendment that

the powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, "29 January 1946 letter to Karl Jaspers," in *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers: Correspondence 1926-1969*, transl. Robert and Rita Kimber, eds. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace & Co 1992, pp. 28-33, here pp. 28, 30.

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York, NY: Penguin Publishing Group, 1963.

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, "3 January 1960 letter to Gertrud Jaspers," in *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers: Correspondence 1926-1969*, transl. Robert and Rita Kimber, eds. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace & Co 1992, pp. 384-6, here p. 386.

¹⁷ Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn, New York, NY: Schocken Books 2003, pp. 193-213. [Henceforth cited as LR]

¹⁸ Richard J. Bernstein, *Why Read Hannah Arendt Now*, Medford, MA: Polity Press 2018, pp. 47-58.

reserved to the States respectively, or to the people¹⁹

and that

the power structure of this country rests on the principle of division of power and on the conviction that the body politic as a whole is strengthened by the division of power. [LR 209]

One might have anticipated that Arendt would have been inoculated against most potential rationalizations of racism by her rather thorough consideration of its impacts in Germany in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But, sadly, no. In her earlier work, Arendt had had this to say:

German intellectuals, though they hardly promoted a political fight for the middle classes to which they belonged, fought an embittered and, unfortunately, highly successful battle for social status...Liberal writers soon boasted of "true nobility" as opposed to the shabby titles of Baron or others which could be given and taken away, and asserted, by implication, that their natural privileges, like "force or genius," could not be retraced to any human deed.

The discriminatory point of this new social concept was immediately affirmed. During the long period of mere social antisemitism, which introduced and prepared the discovery of Jew-hating as a political weapon, it was the lack of "innate personality," the innate lack of tact, the innate lack of productivity... which separated the behavior of his Jewish colleague from that of the average businessman.

...it was a consequence of bourgeois definitions that during the course of the nineteenth century they avoided "*mesalliances*" more carefully than ever before.

This insistence on common tribal origin as an essential of nationhood, formulated by German nationalists during and after the war of 1814, and the emphasis laid by the romantics on the innate personality and natural nobility prepared the way intellectually for race-thinking in Germany. [OT 169-70]

Somehow, however, this analysis was elided in Arendt's Little Rock essay in favor of a treatment of American racism that focused on a rather simplistic and hierarchical political approach that insisted on separating legal from social, and indeed moral, context. Such a shortcoming rarely appears in Arendt's voluminous writings. But it is present here. However, and importantly, the story does not end with the publication of her Little Rock essay.

¹⁹ <https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/amendment-10/>.

Now to the second shortcoming in Arendt's Little Rock discussion. If the weaknesses just discussed arose from a too-academic evaluation of the school integration efforts—a kind of philosophical kidnapping of experience into detached political theory—Arendt's troubles were intensified by her understandable but in my assessment flawed determination to establish some distance between the comparison of Blacks in the Jim Crow South and Jews subjected to the atrocities of the Nazi regime.

No doubt, Arendt had a strong aversion to the tendency to label any brutal authoritarianism an echo of Hitler's regime. There is much value in that aversion. Arendt had long appreciated that the antisemitism that she saw and experienced in America was different in kind as well as in degree from that which infected Germany and Europe more broadly before, during, and even after the war years. As she wrote to Jaspers in 1946,

In an a-national republic like the United States, in which nationality and state are not identical...so-called anti-Semitism...is purely social, and the same people who wouldn't dream of sharing the same hotel with Jews would be astonished and outraged if their fellow citizens who happened to be Jews were disenfranchised.²⁰

Here Arendt apparently had in mind the 1935 Nuremberg laws that excluded Jews from Reich citizenship and forbade Jewish/Aryan miscegenation, intensifying restrictive quotas on Jewish enrollment in public schools and universities—but she failed to observe the close parallels with the Jim Crow South. Arendt did call the anti-miscegenation laws of the South, which remained on the books until the 1967 United States Supreme Court decision *Loving v. Virginia*, the most outrageous violation of "an elementary human right" (LR 203). Nevertheless, she seemed to credit, more than was justifiable, the distinction between regional differences in the United States and the national polity.

