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History and Politics in the Thought of Karl Jaspers

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History and Politics in the Thought of Karl Jaspers

Nathan Wallace

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty in Political Science in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

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by

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in
Political Science in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

History and Politics in the Thought of Karl Jaspers

by

Nathan Wallace

Advisor: Richard Wolin

A relatively overlooked but important work, *The Origin and Goal of History*, by Karl Jaspers is examined with regard the intellectual history of its development and influence, and its structure and prospects for contemporary and future relevance for political theory.

Emphasis is placed on the argument that the central aspect of the work has been neglected in recent, important literature: its connection of a universal historical narrative with a theory of contemporary politics.

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Introduction

I. Universal History and Political Thought

In the *Origin and Goal of History* and elsewhere, Karl Jaspers argues for the necessity of a universal history of humankind for his conception of a just society. But this was overshadowed. The influential turn against universal history came with the condemnations of Marxist thought delivered by Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin. For both, universal history was equated with inexorable laws of human destiny and was to be rejected because human affairs necessarily involve human choices which cannot be reduced to law-governed natural phenomena. Both shared the view that this conception of universal history contributed to authoritarianism or totalitarianism. Postcolonial theorists have associated the narrative of universal history with colonial oppression. Later liberal thinkers, such as Rawls and Habermas, any explicit connection between universal history and preferred conceptions of justice is absent. Gandhi's political thought and action seem to share this disregard. Can the conceptions of justice in the works of Rawls, Habermas and Gandhi be reconciled with or complemented by Jaspers' view on the relation of universal history to conceptions of justice? Jaspers avoids equating universal history with a collection of causal laws that

determine the inevitable shape of society in the future, rather he presents universal history as a unifying narrative that can contribute to creating a common ground of understanding across all groups that can serve as a location for the debates inherent to a politically liberal order. Moreover, this universal history is empirical and subject to further investigation and conceptual revision. Thus, he appears to avoid the criticisms Berlin, Popper and the postcolonialists. As examples, I will assess practical difficulties with Rawls' concept of justice as fairness, Habermas' discourse ethics and Gandhi's civil disobedience and argue how a conception of universal history could possibly complement these and similar conceptions. Robert Bellah, in his own extensive work that relies heavily upon Jaspers' historical thesis, stresses the importance of history as narrative and not as a system of inevitable laws. Expanding upon Bellah's conception of universal history as narrative will provide the basis for my argument that Jaspers' universal history might possibly complement these other similar conceptions in a valuable way.

For Hegel, universal history necessarily culminated in the constitutional state with its governing hereditary "universal class" whose class interests corresponded with the universal interests of humanity.¹ Marx connected universal history to inevitable, universal and total human emancipation, a condition in which Hegel's elitist state would no longer exist. Marx's proletariat, like Hegel's "universal class", was both destined by historical laws to rule and was in possession of true universal interests. Marx showed how powerful the narrative of universal history can be for motivating action – and reaction. It was time to change the

¹ Hegel, *Lectures on Natural Right and Political Science*, sections 152-153

world rather than merely interpret it. The changes were given absolute sanction in the form of historical necessity. Between the state as the instrument of the bourgeoisie and the elimination of the state, the intervening period would involve the seizure and use of state power by the proletariat.² These characterizations of Hegel and Marx may be a matter of debate, but they generally encapsulate the difficulties as seen by those who suggested the turn away from universal history.

That totalitarian or authoritarian systems followed upon the application, or mistaken application, of Marx's conception became the clearest, primary cause of the turn against universal history in twentieth century political thought. However, critics of universal history also objected to elements of historical determinism and elitism in fascist theories of racial superiority. This line of reasoning first took shape in the influential works of Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin, which expressed liberal views of politics that sought to avoid the perfectionist views of a just society along the line of Hegel or Marx. In 1945, Popper argued that Marx's thought combined universal history with a set of desired social norms to create a "myth of destiny".³ Against this, Popper argues for a "scientific" approach to politics, which, for him, means a less ambitious, "piecemeal", approach that seeks practical reform of extant liberal democratic institutions in favor of democratic pluralism rather than universal revolution.⁴ For Popper the egalitarianism or any other aspect of Marx's desired society is not the problem, the theory of how a just society can and necessarily will be achieved is. He sought

² Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, Chapters 1 and 2.

³ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. (Princeton University Press) 7-8.

⁴ *Ibid*, 3.

to show: “how we can become the makers of our fate when we have ceased to pose as its prophets.”⁵ In the 1950s, Berlin expressed a similar view, particularly in his essays “Historical Inevitability” and “Two Concepts of Liberty”. While recognizing that history displays intelligible patterns, this fact should not be directly employed as a basis for arguments for how a just society, a pluralist society for Berlin, can or should be attained.⁶ The way that Hegel and Marx applied their conceptions of universal history to their conceptions of a just social order was perfectionist; it offered a notion of “a final harmony in which all riddles are solved, all contradictions reconciled.”⁷ This, for Berlin, was a fatal deception. For both Popper and Berlin, universal history had led to pathological outcomes. It had to be quarantined.

Another line of the critique of universal history has been drawn more recently in postcolonial thought.⁸ Here the focus is on the combination of the advocacy of principles of negative liberty, egalitarianism and democracy with a view of civilization as the result of universal historical progress that has not yet reached all peoples. This served as a justification of oppression by liberal societies, such as Great Britain, over other societies, such as India. Because of his great influence on nineteenth and twentieth century liberal thought, John Stuart Mill can be seen as the exemplar of this broad trend. Mill accepted Auguste Comte’s theory of universal history in which modern European society was seen as

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997) 131.

⁷ Ibid, 238.

⁸ For example: Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton University Press, 2000), Uday Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire* (University of Chicago Press, 1999).

more advanced than other types of societies. From his father, James Mill, he inherited a belief in the superiority of British culture relative to that of India. It was upon such conceptions that Mill would argue that the principles of liberty that he advocated were not yet suitable for non-European societies, which he thought to be at an objectively lower level of development. For such societies, Mill advocates oppressive rule: “a vigorous despotism is in itself the best form of government for training the people in what is specifically wanting to render them capable of a higher civilization.”⁹ The fact that Mill can justify a complete reversal of his liberal principles upon what he takes to be universal historical criteria demonstrates the very compelling power, maybe even the primacy, of the latter for his thought. Again, the question arises, or is at least implied, in postcolonial thought whether it would be better to quarantine universal history entirely.

Thus, the main lines of criticism of universal history since the 1940s have diagnosed that concept with tendencies towards domestic totalitarianism or authoritarianism and imperial domination. These criticisms are compelling. For many, these would indicate that universal history is not only irrelevant for any desirable theory of a just society, but also potentially harmful.

When Francis Fukuyama announced that contemporary liberal democracy is the “end of history”, this thesis was met with surprise by many – by 1989 who had ever heard of such a thing as universal history? An intellectual sensation that evoked a great deal of disapproval on widely varying bases, Fukuyama’s thesis nevertheless began to lift the taboo. What

⁹ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty in Three Essays*. (Oxford University Press, 1975) 66.

Fukuyama began to reveal was merely the tip of the iceberg. Fukuyama's primary concern is the opposite of Marx's, to interpret the world rather than to change it. He does not connect universal history to the process of thinking about what a just society would look like and how to achieve it. Mistakenly depicted by many as an optimistic prophet of triumphant neoliberalism, his conclusion is: "The end of history will be a very sad time."¹⁰

Fukuyama's end of history thesis led to the postcolonial critique as well as to works that similarly ascribed to universal history a useful role in describing the realities of contemporary societies and global affairs. While the postcolonial critique was intended to serve as a warning based on lessons drawn from the combination of universal history with instances of oppression, the latter type of studies follow Fukuyama's pattern by using universal history as a tool to interpret the situation of the present. There eventually arose a third type, that in which universal history is conceived of as having a practical role in the conceptualization and realization of a just society. Thomas McCarthy and Robert Bellah are the proponents of this view. McCarthy argues that a conception of universal history, what he calls a theory of "human development", is needed despite the criticism that that concept has faced since at least 1945. The postcolonial critique is important for McCarthy; he incorporates its concerns into the framework of what a universal history with a practical intent should look like.¹¹ He, however, does not mention the very influential work of Popper and Berlin on the subject, explaining the disappearance of universal history by pointing only

¹⁰ Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" in *The National Review* (Summer 1989).

¹¹ Thomas McCarthy, *Race, Empire and the Idea of Human Development* (Cambridge University Press, 2009) 225-226.

to the lack of belief in progress after the horrors of the Second World War and Holocaust. McCarthy's point is that while the postcolonial critique of universal history is valid, it does not condemn the genre itself, but can help reorient it towards new values by showing the oppressive aspects of earlier formulations. Most importantly, he argues that aspiring to a "unity of history" should be done, "from a point of view oriented to practice: grand metanarratives give us an idea of the kinds of a more humane future for which we may hope, but only if we are prepared to engage ourselves in bringing them about."¹² But he does not explain why this is the case, how the link from such metanarratives to the hope for a more humane future is brought about. For McCarthy, rather, the point is to orient the metanarrative of universal history towards those values that are considered just, chief among them "basic human rights and personal and political autonomy, or non-domination."¹³ For him, universal histories, human development theories, can, "marshal empirical and theoretical knowledge in the interest of realizing valued outcomes."¹⁴ Therefore, the values to be attained precede, or seem to precede, the construction of the narrative proposed, which then serves as a justification of those values.

That there is not only one way to conceive of universal history from a practical point of view is implied by Bellah in his book *Religion and Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*. Bellah agrees with McCarthy that orientation of universal history should be towards practical goals, rather than only as a tool for understanding the

¹² Ibid, 225.

¹³ Ibid, 234.

¹⁴ Ibid, 238.

contemporary situation. Both would, however, agree that such interpretive universal history can never be completely separable from how practical aims are or can be pursued, as for instance in the way one could argue that Fukuyama's view could be used as a rationalization for forced "democratization" by military intervention. *Religion in Human Evolution* is a massive work, much longer than Jaspers' *The Origin and Goal of History* from which it derives its basic framework. Unlike McCarthy's, Bellah's work is not just a theory of universal history; it is a universal history itself. Bellah calls this a "history of histories, a story of stories."¹⁵ He has two practical aims: warning of ecological crises and the consequences of ethnocentrism.¹⁶ He assumes that this history can illuminate: "the moral situation humans are in today and the changes we need to make."¹⁷ But one cannot simply say that Bellah chooses what to include in this "story of stories" and what to exclude only on the basis of what he explicitly values and wants to achieve. Rather, he thinks that trying to tell the broadest possible story of the human experience, while basing it in facts, in itself leads to a framework of understanding in which there is likely to be agreement upon his own values. In other words, the process of telling a story and listening to it is assumed to be the engine by which agreement on those specific values can be generated. Bellah observes that most communication in daily life is in narrative form. Narrative is crucial in the cognitive development of children. Narrative is constitutive of both individual identity and social

¹⁵ Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2011), 45.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 602.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 601.

identity.¹⁸ What Bellah is aiming at with his universal history is a common human identity – not by constructing it but by contributing to awareness of it through an empirical universal narrative. To do this he links the theory of evolution, the most widely held narrative of human origins in modern times, with the framework of universal history offered by Jaspers. He sees both of these as not containing the dichotomies that pervaded earlier universal histories – dichotomies separating the “superior” from the “inferior”, the “civilized” from the “savage”. The implication of this is clear: in Bellah’s view, to abandon universal history is to forego a means for the expression and understanding of human identity, leaving the field open to the competition and clash of particular identities, likely ones informed by absolute claims to truth. Since Bellah’s narrative stops around 2,000 years ago, it cannot be said that he has followed McCarthy’s advice and let his values guide his historical account. The contemporary values that he says he hopes his history will promote, an awareness of the threats of ecological disaster and ethnocentrism, do not *directly* relate in their contemporary forms to any of the events considered. But can such a universal history really lead to a discussion about common human values?

It is Jaspers’ assumption in *The Origin and Goal of History* that it can. First published in 1948, that work developed in intellectual atmosphere of intense and profound rethinking that led to Popper and Berlin’s condemnations of universal history – the Second World War, Holocaust and beginnings of the Cold War. But unlike the latter two, Jaspers decided to deliver an entirely new version of universal history. The stark contrast here is a

¹⁸ Ibid, 35.

superficial one. All three were very disturbed by the way that universal history had been handled by Marx. All three believed that its use by Marx had contributed to totalitarianism. But while Popper and Berlin sought to quarantine universal history or simply leave it behind in pursuit of a practical and pluralistic politics, Jaspers thought that the same or similar ends could not be achieved without it. Jaspers uniquely sought not only to move beyond previous versions of universal history, he sought to replace them. The result was a universal history that avoided the structural aspects that had plagued earlier versions: determinism and elitism. This was not a denial that determinism and elitism have played a very major role in human history, which, of course, they have played and still play.

The literature on *The Origin and Goal of History* has neglected that the work is more than a universal history. It was written with a specific political vision in mind, one that Jaspers thought others could more readily share after reading the historical narrative. Briefly, Jaspers wants to suspend any efforts to pursue a “perfectionist” vision of “absolute liberty” for now, and, instead, wants to foster the value of negative liberty. In this he and Berlin and Popper again overlap. His other major political concern to counter the threat of “world empire” with the concept of “world order” as, “the continuation and universalization of political freedom.”¹⁹ In later works, he elaborates these conceptions by insisting that mass civil disobedience up to and including a willingness for self-sacrifice is essential for the attainment of political liberty. His universal history does without any concept of progress or determinism, so it is not as if these values should be held because they have been proven by

¹⁹ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 198.

history. In that sense his history does not simply provide a blueprint for the sort of values or actions that he prescribes. Overall, it is hard to describe how his historical narrative directly connects with his values. However, it is clear that he wanted to supplant any kind of deterministic and total universal history such as that drawn up by Marx. He also wanted to popularize universal history. This was a book written with the intent to reach a large public audience. It is not burdened with academic jargon. This is evidence of its egalitarian intent. The narrative focuses on singular moments in the past that affect everyone in the present: the shift from prehistory to the literate ancient civilizations, the breakdown and transformation of the ancient civilizations in the Axial Age, and the cyclical persistence of empires since. There is no concept of a hierarchy of “civilized” versus “savage”. This structure is meant to avoid presenting a total, final account of humankind’s history.²⁰ Rather, it is meant to present a framework of understanding of universal history that is widely accessible and does not operate as an ultimate doctrine. It is entirely empirical, not, as for instance in St. Augustine’s version, an attempt to make universal history intelligible as the work of God in the world. But it does not require an entirely secular view, ascribing the ultimate question of the origin of consciousness to the empirically unknowable, or to God. In these features, it seems Jaspers’ intent was to foster a participatory readership, where insights from a reader’s own life are welcome, even necessary. Jaspers, in fact, holds the same view as Bellah on the connection between narrative and individual identity, universal history and human identity, though he does not flesh it out as much. This is evident when he writes, “It is not heredity

²⁰ Ibid, 267.

that makes us human, but always the content of a tradition.”²¹ Tradition, or narrative, in this view, operates at a deeper level of the human psyche than concepts. As Jaspers puts it: “there is a trend away from... tradition and toward the point of mere thinking, as though something could be brought forth out of this insubstantial work of reason. It is enlightenment which, itself, no longer enlightens anything, but leads into nothingness.”²²

Jaspers and Bellah agree that the Axial Age was an age of universalization. From China, through India and into Greece there was an abundance of small states or relatively autonomous regions of the ancient empires. It was an age of military and economic turmoil, increased commerce and, as a result of those factors, an increasing awareness of cultural diversity. The result was an erosion of the power of ethnocentric concepts of identity. The evidence of this universalization can be found in the universal religions that arose during this time and never before in human history. For Jaspers, it is very important that this universalization took place alongside a growing awareness of history. The turmoil of the age led people to question existing institutions. This questioning led to awareness of the past, a search for the reasons why such institutions existed and not others. There was a trend toward delegitimization of extant hierarchical institutions. For the first time, egalitarian concepts of social order become important. Egalitarianism here follows from the trend of universalization. Throughout the vast region, in scope and depth it was a time of questioning and innovation such as had never happened before. People began to think universally,

²¹ Ibid, 236.

²² Ibid, 237.

extending their understanding of what is human beyond their own cultures. And they began to think historically – in the terms of common sense, empirical history.

These changes were not because of some inexplicable factor, like a random collision of a cosmic ray with human brains. It was not an advance in biological evolution. It happened because a monolithic structure of power in the ancient empires could not adapt to slow but persistent technological advances and their dissemination. Literacy would likely have been the most important factor. But these changes were not determined by technology, either. Rather new technologies gave a new platform to the fundamental human capacity to call into question and resist the unjust imposition of power. Under the same circumstances, it would have happened in the Andes or in the Kalahari Desert. From these factors alone, one might think the result would have been an understanding of the validity of both a common human identity and individual and cultural particularity.

The Axial Age ended, or was interrupted, with the rise of new empires throughout the Axial regions. Concomitant with the rise of these empires was the development of the universal religions. Each of these reflects the two essential Axial breakthroughs: universality and history. They also reflect the egalitarianism of the Axial Age. But they all do so in combination with an exclusive claim to absolute truth. Universality has been transformed into the universality of all believers in the correct doctrine. History has been transformed from empirical history to an elitist and determinist history – primarily the history of those who believe correctly and what their ultimate rewards will be.

The critiques of universal history by Popper, Berlin and the postcolonialists all share a common target, one that they, however, do not fully recognize. That target is the *false* universality that informs the universal histories of thinkers such as Hegel, Marx, Mill and others. In the case of Hegel and Marx, universal history is deterministic and elitist. The variance is on who is in the elite, a “universal class” or the proletariat, and what end is determined. For Mill, following Comte, it is a European ethnic, “civilized” elite that history shows to be superior to others. None of these can be said to be truly empirical, though they all involve empirical elements to suit their purposes. None of them can be said to function as a narrative framework for all humanity. The universalize only what they want to. If Bellah and Jaspers are right about the way that narrative fosters identity, then none of these can foster a human identity. Conceiving of the Axial Age and differentiating its innovations from their subsequent incorporation into doctrines of absolute truth is in itself an important way that universal history can show what is false in the claims to universality in Hegel, Marx, Mill and others. However, in their critiques, Popper, Berlin and the postcolonialists do not conceive of the possibility of an empirical universal history, i.e. one that is neither determinist nor elitist and, to the greatest extent possible, lets the facts speak for themselves. Jaspers and Bellah have shown that such a history is possible.

The result of the criticism of Popper and Berlin has been to implicitly deny that universal history has any relevance for thought and action that aims to contribute to a just society. Coming decades later, the postcolonial critique reinforces this position. The result has been that for thinking about justice, universal history has become an irrelevance, at best.

Countless examples of this trend exist. Two prominent academic examples can be found in the thought of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. Another example is the thought and action of Gandhi, who is particularly interesting not only for the uniqueness of his approach, but also for his evident effectiveness in real world politics, the actual extent and quality of which is, however, debatable. Though still prevalent and virulent today in the forms of ethnocentric and nationalistic politics and religious fanaticism: understandably, elitist, ethnocentric and deterministic social thought has largely fallen out of fashion in most educated circles around the world. These three thinkers are no exceptions to this trend. They all promote universalist and egalitarian values and ways to work for a world in which these values can be actual. They all, however, appear to do so in a historical vacuum. In the case of Habermas, this may be changing, probably partially due to works such as those of McCarthy and Bellah. Nevertheless, in his formulation of discourse ethics, universal history was not explicitly involved.

Therefore, Rawls, Habermas and Gandhi can serve as examples of contemporary political thinkers for whom universal history is unimportant. In the cases of Rawls and Habermas, it is certainly the influential trend exemplified by Popper and Berlin that accounts the absence in their work of consideration of universal history. In the case of Gandhi, accounting for this absence is possibly less clear, though it probably owes something to the influence of Leo Tolstoy, who himself both advocated civil disobedience and reacted against the trend of connecting universal history with political doctrine, a trend exemplified by Marx. For Rawls and Habermas, universal history is simply not present; it is not important

for the cases they wish to make. Gandhi is more explicit. For him, the essential basis of civil disobedience is *satyagraha*, or truth-force, something he claims is equally accessible to everyone *a priori*. When describing this central, universal concept, he excludes the relevance of universal history: “History then is a record of the interruption of the course of nature. *Satyagraha*, being natural, is not noted in history.”²³ For all three, the universalistic and egalitarian goals they wish to achieve are seen as, or hoped to be, achievable by people with no necessary knowledge of universal history. Ironically, wherever such prime examples of this position are found, they are held by intellectuals who are themselves in possession of a very great amount of historical knowledge.

All three of these thinkers understand universal history to be essentially a purportedly definitive knowledge of a set of facts. On the other hand, for Jaspers and Bellah, universal history seems to mean: the best possible empirical narrative of all events of the past with influence for all humanity that we can recount given the present circumstances of our knowledge of the facts. This is, in other words, a framework for an ongoing collective project of research, debate and rearticulation, rather than a finished product. This contrasts with the tradition of universal histories that Tolstoy, Popper and Berlin opposed, a tradition whose exemplars propounded definitive and complete knowledge.

What then would be the result if such a conception of universal history as narrative were to inform political thought and concepts of justice? No one knows because it has not really been tried. Jaspers’ formulation has been largely ignored and Bellah’s has only

²³ Mahatma Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* (Navajivan Publishing House), 74.

recently appeared. The most essential point is whether narrative fosters identity, whether universal history fosters human identity. Whether, as Bellah puts it, “the self is a telling.” If this is accurate, then universalist and egalitarian values would likely be more amenable to popular comprehension and adoption and in possession of greater motivating capacity. This would be the case because of how narrative functions within the human mind – at a level deeper than concepts – as seen in the frequency of its use in everyday communication and its intrinsic role in children’s mental development.

More should be said about human identity. Human identity would seem, by definition, to be universalist and egalitarian. Bellah’s conception would imply that narrative alone is constitutive of identity and that identities of all kinds, individual identity, group identity or that of humanity as a whole, are possibly not even concepts at all, strictly speaking, as they might be understandable or attainable only through narrative, or through a certain kind of narrative. A more elaborated discussion of this topic, including whether or not these assumptions are true, cannot be encompassed here.

Rawls, Habermas and Gandhi, as examples, propose values or actions that would seem to necessarily depend upon human identity. Such values and actions in the case of each are not specific to any particular group, but essentially universal. This is not to say that each one did not communicate messages that were primarily intended for only one group at times. Even in the case of Gandhi, whose legacy is so closely tied to Indian independence, much of his thought was communicated with the intent and full awareness that it would reach a world audience. But while these thinkers seem to depend upon implicit background understanding

of human identity, they do not rely upon the narrative of universal history for the popular comprehensibility of their proposals. However, all three themselves possessed a very expansive knowledge of world history, possibly the narrative background for their conceptions of justice. If Jaspers and Bellah are right, then this state of affairs would mean that the proposals of these three should exhibit practical difficulties, particularly in terms of popular comprehension, popular adoption and motivating capacity. But if these proposals do exhibit such difficulties, that should not automatically mean that Jaspers and Bellah are right, since their approach remains basically untried.

The proposals of Rawls, Habermas and Gandhi do exhibit these sorts of practical difficulties. Each of these proposals has been prominent for decades and relatively widely disseminated through institutions of higher education. In the case of Rawls, his first principle of justice as fairness is one of “equal basic rights and liberties.” These are not dissimilar from the rights and liberties found in the United States Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights. At first glance these principles would seem to enjoy wide popular comprehensibility and support in the United States and much of the world, at least since the civil rights movements since the 1960s. However, in the United States, the attitudes of whites and blacks concerning treatment by the police has always showed a large disparity in public opinion polls – with blacks always reporting far less confidence in fair treatment by the police.²⁴ This persistent disparity, which has shown no significant improvement in decades, would not be the case if the principle of equal basic rights and liberties was in fact

²⁴ “Americans, Race and Police” (www.gallup.com)

deeply accepted by the American populace as a whole. Another of Rawls' principles, the imperative to reduce inequality of economic outcomes, has garnered only a modest increase in support in the United States public opinion since the 1970s.²⁵ However, over the same period, income inequality has increased dramatically. Rawls postulates that gradually increasing shifts in public opinion around the world could possibly converge upon an "overlapping consensus" that supports Rawls' proposed substantive concepts of justice. This trend, if it exists or will exist, should be investigated empirically. In such studies, it would probably be easy to overestimate actual support for these substantive concepts of justice, because voicing support for them could be socially preferable and in conformity with their endorsement by regimes of power, while authentic understanding of them and deep attachment to them may be difficult for most people to achieve given the systems of domination and indoctrination in which they live.

In the case of Habermas' principles of discourse ethics, it is difficult to ascertain public opinion towards fair rules of public discourse. Empirical studies of this would be warranted, but as of now such studies do not seem to exist. Probably only around a quarter of the US adult population attends even one meeting on local or school affairs each year.²⁶ Whether or not the force of the better argument alone should be given credence is the opinion of what percentage of those who participate in such meetings is impossible to say. For most Americans, the question never arises. If national politics is any indication, the force of the better argument is not a factor held in high regard by most in the US. In the 2016 US

²⁵ "Majority in U.S. Want Wealth More Evenly Distributed" (www.gallup.com)

presidential general election, 76 percent of all television advertisements related to the election were based not on issues but solely on the character of one or both of the candidates.²⁷

Gandhi was probably the world's most important theorist and practitioner of civil disobedience. Not only was he able to motivate an effective mass movement that led to independence for India, he was emulated in other movements, maybe most notably the struggle for civil rights for blacks in the US. One could make an argument that, of all political thinkers who were firmly devoted to both universalist and egalitarian values, he achieved the greatest level of success in practice. Civil disobedience, though it occurs now with much greater regularity in many parts of the world than it did before Gandhi's time, cannot be said to have accomplished anything substantial with regard to threats that have long posed a clear and present danger to humanity generally, such as global climate change and global economic inequality. Only a tiny fraction of all people ever engages in civil disobedience. What might account for this ambiguous legacy?

This is not the place for an exhaustive consideration the vast number of possibly relevant circumstances. However, it seems that one factor might be Gandhi's peculiar and contradictory relationship to universal history. Following the advice of his well-known mantra: "Be the change you wish to see in the world," he himself enters into universal history. Evident to anyone who considers him critically, here is someone who clearly intends

²⁶ "The Current State of Civic Engagement in America," Pew Research Center. (2009) Available online.

to effect, and does to a certain degree effect, a change that is relevant to everyone, in the form of his theory and practice of civil disobedience and its results. Further, since this change is universalistic and egalitarian in intent, it seems to speak to a common human identity. Gandhi himself, in the story of his words and deeds, offers people a glimpse, a relatively brief glimpse, of universal history, a cohesive narrative of humanity. This probably accounts for why some people have wanted to emulate him, and have done so in effective ways. Those relatively few who take the trouble to learn about him can obtain a considerable understanding of his values through the avenue of relatability to him that the narrative of his theories and actions provide. On the other hand, Gandhi refused to enhance the understandability of his values and actions with any significant reference to universal history. A more detailed look than can be afforded here would probably explain this factor with reference to the sharp dichotomy between universal history and justice that is proposed by Tolstoy, a great influence for Gandhi in this respect. Tolstoy's doctrine amounts to the proposition that people simply have the automatic ability to pursue justice, in terms of universal and egalitarian values, without any narrative background understanding of their circumstances, including those circumstances that run contrary to these values. What is required is the catalytic persona of the "enlightened" or charismatic leader. Tolstoy's preferred model for this role was Jesus, as interpreted by Tolstoy. This program was Tolstoy's alternative to the prominent formulations connecting universal history with politics of the nineteenth century, which to him appeared to be obviously disastrous. This model

²⁷ "A Report on Presidential Advertising and the 2016 General Election," University of Maryland Political Advertising Research Center. (2016) Available online.

proposes that civil disobedience be conducted by a few “enlightened” or charismatic leaders and a mass of automata who merely emulate without understanding. On this point, Tolstoy and Gandhi agree by implication. From this perspective, it is not hard to see why Gandhi’s model of civil disobedience, or something like it, has not enjoyed more success than it has.

The examination of these three cases suggests the conclusion that each proposed set of values or actions likely suffers from practical difficulties in terms of popular comprehension, popular adoption and motivating capacity. The alternative, which relies upon the assumption of the unique capacity of narrative to foster identity and understanding at a deeper level than concepts can, would seem to possibly provide an effective means to address these difficulties. Apart from in the thought of Jaspers and Bellah, this conception of narrative has not been considered by any other thinker in this field. Jaspers here provides the prototype, one that Bellah actually does not consider very thoroughly. The central assumption here, however, concerning the capacity of narrative is brought into much sharper focus in Bellah’s work; though it is present, if mainly by implication, in Jaspers’ work.

In terms of orientation towards universalistic and egalitarian values, Jaspers’ thought is compatible with the three cases examined. Like Gandhi, Jaspers, in writings appearing after *The Origin and Goal of History*, elaborated his political theory to place great emphasis on the necessity of civil disobedience. Further, Jaspers and Bellah both seek to enhance the understandability of their proposals with reference to universal history. They do so, however, in a way which should be acceptable to the critics of universal history, as examined above, the liberals Popper and Berlin and the postcolonialists. In this view, universal history

appears as a *modest framework* of understanding, based on empirical fact, open to debate and revision as the circumstances of knowledge of the relevant facts expands through research and changes through critical appraisal. In other words, it differs from all earlier versions by abandoning the pretenses of elitism, total knowledge and prophetic insight into the future. Whether this approach can effectively address the practical difficulties examined above remains to be seen. There are sufficient reasons to assume that it may be able to do so.

II. Jaspers and Politics

Karl Theodor Jaspers began, before the First World War, as an “unpolitical man” for whom political intervention by intellectuals was properly a matter of rarified aesthetics, in the manner of the *George-Kreis*, but he ended, half a century later, by calling for a nonviolent revolution “from below” based on mass civil disobedience.²⁸ This later aim would seek a liberal sphere of democracy supportive of cultural and religious diversity and popular participation. Toward that end, he presents a theory that connects his philosophical conception of the radical

²⁸ Karl Jaspers, “Philosophical Autobiography” in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers* (La Salle: Open Court), 55.

freedom of the faculties of consciousness and conscience to practical political action. This theory is not expressed all at once, but develops from his earliest to latest political writings.

From his psychological work before the First World War until the height of his political involvement in the 1960s, Karl Jaspers' wrote about a vast range of topics of the human experience. Jaspers' political thought is written from the perspective of one who lived through and was swept up in the catastrophes of the first half of the twentieth century: the two World Wars, the fascist and communist totalitarian regimes, the Holocaust and the dropping of the atomic bombs. The reflections upon these events in Jaspers' political works appear there with a high degree of clarity and palpability that, arguably, no other author of that period achieves. Jaspers achieved early fame with this seminal psychological work, *General Psychopathology*, which sought to establish the new field of psychiatry upon foundations cleared of elements of vagary and pseudo-science current within the broader field of psychology. Here one can find his most penetrating critique of Sigmund Freud. Freud was considered by Jaspers to have developed an approach that was wholly dependent upon interpretation of images and experiences to the exclusion of the factual findings of psychology as a science of human behavior. Freud had mistakenly reduced the free human consciousness to animal instincts and drives, much as Marx had reduced it to sheer economic factors. Moreover, Freud was condemned for ruling his school dogmatically and excommunicating dissident psychologists. For Jaspers, Freud's psychotherapy was the consolatory prison of a vain but hopeless shadow of bourgeois life. After the Second World War, Jaspers would characterize Freudianism as "totalitarian" alongside fascism and

communism.²⁹ Jaspers argued here for an approach to therapy which integrated scientific knowledge of human psychology with a sensitivity to the uniqueness of each patient, an awareness of his or her biographical self-understanding. Jaspers was commissioned to write this work primarily because, among his colleagues in psychiatry, he simply had the greatest ability to devote the massive amount of time required by such a broad project. His clinical duties were highly limited owing to his chronic and disabling bronchiectasis.

General Psychopathology, the first edition of which was published in 1913, seems to have immediately attracted the attention of Max Weber, with whom Jaspers subsequently became a close friend. It was in the circle of intellectuals around Weber during the years of the First World War that Jaspers began to consider politics as a field for intellectual intervention. Jaspers attained an appointment to the Heidelberg faculty of philosophy, a move which was made with the embryonic intention to ground his developing political thought in a credentialed philosophical basis. Even until his death, however, he remained for the most part an outsider in German academic philosophical circles, despite his later, immense fame – or, perhaps, to some extent, because of it. Weber’s untimely death shortly preceded Jaspers’ appointment to the philosophy faculty. Jaspers would always remain haunted by Weber’s last words, uttered as he slipped into incoherence and died: “The true is the truth.”

The relationship between the political thought of Weber and Jaspers stands in need of clarification. Scholars are notoriously divided as to how to classify Weber’s political thought. Weber was in favor of parliamentary democracy with freely-contested elections,

²⁹ Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Anti-Reason in Our Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 21-22.

but he also advocated a form of “charismatic leadership” based on his sociological theory of charismatic legitimacy. He decried the “bureaucratization” of contemporary society as a trend leading to anomie and authoritarianism. However, he has also been characterized as authoritarian himself, e.g. by Jürgen Habermas who characterized the decisionist Carl Schmitt as Weber’s “legitimate pupil”.³⁰ Jaspers writes that Weber’s politics “coined my own”, Jaspers qualifies this statement by stating that he had never followed Weber’s nationalistic or militaristic tendencies.³¹ Jaspers was a regular participant in Weber’s “Sundays at home” in which Heidelberg intellectuals would meet to discuss political affairs of the day. The liberal-democratic orientation of this colloquy was well-known at the time. It was during this period, from 1913 to 1920, that Jaspers, inspired by Weber’s example, put aside the role of the “unpolitical man” and began to see politics as a legitimate field for public intellectual activity. A problem arises, however, when one seeks to connect Weber’s political thought with that of Jaspers. Jaspers’ thought should not be open to the same controversies that characterize the scholarly appraisal of Weber’s thought. There are no grounds to characterize Jaspers’ political thought as nationalistic or authoritarian in intent. While Jaspers’ writings about Weber are unique for their effusive praise – Weber is the “Galileo of the *Geisteswissenschaften*” – nevertheless the influence of the latter for Jaspers’ own political thought should not be overestimated. That influence primarily involves two factors: the basic motivation toward public intellectual activity and the desire to warn against ideological extremes and their totalitarian tendencies. Jaspers recounts a meeting of

³⁰ Otto Stammer, ed., *Max Weber and Sociology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), 66.

Weber and Joseph Schumpeter in a Vienna coffeehouse. Schumpeter remarked how pleased he was with the Bolshevik revolution, owing to the fact that now communism would provide a “fine laboratory” in which it would prove itself to be a disaster. Weber became angry and appalled at this, asserting that it could only be “a laboratory filled with mounds of corpses.”³² The association implied by Weber here, connecting extremist ideology and totalitarianism, would become a constant structural feature of Jaspers’ political thought. Jaspers wrote to his parents: “Since I am neither right nor left, I place a value on being connected with the name ‘Max Weber’.”³³ Unlike Weber, however, Jaspers would advocate in his late writings for mass civil disobedience as the foundation for freedom in a democratic community. This late position, from *The Future of Germany*, published in 1966, was only foreshadowed in his most extensive treatment of politics in his *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Mankind* (1958), though there he stressed the necessity of democracy, the dangers of a political culture of blind obedience and the intrinsic value of the Hungarian uprising of 1956. In that work, he wrote an uncharacteristically unclear, even partially contradictory, assessment of Gandhi’s political use of mass civil disobedience. At this point, he was undecided as to whether he should likewise promote mass civil disobedience or not. There he wrote, on a single page, that Gandhi gives the “true answer” and “no answer”.³⁴ In *The Future of Germany*, he

³¹ Karl Jaspers, “Philosophical Autobiography” in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers* (La Salle: Open Court), 57-58.

³² Karl Jaspers, *Three Essays: Leonardo, Descartes, Max Weber* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964), 222.

³³ Karl Jaspers to his parents, June 25th, 1932, Nachlass Karl Jaspers, Familienarchiv.

³⁴ Karl Jaspers, *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Mankind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 39.

delivered his most scathing critique of what he perceived to be the hypocrisies of German politics in the Federal Republic, declaiming: “We are getting nowhere with the web of lies at the core of our national existence.”³⁵ He called for “spontaneous popular action wherever possible” and “a ‘legitimate’ nonviolent revolution from below.”³⁶ Jaspers is emphatic that these movements must come “from below”, and this is not in keeping with Weber’s conception of “charismatic” leadership by exemplary individuals. That concept, however, was never intrinsically involved in Jaspers’ political thought. But, on the other hand, neither was any advocacy of mass civil disobedience before 1966. However, Jaspers would not have found his practical position on civil disobedience in 1966 to be inconsistent with his more theoretical earlier political work. That earlier work, *Man in the Modern Age*, revolves around questions of how to conceive of freedom – timely questions in a Germany on the brink of totalitarianism – whereas, in this later work, Jaspers seeks to describe practical measures. Overall, Jaspers’ great admiration for Weber only translated into two chief components of his political thought: its emphatically public orientation and its opposition to any variety of ideological extreme. Jaspers’ reception should escape the same sort of controversies that surround the interpretation of Weber’s political thought. Jaspers cannot be characterized, as Schmitt has, as an heir to any authoritarian strand in Weber’s thought, because in *Man in the Modern Age*, there are no practical prescriptions for action and, in his later works, he emphasizes participation and civil disobedience.

³⁵ Karl Jaspers, *The Future of Germany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 160.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 74-77.

After the death of Weber, Jaspers soon turned to the young, and as yet unknown, Martin Heidegger. Despite what would later emerge as their irreconcilable differences, the primary factor that welded together the friendship of these two men in the early 1920s could only have been their common self-conception as outsiders within philosophical academia. Jaspers recalls that his first philosophical work, *Psychology of Worldviews*, earned him the reputation in some quarters of being a “dangerous nihilist”. From Heidegger’s critique of that work, comes his conception of the “destruction” of Western philosophy. Both sought in the early 1920s to set out upon radically new paths of thought, and, for several years, this orientation was enough to sustain a friendship. As Heidegger’s thought began to coalesce towards *Being and Time*, however, their differences began to emerge and their friendship began to disintegrate. Jaspers’ judgment upon reading a manuscript of *Being and Time* was that the work was “dictatorial” in orientation.³⁷ In his 1945 letter officially recommending that Heidegger be barred from teaching, Jaspers described his relationship with Heidegger before 1933 as “complicated.” And that is certainly not an understatement given that, as early as 1922, Jaspers recalls being disappointed with the direction Heidegger’s thought was taking. Jaspers recounts a friendship with Heidegger in the 1920s that was fraught with tension.³⁸ In the early 1920s, Heidegger submitted Jaspers’ *Psychology of Worldviews* to a critique that Jaspers felt was merciless and unjust. Jaspers recalls many conversations in which Heidegger was inexplicably moody or taciturn. Though Heidegger dedicated *Being and Time* to Edmund Husserl, he had privately expressed his contempt for Husserl to Jaspers. However, Jaspers also recalls that he and

³⁷ Karl Jaspers, “Letter to the Freiburg University Denazification Committee”, in Richard Wolin, ed., *The Heidegger Controversy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 149.

Heidegger thought to share a unique orientation towards philosophy that, for a time, provided a common ground for their friendship. In a particularly striking instance, Jaspers describes showing Heidegger a letter full of misspellings and grammatical errors from a woman who was clearly going insane. Heidegger shared Jaspers' empathy for the writer's simplistic, yet honest, expression of her anxiety and despair of death. Jaspers concluded that only he and Heidegger among German intellectuals would take such a letter seriously. For Jaspers part, this attitude was in continuity with his appreciative studies of schizophrenic creativity, e.g. in *Strindberg and van Gogh*. But what would take shape as an early aspiration to together form a radical new approach to philosophy would soon devolve for the two men into a panoply of irreconcilable personal, political and philosophical differences.

