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Author(s): Antony Black

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The “Axial Period”: What Was It and What Does It Signify?

Antony Black

Abstract: Karl Jaspers coined the term the “axial period” to refer to what he saw as the simultaneous development in several different and separate societies—China, India, Iran, Israel, Greece—of “a new departure within mankind.” What he meant has been characterized as “a kind of critical, reflective questioning of the actual and a new vision of what lies beyond.” While it is true that people in each of these separate cultures began to develop new ways of talking about the cosmos, ethics, and community, Jaspers’s approach and description of these phenomena were, I shall argue, highly defective. This has led to serious misunderstandings of what was involved.

It has become widely accepted that something was special about the period in world history in which there occurred, almost simultaneously it is believed, the preaching of the major Hebrew prophets around the time of the Exile,¹ the first development of science and philosophy in Greece from Thales to Aristotle,² the growth of philosophy, and especially political philosophy, in China from Confucius (d. 479 BCE) to the Legalists in the third century BCE,³ and the exposition of religious philosophy in India in the Upanishads (a little earlier, c. 800 to c. 600 BCE).⁴ Karl Jaspers suggested that this “axial period,”⁵ as he called it, amounted to “a new departure

¹Norman Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985).

²*The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought*, ed. Christopher Rowe and Malcolm Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), part 1.

³A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1989); Yuri Pines, “Envisioning Empire: Chinese Political Thought of the Warring States Period (453–221 BCE)” (Hansbula: Hawaii University Press, forthcoming). I am very grateful to Professor Pines for allowing me to see this book before publication.

⁴See U.N. Ghoshal, *A History of Indian Political Ideas: The Ancient Period and the Period of Transition to the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959).

⁵Karl Jaspers, “The Axial Period,” in Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 1–25, 17. Hereafter cited in text by page number. This has been discussed in *Daedalus* 104 (Spring 1975) and in *The Origin and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations*, ed. S. N. Eisenstadt (Albany, NY: State

within mankind," meaning "a kind of critical, reflective questioning of the actual and a new vision of what lies beyond."⁶ Jaspers and others hold that the intellectual and spiritual achievements of this time have inspired most of humanity ever since. It was then, they say, that the foundations of all major world civilizations were laid down.

The "axial age" has come to be viewed as the greatest single turning point in world history so far as things of the mind (Geist) are concerned. Jaspers and those who think like him speak as if all the subsequent developments of humanity in the mental sphere flow from these sources. Applying this belief to the history of political thought,⁷ one would say that thinkers such as Isaiah, Plato, and Confucius performed breakthroughs that established the terrain for what was to come.

At first, these coincidences in time do appear striking. In this article, however, I want to argue that this whole language and approach, while not completely inaccurate, are liable seriously to misrepresent what actually happened both then and later.

A Period?

The concept of an axial period or age does not hold up. This fallacy is clear even in Jaspers's own definition of it as "the period around 500 BC, in the spiritual process that occurred between 800 and 200 BC" (1). This timeframe is too elastic to be called a "period." It is, indeed, very striking that these developments were fairly close to one another in time, yet completely separate geographically; there can be no question of influence. Jaspers's dates, however, seem to have been contrived primarily with the Hebrew Scriptures in mind; while the Upanishads also date partly from around 800 BC, in Greece and China creative thought did not begin until some three centuries later.

Equally serious, the mental phenomena which Jaspers ascribed to this "period" appeared in Egypt and Mesopotamia and Iran⁸ many centuries earlier. One prehistorian of the Levant finds them actually preceding, and in

University of New York Press, 1986). Most recently, Karen Armstrong, in *The Great Transformation: The World in the Time of Buddha, Socrates, Confucius and Jeremiah* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006), which is a major achievement of high-class popularization, has accepted and embroidered Jaspers's notions.

⁶Benjamin I. Schwartz, "The Age of Transcendence," *Daedalus* 104 (1975): 3.

⁷The argument for this article came out of work I am doing for "A World History of Ancient Political Thought," to be published by Oxford University Press in about two years.

⁸R. C. Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961). Zoroaster probably lived between 1500 and 1300 BCE.

his opinion helping to stimulate, the introduction of agriculture.⁹ In texts from early Egypt, such as “A Dispute over Suicide”¹⁰ (probably dating from late third millennium BCE), we find sentiments no less reflective and personal than those that Jaspers finds typical of the axial period.¹¹ In other cases, we know too little about earlier periods to assume that there was no similarly original thinking behind, for example, the development of socioethical customs (*li*: rites) in China or the formation of the nation of Israel.¹² At the other end of the period, *Kautilya’s Arthashastra*, the most important surviving document of ancient Indian political thought,¹³ was composed between the third century BCE and the second century CE, that is, well after the end of Jaspers’s period.

