



Should the Axial Age be Renamed?

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Abstract: The recent popularization of the term "axial age" has stimulated a debate about whether scholars should develop a more precise, way of describing the socio-spiritual parallelisms of the first millennium BCE. This essay evaluates Eugene Halton and John Torpey's recent contributions to this debate. Both authors agree on the basic problem with the term "axial age" – it falsely suggests that history displays one spiritual pivot—yet they reach quite different conclusions regarding terminological alternatives. Halton suggests abandoning the term "axial age" and speaking instead of a "moral revolution." Torpey recommends keeping it but simply applying it to several other periods of transformation. This essay ultimately rejects both suggestions and recommends instead that scholars continue using the term "axial age" in the same, heuristically vague way that they tend to employ other world-historical periodizing terms such as "antiquity," "medieval," or "modernity."

Keywords: Halton, Eugene; Jaspers, Karl; Torpey, John; Axial Age; social theory; philosophy of history; historiography.

The middle centuries of the first millennium BCE witnessed the emergence of the classical religious and philosophical lineages—Greek, Hebrew, Persian, Indic, and Chinese—that still orient the lives of most people today. Given the centrality of these developments to all subsequent history, Karl Jaspers described this period as *Achsenzeit* (axial age).¹ A wide range of distinguished intellectuals engaged and developed Jaspers' concept.² But it is only in recent years that the term "axial age" entered the general academic parlance.

The recent popularization of the term "axial age" has stimulated new lines of critical inquiry. A growing literature charts the pre- and post-Jaspersian development of the idea of an axial age. There is also a burgeoning, albeit still flawed, attempt to use algorithmic tools for testing the empirical validity of the axial age thesis. Given its numerous empirical and conceptual limitations, an expanding debate has also emerged as to whether the term "axial age" is even worth preserving. Two recent proponents of this position are Eugene Halton and John Torpey. Both authors agree that the axial age thesis falsely suggests that history exhibits one and only one spiritual pivot, yet they differ in their conclusions. Halton prefers to let go of the term "axial age" and, instead, to speak of a first millennium BCE moral revolution. Torpey alternatively keeps the concept of an axial age, yet applies it to several other periods of major socio-spiritual ferment.

¹ Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, München, DE: Fischer Bücherei, 1955. [Henceforth cited as *UZG*]

² For example, Eric Voegelin, Arnold J. Toynbee, Marshall G. S. Hodgson, Benjamin Schwartz, Shmuel Eisenstadt, Jürgen Habermas, John Hick, Robert Bellah, or Charles Taylor.

Eugene Halton's Argument

In a major contribution to scholarship on the history of the axial age debate, Halton highlights the largely overlooked line of axial thought that leads from nineteenth century Scottish folklorist, John Stuart-Glennie, through to the visionary American urban planner and social critic, Lewis Mumford.³ However, beyond merely clarifying the presence of this intellectual trajectory, Halton further suggests that scholars should abandon the term "axial age" altogether and adopt as an alternative Stuart-Glennie's phrase "moral revolution."⁴ Halton presents three arguments for his thesis.

The first argument relates to what Halton calls the "ethics of terminology." Specifically, he claims that since Stuart-Glennie developed a resonant concept of the axial age some seventy-five years before Jaspers, terminological ethics requires using Stuart-Glennie's term instead of the one introduced by Jaspers. Halton quotes Charles Peirce to support this view: "The author of a scientific conception has the first right to name it; and his name ought to be accepted, unless there are grave substantial objections to it" (AMR x).

I find this argument unconvincing. Stuart-Glennie was not the first to highlight the religious-philosophical parallelisms of the first millennium BCE, as it is shown by Jan Assmann who mentions several thinkers who preceded Stuart-Glennie on this front.⁵ So if one decides to apply Peirce's terminological ethics to the axial age debate, naming rights would have to go to someone else, most likely Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron, who is, according to Assmann, the first known figure to have written about the subject.