After publishing *Psychology of Worldviews* in 1919 and then assuming a chair in philosophy at Heidelberg in 1922, Jaspers published nothing for more than a decade, with the exception of works he had prepared before *Psychology of Worldviews* and a short treatise on university education. The latter work, which promoted academic freedom and a distancing of the university from nationalism, Heidegger was rumored to have criticized shortly after its publication as: "the most irrelevant of all irrelevancies of the time."³⁹ Jaspers' lack of publications during this period lead some of his colleagues to the opinion that he was "done for". However, during this period, he was nevertheless preparing two projects which would be published in the early 1930s: *Man in the Modern Age* and the three volumes of *Philosophy*. As a new professor of philosophy – the rare exception of such without a doctorate in philosophy in

³⁸ Karl Jaspers, "Philosophical Autobiography" in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers* (La Salle: Open Court), 75/3.

Germany – Jaspers devoted these years to an extensive reading of the texts of Western philosophy and to teaching courses associated with his new approach. For this period, there is little evidence to document the development of his political views. But it is not hard to find continuity between the inspiration he drew from Weber and his circle and *Man in the Modern Age*. That continuity consists of, as mentioned above, a motivation for public intellectual activity and an opposition to the ideological extremes that commonly characterized politics of the period. Nevertheless, one indicator of Jaspers' political orientation during this period comes in the form of his signature on Magnus Hirschfeld's second petition to repeal paragraph 175 of the German penal code which criminalized homosexuality.⁴⁰ As the perhaps the most prominent voice of psychiatry in Germany, this signature can only be seen as an important public statement, insofar as homosexuality was not only criminalized but also considered a form of mental illness at that time.

Also during the 1920s, Jaspers was working on his first political work, *Die Geistige Situation der Zeit*, translated into English as *Man in the Modern Age*. The aim of that work was to base a criticism of totalitarianism, in both its fascist and communist forms, upon an existential conception of the human condition, i.e. upon a basis that does not postulate a true and essential human nature but rather upon the premise that being truly human, and hence being truly free, is uniquely dependent upon conscious decision, and thus open to infinite interpretations of what it means to be human. Somehow, Jaspers thought, an order in which such differing conceptions can peaceably coexist must be attained. With this Jaspers sought to replace Marx's conception

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 75/5.

⁴⁰ Tamagne, Florence. *A History of Homosexuality in Europe* (Algora Publishing, 2004), 61.

of alienation, a conception that necessarily implied a true, essential and singular human nature from which all humans are historically alienated. Such a view, Jaspers thought, cannot but support an unfree social order, insofar as it serves as a claim to exclusive access to the “science of society” which would serve to bring about universal and total emancipation from all oppression, but at the cost of eliminating all differing conceptions of the meaning of being human. Though he does not use the term, this is the first work to attempt a theoretical critique of totalitarianism. His aim here is primarily critical – he does not prescribe any particular institutions or actions to meet the threat of totalitarianism. There is no endorsement of organized, mass resistance or of liberal democratic order. The absence of any such prescriptions surely owes itself to the fact that, in the turbulent atmosphere of the late 1920s, there was no entirely certain understanding of how the pandemic economic excesses and crises and the tremendous social inequalities of industrialized countries could be addressed without violence. On the contrary, extremist ideologies prescribing violent means of reform were all too common. It was only later that the innovations of the contemporary welfare state and organized, mass civil disobedience gradually developed as formulas for addressing the economic turmoil and social inequalities that stemmed from the profound transformation of societies that underwent industrialization.

Jaspers has been characterized as an opponent of parliamentary democracy in *Man in the Modern Age*. No criticism of parliamentary democracy appears in that work, however. There is a sharp criticism of parliamentary democracy in his works from the Federal Republic period, but that criticism is based on his view that parliamentary democracy in Germany was, at that time, hypocritical in the sense that it was not democratic, i.e. not representative, enough. The claim

that *Man in the Modern Age* presents such a criticism is based on the implication that Jaspers was, in some fashion which goes unelaborated in these accounts, an authoritarian opponent of democracy at this time. In an essay on Jaspers' appropriation of Kierkegaard, Istvan Czako claims that *Man in the Modern Age* contains a "carefully worked out critique of parliamentary democracy."⁴¹ Chris Thornhill in his book, *Karl Jaspers: Politics and Metaphysics*, makes the same claim; that there is, in his words, an "attack on parliamentary democracy" in *Man in the Modern Age*.⁴² Neither Czako nor Thornhill provide any quote or citation that substantiates their claim – and this is due to the fact that such a passage cannot be found anywhere in that book. One would think that such a remarkable claim would at least warrant one quote or citation. Moreover, Thornhill tries to characterize as Jaspers as expressing a conservative ideology here, claiming that Jaspers, "shows a certain proximity to the ideas of Schmitt, Spengler and Heidegger."⁴³ This is also mistaken insofar as those thinkers did not articulate a criticism of totalitarianism while Jaspers did so. Furthermore, parts of *Man in the Modern Age* can just as easily, and misleadingly, be favorably compared with some elements of Marxist thought, insofar as Marx also decries the oppressive nature of mechanical regimentation in society. In fact the, still erroneous, comparison with Marxist thought would be closer to the truth than the comparison with right-wing thought, owing to factors such as the complete lack of any "blood and soil" nationalistic element in the work at all and the presence of a penetrating condemnation of "anthropological" theories of racial hierarchies. But neither comparison is useful in characterizing Jaspers' political thought here, because what Jaspers is explicitly trying to argue

⁴¹ Istvan Czako, "Karl Jaspers: A Great Awakener's Way to Philosophy of Existence," in Jon Steward, ed., *Kierkegaard and Existentialism* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), 160.

⁴² Chris Thornhill, *Karl Jaspers: Politics and Metaphysics* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 2.

for is an orientation of thought that avoids ideological extremes. Scholarship on Jaspers' political thought should avoid trying to ascribe a position for him in any one ideological camp or another.

The tendency to make such an ascription may have started with Hans Gadamer, who presents the only such characterization by one who actually knew Jaspers. For that reason, Gadamer's characterization is all the more remarkable. Gadamer, in an interview, stated that *Man in the Modern Age* "smacked a little of Nazism" and that "Jaspers did satisfy certain requirements of the Nazis" in that book.⁴⁴ This characterization is unfair, however. Jaspers explicitly intends the work to form a warning against the totalitarian results of undemocratic ideologies:

Bolshevism and fascism present themselves as easier possibilities [than a simple sense of mundane responsibility]. Let us learn once more to obey without question; let us content ourselves with a set of easy catchwords; let us, meanwhile, leave action to some all-powerful individual who has seized the reins of government! These forms of dictatorship are substitutes for true authority, achieved at the cost of renouncing, on the part of almost all of us, the right to be ourselves.⁴⁵

Nothing in the work qualifies this essential statement of clear opposition to both fascism and Bolshevism. Gadamer's opinion in this case must be seen alongside his completely false claim that Jaspers was the driving intellectual force behind Heidegger's 1933 rectoral address. That claim can be proven to be false through examination of the correspondence between the two men. This issue is examined in detail, below. Even without evidence from the correspondence,

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Century of Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2006), 120-121.

⁴⁵ Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: Doubleday, 1957), 98.

nothing in Jaspers' works is similar to Heidegger's rectoral address. The basis for Gadamer's comments, if it does not arise from some lingering personal animosity, appears to be inexplicable.

While *Man in the Modern Age* presents no practical prescriptions for political action, a closer look at the work in the context of the development of Jaspers' thought shows that the allegation of authoritarian intent is untenable. Jaspers recalls that the politically liberal orientation of his father and family left an indelible mark on him. Jaspers' father was a prosperous banker and held various political positions in Oldenburg. When asked to stand for election to the Reichstag, he declined, however, owing to his distrust of the idea of a German *Reich* in general and his loathing for Bismarck and Prussian militarism in particular. It was such sentiments that led his father to the opinion that Oldenburg should have been part of the Netherlands. The circle around Weber, despite a very dense complexity of views, was predicated upon a basic, shared conception of the legitimacy of at least some degree of parliamentary democracy. In the late 1920s, Jaspers wrote to Heidegger expressing his admiration for the United States, implying that Jaspers might rather live in the United States than in Germany. This sentiment was met with silence by Heidegger, but it could have only provoked his disapproval, given his characterization of the United States as a dismal product of the broad trend of "Western nihilism". In this work, Jaspers does not provide any suggestions for political action. It seems unlikely that he could have envisioned anything like the call for mass civil disobedience that he issued in the 1960s at this time. What comes closest to a criticism of democracy here is Jaspers' warning against mass public opinion – but only insofar as it is itself illiberal and undemocratic. Much of the work is devoted to criticism of the "bureaucratization",

in Weber's sense, or mechanical regimentation of society, a trend, in Jaspers' view, the outcome of which is a priming of the masses of the people for unthinking submission to ideological demagogues. In these regards Jaspers was quite prescient of 1933 and Hitler's rise to power through democratic means. Similarly, in 1935, a plebiscite in the Saar region, then under League of Nations control, resulted in 90.8 percent of votes in favor of joining Nazi Germany, against the urgings of anti-Nazi Germans who had migrated to the region to escape Hitler's regime. Jaspers warns against "successful demagogues able to intoxicate the masses", but he does not think that the mass of the population is inherently and essentially unfit to govern itself, given the existence of adequate democratic institutions. Rather, he locates the factors that are deleterious to liberal democracy in forms of oppression, i.e. mechanical regimentation of society or "bureaucratization". His outlook is prescient of the rise of totalitarianism under Hitler: "the state-will becomes a dictatorial re-establishment of unity, authority, and obedience, as a result of which (the sense of the state having become fanatical in its intensity) human liberty will be lost, and there will remain nothing but the force of crude brutality."⁴⁶

In May, 1933 Heidegger assumed the office of rector of Freiburg University and joined the Nazi party. In late June, he visited Heidelberg to deliver a speech to a student association entitled "The University in the New *Reich*".⁴⁷ Jaspers describes the speech as a "program for the National Socialist renewal of the universities." While the student audience fêted Heidegger with an ecstatic standing ovation, Jaspers, disgusted by the speech, remained seated in the front row and did not applaud. That night, Heidegger stayed at Jaspers' house. Over dinner, Jaspers

⁴⁶ Ibid., 108.

thought to confront Heidegger with pointed questions about his recent allegiance to the Nazi party. When asked about the Nazis' propaganda concerning the "elders of Zion", Heidegger responded that: "there really is a dangerous international fraternity of Jews." And, when asked how someone as uneducated as Hitler could lead a nation of culture such as Germany, Heidegger responded: "education does not matter. Just see his wonderful hands."⁴⁸ This would be their last meeting.

This conversation is the immediate background of Jaspers' most problematical political work, his "Theses on University Reform". Its twenty-seven typed manuscript pages bear some resemblances to Heidegger's rectoral address, "The Self-Assertion of the German University." It can only be these resemblances that led Gadamer to claim in an interview that: "a portion of Heidegger's rectoral address stems from Jaspers... It's common knowledge that the ideas of labor service, military service, education service and so on – all of that is Jaspers."⁴⁹ The correspondence between the two men shows, however, that Jaspers wrote the "Theses" only after reading Heidegger's rectoral address. Moreover, he notified Heidegger that this document had been written, but he did not send it, but instead filed it away and waited to send it should Heidegger request it. Heidegger did not request the document, indicating that he was not interested in Jaspers' views.⁵⁰ The "Theses", however, were written by Jaspers in order to

⁴⁷ Martin Heidegger, "The University in the New *Reich*" in Richard Wolin, ed., *The Heidegger Controversy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 43-45.

⁴⁸ Karl Jaspers, "Philosophical Autobiography" in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers* (La Salle: Open Court), 75 8/9.

⁴⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Century of Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2006), 122.

⁵⁰ Hans Saner, "Jaspers' 'Theses' on the Question of University Rejuvenation (1933): A Critical Comparison with Heidegger's 'Rectorial Address'", in Richard Wisser and Leonard H. Ehrlich, eds., *Karl Jaspers: Philosopher among Philosophers* (Konigshausen and Neumann), 139.

influence Heidegger's policies as rector, and, hopefully, through him, to influence university education throughout Germany. Since Heidegger never read the "Theses" and since Jaspers wrote the document after Heidegger's rectoral address, Gadamer's claim that Jaspers was influential for Heidegger's address cannot be valid. The "Theses" document remained in Jaspers' files and unknown to the public until after his death.

Jaspers wrote the "Theses on University Reform" in July, 1933 when Jewish faculty of Heidelberg University, including two of Jaspers' friends, had already been removed from their teaching positions by the regime, new deans acceptable to the regime had taken office and new restrictions upon Jewish students were already in place.⁵¹ A government notice of reward had already been issued by this time publically calling for the murder of Theodor Lessing, a critic of the regime and Jewish former student of Edmund Husserl who had recently fled to Czechoslovakia. Jaspers' letter to Heidegger concerning the "Theses" asserts that the document is, "not in conflict... with the proposals heard up until now from the government side."⁵² The new anti-Semitic policies go completely unmentioned. Nothing in the document is explicitly opposed to the oppressive measures already underway against Jews in German universities nor opposed to the new constitution of the University of Heidelberg which was instrumental in handing power over the university into to the Nazis. This has led Hans Saner, Jaspers' last research assistant, biographer, and editor of his correspondences and notes, to claim that this

⁵¹ Ibid., 150.

⁵² Ibid.

document stands as evidence of the fact that Jaspers, “not only misjudged reality but suppressed it.”⁵³

How could Jaspers, with his repugnance for Heidegger’s Heidelberg June, 1933 speech outlining plans to advance the Nazi takeover of the universities, and his polemic against totalitarianism in *Man in the Modern Age*, suddenly decide to work in cooperation with the Nazis? It is as if Jaspers had asked himself: “how can one convince the Nazis to structure education policy in such a way that is both attractive to them and that provides a space for resistance to them?” The “Theses” are Jaspers attempt to answer this question, the premise of which is itself impossible. If this document had been presented before 1933 or after 1945, it could not have been seen, as it rightly has been by Saner and others, to represent a “suppression of reality” on Jaspers’ part and, hence, an intent to contribute to authoritarianism. The similarities with Heidegger’s rectoral address and the few words of praise that Jaspers expressed to Heidegger about that address, when compared with the substance of the “Theses” are attempts at superficial ingratiation while the proposals of the “Theses” themselves attempt to insulate universities from political control and promote academic freedom. Had any of Jaspers suggestions actually been adopted, however, it seems highly unrealistic to assume they would have produced any of his intended effects at all given the totalitarian nature of the regime.

The differences between Heidegger’s rectoral address and Jaspers’ “Theses” reveal that these two documents arise from opposed political orientations. On the surface, Heidegger’s address is full of nationalistic references evocative of, in his words, the “soil and blood” of the

⁵³ Ibid.

German *Volk*.⁵⁴ Jaspers “Theses” on the other hand only contain a few, vague nationalistic overtones, e.g. “German science”. The central issue is their difference on the concept of academic freedom, since where any of their plans intersect the plane of actual politics is at the point where the question arises whether the universities are to retain any academic freedom or not. For Heidegger, this question is decided wholly in favor of control of the universities under the totalitarian *Führerprinzip*. As he says:

The much praised ‘academic freedom’ is being banished from the German university; for this freedom was false, because it was only negating. It meant predominantly lack of concern, arbitrariness in one’s intentions and inclinations, lack of restraint in everything one does.⁵⁵

Jaspers, on the other hand, is unequivocal in his principled defense of academic freedom:

Since ancient times scholars have demanded that their research and teaching be free. This freedom means that scientific development can receive its commitment, its goal and its path only through itself out of the ground shared by the people, for whom there can be no authority other than the illumination brought about by true knowledge itself.⁵⁶

Jaspers even goes further, recommending a more democratic and egalitarian notion of academic freedom than that extant in the already compulsively hierarchical German university before the Nazi seizure of power:

⁵⁴ Martin Heidegger, “The Self-Assertion of the German University” in Richard Wolin, ed., *The Heidegger Controversy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 34.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Karl Jaspers, “Rejuvenation of the Universities?”, in Richard Wisser and Leonard H. Ehrlich, eds., *Karl Jaspers: Philosopher among Philosophers* (Konigshausen and Neumann), 314.

The bond based on freedom between teacher and student cannot come about through coercion. It needs, instead, a relationship that is Socratic in intention, without authority, but with both parties formally on one level.⁵⁷

Jaspers' concrete recommendations even extend to measures which would be considered progressive by twenty-first century standards:

The number of attendance hours at lectures and workshops must be reduced for the individual student... It is necessary to do away with all obligatory syllabuses, required course sequences, and attendance records.⁵⁸

For Jaspers, these plans are, as he says, "aristocratic." For Jaspers that term did not equate to any kind of imperative for the leadership of a hereditary caste of nobility – such a concept is nowhere to be found in Jaspers' political thought. This term, which also crops up in his correspondence with Heidegger and *Man in the Modern Age*, can easily be a source of confusion. What Jaspers meant by the term "aristocracy" is more properly understood in the literal sense of "rule by the best" or "meritocracy", presupposing a background of democratic equality of opportunity. Jaspers' recommendations that professors and students be considered "formally on one level" and his proposals that would have radically loosened the academic strictures upon students are elements of this liberal and egalitarian intent. On the quintessential issue of academic freedom, Jaspers' proposals could not be more opposed to Heidegger's desire that the university become a mechanism of "the new *Reich* that Chancellor Hitler will bring to reality."⁵⁹

Aside from the issue of academic freedom, comparison of Heidegger's address and Jaspers' "Theses" can become confounded upon their similar uses of the terms "labor service"

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 322.

and “military service” or “military sport”. What is essentially at issue here is whether students of German universities could be further disciplined and regimented along authoritarian lines. As mentioned above, Gadamer credits the presence of these terms in Heidegger’s address to Jaspers. Despite the fact that this is not possible because Heidegger never saw, nor wanted to see, Jaspers’ “Theses”, these terms had already been introduced into university life before either man wrote about them. Hans Saner writes that the application of these terms to university life stems from Heidegger, although this is implausible since even in the late 1920s these concepts were part of Nazi party programs. But when Saner depicts Heidegger as their foremost academic ideologue, he is likely correct, insofar as Heidegger’s May, 1933 rectoral address emphasizes the necessity of these elements in university life in grandiose terms.⁶⁰ German student associations, following the Nazi Party line, instituted compulsory labor service for university students in June, 1933. When Jaspers wrote the “Theses” in July, 1933, he accepted these new, authoritarian measures, but sought to limit their impact on student intellectual development. It seems reasonable to assume Jaspers thought he stood no chance of expressing outright opposition to these measures. He writes:

The discipline and attitude brought about by labor service and military sport are not to be imitated or repeated in scientific education... a separation in time will become necessary... between the labor service and military service on the one hand and the period of study on the other.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Martin Heidegger, “The University in the New *Reich*” in Richard Wolin, ed., *The Heidegger Controversy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 45.

⁶⁰ Hans Saner, *Ibid.*, 146.

⁶¹ Karl Jaspers, “Rejuvenation of the Universities?”, in Richard Wisser and Leonard H. Ehrlich, eds., *Karl Jaspers: Philosopher among Philosophers* (Konigshausen and Neumann), 326-327.

Saner interprets Jaspers on this point as saying: “there you have drill and coercion, both of which are inimical to intellectual labor.”⁶² Heidegger, in contrast, thought these measures should “pervade all of student existence” and would thereby contribute to the “*Volksgemeinschaft*”.⁶³

The question remains, however, to what extent is his “Theses” document in the situation in which it arose indicative of Jaspers’ own political views and the development of his political thought? It is clear that, despite its intent to protect academic freedom, the timing of the document could only have contributed to strengthening a regime that would invariably have bent any and all measures it adopted to its own ends. Further, if anything from the document was adopted, this could only have compromised Jaspers’ own intellectual reputation by involving himself with the regime. As Saner says, the fact that Jewish faculty had already begun to be removed when Jaspers wrote this document signals Jaspers’ sheer “suppression of reality.” Unlike at any other time in his career, this incident represents a contradiction between his political thought and his practical activity. There is nothing to signal that either the polemic intent of his prescient *Man in the Modern Age* or his generally liberal democratic outlook of earlier years had diminished. Nor would his later political writings centering on themes of reason, responsibility and liberal democracy present any theoretical reversal of the liberal spirit of the “Theses”. Still, how can such a tremendous suppression of reality in practice not, at least to some degree, call into question his invariable opposition to authoritarianism in theory?

⁶² Hans Saner, *Ibid.*, 146.

⁶³ Martin Heidegger, “The Self-Assertion of the German University” in Richard Wolin, ed., *The Heidegger Controversy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 35.

Jaspers' inchoate career as a public intellectual was brought to an abrupt halt by the rise of the Hitler regime in Germany. Published in 1931, *Man in the Modern Age* would be Jaspers' last explicit foray into the political realm until after the defeat of Nazi Germany by the Allied forces. Jaspers was forced into retirement in 1937 and banned from publishing in 1943. But, even during the decade between Hitler's rise to power in 1933 and his publishing ban, Jaspers felt that any overt public resistance on his part to the Nazi regime would endanger the life of his Jewish wife, Gertrude, as well as his own. Officially requested by the government to obtain a divorce, and while other such marriages between Germans and Jews were terminating under political pressure, Jaspers refused to abandon his wife. Though he and Gertrude made attempts to arrange suitable conditions for emigration, all of these ultimately resulted in failure. Conditions of life were meagre for German exiles in many cases, and, compounded with Karl Jaspers' already frail health, he and Gertrude felt his life under such conditions would be gravely endangered. Jaspers later recounted that he felt his best chance for exile, appointment to Princeton University, had been stymied by Albert Einstein's refusal to write the requested letter of recommendation. He and Gertrude concluded between themselves a suicide pact, to be carried out when their deportation to the camps became imminent. They were narrowly spared this fate by the liberation of Heidelberg in March, 1945 by American forces.

Determined not to be left "empty-handed" should Germany be liberated, Jaspers used the years from his forced retirement in 1937 until 1945 to work on the foundations of his later thought. The period from 1945 until his death in 1969 would see his assumption of the paramount role of a virtual *Praeceptor Germaniae* and his rise to fame throughout the world except for in those countries under communist rule. His numerous works of this period would

regularly top the popular best-seller lists. Not long after 1945, he remarked to Hannah Arendt that the massive sales figures of his books had pushed him into the highest tax bracket. After his death, however, his name almost immediately sank virtually everywhere into complete oblivion.

After the war, Jaspers and Hannah Arendt resumed their exchange of letters. Arendt, despite her own limited resources, regularly sent food and medicine to Jaspers and his wife. This act of kindness, more than any other factor, led to a close, life-long friendship. After he and Gertrude moved to Basel, Switzerland in 1948, Arendt would pay them numerous visits in the subsequent two decades. Arendt was greatly instrumental in facilitating the translation and publication of many of Jaspers' works in English. However, an examination of their correspondence indicates that their development of their political works proceeded independently. In his last letter to Arendt which includes any substantive discussion of political thought, Jaspers was still struggling to explain aspects of Max Weber's thought that had been foundational for his own thought. Jaspers would always continue, as he humorously put it, to play "schoolmaster" to Arendt. What emerges from the correspondence as uniting Jaspers and Arendt more than any aspect of philosophy, and despite political differences, seems to be a shared sympathy for the struggle for civil courage in times of crisis.

A pivotal moment in Jaspers' thinking can be seen in correspondence with Arendt from 1953 concerning Senator Joseph McCarthy's investigation of intellectuals suspected of holding communist sympathies. Jaspers writes: "an unimaginable stupidity must have taken hold in the

USA. It frightens us because we are familiar with it.”⁶⁴ At this time Jaspers was one of the honorary presidents of the Congress on Cultural Freedom, an office held at one time by other prominent intellectuals including John Dewey, Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre. The Congress for Cultural Freedom was active at the height of the Cold War in promoting an international intellectual culture of liberal democracy in countries not under communist control – it was later revealed to have been secretly funded by the Central Intelligence Agency. Jaspers became disillusioned with the organization as some of its leaders, e.g. Sidney Hook, publicly expressed toleration for McCarthy’s activities and condemnation of his critics such as Albert Einstein. In a letter to Arendt from May, 1953 Jaspers expresses his lack of confidence in the Congress for Cultural Freedom.⁶⁵

This expression of this sentiment corresponds to a shift in the development of Jaspers’ political thought after the Second World War. While the persistent themes of authoritarianism and totalitarianism that are involved in all of his political thought continue up to the end, at this point, his thinking, which up until now had placed great weight on “reason, this comprehensive power of communication,”⁶⁶ would begin to shift, following upon his increasing skepticism of liberal democracy, toward his major final political work, *The Future of Germany*, with its acute criticism and call for civil disobedience. His political works from the latter half of the 1940s, *The European Spirit*, *The Origin and Goal of History*, and *Reason and Anti-Reason in Our Time* can be characterized as constituting his period of “communicative reason”. The earliest

⁶⁴ Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, eds., *Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926-1969* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1992), 220.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁶⁶ Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Anti-Reason in Our Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 76.

indication of this shift comes from his 1954 article, “The Political Vacuum in Germany,” in which, concerning the prospects of democracy in the Federal Republic, he admits to, “being overcome by a terrible pessimism.”⁶⁷ This work follows shortly upon the correspondence with Arendt concerning McCarthyism. In this work he took the unpopular stance of opposing German reunification and plans underway for West Germany’s rearmament. He took the urge to reunification, which was in fact impossible given East Germany’s role as a Soviet satellite state, to be a “longing for the glory of the past *Reich*” rather than based upon a public opinion that supported genuine democracy. Jaspers finds that political culture in West Germany had yet not overcome its deeply-seated desire for a “great leader”.⁶⁸ His implication is that, in such a situation, reunification and rearmament could only work in favor of the perpetuation of that cultural trait. In terms of the development of his political thought, here for the first time one can see Jaspers discuss themes of obedience and participation. He contends that the Bismarck’s suppression of domestic democratic tendencies resulted in a culture of obedience that persists in the present, while neighboring countries, the Netherlands and Switzerland, though culturally similar to Germany, escaped this fate.⁶⁹ He introduces for the first time in his works a dichotomy between a culture of political participation and a culture of obedience:

Popular participation in politics may be part of daily life, reflected in the general attitude, in the acceptance of joint responsibility, in equal rights, in neighborliness; or politics may remain outside daily life due to the emphasis on hierarchies or because political intercourse consists of giving and obeying orders.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Karl Jaspers, “The Political Vacuum in Germany”, in *Foreign Affairs* (July, 1954), 606.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 599.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 599-602.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 600.

The echoes of the principle of this dichotomy would intensify into his later advocacy of civil disobedience. For a short time, as a president of the Congress for Cultural Freedom he would play the role of a standard bearer for the “free world”, but in the early 1950s he ceased to fit that part as his political thought assumed a more skeptical and radical dimension.

An early signal of that later attitude, however, appears immediately after the Second World War in the form of his *Schuldfrage*, or as it has been translated into English, *The Question of Germany Guilt*. This marks his departure from the style of *Man in the Modern Age*, which was directed at the *Bildungsbürgertum*, and the adoption of a literary style that sought “the broadest possible audience.” The book is based on a series of lectures Jaspers delivered at Heidelberg University in the months following the end of the war. Its contents include a description of various types of guilt he thought relevant to the situation in Germany following the Holocaust. The most important of these for his later political thought is the concept of moral guilt. He argues that the absence of a capacity to feel moral guilt is a necessary factor in maintaining the culture of obedience that he sees solidifying under Bismarck and permeating German politics up to the present. The picture he presents is one in which the majority of the German population is conditioned by an attitude of unquestioning obedience to state power, a situation in which indifference and irresponsibility toward political reality prevail.⁷¹ His association between unquestioning obedience and the inability to assume a sense of responsibility foreshadows his later political thought:

⁷¹ Karl Jaspers, *Basic Philosophical Writings* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2000), 403.

Political unfreedom... obeys on the one hand, and feels not guilty on the other. Feeling guilty and hence knowing oneself to be liable is the beginning of the inner upheaval which seeks to actualize political freedom.⁷²

His *Guilt* lectures packed the auditorium at Heidelberg, but he was dismayed by the audiences' reactions, complaining to Arendt, "never before 1937 did I experience so little of a kindly attitude toward me in the auditorium as I do now... Communists call me a forward guard of National Socialism; the sullen losers [the Nazis], a traitor to my country."⁷³ He also received numerous appreciative private letters and reviews in the press.⁷⁴ Continuing in the vein of *Man in the Modern Age*, he adopts an orientation that eschews ideological extremes. On the question of moral guilt, he was clearly aiming at ordinary Germans who had collaborated or inactively felt solidarity with the Nazis (the Nazi officials themselves he classified under political or criminal guilt). Subsequent research has shown what could only have been common knowledge in Germany at that time: that a large portion of Gestapo investigations had arisen from denunciations made by ordinary Germans.⁷⁵ His emphasis on his theoretical connection between consciousness of moral guilt and political liberty, which appears for the first time here, would go on to play a prominent role in his political thought from 1953 in its central conception of responsibility. His attitude of radical moral confrontation, first displayed here but held in abeyance for the rest the 1940s and early 1950s, would again become manifest in the period of his *Atom Bomb* book and his *Future of Germany*. In the late 1980s, German intellectuals would

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, eds., *Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926-1969* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1992), 58.

⁷⁴ Mark W. Clark, "A Prophet without Honor: Karl Jaspers in Germany, 1945-48), 212.

⁷⁵ Gellately, Richard, "The Gestapo and German Society: Political Denunciation in the Gestapo Case Files" (*Journal of Modern History*, December 1988), 662-664.

debate the interpretation of Nazism and the Holocaust in Germany's history. Jürgen Habermas, playing a leading role in what would become known as the *Historikerstreit*, would claim that Jaspers' conception of collective moral guilt for the tragedies of that period should continue to be affirmed by Germans.⁷⁶ Jaspers' conception of moral guilt has subsequently contributed to other countries' discussions of coming to terms with histories of atrocities and other forms of oppression. In that regard it has been by far the most actively received aspect of Jaspers' political thought – where almost the entire remainder has gone virtually completely unnoticed, both in the public sphere and in academia, since his death.

In his 1957 work, *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Mankind*, Jaspers orients a broad survey of contemporary world politics around the pivotal question: how can political liberty endure in a global situation where the risk of totalitarianism is, where not already manifested in extant communist regimes, always a potential lurking beneath the surface of constitutional democracies? For Jaspers, the problem with democracy is that democratic institutions and democratic politicians are never alone sufficient for its preservation. Jaspers observes in democracies a suicidal tendency which can lead to the loss of liberty through its own procedures, looking to the free elections of 1933 in Germany as a prime example, concerning which Hitler gloried in having, “defeated insane democracy by its own insanity.”⁷⁷ This leads him to conclude that: “No democratic form of government can guarantee the democratic idea.”⁷⁸ Thus Jaspers seeks a factor outside of democratic government, beyond its institutions and politicians,

⁷⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The New Conservatism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 233.

⁷⁷ Karl Jaspers, *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Mankind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 303.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 294.

which must serve as its foundation. In so doing, one can see him continuing to develop the theme of contrast between a culture of obedience and a culture of participation that he broached in “The Political Vacuum in Germany”. But, at this point, he is not yet ready to call for a nonviolent revolution based on civil disobedience. What one observes here, rather, are the principles that framework that later appeal. As Jaspers was writing this book, he observed with bitter anguish the brutal Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising of 1956. He also took inspiration from the courage of the Hungarian resistance, writing to Arendt: “I wouldn’t have thought it possible that a people could still do today what the Hungarians have done... It will have consequences.”⁷⁹ Hungary was an example, he thought, of a struggle for freedom that can serve as a foundation which makes democracy possible. Such struggles necessarily involve the courage to risk or sacrifice one’s own life on the part of individuals, and not merely to obey orders or to avoid punishment, but, crucially, in the service of one’s own conscience and in solidarity with others. The other side of this view was his earlier position that the culture of obedience in Germany since Bismarck had the tendency to supplant following one’s own conscience, in full acceptance of the responsibility for the consequences, with a tendency to merely obey the orders of established power. That culture of obedience, Jaspers thought, detached individuals from a sense of responsibility for their own actions. Individuals should be motivated to participate in politics on the basis of something that they view as above politics, for Jaspers’ the “suprapolitical”, or what their conscience tells them is right. This, he argues, is unlike the role of the religious fanatic, who, also willing to die for what he thinks is right, would

⁷⁹ Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, eds., *Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926-1969* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1992), 304.

do so without a sense of responsibility for the community and world in which he lives.⁸⁰ Such a religious fanatic might be thought of merely rigidly obeying a law that he thinks is of divine origin and thus not essentially different than an obedient political subject. Likewise, a sacrifice of one's life would be a waste if it is done in circumstances where it could not become known to others, where its purpose would go unknown in the absence of publicity and solidarity.⁸¹

Gandhi's non-violent civil disobedience is presented as an exemplar, though not one that Jaspers' thinks is practical when faced with totalitarianism. Gandhi, nevertheless, risked his life to promote civil disobedience in face of possible state violence by a "liberal" British Empire and was effective under those circumstances. When faced with totalitarian oppression, however, only violent means of revolt stand any chance of being effective:

The subjection of Hungary has shown to the dullest eye that the totalitarian Russian terror would have preferred Hungary as a desert to Hungary free. Against total violence there is no help in less violence, nor in non-violence.⁸²

The kind of struggles, violent or non-violent, that Jaspers points to as exemplars all involve a struggle for freedom against oppression, motivated by reasons of conscience that are publically displayed, at the real risk of life, and in solidarity with others. The power of such struggles, he claims, and they must involve all of those factors, is that they send a message of ultimate responsibility, responsibility to reasons of conscience even at the expense of one's own life. Whether they are or are not effective in achieving their immediate ends, they set an example that commands attention and inspires emulation:

⁸⁰ Karl Jaspers, *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Mankind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 43.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 40.

Hence the convulsion that spread suddenly through Europe and America after the Hungarian revolt, the all but unprecedented unanimity in the awakening consciousness of human dignity and the experience of its total peril! Such an experience is like a hurricane sweeping the minds... Conscience stirs the world over, though politically and militarily the world is just looking on. Independently of religions, classes, and interests, man responds to the event as a human being.⁸³

Though the Hungarian uprising was not successful, it surely cast doubt upon Jaspers' earlier contention, in *The Origin and Goal of History*, that totalitarianism cannot be overcome from within. Jaspers' point here is that, even when it is unsuccessful, such an uprising's effects spiral beyond the immediate locus of the event – its immediate defeat may lead to its ultimate success. And, one might argue, that Hungary's ultimate consequences were the revolutions of 1989 in communist countries. The principle of emulation here extends to democratic regimes. It is not, therefore, for Jaspers, the institutions and leaders of already democratic regimes that ensure democracy, though they are necessary for its operation. It is rather a political culture shared by the populace that, in emulation of such struggles for freedom, cycles continuously between responsibility and criticism. In solidarity as a democratic community, the people must accept joint responsibility for their state's actions, even at the possible risk of their lives.⁸⁴ But, on the other hand, they must criticize the state and be poised to struggle against it, here too at the possible risk of their lives.⁸⁵ Though democratic education plays a role in this, it is not so much such planned education that Jaspers sees as crucial as it is the spontaneous process of emulation which simply happens through public communication.⁸⁶ Jaspers' conception of democracy is appears to be one that presupposes a universal background for democracy in human conscience

⁸³ Ibid., 29-30.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 310.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 303.

that is stimulated in instances of struggle for freedom. These principles set the framework for his later advocacy of civil disobedience, however here they seem to be presented in an inchoate state of their formulation, demanding that the reader piece together themes from distant chapters of a very densely detailed book.

His 1966 work, *Wohin treibt die Bundesrepublik?*, translated in English as *The Future of Germany*, presents the final position in the development of Jaspers' political thought. Notably, after its publication, he would advocate for gay liberation in Germany by contributing an original essay to the 1969 volume which became the bible of that movement, *Weder Krankheit noch Verbrechen*. Jaspers, aged eighty-six, died in 1969 in Basel. He remained politically active until the end. Upon renouncing his German citizenship in protest of the former Nazi Kurt Georg Kiesinger's appointment as German chancellor, he became a citizen of Basel in 1966. *The Future of Germany* contains scathing, detailed criticism of the Federal Republic's foreign and domestic policies. In a letter, Arendt showered Jaspers with effusive praise. She publically reviewed the work as "the most important book published in Germany since the Second World War". East German head of state Walter Ulbricht promptly banned the book in East Germany, based on excerpts appearing in *Der Spiegel* before publication. The book immediately became a media sensation in Germany and topped the bestseller lists. But Jaspers lamented to Arendt that it had sold only one fifth as many copies in its first month as had another recent bestseller, Peter

⁸⁶ Ibid., 29-30, 312.

Bamm's biography of Alexander the Great entitled, *Alexander: Power as Destiny*.⁸⁷ Jaspers' ironic aside here is reminiscent of a passage from *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Mankind*:

Struggles for independence become exemplary for political ethics, deeds of Alexander's or Caesar's type only for later conquerors and for the impulses of violence. Admiration for them by frenzied enthusiasts or powerless malcontents prepares the way for blind participation in political evil.⁸⁸

Not everyone in Germany, however, was more interested in rehashing the life and times of a long-dead megalomaniacal autocrat than in rationally coming to terms with the pressing demands of the day. Jaspers notes that the book had resonated well with students.⁸⁹ In 1968, students, the *68er-Bewegung*, at campuses throughout West Germany, engaged in massive protests and endured frequent police brutality. Later joined by others, the protests culminated in Bonn where 80,000 people protested the new emergency legislation that had been the prime target of Jaspers' polemic. Germany's long-standing trend of nationalism and authoritarianism predominating among university students was at an end. The massive protests of 1968 would catalyze the formation of the political culture of a rising generation that placed greater value in democratic participation. Jaspers' political thought contributed to this transformation.

The goal of *The Future of Germany* is democratic revolution. It represents the culmination of Jaspers' political thought. It stands in continuity with Jaspers' existential conception of the human condition from *Man in the Modern Age*, with which he opposed

⁸⁷ Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, eds., *Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926-1969* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1992), 643.

⁸⁸ Karl Jaspers, *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Mankind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 30.

⁸⁹ Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, eds., *Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926-1969* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1992), 654.

totalitarian thought that he described as always presupposing a reduction of free reality of human consciousness, and conscience, to a determinist doctrine of essential human nature. The concept of moral guilt from *The Guilt Question* surfaces here in his contention that an ethic of responsibility on the part of individuals is necessary for democracy. Jaspers returns to his emphasis on the necessity of an understanding of the past that clarifies the reality of the present situation and avoids falling into a formula for prediction based on a supposed causal necessity. In this, he resumes the polemic of *The Origin and Goal of History* against Marx, whom he accused of turning history into delusional prophecy.⁹⁰ The necessary role of the courage for civil disobedience in a democracy in this work was prefigured in *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Mankind*.