While the surge of creative thinking in the ancient world did more or less come to a close at approximately the time Jaspers states (with the above exception), mental events at numerous other points in time could equally well be described as “axial.” I do not see on what grounds, for example, the rise of Christianity, the rise of Islam, the European Reformation, and the European Enlightenment are to be excluded, since these were also historical moments when a similar deepening of ethics and human bonding, similar explorations of possible meanings of human existence, took place. Others might wish to extend the list in other ways. Jaspers might have responded by arguing that such later developments all stemmed from the original breakthroughs. But that assertion would assume that there was little or no true originality in these later movements—an absurd proposition. I do not, therefore, see how one can possibly confine axial developments to this period. There was no identifiable axial period.

What Were “Axial” Movements About?

I would agree that there were, nonetheless, certain phenomena of the kind to which Jaspers referred that were distinctive. Yet here, too, Jaspers (and others)

⁹Compare Jaspers, “The Axial Period,” 2 (quoted below), with Jacques Cauvin, *The Birth of the Gods and the Origin of Agriculture*, trans. T. Watkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000/1994), esp. 67–69.

¹⁰James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955), 405–7.

¹¹“Justice (lasts) for ever and goes down into the necropolis with him who renders it. When he is buried . . . his name is not wiped out from the earth, but he is remembered for his goodness. That is a principle of the divine order” (inscription of c. 1850 BCE): cited in Henri Frankfort et al., *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1946), 84.

¹²Probably in the thirteenth–twelfth centuries BCE: Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 BCE* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979).

¹³*The Kautiliya Arthashastra*, ed. and trans. R.P. Kangle, 2nd ed. (Bombay: University of Bombay, 1969).

have seriously skewed a promising line of analysis. First, the use of the all-embracing, universalistic term "axial" has spawned a tendency to assume that phenomena in different cultures had more in common than was actually the case.¹⁴ Second, Jaspers's generalized description of what axial movements were about consistently drew attention to their religious aspects at the expense of everything else. Consequently, much of what he says is more appropriate for Israel and India than it is for China and Greece. His initial summary is as follows (I italicize passages that seem to refer primarily, if not exclusively, to religious phenomena and have little or no relevance to Greece or China):

What is new about this age . . . is that man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, of himself *and his limitations*. He experiences the terror of the world and *his own powerlessness*. He asks radical questions. Face to face with the void he strives for liberation and redemption. *By consciously recognising his limits* he sets himself the highest goals. *He experiences absoluteness in the depths of selfhood and in the lucidity of transcendence . . .* In this age were born the fundamental categories within which we still think today, *and the beginnings of the world religions, by which human beings still live, were created*. The step into universality was taken in every sense (Jaspers, 2).

The language clearly suggests that Jaspers had in mind, above all, religious phenomena, and religious phenomena of a particular kind.¹⁵ In fact, his definition privileges the breakthroughs that occurred in India and Israel very much at the expense of those that occurred in China and Greece. Moreover, to imply that "world religions" such as Christianity and Islam were formed during this period rather than in the first and seventh centuries CE, respectively, is absurd. Furthermore, having initially referred to China, India, Iran, Palestine, and Greece, Jaspers then proceeds to refer simply to "China, India and the West . . . these three origins" (Jaspers, 2, 9). He lumps together, therefore, Israel, Greece, and Iran, and introduces the historically misleading notion of "the West." This was not only a peculiarly flagrant instance of "orientalism" (actually making Iran part of the West), but by implicitly denying the independent role of Greece, Jaspers downgrades and perhaps excludes altogether developments in philosophy and science.

The phenomena in question were, indeed, remarkable and unprecedented, but I suggest they may be more accurately defined in terms different from

¹⁴One finds this in, for example, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "The Axial Age: The Emergence of Transcendental Visions and the Rise of Clerics," *European Journal of Sociology* 23 (1982): 294–314.

¹⁵For an interesting comment on transcendence, see Heiner Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age: A Reconstruction under the Aspect of the Breakthrough towards Postconventional Thinking* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992–1993), 273.

those used by Jaspers and his successors. What distinguishes the axial stage is an approach to the self and to the cosmos that is more reasoned, brooding, reflective, self-conscious, and at the same time more articulate. There was, indeed, a fuller awareness of the interior person (which also found expression in literature and the plastic arts). But there was also (as we shall see) a political and social dimension that Jaspers all but ignored. There was discontent with the execution of daily concerns, a search for better ways of organizing society, and a greater demand for self-sacrifice. People were seeking both to understand and, at the same time, to change the way life is; they were looking for changes in attitude as well as conduct. This was very clear in Confucius¹⁶ and also Mozi, in Solon, Aeschylus, Plato, and the Hebrew prophets; it was less evident in India.

