CONVERSATIONS ON TRIBALISM AND COSMOPOLITANISM

"TECHNOLOGY, PLURALISM, AND COSMOPOLITANISM: AMIDST THE RETURN OF TRIBALISM"

ZOË HITZIG AND
ANN LAUTERBACH
(WITH ALLISON STANGER)

ALLISON STANGER [AS]: Roger described this as a closing panel about poetry. But after reading the title he wrote for this session – 'Technology, Pluralism, and Cosmopolitanism Amidst the Return of Tribalism' – you'll notice there's no mention of poetry whatsoever. Given that we have two wonderful poets here, however, I can't help but think that poetry will find its way into the conversation.

Zoë is my co-director at the *Getting Plurality* Research Network at Harvard University. She's also a member of the Harvard Society of Fellows – which, if you don't know, essentially means you have to be one of the smartest people in the world to get in. She holds a PhD in mathematical economics, an undergraduate degree in mathematics, and has already published two volumes of poetry, with work appearing in *The New York Review of Books* and *The New Yorker*. She's an extraordinary thinker and writer, and she may share more about her work with us.

And then, of course, we have Ann Lauterbach. What can I say? She is one of Bard's – and the world's – finest poets. Last night, I heard several people say that Ann always gives the best talk at the Hannah Arendt Conference, even though she's always nervous beforehand. I have no doubt she'll deliver again today. So, without further ado, I'd like to welcome Zoë to the podium.

ZOË HITZIG [ZH]: Thank you, Allison. And thank you to everyone for making this such a great conference so far.

I'll keep my remarks brief, touching on digital technology and pluralism – some of the words in our panel's title – before getting out of the way so we can hear from Ann. It's a real honor to be on a panel with her, as she's someone I've looked up to for a long time.

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If there's a central thesis to what I'll say, it's this: Communication – an essential element of any pluralist society – requires the sharing of both content and context. While digital information technologies have dramatically increased the speed and scale at which we share content across vast differences, they have not kept pace in conveying context. Digital technology can play a valuable role in connecting us in a pluralistic society, but its success depends on a healthy balance between content and context – one that, at present, we do not have.

So, I'll begin with a very basic, even naïve, question – one that's more abstract than much of what we've discussed at this conference: How do we communicate with each other?

One simple answer is that communication involves a combination of verbal and nonverbal language that carries content – the 'what' of a message. We interpret that content through context – the 'who', 'when', 'how', 'why', and 'where'. Context is what binds content to meaning.

Think about how communication works in face-to-face settings – what we're all doing here. Consider a specific exchange that took place over the last few days: small talk by the coffee dispenser, a particularly insightful and well-calibrated question during a session, or even an awkward smile as someone emerged from one of the genderless bathroom stalls. Whatever it was, the mere fact that the interaction happened in person likely provided a shared understanding of basic context.

Your answers to certain questions would likely align with the other person's: Where? Olin Hall. When? Mid-October. Who? At the very least, you know it's someone who attends the Arendt Center's annual conference. What's remarkable about in-person interactions – something we shouldn't overlook or take for granted – is how much common contextual understanding they provide. Our interpretations are rich and nuanced, shaped by sensory details and social, biological, and cultural cues honed over millennia.

But face-to-face interaction is also limited in its pluralistic potential. It's constrained by physics – by gravity, by the fact that we can't be in two places at once. Vast oceans separate us. We are bound to a single body, and family, work, and limited resources often keep us tethered to a tight radius around our dwellings. If we could only communicate with those physically near us, our interactions would be few and infrequent. Our possibilities for pluralism would be severely constrained.

Communication technologies changed that. They allow content to travel across distance and time. Think of cuneiform tablets, the printing press, the telegraph, the telephone, the radio. Then email, internet forums, text messages, and social media. Each new technology has expanded communication's reach, but primarily by making it easier to transmit content across distances. This has often come at the cost of context. Every major advance in communication changes not only how we share content, but also how context is conveyed, distorted, flattened, or omitted.

In response, societies have tried to develop norms, expectations, and tools to restore context where it has been lost. Ancient cuneiform tablets were sealed with impressions to authenticate their authorship. Books have long included colophons listing publication details. Since the 13th century, papermakers have embedded watermarks to indicate origin and quality. Telegrams were stamped with the sender's location and date.