The political message of *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Mankind*, which is presented there only in outline, is stated succinctly in *The Future of Germany*. The possibility of political liberty and democracy is founded upon civil disobedience:

There can be no free state and no free citizenry without the possibility of a 'legitimate' nonviolent revolution from below, whether by political strikes, by mass protests, by a majority's refusal to vote, or by some other kind of direct popular action. The true revolution is a revolution in our way of thinking. It seeks to convince, not to compel.⁹¹

Two years before the massive protests of 1968, Jaspers saw Germany charting a course for authoritarianism. The two chief German domestic political problems Jaspers identified were the proposal of new emergency laws and the role of the major political parties, insofar as they appeared to offer no effective democratic opposition when not in government. Under pressure

⁹⁰ Karl Jaspers, *The Future of Germany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 87-89.

from the Allies, who had not yet withdrawn from West Germany, German politicians had begun to consider amending the German constitution with measures that would add new governmental powers in case of a national emergency. Jaspers saw this as the greatest threat to the Federal Republic's fledgling democracy. The emergency measures would be added to the constitution in 1968, after passage by a *Bundestag* controlled by a "grand coalition" of the Christian Democrats and the Socialists. Jaspers saw a growing shadow of the same legal basis through which Hitler seized power. For him, the chief problem with the proposed emergency laws was their ability to license government suppression of dissent:

Do we want emergency laws to make a popular uprising against war impossible? Do we want a terroristic control mechanism to exclude the chance that people might resist everywhere? Such a revolt would be magnificent, and it is possible... A rational people's hearts and minds can defy the irresponsibility of the government and military. The police can rise against the government, the soldiers against the generals.⁹²

The political parties, Jaspers laments, when in opposition, often seek to collude with governmental power. The lack of an effective politics of opposition in parliament led Jaspers to predict that a "grand coalition" may eventually take power. He was prescient – under former Nazi chancellor Kiesinger in late 1966, months after this book was published, such a coalition did form. It then went on to pass the proposed emergency legislation. This would spur massive democratic unrest; the ultimate results fit into Jaspers' proposals very well, insofar as this unrest would introduce a vastly more participatory political culture in Germany. Some extreme parts of the protest movement went far beyond Jaspers' visions, adopting exemplars such as Che Guevara and Ho Chi Minh. Such extremes, however, did not last – a more participatory culture did. In

⁹¹ Ibid., 74.

that result, Jaspers, had he lived longer, could have only been at least partially satisfied, insofar as he had advocated “spontaneous popular organizations” and a culture where political representation is in touch with the people: “a grass-roots democracy, a party structure with its basis among the people, rather than in the bureaucratic party machines.”⁹³ Ultimately, in cases of the threat of authoritarian rule, he advocates for outright revolt. He cites the Kiel mutiny of 1918 where German sailors defied orders to go into battle, thereby prompting the German revolutions of 1918. Uprisings such as the Kiel mutiny show, he says, that “reason can prevail by disobedience.”⁹⁴ The case of Hungary in 1956 indicated to him that circumstances may sometimes warrant violent revolt. From 1954, with his disillusionment with the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which sets the stage for his essay “The Political Vacuum in Germany” of that year, Jaspers began to a series of polemics generally united by opposition to political culture of unquestioning obedience in general, and its Bismarckian strain in Germany in particular. These efforts reach their culmination in *The Future of Germany*. There is nothing to indicate that he thought that the principles of these polemics applied only to Germany, however.

“He was born for the ways of a democratic republic”, Hannah Arendt said of Jaspers in her speech at the memorial service after his death in 1969.⁹⁵ His legacy will likely bear out the truth of these words. Because his works were massive bestsellers during his lifetime, his influence on political culture is undoubtable. Within academia, he has fallen into oblivion,

⁹² Ibid., 40.

⁹³ Ibid., 82-83.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 40.

⁹⁵ Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, eds., *Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926-1969* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1992), 685.

however. The exceptions are to be found in Habermas' appropriation of isolated elements of Jaspers' thought, concepts of guilt in the context of the *Historikerstreit* and, along with others such as S. N. Eisenstadt and Robert Bellah, the concept of the Axial Age from *The Origin and Goal of History* in works concerning religion.

Shaken out of the intellectual complacency characteristic of an "unpolitical man" by the First World War and through his intense intellectual friendship with Max Weber, Jaspers aimed his first political polemic against the specters of totalitarianism encroaching upon the European horizon in the early 1930s. His prescient early political work sought an audience among the German *Bildungsbürgertum*. Later, by contrast, he sought to reach the "broadest possible audience" with his political works after 1945. His works are a model of the struggle for the clarity and integrity of thought in times of crisis. In the second half of the 1940s, he advocated a politics of communicative reason, plurality and negative liberty. Hannah Arendt then referred to him as a "citizen of the world". This title best fits his orientation during this period of his work. From roughly 1953, Jaspers' political thought centers on the construction of a theory of democracy that takes its basis in individual participation, courage and responsibility. His late political works are radical. Civil disobedience becomes equated with democracy itself, and his comments on 1956 in Hungary affirm violent political struggle against totalitarianism. These later positions are the logical outcomes of his *Man in the Modern Age*. His intellectual resistance to totalitarianism there would translate into these later prescriptions for practical action. To understand this connection, it necessary to avoid ascribing to Jaspers any ideological orientation. For years, he hesitated and agonized about whether to explicitly draw out these conclusions. His political thought will continue to provoke enduring questions such as: how can humankind's

history clarify the scope for individual and collective political decisions in the present and help achieve aspirations for the future? How can individuals recognize their responsibility for their communities' actions? How can the courage for civil disobedience become actual in the populace? How can conscience ground the ethics of responsible political action?

The Origin and Goal of History in the Development of Jaspers' Political Thought

The Origin and Goal of History, published in 1948, comes from the distinct period of his thought in the half-decade that immediately followed the Second World War. In this period there is no mention of the necessity of civil disobedience in his works. His *Schuldfrage* stands as somewhat of an exception, but not by promoting civil disobedience, rather by emphasizing the necessity of a conception of shared moral responsibility in a democracy. That effort to confront individuals concerning their own responsibility would lay the foundations for a key element of his later political thought, the necessity of individual participation. On the other hand, in the *Origin and Goal of History*, much more weight is carried by the concepts of negative liberty, communicative reason and pluralism. In that regard, this work fits into the pattern of his other works from 1945 to roughly 1950. However, Jaspers clearly became unsatisfied with leaving his political demands there. In that work, Jaspers connects a survey of world history to contemporary political problems. His answer is that only in a general sphere of negative liberty, can various projects of positive liberty be effectively realized. He is addressing the question:

why do the efforts of humankind to realize their various visions of a just community often, or always, produce unintended results, results contrary or detrimental to the initial aims? His chapter in *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Mankind* entitled “Historico-Political Knowledge” attempts to explain how his study of world history fits into his broader political thought. There, he presents his survey of world history as an attempt to locate the “basic process” of history not in any causal factor, as Marx and his predecessors had done, but in freedom itself:

Let us repeat the great question that determines our sense of being and the manner of our responsibility. Is there a *basic process* of doom and salvation, objectively existing and cognoscible to the human mind? Or does the basic process lie in freedom itself? That is to say: does it result from human decisions – decisions which have not been finally made?⁹⁶

Jaspers makes it clear in this that his history is based on the second assumption, unlike the premises of Marx’s in the causal factors of “class struggle” and “alienation” or Hegel’s in the working out of the “absolute ideal”. Such accounts detach historical events from the decisions that made those events actual. Individuals, Jaspers thought, do not come to a real sense of their own responsibilities when they accept such historical views as valid. But, by this time he wrote those lines in *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Mankind*, he had begun to emphasize those elements which would later coalesce into his advocacy of civil disobedience, elements not present in *The Origin and Goal of History*. By grounding world history in freedom, as human decision, Jaspers attempts to put history in the service of democracy. For democracy to be viable, it must be aware of the decisions in the past that made it possible, and the conditions, both favorable and contrary, that surrounded those decisions: “Democracy can realize its idea only if

⁹⁶ Karl Jaspers, *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Mankind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 269.

it constantly illuminates its own past.”⁹⁷ The pivotal moment in Jaspers’ history, arguably, is that of the victories at Marathon and Salamis, in which he sees as the genesis of political liberty. Later, Jaspers would cite struggles for political liberty in medieval Britain, and Western Europe. However, such examples are not extensively discussed in *The Origin and Goal of History*. Had Jaspers already adopted the explicit advocacy of civil disobedience, his world history would have looked somewhat different. However, as it is, one can already see the framework of his later political thought taking shape in *The Origin and Goal of History*. In short, a world history that postulates no essential and ultimately necessary causal connection between events, whether ideal or material, but rather emphasizes the role of conscious human decisions, provides the basis for Jaspers’ argument that, ultimately, it is only the responsible participation of everyday individuals that is decisive for the life of democracy.

III. Thesis

Unlike recent scholarship taking its point of departure from *The Origin and Goal of History*, Jaspers’ thinking in that work amounts to more than just the concept of the Axial Age. Rather that concept, as well as Jaspers’ history as a whole, must be seen as intrinsically connected to his political thinking. My analysis is designed to argue for how that connection can be properly understood. Why did Jaspers’ write a survey of world history? Primarily because he thought Marx’s history had got it wrong, and that Marx’s errors had contributed to an influential and unsatisfactory political program of action. Why did Jaspers seek to define the role of science

⁹⁷ Ibid., 310.

and technology in the history of humankind as a whole? In that regard, his effort is also political – he seeks to prove the neutrality of science and technology. In short, it is not science and technology that are at the root of unsatisfactory conditions of human life. Why does Jaspers ultimately connect his world history to his central argument for negative liberty? Marx’s conception of history which is based on an assumption of alienation from true human nature. It, therefore, leads to positing a singular and universal conception of liberty. But, for Jaspers, there is no such “true human nature” and no “alienation” from it – the antinomy driving the causal basic process of Marx’s history. History is, rather, a record of conscious decisions made by humans. In a time when universal and singular conceptions of the “right” order of human affairs had led to the rise of fascist and communist totalitarian regimes, Jaspers sought to provide an alternative to such monolithic, total conceptions. Jaspers’ history seeks to show how no single and universal concept of human nature is the basis for a causal basic process of history. Those, like Marx, who would posit such a conception, end up positing a total doctrine of positive liberty. Actual history, for Jaspers, does not bear out those conceptions. Instead, what he argues that one finds, is the potential for a plurality of conceptions of the good life, the meaning of being human. To argue for a space for such plurality, a sphere of negative liberty, follows from his political intent to oppose the totalitarian views that became influential in the twentieth century.

Chapter 1 examines the important, recent secondary literature stemming from *The Origin and Goal of History* as well as discussion of structuring themes from Jaspers’ broader *oeuvre* and from that work in particular. The following chapters present a more detailed analysis of the political theory that structures *The Origin and Goal of History* (Chapters 2 through 5). My focus

in these chapters is on his political thought, specifically upon the way in which his historical thought serves as a basis for his political thought.

Chapter 1

The Development and Influence of *The Origin and Goal of History*

Karl Jaspers' *Origin and Goal of History* stands on the threshold of the imbrication of philosophy of history and anthropological science. The concept of human cultural evolution denotes an epistemic orientation that is based on the philosophy of history while seeking to incorporate the findings of anthropological science. With this, the philosophy of history gains cognitive traction in the contemporary intellectual context; it speaks partially in the idiom of contemporary science. However, the foundation remains its basic orientation towards consciousness. The *primary* field of such investigation remains the thoughts and actions of individuals and groups, their mutual relations and their relations with nature. No amount of data on, for example, how the human brain specifically differs from those of other organisms gives rise to the *primary* questions of the philosophy of history. Such knowledge can only play a supporting role. The data of history, for example when settled agriculture first arose for a given society, provide a matrix for the questions of primary concern. Observations about the biological structures involved and the material and technological conditions involved speak to *how* events occurred not *directly* to *why*. For an approach to the

why questions, one must attempt to recover what men thought about themselves, i.e. what their values and identities were. In short, the primary field of investigation is that of humanity's ethical orders, of *ethoi*. The intermediate result of investigation is formulation of principles, general to all or to some *ethoi* or specific to any given one, concerning their existence, diversity, relation, chronology, and transformation. The end results of the philosophy of history are propositions that seek to clarify the present and open avenues of expectation for the future.

The work of subsequent scholars on Jaspers' concept of the Axial Age, a period from roughly 800 to 200 BC, occurs in something of a mutual conversation. The product of this decades-long conversation has largely been a deepening of the understanding of cultural phenomena of the Axial Age. Charles Taylor summarizes the consensus: "Any view about the long-term history of religion turns on an interpretation of the Axial Age."⁹⁸ Jaspers would likely be dismayed that six decades after *The Origin and Goal of History*, scholarly attention to that work remains so insulated within the study of religion, albeit where it provides a useful conceptual framework. Jaspers' own liberal political thought has been overshadowed. Arguably, no thinker arising from the tradition of German philosophy of history after Marx has made such a systematically-elaborated connection between history and politics. It should therefore be no surprise that Marx is always present, though usually

98. Charles Taylor, "What Was the Axial Revolution?" in *The Axial Age and its Consequences*, eds. Robert Bellah and Hans Joas (Cambridge: Belknap, 2012), 30.

implicitly, in the structure of *The Origin and Goal of History*, both as opponent, and, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, as contributing interlocutor. For future work on Jaspers' political thought, the study of his philosophy of history will prove to be essential. This study is written with the hope to contribute to such future work. The extant literature on Jaspers makes no systematic connection between his philosophy of history and his political thought. An analysis of Jaspers' political thought would include, at least, his early work on Max Weber, *Man in the Modern Age*, *The Question of German Guilt*, *The Origin and Goal of History*, *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Mankind*, *The Future of Germany*, various essays from *The Great Philosophers* and various short essays on politics. The general foundations of his political thought, however, can be found nowhere so clearly and completely expressed than in *The Origin and Goal of History*. The path towards any cogent criticism of Jaspers must start there, and it is a very long path. Meaningful criticism must be tailored to its object, and thus not all criticism proceeds alike. The beginning of such a path is undoubtedly the notion that there is something worth criticizing, which is, for the rational mind, always accompanied by the notion that there is something worth appropriating. These tasks must be preceded by reconstruction of the argument in its essential aspects, exposition of its implications and orientation of the resulting essential schema toward facility of criticism and appropriation.

Recent and ongoing appropriations have focused on Jaspers' Axial Age thesis. As there is relatively broad consensus among these, I will consider only those offered by Eisenstadt, Bellah and Habermas. Jaspers' correspondence with Martin Heidegger can draw

the former's philosophical connection between history and politics into clearer view. However, it should be noted that the thesis of the Axial Age itself, when taken in the context of the book as a whole, is not Jaspers' chief concern. His other concerns include: the argument for political liberty, the conception of consciousness as the origin and goal of history, the conception of modern nihilism with its totalitarian consequences, and the conception of the age of technology. Jaspers covers a vast spectrum of human affairs in this work -- from the origin of the species *Homo sapiens* to the unknowable horizon of the far future with its shadow of the possible nuclear destruction of humankind. The main pillar of this work is his appropriation and reworking of the Western philosophy of history, but this is accompanied by his reception of Eastern philosophy and the histories of India and China as well as based in a conception of human nature borrowed from anthropology and supplemented with contemporary political economic thought. That pillar supports his chief concern which is to argue that the will to power and the will to knowledge must share the world of humankind in a fluctuating order of *political liberty*.

Martin Heidegger

In the literature concerning the Axial Age, a brief but illustrative passage occurs in an interview with Jürgen Habermas. He says:

Heidegger... is suspect for me even as a philosopher because, during the 1930s, he interpreted Nietzsche in precisely the neo-pagan fashion then in vogue... I regard Heidegger's botched "*Seinsdenken*"... as a leveling of the

epochal threshold in the history of consciousness which Jaspers called the "Axial Age". On my understanding, Heidegger betrayed that caesura that is marked, in different ways, by the prophetic awakening of Mt. Sinai and by the enlightenment of a Socrates.⁹⁹

This can be compared with Robert Bellah's sentiments:

I doubt that any of us would rather want to live in a tribal society than in one whose beginnings lie in the Axial Age; I know I would not. Yet it is a heritage of explosive potentialities for good and for evil. It has given us the great tool of criticism. How will we use it?¹⁰⁰

It is as difficult to draw any clear and detailed picture of how daily life must have transpired for the average human of prehistoric or archaic times as it is easy to see that without authentic criticism and all that that term entails, the press of the necessity both of nature herself and of humankind's artificial second nature would have been markedly stronger in general before the Axial Age. Heidegger wrote to Jaspers concerning *The Origin and Goal of History* in 1949:

You reject the thought that modern technology has the character of an assault, but it does have this character and, *therefore*, modern natural science *and* modern history also have it. It seems to me that the relationship between modern natural science and modern technology is not sufficiently clear to you, but, in essence, both are grounded in the *essence* of technology. This essence is, as far as I can see, the completed essence of Western metaphysics. The unfolding of the essence of technology begins... with the *idea* of Plato.¹⁰¹

It is inconceivable how a *subjective* principle, e.g. the Platonic idea of *the good*, can

⁹⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Divided West* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 88.

¹⁰⁰ Robert Bellah, "The Heritage of the Axial Age," in *The Axial Age and its Consequences*, ed. Robert Bellah and Hans Joas (Cambridge: Belknap, 2012), 465.

essentially coincide with technology of any age, which is always something *instrumental* in essence. That archaeology can recover the instrumental function of a prehistoric implement but, in the absence of any linguistic evidence from the prehistoric period, can recover nothing of the subjectivity of those who may have used that implement is one demonstration of this cognitive dichotomy. That *any* such subjective principle can be a *conditioning* factor in the everyday role of instrumental objects is a given, but that is clearly not Heidegger's point. Jaspers' conception of technology is an ethically neutral one, it is essentially abstract instrumentality and, wherever it is active, its role is conditioned by whatever values shape its particular context. However, and this will be elaborated in Chapter 2, modern society can, to an extent, appear *technologized* -- Jaspers uses the term "global factory" -- but this is, of course, only an analogy, since social relations depend primarily upon a communicative rather than upon an instrumental rationality, which Jaspers clearly recognized. One might still ask whether there is something substantial behind Heidegger's diametrically opposed assertions. Perhaps the dichotomy between meaning, a function of subjectivity, and instrumentality, a function of objectivity, is false -- perhaps it is conditioned by a heretofore unaccounted factor. No such systematic account of any such factor emerges in Heidegger's work, however. Jaspers' notes on Heidegger, which he contemplated turning into a book, contain several specifically intended to respond to views of Heidegger's like the one expressed above, which is characteristic of Heidegger's later work generally. Here Jaspers portrays Heidegger's flight from the subject-object dichotomy into *unio mystica*:

¹⁰¹ Martin Heidegger, "Letter 134," in *The Heidegger-Jaspers Correspondence*, ed. Walter Biemel and Hans Saner (Amherst: Humanity, 2003), 176.

Heidegger differentiates between philosophy and science in the following: Science arrives at correctness of statements while philosophy is where the truth of Being is at stake -- this statement is in itself "correct," but now the question of thinking concerns that which lets the truth of Being be revealed-- such thinking itself can only take place within the subject-object dichotomy... or it is transformed into the *unio mystica* that is itself no longer thinking in the sense of differentiating, speaking, imparting...¹⁰²

It was clear to Jaspers that Heidegger's mystical, arbitrary *coincidentia oppositorum* constituted, for the latter, an endemic theme. Richard Wolin also identifies this theme and further characterizes its consequences with precision:

Heidegger's penchant for dogmatic historical judgments and the equation of incomparables... Such travesties of historical reasoning... go to the essence of the judgmental incapacities of the doctrine of the "history of Being" as a framework for historical understanding.¹⁰³

There are some notes from Jaspers on Heidegger in which Jaspers depicts Heidegger an important "rival". Far from indicating that Jaspers thought that there were mutually fruitful, constructive tension, these comments merely reflect Jaspers' opinion that the public might benefit from some corrective clarification of Heidegger's arbitrary, but all too sophisticated and influential, *ex cathedra* pronouncements. He would surely have formulated and presented such a work as a diplomatic engagement with a worthy adversary, especially given his own *verstehende* approach to mutually immersive therapeutic dialogue in the practice of psychotherapy. However, such an approach, which several of his notes show he was preparing to adopt, would have not have essentially altered his blunt, yet empathetic, basic

¹⁰² Karl Jaspers, "Note 98," in *Karl Jaspers: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Edith Erlich, Leonard Erlich and George Pepper (Amherst: Humanity, 2000), 499.

¹⁰³ Richard Wolin, "Introduction," in *The Heidegger Controversy*, ed. Richard Wolin (Cambridge: MIT, 1993), 15.

view. From Jaspers' notes:

This savagery against *humanitas*... against culture, against education... this affirmation of barbarism... All this is Heidegger but is not he himself--he becomes its creature.¹⁰⁴

Moreover, Jaspers observes that, after Heidegger became a Nazi, his thinking underwent somewhat of a transformation: from such opaque terms as "decisiveness", which goes unelaborated, and "Being towards death" to the no less opaque "Being in Nothingness" and "the event of Being". The latter pair reflecting, in Jaspers' view, "the passivity of opening oneself up, of acceptance." To Jaspers, this was not a substantive "turn" but merely a new modality of the same basic "dictatorial" premises.¹⁰⁵ Behind the opacity of the terms, Jaspers was confronted by a vivid example of Heidegger's "passivity" and "acceptance" in a letter from 1950:

Stalin doesn't need to declare war any longer. Every day he wins a battle, but one doesn't see it ... every piece of writing is a counterattack... *In this homelessness* there occurs not nothing, but *an advent conceals itself* there, whose furthest hints we may, perhaps, still experience in a light breath and which must be captured in order to preserve them for a future that no historical construction, especially today's, which thinks technologically, will decipher.¹⁰⁶

Jaspers' wrote in response: "My horror grew when I read that." The dark implication of Heidegger's words is that this "*homelessness*", or the inevitable conquest of West Germany by Stalin, would provide that arena in which Heidegger's writings can lead to an eventual

¹⁰⁴ Karl Jaspers, "Note 167," in *Karl Jaspers: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Edith Erlich, Leonard Erlich and George Pepper (Amherst: Humanity, 2000), 508.

¹⁰⁵ Karl Jaspers, "Note 130," *Ibid*, 504.

"*advent*". It was not lost on Jaspers that this amounted to Heidegger's admission that he still sought to place his thought in a complimentary relation to totalitarianism. "With things like this, one wonders about authorization and rehabilitation," Jaspers writes, casting doubt upon the process by which Heidegger was eventually denazified and permitted to resume teaching in the Federal Republic. Heidegger's expression of spiritual capitulation to Stalin provoked Jaspers' harshest lines in their correspondence:

How is it that somewhere you allowed a very positive judgment of Marxism to be published without clearly saying at the same time that you recognize the power of what is evil? ... Is not this power of evil in Germany also what has constantly grown and, in fact, what prepares Stalin's victory: the concealing and forgetting of the past... the return of the old ruts of thinking and all the ghosts which destroy us, even though they are empty? ... Is Stalin not victorious precisely through all of this? Is not a philosophy that surmises and poetizes in sentences such as your letter, that produces a vision of something monstrous, is this not, in turn, something that prepares the victory of totalitarianism by separating itself from reality? Just as, before 1933, philosophy to a great extent actually made ready the acceptance of Hitler?¹⁰⁷

Jaspers never wrote the book on Heidegger which he had contemplated and for which he compiled notes, which have been posthumously published as the *Notizen zu Martin Heidegger*. The point of such a work would likely have been that, despite their erudite bases, the positions of the later Heidegger -- the one quoted above is characteristic -- are determined by no one factor more so than by the *arbitrariness* of their author:

¹⁰⁶ Martin Heidegger, "Letter 144," in *The Heidegger-Jaspers Correspondence*, ed. Walter Biemel and Hans Saner (Amherst: Humanity, 2003), 190.

¹⁰⁷ Karl Jaspers, "Letter 149," in *The Heidegger-Jaspers Correspondence*, ed. Walter Biemel and Hans Saner (Amherst: Humanity, 2003), 196-197.

How, then, is community possible? Are we merely reduced to mutually incomprehensible monologues, reproaches, absurdities? The form information takes in language is that things must be asserted and substantiated. The meaning of both can be realized only when the field of scientific theses, proofs, and argumentation is acknowledged, presupposed and referred to--not as something alien, not as something secondary, but as a desire to know; and the recognition of both is not founded in anything beyond themselves. Only on this foundation is it possible to liberate logical thought, as authentic philosophizing, from arbitrary power play.¹⁰⁸

There is a tremendous tension between Heidegger's erudition, on the one hand, and the complimentary relationship between the arbitrary bases of his thought and totalitarianism, on the other. Caught in an inner dialectic, Heidegger reduces consciousness to a mystical phantasm for which he is the only oracle. This comes with the unenviable feature that there can be no argument with an oracle.

S. N. Eisenstadt

Eisenstadt employed Jaspers' conception of the Axial Age as the basis for a sociological research program which has spanned several decades and involved scholars from various disciplines. To a great extent, this approach necessarily detaches the thesis of the Axial Age from the larger context of *The Origin and Goal of History*. This detachment is a requisite for a focus upon empirical studies of the Axial Age civilizations in their early stages. Robert Bellah has done more than anyone other than Eisenstadt to further this

¹⁰⁸ Karl Jaspers, "Note 93," in *Karl Jaspers: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Edith Erlich, Leonard Erlich and George Pepper (Amherst: Humanity, 2000), 496.

research. It is not possible to give an overview of the vast amount of empirical detail covered in these studies. Nevertheless, these studies have resulted in their authors' reformulation and clarification of some of the central principles of the historical dynamics involved in the period. These are summarized here. None of the authors involved in this literature raise doubts about the principle structure of the investigation as framed by Jaspers. However, their restatements of the principle historical dynamics are amenable to further clarification in line with a reconstruction of Jaspers' essential argument of *The Origin and Goal of History* that extends beyond the Axial Age thesis itself. Of Eisenstadt's voluminous writings on the Axial Age, one early essay and one late essay provide the most comprehensive outlines of his conception of the essential dynamics of the period: "The Axial Age: the Emergence of Transcendental Visions and the Rise of Clerics" and "The Axial Conundrum between Transcendental Visions and Vicissitudes of Their Institutionalizations". Among Axial Age civilizations, i.e. those of the West, India and China, Eisenstadt sees a basic uniform historical trend. However, he goes much further than Jaspers in describing the various institutional differences among these instances. The question of these differences, however, remains secondary to the basic similarities, and for Jaspers' philosophy of history, which is primarily concerned with principles, these institutional differences are likewise of, at most, secondary importance.

Eisenstadt isolates three definitive aspects of the Axial Age transformation: (1) *ontological dichotomy*, (2) *soteriological restructuring*, and (3) *new epistemic elites*. Another

factor is the resultant relationships of these three factors with various, particular modalities of (4) *legitimation*.

(1) The concept of *ontological dichotomy* is the most essential: "the emergence, conceptualization and institutionalization of a basic tension between the transcendental and mundane orders."¹⁰⁹ Before the Axial Age, in the periods of prehistory and the ancient civilizations for Jaspers, Eisenstadt observes, instead of this "disembedded" or dichotomous relationship, one that he describes as homologous:

In pre-Axial Age "pagan" civilizations this higher world has been symbolically structured according to the principles very similar to those of the mundane or lower one. Relatively similar symbolic terms were used for the definition of God(s) and man; of the mundane and transmundane orders... In most such societies the transmundane world was usually equated with a concrete setting, "the other world", which was the abode of the dead, the world of spirits, and not entirely unlike the mundane world in detail.¹¹⁰

The basic principle of the Axial Age transformation is a cognitive shift away from that homologous model:

By contrast, in the Axial Age civilizations, the perception of a sharp disjunction between the mundane and the transmundane worlds developed. There was a concomitant stress on the existence of a higher transcendental moral or metaphysical order which is beyond any given this- or other-worldly reality.¹¹¹

Axial Age worldviews... include a *broadening of horizons*, or an opening up of potentially universal perspectives, in contrast to the particularism of more

¹⁰⁹ Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "The Axial Age: The Emergence of Transcendental Visions and the Rise of Clerics," *European Journal of Sociology* 23, no. 2 (1982): 294.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 296.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

archaic modes of thought; an *ontological distinction* between higher and lower levels of reality; and a *normative subordination* of the lower level to the higher.¹¹²

The cognitive introduction of this new ontological dichotomy between transcendental and mundane levels of reality furthered ongoing questioning of extant homologous social orders and led to both a resultant legitimacy crisis and the attempts to reconstruct social order on new bases. The direction of the shift, described above in its principle, was general, while the subsequent new institutional patterns varied in detail. The broad institutional shift from a homologous social order to a dichotomous one was nowhere instantaneous, nor did it anywhere involve the complete abandoning of all aspects of cultural life where these revolutions took place.

(2) A process of *soteriological restructuring* began:

The development of these conceptions created a problem in the rational, abstract articulation of the givens of human and social existence and of the cosmic order. The root of the problem lies in the fact that the development of such conceptions necessarily poses the question of the ways in which the chasm between the transcendental and mundane orders can be bridged. This gives rise to the problem of salvation -- to use Weber's terminology.¹¹³

This soteriological restructuring occurred across the entire spectrum of life in society. On the individual level:

Purely personal virtues such as courage, or interpersonal ones such as

¹¹² Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "The Axial Conundrum between Transcendental Visions and Vicissitudes of Their Institutionalizations," in *The Axial Age and its Consequences*, ed. Robert Bellah and Hans Joas (Cambridge: Belknap, 2012), 279.

¹¹³ Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "The Axial Age: The Emergence of Transcendental Visions and the Rise of Clerics," *European Journal of Sociology* 23, no. 2 (1982): 297.

solidarity, have been taken out of their primordial framework and are combined, in different dialectical modes, with the attributes of the resolution of the tension between the transcendental and mundane orders.¹¹⁴

Family and kinship associations had existed in a closer identity with their particular society in the homologous, pre-Axial stage. Now they became more differentiated from that homologous context, which, in Eisenstadt's somewhat complicated terminology, is here equated with "broader ascriptive formations" and, elsewhere, with, what amounts to the same thing: "primordial ascriptive collectivities". There is perhaps some difficulty locating the line between prehistory and the ancient civilizations with Eisenstadt's terminology.

A parallel development was in the transformation of family and kinship relations, to some extent also economic relations. They often emerged as distinct autonomous symbolic and institutional arenas, disembedded from broader ascriptive formations and the criteria and modes of justification governing them.¹¹⁵

Once the cognitive coherence undergirding the modalities of legitimacy of homologous social orders, or "primordial ascriptive collectives", had begun to be eroded, the cognitive potential for soteriological restructuring of collectives upon hypothetically universal principles became possible:

It is a one of the most important features of these broader civilization frameworks that they are not tied to *one* political or ethnic collectivity. They could encompass many different collectivities, could impinge upon existing

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 299.

¹¹⁵ Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "The Axial Conundrum between Transcendental Visions and Vicissitudes of Their Institutionalizations," in *The Axial Age and its Consequences*, ed. Robert Bellah and Hans Joas (Cambridge: Belknap, 2012), 280.

political, territorial or kinship collectivities and institutions.¹¹⁶

Whereas in the world of the ancient civilizations, life was set within a monolithic order which had the character of something permanent and which reconstituted itself almost unchanged through all disturbances, such as natural catastrophes and barbarian invasions, the Axial Age brought a new social dynamic of continuous, cyclical constitution, breakdown and reconstitution of social orders:

Insofar as the political sphere is perceived as relevant to "salvation", political conflict in particular has been affected as well. New dimensions have been added to the processes of conflict... These new levels of conflict generated new processes of change and continuous reconstruction of the social order.¹¹⁷

Eisenstadt links this "continual reconstruction and transformation of the premises and contours of the different collectivities" after the Axial Age transformation to the replacement of homologous social order with the dichotomous model:

The new societal centers, institutional frameworks, and distinct "civilizational" collectivities were no longer taken for granted; they were no longer perceived as "naturally" given, either by divine prescription or by the power of custom. They could become the object of contestation between different elites and groups.¹¹⁸

The result of this shift was:

...the possibility of principled, ideological confrontation between hegemonic

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "The Axial Age: The Emergence of Transcendental Visions and the Rise of Clerics," *European Journal of Sociology* 23, no. 2 (1982): 304-305.

¹¹⁸ Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "The Axial Conundrum between Transcendental Visions and Vicissitudes of Their Institutionalizations," in *The Axial Age and its Consequences*, ed. Robert Bellah and Hans Joas (Cambridge: Belknap, 2012), 281.

and challenging groups and elites, of the continual confrontation between orthodoxy and heterodoxy (or sectarian activities), and the potential combination of such confrontations with political struggles over power, with movements of protest, with economic and class conflicts...¹¹⁹

With the introduction of this dynamic, *detailed* cognizance of past events became relatively more desirable than it had been in the ancient civilizations where change in social conditions was minimal. Whereas the relatively glacial pace of social change in the ancient civilizations could be efficiently cognized with only the most abbreviated historical records, in addition to records such as king lists, now the relatively rapid succession of important events, and the consequent increased complexity of historical factors with bearing upon the present, necessitated a new mode of historical cognizance in which the individuality and personality of actors had to stand forth in far greater acuity.

(3) Thus, for the first time, intellectuals, various sorts of *new epistemic elites*, appear in history:

The development and institutionalization of the perception of basic tension between the transcendental and mundane order was closely connected with the emergence of a new social element. Generally speaking it was a new type of elite which was cited as the carrier of models of cultural and social order. Examples would include the Jewish prophets and priests, the Greek philosophers and sophists, the Chinese Literati, the Hindu Brahmins, the Buddhist Sangha and the Islamic Ulema.¹²⁰

In the case of all these new epistemic elites, the basic principle around which their collectivity was organized was specifically Axial, in the sense that it was disconnected from

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 281-282.

the prior, homologous social order, the "major ascriptive framework" of pre-Axial societies, and expressive of the basic ontological dichotomy:

They tended to become disembedded from the major ascriptive frameworks; at the same time, they claimed autonomous access to the new order promulgated by an Axial vision, which resulted in continual contestation about their status in relation to the new order... They did not think of themselves as only performing specific technical or functional activities--for example as scribes—but indeed as carrying a distinct cultural and social order manifest in the prevailing transcendental vision of this society.¹²¹

The dissolution of homologous social orders led to other ramified outcomes that follow some general tendencies, despite wide variation between particular instances. These changes represent a growing autonomy of different spheres of social life that began in the breakdown of the homologous social order -- the source of Eisenstadt's concept of "autonomy" -- brought about by the introduction of the ontological dichotomy:

Meanwhile, the growing--if, by comparison with modern societies, still limited--autonomy of the major institutional formations led to the parallel developments of relatively autonomous media of exchange--power, money, influence, and solidarity--especially as they became attributed to particular societal sectors.¹²²

(4) Compared with the relatively stable modalities of *legitimation* in ancient civilizations, Eisenstadt describes a shift in such modalities in the Axial Age in favor of a

¹²⁰ Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "The Axial Age: The Emergence of Transcendental Visions and the Rise of Clerics," *European Journal of Sociology* 23, no. 2 (1982): 298.

¹²¹ Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "The Axial Conundrum between Transcendental Visions and Vicissitudes of Their Institutionalizations," in *The Axial Age and its Consequences*, ed. Robert Bellah and Hans Joas (Cambridge: Belknap, 2012), 286.

¹²² Ibid.

pattern of relatively greater instability. His "primordial" criteria are what for Weber are "traditional", i.e. legitimation by virtue of belief in precedent or "what has always existed", which is: "the most universal and most primitive case."(130-131) "Sacred" criteria of legitimacy for Eisenstadt equate to Weber's conception of *oracular* legitimation, the origin of which Weber locates in the period of the ancient civilizations -- where Eisenstadt likewise locates the origin of "sacred" legitimation. That this oracular version is derivative of traditional legitimation is evident:

In times of strict traditionalism a new order, that is one which was *regarded* as new, could, without being revealed in this way, only become legitimized by the claim that it had actually always been valid though not yet rightly known, or that it had been obscured for a time and was now being restored to its rightful place.¹²³

For Eisenstadt "ideological criteria" of legitimacy equates to Weber's conception of rational or legal legitimacy, i.e. legitimacy based upon a cognition of *correctness* in conformation between a general principle and particular instances. The principle of such legitimacy is one intrinsic element of the concept of soteriological restructuring. For Eisenstadt, "traditional charismatic" legitimacy arises in the pre-Axial period and represents a fusion of both of these types. Eisenstadt's conception of the types of legitimacy follows upon Weber's – although it is regrettably not as clearly conceived. He describes a shift in the dynamics of the modalities of legitimation in the Axial Age:

If the legitimation of social order in most of the great pre-axial civilizations was based on some fusion of sacred and primordial criteria of traditional

¹²³ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: The Free Press, 1964), 131.

charismatic legitimation, the picture became more complicated with the institutionalization of the perception of the tension between the transcendental and mundane order. In these post-axial civilizations, there developed first a strong tendency to a continuous oscillation between primordial criteria on the one hand and sacred or ideological ones--defined in terms of the attributes of salvation--on the other; and the concomitant tendency to ideologize or "sacralize" the primordial attributes or to vest the sacred with primordial attributes.¹²⁴

In sum: Eisenstadt characterizes the Axial Age as a pattern of social transformation in the West, Middle East, India and China during the first millennium BC in which new epistemic elites, all holding some version of a transcendental concept of order, sought to instrumentalize their various versions of such a concept, resulting in a historically diverse and ramified but patterned fluctuation in modalities of legitimation. These constitute what Eisenstadt considers the general and essential factors of the Axial Age transformation. Much of his work concerns various particular developments that emerge on the basis of this framework. Eisenstadt's narrowing of Jaspers' larger theoretical agenda in *The Origin and Goal of History* is effective as a framework for focused empirical research in that it, in its separation from the broader history of consciousness, increases the acuity of the principles endogenous to the historical period upon which it focuses.

Robert Bellah

¹²⁴ Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "The Axial Age: The Emergence of Transcendental Visions and the Rise of Clerics," *European Journal of Sociology* 23, no. 2 (1982): 300.

The portion of Bellah's work that is relevant to the Axial Age seeks to accomplish two chief aims: a detailed historical study that connects the social and intellectual trends of the period and a theoretical view which seeks to place the development of the Axial Age in anthropological context. Bellah considers this project his "universal history."¹²⁵ In *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*, Bellah succeeds in organizing a massive amount of historical detail into a coherent depiction of the chief currents of the Axial Age in each of its three regions. However, due to his general blurring of the line between history and anthropology, between understanding and explaining, between subjective and objective orientations, Bellah's study should not be considered a "universal history". He writes:

There has been an effort to distinguish evolution and history: evolution occurs in nature, history occurs in culture. This distinction is... a somewhat modified version of the old distinction between *Naturwissenschaft* and *Geisteswissenschaft*... I believe this whole distinction is misplaced: evolution is historical; history is evolutionary.¹²⁶

The problem, of course, is that before the inception of human consciousness -- a point in time *both* empirically unknowable *and* absolutely presupposed by any valid universal historical conception -- *there was no history* because there was no meaning of events and no *human* instrumentality. All other species of the genus *Homo* are extinct, and, even if archaeology reveals that some such other hominid species possessed instrumentality, evidenced by tool use, this affords no evidence of or access to the linguistic dimension, which, if it existed at

¹²⁵ Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2011), 600.

all, may not have even shared the same universal grammar that conditions human intersubjectivity. It is ironic that directly after these comments, Bellah quotes Habermas on "social scientific neoevolutionism" -- something that Habermas rejects. Bellah, however, does not seem to recognize the clear difference of views, and even provides a quote from Habermas that barely touches on the issue, the invalidity of reducing interpretation of meaningful social phenomena to merely naturalistic explanation. Elsewhere, Habermas clearly characterizes "the spread of naturalistic worldviews" and their consequences:

Advances in biogenetics, brain research, and robotics driven by therapeutic and eugenic motives are being successfully presented in a positive light. This program is designed is designed to facilitate the spread of ways of understanding ourselves in terms of the objectifying categories of natural science into everyday contexts of communication and action. Habituation to forms of self-objectification that reduce all meaning and experience to what can be observed would also dispose individuals to corresponding forms of self-instrumentalization.¹²⁷

Bellah's attempts to integrate evolutionary and historical approaches in the first few chapters of *Religion in Human Evolution* ultimately remains unsystematic and, instead, relies upon a gestural bricolage of observations drawn from popular science interspersed with erudite, but fragmentary meditations on classics of philosophy and social theory. Altogether these observations do not even stay true to Bellah's explicit principle of naturalistic reduction -- though they do not entirely avoid it, either. In their accounts of human cultural evolution, both Habermas and Jaspers avoid the naturalistic reduction into which Bellah falls by using

¹²⁶ Robert Bellah, "The Heritage of the Axial Age," in *The Axial Age and its Consequences*, ed. Robert Bellah and Hans Joas (Cambridge: Belknap, 2012), 448.