I would prefer to abandon the term "axial" with its slightly mystical (astrological?) connotation. We should perhaps refer to the phenomena in question as strivings toward mental and moral discovery and refinement. I shall, therefore, use the term "breakthrough." There was a new refinement, or sharpening, of ethics and the mind, based on principles and ideals conceived in more general terms, and in their relation to the cosmos—and sometimes to humanity—as a whole. What was involved was nothing less than a new interpretation of our experience and a new set of goals. This is true both of the societies or cultures related to the events in question and also, in some cases—notably Greece and Israel—of many other societies to which their achievements were transmitted.

One novel feature of these cultural events was that they were set in motion by individuals still known to us, either by what others recorded about them and their teachings, or by what they themselves wrote. Each of these individuals thought and lived in conscious and difficult otherness from their surroundings. And yet—as Jaspers and others have powerfully stated—they each affected over very long periods the ways in which people think, live, and behave, even today.

Tradition

All this change involved a series of new attitudes toward tradition. Various intellectual strategies were adopted. One could (1) revere the good old tradition, but interpret it according to one's own convictions, using this interpretation as a standard for the reform of existing practices of which one disapproved, but still with the intention of maintaining the "true" tradition and its original spirit. In other words, one could set out to restore the good old tradition; examples might be Confucius and the Hebrew

¹⁶See Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age*, 24–40, 47, 273, 276–77; Benjamin I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 51, 79.

prophets. (This practice could function as a convenient way of inducing change within a textual revelation.) (2) One could contest tradition as such and innovate explicitly but without calling everything into question. The Buddha retained the idea of karma (moral cause and effect) while radically reinterpreting it. Laozi declared that "the Dao which is called the Dao is not the Dao."¹⁷ The Buddha and Socrates denied that tradition possessed any value; one must start afresh, relying on one's own mind and experience, which, indeed, means "transcending" (to use the term which so appealed to Jaspers) tradition. (3) One could assume nothing and subject everything to scrutiny, interpreting both what exists and human possibilities without any regard for what others had said. All beliefs and principles are open to debate. This approach was adopted by some Greeks, notably the Sophists and Socrates. They made enquiry and intellectual openness into the actual aim and principle of mental activity. Some Chinese thinkers were in practice equally open-minded.

Class

Thinkers in different cultures took a variety of views on class structures.¹⁸ In general, the old landed aristocracies tended to be discredited in the new theories. Thus, Confucians thought ranks should be reformed by elevating only the *shih* (true gentleman); Chinese power theorists also wanted distinction to be awarded to merit alone. Jewish thought was inimical to class differentiation; in its place they elevated the egalitarian ethnic group. In classical Athens, attempts were made to mitigate the effects of social divisions arising from property ownership by allocating political powers to all citizens. Though Athenian democracy eventually enforced formal political equality, wealthy citizens could still play a preponderant role so long as they contributed to public works. The Spartans rigidly maintained hereditary class rule. In India, on the other hand, most new developments in religious thought simply rationalized, and thereby reinforced, caste divisions. Buddhism, not unlike Judaism, abolished class distinctions within the egalitarian religious community (the *sangha*), which tended to become a new kind of elite.

Religion and Philosophy

The distinction between philosophy and religion was not familiar to ancient thinkers. One may distinguish, first, between those movements in India, Iran, and Israel that claimed divine revelation, and those in Greece and

¹⁷Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Stephen Aldiss and Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1993), 1 ("Tao called Tao not Tao").

¹⁸Eisenstadt, "The Axial Age," is hardly adequate on this (303).

China that did not. The movements based on revelation were distinctive in the absolute certainty and social exclusiveness that their method demanded. Revelatory theology was a communal as well as an epistemological phenomenon. It created strong communities based on intellectual assent to certain propositions and/or behavior patterns. The difference was not that religious beliefs in China and Greece were less strongly held, but they did not claim these beliefs had been revealed in texts. Noticeably in both Greece and China, the supreme deity (Zeus/Heaven) was invoked by those supporting a radical re-evaluation of existing social and political structures, such as Solon, Mozi, and Aeschylus.

Some thinkers in Greece¹⁹ and China may be called secular, Confucius and Protagoras for example. In Athens in particular, a questioning attitude toward religion and gods developed. Few Greek thinkers explicitly denied the existence of deities, but the powers ascribed to them were viewed with skepticism. Confucius urged his followers to focus on the problems of people here and now rather than the spirit world (*Analects* 6.12); he was not concerned with the afterlife, but much concerned with respect for the dead as well as a wide range of ritual conduct. Plato, on the other hand, while dismissive of current forms of religion, argued that dialectical philosophy made it possible to arrive at certain knowledge of divine being, but this could only finally be achieved when the divine revealed itself to the individual soul. Revelation was a matter of personal attainment, but it culminated in a mystical experience; one could not gain true knowledge of the divine by dialectic alone.