As mass media emerged, Hannah Arendt recognized both its potential and its dangers – how it could foster connection but also homogenization, isolation, and propaganda. In other words, mass media accelerated the spread of content, while efforts to preserve context lagged behind. Consider Orson Welles's War of the Worlds radio broadcast, which was formatted as real-time news bulletins. While the number of listeners who genuinely believed in a Martian invasion may have been exaggerated, the event underscored the need to provide clear context when blending fact and fiction. Afterward, radio hosts became more diligent about inserting disclaimers when content was fictional, rebroadcast, or sponsored.

Compare that to today's internet. The idea that we might expect disclaimers to help us interpret online content –an advertisement, a tweet, a suspicious email – now seems almost quaint. Efforts to reassert context are no match for the breakneck speed and scale of online content delivery. Even agreeing on basic facts about a given message has become difficult. Think of fact-checking attempts on Twitter (now X), a chaotic platform with 500 million active users, owned by a billionaire sociopath. It sporadically attaches 'community notes' meant to provide context to tweets, but this is a weak attempt at restoring context to compressed, 280-character messages.

Discussions about the social impact of digital technology often focus on issues like privacy violations, misinformation, disinformation, and deception. But I believe these are all symptoms of a larger issue: the erosion of context. Effective communication – communication essential

for a pluralistic society – requires participants to identify and protect the context of their exchanges.

What does it mean to identify context? It means being able to authenticate the 'who', 'why', 'where', 'how', and 'when' of a communication. Who posted this tweet? Who sent this email or text? When was it written? Why? Is it from a person, an organization, an AI? Does the sender have my best interests in mind? Am I seeing this because it's relevant to me, or because I'm being manipulated?

To protect context means ensuring that communication isn't misused outside of its intended purpose. Can I trust that a private email won't end up in a newspaper, a courtroom, or my employer's inbox? Will this message go viral? Will the platform or telecom company use my words to train an AI that will one day replace me – or worse, lead me to buy shoes I don't need, attack someone I don't know, or storm the Capitol?

Many of today's digital communication problems – issues of authenticity, truth, privacy, and data protection – ultimately stem from our failure to preserve context. Without the ability to authenticate context, we can't establish norms for protecting it. And without protections, authentication efforts are futile. In this sense, authenticity and privacy are two sides of the same coin, and treating them as separate problems hinders our ability to address the deeper issue: our growing inability to communicate across differences.

The real problem isn't that we can share vast amounts of content across the globe. It's that this ability has not been accompanied by adequate methods for preserving and asserting context. I don't have easy solutions. The deeper issue – one we must never sugarcoat – is that technological innovation is currently driven by what's profitable, not by what's good for people. And that will remain the case as long as we continue to bow to Big Tech.

Still, thinking about context points us toward some possible ways to build more pluralistic forms of digital communication. I'd break these into two categories: tools for identifying context and tools for protecting it.

For identifying context, cryptographers have developed technologies like zero-knowledge proofs – sometimes called 'anonymous credentials' – that let individuals authenticate aspects of their identity in different contexts without revealing everything about themselves. These could

allow users to prove they are human, verify their age, or confirm other relevant traits while maintaining control over their anonymity.

For protecting context, one solution is to use communication channels run by non-profit organizations that prioritize user privacy, like Signal. Another simple but effective strategy is to use disappearing messages – reducing our exposure to surveillance and refusing to be reduced to mere data.

To sum up: In the age of the internet, pluralism depends on our ability to preserve not just what we communicate, but with whom, when, and how. And right now, we are failing to keep up.

ANN LAUTERBACH [AL]: My talk is titled 'Technology, Pluralism, and Cosmopolitanism Amidst the Return of the Tribal: A Poet's Discontinuous Meditation'. Ever since I watched Ray Kurzweil, here at Bard's Fischer Center, sketch two rapidly ascending lines on a huge screen – lines converging at what he called the singularity – I've felt a mix of melancholy, gladness, and anxious fear. Gladness that I will likely not be alive when this event occurs, and fear that it inevitably will, like death. Since then, my darkest thought has been that our species has chosen to will itself extinct – that we've grown tired of the difficulty of living, exhausted by the human condition, squandered our resources, and are now ready to abandon life, propelled forward on a technological arrow shot from Elon Musk's bow. This thought follows me like a shadow, even as I continue to take delight in the shifting sky, the turning leaves, the quizzical expression of a perplexed student.