¹²⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 1.

the findings of anthropological science as an idiom that is particularly useful for displaying the *distinction* between what is universally and distinctively human and what is nature -- a distinction on which the contemporary anthropological idiom does not have a monopoly. Despite one, completely unelaborated, instance of asserting that humans are "really different" from animals, Bellah generally leaves the line quite indistinct throughout his observations.⁽⁸³⁾ Furthermore, it is on the basis of this naturalistic principle that Bellah tries to explain the origin of human ritual as sharing an essential continuity with animal practices. The fundamental error of this conception is evident to Habermas:

Whereas chimpanzees do not point to things or teach things to conspecifics, human beings learn both through cooperation and through instruction. In their dealings with existing cultural artifacts, they also discover for themselves the functions embodied in them. The kinds of traditions, rituals and tool use that are also encountered among chimpanzees do not reveal an intersubjectively shared cultural background knowledge. Without intersubjective understanding, there can be no objective knowledge.¹²⁸

That the chimpanzee, humankind's closest biological relative, has no history would contravene Bellah's explicit principle of naturalistic reduction that: "evolution is historical; history is evolutionary". A fundamentally different conclusion is reached by Habermas, and, in fact, it is identical with Jaspers' view. Habermas writes:

Only *socialized brains*, linked up with a cultural milieu, become bearers of those highly accelerated, cumulative learning processes that have become uncoupled from the genetic mechanism of natural evolution.¹²⁹

In light of this fundamental difference, I can only consider Bellah's overall account of

¹²⁸ Ibid, 172.

"universal history" as one suffering from a catastrophic defect. Bellah stresses the observable similarities in the practice of "play" between animals and humans. His point is that practices of play exhibit conditions where natural compulsion is not immediate for both animals and humans. That might seem generally true, but it seems unlikely to even hold for all observable cases, especially in cases of human children, who are uniquely susceptible to natural compulsion due to their unique vulnerabilities and who, at the same time, very commonly exhibit playful behavior. In the case of human children, the role of natural necessity is very different, much greater, than among young animals. Humans also routinely, consciously *overcome* natural constraints *in order to* play, such as, for example, in the case of athletes with physical disabilities. Animals, on the other hand, only overcome natural constraints on the basis of instinct. Furthermore, all cases of human play proceed, as all human activity does, from some *meaningful* relationship of thought and action while animals never display any awareness of meaningful associations in terms of any activities or in terms of any phenomena at all. The blurring of the distinction between human and animal, between culture and nature, follows directly from Bellah's own explicit naturalistic reduction, which obfuscates the role of consciousness, a *unique* and universal human attribute, the source of historical meaning, and, hence, presents a structural incompatibility with Bellah's self-proclaimed task of writing a "universal history". Unfortunately, Bellah's work on the Axial Age, in addition to these problems, is profuse with vague phrases, such as "the self is a telling", and unclear and unsystematic incorporation of theories or findings drawn from the natural and human sciences. He even mistakenly refers to Jaspers' book as "*The Meaning*

¹²⁹ Ibid.

and Goal of History."¹³⁰ Copious insightful references to classics of social theory, e.g. to works of Durkheim, Weber and Parsons, suffer from confusion radiating from the other components. Future work in this area should not build upon these bases.

In *The Origin and Goal of History*, as in the subsequent theoretical work of Eisenstadt and Habermas on the Axial Age, relatively little attention is given to the actual texts from the period that are indicative, in fact partially constitutive, of the transformational developments of the period. Such textual support is provided by Jaspers in his *Great Philosophers*. Bellah's wealth of portrayals of the meaningful connections between these texts and social conditions of the period are illuminative. Furthermore, despite the intrinsic difficulties of his "universal history", his basic characterization of the period is not really contradictory, in principle, with the conceptions of Jaspers, Eisenstadt, or Habermas. The massive chapters of *Religion in Human Evolution* are filled with exegesis of various texts from the period across the three great regions. The new epistemic elites that Eisenstadt describes are, in Bellah's terminology, "renouncers". They renounce the extant homologous social order in favor of a transcendental one. Bellah evocatively recounts a story from India of the period depicting such renunciation. From Bellah's summary of the story:

There was a king of Benares who ruled justly... Indra, king of the gods, took pity on him and sent the future Buddha to be born as a son to his chief queen. The child was named Temiya... Temiya remembered his previous births, including that in the past he had been king of this very city and that, as a result

¹³⁰ Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2011), 604.

of his actions, he subsequently spent 80,000 years in an especially terrible hell... He determined that this would not happen again, so he pretended to be lame, deaf and dumb... When he was 16 the soothsayers told the king that he would bring bad luck to the royal house and should be killed... Temiya was sent in his chariot to the charnel ground, where he was to be killed, but the gods saw to it that the charioteer took him to the forest instead. At that point Temiya revealed his true self, showing himself to be strong and fit... and declared his intention to become an ascetic... When Temiya's parents received the news they rushed to the forest where he was and overwhelmed with his new self, proceeded to renounce the world themselves. Soon the whole city had come out to the forest and everyone became a renouncer... Soon a neighboring king, hearing what had happened, decided to annex Benares... but once in the city he felt an overwhelming impulse to find the ascetic prince and his parents. Upon finding them, he, too and his subjects following him, became renouncers. Another king followed his example. Soon it was clear that Temiya was, after all, a *cakravartin*, a universal ruler.¹³¹

The first theme is that it is now only outside the extant homologous order that true kingship would be realized. Kingship as it has previously been conceived had been revealed to be false, insofar as it did not conform to an insight from above and beyond the world, inaccessible to any but the Buddha and only to others through him. The second theme is that diffusion of that message to others. Soteriological restructuring of whole kingdoms follows. The true king, by virtue of his transcendental insight, can no longer be a king according to the extant homologous order. Bellah describes the thematic analogues in the other traditions:

Plato tells the Athenians not to look at Achilles... (Achilles was a kinglet and his mother a goddess) but at Socrates, not an aristocrat at all but a stonemason and a busy body... For it is Socrates, the lover of wisdom, the philosopher, who should be king. ... In China, it is Mencius who tells us that Confucius, the failed official who gathered a few followers as he traveled from state to state in ancient China... was the uncrowned king. ... In Israel, the tension between God and king was endemic in the period of the monarchy: at times God seems

¹³¹ Ibid., 584-585.

to have made an eternal covenant with the House of David... but often kings, are portrayed as sinners or even enemies of Yahweh.¹³²

These examples based on texts of the period indicate a new, dichotomous pattern replacing homologous "old unity of God and king" in each case.¹³³

Jürgen Habermas

In his essay "The Sacred Roots of Axial Age Traditions", Habermas seeks to broaden the sociological conception of the Axial Age after its narrowing by S.N. Eisenstadt. While Eisenstadt's approach brings into greater clarity the historical principles endogenous to the Axial Age transformation, a valuable clarification which serves as a basis for detailed comparative studies, this approach must simultaneously focus chiefly upon what is original to the period, rather than upon general historical continuities. Habermas' intent is not to undermine Eisenstadt's approach, with which Habermas has expressed agreement. Rather, and in this respect Habermas is in agreement with Jaspers, the conception of the Axial Age itself rests upon a broader conception of the history of consciousness. Eisenstadt focuses more upon the Axial Age, while Habermas focuses more upon "the sacred" as one chief and continuous feature in the history of consciousness generally. In Jaspers' original conception,

¹³² Robert Bellah, "What is Axial about the Axial Age?" *European Journal of Sociology* 46, no. 1 (2005): 71.

these two *foci* are combined in a comprehensive formulation. Both Eisenstadt and Habermas go a long way toward making their respective aspects of Jaspers' original conception more clearly focused.

Habermas seeks to elucidate how “the sacred” serves as a source of *normativity* distinct from the function of secular thought, which, in his terminology, is synonymous with “postmetaphysical thinking”. The sacred for Habermas is the essential and enduring *proprium* of religious traditions extending across human history:

The worldviews of the Axial Age inherited their relation to cultic practices from a much older complex composed of mythical narratives and ritual actions. This sacred complex had laid the foundation for the alliance between rulers and priests already in the archaic high cultures. Here the amalgamation of religious traditions and practices with self-representation of political power had prepared the ground for the legitimation functions that were later performed by the religious and metaphysical worldviews for the politics of the Ancient Empires.¹³⁴

This sacred complex, consisting of mythical narrative and ritual action, arises from a particular mode, myth, of dealing with risks presented by both nature and culture:

Myths invariably serve as the function of coming to terms with the existential experience of being exposed to the contingencies of an un-mastered environment. The causes of uncontrolled risks and dangers demand an interpretation in terms of the available narrative framework of communication, social and instrumental action... “the invisible causes and forces which give rise to and regulate the non-human world (nature) or the human world (culture) *assume the attributes* of man, i.e. present themselves spontaneously... as beings analogous to men, but *different* in that they know what man does not know, they do what man cannot do, they control what he

¹³³ Ibid., 72.

¹³⁴ Jürgen Habermas, “The Sacred Roots of Axial Age Traditions.” (unpublished essay), 8.

cannot control...¹³⁵

A conceptual distinction of this particular mode of consciousness from consciousness generally seems justified on the basis of the modality of *instrumentality* that arises from myth:

Almost anyone can communicate with anyone and anything with anything, can express feelings or wishes, intentions and opinions, and they can influence one another reciprocally. For communicating means exerting influence. From our perspective, the performative attitude in which a first person relates to a second person in order to communicate with her becomes blurred with the instrumental attitude towards an impersonal or superpersonal power on which one can exert causal influence, and thereby force them to act in a certain way.¹³⁶

Such instrumentality arising from a mythical conception is not the same as that found in ordinary use of tools or any form of technique, generally. Habermas does not make this point explicit, however I think this distinction is implied in his account. The sort of instrumentality that arises from a mythical conception cannot be equated with humankind's original instrumentality by which he overcomes natural necessity. The picture of instrumentality here, that deriving from myth, leads Habermas to the conclusion that: "a bridge leads *from myth itself* to rites."¹³⁷ Thus the element of the sacred complex that consists of ritual enactment arises from myth and, therefore, is not an inheritance that persisted across the evolutionary threshold that distinguished humans from their nearest relatives among other species.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 13.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

Habermas argues that if one considers only the trend of “disenchantment” that accompanies Axial Age thought, one misses the cognitive element that explains the persistence of religious traditions, generally. Disenchantment involves the shift in emphasis towards rational criteria of legitimation, the shift away from what Eisenstadt calls the homologous order and what Bellah identifies as the unity of “god and king”. The *agreement* between two things, here, specifically, between a general concept and any given particular instance, becomes preferred relative to traditional or charismatic criteria of legitimation. That the logic of disenchantment would have long since delegitimized mythical cognition entirely leads Habermas to suspect that the persistence of post-Axial mythical analogues is owing to the impermeability of ritual practices with which such views are conjoined and which constitutes the “sacred core” of religious traditions:

In conclusion, postmetaphysical thinking will miss what is proper to religion, the constitutive moment of a religious understanding of the world, as long as it focuses exclusively on the *cognitive* structures that emerged during the worldview revolution of the Axial Age. This focus fails to do justice to the *sacred complex* which consists in both, in the doctrinal contents handed down in scriptural form and dogmatized through interpretation, and in the communal ritual enactment of the lived articles of faith.¹³⁸

For Habermas, religious rites form a cultural element that remains essentially constant *through* the great transformation of the Axial Age. While postmetaphysical thinking can criticize the legitimacy of myth and its modern pseudo-scientific analogues, in the sacred complex, mythic thinking insulates itself against criticism with religious rites which, in Habermas’ account, act as a normative stimulus of social solidarity *different* from that arising

¹³⁸ Ibid., 7.

from the legitimating presence of an intersubjectively shared “lifeworld” which constitutes, for Habermas, the unique evolutionary achievement of *Homo sapiens*.

The dialectic in Marxism and psychoanalysis

Jaspers criticizes both Marxism and psychoanalysis in both *Man in the Modern Age* and *Reason and Anti-Reason*. His main criticism of psychoanalysis can be found in *General Psychopathology*. The two systems of thought become aberrant in different directions, both with different dehumanizing results: Marxism deifies humanity, psychoanalysis reduces humanity to animalistic existence. The former totalizes knowledge, while the latter reduces everything to the instincts and drives. Both tend toward closed systems, resistant to outside criticism and real dialogue. Both are founded upon essentially valid and valuable insights. Freud brings the psychopathological reality of repressed sexuality into clear view. Marx contributes to sociology and political economy, but has his central insight in the dialectical conception of history. Both explode their central insights, respectively owing most immediately to Hegel and Nietzsche, into an all-embracing conception of human nature which petrifies in dogma. Both Marx and Freud took on the character of men who wanted to be leaders of obedient followers who would turn their interpretations into action, and this, says Jaspers, is at the heart of their unscientific character. Marx is famous for his vitriolic public attacks on those who disagreed with him. Freud adopted a similar, but more subdued, attitude:

Psychoanalysis wants to bring into consciousness what has been repressed in psychic life and he who passes judgment on it is himself a man who has such repressions... such resistance easily finds itself disguised as an intellectual rejection... we frequently find the same thing in our adversaries as we find in our patients.¹³⁹

In the case of both, Jaspers is in agreement with their central motive insights, but, nevertheless classifies both as totalitarian. Totalitarianism for Jaspers has two poles: rule of force and fear at one pole and nihilation into animalistic existence at the other. Neither Marx nor Freud consciously set out for such extremes, but in the spiritual situation of their times, such systems of thought could only contribute to that polarization which was already underway. Their common point of departure is a concern for freedom, their paths diverge in terms of formulation of the central dominated element, but, then, caught in inner dialectic, each converges again into closed systems of dogmatic assertion of truth, finally blending into broader social trends of power and nihilation. Much of what Jaspers has to say about technology and work is parallel to if not derivative of Marx. There are acknowledged influences of Freud in *General Psychopathology*, more prominently in earlier editions. Indeed his criticisms of Marx and Freud operate on three levels, criticism of the thinkers' respective systems of thought, but more importantly, criticism of both as prominent representatives of aberrant outcomes of modern science and, through both thinkers, criticism of endemic social trends. This comparison first appears in *Man in the Modern Age*, but, is drawn again in *Reason and Anti-Reason* shortly after the Second World War. It is much easier to gain insight into Jaspers' own thought through this comparison than it is through, for example, his comparison of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche as the twin prophets of nihilism.

¹³⁹ Karl Jaspers, *General Psychopathology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 773.

Both Freud and Marx are for him archetypes of science gone astray -- in this comparison we see in microcosm the problematic relationship of power and knowledge which is the central issue of Jaspers' historical thought. But while, outside of this illustration, Freud is really only of relatively limited importance for even the psychological Jaspers, Marx is of great importance for Jaspers' philosophy of history and earns Jaspers' severe disapprobation:

Marx exercises no conscious control over his will to power... He appeared as the herald of science, but of a science that is not a science at all. He came as one who commands in the name of history... only destruction and purposeless violence can spring from the attempt to give reality to an absurdity.¹⁴⁰

Understanding and explaining

In his *General Psychopathology*, Jaspers describes a pluralistic method of inquiry in which knowledge of meaning and knowledge of causation are combined: "We understand psychic connections from within as meaning, and we explain them from without as regular if not essential accompaniments and sequences."¹⁴¹ The concept of causation for Jaspers consists of conditioning through circumstances, precipitating factors, and forces productive of decisive effects. In general, explanation is the linking of cause and effect: "for instance... alcohol and delirium tremens; season of the year and suicide rate; thyroid disease and excitability; cerebral hemorrhage and speech disturbance..." Treatment cannot be based on causal knowledge, alone, however: "The significance and limits of causal knowledge are

¹⁴⁰ Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Anti-Reason in Our Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 19-20.

perhaps most clearly seen in relation to *therapeutic possibilities*." Causal knowledge should not be divorced from consideration of meaning in psychotherapy:

The tendency to make causal speculation the main thing has a disastrous effect on our empirical knowledge of psychic abnormality. The world of objective knowledge--causally inexplicable as it may be--is abandoned in favor of empty constructs.¹⁴²

Finally, causal knowledge is, of course, indispensable, but it not the decisive element, knowledge of which is the task of the understanding:

Causal knowledge is always faced by something which no matter how we operate it implies that in the end all the well-being of man is still dependent on something decisive in himself, which is only approachable if we understand.¹⁴³

Jaspers defines understanding in psychiatry in contrast to explaining:

In the natural sciences we find causal connections only, but in psychology... a quite different sort of connection. Psychic events 'emerge' out of each other in a way which we understand. Attacked people become angry and spring to the defense, cheated persons grow suspicious. The way in which an emergence takes place is understood by us, our understanding is genetic. Thus we understand psychic reactions to experience, we understand the development of passion, the growth of an error, the content of delusion and dream; we understand the effects of suggestion, an abnormal personality in its own context or the inner necessities of someone's life. Finally, we understand how the patient sees himself and how this mode of self-understanding becomes a factor in his psychic development.¹⁴⁴

That the concept of the understanding has a relativistic character can be seen in clear terms in Johann Gottfried Herder's early exposition of the concept in *Yet Another Philosophy of*

¹⁴¹ Karl Jaspers, *General Psychopathology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 451.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 461.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 462.

History (1774):

Have you ever noticed how inexpressible is the individuality of one man, how difficult it is to know distinctly what distinguishes him, how he feels and lives, how differently his eyes see, his soul measures, his heart experiences, everything? What depth there is in the character of a single nation... you must enter the spirit of a nation before you can share even one of its thoughts or deeds... plunge yourself into it all and feel it all inside yourself -- then only will you be in a position to understand; then only will you give up the idea of comparing everything, in general or in particular, with yourself. For it would be manifest stupidity to consider yourself to be the quintessence of all times and all peoples.¹⁴⁵

Johann Gustav Droysen is credited as the first to explicitly distinguish between *Verstehen* and *Erklären*, understanding and explaining, as means of investigation. Droysen describes understanding:

The method of historical investigation is determined by the morphological character of its material. The essence of historical method is *Verstehen* by means of *investigation*... The possibility of this understanding arises from the kinship of our nature with that of the utterances lying before us as historical material. A further condition of this possibility is the fact that man's nature, at once sensuous and spiritual, speaks forth every one of its inner processes in some form apprehensible by the senses, mirrors these inner processes, indeed, in every utterance. On being perceived, the utterance, by projecting itself into the inner experience of the percipient, calls forth the same inner process. Thus on hearing the cry of anguish we have a sense of the anguish felt by him who cries.¹⁴⁶

In his *General Psychopathology* Jaspers cites Droysen's distinction of *Verstehen* from the

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 302-303.

¹⁴⁵ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Herder on Social and Political Culture*, ed. F. M. Barnard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 181.

methods of the natural sciences that structured his approach.¹⁴⁷ Raymond Aron describes Jaspers' concept of the distinction between explaining and understanding:

Jaspers... proposed to separate understanding... entirely from causality... That the weak may hate the strong, the unfortunate envy the rich, that the ill-favored individual should care little for higher values, we understand quite clearly, immediately, without reference to a rule or law. On the contrary, we note that according to the law of sequence, syphilis brings on general paralysis, but we do not understand it.¹⁴⁸

Aron depicts the influence of Jaspers upon Weber:

Weberian science is defined, therefore, by an effort to understand and explain the values men have believed in, to explain and understand the works produced by men.¹⁴⁹

The Weberian idea of understanding is largely borrowed from Karl Jaspers, at the time when Jaspers was a psychologist, or, rather, a psychopathologist. In his youth, Jaspers published a treatise on psychopathology... The heart of Jaspers' psychopathology is the distinction between *explanation* and *understanding*.¹⁵⁰

Weber turned Jaspers' conception into the question: "How can there be an objective science—one not distorted by our value judgments—of the value-charged productions of men?"¹⁵¹ Jaspers takes this development a step further in *The Origin and Goal of History*. On the one hand the result is a history based on meaningful connections, rather than a conception of a causal process akin to nature, and, on the other hand, a political theory of

146 Johann Gustav Droysen, *Outline of the Principles of History (Grundriss der Historik)*, trans. E. Benjamin Andrews (New York: Howard Fertig, 1967), 12-13.

147 Karl Jaspers, *General Psychopathology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 301.

¹⁴⁸ Raymond Aron, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 45-46.

¹⁴⁹ Raymond Aron, *Main Currents of Sociological Thought*, Volume II (New York: Basic Books, 1967), 187.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 185-186.

negative liberty, which, following the principle of the understanding, is a bridge mechanism between otherwise separated spheres of value. Marx, on the other hand, positing a universal conception of positive liberty, does so on the basis of an explicit rejection of the principle of intersubjective understanding:

Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so we cannot judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this consciousness must rather be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social forces of production and the relations of production.¹⁵²

In Jaspers' psychological and historical approaches, this conception is diametrically reversed.

From history to liberty

Work on Jaspers by scholars such as Eisenstadt, Bellah and Habermas has mainly focused on themes related to the Axial Age. Eisenstadt's approach effectively narrows the focus and distills principles with which empirical investigations can proceed. Habermas' approach points to the limits of the Axial Age thesis in terms of the understanding of broader historical continuities. Jaspers' own conception prefigures both of these approaches. However, a consideration of how Jaspers' philosophy of history forms the basis for his argument for political liberty has not been considered in the literature. For Jaspers, an international framework of negative liberty is the precondition of all effective projects of

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 187.

¹⁵² Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1904), 12.

positive liberty, all ethical orders. Here one can see, as noted above, how Jaspers developed his earlier, psychological concept of the understanding into a political concept:

Only when positive liberty has been realized on the basis of the legal safeguarding of negative liberty, does the proposition apply: Man is free in the measure in which he sees freedom around him, that is, in the measure in which all men are free.¹⁵³

There is no universal and monocausal element that governs history. Both the *origin* and the *goal* of history are human consciousness. Jaspers' conception of consciousness can really only be defined as what is intrinsically human but distinct from humanity's biological element and his relationship to nature generally. Consciousness, perhaps itself indefinable, nevertheless shows up in two ways, subjectively and objectively: subjectively in the communicative constitution of human groups and objectively in humankind's instrumental relationship with nature. Both features of consciousness are intrinsically and uniquely human. This is the point where Jaspers and Habermas put such stress upon the anthropological findings which draw this distinction empirically. That Bellah muddles this distinction is really inexplicable, but, in the unsystematic execution of his naturalistic reduction, he does nothing to undermine that fundamental distinction. Heidegger's view, discussed above, collapses the subject-object dichotomy and leaves no way for consciousness to show up at all. He also considers "modern history", by which he was obviously referring to Jaspers' history, as "an assault". However, he presents no clear alternative view. In the

¹⁵³ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 160.

discussion of his correspondence with Jaspers, above, one saw how the “debate” centered on the subject-object dichotomy. Without it, one has no way of conceiving of consciousness, as that element distinctive of humanity. Here is how Habermas puts it: “the communication with someone about something in the world represents an evolutionary watershed between *Homo sapiens* and his closest biological relatives.”¹⁵⁴ The best explanation of why subsequent scholarship has not connected Jaspers’ history of consciousness with his political argument is that *The Origin and Goal of History* is simply a very complex work, covering, as it does, a huge amount of territory in a relatively brief manner.

However, the connection between the history of consciousness and the political argument for a framework of negative liberty can be distinctly seen. It hinges on one, admittedly brief, passage:

Briefly: Some sort of distress is always the source of planning. The most profound distress of all, that caused by war, is the source of total planning. The meaning and justification of such planning in times of distress are then transformed by the fact that the State’s will to power... reaches the maximum degree of momentary energy through total planning... Existence is staked on military conquest, which alone is capable of reversing one’s own bankruptcy by the plunder of others. That which is of practical value to military ventures is established as a permanent condition, with a view to a planned or feared war. Thereupon a fresh motive comes into being. The condition of absolute power, necessitated by war, is to be carried over into the peace as a permanent condition of absolute sovereignty.¹⁵⁵

Jaspers defines “planning”:

¹⁵⁴ Jürgen Habermas, “The Sacred Roots of Axial Age Traditions.” (unpublished essay), 26.

¹⁵⁵ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 176.

Planning is any arrangement with a purpose. To this extent, planning has formed an element in human existence from the beginning. Animals live without plan, according to their instincts.¹⁵⁶

Jaspers conception here necessarily implies that the principle of “total planning” or “absolute sovereignty” arises from war, and that this phenomenon pertains “always”, i.e. throughout history. Planning here is synonymous with instrumentality, with the objective relationship between humanity and nature. The fact that planning is original to the human condition is simply another way of saying that humankind must consciously deal with natural necessity to be human in the first place, unlike animals which exist within nature on the mere basis of instinct. This passage shows that war is that condition where the social relationship is transformed into an instrumental one, or, probably more accurately, the communicative character of the social relationship is blurred with instrumentality. An artificial *second nature* arises within human society. Furthermore, the social relationship is not merely temporarily instrumentalized, but, after war, it remains so, or can remain so, according to this conception. Instrumentality is the way in which the human consciousness deals with nature. Drawing upon this passage, one can see that Jaspers is implying that war is a relationship between societies that is analogous to humankind’s relationship to nature. It implies that one group sees another as a potentially threatening alien force, insofar as it is a possible source of imposed necessity. However, at the same time, the enemy group is actually not nature at all, but only another human group, i.e. one with which mutual understanding is possible if not actual. It is clear from the passage that war results in the inner instrumentalization of the aggressor group: that instrumentalization which was temporarily employed in war

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 174.

introduces a shift from an original condition to a “permanent condition” of “absolute sovereignty”. But why this happens specifically in conditions of war among human groups and not in instrumental dealings with nature is nowhere specified by Jaspers. Perhaps it is that a group ceases to understand itself in the effort to refuse to understand another group. Nevertheless, this inner instrumentalization runs counter to the other aspect of human conscious life, namely the intersubjective relationships that constitute particular human groups. Whatever any given group’s conception of the good life might be, it must be subjective. What Jaspers is describing is a shift, brought about by war, in a group’s self-conception from something subjective to something taken as objective. In other words, a group’s ability to conceive of its particular vision of positive liberty is hijacked in the inner instrumentalization resulting from war. War is the absence of scope for negative liberty. When a group sets out to pursue positive liberty, according to whatever conception of such it may hold, and the result is not the desired liberty, but, instead, a new form of necessity, a dialectic is operant. The passage on war implies the origin of this dynamic. War is not necessary to the human condition in the same way that language use or tool use is. Therefore, if war is the source of a dialectical dynamic whereby attempts at positive liberty are transformed into new sources of necessity, of not a natural but a normative sort, such a dynamic is a *contingent* aspect of human affairs, i.e. contingent upon the decision to wage war. The emphasis on negative liberty as the precondition for effective projects of positive liberty in Jaspers’ political argument arises from this historical view.

Chapter 2

History

Introduction

Jaspers wishes to ground his political argument for negative liberty as the precondition for effective projects of positive liberty in a general conception of the history of mankind. To do so, he builds upon the tradition of the philosophy of history. He constructs the most elaborated connection between the philosophy of history and politics since Marx. For Jaspers, Marx was one who wished to “command in the name of history” by decreeing a universal conception of positive liberty, the singular and universal ethical order of a “new man” on the basis of a monocausal conception of history. Jaspers rejects Marx’s conception of history:

When dialectic is understood as causality, and its “laws” are treated like necessary causal laws... In such a case, dialectic becomes monocausality. The total happening takes place in the form of turnabouts which are dialectically comprehensible and recognizable as necessary, in the sense of genuine causality. The confusion of taking what is thought dialectically as though it were causal cognition results in expectations of what is to come and in acting on them... If, in carrying out a total act of destruction concerning human circumstances, I expect a new man to arise by virtue of a dialectical meaning-

relation falsely treated as causality, I in fact execute a magical act.¹⁵⁷

In part, Jaspers' philosophy of history must have been intended to offer a show of intellectual support for liberal democracy in the Federal Republic and the West generally after the Second World War. However, this could not be his primary aim here. In the rejection of Marx's monocausal history, Jaspers proceeds along an intellectual direction that he first broached with the application of the concept of the understanding in his early psychological work. Human history cannot be explained solely or primarily with reference to causal connections between events in sequence, as can natural history. Evident patterns of cause and effect in human history must be subordinated to an understanding of how men conceived of themselves, their groups, and other groups. Jaspers' own view can be seen by the contrast he draws with Marx:

If I look at history as though it were a natural process in which I do not take part, then history divides into the automatic happening and the spectator. However, for history to happen, human beings have to take an active role... Marx's idea of history... can, in analogy to the confusion of intuitive knowledge and technical application, be used in two ways: for passively watching as things happen, or for the justification of activism. In the first case, the attitude is "why do anything, why interfere!"... In the second case, the tendency of Marxist ideas is to justify the use of extreme force as the means of bringing about splendid conditions whose realization may be expected with certainty if the ineluctable movement of history is realized.¹⁵⁸

Marx reduces the meaning of events in history to a causal process akin to natural history. It is against this conception, which he calls a "fanaticism of certainty", that Jaspers orients his own concept of history. Jaspers seeks to do what he says Marx fails to do by attempting to:

¹⁵⁷ Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*, Volume IV (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 350.

Bring about a constructive ordering of actual human existence, which, allowing for all half-measures, injustices, disagreements, still makes possible human fulfillment, in the framework of positive—not destructive—history.¹⁵⁹

Nearly two decades after *The Origin and Goal of History*, Jaspers would echo this earlier aspiration of his in a call for a *legitimate* and *nonviolent* revolution.¹⁶⁰

Schema of history

Jaspers divides his account of history into five stages.¹⁶¹ The first is the prehistoric age in which humankind attains speech, tools and the use of fire. Before this stage, the life of humankind would have been indistinguishable from unconscious natural processes. Speech and the most rudimentary use of technologies separate humankind from nature – but when and how this separation occurs, and whether gradually or abruptly, will probably always remain beyond knowledge. Recorded history begins with the attainment of writing. History necessarily implies linguistic evidence. The earliest written records date from around 3000 B.C.; recorded history has lasted approximately 5,000 years. In the second stage, the ancient civilizations develop in a vast but relatively narrow strip of land spanning from Mediterranean Europe through North Africa, Asia Minor and the Middle East to India and China. Much later, and in isolation despite intriguingly apparent similarities,

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 352.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Karl Jaspers, *The Future of Germany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 74.

civilizations develop in Central and South America. During the third of Jaspers' stages, the Axial Age, a period from roughly 800 to 200 B.C., the “spiritual foundation” of humankind develops in three independent regions: in the West, in India and in China. In the fourth period, between 200 B.C. and 1500 A.D., the West, Jaspers says, “inwardly articulates” into Occident and Orient, as distinct from India and China which constitute the East. This “inward articulation” is the basis of the particular fragmentation and metamorphoses that appear only in the West, while a relatively greater uniformity appears in the East. Within the particular history of the west this fourth stage includes the periods of late antiquity and the middle ages. By 700 A.D., Jaspers finds the “highest seat of spiritual life of the earth” in Chang'an, the capital of China, and only a “remarkable residue” still present in Constantinople.¹⁶² By 1400 A.D., a relatively uniform level of civilization can be observed across Europe, India and China. Around 1500 A.D., however, the fifth stage begins uniquely in the West with the breakthrough into modernity, “immediate historical matrix” of our times. The “most extreme transcendence” is attained in the West as well as in India and in China. However, in the West alone it is “fettered to the world of immanence”. The result is a form of “perpetual unrest” unique to the West. Modernity brings by means of the West the unprecedented free advancement of science and technology as well as a planetary pattern of centripetal power.

¹⁶¹ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 22-27, 71-77.

The East and the West

For the consciousness of the West, since the time of the ancient Greeks, the East has taken on a symbolic form as a vast, ultimately unfathomable and essentially despotic matrix - something akin to the blind forces of nature, separate from man and potentially able to overpower him.¹⁶³ The Greek consciousness of differentiation relative to the East -- the barbarians and the Persian empire -- survived in the forms of the divisions between Western and Eastern Roman Empires, Western and Eastern Christendom and the West and Islam. The terrifying images of either savage barbarian hordes or Asiatic despotism with its corresponding stagnant, ant-like existence of the innumerable anonymous masses is not hard for a parochial Western consciousness to conjure up. This symbolic sense in which the terrifying figure of the East wells up in the Western consciousness shows Western humankind an image of himself as emerging from this gargantuan primordial matrix, and perpetually on the verge of sinking back into it. This image is sociologically "untrue and unjust" says Jaspers. Nevertheless there are two important avenues for the understanding here. On the one hand it is important to relate the intellectual and sociological analogues in the East and the West with each other -- because they are real, they point to a deep shared civilizational substratum, and such investigation brings the history of both regions into clearer consciousness for both. On the other hand, the Western view relative to Asia is an image of its "emergence" from "stabilization of the spirit in fatalism" -- and there is some essential validity embedded here -- if only as the Western version of that consciousness of

¹⁶³ Ibid., 57-70.

particularity possessed by all cultures. But as a *symbolic* dichotomy it obfuscates aspects of sociological reality. While the East exhibited nothing like the comparatively peculiar Western intellectualization of political liberty stemming from ancient Greece, and nothing like the relatively higher degree of torment and rupture in cultural reconfigurations that characterize the West generally since ancient times, nevertheless the conscious opposition to despotism, and the will to emerge from it, is not a solely Western characteristic. Rather: "emergence is a universal historical process, not a peculiarity of Europe's attitude toward Asia."¹⁶⁴ This amounts to saying that: where despotism exists, it does not exist in a vacuum, but implies the will to overcome its opposition. This points to two principles: a theory of the presence at all times of a universal human capacity for the essence of "emergence" from despotism, the pressure for differentiation of cultural entities even where there is no freedom for the actualization of such and, the theory of the development of the ancient civilizations in all three regions, the Middle East, India and China from an initial stage of social orders planned to protect settled agricultural technical peoples from barbarian incursions. Nevertheless, the relatively high saliency of such emergence in the West partially conditions the unique ferment of European modernity.

In Hegel's narrative the East is "the childhood of history." Max Weber, on the other hand, focuses less upon what is universal and essential, but more upon what is particular and contingent, a distinction expressed in his description of his inquiry in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* into: "what combination of circumstances should be attributed

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 70.

the fact that in Western civilization, and Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having *universal* significance and value."¹⁶⁵ Jaspers says that Weber presupposes a knowledge of history in his readers; he presupposes in his readers familiarity with the Hegelian narrative, but it is against this that he wants to bring to light an understanding of the contingencies and differences of societies. In so doing, he took factors that, in Marxist terminology, appear “superstructural” and assigned to them primary importance in the histories of societies.

Prehistory

Prehistory is that section of humankind's past which is partially recoverable in explanatory terms, but where the meaning of events is unknowable because of the absence of written records.¹⁶⁶ Modern archaeology and biology have extended knowledge of humankind's past far beyond anything comprehended by earlier periods. Humankind's place in process of biological evolution common to all life has been definitively established. From bone fragments, tools, ornaments, cave paintings and primitive structures, inferences can be drawn as to purposes of their uses, but no understanding of the meaning of these things for the cultural life of prehistoric humankind can be drawn beyond imaginative hypotheses. One can infer techniques such as hunting and gathering. Migrations may have occurred for

¹⁶⁵ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 1992), xxiii.

¹⁶⁶ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 23-43.

specific purposes, but other species have spread across the globe, as well. Were there technological breakthroughs in prehistory that were suppressed because they disrupted existing structures of power? The understanding cannot penetrate the mind of prehistoric humankind. For multiple tens of thousands of years, the cultural acquisitions that archaeology can recover remain almost unchanged: humankind used tools and fire, made various ornamentations and weapons, buried the dead, domesticated animals and, in some places, built enduring structures of stone. The works of various groups display cultural differentiation. In his biological nature, prehistoric humankind was identical to historical humankind. Johann Jakob Bachofen formulated such cultural categories as the "Appolonian" and the "Dionysian" in an attempt to penetrate the prehistoric psyche, but he could not accomplish more than hypothetical inferences based upon patterns of meaning already available to understanding of the historical period. All that can be known with certainty is that the earliest historical records show that humankind understood the world in mythological categories. The central question for prehistory is: why were the initial breakthroughs, such as fire and simple tools, separated from further technological developments by tens of thousands of years of intellectual stagnation? The intellect of prehistoric humankind stifled instead of continuing the process of questioning that had given rise to these initial developments; it did not recapture the essence of innovation and build upon these basic accomplishments until the dawn of the ancient civilizations, which, by comparison, is relatively recent. Such a life, one still tightly bound up with natural necessity, would have been anything but a romantic idyll. Prehistoric humankind can be seen as unhistorical on this account: he lost touch with that impulse of questioning his circumstances and innovative

thought that initially separated him from nature. He could not have seen himself as developing in time, but could have only encountered himself as he would his natural surroundings, as something repetitive like the cycles of day and night, the phases of the moon or the seasons of the year. It seems that humankind in that numb condition before history, as little knowable as he is to us, was still infinitely less known to himself.

Consciousness

What is man? How does he differ from the animal? For Jaspers, humankind, even in biological structure, is unique: "all other living creatures are at once confined and consummate in their peculiar structure, but man is boundlessly open in his potentialities, his being has not attained consummate shape and can never do so."¹⁶⁷ He cannot survive without a conscious reflection upon his natural circumstances and the development of techniques to avoid succumbing to its forces. Furthermore, this ability for conscious reflection does not arise except in communication, so it implies the necessity of community, the transmission of meanings. For animals, even the higher primates, specialized organs and instinctual drives are all that is needed for survival in nature, except where there may be a relatively short period of purely instinctual physical dependency on the mother. In no case does any animal rely upon conscious transmission of techniques for living. And if any of the higher primates have such a capacity, it is so relatively slight as to be infinitesimal. In

humans, on the other hand, the biological and the cultural are so intimately bound up that the very survival of the species depends upon both. Jaspers points to anthropological theory, specifically the work of Adolf Portmann, when he observes that the human infant physically matures outside the womb, in interaction with others, in emulation of adults or of other children. The relatively higher brain and body weight and unique helplessness differentiate human infants from the higher primates, our closest biological relatives. His example is that the spine of the infant assumes its properly mature shape through emulation, but this is no doubt only one aspect. Noam Chomsky subsequently claimed that human use of language develops along these lines, as well, in that language develops in a process by which the brain's physiological structures are brought to maturity through meaningful communicative interaction. Although Chomsky's specific insight was unknown to Jaspers, it is implied by Jaspers' general portrayal of human nature -- German historicism was influential for both, probably particularly in the influence of Wilhelm von Humboldt. Jaspers summarizes the fundamental interdependence of intellectual culture and human biology by saying, for humanity: "*Geist* is already operative, even in the biological realm itself."¹⁶⁸ Human nature is partially conditioned by conscious decisions for Jaspers, and is, therefore, inconsummate in principle. Consciousness seems indefinite and insusceptible of definition, except insofar as it can be defined by contrast with humankind's biological stratum, which alone would be incomplete and incapable of physical survival without consciousness.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 47.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 37.