The Buddha, Confucius, Socrates, and Plato did not base their teachings on divine authority.²⁰ Nor did the Buddha, Confucius, or Socrates claim any authority for themselves, though followers of the Buddha and Confucius spoke and behaved as if they had. Socrates alone did not become the focus of a belief system or ideology; that may tell us something about Socrates himself and about the culture into which he was born.

Critical enquiry—philosophy and science—played a primary role in the breakthrough in both Greece and China.²¹ In both there was sustained debate about social, ethical, and philosophical issues. In India, enquiry took the form of a personal search through meditation and self-denial, which produced Buddhism and other spiritual paths. The genre of *arthashastra* (economics and politics) used philosophy in the sense of systematic enquiry based on empirical evidence. Israel, too, had a plurality of approaches—the royal, prophetic, and Levitical.²²

¹⁹See *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought*, part 1.

²⁰It is clear from the *Apology* that Socrates was conscious of “the divine”—an inner voice—in his own life.

²¹G.E.R. Lloyd, *The Ambitions of Curiosity: Understanding the World in Ancient Greece and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

²²See Keith W. Whitlam, *The Just King: Monarchical Judicial Authority in Ancient Israel* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1979).

Thus, in all cases there was now *intra-cultural* dialogue. In Greece, India, and China, alternative ideologies developed within what had been a single cultural unit. In Israel discourse was somewhat more restricted to what was within the parameters of the revealed texts. Each of the intellectual milieux was more enquiring, more open, and presented a greater choice of mental approaches (for a time) than before. As cultures, they became more diverse.

The philosophical enterprise was, above all, an invitation for people to think for themselves. Philosophy put the onus on the individual to respond; we find this in Confucius and the Buddha (and quite possibly, later, in Jesus); if I give them one corner and they don't come back with three corners, then I don't go on: *Analects* 7:8. A major innovation in Confucius and Socrates was asking questions without giving answers. This strategy could seem a kind of mind-play with little or no immediate social utility, but we can see that it had considerable social utility in the long term: it generated modern philosophy, without which scientific enquiry could not have proceeded beyond a certain point. Philosophy now became a distinctive human enterprise. Moral and scientific enquiry went together because both were looking for general principles; nature works according to regular laws. Open debate and enquiry were surely as important as any other new development.

Aesthetics

In India *kama* (pleasure, especially sexual) was seen as a distinctive human pursuit. Moral and philosophical questions were explored in poetic literature (such as the *Mahabharata*). Among the Greeks, drama, poetry, and the plastic arts played an especially important part in the breakthrough. The pursuit of beauty was seen as allied to the pursuit of truth, both being a striving toward perfection. One finds this in Plato's *Republic*, the state as a work of art, indeed. The beautiful (*to kalon*) entered the moral and intellectual framework of Greek discourse as a category in its own right. Plato took this further than anyone else; Aristotle the Macedonian ignored it. For Plato the essential, "true" man is the truly beautiful man. The Athenians explored the meanings of life and the possibilities of humans through their liturgical dramas. Aeschylus's Prometheus looks down from his rock of agony to invoke "the sea-waves' innumerable smiles . . . and the all-seeing sun disc" (*Prometheus* ll. 89–91).

Socrates and Plato were the only axial philosophers who took sexual desire (*eros*) seriously, as did Greek culture generally. This focus started in the seventh century, when we see replicas of the human form (clearly inspired by Egypt) presented as not only meaningful but desirable—the inspiration of the Renaissance in Europe. For Socrates-Plato, the path to knowledge begins with the love (not necessarily consummated) of an individual human being (usually male; contrast Dante) who is both physically and mentally beautiful. Plato was a prose artist; his "dialogues" were intellectual

dramas, like novels, with an element of play. This tended to be lost on later "Platonists," including Christian and Islamic philosophical theologians. They were missing something important. Both Socrates and Confucius were original thinkers with a developed sense of humor.

Individualism and Universalism

Did these breakthroughs involve greater self-awareness, more focus on the motives and emotions of the individual? Personal forms of religion were already to be found in early Egypt by the late third millennium BCE and still more under the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BCE). The god "knows your innermost feelings"; he "comes at the voice of him who calls on him."²³ I see no reason not to think that individualism in the sense of self-awareness—a keen sense of individual destiny and its pathos—is a human trait present from the earliest times. What we do tend to find now is a greater sense of individual as opposed to group moral responsibility, and a demand or appeal that individuals give their personal and voluntary consent to religious truths, or make their own judgment concerning what is true. All this implied individual self-determination in the most important affairs of life. But was there a greater desire for privacy, more freedom of occupation, more freedom to choose whom you marry? Possibly, but here we must leave it to specialists to make a judgment.

