



Existenz

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Transcendence and Existential Solidarity as Antidotes to Political Rupture

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Abstract: This essay explores the veiled yet probable cause of the current political crisis in the United States of America. Jaspers' fundamental distinction between existence (*Dasein*) and *Existenz* provides the main conceptual tool for this inquiry, which is guided by the question: How can a lived experience of transcendence elevate society and politics to a level of human interaction that is aligned with and mirrors *Existenz*? Existence (*Dasein*) and *Existenz* are diametrically opposed modes of being in the world. Each mode of world orientation tends to predetermine the purposes of everyday living and the character and depth of interpersonal relations and communication. *Existenz*, the lived experience of transcendence, has intrinsic value. Additionally, *Existenz* naturally supports making consciousness flexible and undermines the identifications with ideologies or fixed beliefs. As a result, bitter political hostility may transform into respectful and principled political contest. Jaspers sketches a possible scenario without making any predictions for its realization.

Keywords: *Existenz*; existence (*Dasein*); experience of suspension; loosening of consciousness; relaxation of identifications; political behavior; genuine communication; loving struggle .

Introduction

Contemporary Western societies, especially the United States of America, appear to be afflicted by narcissistic ambitions, self-serving interest groups, and hostile political divisions. This has always been the case to some extent since the founding of the United States, but its current political climate proves to be outright dysfunctional and destructive. The United States' constitutional framework faces threats of being intentionally undermined. Accusations and media coverage of an alleged insurrection, civil war, and the end of this federation's democracy are actively entertained by a sizeable portion of officeholders in both parties, influencers, and their followers. A divided citizenry fears that this country's civilization,

based on law, appears to be in ominous peril.

The guiding question of this essay is the following: Can Jaspers' philosophy provide any suggestions or resources for counteracting the glaring social tensions and political dysfunction? In line with the overarching spectrum of Jaspers' philosophy, I attempt to explore whether transcendence and existential solidarity might be possible remedies or antidotes to the presently dire scenario in the divided states of America.

As a general guide for my own exploration and for my readers' benefit, I am citing a central proposition from Jaspers' book *Von der Wahrheit*, his second masterwork on his philosophy of *Existenz*, that is still not yet translated into English:

Instead of bringing about a mere knowledge of something, the meaning of a philosophical thought is

rather...a change in the *awareness of being*. Alongside the philosophical thought the inner attitude changes, both toward the world and toward oneself.¹

Two Opposing World Orientations: Existence versus *Existenz*

Jaspers identifies two diametrically opposed modes of human living: existence in contrast with *Existenz*. The English word "existence" is the translation of *Dasein* (literally meaning "being there"); it refers to a state of living that is focused on the objective world and its mundane concerns. *Existenz*, by contrast, names a state of being that is receptive to transcendence and finds its natural habitat in it. Jaspers profiles the stark and irreconcilable differences between existence and *Existenz* as follows:

From the point of view of the world, any appearance of *Existenz* is merely objective being. From that viewpoint we see consciousness and the subjective I, but not *Existenz*; from there we cannot even understand what is meant by *Existenz*. From the point of view of *Existenz*, its own being is merely something that appears in existence, an existence that is not an appearance of *Existenz*, and is not its true self, but is recreant. It is as though originally all existence should be *Existenz*, and as though whatever part of it is nothing but existence could be understood as depleted, entangled, bereft of *Existenz*.²

Depending on which one of these divergent orientations is dominant, community affairs, political behavior, and communication styles are subject to correspondingly different motivations and different experiential flavors, which in turn tend to engender different social conduct. In this essay, I am exploring whether *Existenz* has a possible modifying or transforming effect on *Dasein*, mundane existence, and on its predominantly utilitarian comportment that is oblivious of *Existenz*. Existence is a mode of individual and collective behavior that is largely governed by the pursuit of physical survival, well-being, and self-interest. Being tethered by the objectively extant world, existence—when seen from the perspective of *Existenz*—is tethered being. If *Existenz* does, in fact, have an elevating influence on *Dasein*, what are

the conditions or needed changes for such possible transformation? And, finally, how likely or realistic is such a transformation, individually and collectively? Jaspers sketches the possibility of such transformation in individual cases, but he is skeptical regarding sweeping social changes as a result of a few more human beings experiencing *Existenz*.