The ancient civilizations

History begins in the spheres of the ancient empires of China, India, Mesopotamia and Egypt. These societies developed writing and, hence, leave remains whose meaning can be directly recovered, rather than merely inferred from the supposed use of unearthed primitive artifacts. Jaspers writes: "we feel solid ground under our feet wherever a word reaches us."¹⁶⁹ Along with writing, the ancient civilizations are distinguishable from primitive peoples on the basis of the technologies of agriculture, irrigation and horsemanship. The relatively high level of technological development, involving permanent settlement for the purposes of agriculture, gave rise to a tension between these early areas of civilization and their nomadic, barbarian neighbors. These civilizations had their origin in defensive formations against barbarian incursions, but, later, they would undergo a transformation on two levels: they became despotic and their intellectual culture, their spiritual life, took on a stagnant character. After an initial period of technological breakthrough, which set men free to a degree from direct submission to natural necessity, a counter-movement occurs, establishing a human despotism in place of that of nature. There must have been power relations with prehistoric societies that prevented intellectual breakthrough. It appears as if something of the barbarian psyche triumphed, establishing in the spheres of the ancient civilizations an analogue of the endless numb repetition of the life of prehistoric humankind. Continual incursions of barbarians, conquest, revolution and natural catastrophe, were

followed by continuation of the extant old culture in each of the ancient empires. The civilizations of Mexico and Peru are somewhat anomalous chronologically, though they appear to fit the formal structural patterns of the other ancient civilizations, i.e. as early technological civilizations mired in despotism and cultural rigidity. Jaspers seems to believe that there was probably some slight cultural connection between Asia and Central and South America -- probably across the Pacific Ocean on account of its islands -- such as Easter Island. In one account he says they resemble Egypt and Babylonia, in another, East Asia.

History

For Jaspers, history has three primary aspects: recollection, rationalization and emulation.¹⁷⁰ Together these aspects are also basic constituents of consciousness, and hence of humankind's at once definitive and inconsummate essence. Most fundamentally, the human infant develops consciousness through emulation of others. Next, men must rationalize to some degree in order to merely survive in the external natural world, by creating at least rudimentary technology in the form of tools. Finally, both of those processes must, at some minimal level, be transmitted in the form of intellectual recollection of techniques from generation to generation for the bare survival of the species. At a certain level of technological development, namely writing, the last of these processes, recollection

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 28.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 46-48.

or transmission, becomes infinitely more effective. The confinement of literacy to a dominant scribe class in the ancient civilizations placed a temporary brake upon this maieutic potential. In each of these three characteristic aspects of consciousness, humankind manifests the uniqueness of his essence. They are at once inward, meaningful, activities and outward, causal, activities. Altogether, history, seen in this way, is simply synonymous with conscious activity -- but this, of course, is here built upon scientific understanding of history, i.e. that clarification of it achieved with regard to consciousness. Conceived in this way, no human society has ever been absolutely unhistorical. There has always been, by necessity, some conscious activities and some transmission of the patterns of such. On the other hand, upon this conception, societies can be seen as more or less historical by virtue of their relative levels of the reliability and robustness of the third of these activities, recollection or transmission. Awareness of this gradient becomes important insofar as, in various periods of human history, humankind has been more or less historical. In prehistory, historical transmission was at or near the barest minimum necessary for survival for several tens of thousands of years. In the world of the ancient civilizations, initial radical breakthroughs were stabilized mutely in place across millennia, a general span that varies in particular areas but runs roughly from the invention of settled agriculture to the Axial Age.

The Axial Age

Jaspers' inquiry into the period he calls the Axial Age proceeds along three lines:

inquiry into the facts of the period, inquiry into their causes and inquiry into their meanings.¹⁷¹ The Axial Age refers to a demythologizing structural reorientation in intellectual culture across the civilized regions during the period from around 800 to 200 BC. Jaspers cites two scholars, Peter Ernst von Lasaulx and Viktor von Strauß, who both sketched early conceptions of the period by noticing parallel cultural dynamics in the West, India and China.

Lasaulx writes:

It cannot be an accident that, six hundred years before Christ, Zarathustra in Persia, Gautama Buddha in India, Confucius in China, the prophets in Israel, King Numa in Rome and the first philosophers -- Ionians, Dorians, and Eleatics -- in Hellas, all made their appearance pretty well simultaneously as reforms of the national religion.¹⁷²

Von Strauß writes:

During the centuries when Lao-tzu and Confucius were living in China, a strange movement of the spirit passed through all civilized peoples. In Israel Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Daniel and Ezekiel were prophesying and in a renewed generation (521-516 BC) the second temple was erected in Jerusalem. Among the Greeks Thales was still living, Anaximander, Pythagoras, Heraclitus and Xenophanes appeared and Parmenides was born. In Persia an important reformation of Zarathustra's ancient teaching seems to have been carried through, and India produced Sakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism.¹⁷³

The events of the Axial Age occurred in three great regions of culture, China, India and the West. The latter region encompassed the ancient Middle East, Greece, the Mediterranean

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 1-21, 51-60.

¹⁷² Ibid., 8.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 8-9.

world and Egypt. In all three regions, there was a multitude of small states and city states, often with a considerable degree of autonomy from the ancient empires. In China the empire was virtually powerless. In the Persian Empire, cities had some degree of autonomy. The free *poleis* of Greece were archetypes of this externally independent condition. The Greek cities fought amongst themselves and were internally constituted by their densely variegated complex of mythological systems and mystery cults, some taken over and adapted from the East and Egypt; imbricated with these were a diversity of systems of social stratification and political institutions. The successful defense of Greek political liberty in the Persian War must have left a profoundly deep imprint on the Greek mind -- it persisted for millennia as the polarity between Occident and Orient, between the West and the East. Warfare and economic change were endemic in all three great regions during this period, giving the era a general character of ferment. Questions must have arisen in each of the three regions as to the nature and legitimacy of social conditions and the established orders of ancient traditions. Scientific inquiry occurred in all three regions, reaching greatest acuity in Greece. Men, awakened by turmoil and change, everywhere began to ask questions, and to seek independent answers. Awareness of neighboring peoples and cultures was evoked through commerce and warfare. The stolid edifice of the ancient world began to crumble. In conscious reflection, men began to wonder how life in community should be rightly ordered. New importance was given to civic education and the planning of right institutions. Decisive answers were sought on the basis of free reason rather than upon the prevailing, but declining, mythological bases. Out of this intellectual ferment, in which only the relatively

privileged and educated few could participate to any profound depth, the structures of social, political and religious order were remolded into the basic forms which, despite significant alterations, persist until the present. Truth was no longer the exclusive possession of priests in the recesses of the temples, but was sought out abroad. Philosophers, prophets and wandering spiritual teachers appeared -- in a diversity of forms, and separately in each of the three regions, they joined the tumult of their awakening age, focusing, reflecting and systematizing its basic conscious impulses, and, in some cases, leaving their thoughts in new texts which would become authoritative with time. The common element of their insights was a rejection of the whole world of *mythos* while attempting to lead men to an new apprehension of reality through some inner, individual connection or transformation, be it ascent to the realm of the ideas through reason, the resignation of *ataraxia*, the *tao*, *nirvana*, or inner surrender to the will of the one God. The world of myth having been rejected, truth claims were now everywhere to be set upon a new, right basis: a basis comprehensible by “man as man”, one not essentially confined by culture or mediated by a priesthood, able to be read by him, to be learned in community with others, and to be discussed in public. Plato expositis all these basic aspects of Axial Age thought in the form of *Kallipolis*, the beautiful city, which is:

A pattern in heaven, where he who wishes can see it and found it in his own heart. But it does not matter whether it exists or ever will exist. In it alone, and in no other society could an intelligent man take part in public affairs.¹⁷⁴

Alongside the new intellectual culture, the ancient empires persisted but began a process of

¹⁷⁴ Plato, *Republic*, 592b.

terminal decline. The immediate outcome, the end of the Axial Age, in each of the three regions was punctuated by a rebirth of empire upon a newly reformed intellectual culture. Alexander sought *homonoia*, single-mindedness. Rome mirrored this synthesis in her pantheon of all the gods. Chandragupta Maurya unified India. Qin Shi Huang unified China. The high purity and dynamism of the ideals of the Axial Age would, in the ensuing imperial age, rigidify in dogmatic formulations, interpenetrated with cultural remnants of the older orders which had, nevertheless, lost their original vitality. Jaspers says the Axial Age was: "an interregnum between two ages of great empires, a pause for liberty, a deep breath bringing the most lucid consciousness."¹⁷⁵

In the person of Socrates, the West has its ultimate exemplar of the Axial Age. Three accounts from his contemporaries, Plato, Xenophon and Aristophanes, together serve to give Socrates's personality the vitality of someone almost personally known. Nietzsche expressed that sentiment when he writes: "Socrates is so close to me that I am almost always engaged in a struggle with him." Historical criticism, the science of philology, cannot, says Jaspers, form any one definitive picture of Socrates. The closer one approaches, the more fragmented one's view becomes:

Either it concludes that a collection of arguments and anecdotes from various sources has been transferred to Socrates, or else it disavows its own character as science and by claiming to discover more than critical methods can justify, and then the result is a multiplicity of incompatible images, each one supposedly critical, in other words a result that cannot be called scientific.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 51.

¹⁷⁶ Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*, Volume I (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), 28.

On the other hand, Hegel explodes the personal reality of Socrates to the absolute status of a pure historical force:

It was in *Socrates*, that at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, the principle of subjectivity -- of absolute inherent independence of Thought -- attained free expression. He taught that man has to discover and recognize in himself what is the Right and Good, and that this Right and Good is in its nature universal. Socrates is celebrated as a Teacher of Morality, but we should rather call him the *Inventor of Morality*. The Greeks had a *customary* morality; but Socrates undertook to teach them what moral virtues, duties, etc. were. ... Many citizens now seceded from practical and political life, to live in the ideal world. The principle of Socrates manifests a revolutionary aspect towards the Athenian state... on account of giving utterance to that principle... Socrates was condemned to death... the Athenian people condemns its deadliest foe--but... what they reprobated in Socrates had already struck firm root among themselves, and they must be pronounced guilty or innocent with him.¹⁷⁷

Neither approach is in itself sufficient, according to Jaspers. With both one proceeds according to a law of absurdity: to fixate in knowledge a man who, above all else, attested to the fact that he *did not know*. Jaspers compares the accounts given by Plato, Xenophon and Aristophanes. In the end, he singles out Plato's account as that which puts one closest in touch with Socrates as: "a one who speaks from inexhaustible depths, who springs from an unfathomable source and lives toward an unfathomable end."¹⁷⁸ Hence, for Jaspers, the question of Socrates should remain open -- as a provocation to *authentically conscious* thought which proceeds at once independently and in respectful dialogue with others, open to facts but without absolute arrest in knowledge or action. In open, inconsummate questioning

¹⁷⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover, 1956), 269-270.

¹⁷⁸ Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*, Volume I (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), 26-27.

and dialogue, one can see and awaken that spiritual situation of the Axial Age in which Socrates's own questions arise. To the contrary, Plato's character Alcibiades in the *Symposium* exemplifies the dogmatic approach to Socrates, which is incapable of questioning and dialogue:

When I opened him and looked within at his serious purpose, I saw in him divine and golden images of such fascinating beauty that I was ready to do in a moment whatever Socrates commanded.¹⁷⁹

In comparison to the intellectual cultures of the preceding ancient civilizations and primitive peoples, those of the Axial Age are all oriented towards principles of *possible* universal validity for all humankind. Despite their factual imbrication in the cultures of the Axial Age peoples, at their spiritual heights, they are abstract and applicable to all peoples. Whereas the ancient empires were an amalgam of cultures, there was a constant and definitive highest culture, a domain built upon a continuous tradition in which political power was conjoined with mythic views of cosmic order and magical rituals. The domination of such a high culture is what made up the ancient imperial entity's singular pillar of power. But this applied outside of the great empires, as well. Greece serves as an example: the Greeks, though holding no vast empire, considered themselves the world's paramount civilization. Even in Hellenistic times, the Ptolemies ruled Egypt with their native tongue for centuries. The Persian army that was defeated at Marathon serves an illustration of the cultural model of the ancient civilizations. In Jacob Burckhardt's words:

¹⁷⁹ Plato, *Symposium*, 216d-217a.

A great avalanche of men, reputed to number 1,700,000 marched against Greece. It was a senseless and ill-organized horde; the various tribes retained their preferred national weapons and their native leaders, though these were not considered officers but slaves, since the nominal commanders were all Achaemenids, connected by birth or marriage with the king.¹⁸⁰

With the birth of Axial Age thought, universal principles became imbricated in the already extant cultures from which they arose, but these principles would operate differently than the myths which had informed the ancient civilizations. Their universality was never wholly overcome by the particular cultures which embodied them, rather the opposite occurred: the universal triumphed over the particular, despite outward appearances to the contrary. Hellenism was not Greek civilization essentially, but was such only incidentally and outwardly. In essence it was *homonoia*. In Rome this principle also ruled -- a famous illustration is the case of Paul of Tarsus, who was both Jewish and Roman. In none of the empires arising at the end of the Axial Age did cultural particularity cease to matter, though in all cases the essential motive force had become universal.

Through cyclical motion in both space and time, Axial Age thought would subsequently spread and regenerate itself. Everywhere, the older orders of intellectual culture would be incorporated or extinguished completely. Nowhere did any lasting culture emerge on the model of the ancient civilizations or primitive peoples after the Axial Age. In the East, Confucianism would spread to Korea, Japan and parts of South-East Asia. Buddhism would spread from India to China and much of the same region. Christianity is a

¹⁸⁰ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Greeks and Greek Civilization* (New York: St. Martin's), 215-216.

complex intellectual amalgam, but its formative phase occurred in the syncretistic world of the linguistically Greek, Hellenistic provinces of the Roman East. The definite essence of Christianity would become a combination of Jewish piety and tradition; Greek philosophy, science and citizenship; and Roman conceptions of order and authority. Proceeding according to no one plan, agglomerating diverse cultural influences, Christianity wound its eccentric way through the ancient world, arriving at the feet of Constantine, and, through him, attained the status of a world religion. Since the Axial Age, the basic intellectual principles of the age have endured in all three great regions, and in those areas to which they spread. Patterns of revival in intellectual culture have always harkened back to it. The Holy Roman Empire was conceived as a reincarnation of Rome. Islam sought to revive the essence of Biblical faith. The Renaissance and Reformation both conceived of themselves primarily as a return to various elements from the Axial Age -- though in the Reformation this was complicated by the fact that Christianity took on its definitive shape after the Axial Age. Napoleon posed in the trappings of Augustus. George Washington was painted partially nude, loosely draped in a toga. In the East, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism persisted and underwent periodic cycles of stagnation and regeneration. The pure ideal, in the case of each of the three great regions, persisted as an element that could be revived even after centuries of slumber and disinterred from its imbrication with elements of cultural particularity everywhere. In no case were the elements of Axial Age thought completely supplanted by extant particular cultural formations nor eroded by changing times, social, economic or political conditions. Axial Age thought underwent no essential inward transformations of its own, but affected all-encompassing outward transformations. It

transformed cultures everywhere from outside both in conjunction with imperial conquest and through passive cultural diffusion, cycling boundlessly through space. It transformed cultures from the inside, eternally provoking return to its essence in new movements of ingenuity. Its essence was in thought, in reflections upon transcendence of the world. Everywhere it informed nations, spiritual movements, and canons of art; it compromised everywhere with the material world, but in every instance only temporarily. The empires that served to give consummate mundane expression to this principle of *homonoia*, eventually decayed, while the eternal principle moved on and began anew. In the aspects of space and time, it structured a single sphere of world history. Though in each of its many iterations, the paramount goal of the ideal pattern set up in heaven was never realized with finality on Earth.

After the Axial Age

The brief fluorescence of political liberty and scientific inquiry that arose in Greece before the Hellenistic period, achieved a tenuous, though lasting, significance in the Western cultural consciousness.¹⁸¹ Between the ancient world and the modern world, the idea of order that manifested itself first in the unifying civic ethos of the Roman-Hellenistic cultural complex with its relatively free sphere of cultural dynamism, became, after the third century AD, a stolid and dogmatic theological edifice in Byzantium. The definitive symbol of the age

for Europe was Christ *pantokrator*, ruler of all. This period between late antiquity and modernity was structured by theocratic states in the broader Western sphere: in Byzantium and its rivals, the Sasanian Empire and the Arab empire on its Islamic foundation. In the Occident, the by which Jaspers indicates Western and Northern Europe, the same model of theocratic unity could find no very stable foothold. On the contrary, in competition between church and state powers, in cultural fragmentation, something obdurate in the Occidental character found affinity and inspiration in the distant memories of Greek liberty and science.

It was through contact with this volatile Occidental matrix that scientific inquiry within the essentially theocratic Arab empire could attain a brief fluorescence in medieval Iberia. The extant Occidental model of fragmentation of relatively autonomous small units of political power accompanied by a weakened central theocratic power, was the condition under which scientific inquiry flourished in Moorish Iberia. In the East, science likewise developed, but in a context closer to imperial power. That this was accomplished without the loss of Moorish cultural particularity provides an early example of the cultural adaptability of *external* political liberty and scientific inquiry, if only, as it definitely was there, as elsewhere in the Occident, still in a very inchoate form. The end of Moorish civilization came not in the *Reconquista*, but in the earlier, forceful imposition of internal theocratic imperial discipline through the Almoravids. The Almoravids themselves, as nomadic Berber desert tribesmen of the harsh Atlas Mountains region, renowned for their zealotry, could not be more culturally opposite to the refined aesthetics of Moorish civilization. The most decisive

¹⁸¹ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 51-70.

impetus for the Almoravid invasion was not their own zealotry or desire for plunder, however, but rather was one arising from dissatisfaction with the heterodox attitudes of the relatively independent multitude of small Moorish states on the part of the Muslim theocratic and intellectual elite, who remained beholden to the center of imperial power in the East. Intellectual life at the Eastern extreme of the Arab Empire at this time was exemplified by al-Ghazali, who, in concert with the ruling theocratic order, encouraged the Almoravid invasion.

With the end of the external political liberty of the Moorish city states, the Arab Empire overcame its internal struggle in favor of a monolithic theocratic order. No such lasting stability could be achieved in the Occident, where, rather, tensions arose everywhere: between Christianity and culture, between empire and nations, between Romance and Teutonic peoples, between Catholics and Protestants, between theology and philosophy. The Occident became defined by internal tensions, where the opposing entities would have to settle for the mere claim to universal truth, in the absence of any one unifying power to possess it in fact. Jaspers writes:

Hence the West is typified by a *resoluteness* that takes things to extremes, elucidates them down to the last detail, places them before the either-or, and so brings awareness of the underlying principles and sets up battle-fronts in the inmost recesses of the mind.¹⁸²

Out of this unstable matrix of the medieval Occident the two related forces of political liberty and scientific inquiry would arise. When Jaspers notes that: "the classical development of

political freedom... occurred not more than seven hundred years ago in England," he refers to the principle of the struggles of the nobility against the monarchy that resulted in the *Magna Carta*. Modern science took preliminary form in philosophy of the Paris nominalists.

Through scientific inquiry the world was opened to investigation of unprecedented scope:

During the last few centuries, a single phenomenon that is intrinsically new in all respects has made its appearance: science with its consequences in technology. It has revolutionized the world inwardly and outwardly as no other event since the dawn of recorded history. It has brought with it unprecedented opportunities and hazards... New foundations for the whole of existence have now been inescapably laid.¹⁸³

While both modern political liberty and modern scientific inquiry arose from a common enduring legacy of the Greek intellectual culture of Axial Age antiquity and together escaped ultimate destruction in the Occident where the city of God and the city of man could find no perpetual peace, in their subsequently imposed isolation, the former remained for the most part an evanescent and tenuous question for humankind generally while the latter became the real and universal manifestation of the destructive credo: "knowledge is power."

Interpretation

The originality of Jaspers' account of history is owing to his efforts to appropriate in essence, to clarify and to rearticulate the Western tradition of philosophy of history. His

¹⁸² Ibid., 65.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 61.

purpose was two-fold: to exhibit the essential commonality of Axial Age traditions and to show the way in which political liberty and scientific inquiry can be understood in the essential and conjoined stages of their historical development. The end product is a vast survey, only venturing into detail in order to study pivotal points. On the whole, the survey is meant to exhibit with clarity the essential determining factors of the contemporary period, the period upon which the world had embarked with in the transformative catastrophes of the First and Second World Wars, bringing, according to Jaspers, an age of world unity.

Jaspers himself did not conduct any extensive specialized research into the facts of history, apart from his works on intellectual history and his history of psychiatry in *General Psychopathology*. When writing as an intellectual historian, he preferred to present studies of individual thinkers, exemplified by his monumental collection of essays in *The Great Philosophers*, his *Nietzsche* and *Descartes* volumes and elsewhere. In three of his chief political works, *Man in the Modern Age*, *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Mankind* and *The Future of Germany*, he organizes his thoughts according to particular political or social themes, rather than presenting a historical survey. *The Origin and Goal of History* constitutes the only historical survey of any great length in his entire immense and diverse *oeuvre*. Even working one's way through this survey one is constantly challenged by Jaspers' manifest disdain for anything simply chronological. The survey begins, not at the beginning, as it were, but in the middle, with the Axial Age. He supplies not one, but two separate schemata of world history generally -- and only for the purpose of orienting the reader at key junctures. His survey is obviously intended to be read and re-read, for the

reader to assemble its pieces one by one. In this respect it follows precisely Jaspers' own conception of how consciousness becomes active in the world. For him, consciousness becomes active under conditions of "failure", by which he means when it encounters circumstances that are not immediately understood, that provoke problems and that lead to the engagement of the intellect in search of answers.

It is with Marx's thought in particular that Jaspers has the most contentious relationship. Jaspers' entire aim is directed against Marx in *The Origin and Goal of History* - - and this is largely, though probably not entirely, apart from the fact that West Germany, and the West generally, had just embarked upon a state of anxious confrontation with the Communist world in the Cold War. This book, appearing as it did very shortly after the Second World War, could not have been conceived virtually overnight as a mere political intervention on the side of liberal democracy in the West. It must have, rather, been the case that the basic conception of this book arose out of that period before the Bolshevik revolution when Jaspers and Weber were united in a spirit of common intellectual endeavor. Marx wanted to interpret the world so as to dispense with interpretation entirely and enlisted the philosophy of history in his effort toward that end. The contrary view, to put it abstractly, is that interpretation itself should be interpreted. More simply put: what is the role of consciousness in the world? This question, for Jaspers' philosophy of history, is central. Humankind has always been fully human, has always possessed history. History is intrinsically bound up with the basic processes of consciousness in: emulation, rationalization and recollection. Jaspers conceives of humankind as, at once, a biological and

a conscious entity, exhibiting the unique and necessary presence of both elements -- and in this respect unlike any other form of life. Humankind is just as much constituted by mutually communicated meanings as he is by his particular biological causality. He is both of these primarily, and, only secondarily, conditioned from the outside by physical forces and the effects of human power. On this basis -- which is not speculation but rather is grounded in empirical observation -- history takes on an entirely different aspect than that of which Marx conceived. For example, in prehistory, from this view, one can see that conscious innovation on the part of human communities stagnated for countless millennia -- despite that fact this view holds that the potential for consciousness must have been there in the first place, from the beginning. There would have been no means of self-differentiation of humankind from natural necessity without tools, which are embodiments of consciousness in material objects through work -- there would have been no maturation of humans outside the womb -- there would have been nothing recognizably human. Then, the presence of conditions which constrain consciousness, conditions of power, must be seen as secondary phenomena, causal in nature, but not the ultimate determinants of the conditions of humankind's existence. With the bare, purely causal explanation of history employed by Marx, one has, at best, half the story, and, in fact, probably less than that. Jaspers clearly wished to play a political role supportive of liberal democracy against Communism generally, and to specifically promote liberal democracy in the Federal Republic after the Second World War.

These aims alone however do not account for the overall scope of *The Origin and*

Goal of History, which is concerned with rearticulating of the philosophy of history. In history one can conceive of a causal framework constructed upon explanation. Such an effort could run through the history of the West since antiquity, and could be extended to China and India as primary spheres and could be extended to the histories of all peoples in the world insofar as the age of technology has delivered a single context of world history. Barring catastrophe, the philosophy of history will always be part of intellectual culture. The form in which it developed in the West, however, must be adjusted to fit changed circumstances. In late antiquity, thinkers had no scientific knowledge of human origins, and only relatively scant scientific knowledge of the natural world, and they lived under conditions in which political liberty was completely impossible, extant only as a dim glimmer of hope from the distant past. The form that their philosophy of history took fit these circumstances, suited their present needs to understand themselves within those circumstances, as it were at a great remove from scientific knowledge and political liberty. Insofar as the philosophy of history grew up in conjunction with religious traditions of faith, it did so authentically, by holding on to the hope that humankind, enmeshed as he is in power, can, nevertheless, overcome the effects of power upon his own consciousness and share this freedom with others to the extent practical and possible. In these early times, the explanatory and understanding elements of the philosophy of history were construed and related to each other in a fashion that fit those times. Everything to be explained was at an incredible distance. The scope for collective understanding was miniscule. With Marx the philosophy of history maintained its eschatological proportions when it entered a world very unlike that in which it was originally formulated, the world of late antiquity. In the Occident,

a world conditioned already by a fragile tradition of political liberty and in which modern science had been compelled to supply technologies that infinitely multiplied humankind's physical powers, a radical secular eschatology could not but become an immensely destructive explosive force -- at once self-destructive and destructive of that collective understanding upon which liberty and science were based. Marx's error was a poverty of faith, to speak symbolically; to speak theoretically, it was a poverty of understanding. Specifically, it was lack of understanding that at no point did the philosophy of history posit that a causal, explanatory framework of historical events, and their dialectical relationships, was the same as total determination of either the consciousness of the present or future possibilities of humankind. Marx writes:

In the social production of the environment of their life, human beings enter into certain necessary relations of production that are independent of their will, and that correspond to a determinate stage of development of their material productive forces. The totality of these relations of production form the economic structure of the society, the real basis upon which a juridical and political superstructure raises itself, and to which determinate forms of social consciousness correspond. The mode of production of the material life of society conditions the socio-political and intellectual life-process generally. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness.¹⁸⁴

On the contrary, such a theory of causation as total determination, can only serve to obfuscate the freedom of the consciousness in the present and future -- the clarification of which is the aim of science. Hence Jaspers' verdict that Marx: "destroyed science in the

¹⁸⁴ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1904), 11-12.

name of science."¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁵ Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Anti-Reason in Our Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 17.

Chapter 3

Science

Introduction

Central to Jaspers' thought is the postulate that consciousness always shows up within the subject-object dichotomy. Nature, the world of objective relations, can be conceived of causally. Life in human communities, on the other hand, involves the perception of intersubjectively shared meanings:

Causal knowledge is always faced by something which no matter how we operate it implies that in the end all the well-being of man is still dependent on something decisive in himself, which is only approachable if we understand.¹⁸⁶

Therefore, for Jaspers, the priority of the understanding, of subjectivity, is clear. In the overlapping spheres of science, technology and work, the human consciousness is oriented

¹⁸⁶ Karl Jaspers, *General Psychopathology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 462.

toward the objective world. Jaspers perceives in contemporary manifestations of each of these spheres a tendency towards the objectification of humankind. His purpose to assert that each of these spheres is, in itself, ethically neutral. In other words, neither modern science nor modern technology is, in itself, a barrier to liberty. His view of history implies that science and technology can have a complimentary relationship to the freedom of the consciousness. His description of the “Promethean age” implies that the conjunction of humankind’s first use of tools was necessary to the process of hominization itself. The inception of the ancient civilizations were in part based upon the development of agricultural technology and writing. The relatively stagnant intellectual life of ancient civilizations was, nevertheless, a stage of considerably greater freedom of the human consciousness than the preceding hundred or so millennia of prehistoric human existence. The neutrality of the sphere of science, technology and work, for Jaspers, gives each an ambiguous character. Jaspers seeks to describe how each sphere, when detached from the guiding rein of understanding, turns into a source of self-objectification of humankind. This description simultaneously seeks to bracket each of these spheres in order to support his central political argument:

Only when positive liberty has been realized on the basis of the legal safeguarding of negative liberty, does the proposition apply: Man is free in the measure in which he sees freedom around him, that is, in the measure in which all men are free.¹⁸⁷

Negative liberty in this conception is synonymous with understanding across different human groups. By bracketing the spheres of science, technology and work as ethically neutral

factors, Jaspers establishes a focus on subjective factors of human existence as the immediate sources of liberty or the lack thereof.

Philosophy and Science

Outside *The Origin and Goal of History* the concept of history is not subject to any in-depth treatment in Jaspers' other writings. Short pieces that accompany his *Great Philosophers* are exceptions, as are portions of his essays on individual philosophers. Of the latter, the most extensive, but still relatively brief, treatment of the concept of history can be found in his *Nietzsche*. On the other hand, the meanings of the concepts of philosophy and science constitute perennial concerns for Jaspers. The aim of *Origin and Goal of History*, Jaspers writes, is the elucidation of the situation of the present:

The purpose of an overall philosophical view of history, such as we are seeking to arrive at, is to illumine our own situation within the totality of history. It serves to light up the consciousness of the present epoch and shows us where we stand.¹⁸⁸

To accomplish this, the Axial Age is not sufficient. Around 1500 the West embarked upon a great transformation of intellectual culture arising from initial developments in the form of modern science. For Jaspers modern science is founded upon philosophy. Augustine found that there are precisely 288 logically possible “sects of philosophy” all of which have

¹⁸⁷ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 160.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

differing opinions of how to attain the *summum bonum*.¹⁸⁹ Jaspers says philosophy itself cannot be defined: "There is no definition of philosophy because philosophy cannot be determined by something outside it."¹⁹⁰ However, he often supplies definitions that, nevertheless, seem intentionally vague, such as: "Philosophical thought is inward action; it appeals to freedom; it is a summons to transcendence."¹⁹¹ Similar characterizations can be found throughout his writings. Jaspers relates philosophy to science: "...philosophy is not only less but also more than science, as the source of a truth that is inaccessible to scientifically binding knowledge."¹⁹² This latter statement that comes closest to the definition of philosophy that is actually implied in Jaspers' own thought. Philosophy is the core of the sciences, insofar as it is *knowledge of how the sciences obtain universally valid knowledge*. This should be distinguished from objective knowledge ascertained by the sciences, owing to the fact that such knowledge is, according to this view, made possible by the general clarification achieved first through philosophical inquiry. That this definition of philosophy does not account for all forms of thought that have been classified as philosophy is consciously presupposed by Jaspers. The contrast between philosophy and science in Jaspers' thought can be most clearly seen in his comments on Marx -- though this characterization mainly serves the purpose of exemplifying a broader distinction between philosophy and anti-philosophy, between science and pseudo-science. Jaspers is in the final

¹⁸⁹ Augustine, *City of God*, Book XIX

¹⁹⁰ Karl Jaspers, *The Way to Wisdom (Einführung in die Philosophie)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 163.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

analysis mostly concerned with using his analysis of Marx as an example what he sees as a blind alley of thought, insofar as he is of the opinion that Marx wreaked havoc with the fundamentals of the philosophy of history. And this is all aside from the fact that Jaspers no doubt thought that Marx himself had never really been *directly* influential for existing Communist regimes -- no one would think that Marx actually envisioned or advocated the totalitarian horrors of Stalinism or Maoism, for example.

What Marx shared with Descartes is a conception of philosophy as total, systematic knowledge.¹⁹³ Philosophy, having reached ultimate truth about the world, need no longer interpret the world, but rather must serve as the necessary insights for action. Knowledge must become power. If, on the other hand, philosophy is inquiry into how the sciences obtain universally valid knowledge, it can really only ever interpret the world by continuously encountering it anew in its changing aspects. The crucial difference is one of the role of consciousness. Philosophy in Jaspers' view is a call to consciousness -- as fluid communication of meanings constituting intellectual culture, or *Geist*, essential to human life in general, intrinsic to the physical existence of the human life-form. On that interpretation, philosophy as constituted by the works of the great thinkers with whom it is generally associated is a record of particularly important and hard-won insights achieved in their particular situations, however, in a way that is not essentially different from how consciousness generally operates for all men. For Marx, on the other hand, consciousness is a

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 155.

product of those structures that are already known absolutely, i.e. in their essentials, through philosophy:

It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness.¹⁹⁴

Whether consciousness is a primary or secondary feature of human existence is crucial. If consciousness is secondary, then absolute knowledge becomes possible, because the continuous fluidity of communication of meanings is bracketed as something superfluous, and causal knowledge of physical sequences becomes of primary importance. Then, in this denial that how men understand their situations has any intrinsic role in conditioning those situations, the essential laws governing all human situations can be revealed completely:

We must rather explain this consciousness by the contradictions obtaining in the material life of the time, in the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the social relations of production... The bourgeois relations of production are the last of the antagonistic forms of the social process of production... With the present social formation, therefore, the introductory period of the history of human society is closed.¹⁹⁵

It is clear from this how such an empirically fallacious view of consciousness leads to the claim to absolute knowledge. Since bourgeois society is the final stage of the dialectic, to overcome it is to overcome the dialectic entirely, absolutely -- through contributing to the downfall of its final stage. Without relegating consciousness to a secondary position, no social formations could be conceived of as following *entirely* from determining laws. And

¹⁹⁴ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1904), 11-12.

without the postulate of such determining laws of social reality, a prescription for total emancipation, "human emancipation", could not be conceived. But what can "human emancipation" mean if consciousness itself is a product of exactly those contradictions which are to be overcome? Science is inquiry into the world with the aim of ascertaining what can be known with universal validity. Philosophy, on the other hand, is knowledge of how the aims of science can be achieved in differing circumstances, in differing configurations of power -- this is Jaspers' operant definition of philosophy:

Although scientific truth is universally valid, it remains relative to method and assumptions; philosophical truth is absolute for him who conquers it in historical actuality, but its statements are not universally valid. Scientific truth is one and the same for all--philosophical truth wears multiple historical cloaks; each of these the manifestation of a unique reality, each has its justification, but they are not identically transmissible.¹⁹⁶

Both of those views of philosophy and science can be seen by taking Marx as a counter-example, because he reverses them both in a way that is clear to see. Jaspers recognizes that Marx also made contributions to the science of economics, apart from this. For Marx, philosophy has achieved final insight into the circumstances of power in its essentials, therefore philosophy as it was known is at an end. Science is likewise at an end, because the final science of society is now available. In Marx these formulations provide the final, definitive answers that subvert that conscious process by which both philosophy and science proceed.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 12-13.

¹⁹⁶ Karl Jaspers, *The Way to Wisdom (Einführung in die Philosophie)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 162.

Modern Science

For Jaspers the development of modern science is the defining factor in what would become an all-embracing historical transformation, beginning in the West and subsequently spreading across the globe, ushering in modernity -- the age of technology -- everywhere. Hence, understanding of science becomes crucial in Jaspers' view: "the great and pressing task of our epoch is the pure apprehension of the meaning and limits of modern science."¹⁹⁷ Science, both ancient and modern, is characterized by three attributes according to Jaspers: "It is methodical cognition, cogently certain and universally valid."¹⁹⁸ Jaspers' treatment of science in *Einführung in die Philosophie* achieves greater depth than treatment found in *The Origin and Goal of History*, but without the breadth of historical consideration found in the latter. The difference between modern and ancient science is one of attitude. While ancient science, typified by Greek science, presented its works as finished, modern science is defined by an attitude which: "set its own development as its conscious goal."¹⁹⁹ The basic impulse at the heart of science is the will to knowledge, in modernity its attitude is one that presupposes its absolute right to freedom; the basis of modern science is in: "the subjective impulse to *universal knowledge*."²⁰⁰ Nothing that exists is outside its bounds; everything is a possibly

¹⁹⁷ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 94.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 83.

¹⁹⁹ Karl Jaspers, *The Way to Wisdom (Einführung in die Philosophie)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 151.

²⁰⁰ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 86.

legitimate object of inquiry. Everything, even its own findings, are subject to potential revision; it leaves behind all: "vague talk, all plausible opinions, all stubborn prejudice and blind faith."²⁰¹ It searches for the highest degree of universally valid knowledge everywhere and communicates that knowledge in a continuous process of development and revision involving cooperative work. Insofar as scientifically ascertained knowledge results in replicable techniques, it takes on the form of technology, and through work, production. Technique here is not construed to cover the sphere of communication of meanings, but rather only application of conscious processes in order to achieve a desired transformation in physical conditions.

However, "science is a whore", says Jaspers, in a curious deviation from his usual idiom, in echoing Nicholas of Cusa. Cusa writes:

Just as carnal lust finds its consecration and appeasement only when channeled in the sacrament of marriage, so love of knowledge finds its appeasement only when channeled in true union with the Bridegroom. So long as the mind indulges without restraint in vain knowledge, it no more finds the object of its natural desire than does a man who cohabits with every whore. There can be no marriage with a fickle woman, only with eternal wisdom.²⁰²

In other words: the validity of science remains governed by its methods and assumptions.

Without a philosophical understanding of how statements of universal validity can be made, science falls into the role of mere servitude: "into gratuitous convention, meaningless

²⁰¹ Karl Jaspers, *The Way to Wisdom (Einführung in die Philosophie)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 152.

²⁰² Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*, Volume III (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), 202.

correctness, aimless busy-ness, and spineless servitude."²⁰³ Jaspers says that science, when properly guided by philosophy: "springs from the *logos* that does not enclose itself within itself, but, open to the *alogon*, penetrates the latter by subordinating itself to it."²⁰⁴ What is described here can be thought of as a hermeneutic device by which conscious thought is evoked out of unconscious conditions of everyday life. An example can make what Jaspers means more concrete: in prehistory humankind's consciousness necessarily arose simultaneous with the full biological formation of the species. Anything biologically recognizable as fully human had to involve conscious thought. At the beginning of the prehistorical period, men conceivably could have taken many different forms of conscious action, but we have no empirical evidence aside from the existence of tools and a few other types of objects. Into tools humankind put a conscious design first evoked in his mind. They had a meaning for him; they had his *logos*. In them he could have seen his own conscious efforts to overcome the sheer compulsion of nature. But then, known through modern archaeology, a vast, terrible period of perhaps one hundred thousand years or more appears to intervene in which silence ruled the world. This silence is an example of the *alogon*. Something -- something one cannot penetrate by knowledge -- put a brake on conscious activity. One can only theorize that something akin to the magical pseudo-knowledge prevalent in primitive peoples whose societies were contemporary with modernity in the West, and thus were capable of being investigated by modern anthropology, was the general

²⁰³ Karl Jaspers, *The Way to Wisdom (Einführung in die Philosophie)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 159.

trend across all human societies in prehistory. Thus conceived, the *alogon* is a kind of "magic spell" that freezes conscious activity into unconscious repetition like a natural process. Primitive humankind could have looked at the first tools, recovered their basic purpose, and further developed that purpose into new and better tools. But, instead, there was a vast period of stagnation. Primitive humankind could repetitively create tools, but he could not recover and further develop the *logos*, or conscious intention, encased within them as their meaning, for that he would first need to confront that *alogon* which stood in his way. In his "science" he proceeded blindly, reproducing primitive technology according to unquestioned methods. This example is intended to illustrate how Jaspers sees the role of philosophical inquiry in evocation of consciousness before and as the guiding basis of properly-oriented scientific inquiry: properly construed, philosophy directs science away from its constant tendency toward apathetic immersion in the unconscious images of every age.