A further innovation, in certain instances, was the idea that all humans are equally capable of thought and, therefore, had access to the new enlightenment. In Greece and China, people were beginning to discuss what was appropriate for human beings as such rather than for the members of one tribe, class, or nation. Philosophy focused upon human rather than tribal characteristics. In Israel and India, on the other hand, revelatory religions reinforced the exclusive epistemological communities of the Israelites and the Brahmins. That both Christianity and Islam were different in this respect is a further reason for not seeing these cultures as merely derivative from mid-first-millennium BCE Judaism.

Insofar as breakthroughs did give rise to individualism and universalism, they were a major transformation in world history, perhaps as important in their own way as the agricultural or industrial revolutions.

Political Thought

How did the breakthroughs affect political thought? The political order was of primary concern to all thinkers in China. The constitution of the polis

²³Cit. Pascal Vernus, "La Grande Mutation Ideologique du Nouvel Empire," *Bulletin de la Societe d'Egyptologie de Geneve* 19 (1995): 85.

became the subject of intense debate in Greece from the mid-sixth century onward. The Hebrew prophets were concerned with power relationships and above all with the destiny and governance of the people of Israel. The main thrust of intellectual development in India included defending and refining the status of the four *varnas* (castes);²⁴ there, too, thinkers were concerned with power relationships, especially social stratification. Two later breakthroughs—Islam and Marxism—placed an absolute value on ensuring that the right people—the newly knowledgeable ones—gained political control. These two were entangled in struggles for power from their beginnings, though Islam later evolved into personal piety, Marxism into social science (relatively harmless).

In all the breakthroughs, there was a new application of thought to the problems of society. They were all seeking alternatives, whether revolutionary or conservative, to the political mindset current in their societies. They were all concerned with modifying instinctive behavior, especially in matters of fighting and sex, and to present such modifications as necessary in the light of the way things really are. Both Homer and the *Mahabharata* indicated the consequences of unbridled, instinctive behavior in advanced societies. The breakthroughs put forward principles of loyalty and good behavior that were not based primarily on the family, clan, or tribe (though these, especially the first, might still be considered very important). By articulating ties and obligations beyond the familial and tribal, the new ideas worked better than traditional ideas for large societies.

In itself this focus was nothing new; sacred monarchy²⁵ had already secured the transition from tribalism to state. What was different was the ontological basis of the new ethics. Thus, in Indian thought, the nature of the cosmos is such that the supreme deity has established the four *varnas*. The Hebrew prophets based their appeals for justice on the word of Jahweh himself, in the ancient law and speaking through the prophets. China and Greece were more complex. For the Confucians, the hoped-for universal empire was indeed required by Heaven, in a manner broadly analogous to Indian and Israelite thought. But other thinkers put their faith in *realpolitik*, or in political “inaction” (*wu-wei*), which strangely enough could be combined. The most innovative Greek thinkers, on the other hand, thought that the polis was required not by deity but by human nature to meet the material and moral needs of humans. In Greece there was a uniquely wide variety of opinions about how states should be ruled, including rule by the people. Only in Greece were different forms of government discussed, and only in Greece

²⁴Brian K. Smith, *Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Indian Varna System and the Origins of Caste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

²⁵Bruce G. Trigger, *Understanding Early Civilizations: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Francis Oakley, *Kingship: The Politics of Enchantment* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

was there empirical research (under Aristotle) into how different kinds of constitution actually worked. Finally, only in Greece, though somewhat less explicitly also in China, was there discussion of states, social arrangements, and ethical principles in such a way that what was said might apply to human beings generically.

Two socio-political concerns recurred in several breakthroughs. Power should be based on merit, not birth; public office required virtue and intelligence. This idea was advocated most vocally in China and Greece, but also in Israel; in India it was moderated by the belief that status was the consequence of merit acquired in past lives. Second, the rich and the poor should respect one another, and the rich should be generous toward the poor. This idea was advocated most vocally in Israel and Greece, but also occasionally in China. Both these points had been stressed in Egypt much earlier.²⁶ In Israel and Greece, some advocated redistribution of wealth. Uniquely (once again) in Greece the relationship between rich and poor was politicized: the relative merits of oligarchy (rule by the rich), democracy (rule by the poor), and a mixture in which both classes shared power, were widely discussed. This analysis of power was initiated by Solon, to whom modern democracy owes more than to any other single figure.

Even when thinkers were engaged in projects that had no immediate bearing on politics, their appeals to reason and the individual conscience pointed toward a new kind of social contract based on the inner consent of individuals. The new ideas increased people's capacity for self-discipline. They enabled societies to adapt better to future shocks, because loyalty became focused not (or not only) on an individual ruler or dynasty, but on the political order or the state itself; and, beyond that, on the bedrock of social and political principles. Some of these advantages may be seen as latent functions of the breakthrough projects. What actually happened as a consequence was decidedly various.