For mundane existence or *Dasein*, *Existenz* is a mere possibility. Jaspers' notion of possible *Existenz* names the linkage for any prospect of *Existenz* and mundane existence to relate and communicate with each other. Identifying such a relational link is very difficult in light of the fact that world and *Existenz* are inextricably intertwined in daily living.

Existenz, which in itself does not exist, appears to possible *Existenz* as existence. In our minds, of course, we cannot close the gap between world and *Existenz*, between things we can know and things we can elucidate, between objective being and the free being of *Existenz*. In fact, however, the two modes of being are so close together that a consciousness which is also possible *Existenz* will find the distinction an infinite task whose performance combines the cognition of mundane being with the elucidation of *Existenz*. [P1 58]

Jaspers' notion of possible *Existenz* marks the transitional space between the objective world and *Existenz* and thereby suggests how mundane existence may be experienced as more than just ordinary and routine objectivity by transforming into an expression of *Existenz*. Jaspers elaborates:

There is no pointer to lead us from objective being to another kind of being, unless it be done indirectly, by the disjointness and inconclusiveness of objective being. But *Existenz* does permeate the forms of that being as media of its realization, and as possibilities of its appearance. Standing on the borderline of world and *Existenz*, possible *Existenz* views all existence as more than existence. Proceeding from the most remote, from the mechanism, being will approach itself, so to speak, via life and consciousness, seeking to find itself in *Existenz* as what it is. Or—while consciousness at large conceives existence from this borderline as pure existence—it may be the character of all existence to be potentially relevant for *Existenz* by providing the impulse for it or serving as its medium. [P1 59]

The objective world is the source and means to satisfy human needs and desires. From the perspective of world orientation, this world appears complete and self-sufficient, unless our view of the world and of ourselves exceeds the conventionally

¹ Karl Jaspers, *Von der Wahrheit*, München, DE: Piper Verlag 1991, p. 170, my translation.

² Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy, Volume 1*, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press 1969, p. 59. [Henceforth cited as P1]

accepted limitations of the world. For possible *Existenz* transcendence opens up in the world. Jaspers outlines essential corollaries of such an expanding shift toward transcendence, which is a shift that includes a novel appreciation of the world:

Insofar as man is not just a mundane particle but free to be himself, he is possible *Existenz*. To his consciousness at large the world will appear as world, in world orientation; but to his possible *Existenz* the world will unlock transcendence. For man as possible *Existenz* the world will lose its indifference. To his existing life it is an object of desire and concern, of pleasure and utilization; to his possible *Existenz* it is the place and the means of relating to transcendence, with other *Existenz*. The world becomes the temporal site of *Existenz*. [P1 117]

According to Jaspers, *Dasein* and *Existenz* require distinct modes of cognition:

Objective cognition abstracts from the cognitive subject and sees only the pure objectivities; the externalized object of world orientation has become soulless. For existential conduct, on the other hand, there is no pure objectivity. By virtue of its own being, *Existenz* sees the reality of self-being in its objectively encountered historicity. [P1 118]

Meant is here the gulf between mundane existence, which is dominated by relations to objects, and *Existenz*, which is permeable by transcendence and reproduces itself in social attitudes and behavioral conduct. World orientation and *Existenz* imbued by transcendence reflect different mindsets and motivations, whose impacts on social interactions may be subtle, at least initially. However, motivations dominated by self-interest and power tend to lead to the hardening of positions, reluctance to compromise, and to demonization of those who act and think differently. The contrast between these two divergent world orientations shines a light on the human condition in general. At the same time, the contrast between existence and *Existenz* also indicates possible ways to humanize society, if only marginally. In the following, I will trace one potential trajectory of such prospects.

The Ubiquity and Essence of Political Behavior

Jaspers uses a fairly broad meaning of the concept "political," which, as E. B. Ashton, the translator of many of Jaspers' works, points out,

he applies to the entire realm of private intercourse...to

business dealings and dealings within the family. [P1 xvii]

In political conduct, Jaspers states,

we arouse and shape the will of those who work with us, and we work against opposition—that is to say, against resistance we meet in the form of human will. [P1 148]

Jaspers' wide-ranging definition of "political" reflects the pervasiveness of political conduct he detects throughout human interaction. He writes:

Everybody has political intercourse. It is not only the form of state action but a given situation for all human existence. Its manifestations on a large scale and in dealing with private interests are mutually illuminating.³

The last sentence in this quote, which pops up as a rather casual remark not developed further in its context, reveals a great insight for understanding political behavior on the social and on the individual scale as intertwined mirror images. Their mutual entanglement suggests ways of influencing large-scale social sentiments and actions, namely by changing the sentiment and conduct at the level where change is initiated and is most likely to germinate on the individual level.