Furthermore, Peirce's terminological ethics does not apply to the kind of pre-paradigmatic social-scientific and humanistic inquiries that the axial age

debate represents. For example, let us consider the difference between the axial age debate and efforts by theoretical physicists to name a newly theorized sub-atomic particle. Physicists largely agree about the content of their background theoretical framework and of the characteristics of the newly identified sub-atomic particle. The only issue is how this sub-atomic particle should be named. In such cases, naming rights are given to the first or leading figure who theorized the particle, perhaps even by attribution of that person's name (for instance, the "Higgs-Boson particle"). In the axial age debate, however, terminological differences represent deeper disagreements about the content and significance of the period, as well as about the broader vision of history in which the period is placed. For example, when Eric Voegelin rejects the idea of an axial age and proposes instead the term "ecumenic age," the matter cannot be resolved by simply noting that Jaspers wrote first about the period. For, though, Voegelin acknowledges the same historical parallelisms as Jaspers, he rejects the proposal that they constitute facets of a common socio-spiritual breakthrough. The terminological divergence between Voegelin and Jaspers reflects a meaningful theoretical disagreement. The same can be said for Stuart-Glennie and Jaspers' respectively proposed terms. These debates cannot be resolved by referencing temporal priority. Indeed, Halton's own arguments about the earliest stages of religious history actually confirm the inapplicability of Peirce's ethics of terminology to the axial age debate. In addition to highlighting the existence and merits of Stuart-Glennie's concept of the moral revolution, Halton also claims that Stuart-Glennie's notion of panzooicism is superior to Edward Tylor's term "animism," developed in 1871, two years prior to Stuart-Glennie's contribution (AMR xi).

Halton's second argument concerns the possibility of using the term "moral revolution" instead of "axial age." His main claim on this front is that, whereas "axial age" falsely suggests that there is only one major pivot to history, the term "moral revolution" presents the socio-spiritual developments of the first millennium BCE as but one period of transformation among others.

I agree with Halton's critique of this aspect of the axial age thesis, which I henceforth describe as its prioritization problem. The term "axial age" suggests that history's one axis emerges in the Eurasian cultural developments of the first millennium BCE. Jaspers describes this situation as follows:

³ Eugene Halton, *From the Axial Age to the Moral Revolution: John Stuart-Glennie, Karl Jaspers, and a New Understanding of the Idea*, London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. [Henceforth cited as AMR]

⁴ Eugene Halton, "Sociology's Missed Opportunity: John Stuart-Glennie's Lost Theory of the Moral Revolution, Also Known as the Axial Age," *Journal of Classical Sociology* 17/3 (August 2017), 191-212.

⁵ Assmann lists Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron, Jean-Pierre Abel Rémusat, Georg F. W. Hegel, Eduard Maximilian Röth, Ernst von Lasaulx, and Victor von Strauß und Torney. See Jan Assmann, *Achsenzeit: Eine Archäologie Der Moderne*, Frankfurt, DE: C. H. Beck, 2018. [Henceforth cited as AAM]

It would seem that this axis of history is to be found in the period around 500 B.C., in the spiritual process that occurred between 800 and 200 B.C. It is there that we meet with the most deepcut dividing line in history. Man, as we know him today, came into being. For short we may style this the "Axial Period."⁶

One can expose the conceptual shortcoming in Jaspers' logic by simply noting how, in addition to the important religious and philosophical lineages that admittedly arose during the first millennium BCE, "man, as we know him today," also came into being through the contributions of the languages and patterns of small scale community that arose during the Paleolithic period, the plants and animals that Neolithic peoples domesticated, the cities and bureaucratic states that the early civilizations established, and the new patterns of technical inquiry that appeared during Modernity. Why, then, would we describe only one of these periods as axial?

With regards to Halton's specific argument, however, highlighting the prioritization problem does not provide sufficient warrant to adopt the term "moral revolution." One would have to additionally show that its specific balance of strengths and weaknesses outweigh those of the phrase "axial age." In what follows I show that Halton does not accomplish this task.