Aftermaths of the Breakthroughs

In each of these ancient literate cultures, the breakthrough was followed by a dying-down and petrification of thought. This took place in China after the unification under the Ch'in and Han; in Greece, the eastern Mediterranean,

²⁶The first occurs in the oldest known treatise on political theory, the *Instruction to Merikare*, written between 2100 and 1800 BCE: Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings: The Old and Middle Kingdoms* vol.1 (1973), 106. There are many examples of the second, some anticipating Christian ideas: “I gave bread to the hungry and clothing to the naked . . . I gave sandals to the barefooted; I gave a wife to him who had no wife” (funeral inscription from the 2100s): cited in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Ian Shaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 129.

and western Eurasia, after the conquests of Alexander. This postaxial phenomenon was as worldwide as the axial phenomenon itself. The same aftermath occurred later in Christianity, Islam, and Marxism. Each of these underwent a routinization in thinking. This was perhaps partly because, after outbursts of moral and intellectual creativity, societies needed time to bed down and grow wise again according to their new cultural paradigms.

If the respective breakthroughs had in some ways transcended the religions of the old kind, they in turn created closed systems of a new kind: Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism (a ritual system). Adherence to certain forms of behavior and ritual was demanded more categorically and with more serious penalties for impropriety by those acting in the name of religions claiming to be based on revealed texts (the Indian and the Abrahamic). Both Judaism and Hinduism absolutized a particular culture. Jaspers failed to point this out. The Greek breakthrough was an exception; despite Plato's efforts, it never led to a new closed system (except when combined with Judaism in Christianity and Islam).

As a consequence of the breakthroughs, the new ideologies were more articulate, systematic, detailed (for example the Talmud and the Laws of Manu), and probably also more robust than the old ideologies. Opinion and ritual were more supervised, more controlled, although (and this was the strength of religious systems) not by a central authority, indeed (in the cases of the textually revealed religions) even more independently of the state than before.

The new ideas were at first taken up by groups of followers. The Buddha, Confucius, Socrates—and later Jesus—all had disciples, a new kind of relationship between moral-mental teacher and learner. (Eisenstadt stated that "axial" movements tended to produce "a new type of intellectual elite . . . potentially independent of other categories of elite and social groups.")²⁷ Plato and Aristotle, on the other hand, had what may be called "pupils"; that is to say, persons who, not at all unlike modern academics, were following a method rather than a doctrine. The Confucian "scholar" stood somewhere between these two categories; there were parallels between the "philosopher" in Greek and Roman society and the scholar in China, though the philosopher was more independent of the state system.

Some of the new belief systems were missionary, others were not. For some, notably Buddhism and later Christianity, the institution of propaganda was an integral part of the original enterprise. The new ideas were eventually adopted by whole societies. They then provided a set of shared, integrated, rationally defended values, internalized so that leading members of society could agree on how one should think and how one should live. Once again, in the case of the textually revealed ideologies, this led to a new intolerance of other views. Such intolerance was noticeably absent in China,

²⁷Eisenstadt, "The Axial Age," 294, 298.

the Hellenistic world, and the Roman Empire prior to the adoption of Christianity. In China, the followers of Confucius, the Buddha, and Laozi cohabited. On the other hand, the inheritors of ancient Greece and Israel failed to reach an accommodation in the Roman Empire. Yahwistic religious scruples prevented Christianity from endorsing sacred monarchy except on its own terms, by which time the old order was gone.

The breakthroughs in Greece and Israel had contrasting strengths and weaknesses. The Socratic breakthrough had the weakest institutional base of all. The Greek breakthrough became most detached from its ethnic base. It is perhaps the tenderest, most volatile of plants; its seeds are borne by the wind. Neither Platonism nor philosophy and science ever became a mass movement. On other hand, they have been taken up by people from many, now almost all cultures. From an organizational point of view, the convector of the Greek breakthrough is the modern academy.

There are other instances of breakthroughs being transmitted to other cultures, for example Buddhism to China, and those derived ultimately from Judaism—Christianity and Islam—to the pre-axial cultures of America and Africa. The Greek breakthrough has been incorporated into advanced cultures on at least three separate occasions: into Rome during the first century BCE, into Islam from the seventh to the twelfth centuries, and into medieval Europe, where it became thoroughly integrated and, one might say, has sometimes almost thrust its rival out of the nest. 'Renaissance' is the transfer of the achievement of one culture's breakthrough into a different culture.