In modernity, Jaspers argues, owing in part to the thought of Bacon and Descartes, knowledge has become fallaciously confused with power: "Mastery of nature, ability, utility, 'knowledge is power', this has been the watchword since Bacon. He and Descartes sketched the outlines of a technological future."²⁰⁵ This direction is a blind alley for modern science, however, and one that reverses its essential orientation. It is fundamental for Jaspers that inquiry and the attainment of knowledge alone does not give direct rise to the dehumanizing effects that he ascribes to the will to power. Assuming its *proper philosophical orientation*,

²⁰⁴ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 92.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

modern science is seen by Jaspers as the expression of the will to knowledge. He distinguishes the will to knowledge from the will to power:

Readiness to fit in with nature has always been part of the ethos of the natural scientist. But he wants to know what nature does and what happens in nature. For this will to knowledge, this freedom of the knower, who suffers, endures and lives, not blindly but with his eyes open, is something quite different from aggressivity and will to power. It is a will to power not as dominion, but as inner independence. This liberty of consciousness of the knower is able precisely to grasp pure factuality as a genuine hieroglyph of Being. It is not aggressivity that is contained in the ethos of cogent, universally valid knowledge--in contrast to the plausible, approximate, fluid, and ultimately capricious—but will to clarity and trustworthiness.²⁰⁶

This distinction is discussed at greater length in *Reason and Anti-Reason*. Here is the summation of this distinction as it is drawn there:

It is not easy to understand science. One must have participated in it to have a trustworthy idea of what it is. If one has no inside knowledge of science and thinks of it merely in terms of its externals, of the wrong tracks it has sometimes taken, of its transposition of means into ends, of its technical applications, then one will misinterpret it... as an expression of the will to power.²⁰⁷

The misunderstanding of modern science as will to power can be seen to have a dual aspect: on the one hand it is prefigured in modern thought specifically and, on the other, it is a misunderstanding arising upon a critical attempt to understand modern life in general. In the first aspect, science is conceived of as the possibility of achieving total knowledge of the world as a whole. Jaspers, through his criticism of Marx, sought to describe this first aspect,

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 90.

²⁰⁷ Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Anti-Reason in Our Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 31.

as discussed above. In the second aspect, the products and effects of science in general are received and criticized by individuals without the ability to differentiate the authentic scientific orientation from its either typically inconvenient and unwanted or manifestly destructive and dehumanizing effects. Modern science essentially involves an assumption of the ability to know of objects in the world. However, this turns into a misapprehension when it is conceived to mean the ability to know of the world as a whole. On the basis of that misapprehension, a further fallacy is construed: that it is only a matter of good will, operating on the basis of this knowledge, to create a permanent world order of complete satisfaction and happiness. This result amounts to a scientific superstition or “surrogate faith”. Upon the inevitable failure of such scientific superstitions which expect the impossible, repudiation of science in general results.²⁰⁸ The fallacy of total knowledge arises when science is not taken as an activity for which its own development is its conscious goal, but rather when that goal is mistakenly construed as a state of completion.

Technology

Technology is intrinsic to the essence of humankind, insofar as the human is a being who cannot but separate himself from nature through conscious action. Until the modern

²⁰⁸ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 94-95.

period, the most powerful technologies had consisted of relatively rudimentary utilization of physical forces of domesticated animals, fire, wind and water. But with modernity, the scale of physical forces amenable to utilization increases exponentially, through the steam engine, the electric motor, and more efficient means of harnessing the energy from sources such as coal, oil, rivers, and, finally, from an entirely new source in atomic energy. Jaspers defines technology as: "operation with the substances and forces of nature for the purpose of producing useful objects and effects."²⁰⁹ Technology is the outcome of a consciously formulated technique in response to some situation of faulty functioning. It results in the production of either sources of energy or goods. It produces everything with a purpose in mind, but its products can subsequently be utilized alone or in conjunction for other purposes. The essential nature of technology for the life of humankind in general is evident when one considers Jaspers' conception of the human infant, who is "born incomplete" and matures through both physical growth and conscious exchange of meanings with others. But technology is not communication -- the latter cannot be simply reduced to a calculation of means and ends, but rather must necessarily always involve an element of meaning. So planning in social affairs is not, by this definition, technological. Technology is the way humankind relates to nature: "its purpose is to liberate man from his animal imprisonment in nature, with its want, its menace, its bondage."²¹⁰ Humankind's relation to nature is always already -- from birth -- one of faulty functioning *in part*. This relationship is characteristic of the difference between human and animal; in Jaspers' formulation, consciousness is the

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 101.

crucial element of this differentiation:

The animal finds its environment ready-made and is unconsciously bound to it. Despite being likewise bound, man brings forth his environment in boundless overpassing of his ties. Life in an environment that he has created himself simultaneously with life in the natural environment, is the hallmark of humanity. He finds himself in his own creation, not only through release from want, but also in the appeal that the beauty, appropriateness and form of his creation has for him.²¹¹

When conscious action separates humankind further from nature it essentially does so in a way that is self-sustaining. This is what Jaspers means when he points to the authentic attitude of the natural scientist as one that seeks to fit in with nature. Thus technology is reducible to a calculation of utility; it is always the formulation of certain means toward the attainment of a given end. In this way, its technical rationality can be distinguished from meaningful relationships which proceed from communication. However, at the same time, it arises out of a subjective decision on the part of humankind to shape his world in a way conducive to himself. On the basis of this definition, deviant instances of technological applications would be those where the results take the form of new conditions of constraint upon humankind's intrinsic spirit of perpetual inquisitiveness or new conditions where humankind's relationship to nature is destructive, and, hence, unsustainable in the long term.

Work

²¹⁰ Ibid., 100.

²¹¹ Ibid., 101.

For Jaspers, work is that activity for which technology arises and in which technology is applied. Different technologies require different modes of work. In the age of technology, the present age, work has undergone as substantial a transformation as has technology. Jaspers' conception of work is grounded in his theory of consciousness, insofar as work can be defined as: "consciousness of participating in the creation of our environment."²¹² Work always involves some combination of mental and physical activity, though tasks of a more mental nature are more difficult, insofar as they are relatively more original and creative rather than repetitive. Work is one of the fundamental attributes of humankind and one which, in its specifically human form, differs from animal activity:

The animal satisfied its needs directly through nature. It finds what it needs ready-made. Man can only satisfy his needs through conscious and planned interposition of means.²¹³

This difference is manifested in the tools humankind makes which separate humans from nature, and, without which, ultimately he could not remain recognizably human. Animal actions cause all their effects to disappear, while the work of humankind can often create enduring objects. In order to live at all, humankind must work by pursuing some ends through the adoption of some means according to a mental plan, but work in general cannot be reduced to this one factor for humankind. For animals, on the other hand, the pursuit of ends and use of means is observable, though in every case this activity is completely unconscious, completely unplanned.

²¹² Ibid., 108.

However once one enquires into what constitutes work apart from its element of planned, purposive activity, one encounters that additional element in a theory of its bifurcation into two seemingly mutually antagonistic factors. Whether or not these factors are actually combined in practice is a question that is unaddressed by Jaspers -- but nothing indicates that such a combination is not possible -- in fact it seems likely. Jaspers presents two different conceptions of work -- both of which are actual for him. This point stands in need of clarification, because it is not presented particularly clearly in the text. What is at issue is Jaspers' subjective view of the value of one conception of actual work activity over another. The first, the one Jaspers prefers, is that work is not merely functional activity, but potentially an experience whereby man manifests his essential being through work:

The worker becomes conscious of himself in the mirror of that which he has produced. His serenity springs from sharing in the life of the existential forms which he has helped to create, from the creation of something that exists.²¹⁴

Jaspers does not elaborate here the necessarily, intrinsically communal and not purely individual character of *this* conception of work activity, but that this conception implies that work occurs within a context of communally-shared meanings clearly follows from Jaspers' general conception of consciousness as intrinsically communicative in part. For the second conception, Jaspers quotes Hegel:

...religious labor that brings forth works of devotion which are not intended for any finite purpose... Such labor is itself an act of worship... Work as pure creation and as perennial labor is its own purpose and hence is forever

²¹³ Ibid., 106.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 108.

unfinished... [This conception of work runs from] the merely bodily movement of the dance to the stupendous and gigantic works of architecture... all these works fall into the category of sacrifice... the very activity is an offering; no longer of a purely external thing, but of the inner subjectivity... in this producing the sacrifice is spiritual activity and the effort which, as a negation of the particular self-consciousness, holds fast to the purpose that lives within it in imagination, and brings it forth to outward view.²¹⁵

That this is expressed in a religious idiom is not the essential point. What is involved in this second view is an analogue of the way that the animal "works" in its environment -- its activities do not create lasting objects, but effects which, rather, all disappear. Here the analogue of that element is the conception of work as "sacrifice" -- sacrifice not of a purely external thing, but *sacrifice of inner subjectivity*. Where the products of animal "work" all disappear by nature, work under the aspect of sacrifice for humankind causes products to *ritually* disappear in a sundering of the intrinsic conscious connection between human and product. In the first conception, man comes closer to himself in his work, but in this conception he estranges himself from himself in his work. It is not the mirror in which man projects his conscious image, but the negation of particular self-consciousness. The objects produced in this sense may not actually disappear, but in their essence the consciousness of the worker reflected in his product all but disappears in the face of a domineering task that demands unquestioned obedience. At this particular point of comparison, Jaspers' opposition to Hegel's thought is overtly visible. This second view is a picture of work as it is dialectically transformed into *dehumanization*. That actual work can, and may usually, occur in spheres combining both conceptions seems probable.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

Work for Jaspers is essentially communal: "The world of man, the overall condition in which he lives, grows out of communal work."²¹⁶ The communal nature of work necessitates a division of labor as a constant requirement for all societies. Differentiation of tasks leads to class formation and mutual separation according to respective work specializations. At a fundamental level there has to be some social coordination of labor -- the quality and quantity of production reflects an awareness of the society in which the worker produces including awareness of the production of other workers. Division of labor and organization of production imply the need for exchange. Most products are not directly consumed by the worker who produced them, but become exchangeable commodities. Exchange necessitates money, an abstract value imperative. The two ideal types of exchange relations possible for any society are: a market distribution and planned distribution. Here again Jaspers differs from Marx. The division of labor for Jaspers is not fundamentally and by itself an instance of domination. Marx, by comparison, presents a rather implausible doctrine of the division of labor arising primarily from sexual relations:

There develops the division of labor, which was originally nothing but the division of labor in the sexual act, then that division of labor which develops spontaneously or 'naturally' by virtue of natural predisposition (e.g. physical strength), needs, accidents, etc. etc. ... As soon as the distribution of labor comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape.²¹⁷

²¹⁶ Ibid., 107.

²¹⁷ Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: Norton, 1972), 158-160.

For Marx the division of labor is essential a relationship of domination through the alienation of the worker from his product, and it is inseparable from its primary basis in sexual relations. It is, therefore, hard if not impossible to see how "human emancipation" for Marx could be achieved for a society in which sexual relations are permitted. For Jaspers, the division of labor is a constant across all societies, and an unproblematic one. Where domination arises for Jaspers is in the manipulation of the meaning of work in various situations. To the extent that work becomes more and more a process of unconscious repetition, alienation and domination through work increases as well. Jaspers recognizes that Marx and Engels' general concern for the importance of work in modern society is warranted, however, insofar as, unlike in previous periods, the way work is organized and conducted has become relatively more important in the modern period in relation to matters of social structure.

The age of technology

According to Jaspers, humankind has embarked upon an age of technology since the nineteenth century, beginning in the West and gradually coming to encompass the world a whole. The defining aspect of the age is one of *malfunction*, where technology's intrinsic function as a means by which humankind shapes his environment has become, everywhere and systematically, an end in the service of which man himself increasingly must conform as a means. Modern technology harnesses exponentially greater natural forces than technology

in all earlier periods, while at the same time involving itself in all aspects of everyday life to an unprecedented extent. The average human is at once nearer to advanced technology and at an increasingly uncomprehending distance from it. Central to Jaspers' conception of the age of technology is the status of technology as neutral, neither good nor evil in itself. Jaspers intends to direct the consciousness of modern humankind towards technology, because, in his view, the fundamental defect of the age of technology is the systematic distancing of humankind from conscious awareness of difference between the actual role of technology in life and its potential role, when rightly oriented, towards the production of an authentically human environment for humankind generally. The age of technology for Jaspers is one where a loss of consciousness is systematically brought about on a global scale:

Where that element of technological activity which consists of performances that can be learned by practice becomes self-satisfying routine, it ceases to be an enrichment of life... and becomes instead an impoverishment of life. Work without the spiritual effort which is an indispensable means of enhancing consciousness, becomes instead sufficient to itself. Man sinks down into unconsciousness or lack of consciousness.²¹⁸

It seems that, in general, Jaspers' thought implies that the will to power assumes two primary functions: domination and nihilation. In the age of technology, both of these functions are performed through the operation of technology. Domination occurs on two levels in this situation. The first is the role of the state, which: "through the communications system can

²¹⁸ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 102.

make itself effective at any moment over wide areas, right into every home."²¹⁹ Domination is also achieved over the individual in his systematic everyday involvement in the life of his society:

Technological thinking spreads to all spheres of human action. ... In consequence of the fact that the fashioning of life has become the work of machines, the whole of society is transformed into one great machine, into a single organization embracing the whole of life. ... From now on, everything that wishes to be effective has to be fashioned after the pattern of the machine, that is, to take on an exact, constrained character and be bound by outward rules. The greatest power emanates from the greatest and most perfectly evolved machine... Man himself becomes one of the raw materials to be purposefully worked over. Hence that which was previously the substance and meaning of the whole--man--becomes a means.²²⁰

As an illustration of the imposition of machine-qualities upon everyday life, Jaspers cites a newspaper article in which a twenty-one year old American bomber pilot described his understanding of his own situation:

I am a cog in the inferno of a vast machine. The more I think about it, the more it seems to me as though I have been a cog in one thing after another since the day I was born. Whenever I started to do something I wanted to do, a thing much larger than I came along and pushed me into a place that was waiting for me. It's not exactly pleasant, but that's how it is.²²¹

Concomitant with this system of domination is a process of nihilation: "The conditions of the age of technology have proved conducive to an outbreak of nihilistic possibilities in the

²¹⁹ Ibid., 123.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid., 112.

whole of the population."²²² Nihilism for Jaspers is essentially the dissolution of cultural traditions and their replacement by manufactured mass information-patterns. Jaspers is not nostalgic for rustic life here, but rather thinks that the shift in question has deleterious social-psychological consequences, such as the rise of mass-movement politics and their demonstrable tendencies towards totalitarianism. On the one hand there is traditional culture *and* authentic science, and on the other there is manufactured mass-existence and pseudo-scientific ideologies, e.g. Marxism, Bolshevism, Fascism, Nazism -- to name only some of those ideologies prevalent in Jaspers' time. Nihilism implies a shift from both elements of the former to both elements of the latter more or less simultaneously. This, taken negatively, implies a potential harmony between cultural traditions and authentic science, which, however, Jaspers does not elaborate.

Jaspers would certainly not think that doing away with technology would be a viable remedy for the trends of domination and nihilation endemic to the age of technology, however, even if that were possible. Rather, the root of the problem is in humankind's orientation towards technology -- and that orientation is at once broader and more amorphous than technology itself: "The direction of technology cannot be looked for in technology itself, but must be sought in a conscious ethos. Man must find his way back to the guiding reins."²²³ A change in orientation towards a more humane system of the application of technology in life, can only gradually occur under conditions of political liberty, in Jaspers'

²²² Ibid., 131.

²²³ Ibid., 119.

view, which will be discussed in the next chapter. No one right model for humankind's orientation to technology in general can be formulated positively, however, but rather the point is to provoke awareness of the avoidable, dehumanizing configurations that are possible for technology in absence of more humane configurations which are sensitive to both collectivities of cultural meaning and individual freedom of choice. The potential for re-orientation, however, lies partially in the neutral status of technology itself. Just as technology can dehumanize, it can also make living conditions more humane. With technology has come a new value on labor insofar as physically ruinous labor is more often expected to be avoided. Technology can integrate without disturbance into the human world; in this Jaspers sees a kind of admirable technological beauty. New knowledge of the natural world can be achieved through technological implements such as the microscope and the telescope. Improved means of transport allow for greater ease of travel and expand the opportunity for travel to greater numbers of people. Film and audio recordings assist historical recollection. Technology has a dual relationship to nature. It distances humankind from nature's compulsive forces, but it also brings him closer to nature in knowledge of nature's realities. The exercise of these capacities requires, however, the avoidance of technology's capacity to impose new forms of compulsion and to imprison humankind's intrinsic inquisitiveness through unconscious and formulaic repetition of equally mechanized processes of labor and leisure.

Chapter 4

Liberty

Introduction

Jaspers' argument is that an international framework of negative liberty is the precondition for all effective projects of positive liberty. The world situation after the Second World War is one that he conceived of as a *de facto* unity facilitated by the potentially global scope of communication technology. In this situation a diversity of human groups will persist, as has always been the case in history. Diversity of human groups known to each other has always brought internal challenges to the bases of legitimacy inherent to all groups. When legitimacy decreases, the role of force in human affairs increases and *vice versa*. Nihilism represents a general tendency towards diminishing legitimacy. It is the precondition of totalitarianism, or rule by force and fear. In the contemporary situation, force in human affairs, when combined with contemporary technology, has demonstrated the potential for greater destructive capacities than at any previous period of history, posing even

the possibility of total annihilation. While Jaspers thinks all eruptions of the use of force cannot ultimately be prevented, the enhancement of legitimacy across diverse groups, diverse *ethoi*, resulting from a framework of negative liberty offers the best hope for diverse versions of positive liberty by diminishing the chances of eruptions of force in the long term.

Nihilism

Nihilism, not totalitarian mechanization or liberal democratic order, is the most basic trend of the present, according to Jaspers.²²⁴ *The Origin and Goal of History* was conceived and written in a period the forces of totalitarianism, whether fascist or Communist, seemed capable of engulfing humankind as a whole in a global reign of terror. From the Bolshevik revolution, through the rise and defeat of Fascism, and continuing in the form of the Cold War and the rise of Maoist totalitarianism in China, the question of the fate of humankind seemed defined by the contentious polarity between the free world and the forces of despotism. Despite its undeniably tangible reality, this the concept of this distinction, however, does not penetrate to that deeper stratum at which the spiritual situation of the age attains its fundamental orientation in nihilism. For Jaspers, nihilism is, in essence, the *specifically contemporary* form of that basic systematic by which consciousness is redirected toward an *active* unconsciousness and petrified there. Its formula is flexible: its manifestations vary according to the forms which phenomena of consciousness take, and no

one manifestation embodies the whole trend of nihilism itself.

In their respective conceptions of nihilism, Jaspers and Nietzsche could not be further apart. For Jaspers, Nietzsche's thought constituted anything but an example for emulation, but rather it was the clearest example of those most deleterious excesses of thought towards which all responsible political thought of the present and future must be opposed. Any potential ambivalence in Jaspers' extensive writings about Nietzsche is an expression of Jaspers' struggle to find a shared ground of truth even across the sharpest lines of division between men, in fact especially there. Entering a dialogue of thought with Nietzsche for Jaspers was like speaking with a patient as a psychiatrist. However in the case of his writings about Nietzsche, that dialogue is meant to be the model for a public dialogue by which individuals can come to know the will to power as it manifests itself inwardly and in society at large. It should therefore come as no overt surprise that Jaspers does not always unequivocally set his own thought in opposition to Nietzsche. If nothing else, the immersive method of *verstehende* psychology forbids alienation from the pathology of the patient. There was something essential about Nietzsche the man which remained authentically human and essentially true prior to his expression of a fanatical and malevolent worship of power. Jaspers' position is one of an understanding that refuses to confront Nietzsche's thought as something entirely alien. In so doing it seeks to avoid that lapse into unconscious absorption in one's own will to power and the concomitant paralysis of any possible inward opposition to it. This attitude towards Nietzsche, and through him towards nihilism itself, reflects

²²⁴ Ibid., 126-152.

Jaspers' maxim: "What we cannot *be* at all, we cannot *understand* either."²²⁵

However, in practical political terms, Jaspers could not be more opposed to that doctrine of nihilism in both thought and action which Nietzsche, who pathologically thought of himself as nothing less than *nihilism personified*, as the "first perfect nihilist", so vividly describes:

Nihilism does not only contemplate the "in vain!" nor is it merely the belief that everything deserves to perish: one helps to destroy.-- This is, if you will, illogical; but the nihilist does not believe that one needs to be logical.-- It is the condition of strong spirits and wills, and these do not find it possible to stop with the No of "judgment": their nature demands the No of the deed. The reduction to nothing by judgment is seconded by the reduction to nothing by hand.²²⁶

Nihilism for Nietzsche is thus something to be explicitly affirmed, even to be "perfected" in action by his "masters of the Earth". And towards that intrinsically destructive impulse, Jaspers is diametrically opposed:

Nietzsche is utterly lacking in that broad, clear, all-embracing flow of thought through which we cannot only gain a practical orientation but also acquire the long-range thinking which perseveringly examines and builds.²²⁷

Jaspers' most lucid description of the pathology expressed in Nietzsche's thought comes in the form of a parallel with Kierkegaard and Marx. Jaspers' point becomes lost if one sees the

²²⁵ Karl Jaspers, "On My Philosophy," in *Existentialism: from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Meridian, 1989), 173.

²²⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Vintage, 1968), 3, 18.

²²⁷ Karl Jaspers, "Nietzsche and the Present", *Partisan Review* (Jan-Feb 1952), 21.

pathology as something unique to Nietzsche, or even unique to all three in common, instead of seeing the three as expressing, in admittedly very different ways, a common nihilistic trend, which, in its most essential elements is not the work of any one man or of any few, but rather is at large in the world of modern humankind as a whole:

The study of these three is for each of us a kind of initiation into the depths of actuality. Without them we would be asleep. They open up the modern consciousness... anyone who since their time evades them, who rejects them without having come to know them in their essence, must necessarily remain unclear in his own being; he falls victim to something that he does not know but might know, and is defenseless in the modern world.²²⁸

Jaspers' disapprobation is clear:

These three are by no means the leaders of a new humanity... they are dangerously ambiguous people. They have shown a unique power to set things in motion, they promote and create integrity, but they also bring destruction. They are indispensable educators, but also show an immense danger. For we still have to learn how to be educated by them in the right and not the ruinous way. Their intellectual activity does not merely disclose the ruin which has already befallen, but is in itself a continuing process of destruction.²²⁹

The common pathology is most specifically described in terms of its role as an obstacle for consciousness:

They prepare our consciousness for the awakening of new potentials--but at the same time they bring with them the ideas, fascinating to many, which immediately submerge this consciousness.²³⁰

For Jaspers the critical issue is to learn to be educated by these nihilistic thinkers in the right

²²⁸ Ibid., 25.

²²⁹ Ibid.

manner. However, any serious attempt to do so leads to an abundance of difficulties and little hope for any formulation of a simplified propaedeutic. Through immersive understanding in these thinkers' works, especially Nietzsche's, to an almost equal extent Kierkegaard's, and, at least one step removed, those of Marx and Freud, one can encounter, bring into focus but not actively appropriate, the nihilistic expression of the contemporary *Zeitgeist*. The result of this understanding is modeled by Jaspers in *The Origin and Goal of History* and elsewhere, but that result is anything but a manifest extension of these thinkers' doctrinal pronouncements. On the contrary, the more unlimited one's consciousness of nihilism as expressed in their thoughts becomes, the more circumscribable nihilism in the world at large becomes, at least inwardly, in thought. And this results in the formulation of what possibilities for action may be at hand, in the form of political liberty, to run counter to nihilism and aim to preserve the hope of a more humane ethos.

The falseness of nihilism operates in three dimensions: past, present and future. It deracinates the past by uprooting cultural traditions as bases for the stability of communal feeling; it occludes the operation of the will to power in the present; and it forecloses the future with definitive statements of human nature based on pseudo-knowledge. The political system that corresponds with nihilism is totalitarianism, but totalitarianism is itself only a secondary phenomenon, generated out of an extant culture of nihilism. Instead of using technology as a means, humankind takes on more and more the semblance of a technological apparatus. In his dysfunctional technological second nature, humankind becomes

²³⁰ Ibid.

subservient somewhat like the animal living in unconscious subservience to physical nature:

It may seem as though man... could live in his immediacy from his instincts. But he cannot. ... Man is not merely a creature of instinct, not merely a point of understanding, but also a creature that is, as it were, above and beyond itself.²³¹

But while the animal's enslavement to nature is complete, humankind's subservience to a second nature of his making is always dependent upon himself. In this condition, humankind's resolve, his individual capacity for decision, atrophies in disuse and, consequently, erodes. From out of the collective mass into which man has congealed himself, the resolve of all individuals is distilled and agglomerated at one point, the locus of power of the totalitarian machine.

For Jaspers, nihilism is the theoretical opposite of faith. Jaspers' efforts here seek to clarify both these concepts, and, in so doing, he presents his own manifold conceptions of both. With the concept of faith, Jaspers wants to indicate an element that is not exclusive to any one religious tradition, but rather something that is essential for "man as man". His aim in so doing is to enunciate a basis for collective understanding across cultural or religious divides that at once unites individuals and preserves their cultural or religious particularities. Faith for Jaspers is ultimately not entirely separable from philosophy and science. This unity of these three concepts necessarily involves an understanding of faith that does not equate it with dogma or with any *exclusive* claim to truth. Faith, rather, for Jaspers, undergirds

religious and cultural traditions -- alongside and even in spite of any exclusive claims to truth. It is against this underlying matrix that is conceived of as faith that nihilism exercises its erosive effect. So faith and the everyday conception of secularism are not ultimately in tension with each other, for Jaspers. The resolve that nihilism erodes is a property of faith. The way that this erosion occurs sheds light on the meaning of both terms for Jaspers:

Instead of living in faith, man lives in illusions concerning realities in the world... The thesis that justifies this out of nihilism runs: Man always lives on illusions. History is the course taken by changing illusions. ... The man without power is particularly disposed to illusions, and today the individual is perhaps more powerless than ever before. But he can also lay hold of the only chance open to powerlessness, unconditional striving for truth. The nihilist declares this in turn to be an illusion. For there is no truth. Hence he finishes up with the thesis: One must believe, no matter what--the necessary illusion will be extracted from one's own energies, which can say: I do not believe it, but one must believe it.²³²

The resolve inherent within and definitive of faith is indicated here with the words: "unconditional striving for truth." This is meant to indicate a form without reference to particular content. This form undergirds the various particular religious and cultural traditions of humankind. The effect of nihilism is pictured as running counter to this. Nihilism seeks to replace the unconditional *striving* for truth with definitive *truth claims*. It, therefore, subverts the intrinsic, inquisitive consciousness of man, which simultaneously investigates and constructs his reality, with a set of foreordained answers that need not and must not be questioned. Here power, instead of knowledge, is the real basis of truth claims, hence their illusory quality in Jaspers' conception. In other words, if what is taken to be true

²³¹ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 215.

is taken to be so merely because it is ordained by power, it cannot actually be true. Science and faith for Jaspers are not *essentially* different. Together they are forms of the expression of the will to knowledge, in "unconditional striving for truth" on the part of both. The same way in which scientific truth claims have potential for universal comprehensibility, applies to the essence of faith, as well. But this conception must hold that what is truly definitive about any actual tradition of faith is not any exclusive doctrine of truth, but a sort of hope that the free human consciousness can transcend the imposition of power. In the same way that faith and science are *formally* compatible with any particularities of cultural content according to this theory, so too is political liberty. Jaspers does not bring his concept of faith in any great theoretical clarity, and this is probably because he would think that individuals need not necessarily conceive of faith with theoretical exactness, but rather may possess faith as mediated through particular cultural or religious instantiations. Faith for Jaspers basically equates to trust. Liberty, science and faith tend to overlap to an extent by implication in Jaspers' thought. What these elements seem to share is a kind of *transparent* universality, i.e. a potential for universal validity that simultaneously does not obstruct or replace cultural particularity or individual free resolve. Nihilism, on the other hand, is, in this view, something of an "anti-culture", a systematic under which cultural particularities dissolve and by which a homogeneous mass of abstract humanity precipitates.

One implication of Jaspers' political thought is that if a political liberalism within which faith and science can flourish does not spread across the globe, nihilism, nevertheless,

²³² Ibid., 217.

will do so. This is owing to the fact that the present situation, which became definite for Jaspers after the Second World War, is one of *de facto* world unity. He writes: "There is no longer anything outside... The unity of the Earth has arrived."²³³ The *de facto* unity of world, for Jaspers, owes itself immediately to the technologies of communication and transport that structure a global situation in which events anywhere can potentially have effects anywhere else, and, potentially, for the whole. Jaspers' conception here, is, if anything, more intensely real today than when the late 1940s when *The Origin and Goal of History* was published. The compounded effect of both nihilism and world unity would be the tendency toward a global mass. Throughout history, the larger part of almost all human populations in settled, agricultural societies consisted of the peasantry, and, as such, constituted a relatively intellectually, economically and politically destitute stratum. The analog of this stratum in the age of technology is, for Jaspers, "the mass". While the mass mirrors the peasantry of earlier times in terms of its relative intellectual poverty and relative economic disadvantage, the former differs from the latter in that it has a vital role in political affairs. In order to conform to the economy in the age of technology, literacy and some technical education have become relatively more desirable. But this level of education is not a robust form of intellectual development, and it corresponds to a political environment in which influence of the masses through propaganda becomes increasingly prevalent. A mass which has been "half-educated" for economic purposes can no longer be effectively controlled through threat of force or sheer economic necessity because even semi- or half-educated individuals are no longer simple-minded enough to submit to such conditions over the long term. Moreover,

²³³ Ibid., 127.

the development of a technological economy requires social emancipation, with its flexibility of labor conditions relative to earlier, less fluid, models such as serfdom or slavery. But under conditions of social emancipation, individuals would necessarily need some conception on themselves as political agents. This awareness, however, like the education of the broad population in general, is only partial, only more or less that level necessary for the adequate functioning of the economy. Under such conditions the mass of the population becomes possessed of a will, while it is simultaneously lacking in, and structurally incapable of, the requisite intellectual means of sound, responsible, political judgment. This is not due to lack of the potential for pragmatic common sense, but rather is due to a general and structural epistemic impoverishment. The process of mass development is the social manifestation, therefore, of the intellectual culture of nihilism. Jaspers' draws up this conception of the mass with nihilism in mind; it stands in contrast to his conception of a people; both are conceived of as ideal types for the purpose of comparison:

A distinction must be made between mass and people: The people is subdivided into orders, is conscious of itself in ways of life, modes of thought, and cultural heritage. A people is something substantial and qualitative, it possesses a communal atmosphere; the individual from the people has a personal character that is partly derived from the strength of the people by which he is borne. The mass, on the other hand, is not subdivided, is unconscious of itself, uniform and quantitative, devoid of specific character and cultural heritage, without foundations and empty. It is the object of propaganda, destitute of responsibility, and lives at the lowest level of consciousness.²³⁴

This is not meant to imply that a people is a social arrangement devoid of domination. In any people, however, a deeper stratum of shared cultural content, by virtue of which social

relations are deemed legitimate or illegitimate. This basis, while possibly incapable of rational justification, at least provides some insurance against the sort of excessive change that can rapidly and blindly occur when a mass is intoxicated by radically new ideas. Jaspers was no doubt thinking of Bolshevism and Nazism in this regard. The shared cultural content of a people provides a set of guidelines for what sorts of social action are to be deemed acceptable and what sorts are not. This implies the mediation of a common narrative history upon which the collective identity of a society is based. When the guidelines for socially acceptable action remain relatively stable, even under relatively repressive conditions, individuals have at least a basis for a predictable life-order, with understandable standards of achievement for themselves and expectation of others, whereas in a mass all are beholden to whatever ideology proves capable of animating the majority and achievement takes on a new, opportunistic, dynamic as it can only be equated with the garnering of mass approval. Certainly no one people or mass conforms entirely to these ideal typical patterns, however. In Jaspers' view of the *de facto* situation of world unity, the tendency towards the building of masses is no longer a national phenomenon, but rather is operant on a global scale for the first time.

Active in the mass, nihilism erodes extant values, and with them, the relatively "organic" structures of legitimacy. In place of these structures, ideologies arise. In Jaspers' conception, ideology is essentially nothing more than its dialectical function, while. Jaspers' model of ideology is drawn up with reference to the most prominent ideologies of his day,

²³⁴ Ibid., 128.

Fascism and Bolshevism. It also draws upon Jaspers' conception of the dialectical nature of theories such as those of Marx and Freud, albeit primarily as means of illustration of this broader trend. The dialectical nature of ideology is essentially, on the one hand, a claim to absolute truth, and, on the other, a claim that nothing is true. The practical effect of this inner contradiction is that no one for whom an ideology is a standard of action admits to following that ideology as an ideology. Ideology is always the possession of one's enemy, never one's own beliefs, which, by their very nature as one's own, must be true, or "critically" apprehended, and not ideological. In such a situation it is impossible not to be absorbed in self-deception. Jaspers points to this dialectical structure of ideology by saying: "Everything is an ideology and this thesis itself is an ideology. Nothing is left."²³⁵ An ideology for Jaspers is rigid and directed against an opponent; it necessarily involves a dichotomy between "friend and enemy" -- though he does not use those precise terms. In this view, an ideology's content is not significant -- all ideologies are beholden to the will to power. It should, however, be noted that the more sophisticated an ideology becomes, the more "critical" it appears -- but "critique" in this sense merely becomes an internal mechanism granting the illusion of the pursuit of truth. What is not involved is actual collective understanding. Any ideological position must be isolated from any real understanding of the views of "the enemy".

A common thread running throughout Jaspers' contemporary *Zeitdiagnose* is an echo of Francis Bacon's pronouncement: "Half knowledge leads to unbelief, whole knowledge to

²³⁵ Ibid., 133.

belief."²³⁶ This finds a practical expression in Jaspers' contention that Freudian psychoanalysis, a systematic reliant upon what is essentially a reduction of human phenomena of consciousness to instincts and drives, is effective mainly for individuals of an intermediate stratum who lack a high level of intellectual attainment but who are not entirely uneducated.²³⁷ Jaspers' does not go into detail about what the level of education needed to become immune to such intellectual systematics -- Freud's is merely an example which stands for ideologies in general. However, one can assume that the approach of understanding sociology, *verstehende Sociologie*, practiced by Weber which sought to illuminate social phenomena through detailed depiction of the particular elements which ground and define cultures rather than emerge as "superstructural" elements upon an ultimate basis in a purportedly universal dialectical structure. The central tenet of such an approach is that all elements of cultures are ultimately particular, regardless of how universal their actual historical scope may be. That the dialectic is not universal itself, but merely a rather abnormal particular cultural configuration, is implied in this theory. The universal feature of this theory is in its conception of human consciousness. Consciousness for Marx, is constituted out of the dialectic. From the Jaspers' point of view, this formulation takes over and mobilizes the core of what it wishes to overcome, i.e. a dominant and false conception of human nature generally. It is at this juncture that the concept of faith becomes operant in Jaspers' thought. On the one hand, Jaspers does not want to deracinate the cultural traditions that he perceives as embodiments of faith, albeit even if they are partially oppressive. On the

²³⁶ Ibid., 131.

other hand, his conception of faith implies some element of transcendence, which, however, remains rather undefined in his attempt to avoid nominating any one tradition of faith as the correct one. However, one does not have to stop at such a conception of faith without further theoretical clarification, assuming that whatever its contents might be, that it is already and immediately understandable. Jaspers' conception of faith comes into could be clarified in by formulating in this way: faith is consciousness of the primacy of consciousness. The postulate that consciousness transcends the dialectical structure of its reversal towards unconsciousness seems to be the conception of transcendence employed in Jaspers' works. Thus when Jaspers' writes that: "Our era's lack of faith has brought nihilism," he is not primarily lamenting the degradation of institutions of religion in a nostalgic sense, but pointing towards that potential for the evocation of consciousness that had grown up within them, despite, their perhaps factually oppressive -- or potentially liberating -- natures.²³⁸

Conditions antecedent to the age of technology served to inform its partially nihilistic character:

The fact that technology became operative and was universally adopted was due to this spiritual world, this way of thought and life which it found waiting for it.²³⁹(135)

Jaspers identifies three chief contributing factors of this element of the contemporary

²³⁷ Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Anti-Reason in Our Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 25.

²³⁸ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 131.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 135.

situation: the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and German idealism. The cumulative effect of these factors became an impetus toward cultural transformation guided by a general conception of the possibility of a "new man", of starting virtually everything anew for humankind:

People talked about a new human consciousness, about a new man, about spiritual creation, about truth and salvation. They looked into a luminous future -- yet this kind of talk was nothing more than the accomplishment of the *tabula rasa*, a symptom of growing loss of consciousness... After great men had taken the wrong path, the world became a theater for petty place-seekers and obedient intriguers, who knew no difference between true and false or good and evil, but were merely tools submissive to the function of power.²⁴⁰

It is again Marx who serves as Jaspers' chief example here. In Marx's thought, one can see this broader trend in microcosm. Marx thought a new man, a new human consciousness, would be the result of revolution. His theory was founded upon German idealism, while the prescriptions for action he and Engels made in the *Communist Manifesto* had their most typical antecedent in Jacobinism. Rather than overcoming the dialectic in society, Marx's own emancipatory thought was caught in the net of its own inner dialectic and transformed outwardly into a doctrine of totalitarian oppression. The elements of Marx's thought which derive, in one way or another, from German idealism and the French Revolution, have a common origin in the intellectual culture of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment, defined in terms of its essential outcome, was a process of secularization, a disconnection of the actual locus of political power from a broader social bond with religious institutions -- it marked the end of a comprehensive, albeit rather amorphous, sphere of Occidental

Christendom. A multitude of various new intellectual elements contributed to the Enlightenment: the press, knowledge of other cultures, other religions, exposure to utopian dreams of the future, questioning of authorities of all kinds, and the airing of new, and sometimes scandalous, mores. However, according to Jaspers, the essential outcome of the Enlightenment, which ushered in the secular age, was not an inevitable result of those and other sorts of contributing, new cultural factors. On the contrary, all such factors were intrinsically nothing more than products of knowledge, it was the ways in which they were *incorporated* into European culture that lead to the degradation of faith that Jaspers identifies as nihilism. Again Jaspers returns to the theme that half knowledge leads to lack of faith, while full knowledge is compatible with faith; referring to the Enlightenment, he writes:

This road need not have led to loss of faith. Only half and misconstrued enlightenment leads into nothingness, whereas total and unrestricted enlightenment renders the enigma of the origin really audible for the first time.²⁴¹

Jaspers does not explicitly say so, but the implication here is that objects of knowledge as such have no intrinsic incompatibility with institutions of faith, or social conditions in which religious institutions and political power are conjoined, i.e. new knowledge was itself not the chief impetus of secularization. Rather it was when particular aspects of knowledge, probably especially radically new conceptions, were taken as *surrogates* for extant institutions in which legitimacy inheres that the more disruptive outcomes of the

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 136.

Enlightenment arose.

This transformation wrought upon the basis of new knowledge served as the foundation for the other developments which contributed to the nihilistic situation of the present: the French Revolution and German idealism. In both developments, Jaspers depicts an ostensibly original impulse toward emancipation dialectically transformed into its opposite. In the case of the French Revolution: "although it desired liberty and reason, it made room for despotism and violence."²⁴² The case of German idealism, for Jaspers, likewise carried the seeds of the reversal of its own original intentions:

The philosophy of German idealism--especially of Fichte and Hegel--brought about an enhancement of philosophical self-confidence, an alleged total knowledge that knows what God is and desires, and loses all capacity for astonishment because it fancies itself in possession of absolute truth. This kind of sham faith was bound to swing over into lack of faith... It was one of the manifestations of human thought that possessed genius, and its speculative grandeur cannot be doubted... Here the *hubris* and waywardness of genius became an unparalleled seduction. Whoever drunk of this potion became intoxicated, a promoter of ruin...²⁴³

The excess of German idealism, according to this view, owes itself to a highly explanatory, highly causal, conception of historical development which, while valid, can appear to subsume all particularity under its explanatory exposition, whereas Jaspers' approach, following upon Weber, seeks to assert the priority of the particular and its corresponding mode of apprehension, the understanding.

²⁴² Ibid., 137.

²⁴³ Ibid.