The United States is not a nation-state in the European sense and never was. The principle of its political structure is, and always has been, independent of a homogeneous population and of a common past. This

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, "30 June 1947 letter to Karl Jaspers," in *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers: Correspondence 1926-1969*, transl. Robert and Rita Kimber, eds. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace & Co 1992, pp. 89-92, here p. 90.

is somewhat less true of the South, whose population is more homogeneous and more rooted in the past than that of any other part of the country. [LR 199]

That Arendt was able to transcend the presuppositions of her conceptual scheme of distinct political, social, and private spheres is a testimony to her commitment to thinking in the tradition of Socrates, where opinions are provisional and subject to sustained inquiry. This process of thoughtful transcendence was accomplished in no small measure by her continued dialogue with her mentor, Jaspers. The loving struggle of existential communication constitutes a dynamic whereby, if I may so put it, there is a relationship that is co-creative of *Existenz*.

Arendt was arguably viewing the political and social dimensions of America's racial dilemma as overlapping in a kind of Venn diagram. Perhaps a consideration of the private sphere might also find a place in such a Venn diagram, not in a static sense of defined domains but in the active sense that, as both Jaspers and Arendt appreciated, pulses through all human experience.

Transcending and Freedom

In the section "The Modes of Transcending as a Structural Principal," Jaspers writes:

Transcending is not in existence as a given fact, but as a chance of freedom. Human existence is one in which possible *Existenz* appears to itself. Man does not only exist; he can transcend, or he can refrain from transcending.²¹

Those who have experienced a fundamental threat to their freedom, as both Jaspers and Arendt did in the Nazi era, had ample cause to reflect upon the centrality of freedom to human beings. For Arendt, totalitarian power seeks the reduction of each person

to a never-changing identity of reactions, so that each of these bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other. [OT 438]

Total domination seeks to erase individual human differentiation through indoctrination and terror, and this erasure requires such control that it comes down to treating each person as a mere thing, and the

psyche that Jaspers explored in such depth would be nothing more than the bundle of reactions exhibited, for example, by Pavlov's dog.

Liberty and freedom have been central to political discourse throughout the United States' history. For example, Fischer traces a variety of historical usages of these key terms to English folkways transplanted to America before the nation's founding.²² European settlement, and even the English colonization, were not univocal events. The migrations that established the Virginia, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania plantations and later populated the Appalachian region brought a profoundly different conception of liberty. Fischer argues that those embedded ideas live today, and account for the seemingly intractable divisions in political stances across regions that are at the core of contemporary American tribalism.

As an illustration of this Fischer writes about the Puritan colonies of New England that grounded their public life on a principle called ordered liberty. Liberty was collective: it pertained to the community and was the foundation for imposing restraint on individuals if such restraint was consistent with common law. Individuals might be granted certain exemptions which were, in turn, named liberties. The extent of such liberties helped describe a social order, with all men (that is, males) possessing some basic freedoms, free men possessing a wider range of legitimate action, and the class of gentlemen being granted a still more expansive capacity of liberty. The community came first in priority, and only then the individual according to his status. Restraint was the fundamental order, which admitted of particular exceptions. There was, however, a critical freedom that was zealously coveted and politically safeguarded: liberty of conscience, or soul liberty, specifically meaning freedom to serve God in this world. In the Puritan way, this was quite narrowly defined as freedom to exercise the true faith, namely, practicing conformity to a rigorous Calvinist orthodoxy. Lastly, the New Englanders recognized a negatively defined 'freedom from' as a social norm, a concept to be articulated centuries later by Franklin D. Roosevelt as freedom from want and freedom from fear. The community had an obligation to liberate the poor from the tyranny of circumstances as a cornerstone of ordered liberty that included the

²¹ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy, Volume 1*, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press 1969, p. 77. [Henceforth cited as P1]

²² David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press 1989, pp. 199-205, 815. [Henceforth cited as AS]

four libertarian ideas – collective liberty, individual liberties, soul liberty and freedom from the tyranny of circumstance. [AS 205]

The idea of an order of liberties also shaped the polity of the Virginia colony, yet in this instance that order was in keeping with a hierarchy of status linked to the formal aristocratic structure of the mother country. The New England order, by contrast, arose from a dissident Calvinist faith that stood against the established Anglican religion with the monarch as its titular head. Fischer elaborates upon the Virginian idea of hegemonic liberty (AS 410-8). Whereas the New England concept viewed the community as the fundamental origin of liberties, Virginians considered freedom in terms of an expression of the power to rule, an inherently hierarchical attribute that had nothing to do with equality. John Randolph of Roanoke, who served in Congress for over three decades, allegedly communicated to Nathan Loughborough: "I am an aristocrat; I love liberty, I hate equality."²³ Fischer demonstrates in a quote from one of Edmund Burke's speeches regarding the southern colonies how it can be rather easy to see how such a conception of liberty could be entirely comfortable with race slavery:

in Virginia and the Carolinas, they have a vast multitude of slaves. Where this is the case in any part of the world, those who are free are by far the most proud and jealous of their freedom...In such a people, the haughtiness of domination combines with the spirit of freedom, fortifies it, and renders it invincible. [AS 414]

Therefore, freedom, then, was a mark of rank and intimately associated with power.