Of the three of us on this panel, I am the card-carrying Luddite – not that I don't use technology. I do. I'm grateful for its speed, its assistance with my poor spelling and shaky memory, and for the way it eliminates the need for forever stamps in my constant correspondences. But I'm not on social media, I don't have a website, and my technological proficiency is about two percent – like the milk in my coffee. Which is to say, I am about 98 percent Luddite.

The Luddites, you may recall, were 19th-century textile workers in England who opposed machines replacing their craft. This stance might seem fitting for a poet, given the widespread belief that poetry is useless, atavistic, anachronistic – at least the kind of poetry I write, which is drawn from the linguistic archive of my soul, constantly fed by the evolving

stream of language in the world. Where this places me on the shifting scale between tribalism and cosmopolitanism is anyone's guess. Perhaps I belong to a tribe of cat-loving poets, raised in 20th-century Manhattan, who prefer hybridity and plurals to dichotomies, binaries, and dualities. I could teach a master class in ambiguity, indecision, uncertainty, and doubt. Can machines doubt?

Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, describes how the advent of doubt began with Galileo, Copernicus, and the making of the telescope. She writes: "The old opposition of sensual and rational truth, of the inferior truth's capacity of the senses and the superior truth's capacity of reason, pales beside this challenge – that neither truth nor reality is a given, that neither of them appears as it is, and that only interference with appearance, doing away with appearances, can hold out a hope for true knowledge."

How do we "do away with appearances" when almost everything now is an appearance, an apparition? The current crisis in the humanities, I believe, stems from an overvaluation of a certain kind of cognitive intelligence – '*she's so smart!*' – and a near-contempt for emotional intelligence, the kind of intelligence shaped by the arts: painting, music, fiction, poetry, the learning of other languages. People from every imaginable background make things. It is our primary human activity, what Arendt calls *homo faber* – the unending variety of things whose sum constitutes the human artifice.

This week's *Hyperallergic* featured a story about Indigenous storytelling through culinary arts, which reminded me of the original meaning of 'tribal': a shared set of customs and beliefs, gatherings and neighborhoods, families and familiars. This was addressed so eloquently in yesterday's panel and again earlier today. Technology, however, has altered the concept of the tribe, even as it manufactures a sense of belonging through silos, branding, slogans, podcasts, and platforms. These often replace or displace the artifacts and activities that once formed the texture of real shared experience.

Allison suggested I watch *Her*, Spike Jonze's 2013 film, to 'get up to speed' on technology. I watched it a few nights ago. It's an overdetermined, attenuated fantasy about a man – last name Twombly – who falls in love with his OS, an artificial intelligence named Samantha. At one point, Samantha sends a real woman to have physical intimacy with Twombly,

but he can't bridge the gap between Samantha's disembodied voice and the actual stranger in his bed. The film is about displaced narcissism and misplaced intimacy, symptoms of our technological world.

Among the many losses we are experiencing is the nexus of capacities that depend on speaking to each other in person – as Zoë emphasized in her talk. When we are physically present, our hands, eyes, mouths, tongues, and voices all contribute to comprehension. Our bodies, though fallible, are porous instruments with multiple pathways for perception and response. Dispositions like belief and faith, love and hope, trust and care, doubt and curiosity – these are cultivated through affective gestures and relational vocabularies. Without them, we are left with a world of transactions, where people make love to operating systems and forget how to make artifacts that bring delight, tracing their origins to distant hands.

Speaking of distant hands – if you can, go see the Siena exhibition at the Met. It's astonishing. It offers an intimate connection to hands from centuries ago.

I'm reminded of William James's definition of experience: "My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind. Without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos. Interest alone gives accent and emphasis, light and shade, background and foreground, intelligible perspective. It varies in every creature, but without it, the consciousness of every creature would be a gray, chronic indiscriminateness, impossible for us even to conceive."