The term "moral revolution" suggests that morality lies at the core of the cultural developments of the first millennium BCE. Heiner Roetz and Hans Joas point out that the emergence of moral universalism was a key feature of this period.⁷ But moral universalism was not the only important development. There was also the appearance of notions of transcendence, of sustained practices of theoretic reflexivity, of the ideals of reason and individuality, of mature historical consciousness, of universal empires by aspiration, of marginal prophetic figures claiming royal authority, and of religious-philosophical communities built upon ideals of renunciation, to name but a few. It is difficult to argue that the overall concept of morality captures the core

of these complex developments. Yet it seems equally difficult to argue that any of the other specifying terms that authors put forth—transcendence, reflexivity, reason and individuality, history, universal-imperial, prophetic, or renunciation—are any more suitable.

Herein remains the value of the word "axial." It draws one's attention to a complex set of transformations without suggesting an essential core. Mumford makes this point well when he describes "axial" as "a deliberately ambivalent term."⁸ Thus, instead of limiting inquiry by proposing one theory of the period's core, the deliberate vagueness of the term "axial age" opens a horizon of comparative inquiry within which diverse insights can emerge. Indeed, I would go so far as to argue that if scholars had followed Stuart-Glennie in adopting the term "moral revolution," it would have been more difficult for the various perspectives that one finds today in the axial age debate to have emerged. For instead of freely advancing insights under the broad generic term of "axial age," scholars would have spent much more time disagreeing over terms.

Halton's third argument turns on how the term "moral revolution" encourages one to look to another period of cultural history for insight into the current crises of civilization than the first millennium BCE. Jaspers turned toward the axial age when trying to address the many challenges and opportunities of the present. In contrast, Halton claims that Stuart-Glennie more productively examined prehistory and the "true primitive intuition" (AMR 28) that is contained in the doctrine of panzooism.

I sympathize with Halton's suggestion that contemporary societies have much to learn from prehistoric peoples. However, I find it curious that in making this argument, he perpetuates a similar kind of one-sidedness that he finds so blameworthy in Jaspers. "Jaspers' claim that the axial age will remain central to a further transformation seems doubtful to me," Halton argues, "simply because it falsely overvalues one of a series of transformations as key to them all" (AMR 122). Yet shortly afterwards, Halton advances the thesis that renewing the panzooist idea that we ought to relate to "the earth not as something put here for humans to take, but as something marvelous out of which humans were bodied forth to serve," holds the key to the "sustainability revolution" that a globalizing

⁶ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, transl. Michael Bullock, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1953, p. 1. [Henceforth cited as *OGH*]

⁷ Heiner Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age: A Reconstruction under the Aspect of the Breakthrough toward Postconventional Thinking*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993, pp. 23-32. Hans Joas, *Die Macht Des Heiligen: Eine Alternative Zur Geschichte von Der Entzauberung*, Berlin, DE: Suhrkamp 2017, pp. 279-354.

⁸ Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine, Volume I: Technics and Human Development*, Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1966, p. 258.

humanity must achieve (AMR 126). This argument undermines Halton's suggestion that the main problem with the term "axial age" is that it prioritizes one period of humanity's spiritual development over others and clarifies instead that his real complaint is that it prioritizes the wrong one.

John Torpey's Argument

John Torpey addresses the prioritization problem differently than does Halton. Instead of presenting a new way of describing the religious and philosophical developments of the first millennium BCE, he recommends using phrase "axial age" to several other periods of profound social change.

Torpey begins his argument by noting that "the period in the middle centuries of the first millennium BCE when some of the world's major religions and intellectual developments emerged...[is] surely a matter that should command our attention and interest."⁹ He acknowledges that this observation initially attracted him to the idea of the axial age. Still, for all his appreciation of the idea, Torpey claims that it leads to a falsely idealistic vision of history. Certainly, it is reasonable to suggest that, as Jaspers puts it, the movements of the axial age collectively established "the fundamental categories within which we still think today," as well as the religious traditions "by which human beings still live" (OGH 2).¹⁰ However, conceptual categories and religious systems are not the only inheritances that shape contemporary life. As was mentioned before, humans also depend upon languages, small-scale social structures, domesticated plants and animals, cities and bureaucratic states, and innovative technical systems, all of which came from the past. Rather than speaking of one singular axial age, it would therefore seem more appropriate to speak of

multiple axial ages, each of which has been central to humanity's development in a somewhat different way.