Positioned between Virginia and Massachusetts, the Quaker William Penn established a very different kind of colony, grounded in the idea of reciprocal liberty. That concept is drawn from a biblical concept inscribed on the Liberty Bell commissioned in celebration of the 50th anniversary of Penn's 1701 Charter of Privileges. Fischer explains that the inscription is a short form of Leviticus 25:10, the mandate for a Jubilee Year, and he quotes the full biblical text from the King James version,

Ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof; and ye shall return every man unto his possessions,

and ye shall return every man unto his family. [AS 595]

In this, the Quakers enshrined in the bell an anti-slavery idea that was more than an undertone, but a reciprocal liberty of universal reach. Penn specifically saw freedom of conscience as a moral absolute and being of higher priority than adherence to any authority, civic or religious. Nevertheless, Quaker liberty was not anarchic, and politically hewed to the rights of property, trial by jury, equitable taxation, and representative rule. Fischer summarizes the section "The Quaker Idea of Reciprocal Liberty" as follows:

Quakers genuinely believed that every liberty demanded for oneself should also be extended to others. [AS 603]

Puritan ordered liberty, Anglican hegemonic liberty, and Quaker reciprocal liberty placed the individual in a communitarian context. Not so the so-called natural liberty embraced by immigrants from England's northern borderlands, who settled along the spine of the Appalachian Mountains. While labels are often more obscuring than revealing, Fischer does not hesitate to call the spirit of backcountry liberty anarchic, namely, as being "without established government or the rule of law" (AS 639). Indeed, in the revolutionary generation, it was Patrick Henry, of "give me liberty or give me death"-fame, who was the avatar of natural liberty. The emphasis is on the individual – the pronoun "me" – on a non-accidental primacy of the independent and singular agent.

When the time came to consider the post-revolutionary polity at the Constitutional Convention, Henry opposed the new arrangement centralizing the government as a correction to the tenuous linkages of the Articles of Confederation, a compact between the nascent states drafted and ratified during the war years and serving as a proto-constitution until 1788. Patrick Henry, along with fellow Virginian George Mason, led the Anti-Federalists in declining to sign the Constitution

primarily on the grounds that strong government of any sort was hostile to liberty. [AS 780]

This group achieved a significant victory in seeing to it that a Bill of Rights was annexed to the original document, guaranteeing personal rights and freedoms and establishing limitations on government power. It is of great significance that the debate between the anti-Federalists (who also included Samuel Adams, George Clinton, and Richard Henry Lee) and Federalists led

²³ William Cabell Bruce, *John Randolph of Roanoke 1773-1833: A Biography Based Largely on New Material, Volume II*, New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons 1922, p. 203.

by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay and strongly supported by George Washington was not only spirited, but led to the highly workable system of checks and balances in government and the critical adaptability to respond to change by way of incorporating the process of amendment. Yet Fischer observes that

This idea of natural liberty was not a reciprocal idea. It did not recognize the right of dissent or disagreement. Deviance from cultural norms was rarely tolerated; opposition was suppressed by force. [AS 781]

Arendt greatly admired the foundation that was laid by America's revolutionary generation and contrasted it, favorably, in her book *On Revolution* with the ideology that drove the French Revolution that followed in 1789. While it was impossible for her to think of the French Revolution without examining the Reign of Terror's purging of a social class in the name of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. She applauds America's revolutionary generation, in first overthrowing colonialism and then working out new rules of self-government, and resisting the temptation to suppress dissidents and impose uniformity of political thought and social homogeneity. Arendt strikingly puts it this way:

In distinction to strength, which is the gift and the possession of every man in his isolation against all other men, power comes into being only if and when men join themselves together for the purpose of action, and it will disappear when, for whatever reason, they disperse and desert one another...the constituting, founding, and world-building capacities of man concern always not so much ourselves and our own time on earth as our "successor," and "posterities." The grammar of action: that action is the only human faculty that demands a plurality of men; and the syntax of power: that power is the only human attribute which applies solely to the worldly in-between space by which men are mutually related, combine in an act of foundation by virtue of the making and keeping of promises, which, in the realm of politics, may well be the highest human faculty.²⁴

Thus, for Arendt, the critical step involved bringing the American Revolution beyond the act of liberating (freedom from the oppressor) to the act of founding (freedom to endow liberty to posterity). For the members of the Continental Congress in

1776, independence was a commitment of "our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor" to success in breaking the shackles of the colonizer, as specified in the Declaration of Independence's bill of grievances justifying an act of political rupture. Arendt illustrates this situation with a quote from John Adams (OR 142):

Chimera! But neither Morals, nor Riches, nor discipline of Armies, nor all these together, will do without a Constitution.²⁵

Adams had written these words onto page 23 of his copy of Gabriel Bonnot de Mably's 1777 book *De la législation, ou, Principes des loix*.