And yet, we did conceive it. We created this gray, chaotic indiscriminateness, but we disguised it as experience. Attention is inherently selective; it implies that something is not being attended to, that something else is always over there, in the other room, across the street, in another country. Technology has transformed this 'elsewhere' into a mayhem of simultaneous attention – a relentless, cascading stream of entangled narratives and images that leave us bewildered and estranged. This is not cosmopolitanism. It's something else entirely. It arrives on cool, flat, glassy screens – time without space – where our bodies lose their bearings, becoming leftover, inconvenient encumbrances.

Maybe it all comes down to pronouns. What if all the *I*'s – the multitudes of selves – became *they*? What then? The self is plural.

This isn't what Arendt intended by her vision, but perhaps it offers a way out of the hardening carapace that encases our ability to know one

another beyond overt identity. We come into the world with few means of communication, but gradually, we expand them. We attach words to objects, to people, to things – and this discovery fills us with wonder. Wonder, Arendt reminds us, was the beginning of philosophy.

That moment of astonishment – when the word 'bird' comes to mean that creature outside, perched on a twig, making its own wordless sound – this is where it begins. And our words come from a multitude of sources, different for each of us. The self is made from a constellation of vocabularies, shaped by myriad experiences, attentions, places, and things.

We cannot be reduced to a single epithet – Gen Z, Black, Jewish.

The self is plural. Hybrid. Mutable.

Let's imagine that our psyches are more like weather than like the tree thrashed by the storm. We are not operating systems. We are not bots. We can change our minds. We can open our hearts.

The tribe we belong to is human.

AS: What's going to happen now is that I'll pose a few brief questions to each of our speakers before turning it over to all of you. I'll keep this short, since I know you're eager to engage with them directly.

First, Zoë, I really loved the driving force of your talk: the idea that today's Internet is turbocharging content delivery while eroding context. I completely agree that context is essential to meaning, and Ann emphasized this as well.

So, I'm wondering: how can we counteract the negative effects of massive digitalization on the human experience? You mentioned some important interventions, and perhaps I could ask you to expand on those. Specifically, when you talked about tools for restoring context, you brought up personhood and zero-knowledge proofs. Maybe you could explain a bit more about what those are? Who here knows what a zero-knowledge proof is? Not many, I presume – so it would be great if you could walk us through that.

I also want to get your take on this proposition: Bots and algorithms don't have rights – humans do. In other words, our laws should prioritize the human tribe, as Ann so beautifully put it. To what extent do you think this perspective could help us uphold and protect the human in a digital age?

And finally, I’d love to hear your thoughts on the various efforts to create a public, non-commercial Internet. There are some fascinating initiatives in this space, and I personally find them quite compelling. What promise do you see in this approach for keeping humans at the center, ensuring that technology augments human intelligence rather than superseding it?

ZH: Those are all such great questions. I don’t even know where to start.

I think I’ll begin with your first question: What are the hopeful visions for preserving the human in this swirl of mass communication – or, as Ann put it so beautifully, the “elsewhere of simultaneous attention”?

I have two conflicting instincts about this. One comes from what I think of as my more dismal poet side – the part of me that wants to say the answer is to retreat. To go home, disconnect, throw your devices far away, and, in a sense, be forgotten. There’s actually a movement around this idea, reflected in some successful laws in the EU and California that enforce a right to be forgotten on digital platforms. This has a technical meaning – allowing people to have certain data erased – but it also remains a kind of fuzzy concept, difficult to fully enforce. Still, I love the idea behind it. What does it mean to walk away, to become illegible? To find parts of your experience that can’t be turned into data, can’t be captured or quantified? Because once you become knowable in that sense, you risk losing the mystery of being alive, of forming real human connections.

That’s one answer – the poet’s answer. But maybe it’s not dismal. Maybe it’s just romantic.

The more pragmatic side of me, though, wants to offer something actionable – something that people can actually believe in. Not just individuals, but those who work in technology, people who want to solve problems. If I stood in front of them and just talked about resisting datafication and embracing the unknowable, they’d probably look at me like I had six heads. They wouldn’t know what to do with that.

So, what’s the alternative? How can we channel their energy into initiatives that actually address these problems? People working in tech see the issues in society, and they tend to approach them as problems to be solved. And there are, in fact, promising approaches – especially in the world of cryptography.