The crisis of the present could be no more manifest than in the Holocaust and other instances of genocide perpetrated by totalitarian regimes. In such instances, the extremes of both poles of the totalitarian-nihilist cultural complex are simultaneously reached, absolute power and absolute destruction of life:

What man may come to has today, almost in a flash, become manifest through a monstrous reality that stands before our eyes like a symbol of everything unspeakably horrible: the National Socialist concentration camps with their tortures, at the end of which stood the gas-chambers and incinerators for millions of people--realities that correspond to reports of similar processes in other totalitarian regimes, although none by the National Socialists have perpetrated outright mass murder by the gas chamber.²⁴⁴

For Jaspers, the horror of such events arises from the latent readiness of the perpetrators that was extant before the crimes themselves:

The fact that this can happen presupposes in the active elements (who were to a great extent drawn from the internees themselves) a readiness, which was already present prior to this realization, not only in the existence of the social outcast, but also in the apparent harmlessness of the trusty bureaucrat or the tranquil life of the bourgeois. It is this readiness that inspires our horror, when subsequent events reveal it as having been there all the time. It is the implementation of unconscious lack of faith, the disappearance of faith without conscious nihilism, life without roots or the life of apparently secure puppets on the strings of decorous convention, which can be exchanged without more ado for the strings of life in the concentration camp.²⁴⁵

This psychological readiness for totalitarian repression and genocide on the part of individuals who were not otherwise politically active has its *immediate* basis in the ideological orientation of the masses. Ideologies, following the implications of this theory,

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 147.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 148.

will likely often be difficult to identify with definitive clarity and precision, because, by their nature, they are intellectual systems of deception by which surrogates for factors such as solidarity and responsibility are pursued in action that remains beholden to a concealed will to power. When this theory is adopted, the readiness of broad masses of individuals for compliance with totalitarianism and genocide can be understood as arising from ideology's intrinsic logic of illusion. Ideology replaces legitimacy with a doctrine of ideas, static and definitive in one respect, and, in another, possessed of a surreptitious flexibility and false dynamic of internal criticism. In a collective, ideology is supported by a tacit or overt system of rewards and punishments. As a system of potentially almost infinite sophistication, ideology can turn even exercises of transgression into sources of support for its own rigid essential core through a dialectical process operating unconsciously in its own adherents' activities. In Jaspers' view, ideology remains defined, however, by its imposition of a variable degree of unconsciousness upon its adherents through an illusion of agency. While an ideology reduces its adherents to actual powerlessness, through the occlusion of consciously-apprehended individual decision and the understanding of such decisions of others, it must simultaneously provide an opportunity to violate others as a way to conceal its own adherents' nearly complete lack of real conscious agency. That the essence of this function is not intrinsic to human nature is foundational to Jaspers' conception, and founded, as discussed above in Chapter One, upon an empirical conception of the relationship between the biological and intellectual elements of humankind's make-up. It is only conscious activity which separates humankind from nature and makes the species possible at all; there is no intrinsic role for deception or violation of others in this essential process. So,

accordingly, when instances of deception and violation of others are observed, they must arise from culturally-particular pathologies and not from a universal basis in human nature as such. Whereas it is empirically evident that the conscious transmission of meanings through communication is necessary for the maturity of the human being as such, no role for deception or violation, or dialectical inversion generally, can likewise be observed as necessary for and, hence, actually universal in human nature. It is in this sense that the dialectic should be seen as a particular, and not a universal, historical structure. The instances Jaspers discusses of mass murder in the Holocaust and under totalitarian regimes are clear instances of such violation of others -- and, in contrast to analogous genocides throughout history, these recent events can be clearly seen as the outcome of a particularly contemporary form of mass mobilization through ideology. Jaspers does not elaborate much of these implications of his theory, however, but he does encapsulate them by saying:

The formation of ideologies is particularly great in its compass today. For in hopelessness there arises the need for illusion, in the aridity of personal existence the need for sensation, in powerlessness the need to violate those who are even more powerless.²⁴⁶

And:

When faith is no longer the basis of the content of life, nothing is left by the vacuum of negation. When one is dissatisfied with oneself, the fault must be someone else's. If one is nothing, at least one is anti-. All ills are heaped onto a phantom... everything is the fault of capitalism, liberalism, Marxism, Christianity, etc.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 133.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 134.

This theory, therefore, serves as a basis for the prediction that where instances of ideology are present as intellectual currents of collective mobilization, the readiness on the part of their adherents for totalitarian organization and complicity or overt participation in mass murder is likewise latent within that population. These, however, are, as possible outcomes of an ideological orientation, extreme ones. Some systematic violation of others should be observable in some form, however, if Jaspers' conception is correct.

As a prominent intellectual in Germany after the Second World War, however, Jaspers made a public attempt to urge Germans to remain conscious of the guilt shared by society at large, in various degrees of responsibility, for the actions of the Hitler regime. His efforts took the form of addresses published in English as *The Question of German Guilt*. These addresses preceded the publication of *The Origin and Goal of History*, which, however, contains an insight into the theoretical foundations upon which those efforts were based. Nihilism carries the threat of occluding the importance of past events as factors that condition the present, knowledge of which illuminates the present and future possibilities. Events such as the Holocaust "leave behind them a hidden horror."²⁴⁸ Such horror is conceived of as a Jaspers writes:

That which has happened is a warning. To forget it is guilt. It must be continually remembered. It was possible for this to happen, and it remains possible for it to happen again at any minute. Only in knowledge can it be prevented.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 151.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 149.

Recollection of such events as the Holocaust provoke an anxiety in society generally that could run counter to the slip towards unconsciousness brought by a culture of nihilism.

Jaspers conceives of an oppositional relationship between such anxiety and nihilism:

When anxiety ceases in nihilism, in so far as that is possible (for as long as we continue to believe in man, a hidden seed of humanity remains undestroyed), man seems like an extinguished being, unconsciously consuming himself in vital passions.²⁵⁰

Liberty

In Jaspers' view, totalitarianism is rule by "force and fear" and is the outcome of the breakdown of legitimacy. He equates this breakdown with the trend of nihilism.²⁵¹ The question implicit in Jaspers' political argument is: how can legitimacy in general be maximized? He writes: "the sole choice is between legitimacy and despotism."²⁵² Viewed in this way, one can see how Jaspers' political argument arises as an intended response to nihilism. Jaspers' argument is that, in a *de facto* united world, only an international framework of *negative liberty* can serve as an effective defense against that erosion of legitimacy and its replacement by the totalitarian rule of force and fear. Jaspers equates the absence of legitimacy with the rule of force and fear:

A legitimate government is able to rule without fear, confident of the consent

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 150.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 152-172.

²⁵² Ibid., 160.

of the people. An illegitimate government is afraid of the people, its own force arouses force in others; out of fear it has to safeguard itself by means of continually growing political terror, through which, in turn, fear becomes the fundamental state of mind of all.²⁵³

When force and fear rules, there is no room for trust, which, in Jaspers' conception is synonymous with legitimacy:

Trust requires a fixed pole, an inviolable fundament, something that is respected by all, in such a manner that anyone who violates it can be cast out as a criminal. This inviolable fundament is called legitimacy.²⁵⁴

Jaspers differentiates negative liberty from positive liberty:

Legally, scope is left to the individual for the play of his arbitrary will (negative liberty), through which also he can shut himself off from others. *Ethically*, however, liberty consists precisely in the openness of life in being together that can unfold without compulsion, out of love and reason (positive liberty).²⁵⁵

Positive liberty, therefore, is the essence of an ethical order, the essence of an *ethos*.

Legitimacy, as a condition interior to any given *ethos*, faces threats from two sources in the context of world unity: on the one hand, from the diversity of *ethoi*, of different conceptions of positive liberty, i.e. different conceptions of what constitutes the good life, and, on the other hand, from the perpetual threat that force will disrupt legitimate conditions.

Concerning the latter, Jaspers writes:

The will to power, and force, are constantly poised to intervene... In everyday

²⁵³ Ibid., 159.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 160.

life, force is engaged in a perpetual struggle with free reason.²⁵⁶

Concerning the former, Jaspers first observes that the diversity of *ethoi* consist in a diversity of views as to what constitutes the good life:

As to what liberty is and what is required to achieve it there is at once a wide divergence of views. Perhaps the deepest human antitheses are determined by the modes of men's consciousness of liberty. What is to one the road to freedom, seems to the other the reverse. In the name of liberty almost everything is desired by men.²⁵⁷

At what point does that begin which is not common to all men: world view, historically determined faith, all the particular tendencies that must have room to move. The only thing they have in common is their need for room to move.²⁵⁸

This diversity places legitimacy in danger owing to the fact that, when a difference of views on what constitutes the good life becomes known across different *ethoi*, their respective bases of legitimacy can be called into question. Jaspers writes: "legitimacy is always in such danger. The understanding can all too easily cast doubts upon it."²⁵⁹ But the understanding itself is not the problem, as it can not only put one in touch with the different views of another, but also, and in the completion of its movement, bring to light what is common between different views:

Politics are concerned with that which is common to all men, with the interests of existence that are independent of the content of any faith, in which all men

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 171.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 152-153.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 163.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 160.

can understand one another so as to make room for each other...²⁶⁰

The danger from the diversity of views of different *ethoi* mutually known to each other arises when negative liberty, that “room for each other”, is absent:

Man has an urge to consider his own life-form the only true one, to feel every existence that does not resemble his own to be a reproach, and to hate it. From this there arises the disposition to enforce one’s own way of life upon everyone else, as far as possible to model the whole world upon it.²⁶¹

Such a disposition can only disrupt the legitimacy inhering in other *ethoi*. It also follows for Jaspers that such an effort to impose one conception of positive liberty upon others has the internal consequence of instrumentalizing the *ethos* that seeks to dominate, and, thereby turning its inner conception of the good life into a means instead of an end. That such an effort is self-defeating rests upon Jaspers’ conception of negative liberty as the condition for effective positive liberty:

Only when positive liberty has been realized on the basis of the legal safeguarding of negative liberty, does the proposition apply: Man is free in the measure in which he sees freedom around him, that is, in the measure in which all men are free.²⁶²

The implications of this view are that: Positive liberty, in the absence of negative liberty, becomes a means, an instrument, for its own propagation beyond its original borders. It would thereby lose its meaning and assume the role of a function. Legitimacy would erode *within* the *ethos* that seeks to dominate others.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 163.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 163-164.

²⁶² Ibid., 160.

The dangers to legitimacy therefore fall into two categories: the will to power and force, on the one hand, and diversity of conceptions of the good life constitutive of, and legitimate within, different *ethoi*, on the other. Insofar as the alternative is one “between legitimacy and despotism”, Jaspers seeks the route to maximal legitimacy. It is the challenge to legitimacy posed by diversity that can be addressed through an international framework of negative liberty and, within states, liberal democratic institutions. Jaspers devotes considerable attention to an outline of liberal democratic institutions. The other factor, the will to power and force, cannot be entirely overcome:

In legitimate conditions, there is an infinite amount that is inadequate, unjust and inappropriate... The consciousness of legitimacy accepts great evils as part of the bargain in order to avoid the absolute evil of terrorism and fear under despotism.²⁶³

To attempt to eradicate all possible sources of oppression would mean to attempt the imposition of one view of universal positive liberty upon all humankind. The implication of Jaspers’ argument is that such an imposition would only be in itself another form of oppression. Marx’s conception of “human emancipation” and the resultant “new man” with a new consciousness, is one such universal conception of positive liberty. History shows that all *ethoi* face a common set of challenges to legitimacy in the categories of force and diversity. Jaspers conceives of a framework of negative liberty as the only means by which the role of force in human affairs can be minimized *while* the scope for particular conceptions of positive liberty to attain maximal legitimacy for those who willing participate in them is *simultaneously* realized. In other words, to be effective, positive liberty relies

upon a basis of negative liberty.

Socialism

In Jaspers' political thought, the concept of socialism represents the general field of *any and all* tendencies towards the institutionalization of positive liberty in contemporary times.²⁶⁴ Therefore, in Jaspers' discussion of socialism, the dichotomy between negative and positive liberty is always implied. The contemporary period, in Jaspers view, is one in which the theory and social action arising on behalf of conceptions of positive liberty suffers from inadequate concern for negative liberty. While the highest forms of human self-consciousness are to be found in the various conceptions of what constitutes the good life, these, owing to their diversity, are a perpetual source of mutual tension and conflict when they do not exist within a broader framework of negative liberty. Every *ethos* seeks to organize a society around particular values that embody a shared conception of the good life. In so doing, the act of making claims to truth about what is just in human affairs is unavoidable. But no one social *ethos* exists in a vacuum, and no one social *ethos* is universal. On the basis of a purported universal knowledge of history, Marx sought to enunciate such a universal social *ethos*. In this respect Marx is a representative of that basic impulse to shape human affairs in community upon a just basis, organized around set of values held in common with a concern for the welfare of all. In this effort, unification of

²⁶³ Ibid., 160.

humankind through a single social *ethos*, a single conception of universal positive liberty is sought. A purported total knowledge of human affairs is here the basis for a universal social *ethos*. Only one vision of the just society, in this view, is warranted on the basis of the definitive knowledge of human history. But, in Jaspers view, both history and every possible instantiation of positive liberty remain inherently tied to the sphere of particularity:

The world of history as a whole, however, is incalculable; in detail it is full of connections of causality, motive, situation and meaning that are susceptible of investigation. All of them are particular when they become realizable to our perception. Their cognition will never become a proven cognizance of the whole. The error of the total conception is shown in monocausal thinking that traces everything back to a single principle, either through the absolutization of a tangible causal factor (e.g. the economic factor in history), or through the totalization of a single process, which has allegedly been apprehended in its substance (e.g. in the dialectic of the objective spirit in Hegel).²⁶⁵

Marx's vision again serves as a paramount example. Positive liberty is taken to its theoretical extreme: nothing sort of a new humanity will result from deliberate refashioning of society, divesting it once and for all of all sources of tension, conflict and oppression. History has revealed the root cause of all these social ills, the task merely remains to implement their remedy. In the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the role of force in this process is admitted. The relationship between various social *ethoi* is always bound to be a source of tension and possible conflict in the absence of a background framework of negative liberty. Marx's conception is bound to require the imposition, by force if necessary, through the dictatorship of the proletariat, of his conception of the just society, because of its exclusively

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 172-192.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 186-187.

positive orientation and, simultaneously, its renunciation of any attempt to foster negative liberty. This involves a dialectical reversal, whereby aims adopted with the desire to free society from oppression actually result in new forms of oppression. The dialectic is at once the phenomenon that a Marxist view theoretically equates with all historical change, seeks to overcome through carrying through its final stage in purposive action but, ironically, falls prey to itself. On the other hand, the implication of Jaspers' theory is that when a framework of negative liberty undergirds a society in which various groups are free to pursue their particular visions of positive liberty, the effect of the dialectic is minimized, if never completely eliminated. The dialectic is operant where conscious aims are unconsciously reversed. This is a pattern endemic to all attempts at building a framework of positive liberty, building a social *ethos*. It occurs because all social *ethoi* must involve some truth claims about what constitutes the good life, but each society so structured does not exist in a vacuum, but encounters other societies with variant truth claims. All social *ethoi* are attempts to codify the *subjective* formula by which man separates himself from nature. Instrumentality expresses the *objective* formula. Every *ethos* is thus an effort to actualize human freedom in distinction to natural compulsion. This is the basic and perennial impulse for positive liberty. But when any society encounters other societies, a relation is possible akin to the relationship between humankind and nature, i.e. it is one of tension and the drive to overcome that tension. In human affairs between groups, this tension eventually leads to the reversal of the fundamental aim, the achievement of the freedom of humankind *vis-a-vis* nature, into a new source of compulsion arising out of the conflictual relationship. When a society is in conflict, it pays the price in terms of a sacrifice of its own internal conception of

liberty by turning everything internal into a tool for the prosecution of the war at hand. But this need not always be the case: if societies would hold a common conception of negative liberty in addition to their particular conceptions of positive liberty, their aims in terms of positive liberty would not be subject to dialectical reversal. History, rather than showing that the dialectic is the universal governing structure of all human affairs over time, in fact shows that the dialectic is a particular result of a particular orientation towards positive liberty, towards the structuring of a social *ethos*, albeit a particular one that is very broad in its historical manifestations and ramifications. That particular orientation towards positive liberty that results in the dialectic is one which lacks the dimension of negative liberty, i.e. some actual and effective basis for coexistence alongside other groups organized around other values, other claims to truth about what constitutes the good life. Even though this orientation, positive liberty in the absolute or relative absence of negative liberty, is shared by almost all actual human societies over time, it is still in itself a particular phenomenon. Marx is just an exemplar of this deeply historically-embedded trend, in that he posits a solution to conflict and oppression through a single, universal conception of positive liberty with no allowance for negative liberty. That, in Jaspers' view, leads to the certainty that any such aim will fall prey to the dialectic, and through it to the very forces of conflict and oppression, which it seeks to overcome.

In Jaspers' theory, negative liberty, therefore, provides the surest basis for any instantiation of positive liberty. In the contemporary period, socialism in general represents all those trends which seek to establish a basis for positive liberty in the context of modern

society, with its unique conditions of technology and mass society. Jaspers' emphasis on negative liberty, far from being an alternative to socialism, in fact expresses his desire to theoretically ground socialism, i.e. *all* contemporary conceptions of positive liberty in general, on a firm foundation. He writes:

All men must be supplied with the necessary consumer goods. Every man has the right to expect his existence to be made possible... Today the name socialism is conferred upon every outlook, every tendency and every plan that aims at the ordering of the life and the work of the community according to criteria of justice accompanied by the repudiation of privileges. Socialism is the universal tendency of contemporary mankind towards an organization of labor and participation in the products of labor that will make it possible for all men to be free.²⁶⁶ (172)

The biggest impediment to such conceptions of positive liberty comes from within, from the attempt to absolutize their own criteria, i.e. their own claims to truth about what constitutes the good life. This amounts to a neglect of the framework of negative liberty that Jaspers seeks to cultivate:

Communism may be characterized in contradistinction to socialism as the absolutization of the tendencies which are true in the first place. They then become fanatical through this absoluteness, and in practice cease to operate as a recasting of historical reality, which instead they melt down to a dead level.²⁶⁷

The dialectic is clearly in evidence in Jaspers' account as outlined above:

As long as socialist demands are concretely visualized and thought out they remain within bounds. It is only when concrete reality is lost sight of and a fantastic paradise of man is presupposed as possible, that its demands become

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 172.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 189.

abstract and absolute. Socialism ceases to be an idea and becomes an ideology. The demand for complete implementation in fact leads away from its fulfilment. Along the path of coercion it leads to servitude.²⁶⁸(190)

With his emphasis on negative liberty and his obvious aversion to Marx's thought, in contradistinction, perhaps, to Marx's economic thought, it is easy to mistake Jaspers as opposed to a robust conception of economic equality in society -- but, in fact, his theory is constructed to leave the door open to such a project of positive liberty, but only within the larger sphere of a liberal political order:

The socialization of the means of production in large-scale undertakings, to abolish the private appropriation of surplus value, is a goal that one can deem just and strive after without being a believing Marxist.²⁶⁹

This conception of social justice, however, is not the aim of Jaspers' economic theory, but only presented as one possible alternative within a general field. The implied aim of the theory is to keep such a field of potential expressions of positive liberty as wide as possible. Totalitarianism, on the other hand, is not essentially any one set of institutions. The theory of totalitarianism has developed in reflection upon particular historical instantiations, specifically Bolshevism and fascism, but Jaspers' conception aims to divest the general conception of totalitarianism from any particular institutional arrangements and locate its essence. That essence is total planning which arises from situations of conflict:

Some distress is always the source of planning. The most profound distress of all, that caused by war, is the source of total planning... That which is of practical value to military ventures is established as a permanent condition,

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 190.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 165.

with a view to a planned or feared war.²⁷⁰

War here is conceived of here, by implication, as that condition where positive liberty is pursued to the exclusion of negative liberty. Positive liberty in this sense is essentially the scope for ideas and actions expressive of the cohesiveness of a particular group. Positive liberty might not be usually associated with war, but with the instantiation of those institutions that are thought to make a society just. But in a conflict situation between groups, it is the action of conflict itself that is considered just. Even an aggressive war would be considered "just" if it somehow meets a society's internal criteria for self-manifestation. In war, however, action in pursuit of a goal of positive liberty is taken to an extreme, to the maximal exclusion of negative liberty permitted by the circumstances. In Jaspers' conception this is the foundation of total planning, and, in the contemporary period, of totalitarianism. The institutions associated with totalitarianism are, aside from this, particular to the historical condition of the present, specifically contingent upon technology:

It is superstitious belief in the universal constructive ability of science that presses along the road of total planning. The age of technology seeks the technological realization of the idea of the overall reconstruction of human existence.²⁷¹

This amounts to saying that, socialism, as the term for contemporary efforts at positive liberty, when it is absolutized, forms a basis for totalitarianism. The root of this development is not any set of historically contingent conditions, e.g. modern technology, but rather it is

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 176.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 185.

the condition of difference between human groups. Human group formation as such implies the adoption of particular values. These values represent the means by which meanings are consciously transmitted among members of the group in that process which separates humankind from nature, liberating him from natural compulsion through decisions leading to acts of self-creation. But the fact that different groups are constituted upon different values, different claims to truth of what constitutes the good life generally, sets the condition for conflict in the absence of some framework of collective understanding between groups. Conflict sets the condition for the reversal of the initial aim of all values to liberate humankind from natural compulsion by introducing a source of man-made compulsion in its place, as a *second nature*. To legislate a single, comprehensive conception of positive liberty for all humankind would be to extend this logic of conflict by the necessity of imposing such a logic upon those who do not already possess it or will not accept it in free discourse. It is with this in mind that Jaspers' theory seeks to establish an intentional framework based on negative liberty as that element within which a factually, i.e. economically and technologically, united world can achieve a greater measure of social order in which differing conceptions of positive liberty can be pursued by groups without the dialectical reversal that results in new forms of compulsion when groups exist side-by-side in a conflictual relationship.

World unity

Two basic alternatives structure humankind's political future for Jaspers: world empire or world order.²⁷² The situation of the present is one of *de facto* world unity, motivated by the will to power and structured through the means of advancing technology. The modern conception of the state with its assertion of sovereignty, whether actual or merely a legal fiction, has begun to lose its relevance in this situation. From this situation one comprehensive order will inevitably arise: "the political unity of the Earth is only a matter of time."²⁷³ The question becomes whether such an order will be one of domination through force, fear and mass delusion or a federated world order based on rule of law and political liberty. World empire in this theory can arise either through force and conquest or through a *de facto* arrangement. The latter could be equated with *de facto* economic domination: "a government which is in actual fact centralized, but which recognizes the sham sovereignty of many states."²⁷⁴ World empire, therefore, does not have to arise out of conquest on the part of a totalitarian state such as the Soviet Union at the time of the publication of *The Origin and Goal of History*. Rather, once the postulate of world unity is accepted, world empire is any situation where, as a total end result or as a predominating set of developing tendencies, political liberty is not in evidence as the background framework for life within and between societies. Jaspers draws a comparison between such a condition and life in the empires that followed the Axial Age:

A profound transformation of man accompanied the transformation of his

²⁷² Ibid., 193-212.

²⁷³ Ibid., 193.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 195.

conditions into those of extended empires. Political impotence altered consciousness and life. Despotic forces, which seemed inseparable from the extended empire, threw the individual back upon himself, isolated him, levelled him down. Where no real share in responsibility and no intervention in the whole were possible, all were slaves. This slavery was veiled by figures of speech and shame contrivances from the free past. There was hardly ever so much talk of Greek liberty, which was again and again guaranteed by the victors, as when it was finally destroyed in favor of an imperial regime... The analogy may, perhaps, cast some light on our future, despite the fact that it will look quite different. It is, at the same time, a warning for all who desire the liberty of man.²⁷⁵

The condition of empire, then, is one in which actual political force, and a concomitant government of fear, is accompanied by some mass delusion of liberty and free participation where, instead, actual unconscious servitude exists. This means that world empire according to this view would not necessarily resemble familiar twentieth century instantiations of totalitarianism, such as Bolshevism or fascism. The two key implications of this conceptualization of world empire are that: world empire is not defined by any one set of institutions, but rather is a flexible concept capable of various institutional manifestations and that, to the extent that political liberty is not the norm within and among at least the larger part of the world's societies, some condition of world empire is already present. The model presented here can have theoretical relevance beyond the international logic of Cold War politics insofar as it does not identify world empire, which would be inherently totalitarian, with any one specific set of institutions or any one ideological orientation. The conceptual opposite to world empire here is a global framework of political liberty. The essence of that concept is likewise not tied to any specific institutional arrangements, but rather lies in the capacity of individuals to consciously participate in political action with the

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

potential to make real decisions, in discourse, non-violent disputation and cooperation with others. The preservation of this widest possible scope for individual political activity concomitant with the same political liberty for everyone else, however, would rely upon a global framework of negative liberty, i.e. a basic framework which would prevent the infringement of one individual's, or one group's, aims upon the equal liberty of others. Such an order should not be constructed upon the basis of a positive conception of liberty, in Jaspers' view, because that would, in turn, be detrimental to the pursuit of particular positive aims by the world's various societies, according to their own values. Furthermore, that framework should be one which is perpetually up for discussion:

The outcome would not be a world state (that would be a world empire), but an order, perennially re-established in negotiation and decision, of states governing themselves within legally restricted domains: an all-embracing federalism.²⁷⁶

Such an arrangement would not be, in Jaspers' view, the end to any and all potentials for relationships of oppression, but rather a legal order in which arising relations of oppression could be countered by individuals acting in concert on the basis of political liberty. Within such a sphere of political liberty, economic oppression could be countered by legal means:

There are, in principle, peaceful means of redressing injustices arising out of economic power... Economic power must also be prepared to accept self-limitation under laws, and to subject itself to conditions; it too will have to serve the idea of world order, if the idea is to become a reality.²⁷⁷

The potential for such an unprecedented world order is, in this theory, conceived as actual

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 198.

based on a persistent tendency of humankind to form orderly communities throughout history. The ancient civilizations were initially such orders, organized with the aim of providing defense against outside threats and a sphere of peace within:

In opposition to all denials of the possibility of a just and legal order of world peace, observation of history and our own wills again and again gives rise to the question: Will this new order not one day become possible, this convergence of all into a realm of peace? The trail towards it was blazed at the very beginning, when men founded state communities for the creation of order among themselves... In such large communities there already prevailed, even if only for limited periods and under a constant threat, dependability and the outlook that sustains legal order. There is, in principle, no boundary to the endeavor to expand such a community, until it becomes the community of all men.²⁷⁸

That the world has never been completely at peace is not, for Jaspers, enough evidence to prove that such a condition of peace is therefore impossible. The age of universal history has arrived on the basis of a technologically and economically united planet, these are also unprecedented conditions. However, for such a situation of peace to come about and endure, a framework of negative liberty would be necessary. The principles of political liberty that developed in the West, especially in the Anglo-American sphere, need not be considered as necessarily bound up with their positive expression in institutions, but rather they should be theoretically reduced to their ultimate, basic principles. Those principles are completely negative and, hence, transparently universal in their applicability to all cultures. Both the process of the development of such an order and the condition of its mature state are ones

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 210-211.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 211.

where systematic injustices are to be expected as a matter of course, because differing conceptions of positive liberty are sure to come into tension with each other. The interests of business may come into conflict with those of labor, or the interests of one particular religious group with those of another or with those of society at large. But such conflicts could be redressed to some extent, whereas the alternative would be eventual unification along the lines of a single positive conception of liberty which would amount to "a new sleep of the spirit," where consciousness diminishes and men become, "creatures that are hardly human anymore."²⁷⁹ The immense power of unprecedented organization of society evidenced by twentieth century totalitarian regimes shows that an alternative to such an imperfect order is always latent and at the ready in the spiritual background of the contemporary situation.

Faith

A theoretical elucidation of Jaspers' conception of faith must consider the dichotomy he draws between faith and contents of faith. Jaspers' conception of the history of humankind revolves around a relationship between man becoming conscious of himself in community with others and in his works, on the one hand, and the petrification of the meaningful products of conscious activity into fixed orders of power, on the other hand. The major junctures in the history of humankind generally are marked by those instances where

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 211.

initial creations of an active conscious process solidify into social formula that channel the active consciousness into, as much as possible under variable particular conditions, unconscious routine: the Promethean age and the subsequent silence of prehistory, the birth of the ancient agricultural civilizations and their subsequent stagnation in the ancient empires, the brief fluorescence of liberty and science in the Axial Age and the subsequent universal empires of *homonoia*. This process of reversal is the dialectic. On the other hand, the process by which humans awaken to consciousness in communication with others is a maieutic, or a process whereby truth is brought forth. Maieutic is a Greek word associated with birth, specifically with the art of causing to be born, or midwifery. This is a fitting image since the human, distinct from the animal, is physically born incomplete and only attains all the requisites for human life with the later birth of his consciousness in meaningful communication. Plato evocatively describes the awakening consciousness: “like a light flashing forth when a flame is kindled, it is born in the soul and immediately nourishes itself.”²⁸⁰ One might speculate, moreover, that the development of consciousness requires both the exercise of communicative and of instrumental rationality, the latter in play and work. In the contemporary period, the function of the dialectic is what Jaspers identifies with nihilism, which, by analogy, seems to reduce man to the level of animal, the sort of creature whose orientation to the world is wholly unconscious. Conscious activity always involves a community in which meanings are mutually exchanged in discourse. This always amounts to the existence of an ethical sphere, or a sphere of positive liberty, in which the views of what constitutes the good life are cultivated in the actions and institutions of a

²⁸⁰ Plato, *Letter VII*, 341c-d.

society. Instrumental rationality always implies some necessary conscious activity by means of which man separates himself, with the work of tools, from the otherwise sheer compulsion of nature. Upon such a conception, despite the pressure of even the most rigidified social orders, man and the activity of his consciousness can never be wholly separated. Faith is equated with consciousness by Jaspers when he identifies it as what distinguished human from animal:

Faith alone sets in motion the forces that master man's basic animal instincts, deprive them of overlordship, and transform them into motors of upsurging humanity.²⁸¹

That Jaspers equates faith and consciousness is not made explicit, however it is certain, because he elsewhere describes the difference between human and animal in terms of consciousness, which he also equates with thought and *Geist*:

Interrelationship between men is does not consist essentially in their zoological structure, but in the fact that they can understand each other, that they are all made up of consciousness, thought and *Geist*. Here there is an intimate affinity between men, whereas an abyss divides them from even the closest of animals.²⁸²

In this sense, faith is conceived apart from any contents of faith. Here faith means when the contents of faith are philosophically conceived in their essence as means for the construction of *ethoi*, or the organization of subjectivity in human societies. This conception theoretically reduces them to their essential relationship to consciousness. Different institutions of faith, such as different religious traditions, are instances of such *ethoi*, or organizations of

²⁸¹ Ibid., 220.

subjectivity. Structurally conceived as such, there is no essential theoretical difference between an *ethos* and an *ethnos*. Any nation, any *ethnos*, is just as much an ordering of subjectivity as any community of faith; both are *ethoi*. To say the same thing, both are expressions of positive liberty, i.e. the scope for expressions of ethical order. However, their variant principles of *objective* order, variant objective ways in which they actually exist in relation to other aspects of social reality, would necessarily involve their differentiation in terms of the empirical aims of the human sciences. This structural identity of both on the theoretical level is implied in Jaspers' view. On that basis his theory deals with both alike. On the one hand, his view of a possible world order takes the form of negative liberty as a foundation for a federated world. Likewise the same principle applies to the sphere of traditions of faith:

If it be deemed improbable that a world order will develop without unity of faith, I venture to assert the reverse. The universality of a world order obligatory to all (in contrast to a world empire) is possible *only* when the multiple contents of faith remain free in their historical communication, without the unity of an objective, universally valid doctrinal content. The common element of all faith in relation to world order can only be that everyone desires the ordering of the foundations of existence, in a world community in which he has room to evolve with the peaceful means of the spirit.²⁸³

It is at the level of the "foundations of existence" that the framework of negative liberty in a possible world order would operate. Here again one can see that for Jaspers effective

²⁸² Ibid., 42.

²⁸³ Ibid., 227.

positive liberty is thought to rest upon a framework of negative liberty between groups.

This view of an order in which various particular cultures, secular or religious, can coexist. But this is not a mere *modus vivendi*, or agreement to halt hostilities for a temporary period. Rather it aims at the source of conflict. What is fundamentally constitutive of an *ethos* is incompatible with the compulsion necessarily brought about by war. War arises when one *ethos* sees another, or several others, as a threat, as a potential source of compulsion, and then takes positive action to remove that perceived threat. This differs from the more basic, general use of force, which could take other forms, such as actions taken in the maintenance of legitimate internal order. The defensive side in an actual war, in this view, would not be considered to be at war, but merely using force for the maintenance of legitimate internal order. No war starts for both sides simultaneously, so there is always an aggressor. War as aggression is a positive act. Theoretically, it shares an essential basis with positive liberty, the construction of an internal ethical sphere. War is the aggressive extension of positive liberty beyond the bounds of its original *ethos*. Externally, as a response to such a potential threat, war seeks the imposition of the values of one group upon another, the imposition of institutionalized compulsion through exploitation, i.e. slavery, or annihilation. This definition rules out reactive defensive action and internal enforcement of legitimate order – both are forms of the maintenance of order. Internally, war turns the *ethos* into a means for the conduct of war. Even if the enemy is completely annihilated, a source of compulsion remains internally, insofar as every *ethos* consists of the cumulative meaning of its essential actions, the history of its institutions. This historical memory will create an

internal tension going forward, as the *ethos* tries to divest itself of the historical memory of internal compulsion which it cannot completely accomplish without altering its identity. In its effects, both internally and externally, i.e. upon a conquered population, the necessary result of war is the historical dialectic. Since the origin of every *ethos* is the conscious liberation from natural compulsion, every subsequent source of compulsion introduced by humankind will result in tension with this most basic conscious orientation of all *ethoi*. An *ethos* can never be founded upon compulsion, either upon internal compulsion or upon that imposed by conquest. The history of any group consists of the way in which its past conditions its present. The effect of war introduces institutions into an *ethos* that run counter to its essential origin. That this is Jaspers' view can be seen in the following passage where he describes a shift from an original condition *to* one of absolute power *through* war:

That which is of practical value to military ventures is established as a permanent condition, with a view to a planned or feared war. Thereupon a fresh motive comes into being. The condition of absolute power, necessitated by war, is to be carried over into the peace as a permanent condition of absolute sovereignty.²⁸⁴

When this new conditions persists in the absence of active warfare, this is, in principle, the equivalent of war itself. Such a condition of persistence of war in principle appears as the result of a dialectical reversal: from an original intention to overcome natural compulsion to the imposition of a second nature of artificial compulsion. The potential for the durability such an imposed compulsion would seem to be very great. In the vast period of the silence

of prehistory such a condition existed. Totalitarianism aims at creating such a silent condition anew. In both examples, humankind is systematically distanced from the activity of the free consciousness and reduced to an animal-like existence in a society whose chief principle is one of aggressive war. The purpose of a framework of negative liberty among different *ethoi* would be the alleviation of that condition in which the principle of aggressive war arises, the condition of the potential for the perception of cultural difference as a threat. The philosophy of history shows that humankind creates sources of compulsion sometimes seemingly even greater than those imposed upon humankind by nature, and hence the internal contradiction of cultures that is the inevitable outcome of the adoption of institutions defined by a principle of aggressive war. In other words, the greatest threat to positive liberty is its absolutization in the absence of a framework based on a principle of negative liberty structuring relations among cultures.

Both science and institutions of faith, or trust, share a common root in the basic human phenomenon of consciousness. But science is consciousness directed towards objective phenomena, whereas contents of faith concern subjective phenomena. This conception that holds what might otherwise be thought of as quite distinct aspects of the human experience together runs throughout Jaspers' thought. The essence of philosophy throughout history for Jaspers has always been to remind both science and institutions of faith of their essential conscious element. He writes:

In view however, of the possibility of a totalitarian world empire and a

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 176.

totalitarian doctrinal truth corresponding to it, the only hope left is for the individual, for innumerable individuals, as they have lived from the Axial Age until today, from China to the West, to preserve the stream of philosophy, however narrow it may become. The independence from both Church and State of the deepest inner being of man related to transcendence, his liberty of soul, that draws courage from discourse with the great cultural heritage, this remains the last refuge, as it has been so often before in evil periods of transition.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 227.

Chapter 5

War

For Jaspers, history is the history of consciousness. Consciousness is what essentially separates human from animal. But what is consciousness? Since it is here taken as what is essentially human, to define it would be to posit an anthropology, when that term is taken to mean a doctrine of what ultimately it is to be human. Consciousness for Jaspers is both unique in the world; it is what distinguishes humanity, but is it also completely indefinite, i.e. it has no necessary qualities: no “true” consciousness and no “false” consciousness. The only characteristic of all consciousness is a formal one: is that it shows up either subjectively or objectively, either as meaning or as instrumentality. Meaning is conceived of here as what gives substantial life to human groups, all factors from, for example, specific values of justice or virtue to conventions of oral pronunciation. Among human groups, such meanings will show at least some differences and such differences constitute the recognizable differences between human groups. Nothing here precludes the conception of actually overlapping or ambiguous formations of meaning involving more than one human group. As consciousness shows up subjectively, it shows up as meaning, and this is never solely a matter of individual arbitrary preference, because, for Jaspers, except perhaps in the cases of

the severely mentally ill, individual subjectivity is a matter inseparable from the communicative environment in which the human being lives. The sphere of meaning is inherently divided into categories such as those of: good and bad, appropriate and inappropriate, desirable and undesirable. Ethical order or *ethos* denotes a group conceived on the basis of shared meanings. As Jaspers succinctly puts it: “human community is founded on conscious meaning.”²⁸⁶ This is really dealt with so briefly by Jaspers that one can easily miss the essential theoretical relationship between Jaspers’ concept of the communicative constitution of human groups and nihilism, the latter theme being crucial to Jaspers’ contemporary *Zeitdiagnose* and his conception of totalitarianism. Nihilism, the erosion of meaning, is theorized here to consist of a logic of instrumentalization. And, again, this connection between Jaspers’ conception of the instrumental aspect of consciousness and nihilism is left largely to implication. Furthermore, when compared with Hegel’s idealist conception of the instrumental, or objective and necessary, constitution of human groups or ethical orders, Jaspers’ conception appears in contrast; for Hegel: “the ethical order is freedom or the absolute will as what is objective, a circle of necessity...”²⁸⁷ However for Jaspers, the instrumental, objective, aspect of consciousness is that mode through which the human being deals with nature. Nature presents a constant source of necessity for humans. There are the regular necessities such as those for food, for the maintenance of health against injury and disease, for shelter from inhospitable weather and for the avoidance of dangerous animals; the ultimate necessity is death. It is through the manifestation of the objective

²⁸⁶ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, 40.

aspect of consciousness, instrumentality, that humans can partially overcome natural necessity. The difference between instrumentality and meaning, can be seen in way the contemporary mind encounters prehistoric artifacts: a prehistoric cutting tool can be recognized as a knife, even in the absence of any understanding of what role in the cultural life of a prehistoric people it played. Its instrumentality is objective and recoverable, but whatever its meaning originally was is not recoverable. Technology is essentially instrumental: it is any technique of operation with the substances and forces of nature proceeding according to a purpose.²⁸⁸ Technology must have a purpose, therefore it is dependent upon meaning. However, for human life to be possible at all, some means of dealing technologically with nature must be present owing to the relative lack of instincts which leaves humans helpless when compared to animals. The human consciousness is pictured here as relating technologically to nature *ab origine*. By implication, technology itself is not intrinsically tied to any meaningful content that any culture might ascribe to it. The unearthed prehistoric knife could have been something as exotic as an instrument of ritual human sacrifice or it could have been the most mundane culinary implement; there is simply no way to know, because its instrumental essence and its original cultural meaning are wholly divisible aspects. This divisibility derives from the very subject-object dichotomy within consciousness itself.