Freedom, in any practical sense, depends upon the ability of a polity to sustain human liberty. Hence Arendt devotes much attention to the Founders' vision that America was establishing *novus ordo saeculorum* a new order of the ages. She reaches back to Virgil's account of the founding of Rome and contrasts it to the United States founding ideas:

when the Americans decided to vary Virgil's line from *magnus ordo saeculorum* to *novus ordo saeculorum*, they had admitted that it was no longer a matter of founding "Rome anew" but of founding a "new Rome," that the thread of continuity which bound Occidental politics back to the foundation of the eternal city...was broken and could not be renewed. [OR 212]

Hence, the revolution was not merely a political rejection but a step into the future. Arendt writes:

Freedom is no more the automatic result of liberation than the new beginning is the automatic consequence of the end. [OR 205]

Neither Arendt nor Jaspers could ever be considered a Romantic (in the cultural sense). Their life experiences would negate any comfortable naiveté. Both fully recognized that freedom and limits were not antonyms in human living, but complements existing in tension. If actions are not dictated by necessity (as are objects and processes in the material world), neither are free choices irrational eruptions in the historical order. In his book *Philosophy* Jaspers writes,

Every existential choice I make becomes definite, an

²⁴ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, London, UK: Penguin Books 1990, p. 175. [Henceforth cited as OR]

²⁵ Zoltán Haraszti, "John Adams on the Abbé de Mably: His Comments on 'The Legislation or the Principles of Laws' Now First Published," *More Books: The Bulletin of the Boston Public Library* VIII/4 (April 1933), pp. 125-145, here p. 135.

ever-singular but irreversible performance...What binds me now is not the empirical reality which my actions made the way it is; what binds me is the inner, self-creating step I took at the moment of choice. I became the way I willed myself to be.²⁶

Jaspers, and Arendt after him, can therefore be seen to dissent from all four of the above-mentioned senses of liberty described by Fisher as shaping the American consciousness at the time of the Founding, and persisting even until today. Debates about substantively different views regarding liberty at the time of the writing of the Constitution in my assessment effectively voids any univocally considered originalism when applying the thoughts of the Founders to contemporary problems, as it is argued, for instance, in recent Supreme Court decisions. The Founders embedded compromise into the body of the 1789 Constitution, then immediately shaded its provisions in the Bill of Rights drafted by Madison and ratified by the States in 1791.

Against the concept that liberties are inherently circumscribed by particular social contexts (as in Virginia, New England, and Pennsylvania), Jaspers and Arendt ground liberty in the power of the human person to bring something new into the world. Yet against the anarchic "me" of the frontier individualists, they understand that absolute freedom is a contradiction in terms. Jaspers writes:

In each new choice I face this necessity, this binding effect of my own historic ground. And it brings forth a deeper necessity: the one that lies in the feeling of "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise," as Luther put it—in other words, in the feeling that "I must." It is with this feeling that Existenz makes its most original decisions about freedom. [P2 171]

Here is where Jaspers, plumbing the depth of the human being (*Existenz*), considers freedom on a very different plane than that of political science or history. The "I must" implies an inner necessity — not a free-floating choice. There is an understanding that the "I will" of action is creative for it takes the risk of commitment, as the signers who pledged their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor fully understood. Arendt, in her reflection on creative action, clearly concurs. Here is how Jaspers encapsulates his reflection:

²⁶ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy, Volume 2*, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press 1969, p. 171. [Henceforth cited as P2]

Hence the risk of total commitment at high points of decision; hence the impossibility of coming to a decision from outside myself, by way of reasons; and hence, on the other hand, the profound certainty of an original sense of Existenz in making the decision. [P2 171]

The Founders consciously undertook their commitment to each other and to posterity, a commitment that future generations were to share. As Lincoln declared at Gettysburg, the founding generation "brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in Liberty" an act that was "a new birth of Freedom." Starkly, Lincoln reminded his listeners — and the present generation — that

It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us, that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion, that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.²⁷