At the end of my talk, I briefly mentioned anonymous credentials, which I think are really exciting. Right now, when you need to prove who you are online – let's say you're trying to verify your identity on social media – you often have to hand over way too much information. It's overkill. For example, I think Instagram currently requires you to submit a copy of your driver's license to verify your account. That's a huge amount of personal information handed over to a platform that does not have your best interests in mind. But what does Instagram actually need to know? Not your full legal identity – just that you're a real person.

Anonymous credentials allow for this. They let you prove specific things about yourself without exposing unnecessary details. For instance, instead of handing over your ID, you could carry a credential that simply proves, I am a person. That's it. You could use it to verify your presence online without revealing anything else about yourself. It could replace captchas, so instead of solving endless, annoying puzzles, you'd just have this credential that says, 'yes, I'm a human'.

And with that, you maintain both privacy and credibility – something that's becoming increasingly difficult in the digital world. To get that, we need to build a good system. I've written a bit about how such a system could actually work. A few months ago, I published a paper exploring different ways to set it up so that the issuer of the system doesn't end up with too much control or power over it.

That's one promising technology I see as useful. But beyond simply proving that you're a person, you might also need to verify other things – like proving you're over 18. Estonia, for example, has an incredible digital identity program that's both highly privacy-preserving and not Big Brother-level scary. They use it to allow people to vote anonymously online, which I think is an incredible idea. It's hard to imagine something like that happening in the U.S., but if people had a secure way to verify certain claims about themselves privately, it could dramatically expand the possibilities for online democracy.

AS: Ann gave us so much to think about as well. I have two clusters of questions, and I'm trying to crystallize them now. The first has to do with the crisis in the humanities that you mentioned. What do you see as the likely response? This is really an educational question. Should we re-center the humanities? De-ideologize them? Or should we take a more Rousseauian

approach, like Rousseau's ideal education for Émile, where there's no exposure to the humanities until after a solid foundation in STEM? The idea being that you need to develop your mind first before turning to the humanities. I was actually thinking that Zoë had the Émile education.

AL: I don't have a clear answer. But the reason I brought it up is that one of my central points is how deeply we undervalue affective intelligence – and the internet has only made this worse. It has turned emotional intelligence into a kind of cartoon.

My concern about the humanities is that their decline aligns with a broader shift in how we define intelligence – what it means to be human, what it means to be smart. We've seen this overemphasis on cognitive intelligence for a long time. Arendt recognized it too. There's that striking passage where she talks about doubt and how, even before Descartes, there was already this idea that the senses were somehow inferior to the mind.

I think that's a huge mistake. It's part of what has divided us from the rest of the animal world and from nature itself. If we were a little less conceited about our brains and a little more attuned to our sensory experience – our sensorium – we might be better equipped to cultivate empathy. Not just self-awareness, but a capacity to feel for others.

So that's why I raised the issue. I don't know the solution, except that we need to rebalance what we consider necessary for becoming a grown-up.

At Bard, I often think about how students arrive as kids. They've just left home, and then four years later, we expect them to step into the world as adults. It's an astonishing expectation – to undergo that transformation on every possible level in just four years.

And one of the most essential ways to prepare students for that transition, I believe, is through the humanities.

AS: I think that's brilliant. And I'm happy to report that, as you're probably aware, recent advances in cognitive science have pretty much blown-up Cartesian dualism.

Our intelligence is embodied. Human intelligence is embodied, and so are our emotions. Ann, you posed that wonderful question: Can machines doubt? And I don't think they can, because doubt is an emotion. It's a kind

of withering of meaning, a hesitation that arises from lived experience, and that, too, is embodied.

But I want to throw out a thought experiment – a question that doesn't necessarily have an answer, but I'd love to hear both your thoughts on it. Ann, you mentioned the singularity, and I'm really glad you watched Her. But here's the question: What are computers made of? Chemicals and electricity. Silicon and electricity. And what are humans made of? Well, electricity and carbon. Chemicals.

So, as we look at the rapid advances in artificial intelligence, this raises a provocative question. We often say that human intelligence is embodied, and fundamentally different from machine intelligence. But what if human intelligence could be simulated – not just with software, but by building something new out of chemicals and electricity? What if we could reverse-engineer the human brain? Would that ever truly be possible?