Only humans create meanings; only humans develop technology. But in both of these essential and distinct aspects one does not fix upon any doctrine of what is definitively

²⁸⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (London: Oxford, 1967), 105.

human, upon any positive anthropology. Jaspers does not explicitly say so, but it is implied that neither instrumentality nor meaning can be said to precede or determine the other entirely; so neither is the more primary element to which the other can be reduced. And both of these elements are empty forms, waiting to be filled with specific contents. Jaspers should be seen, therefore, to articulate a *negative anthropology* insofar as there is crucial stress to be placed upon what is essentially and distinctly human, but that factor, consciousness, admits of no singular, universal definition or admits of as many possible definitions as there are *ethoi*. The first formulation of this negative anthropology appears in *Man in the Modern Age*, but it developed out of the *verstehende*, or understanding, methodological orientation adapted by Jaspers for psychopathology from German historicism more than two decades earlier and which was to prove decisive for Max Weber's development of *verstehende Soziologie*.²⁸⁹ But the negative anthropology in *Man in the Modern Age* would have to wait nearly twenty years until it was elaborated by Jaspers beyond its first, comparatively terse, formulation: "Man is always something more than he knows of himself. He is not simply once and for all, but is a process... endowed with possibilities through the freedom he possesses to make of himself what he will by the activities on which he decides."²⁹⁰ In *The*

²⁸⁸ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, 100-101.

²⁸⁹ Karl Jaspers, *General Psychopathology*, trans. J. Hoenig and Marian Hamilton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 301n-302n. Johann Gustav Droysen, *Outline of the Principles of History*, trans. E. Benjamin Andrews (New York: Howard Fertig, 1967), 89. Raymond Aron, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 45-46. Raymond Aron, *Main Currents of Sociological Thought*, Volume II (New York: Basic Books, 1967), 185-187. Max Weber, "Some Categories of Interpretive Sociology," trans. Edith E. Graber, *The Sociological Quarterly* 22 (Spring 1981), 179n1. Weber's essay, the initial description of the method and scope of interpretive sociology, first appeared in the journal *Logos* in 1913.

²⁹⁰ Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: Doubleday, 1957), 159.

Origin and Goal of History, Jaspers elaborates his negative anthropology by illustrating his theory of consciousness by means of the findings of the empirical anthropologist Adolf Portmann, whose position he summarizes by saying: “the historically determined environment is a co-factor in inducing the first step toward physical maturity,” in humans.²⁹¹ This is interpreted by Jaspers to mean: “*Geist* is already operative, even in the biological realm itself.”²⁹² Both statements amount to saying that in the human being, the subjective sphere of communication of meanings and objective physiological reality are so closely intertwined that the latter cannot develop without the former and *vice versa*. It is in emulation, within a sphere of communication, between the human infant and older humans that the infant matures. Therefore, humans possess a unique ontogeny, insofar as it requires conscious communication of meanings unlike the ontogeny of any other species. Noam Chomsky would later show that this principle explains the psychophysical process of language acquisition in infants. This unique ontogeny leaves humans radically and uniquely undetermined by nature. In the *Origin and Goal of History*, Jaspers reiterates his earlier position: “Man is boundlessly open in his potentialities, his being has not attained consummate shape and can never do so.”²⁹³

It is on the basis of this negative anthropology that Jaspers constructs his universal history. This history is universal in the sense that it is the history of consciousness, that element identified by negative anthropology as essentially human. What is not universal in

²⁹¹ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, 37.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Ibid., 47.

this account is any single subjective or instrumental principle: there is no eschatological ideal manifesting the “truth” of itself in history, nor is there a soteriological instrument that will bring history to an “end”. Jaspers divides his history into three ages: prehistory, the ancient civilizations, and the period from the Axial Age until the present. Because even prehistory gives definite evidence of consciousness, through remains that show tool use and a cultural diversity of human groups, there must be postulated a time at the threshold of prehistory when humanity became fully human. This threshold of hominization Jaspers refers to as the “Promethean Age”.²⁹⁴ A definitive moment of hominization must be postulated, even in the absence of any evidence that it occurred. This is indicated by Jaspers when he writes: “The moment of *becoming completely human* is the deepest enigma of all... Such figures of speech as ‘a gradual process of transition’ merely serve to obscure it... whenever we try to picture man coming in to being, our imagination sees him already there.”²⁹⁵ Without the postulate of such a moment, one cannot maintain a negative anthropology since then a factor prior to hominization would be taken to be solely determinative of hominization, reducing hominization, and thus humanity and consciousness to the necessity of nature. With no distinction between consciousness and nature, one is left precisely with a positive anthropology, a doctrine of total knowledge of what humanity essentially was, is, and must always be. The point at which human ontogeny became dependent upon meaning set the species infinitely apart from nature; here is the event of

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 24, 34-35.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 34.

hominization. This is implied in Jaspers formulation: “the nature of man is his artificiality.”²⁹⁶

The first of Jaspers’ three ages of humankind is prehistory.²⁹⁷ Based on archaeological evidence, prehistory spans an immense period, probably more than one hundred thousand years from beginning to end. In the complete absence of any linguistic evidence, conceivable only in the form of written records, meaning cannot be apprehended from the remains from this period. What one can know, however, and this is only implied in Jaspers, is that technology was almost completely stagnant during this period. There was no technology of writing, and there was virtually nothing more than the most rudimentary technologies that would have kept humanity as closely tied to nature as possible. A further implication is that the subjectivity of prehistoric communities must have been oriented somehow towards maintenance of this condition of technological stagnation. When modern exploration and colonization, and later empirical anthropology, discovered primitive peoples untouched by contact with civilization, be it by either Western or Eastern civilization, these primitive groups were first encountered living in circumstances that may be supposed to be similar to the prehistoric condition of humanity, generally. Such conditions evince a dominant prohibition of inquiry in both technological and communal matters. Just as technology remained stagnant, the group’s factors of collective identity would not have been amenable to question, and, therefore, would likewise have remained stagnant. Hence it is when a modern empirical anthropologist would enter such an isolated culture, upon merely

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 40.

enquiring into its values, but thereby throwing those values into unprecedented question, that the group would inevitably undergo irrevocable internal transformation. In prehistory one sees two distinct trends, the origin of technology and the inhibition of technological development through primitive configurations of subjectivity which are themselves unrecoverable by direct means to contemporary science, but, nevertheless such factors must have been present and must have inhibited technological development with extraordinary efficacy over a period of probably around one hundred thousand years. Within a period spanning roughly three thousand years, beginning around 4000 B.C., the ancient civilizations developed in the Middle East, Egypt, the Aegean region, India and China.²⁹⁸ It is conceivable that a process of diffusion originating in the Middle East was operative. The ancient civilizations broke radically with prehistoric human life through a combination of new technologies, such as writing, agriculture and irrigation, architecture, transportation and horsemanship, and, simultaneously, new conceptions of communal life. The origin of the ancient civilizations was in defensive communities intended to prevent the perpetual invasions of prehistoric peoples.²⁹⁹ These defensive communities turned into empires built upon conquest with caste formations and a condition of relative technological stagnation. It is clear that the concepts of large scale community organization, combining different *ethoi* without assimilation, and the radical difference in levels of technological development set the ancient civilizations definitively apart from prehistoric peoples. The historical character of

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 28-43.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 44-50.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 46.

the ancient civilizations today is entirely owing to the ability to translate their written records and coordinate their recoverable meanings with the extant expressions of their subjectivity, e.g. in paintings, sculptures, or narrative images. For Jaspers the Axial Age, a period from roughly 800 B.C. to 200 B.C., marks the beginning of the third of his principal historical periods, that which includes the present. When Jaspers describes the Axial Age as a period of the: “awakening of the specifically human spirit,” he is referring to a change in consciousness.³⁰⁰ People began to see themselves as conditioned by decisions of other people in the past, rather than regarding themselves as mere objects in the purportedly immutable mythological order that the ancient civilizations imposed upon them. A new spirit of inquiry called the purported legitimacy of prevailing conditions into question and sought to transform them in efforts to establish legitimate conditions on new bases. History seems to have begun to become relatively popularized beyond the control of the dominant scribe classes in the ancient civilizations. History is the methodical recollection of meaning and instrumentality, of consciousness in general. In the Axial Age the revolutionary trend was the recollection of subjectivity, i.e. the subjective reality of what were purportedly objective conditions of social life under the mythological order. The result was demythologization. In the world of *mythos*, different peoples had different gods, but in the new world, the place of the gods, the persistent domain of sacred ritual, would be taken by the universal religions of the three great regions, the West, India and China. Nowhere since the Axial Age has anything like the social model of an ancient civilization arisen. The caesura was definitive. The legacy of the Axial Age, however, is ambivalent, and this is

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 1-21, 194-195.

owing to the fact that in each of the three Axial regions, universal empires of *homonoia*, i.e. singlemindedness, terminated this age of relative liberty, the Macedonian, Indian and Chinese Empires.³⁰¹ Whereas in the world of *mythos*, where the “will of the gods” and the power of the ruler effectively coincided, subsequently spiritual and temporal worlds would fluctuate irregularly between periods of conflict and cooperation. One example is the flexibility Christianity has demonstrated either by resistance to political power or collaboration therewith, e.g. between the sentiment that: “My kingdom is not of this world,” and the doctrine of divine right of kings.³⁰² However, this trend is ubiquitous in the legacies stemming from Axial Age religious thought, as, for example, in the Daoist intellectual distance in its contrast with the Confucian practical engagement with the mundane world. In such examples, one sees the legacy of the Axial Age insofar as it is a promulgation of a conception of a universally true order of human affairs, which may or may not coincide with the mundane orders of politics, economics and society. Seen in contrast with prehistory, the inception of the ancient civilizations might seem like a more significant diremption than the Axial Age itself. It was the essence of that breakthrough that was intensified in the Axial Age. The unfathomable silence of the human consciousness during a hundred thousand years of prehistoric life had been overcome: by means of unprecedented technologies that distanced humanity further from natural necessity accompanied by unprecedented large scale community organizations. It was not until the Axial Age in the three regions of the West,

³⁰¹ Ibid., 194.

³⁰² S. N. Eisenstadt, “The Axial Age: The Emergence of Transcendental Visions and the Rise of Clerics,” *European Journal of Sociology* 23, no. 2 (1982), 300. Robert Bellah, “What is Axial about the Axial Age?” *European Journal of Sociology* 46, no. 1 (2005), 71.

India and China that both science and contemplation of the “right” order of communal affairs again, and roughly simultaneously, began to have a diremptive impact upon extant order. The ancient civilizations appear historical by virtue of one’s ability to understand their words, but these became historical by virtue of their own successful efforts to realize that what had been objective rules of human order in prehistory had actually been subjective decisions. That the Axial Age moment of ferment led to the formulation and establishment of *homonoeitic* conceptions of communal order simultaneously sets the condition for subsequent history and the rubric for the problematization of all contemporary conceptions of consciousness.

Jaspers intends his philosophy of history to elucidate the present in terms of a tension between nihilism and legitimacy. For Jaspers these two are virtually antithetical concepts, but their opposition can be clarified beyond where Jaspers has left it. Nihilism is the condition where subjective ideas appear to be objective realities. The subjective intention of those in power is taken to be the objective, and therefore necessary, order of the world and human affairs.³⁰³ In prehistory, human life was barely distinguished from natural necessity, bound by subjective conditions which constrained the consciousness to its most minimal existence. However these conditions were taken to be objectively true. One can assume the presence of a corresponding “science” of shamanism that would have explained the ultimate reality of everything by deduction from a first principle, in fact nothing other than subjectivity ritualized as shamanism. Though the human intelligence which first gave rise to

³⁰³ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, 127-134, 215.

the technologies of tools, rudimentary architecture and use of fire, was always fully capable of further technological advancement, it actually did not achieve such advancement in prehistory, owing to the fact that nature and her necessity were not seen as objective realities impinging upon the human's subjective capacity and freedom to shape his own world. The world was not conceived as something to be studied objectively, through science, and transformed indefinitely. Rather, humankind lived in a ritualistic relationship to nature in which the order of human affairs was taken to be an extension of natural necessity. Jaspers' account of history thus describes a *prehistoric nihilism*, though he does not use that term. He does, however, see prehistory as a period in which human affairs took on the semblance of natural necessity, saying that prehistoric humankind was: "as though bound to the substratum of natural life," where, "everything that happened was akin to the unconscious processes of nature."³⁰⁴ This theme is repeated in the characterization of *contemporary nihilism*, which would reduce humans almost to the unconscious level of animal life. For Jaspers this is not entirely possible, but such a condition is approachable, and insofar as humankind approaches this condition by seeking: "to live self-evidently from nature like the beasts, he can follow this path only in conjunction with the consciousness of nihilism."³⁰⁵ Therefore, the conditions of humankind in prehistory and under the contemporary form of nihilism are conceived to share the same essential structure. What is common to both forms is that the subjective "glue" which holds an *ethos* together begins to dissolve, to become replaced by a normative economy based primarily on the threat of force. For Jaspers this

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 72.

process can never be total, however, because without some meaningful communication of subjectivity, the human organism could not survive in a purely biological sense. Nihilism in its contemporary form is manifested for Jaspers in the transition from a “people” to a “mass.”³⁰⁶ A people here is conceived of as constituted by a relatively strong and shared set of values; it is not a state of unconscious or coerced obedience to such values but rather is: “conscious of itself in ways of life, modes of thought, and cultural heritage.”³⁰⁷ By implication the validity of such shared values within an *ethos* is conceived by Jaspers as not relying upon the threat of force as a consequence of lack of compliance. Such values, the subjective sphere of an *ethos*, constitute its “authentic world”, in addition to the objective, instrumental relationship with nature. This is another way of saying that an *ethos*, as a people, is constituted by a strong sense of legitimacy, or the condition where the predominant values are accepted by the community as true independent of economic consequences. By contrast, human life in the mass is where the authentic world of a people is reduced to mere economic functionality: “the condition where corporate human life can be made use of, set to work, or deported, and is treated in light of qualities which can be given a number and counted by means of tests.”³⁰⁸ The mass becomes uniform, quantitative and devoid of cultural heritage.³⁰⁹ The result is a collective loss of consciousness. Because this is a human mass, some shared subjectivity must hold it together, but that subjectivity is not recognized

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 215.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 126-130.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 128.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 128.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

as subjectivity by the members of that mass, rather it is seen as objective necessity. Though nothing but nature poses a source of objective necessity for humans. Insofar as individuals begin to see themselves as “cogs in a machine”, as instrumentalized, they begin to act in accordance with what they see as an objectively necessary order of power, rather than out of a sense of legitimacy attached to the shared subjectivity within their community. This, however, is a loss of consciousness insofar as the subjective aspect of human consciousness is impaired. And in this sense legitimacy and consciousness should be seen to go hand in hand for Jaspers. The mass is really a psychopathological outcome for Jaspers, though he does not use that term. The erosion of legitimate subjectivity, with its role in coordinating actions within a community on the basis of trust, through this process of instrumentalization leads to a situation where force, fear and flattery of human universal biological impulses become factors capable of motivating obedience. This is the crucial connection between nihilism and totalitarianism for Jaspers. It is once nihilism has proceeded to erode legitimate subjectivity that totalitarianism will emerge from: “life without roots or the life of apparently secure puppets on the strings of decorous convention, which can be exchanged without more ado for the strings of life in the concentration camp.”³¹⁰ He writes: “the sole choice is between legitimacy and despotism.”³¹¹ Jaspers employs Max Weber’s conception of legitimacy which he interprets in his own words: “Trust requires some fixed pole, an inviolable fundament, something that is respected by all, in such a manner that anyone who violates it can, without difficulty, be cast out as a criminal. This inviolable fundament is

³¹⁰ Ibid., 148.

called legitimacy.”³¹² There is a parallel between Jaspers’ conception of the subject-object dichotomy and Weber’s three types of legitimacy.³¹³ Charismatic legitimacy is individual, exemplary, immediate, and noneconomic, but it becomes routinized into either traditionalistic or rational types of legitimacy. Rational legitimacy is essentially the consciousness of correctness in correspondence between a general principle and particular instances. It is purely formal; in any given case of its application, the content of the general principle and particular instances is completely open; the legitimacy involved derives purely from the consciousness of correctness. Traditional legitimacy in its purest case simply results from individual loyalty owing to a common upbringing. The former parallels Jaspers’ conception of objectivity, the latter parallels his conception of subjectivity. When Jaspers and Weber are compared, the conclusion can be drawn that Jaspers’ description of prehistory is one in which Weber’s conception of rational legitimacy is predominant. The two accounts are complementary. Prehistoric nihilism bound the free development of consciousness in a ritualistic objectivity. Prehistoric groups simply did not record past events; if they had done so, they would have been historical. So traditional legitimacy was clearly not an important factor in prehistoric human life. Charismatic legitimacy breaks out of established routines of communal life. But in prehistory communal life changed in all respects only extraordinarily slowly. A highly routinized rational legitimacy conforms very well to the conditions that can be known concerning prehistory: everything, humanity and nature, must have had to have

³¹¹ Ibid., 160.

³¹² Ibid., 159.

been conceived of as conforming to laws that were conceived of as objective truths over and above ordinary humans. The virtually unchangeable character of both technology and values in prehistory must mean that such “laws”, which would have been conceived of as absolute necessities, must have been in place. Jaspers and Weber construct parallel accounts, based on a shared conception of legitimacy. In modernity, what for Jaspers is nihilism is bureaucratization, or the “iron cage” of rationalization, for Weber. This parallel can be seen in Jaspers’ own definition of bureaucracy: “Bureaucracy is sovereignty based on regulations and orders issued by officials of the civil service. It functions like a machine.”³¹⁴ The rational criterion of legitimacy is inherent to human consciousness, but it is formal rather than bound up with specific subjective content, as the other types of legitimacy are. To the extent that in the real world this rational criterion edges out the other types, and charismatic legitimacy really had its historical efflorescence in the Axial Age, one can observe a diminution of values, a formalization of subjectivity. In terms of consciousness, both terms denote an objectification of the rational criterion of legitimacy to the increasing exclusion of other types of legitimacy. The immense silence of prehistory seems to demonstrate the potential durability of, in Weber’s words: “the polar night of icy darkness”.³¹⁵

When humankind deals with nature, it is an objective, instrumental relationship, a relationship of force. But in community, the relationships between humans are subjectively

³¹³ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California, 1978), 212-254, 1111-1117, 1121-1123.

³¹⁴ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, 180.

³¹⁵ Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford, 1946), 128.

mediated. Following from Jaspers' negative anthropology, human ontogeny could not be conceived of without such subjective mediation, i.e. without communication involving sphere of values. But there is no indication that an instrumental application of force among humans plays any role in human ontogeny at all. It is with such communication that the human becomes fully human, and this applies equally to all human groups, regardless of differing contents of their values, how they see themselves, others, and the world. It is in this relationship that legitimacy in general comes to consciousness. However, rational legitimacy, which is consciousness of formal agreement, i.e. correctness, alone, has an entirely objective character. It is the type of cognition properly involved in dealing scientifically with nature, whether that be external nature or human biology. Insofar as human groups take on a more and more rationalized aspect, the freedom of the subjective consciousness within them diminishes. This accounts for the tendency of *homonoeitic* projects to diminish cultural distinctiveness in the effort to construct as uniform a population mass as possible. Liberty and legitimacy are complementary concepts here, but rational legitimacy with its fundamentally objective orientation towards formal correctness alone is insufficient for liberty, insofar as liberty also implies liberty of the human subjective sphere of communication. This principle should apply to all *ethoi*, regardless of the content of their values. Jaspers' conception of liberty divides liberty into positive and negative aspects. The negative aspect of liberty corresponds to the objective aspect of consciousness. In an orientation of negative liberty, the objective reality of other human individuals and groups comes to light. The objective reality of other individuals and groups is that they are themselves *subjective* entities. They are potentially understandable, even if one does not

wish to understand them. Negative liberty is rationally legitimate: all particular humans and their groups correspond to the general concept of subjective entities. Hence it is correct to see them as such. To interfere with them by force would be to treat them as a source of objective necessity, i.e. as nature. Each human group has the potential to treat itself as a free subjective entity, i.e. as one which is capable of articulating a conception of itself as worthy on the bases of whatever values it might hold. On the basis of this free pursuit of the realization of its values a group becomes fully human. Here again we see Jaspers' negative anthropology, insofar as this view holds that there is no single "true" definition of "human nature". But it would be a mistake to equate this conception with "pluralism" insofar as that concept sees its goal, a plurality of *ethoi*, as the ideologically correct order of human affairs. In Jaspers' conception, an ideology that demands a dutiful willing of peaceable coexistence is not involved at all; everything relies only upon negative liberty alone, an expectation of persistent differences and not their affirmation. In contrast with prior empires, such as the Achaemenid, all imperial projects after the Axial Age appear in some fashion to aspire to a *homonoeitic* ideal. "Pluralism" already dictates what should be the case for all. It already articulates some version of positive liberty, necessarily a univocal one. But in so doing, one has already assumed that every particular sphere of subjectivity has an objective purpose above itself, i.e. "pluralism", for which it is the instrument. The Achaemenid Empire was a pluralistic despotism. Following upon Jaspers' view, subjectivity therefore has become instrumentalized already, and, hence, unfree. In any case, such "pluralism" has no monopoly on real plurality, in fact quite the contrary. It is, therefore, his position that only within a

sphere of negative liberty among all *ethoi* and individuals can the most authentically free articulations of positive liberty be realized:

Only when positive liberty has been realized on the basis of the legal safeguarding of negative liberty, does the proposition apply: Man is free in the measure in which he sees freedom around him, that is, in the measure in which all men are free.³¹⁶

Elsewhere, Jaspers applies this same principle to communities of faith:

The universality of a world order obligatory to all (in contrast to a world empire) is possible *only* when the multiple contents of faith remain free in their historical communication, without the unity of an objective, universally valid doctrinal content. The common element of all faith in relation to world order can only be that everyone desires the ordering of the foundations of existence, in a world community in which he has room to evolve with the peaceful means of the spirit.³¹⁷

It is clear that what Jaspers intends is a most broad conception of human groups, one encompassing all types of groups, including communities of faith; it is in this sense that the broad term *ethos* is most appropriate. All such *ethoi* are expressions of subjectivity, i.e. of freely differing values of positive liberty. Nihilism, on the other hand, is the diminishing of the subjective consciousness. Since one can observe both prehistoric nihilism and contemporary nihilism, it is apparent that technology, i.e. the application of objective consciousness, stands in a neutral relation to nihilism. The *ethos*, a community of shared subjectivity, becomes, under nihilistic conditions, something appearing objective and instrumental. What would be otherwise constituted by a shared vision of positive liberty, is turned into a rationalized “iron cage” or machine in which individuals seem to be mere

³¹⁶ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, 160.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 227.

functional parts. Under such a condition, the scope for negative liberty is also diminished. What is meant by negative liberty is broad, equating it with: “ordering the foundations of existence.” This means that anything that can be dealt with truly objectively is included within the potential sphere of negative liberty that should inform the relations between all *ethoi* and individuals. It is in this sense that the provision of goods under “socialism” is not conceived of as incompatible with negative liberty here.³¹⁸ Jaspers conceives of nihilism as the product of war in his philosophy of history:

Some sort of distress is always the source of planning. The most profound distress of all, that caused by war, is the source of total planning. The meaning and justification of such planning in times of distress are then transformed by the fact that the State’s will to power... reaches the maximum degree of momentary energy through total planning... Existence is staked on military conquest, which alone is capable of reversing one’s own bankruptcy by the plunder of others. That which is of practical value to military ventures is established as a permanent condition, with a view to a planned or feared war. Thereupon a fresh motive comes into being. The condition of absolute power, necessitated by war, is to be carried over into the peace as a permanent condition of absolute sovereignty.³¹⁹

Nihilism is the result of this instrumentalization of an *ethos* on account of war. What Jaspers is referring to here is the aggressive side in a war, i.e. the side where: “existence is staked on military conquest.” For this side, war is an attempt to replace distress arising from relations with another group with a planned “right” order of affairs that proceeds without scope for negative liberty with regard to that other group. In other words, it is an attempt to maximize the aggressor’s positive liberty while providing no scope for negative liberty vis-à-vis the defensive group. This account focuses solely upon the aggressor group, but one can infer

³¹⁸ Ibid., 172-193.

that the use of defensive force in war is not likewise instrumentalization, but rather that it is essentially no different from measures routinely taken to perpetuate legitimacy within the group, e.g. such as forceful measures taken against criminals. Jaspers' argument amounts to saying that war, so conceived, results in the opposite of what it was intended to achieve. The picture here is one in which an *ethos* undergoes an inner instrumentalization, where it begins by pursuing its subjective conception of a right order of affairs, where this, nevertheless, results in the construction of an objectified inner order. Its original subjectivity begins to take on an ideational objectivity, a *second nature* in addition to the material objectivity of nature itself. Its values are no longer values, but instruments for the prosecution of war or the perpetuation of the "condition of absolute power". This process is in tension with the negative anthropology, insofar as therein understanding is as intrinsic as force is alien to human ontogeny. Even though Jaspers does not make it explicit, his conceptions of nihilism and war are, thus, intrinsically connected. His concern for negative liberty arises from this conception of war wherein negative liberty is completely neglected to the detriment of both the defensive side, and, and even more so, to the aggressive side in any war.

The distinction between Jaspers and Marx can be no more clearly seen than in their antithetical conceptions of nihilism and alienation. It is clear from Jaspers' works as well as from his notes, that he held a no more acutely oppositional relationship with any prior thinker than with Marx. While Jaspers' conception of both history and politics develops consistently from his negative anthropology, Marx develops everything from a positive anthropology.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 176.

According to the “Marxist humanist” Erich Fromm the conception of alienation holds constant throughout Marx’s *oeuvre*: “the concept of alienation was and remained the focal point of the thinking of the young Marx who wrote the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, and the ‘old’ Marx who wrote *Capital*.”³²⁰ For Jaspers, alienation is a reality in the form of: “mindless work in the machine age,” but he rejects Marx’s principle: “that private property brings about total alienation from being-human.”³²¹ For Marx, this total alienation from humankind’s “species-being” is the essential principle upon which his version of universal history is based. Fromm provides the clearest, and sympathetic, exposition of this point by saying that, for Marx: “the history of man was at the same time the history of man’s alienation.”³²² In light of this, all history becomes the struggle for “species-being”, for humankind’s unalienated nature. The keystone of “Marxist humanism” cannot but be the doctrine of alienation, as Fromm’s account, the most lucid which exists, makes clear. Nevertheless, Fromm confuses Marx’s thought here with existentialism: “Marx’s concept of socialism is a protest, as is all existentialist philosophy, against the alienation of man.”³²³ But this cannot be the case, insofar as Jaspers coined the term “*Existenzphilosophie*”, loosely translated as “existentialism”, and from the beginning equated it with an opposition to what he characterized as nihilism. The intrinsic connection between *Existenzphilosophie* and the negative anthropology elaborated in *The Origin and Goal of*

³²⁰ Erich Fromm, *Marx’s Concept of Man* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 50.

³²¹ Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*, Volume Four, ed. Michael Ermarth and Leonard H. Ehrlich (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 346.

³²² Fromm, *Marx’s Concept of Man*, 46.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 63.

History was first articulated in *Man in the Modern Age*. There Jaspers characterizes his opposition to the positive anthropology of Marx: “the Marxists believe themselves scientifically enabled to grasp the true being of man.” But, in doing so, it becomes, in Jaspers’ view, nihilistic, inclined to: “destroy what has been of worth to man.”³²⁴ What is implied here is what really becomes more fully elaborated in *The Origin and Goal of History*, where human subjectivity is characterized as essential to human ontogeny and to human group formation. Without a conception of this role of subjectivity, humankind is seen as reduced to the status of a merely natural phenomenon, and the history of humankind becomes not the history of consciousness but that of an objective mechanism, one, in Marx’s case, operating according to the logic of “class struggle” alone. Such a view is a naturalistic reduction, a bracketing of subjectivity, or, as Jaspers puts it, a position that: “paralyzes freedom by involving it in naturalistic necessity.”³²⁵ This position itself is, by implication, an extension of the instrumentalization that Jaspers conceives of as arising from war. It is pictured here as nihilistic, as erosive of the subjectivity, the sphere of values, held by human groups and individuals. The further implication is that Marx’s thought is, and this would hold true of “Marxist humanism” as well, intrinsically in tension with legitimacy in general. This logic is clearly repeated, as in but one example, by Herbert Marcuse, who writes in *Reason and Revolution*: “The world is an alienated and untrue world so long as man does not destroy its dead objectivity... He will try to... *make* the world what it *essentially* is,

³²⁴ Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*, 173.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

namely, the fulfillment of man's self-consciousness."³²⁶ Alienation emerges again as the central thesis of his later work, *One Dimensional Man*, where he writes: "the subject which is alienated is swallowed up by its alienated existence. There is only one dimension, and it is everywhere..."³²⁷ Marcuse's own appropriation of the theme of alienation prevents him from seeing the real, though different, subjectivity actually within his category of "dead objectivity" against which he can only respond with the postulate of a universal and singular "fulfillment" of consciousness. That Marcuse sought to "existentialize" Marxism by way of Heidegger does not alter the basic tension between this line of thinking and legitimacy in general. In that effort Marcuse attaches primarily to Heidegger's conception of technology, which is itself a pseudoexistential rearticulation of the theme of alienation from "being-human" *in toto*.³²⁸ Heidegger equates technology with, "*Ge-stell*", or "enframing", his own neologism, which, for him: "does not simply endanger man in his relationship to himself and everything that is... it banishes man..."³²⁹ In a clearer statement in a letter to Jaspers, Heidegger characterizes technology simply as an "assault".³³⁰ This is merely the total alienation theme revisited: technology is not value neutral instrumentality but in itself an alienation from "true being-human". Technology for Heidegger appears virtually

³²⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1941), 113.

³²⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 11.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 153-154.

³²⁹ Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Harper Perennial, 1977), 332.

³³⁰ Martin Heidegger, "Letter 134," in *The Heidegger-Jaspers Correspondence*, ed. Walter Biemel and Hans Saner (Amherst: Humanity, 2003), 176.

synonymous with private property for Marx. The irreconcilability of this position with existentialism is apparent, as Jaspers writes in *Man in the Modern Age*:

“*Existenzphilosophie*... can only become real in the multiplicity of thought proceeding from extant origins in the communication one to another... *Existenzphilosophie* would be instantly lost if it were once to imply a belief that we know what man is.”³³¹ The contrast here can appear in sharper focus when one considers Marx’s concept of alienation in relation to work. From the early to the late Marx, *both* the categories of alienated humankind and “species-being” are tied to the process of work. As he puts it in *Capital*: “All human servitude is involved in the relation of the worker to production, and all types of servitude are only modifications or consequences of this relation.”³³² In an emancipated society: “labor has become not only a means of life, but life’s prime want.”³³³ What is missing here is any consideration of subjectivity, of, specifically, freedom to work according to different values. Instead, both categories already presuppose an objectively known, singular and universal human nature, as Marx puts it in *Capital*: “We presuppose labor in a form that stamps it as exclusively human... At the end of every labor process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the laborer at its commencement.”³³⁴ But this account, while it does have a purely mental element, does not include a specifically subjective element. This is apparent when one considers, again as an example, a prehistoric knife: the objective instrumentality

³³¹ Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*, 176.

³³² Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume One, ed. Friedrich Engels (New York: Charles H. Kerr, 1906), 396.

³³³ Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 531.

that was intended is apparent, but the subjective role the knife took on in its original culture is irrecoverable without corresponding written records. In Marx's account, work only puts something "exclusively human" into the product, but products of work have both an objective reality recognizable by anyone and a particular meaning that is only accessible to the understanding. The human "creates" himself and his world through work in Marx's conception, but only in an instrumental sense. To add free subjectivity to this account would derail its intrinsic logic of alienation, because then there would be no dichotomy between alienated humankind and "species-being", as that dichotomy rests upon the assumption of what is "true" and what is "false" for all humanity. History, as history of alienation, thus cannot be a history of consciousness, but rather a picture of humankind trying to escape from a universal and singular mechanism of oppression which depicts all humankind as an instrument for the achievement of a singular, universal, and "true" end. This formulation leads to a singular and universal vision of positive liberty, "human emancipation", and, as such, leaves no scope for negative liberty as understanding of differing particular views of positive liberty. This blueprint for the instrumentalization of humankind in general arising from an initial emancipatory aim is, from Jaspers' point of view, the intensification of the dialectic and not its resolution. In articulating a universal history of consciousness, in both its subjective and objective aspects, Jaspers seeks to ground an argument for negative liberty in a world of differing subjective views of positive liberty. Jaspers' history provides an understanding of the origin of the fallacious concept of total alienation itself, a concept extending far beyond Marx through thinkers such as Fromm, Marcuse and Heidegger, as

³³⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume One, 197-198.

arising from the instrumentalization resulting from war, the source of nihilism. The result of the work of such thinkers and others appears to be a broadly ramified and enduring legacy of dissonance between theory and legitimacy in general.

Against Marx's instrumental conception of history and its culmination in a prescription of a singular and universal positive liberty, Jaspers sought to articulate a universal history as the history of consciousness, accounting for both objective and subjective aspects. His is a universal history of both meaning and instrumentality. Unlike Marx, Jaspers had access to the findings of empirical anthropology which demonstrated the uniquely and intrinsically conscious aspect of human ontogeny. Central to the theoretical structure of the work is the account of war as intended conquest, that situation from which a nihilistic inner instrumentalization of an *ethos* is conceived to arise. This leads Jaspers to argue that only within a general sphere of negative liberty can positive liberty be truly realized and, hence, free, insofar as the latter is the exercise of subjectivity. In its aspect as a universal history of meaning, this work was intended to counter the trend of nihilism by exhibiting the principles with bearing upon the freedom and unfreedom of the varieties of human subjectivity over time. On this basis, Jaspers' prescription is one of expectation for the future oriented within the dichotomy: despotism or legitimacy.

Conclusion

Jaspers' philosophy of history in his work *The Origin and Goal of History* has begun to generate an impressive literature and will continue to do so. However, subsequent literature should consider the inherent connection between Jaspers' historical and political theses. This study has attempted to encourage that direction by offering a systematic reassessment of *The Origin and Goal of History* in its relevant context of Jaspers' other works. Jaspers' most significant intellectual relationship by far was his friendship with Max Weber. It was from Weber, Jaspers says, that he began to think politically for the first time. The following passage from his three essays on Weber, first published in German in 1933, is indicative of the influence of Weber upon his political thought:

Totalitarian domination is the negative mirror image of what Max Weber had in mind when he spoke of the difficult path that leads to the realization of political greatness. Totalitarian domination means the end of politics as Max Weber conceived of it. He lived in the continuum of political freedom that began with the Greeks.³³⁵

In his youth, Jaspers' father's disdain for German nationalism had led Jaspers to eschew intellectual engagement with political questions. Later, his chronic illness prevented him

³³⁵ Karl Jaspers, *Three Essays: Leonardo, Descartes, Max Weber*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964), 227.

from serving in the First World War. He felt for several years later that his inability to serve in the military disqualified him from taking public political positions. In the 1920s this began to change, however, as he prepared the work of which he remained the most proud, his three volume *Philosophy*. As a “concrete preface” to that work, in 1931 he published his *Die Geistige Situation der Zeit*, translated in English as *Man in the Modern Age*. This work is the blueprint for his later political interventions. He writes:

The reality of the world cannot be evaded. Experience of the harshness of the real is the only way by which a man can come to his own self. To play an active part in the world, even though one aims at an impossible, an unattainable goal, is the necessary precondition of one’s own being.³³⁶

Here his chief targets are the ideological extremes that menaced the West at that time:

Bolshevism and fascism... These forms of dictatorship are substitutes for true authority, achieved at the cost of renouncing, on the part of almost all of us, the right to be ourselves.³³⁷

The exclusive focus of this work is on the concepts of nihilism of totalitarianism though

Jaspers does not use the latter term:

The coercion of the life-order enforces an entry into the various associations, and interferes with the freedom of individual activity in every possible way... But this ideal of world order is intolerable to those who know their being to be established upon a claim to freedom.³³⁸

In the *Origin and Goal of History*, the themes of *Man in the Modern Age* are further articulated. Central among these is the same relationship between nihilism and

³³⁶ Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957), 197.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

totalitarianism. The relationship between the two concepts in the latter work is prefigured in the former. In one aspect, nihilism appears in both works as the sundering of humankind's connection with history. One can see how Jaspers' thinking about history in *Man in the Modern Age* leads to *The Origin and Goal of History*. Historical awareness itself is thought by Jaspers to be crucial in the fight against totalitarianism. His view is that without understanding of the importance of past events as conditions for the actualities of the present and the basis for expectation for the future, human beings become more amenable to the machinery of social domination that is totalitarianism:

The melting away of historical interconnections until they become a mere heap of individuals replaceable at will as functions in the apparatus, tends to disintegrate man into the brief perspective of the contemporary present.³³⁹

This, he explains, happens due to the disintegration of cultural ties and the subsequent entry of new forms of authority in the vacuum left by the former. The political importance of *The Origin and Goal of History* in Jaspers' view can be nowhere more clearly seen than in this passage from *Man in the Modern Age*, in which he equate historical understanding with the concept of freedom:

The historical is *assimilated*, not as mere knowledge of something, not as a Golden Age which is to be restored because it should never have been allowed to fall into decay. Assimilation occurs only through a rebirth by means of which the past is transformed thanks to the entry into a spiritual region wherein I become myself in virtue of my own originality... Without purpose or plan there will ensue true assimilation; but the realizing force of

³³⁸ Ibid., 226.

³³⁹ Ibid., 202.

remembrance will be incalculable. The contemporary situation with its attendant danger of a breach in the continuity of history, makes it necessary that we should deliberately grasp at the possibility of this remembrance. For if the breach were allowed to become established, man would destroy himself.³⁴⁰

This destructive potential of historical rupture is not really brought into a clear focus by Jaspers. Why does he equate historical rupture with humanity's self-destruction? The answer can be extrapolated from *The Origin and Goal of History*. There, the development of the human organism from embryo to adulthood, human ontogeny, is depicted as inseparable from human conscious activity. Such activity is more than biological mechanics insofar as it involves a factor which all other biology does not: the presence of meanings. History for Jaspers is the study of such meanings, and the philosophy of history is that study in the broadest and most essential possible sense. Jaspers diction is, at times, somewhat vague, e.g. "a spiritual region wherein I become myself in virtue of my own originality". However what he means can be stated with more precision: this "spiritual region" is *geistige*, or intellectual, in the sense that it is the realm of conscious meaning. The definitive step in hominization is this separation of humans from nature through conscious decision. And why this happens cannot be *explained* in terms of biological causality, but only *understood*. The search for that understanding of hominization is the framework of Jaspers' philosophy of history, the structure into which all other historical phenomena are organized. In this way, the whole intellectual project that Jaspers is attempting in *The Origin and Goal of History* can be seen to follow his intention to counter what he sees as nihilism, the degradation of meanings, generally. Meanings are constitutive of what we are, in this view. But, on the other hand, a

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 132.

nihilistic systematic is possible, and is actual in Jaspers view, which evacuates meanings in general. This opens the door to the imposition of normativity by coercive authority. And, following from this theory, such normativity is inimical to human freedom on the most essential level, the freedom to be authentically one's self. The maximization of coercive normativity is Jaspers' concept of totalitarianism. Above, in the Introduction and Chapter Three, I have attempted to show how Jaspers' thought here should be interpreted to mean that such nihilism derives from the inner instrumentalization of an *ethos* concomitant with aggressive war. The equation of the loss of history and the destruction of humankind follows from the inversion of Jaspers' ultimate maxim: "What we cannot *be* at all, we cannot *understand* either."³⁴¹ It is in this fashion that the inherent connection between Jaspers' philosophy of history and his political interventions should be seen.

³⁴¹ Karl Jaspers, "On My Philosophy," in *Existentialism: from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann

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