The Great Task Before Us Today

Neither Jaspers nor Arendt would rest satisfied with a backward look, had they been confronted with the contemporary conditions in the United States of the 2020s. The breakdown of communication under the circumstances of political tribalism would be abhorrent to them. Each one of them accepted the responsibility of thoughtfully speaking out as citizens on exigent political matters. As Jaspers said,

We must rid ourselves of the idea that philosophical activity as such is the affair of professors. It would seem to be the affair of man, under all conditions and circumstances, of the slave as of the ruler.²⁸

Both of them were persons of principle, yet they were not absolutists. Each one recognized that the truth emerges in dialogue. What pertains to one's interior dialogue manifestly applies also to interpersonal

²⁷ Abraham Lincoln, *Gettysburg Address delivered at Gettysburg Pa. Nov. 19th*, . n. p. n. d., Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.24404500/?st=text>.

²⁸ Karl Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom: An Introduction to Philosophy*, transl. Ralph Mannheim, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1954, p. 134.

dialogue. Dialogue requires open-mindedness, listening, and implicit partnership that occurs in a community.

Political tribalism ruptures that partnership in a community. Hence, such a partnership must be restored by transcending differences in beliefs—even while remaining faithful to one's principles. Jaspers and Arendt shared an admiration for St. Augustine whose intellectual and spiritual journey involved an exploration into and eventual renunciation of Manichaeism. Notably, Augustine was put off by the Manichaean bishop Faustus' unwillingness to enter into public discussion about difficult questions and believed that this reluctance betrayed a weak foundation to the doctrines. Such anti-Manichaeism may be pertinent today when political discourse slides into assertions and accusations of fundamental and irreconcilable good and evil, both from the political Right and the Left.

Transcending ideological differences requires the humble skills of compromise and intellectual tolerance. This does not entail being unprincipled. Yet it does require one to recognize that no one grasps the truth as a sole possession, univocal and unalterable. Both Jaspers and Arendt read Kant closely and exhaustively. They understood, and taught, that

human beings can be united in reason and, through reason, in that love which generates the power to resist all ruin—that very fact sets limits on reason...You have shown by your practice in your life that activity, reconstruction, reversal can still be carried out as long as destruction is not total.²⁹

Reason and the limits of reason can be named as the foundation upon which transcending rises, and the horizon toward which *Existenz* may soar.

Thus arises the need for loving struggle. Humans do not, and cannot, possess the truth as sealed-off individuals. Arendt argues, "thinking beings have an urge to speak, speaking beings have an urge to think." Elaborating, she writes

It is not because man is a thinking being but because he exists only in the plural that his reason, too, wants communication and is likely to go astray if deprived of it; for reason, as Kant observed, is indeed "not

fit to isolate itself, but to communicate."...The sheer naming of things, the creation of words, is the human way of *appropriating* and, as it were, disalienating [*sic*] the world into which, after all, each of us is born as a newcomer and a stranger. [LM1 99-100]

The humble insight that each human being at any time accesses truth only partially, and that one's desire to know more completely is a strength, not a weakness, is a key to acknowledging the positive value of compromise. As Arendt points out, there is a fork in the road in communication aptly discerned by Plato in the *Gorgias* where the path of dialogue proper to thinking diverges from the path of rhetoric specific to demagogues in their efforts to persuade the masses (*TP* 233). For the United States, from its founding, the path of dialogue, of checks and balances, of debate and compromise, has been the strait road to which the nation has returned whenever detours toward autocracy have tempted the body politic.

Mutual interdependence undergirds not only the act of compromise but also the attitude of tolerance that sustains it and justifies compromise as a principled decision. The canonic documents of the United States democracy stress this aspect, via the pronoun "we." Hence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident," "We the People of the United States." Both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were forged in a spirit of compromise that tolerated differences typical of the various regions of the country, not least differences in the understanding of the term, "liberty," as discussed in Fischer's *Albion's Seed*. Reflecting on this, the descent from the inclusive "we" of the United States founding documents to the political tribalism of the exclusionary "us versus them" in our present politics can only be seen as a degradation requiring correction.

Tolerance enables one to be open to disagreement in the confidence that, should one's principles be tried in the crucible of debate, they will not only prevail but be stronger for having been tested. This applies also to political speech. The evasion of such a test is, sadly, a feature of current political practice evidenced by instances such as gerrymandering, rules of cloture requiring a supermajority in the United States Senate, and the blocking of legislative debate in the House of Representatives—failing to bring bills to the floor by demanding party-caucus unanimity—practices which both dominant parties utilize to express their control when in the ascendancy.