Jaspers warns those human beings, who are receptive to transcendence, not to be naïve when engaging in social conflict, since the political arena is a duplicitous ecosystem in which possible *Existenz* must battle for its convictions without losing its integrity. Jaspers elaborates in this respect:

Since existence as such is indifferent to truth; since its concerns as such, as they appear and clash, are not truthful; and since every existence collides with other existence, I must, if I want to exist, accept the political realities and enter into their untruthful medium. The task of possible *Existenz* as it exists in the twilight of being and appearance is to find how to be truly human even on the plane of embattled concerns of existence. [P2 90-1]

Possible *Existenz*, entering "the twilight of being and appearance" (P2 91), must face the arena of untruthfulness. Even in seemingly benign negotiations, Jaspers exposes the likely presence of treacheries and trickeries such as: "wearing the mask of consummate good will," feigning a "readiness to yield," and deceptively creating an accommodating atmosphere

³ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy, Volume 2*, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press 1970, p. 90. [Henceforth cited as P2]

(P2 91). All such rhetorical strategies have the same goal, namely, the creation of the desired effect. In such a canny atmosphere, Jaspers holds,

as long as the intercourse is political, the determining factor remains my own ruthless will. [P2 92]

The reign of political intercourse cannot stand diversity. In Jaspers' straightforward words: "Everyone wants the other to be like himself" (P2 378). Egocentric bearing demands conformity to one's own ruthless will and shuts the door to feasible compromise. Such self-centered behavior exists on the interpersonal level and is magnified in the political arena.

The concealed or blatant political antagonism is embedded in a larger common structure of which the partisan opponents are rarely aware. Their clash of will displays bitter hostility, but also reveals mutual dependency of those engaged in acrimonious opposition. As part of one's alignment with *Existenz*, Jaspers suggests, the following dynamic paradox may dawn on me:

Against my self-will, against the accident of my empirical existence, I experience myself in *communication*. I am never more sure of being myself than at times of total readiness for another, when I come to myself because the other too comes to himself in our revealing struggle. [P1 57]

Existenz as an Alien Impulse in Politics

It remains an open question as to what lies at the core of the current political turmoil in the United States. As the federal system and the wielding of political power are built on multiple layers of institutional checks and balances, diversity of opinions is a strength of the United States political system. The current political turmoil is caused by rigid identifications with exclusive cultural positions. These obstinate fixations on specific beliefs are entangled with a dogged will to preserve political power. The level of rigidity of beliefs often reveals blatant fanaticism. Such zeal easily leads to objectification of human beings, in and outside of the political theater. Such extremism and intolerance are a predictable cancer that grows due to the confined vision mundane existence imposes on itself.

Jaspers' assessment of political behavior leads to the question: Can political intercourse be transformed into existential communication? Jaspers is skeptical on this point. He writes:

In existential communication we disdain the use of

instrumentalities, power, or guile, but political intercourse demands specific means of combat and deception. It requires means which threaten to overwhelm the realization of possible *Existenz* at any time. [P2 91]

Jaspers appears to confirm the currently lived experience that existential communication mixes with political intercourse like oil and water. The social consequences of this mismatch become exacerbated when political behavior becomes magnified in public media channels that showcase narcissistic personal ambitions.

When an individual makes an absolute of political intercourse, it is a sign of existential instability. Peculiarly unexistential solidarities arise when inner emptiness of one man joins up with that of another. [P2 93]

Loosening Fixations and Rigid Identifications

The loosening of fixations and rigid identifications provide the core of Jaspers' philosophizing which aims at identifying ways of transcending ordinary objectivity (*Gegenständlichkeit*). Jaspers' analytical surgery is therefore particularly relevant for introducing and strengthening genuine humanity also in politics. True philosophizing, Jaspers conjectures, may lead to healing of the political sphere by a relaxation of consciousness that invites disidentification:

The impulse behind our dissection of the concepts of being is to loosen our consciousness, to experiment with possibilities so as to get at the root of true philosophizing and there to *search* for the one being, as being proper. [P1 63]

The loosening of fixations and rigid identifications may arise when one is experiencing suspension (*Schweben*), which is an intermediate state of awareness that lacks certainty yet affords the ability to hover, glide, and to soar. Such ability provides opportunities to counteract any rigid identification. Jaspers elaborates this with the words:

A maximum of suspension...will be achieved in questions of intrinsic being, because it is present in the most vanishing ways. The extant absolute, the cogent thought, is relative to a mere consciousness at large; but only the loosening of possible *Existenz* lets intrinsic being be grasped so that all relativity, all sublimation of the modes of being, serves this one suspension that makes me aware of being.⁴

⁴ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy, Volume 3*, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press 1971, p. 142.

Jaspers captures the double feature of this intermediate realm with the paradoxical phrase "immanent transcendence." He describes its relevance for *Existenz* as follows:

Only an immanent transcendence can lend weight to *Existenz* in existence. True transcendence can never be existence for a subject; it can only be a reality for freedom. Hence any objective fixation of an objectified being, whether a distant beyond or a bewitched here and now, must be a slip. [P1 74]

Play is another example of an in-between state, where the creative flow is suspended between lightness and seriousness. For Jaspers, play—analogueous to immanent transcendence—is an additional model for philosophizing, for it creates a serious levity that affords freedom from objectifying fixations. He writes:

Philosophizing as the conception and expression of thoughts is a game in this sense; to be aware of playing it is a safeguard that will prevent any objective consolidation of our thoughts in what we take to be questionable truths. [P2 250]

Levity, humor, and being totally absorbed in attending to the task at hand have the feature of playfully being engrossed in a vital and meaningful activity. This serious playfulness is the common core of various features of possible *Existenz*. It is a form of suspension, a state between "being in it" and "being beyond it"—comparable to saying "being in the world but not of it," which is a vernacular version of Jaspers' term "immanent transcendence."

Features of Possible *Existenz*

To make Jaspers' requirements for true communication more tangible, I am listing some of its characteristics that Jaspers highlights. The individual, who is a true partner in unreserved and candid communication, displays some of those features.

Jaspers considers the following features to be characteristic of partners in genuine communication, including in political battles:

He will not rigidly cling to anything he has objectified as valid; he permits and asks limitless questions...As a rational being he wants to hear all reasons and at the same time the voice of the one self...He commits himself in the situation he finds himself in, and yet he never identifies with his situation...He will go among all kinds of people and will take the risks involved...

He feels drawn to strangeness, to opposition, to what will doubt or deny him the most...To him, existence grows lucid only to reveal its true obscurity. From all reflection he will reemerge as himself, although he must pass through disjointness, through uncertainty, through helplessness. He comes to himself without knowing how...*He comes to himself like a gift.* [P2 41-2]

Transforming Political Hostility into a Loving Struggle

Political extremism results from total identification with an ideology and a fixation upon a specific implementation of it. If Jaspers' suggestions for overcoming such identification and fixation would become routine practice in the United States political system, politicians and their supporters might conduct their actions and speech in the spirit of his proposed "loving struggle," that is, a contest with conviction and determination, however without fanaticism.

In Jaspers' words, the political combat should be both "combative and loving at once" (P2 59). Loving struggle

is the fighting, clear-sighted love of possible *Existenz* tackling another possible *Existenz*, questioning it, challenging it, making things hard for it. [P2 59-60]

Nevertheless, an "incomparable solidarity" (P2 60) reigns in such a loving tussle.

This truthful form of communication requires strong convictions and an equally strong detachment from any fixed stance. Both fortitude and poise are then present. For achieving such a balancing act, the required loosening of fixations is analogueous to the effects of a good professional massage, supple jogging, or vigorous yet graceful swimming, all of which result in becoming energized and relaxed. Besides having essential intrinsic value, orientation toward transcendence and existential solidarity provide such a needed relaxation for the benefit of collective cooperation and regeneration.

To the question as to how one should gauge the success of such a collective renewal, Jaspers provides an unswerving reply:

Existential success...has no objective criterion. The conscience of possible *Existenz* alone perceives it in the communicative union. In existence *Existenz* is realized as self with self, even though there is no such reality for any knowledge. [P2 64]