AL: I don't know why we'd want to do that. I don't understand why anyone wants the singularity – the moment when technology surpasses human intelligence. Why is that a goal? I genuinely don't know what problem that's supposed to solve.

And honestly, I think it's a terrible shame. If we ever reach that point, it will only reinforce something that's already deeply ingrained, especially among young people: the idea that your body, your being, is somehow inefficient, negligible, inferior. That it will never be as shiny, as fast, or as smart as the machine you're holding in your hand.

I think that's tragic. It fuels this constant desire to make our faces, our bodies, resemble some bizarre, perfected version of ourselves – one that, unless present company is an exception, is impossible. So why are we doing this? Why do we want this? I honestly don't know. It's confusing to me. And, frankly, it makes me feel ridiculous.

AS: I could suggest one possible motivation to you, which is these boys want to build – and they say this – chatbots that teenage girls will fall in love with. The revenge of the nerds. They forget that teenage girls like bodies too, right?

Q1: Thank you for this panel, and thank you, Ann, for bringing up sense-based intelligence.

This question of technology has been present from the very start of this conference, and I think it complicates the supposed antithesis between cosmopolitanism on one hand and tribalism on the other. It's not clear how that opposition is functioning at all.

Just consider Elon Musk and his obsession with, let's say, self-perpetuation. He's a technologist, yet politically, things are not unfolding the way many assumed they would. Perhaps this is because technology is, in some fundamental way, anti-political. It does not necessarily lend itself to the dynamics of politics as a system of challenge, contest, and negotiation – as McLuhan described it. Technology operates in a different sphere, one where politics doesn't necessarily belong.

At this level, the intentions of the so-called creators – if we can even call them that (I actually reject that term) – are irrelevant. It doesn't matter how well-meaning they are, how determined they are to solve problems. The point is that their inventions take on a life of their own, beyond their control.

This reminds me of Hannah Arendt, who made a crucial distinction between thinking and what she called mere cognition. That distinction is more important than ever. She described thinking as a bootstrap phenomenon – that's her phrase. We don't actually know how humans ever began to think, and there's no guarantee that thinking, in this deep, reflective sense, will continue into the future.

So-called 'thinking machines' need serious critique. The idea itself deserves scrutiny. And if I remember correctly, Lyndsey Stonebridge brought up the prologue to *The Human Condition* earlier. In just a few short pages, Arendt writes about the men who created the atomic bomb. She points out that they failed to grasp something essential: they would be the last people to be consulted on how it was used.

So, yes, this panel raises critical questions. And Arendt was prescient, to put it mildly, about technology, technologists, and the transformation of science into technoscience.

AS: If I may, I'd like to say something about this first. I think you're raising a really important point, and yes, Hannah Arendt was prescient. But it's also crucial that we look closely at what these tools are actually doing –

because some of the advances we're seeing, especially with new chatbots, are truly astonishing. Mind-boggling, even.

Here's something to consider: The recent Nobel Prizes in both physics and chemistry went to computer scientists. A lot of people were upset about this – seeing it as disciplinary trespassing – but what struck me most wasn't the crossover itself. It was the fact that these scientists weren't from universities; they came from industry.

That tells us something about the reality of 21st-century power. Our government – and I've written about this – has effectively outsourced its intellectual capital. The balance of power between the private and public sectors has never in human history looked like this.

And that's part of the reality we're dealing with. These people are moving forward. They're inventing things. And in this era of what Fintan O'Toole has called 'feral capitalism', it may take a coordinated effort to stop them.

AL: I just want to add something to that – especially given my self-proclaimed Luddite position, which also comes with a certain ignorance. But I think it's important not to reject everything happening in technology outright – not that we even could, because we can't.

The real question, I think, is the one Zoë raised: context. Is this technology actually useful and helpful to human beings, or not? That's the distinction we need to be making, but too often, we're not.

Take medicine, for example – there have been astonishing advances because of these technologies. I'm certainly not going to sit here and argue against that.

So what's crucial now is figuring out how to make distinctions – how to separate what serves human well-being from what doesn't. And I think that's exactly what you're trying to get at, right?

ZH: I'll just add quickly that I agree with what Ann and Allison just said. But I also want to say that I'm wary of over-demonizing technology – because, at its core, technology is amazing.