²⁹ Karl Jaspers, "31 January 1956 letter to Hannah Arendt," in *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers: Correspondence 1926-1969*, transl. Robert and Rita Kimber, eds. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace & Co 1992, pp. 273-6, here pp. 274-5.

If these are difficulties in the present, they have come about due to problems in the past. Mistrust degrades communication and dissolves the intercourse in word and deed that animates *e pluribus unum*, with dire consequences for effective human freedom. Effective freedom—political freedom—is, in Arendt's view, the power to act. In Arendt's words,

Action, in which a We is always engaged in changing our common world, stands in the sharpest possible opposition to the solitary business of thought, which operates in a dialogue between me and myself.³⁰

The political practices cited in the previous paragraphs all debilitate the power to act as a community by arrogating agency to a subset of the whole and denying that agency to others. But how and why does such an unhealthy division arise in the body politic and, having arisen, how does it metastasize?

At root is the wide-spread acceptance on both sides, the political Right and Left, of a zero-sum view of economics, politics, and social standing. "Fixity" is the watchword of the zero-sum approach: economic resources are limited and distribution to some means loss to others; success in politics means defeating adversaries; society is hierarchical or caste-defined; rising social status for some requires diminished status for those presently favored.

The alternative can be in the context of a positive sum approach, wherein "mobility" is the watchword. In the field of negotiation this approach is recognized as a win-win strategy. In economics, the pool of resources is elastic and, historically, has grown over time; in politics, consideration of adversaries' interests can both advance one's own cause, provide incentives for agreement, and advance the opportunity for further collaboration; social mobility provides an avenue for widening consensus among groups as well as an improvement over the course of one's lifetime *vis-à-vis* inequality constraints experienced due to socio-economic class, gender, race, or geographic location.

Political tribalism tends toward fixity, even to the point of becoming sclerotic. The hardening of attitudes at both extremes spans a range of issues, for example:

* Abortion: framed, on one side, as an exercise of bodily autonomy and on the other as violating the rights of

the unborn.

- * Guns: framed, on one side, as causing harm to and death of innocent victims, and on the other as the exercise of a protected civil liberty and a defense against state tyranny.
- * Terrorism: considered, on one side, as being primarily a domestic threat targeting specific groups of citizens or the government itself and on the other as an external threat requiring uncompromised protection of the nation's borders.
- * Climate change: considered, on one side, as an existential threat caused by the actions of human beings, whose tipping point is imminent, if not already at hand and hence requires the immediate halt of fossil fuel production, and on the other as a naturally occurring geological fact where human actions are considered to be a minor contributing factor and hence does not warrant rapid changes in energy production.

The list could be vastly extended, but the consequences are already evident at this point. The more apodictic the partisan proposition, the more likely the opposing viewpoint is considered as being either intellectually untenable or morally culpable. And, therefore, the less likely a positive sum approach is considered as being either appropriate or useful. Each side dwells, as it were, in a universe of Platonic forms rather than in the agora of options that has been the site of politics since Cleisthenes (c. 500 BCE).

As a result, even with the periodic shifting of power from one political party to the other, a residual amount of resentment, blame, and grievance accumulates over time. This residual toxicity reinforces the zero-sum perspective and so lies at the root of a seemingly intractable tribalism. Even more than an accumulation of vexations, the zero-sum perspective of I-win/you-lose metastasizes systemically so that extreme polarities are organizing into a constellation of issues, making it more difficult to approach a positive-sum outcome on any one disagreement.

One obvious example of degraded communication is what passes as the norm of political discourse at present. This is the practice, often lauded as discipline, of sticking to pre-established talking points, no matter what the question or discussion topic proposed is. In interviews, press events, or political rallies, public figures are expected to stay on message, to remain within the brand represented by party or movement, rather than to engage and advance the conversation outside pre-set boundaries. The result

³⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Two / Willing*, New York, NY: Harcourt 1977, p. 200. [Henceforth cited as LM2]

is serial monologues and the absence of dialogue. Nowhere is this more evident than in so-called campaign debates. These are most often not debates at all but simply packaged advertisements from behind a podium, broadcasted to an unsuspecting audience via established media channels. No longer are these broadcasts the incisive parry-and-thrust of discussants seeking to probe the foundation of policies and to explore the logic of political platforms.

If the debate were genuine, extreme positions would have less durability. Framing the extremes as a binary choice would quickly be exposed as the logical fallacy of the excluded middle. It is a rare circumstance where only two options, both extreme, are the only choices available. Recognizing that, the middle is where compromise becomes viable. Our politics, in fact, is rife with fallacious argument, namely *ad hominem* attacks, straw man propositions, slippery slope suggestions sliding from reasonable objection into improbable absurdities, the untenable inference of causality from correlation.