In this regard, Torpey claims that, since the agrarian revolution, there have been "three periods that really mattered in human history" (TAA 2), which is to say that there have been three axial ages. According to him, the first was the classical axial period, in which the great religious and philosophical traditions arose. The second coincided with the industrial revolution at the turn from the nineteenth century that led to the emergence of modern technical civilization. And a third, which seems to be leading toward a kind of generalized artificial intelligence, is currently underway.

For Torpey, each of these axial ages has a characteristic preoccupation, a general attitude toward material goods, a dominant energy regime, and a characteristic mode of thought. The first axial age was preoccupied with moral and spiritual concerns, promoted ascetic or minimalist attitudes toward material goods, was dependent upon the energy produced by human and animal bodies, and gave rise to reflective thought, or what **Robert Bellah** calls "thinking about thinking."¹¹ The second axial age focused on improving control over the material world, promoted a consumerist embrace of material goods, depended upon the energy produced by burning fossil fuels, and generated technical thinking, which is thinking about production. And, based on what is already known about the third, ongoing axial age, one can say that it is generally preoccupied with technically modifying mental life, will eventually promote a "sustainable" attitude toward material goods, which he defines in terms of the attempt to get more from less, it will depend upon a renewable energy regime, and will give rise to artificial forms of thought, or as Torpey puts it, "thought that produces thought" (TAA 50).

Torpey admits that his argument suggests that there are at least two additional axial ages, namely, the agricultural revolution and the establishment of early civilization. Still, even after making this point, he subsequently ignores these prior developments. This is a shortcoming of his argument. However, following through on his suggestion suggests that a fleshed out version of Torpey's model would acknowledge at least six axial ages, which can be described tentatively

⁹ John Torpey, *The Three Axial Ages: Moral, Material, Mental*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 2017, p. vii. [Henceforth cited as TAA]

¹⁰ I follow Bullock's translation regarding these aspects of the referenced passage, though I find his decision to render "In diesem Chaos" into "In this age" to be somewhat curious. "In this chaos" is clearly a better translation. For reference, here is the complete German sentence: "In diesem Chaos wurden die Grundkategorien hervorgebracht, in denen wir bis heute denken, und es wurden die Ansätze der Weltreligionen geschaffen, aus denen die Menschen bis heute leben" (UZG 15).

¹¹ Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011. [Henceforth cited as RHE]

as (1) paleolithic, (2) neolithic, (3) archaic, (4) axial, (5) modern-technical, and (6) digital-artificial.

A first point I would raise in relation to this modified version of Torpey's model is that I fail to see how recent advancements in computing technology, the pervasiveness of the internet in everyday life, the movement toward renewable forms of energy, and trajectories of automation and artificial intelligence introduce a fundamentally new axis into human history that is equivalent in its impact to the onset of language, agriculture, urban, state based civilization, to reflective, morally universal, and culturally inclusive philosophies and religions, and to modern science and technology. The model rather seems like a further ramping up of the exponential rate of technical improvement that has, from the outset, been part of the modern technical revolution. A more adequate characterization, then, might describe these recent developments as a kind of secondary (or even tertiary) technical breakthrough.

But this is a side issue. The real dilemma consists in whether or not the term "axial age" should be applied to each of the mentioned periods of profound social transformation.

Broadly construed, the transformations that Torpey mentions are "axial" in the sense that they fundamentally altered human history. When viewed from this angle, it seems justified to describe each one as an axial age. But are these transformations axial in the same way as were the religious and philosophical developments of the first millennium BCE?

Jaspers originally deployed the term "axial age" to highlight not only the similarities between and general significance of the period's religious and philosophical developments, but also their temporal proximity. Indeed, it was largely the observation that Greek philosophy, Hebrew prophecy, Buddhism, and Chinese philosophy arose within several hundred years of distance from each other that initially drew Jaspers' attention. It may therefore be useful to examine the proposed list of axial ages to see whether they display a resonant degree of chronological proximity.

(1) We have little knowledge of when the first complex languages arose. But it seems safe to conclude that the process took place over many thousands of years (*RHE* xviii-xvix).