In its essence, technology has always been something that expands what it means to be human. It opens up new possibilities, and that's something we've talked about a lot – the idea that we build ourselves in

uncertainty, that the future isn't fixed, that we have the ability to become something different than we are now.

Historically, technology has been part of that – it has allowed us to transcend limitations, to imagine and evolve in ways that make life feel worth living.

But, as Allison pointed out, the real problem isn't technology itself. What's particularly perverse right now is that the people in power – the technologists – talk about technology as if it's deterministic, as if there's a single, inevitable path they are leading us down. And it's theirs. It's not open to real possibility, to alternative futures.

That's what's truly frightening – that technology has become a perversion of its own potential.

Q2: This question is for Zoë. When we talk about digital communication, we're not just talking about user-to-company interactions, but also user-to-user interactions, organizations, and various third parties – each with different motives, ideas, and histories. Given that, and considering privacy in this broader context, does a system that prioritizes complete user anonymity and privacy actually reduce our ability to understand and authenticate context? Does it make accountability more difficult, especially for things like deception and misinformation?

ZH: That's a great question. I think the real challenge, or maybe the opportunity, is to ask: What kind of context is actually needed in a given setting?

There's a philosopher of technology and legal scholar named Helen Nissenbaum – my talk was very much influenced by her – who developed a theory of privacy as contextual integrity. She argues that an information flow is private if it respects the contextual norms of the interaction. It takes a bit of unpacking to see why that's not just tautological – it's actually quite a deep idea.

When I think about the power of tools that shield aspects of identity, I see them as valuable because they allow us to refine what we reveal based on the specific context of an interaction. In some situations, you may want to present your full identity – say, with a digital driver's license, your full likeness, or even thousands of personal photos you share with family. That kind of openness is meaningful in certain contexts. But the power of anonymous credentials lies in their ability to let us tailor what we disclose,

depending on the interaction. Instead of all-or-nothing transparency, they offer a way to reveal just enough – balancing privacy with the contextual needs of communication.

Q3: I teach at a small university in Pennsylvania, and I was really struck by your discussion of the right to be forgotten, as well as your references to homo faber – the idea that human beings are fundamentally makers.

Lately, I've been thinking about what I call a crisis of agency, something that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick also touched on when she talked about the middle ranges of agency. So I'm wondering: how do you see the right to be forgotten in relation to the right to create? How do we balance the right to erase aspects of our digital selves with the right to have agency, to actively shape the world as members of the human tribe?

AL: The right to agency and the right to creativity as a single or as in some way in conflict?

Q3: I think a lot of my students don't understand why they should make anything, or why their making has any meaning when they can simply go to a chat bot that will do it more precisely than they can. The nature of creative agency as being human.

AL: That's a really profound question. Actually, a friend of mine just wrote to me and asked: What would you think if nobody ever read anything you wrote? And then he followed up with, Or, to put it another way: why do you write?

I haven't answered either question. But I could answer the first one immediately, because I never actually think about whether anyone reads what I write. It just doesn't cross my mind. I'm always surprised when someone does.

But the way I'd put this most directly is something like this: For years, I thought Ann was making poems. And then, at a certain point, I realized, no, the poems made Ann. It reversed itself. And I understood that I was the result of this activity – this thing you're calling agency. And that realization was kind of wonderful.

I was lucky. I came from places where there wasn't a lot of hope, where there wasn't a lot of endowed agency. I had to make it up as I went along.

And I chose this peculiar idea of being a poet precisely because I knew it was completely outside the usual markers of success in America – the ones tied to money, or a certain kind of family, or the whole liberal agenda of achievement. I thought, Maybe I can go around all that.

That's very particular to being a poet, or maybe to my time. But I think this idea expands. You can tell kids: Pick up a brush. Make something. See if that doesn't bring you more pleasure, more interest in becoming.

Because really, that's what you were talking about, Zoë – becoming, change. How do we change? That's one of my biggest questions about being human. How does change happen?

And I think one way change happens is by making things. I'm almost certain there's a correlation between being a certain kind of person at one point in your life and feeling different at another – because in between, you made something. And it doesn't even have to be a work of art. I'm biased toward art, of course, because it brings pleasure to others. But I think it could be anything.