It is unsurprising that such fallacious arguments are posed in political debate and remain unchallenged by most listeners. After all, most schools no longer educate students to be critical citizens making careful and reasoned judgments. Political officials who have gained office in the current system have little motivation to train voters in the skills of cutting through messaging that depends upon fallacious rhetoric to persuade rather than enlighten. Indeed, any attempt to improve civics education is likely to fall prey to claims that ideology is behind any change in pedagogy.

Shining a light on deficiencies is a necessary but insufficient condition to remedy cracks in the United States polity that have stemmed from shortcomings rooted in the past. As intractable as our problems may seem, they may not be as harrowing as those which other nations have faced in our lifetime. For instance, how does United States domestic political tribalism stack up against Northern Ireland during the times of The Troubles? Or, to take another example, to South Africa during the regime of legal apartheid? Might there be some lessons to be drawn from those experiences?

In both those cases, I believe, there was a need to break out of a cycle of recrimination, a cycle whereby the Other is vilified and considered beyond redemption, locked into the sins of the past. Jonathan Powell, Chief of Staff to United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair

in the late 1990s, notes that to avoid the tunnel vision of us-versus-them

It is precisely your enemies, rather than your friends, you should talk to if you want to resolve a conflict.³¹

Thus, negotiation should not itself be held out as a reward to be granted or withheld. Non-negotiable demands—either explicit or implicit—betray an absolutist stance that simply hardens irreconcilable positions, and denying from the outset the aspirations of the other side merely deepen the conflict.

An alternative stance recommended by Powell is taking the posture of constructive ambiguity (*GH* 108), a tool whereby each side accepts vagueness as a temporary tactic to allow discussions to proceed. Under such a provisional context, the middle ground can be explored while the more intractable issues are bracketed. Of course, these will need to be addressed eventually but in the interim, a process of actual dialogue—not serial monologue—can keep going. A commitment to mutual problem-solving on big issues is strengthened by building a kind of muscle memory of working through compromise on smaller matters. Clearing up those ambiguities, in the end, requires a certain amount of pain since it does feel like giving up positions previously considered more or less sacred. This cannot be accomplished without the gradual build-up of trust that comes with sustained negotiation with a view toward a positive sum outcome. I endorse this process albeit Powell conceded that his use of constructive ambiguity, in the end, turned out to be destructive for a time (*GH* 142).

Undoubtedly, building trust takes time. Powell notes that it took nine years after the Good Friday Agreements of 1998 for the power-sharing arrangement of May 2007 to be achieved (*GH* 137). Powell notes that decades, or even centuries, of animosity, do not die away overnight. Powell elaborates by writing:

They express the centuries-old obstinacy of a Protestant people determined not to be driven from their land by the majority community in Ireland... The result is a classic clash of rights: on the one hand, the right of Orangemen to march down the Queen's highway and express their cultural identity, on the other, the right of Catholic residents not to be terrorised in their own homes. [*GH* 120]

³¹ Jonathan Powell, *Great Hatred, Little Room: Making Peace in Northern Ireland*, London, UK: Random House 2008, p. 313. [Henceforth cited as *GH*]

But now, in the perspective of the 2020s, the quantum of trust and collaboration existing in Ireland has grown astonishingly when compared with the one in the final quarter of the twentieth century.

Moving on to the second example I shall point out that F. W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela were awarded the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize for peacefully terminating the apartheid regime in South Africa and building the foundations for democracy in their country. In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela devotes an extensive part of the book to the topic, "Talking with the Enemy," a theme that is very much in keeping with Powell's approach noted above. Practically speaking, the history of violence between the government and the African National Congress was an impediment to even beginning negotiations, as there was an expressed principle of not engaging with those employing violent means.

Mandela made the point that violence in the past cannot be erased yet that engagement was the best window into a non-violent future. He stressed that residual anger and resentment were counterproductive if the objective was a new social order. He writes in this regard:

Freedom without civility, freedom without the ability to live in peace, was not true freedom at all.³²

One of the critical means of accomplishing the objective of a new social order in South Africa was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission established by Mandela during his presidency and chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Tutu who himself won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 observed that

Forgiveness...is the only way to heal ourselves and to be free from the past...those who say forgiving is a sign of weakness haven't tried it.³³

Just as forgiving is hard, so is asking for forgiveness. The Truth and Reconciliation rules required those seeking amnesty for offenses committed under apartheid to acknowledge their guilt. Such offenses included abductions, torture, and

³² Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company 1994, p. 496.