The Breakthroughs and the State

These developments had repercussions on ethics, social order, and the state. The internalization and, in some cases, universalization of basic norms meant that the transtribal association was now legitimized at a deeper level of meaning for the individual than had been achieved under previous sacred monarchies. There were now strong communities based on intellectual assent to certain forms of behavior and/or propositions. In general, it seems that postbreakthrough societies had a greater capacity for social organization, harmony, and long-term stability.²⁸ The new ways of thought provided further sets of reasons for not depending on force alone (though force remained a necessary condition). These developments thus reshaped the way people in most regions and for centuries to come—in some cases down to the present time—thought about government and politics.

Some breakthroughs transformed sacred monarchy, notably in China and, eventually, in the Mediterranean and western Eurasia. But they nowhere

²⁸See Eisenstadt, "The Axial Age," 299ff.

replaced it. The breakthroughs in India and Israel had little discernible effect on government. Israel was searching for an explanation for the loss of its state, and for a new identity, which it achieved as a people that could function without sacred monarchy. Israel became a nation defined by religious adherence, and eventually Judaism became detached from political power. The Greek breakthrough ended with republics being replaced by monarchy, though not yet sacred monarchy. The only surviving republics were Carthage and Rome.

Postbreakthrough ideologies became interdependent with large states,²⁹ at first, somewhat transiently—in the Hellenistic world and in India under Ashoka—then in the stronger states of China and Rome. China developed as an imperial monarchy with sacred functions, its tradition and way of life imbued with Confucian ethics and rites. Stoic thought was not so firmly established in the Roman Empire but one might compare an ‘imperial’ Christianity with imperial Confucianism. The new ideologies had a softening, moralizing influence on strong monarchy and empire and provided an ethical rationale for them. One might say that both China and Rome were based on an implicit combination of a Machiavellian-Hobbesian rationale of superior force—this was powerfully expressed by the pre-Han realist thinkers—and a Ciceronian-Lockean rationale of rational consent by thoughtful citizens.

In this new era, the savage intertribal wars of early human history, the state-sponsored massacres of preimperial China, and the extreme violence of Roman policy as we find it (for example) in Tacitus, became things of the past. Conflict became institutionalized as war, with rules. The new systems functioned, on the whole, for a long time. By the twentieth century, however, perhaps partly due to technological advance and the social consequences of the industrial revolution, the systems of ethical refinement—whether we look at China, Russia, or Europe—seemed no longer to work. Enormities of hypocrisy alienated the sensitive spiritual descendants of Socrates, Confucius, and Jesus. The main problem was that breakthrough systems provided no safeguard against interstate violence. In 1914 they broke down, imploded. Violence reverted to a preaxial scale. Leninism, Stalinism, Nazism, and Maoism, all rejected ways of thinking and behaving that had drawn their rationale from the various breakthroughs we have been examining. One consequence of this was that large-scale massacres became, once again, legitimate. India was the only breakthrough civilization to emerge relatively unscathed, thanks partly to the reforming originality of Gandhi.³⁰

²⁹See Jaspers, “The Axial Period,” 5.

³⁰Anthony J. Parel, *Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Causes

Finally, why did these breakthroughs occur when they did and where they did? They only occurred in certain civilizations and not in others. Furthermore, they occurred only in relatively advanced societies, but they did not occur in all of these. Previously, these societies had developed various forms of sacred monarchy as the means of transcending tribal categories and making possible a more diffuse society. Sacred monarchy legitimated the structures needed to create military power and a more extensive market. What crisis or crises gave rise to the new developments?

A more expert comparative ancient historian than the present author is needed to give a proper answer. I will only suggest a few possible reasons. All the cultures in which breakthroughs occurred were at approximately the same level of material civilization; they were all commercial societies with a high sophistication of artisan techniques. It seems that literacy was a necessary but not a sufficient precondition for a breakthrough.³¹

This apart, each case needs to be looked at separately. China was suffering increasingly violent competition between states with enhanced military capacity (cf. Jaspers, 18). Israel had suffered the destruction of its state. Neither India nor Greece had comparable crises. However, common factors could include population growth due to improved productive techniques, and, consequently, an increasing volume of migration. These phenomena may have been accompanied by a progressive breakdown of the structure, moeurs, and ties of the family-clan. Such factors might explain why traditional ways of behaving failed to sustain an acceptable level of political order and social discipline. But were Egypt and Mesopotamia, which experienced no similar breakthrough, different in these respects? Or, had they already developed what for them were satisfactory worlds of meaning? The fact that breakthroughs occurred in four distinct regions at approximately the same time could have been because these cultures, though separate, had developed at more or less the same rate, and, consequently, faced the problems of moral disorientation due to the breakdown or inadequacy of tradition at more or less the same time.