Q4: Yesterday, Khaled spoke so beautifully about technology and the idea of the gods leaving while the technology remains. That really stayed with me. I have a question – or really, a nest of questions – so feel free to answer whichever you find most interesting. Could we imagine the singularity as a kind of attempt to summon the gods back? And, following up on Uday's points in the previous discussion, could poetry play a role in some kind of secular or non-tribalistic spirituality? Is there a connection between poetry and technology in that sense? You were touching on this just now, but I'd love to hear more. What is the relationship between poetry and this strange, almost spiritual – even religious – process of technological development? Is there something tribalistic about it? Or is it something else entirely?

AL: Let me put it differently. What I take from this nest of questions is a deeper, fundamental question about spirit – where, if anywhere, it is to be found. Or maybe even, what is it?

Maybe the singularity will lead us to the gods. I think Kurzweil believes that; his diagram certainly seemed to be heading straight for heaven. To me, it looked like it was going directly to hell. But the notion of spirit is complicated. It exists as a kind of third term between the Cartesian mind-

body split – something that doesn't have a clear home. And I think that's part of what you're asking: Where is the home for spirit? I can't possibly answer that. But I do think James was right about attention. If there's a way toward spirit – if we want to call it that – it's through a certain kind of attention, through not being distracted.

For me, that attention is often directed toward language. But my love of language isn't some abstract, disembodied love – it's deeply embodied in my love of the world itself. The tactile, physical worldness of the world is connected to the strange, immaterial nature of language. And the relationship between those two things – the materiality of the world and the immateriality of language – has, for me, a kind of spiritual cadence, a rhythm, a ratio. There's something about their mutual attraction, their need for each other, that gives me a feeling of spirit. But I can't give that feeling to you.

That, I think, is the bigger question: Where can spirit be housed? That brings us back to the conversation about tribalism. In a tribe, there's a house for spirit. A structure, a place to belong. But I've never been part of any structured spiritual tribe – except, perhaps, for Bard College.

ZH: One thing worth considering is why people believe that the singularity could lead to some kind of transcendence or higher spiritual plane. Because they do believe that. It's deeply embedded in the discourse around artificial intelligence. In many ways, it's a religious idea.

What I think is valuable is to ask: What's missing that makes people want to believe in that version of transcendence? Why is there such a desire for a narrative that demotes the human in the process?

I don't have a good answer to that. But I want an answer, because if we understood it, maybe we could offer another path.

NIOBE WAY [NW]: I think you've already given us the answer. It's curiosity. You've all touched on it in different ways, but I want to bring it center stage. Let me share a quick story about a three-year-old, because I know we're short on time. I just learned this the other day. A three-year-old asked her uncle: Is what goes on in your brain the same as what goes on in my brain?

And he said, What do you mean?

And she replied: Do the thoughts in my brain – the things I think – are they the same as the ones in your brain?

What I'm getting as is: we're born naturally curious. We're naturally brilliant at figuring out theory of mind, all these sophisticated cognitive processes, all the emotional depth. But we grow up in a culture that doesn't nurture that curiosity.

So, Zoë, you actually did answer your own question. And Ann, so did you.

Zoë, what I learned from you is that context shapes content, and we can capture context through curiosity – by asking who, what, when, how. That's the five-year-old's curiosity.

Ann, how do we bring back the humanities? By nurturing that curiosity – our natural wonder, our desire to understand ourselves through each other. AI does not have that. That's what makes us human.

I want curiosity to be a constant thread in these conversations – about creativity, technology, everything. Because isn't it mind-blowing that a three-year-old could ask that question? What goes on in your brain? Is it the same as what goes on in mine? That level of intelligence, that depth of curiosity; it's astonishing.

AL: And, of course, there's also the issue of doubt. There are two ways to think about doubt. You can see it as something that makes you fearful – a source of uncertainty, even paralysis. Or you can see doubt as a spark. A reason to become curious. And in that case, the cure for doubt is endless curiosity.

NW: Endless curiosity. And I have to remind you, Allison, you told me at lunch that your joy comes from curiosity.

AS: That's absolutely true. Let's restore curiosity – to our classrooms, to our conversations, and to the world. And let's drink to it! Thank you all so much.