³³ Tenzin Gyatso, Desmond Tutu, and Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*, New York, NY: Avery, Penguin Random House 2016, pp. 234-5.

murder. A condition for amnesty was a truthful and complete public confession of such crimes committed between 1960 and 1993. Where amnesty was refused by the commission, offenders were subject to trial.

A similar approach had been outlined by Jaspers in 1947, in his remarkable consideration of post-WWII Europe. His words would resonate well today, in the caverns of the ongoing political tribalism in the United States:

We want to learn to talk with each other. That is to say, we do not just want to reiterate our opinions but to hear what the other thinks. We do not just want to assert but to reflect connectedly, listen to reasons, remain prepared for a new insight. We want to accept the other, to try to see things from the other's point of view; in fact, we virtually want to seek out opposing views. To get at the truth, an opponent is more important than one who agrees with us. Finding the common in the contradictory is more important than hastily seizing on mutually exclusive points of view and breaking off the conversation as hopeless. [QG 5-6]

In the practical context of a Europe rendered asunder by total war, after fifteen to twenty million deaths on the continent, the emerging understanding of the Holocaust, a physical leveling of cities by bombing, and the displacement of tens of millions of Europeans, Jaspers' prescription was anything but anodyne. In a consideration of Northern Ireland and South Africa, his situation should make the contemporary thinker humble in evaluating claims of the impossibility of transcending our twenty-first-century polarization in the United States.

One fundamental mark of human liberty is a refusal to be trapped by the past. Arendt, in her exploration of "Action" in *The Human Condition*, returns to St. Augustine:

Because they are...newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action.³⁴

Action arises, thus, from the basic condition of human plurality, which Arendt maintains is the political meaning of Augustine's dictum, the startling unexpectedness of "living as a distinct and unique being among equals" (HC 178).

This capacity for action, for making a new beginning, entails a liberation from the determinism of past conditions and the freedom of the human being

³⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1998, p. 177.

to break the chain of action and reaction. Vengeance is the political name of action and reaction; forgiveness has the unexpected effect of superseding the *quid pro quo*, eye-for-an-eye calculation of retributive justice. This superseding, transcending step that begins with political dialogue can be discerned in processes as outlined by Powell, Mandela, and Jaspers. Arendt explains in her words:

Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever. [HC 237]

Accepting partisan tribalism means being willing to be trapped by the past. In the present context, liberty means being willing, in dialogue with adversaries, to craft a new beginning. This requires exploration of common ground anchored in our human condition and a determination to look toward the future rather than dwell in the past.

Pragmatic Hope Derived from History

Neither Augustine nor Lincoln, neither Jaspers nor Arendt had any illusions regarding human perfection. Their clear-sightedness given imperfection brings into focus several important matters: the human need for transcending; the human capacity for transcending; and the human freedom in transcending.

This need for transcending reveals the inadequacy of considering the human being as nothing but a determined object: determined either by historical circumstances, by economic forces, by material conditions in a physiological sense, and especially by being defined as a member of a particular tribe. In this context, Jaspers writes perspicuously,

Our only road to true transcendence is via the personal, individual human being. One who gives up on himself and submits to deified objectivities loses his possible Existenz and thus the chance of an original manifestation of his transcendence. [P2 127]

However, one must not misunderstand transcendence as a flight from the objective, historical world. As *Existenz* one is involved in the world, not aloof from it. Humans are not solitary; the human capacity to transcend brings one into a relationship

with others, as well as into one with the world as one finds it. Arendt speaks of the power of promise in the world of action, which is a power that is generated when people gather together and act in concert, the force of mutual promise or contract. She writes,

If sovereignty is in the realm of action and human affairs what mastership is in the realm of making and the world of things, then their chief distinction is that the one can only be achieved by the many bound together, whereas the other is conceivable only in isolation. [HC 245]

Core to an understanding of transcending tribalism is the realization that the horizon of authentic humanity extends beyond one's own group or tribe, and that the delimiting of sovereignty exclusively to one's own exclusive social domain constitutes the kind of isolation that reduces human beings to thingness.

Lincoln, reflecting in his Second Inaugural on the effects of tribalism in the Northern and Southern states, remarked in wonder,

Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces.³⁵

And yet Lincoln had sufficient self-awareness to then say,

but let us judge not that we be not judged.

It was Lincoln's capacity for transcending—a capacity we may claim to share—that created the space for his luminous peroration,

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations. [SI]

³⁵ Abraham Lincoln, *Second Inaugural Address*; endorsed by Lincoln, March 4, 1865, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mal.4361300/?st=text>. [Henceforth cited as SI]