I would like also to suggest a possible analogy with one possible explanation for the first emergence of human culture itself. It has recently been argued by some anthropologists that humans all along possessed the *capacity* for symbolic thought and symbolically organized behaviour, but that these were only developed and put to use under the pressure of certain circumstances, for example when population growth (once again) and consequent pressure on resources made it increasingly advantageous to be able to

³¹Confucius, the Buddha, Socrates, Zoroaster and (later) Jesus all relied on oral communication, but their ideas were disseminated in written form as well as by word of mouth.

distinguish instantly between insiders and outsiders, and between persons of different status. The anatomy of the human brain, it is suggested, had, as an accidental by-product, capacities which were only realized a good deal later, including speech and art.³²

Applying the same line of reasoning to the breakthroughs we have been examining, one might argue that humans have always possessed the capacity for complex rational and imaginative thought. In other words, they were only making fuller use of features of the human mind that have existed always and everywhere. In the 'axial' case too, certain circumstances, doubtlessly cultural as well as environmental, brought these faculties into play. But only certain human cultures developed this potential of the human mind; and they each developed it in a different way, indeed one may think that some developed it more than others (the Greek or the Indian, for example). This theory does not explain everything, but it does have the advantage of explaining why it is that the developments in question can be comprehended and adopted by people in different cultures, and can be transmitted relatively easily from one culture to another. Incidentally, anthropologists also suspect that, in the case of early humans, when population fell, "these advanced practices subsided." We have noticed a similar return to sleepy normality and routinization after the ideological breakthroughs.

It may be that symbolic thought, by creating certain *prima facie arbitrary* symbols and rules—including language itself—makes communication across cultural boundaries more difficult, and so has contributed to the segregation of humans into different linguistic and ethnic communities.

Whether this is true or not, the breakthroughs being considered here seem on the whole to have facilitated cross-cultural dialogue. First, they created larger cultural units. China became a single cultural unit. Secondly, as we have seen, there was cultural diffusion. Buddhism moved into China, Hinduism and Buddhism into south-east Asia. Greek culture spread all over the Mediterranean and the Middle East as far as central Asia. This is more comprehensible if we see the breakthrough as a realization of potentialities that all humans share. They actually seem to have made people more, not less, capable of learning from each other: Indians adopt Western philosophy and science; Westerners learn yoga and meditation.³³

"Primitive" societies, such as sub-Saharan Africa and pre-Columbian America, suffered severe drawbacks when they came into contact with the mentally more developed societies. They seem to have lacked, among other things, a sufficiently unifying set of beliefs and practices. Societies that

³²Ian Tattersall, "The rise of homo sapiens: how we came to be human," *Scientific American*, special edition ("Becoming Human: evolution and the rise of intelligence"), vol. 16/2 (2006), 66–73; Kate Wong, "The Morning of the modern mind," *ibid.*, 74–83.

³³Between China, India, and the West, "profound mutual comprehension was possible from the moment they met," as Jaspers put it ("The Axial Period," 8).

were advanced but had no breakthrough of the kind we have discussed—Egypt and Mesopotamia—found themselves engulfed by new, more “advanced” ways of thinking; they were successively Hellenized, Christianized, Islamicized.³⁴

Conclusion

While it is mistaken to claim for the axial period (or any other specific period) all that Jaspers and others have claimed, there was, nevertheless, significant mental (*geistlich*) development at that time. The coincidence in time was most striking between what took place in Greece and in China during the sixth to fourth centuries BCE. But, whereas Jaspers drew attention especially to transcendent religious factors, the developments in thought in each of these regions were not exclusively religious, indeed at times, they were decidedly secular. Israelite ideology, on the other hand, had been formulated much earlier, and I see no reason to consider the development by the prophets as any more fundamental than the severe transformations that occurred within the judaic tradition later; indeed, probably less so.

Jaspers's axial thesis was presented at the height of the Cold War. Was one of its attractions that it provided a nonmaterialist account of significant historical change? His article began with the extraordinary statement that “[i]n the Western world the philosophy of history was founded in the Christian faith” (Jaspers 1); this claim is more comprehensible if it was intended to counteract Marxism. Why ignore Thucydides and Polybius unless one is concerned only with philosophy of history as overarching interpretation?

Despite all this, his argument did have the merit of reinstating the importance both of mental phenomena and also of individuals in history. The more one compares the intellectual history of different parts of the world, the clearer it becomes that the contribution of the ancient Greeks was unique (as most people from the Renaissance down to the Victorians always said it was); and that without it the world would have been a different place. The more we look at intellectual development, the more difficult it is to think that the world would not have been profoundly different without Socrates or Confucius. If they had died in childhood, would someone else have influenced the world as they did? I doubt it.

³⁴On a loss of identity in Syria and Egypt in late antiquity, see Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: the Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 47–72.