(2) Agricultural complexes independently arose in the Fertile Crescent around 9,500 BCE, in Northern China around 7,000 BCE, in New Guinea around 5,000 BCE, in Mesoamerica around 4,000 BCE, in the Andes around 3000 BCE, in the Eastern woodlands of North

America sometime between 3,000 and 2,000 BCE, and perhaps also in sub-Saharan West Africa around 2000 BCE.¹² This points to a temporal window of roughly seven thousand years.

(3) The early civilizations display a more **proscriptive** [**proscribed?**], though still significant, chronological window: Sumer c. 3,000 BCE; Egypt c. 3,000 BCE; Northwestern India c. 2,000 BCE; Minoan Crete c. 2,000 BCE; Northern China c. 1,500 BCE; Mesoamerica c. 100 AD; and Andean South America c. 700 AD. This is a period of roughly three thousand five hundred years.¹³

(4) The chronological range narrows with the movements of the axial age. In this regard, one notes that Socrates was born around 470 BCE, Ezekiel, around 620 BCE, Buddha, either 563 or 480 BCE, and Confucius, in 551 BCE. This encompasses roughly a range of one hundred and fifty years. Yet, the situation becomes more complex if second millennium BCE figures are included, such as Akhenaten, Moses, and possibly Zoroaster, each of whom undoubtedly launched novel religious-philosophical movements that displayed many of the same features as the other major axial movements, such as monotheism, moral universalism, and notions of salvation and transcendence. One could also argue that Jesus, Mani, and Muhammad need to be added to the list of axial figures, thereby expanding the range of the axial period by another thousand years. Thus, depending upon which figures one decides to include within the classical axial period, the timeline ranges from one hundred and fifty years to more than two thousand years. Voegelin puts the point well when he notes that "if spiritual outbursts [are] to be recognized as the constituents of meaning in history," then it is difficult to avoid expanding the axial age "into an open field of spiritual eruptions extending over millennia."¹⁴

(5) One can plausibly describe the modern technical revolution as beginning in the early sixteenth

¹² Peter Bellwood, *First Farmers: The Origins of Agricultural Societies*, Malden, MA: Blackwell 2005, pp. 44, 114, 142, 150-1.

¹³ Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power: Volume 1, A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2012, pp. 105-24.

¹⁴ Eric Voegelin, *Order and History: Volume IV, The Ecumenic Age*, ed. Michael Franz, Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press 2000, p. 49. [Henceforth cited as *OH*]

century with Nicholaus Copernicus and ending with the Industrial Revolution, which took place in Britain from around 1760-1840. This gives a timeframe of around three hundred years. However, one could also include the manufacturing and digital revolutions that respectively arose around the turns of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, thereby adding another two centuries.

Based on this rough sketch, it seems problematic to identify a specific chronological span within which the concept of an axial age is applicable and outside of which it cannot be employed. For if the classical axial period can be plausibly extended to include Akhenaten and Muhammad then it would be difficult to argue that the agricultural revolution and the establishment of early civilization occurred over a period too long to be considered axial developments. Additionally, if one makes historical proximity a core component of axiality, then it seems that the modern technical revolutions are the most axial of all.

These considerations introduce two positive points in favor of Torpey's argument.

A different perspective emerges, however, when we address the question from a more pragmatic vantage point. There are, indeed, largely adequate ways of referencing the other axial periods that Torpey's model presents. Most scholars roughly know what they mean when they speak about the paleolithic, neolithic, early-archaic, and modern periods even if they disagree with this or that characterization thereof. Yet "axial" is the most common term for the kind of societies that arose in Eurasia during the first millennium BCE. One implication of Torpey's argument, then, is that a suitable replacement term for the classical axial age would need to be found. It makes little sense to simultaneously describe every major period of transformation as an axial age and the particular axial age that took place during the first millennium BCE as the axial instance of an axial age.

This brings us back to Halton's suggestion to describe the religious and philosophical developments of the first millennial BCE as a moral revolution. Yet I identified certain problems with this approach. In a similar vein, Bellah proposes "theoretic **culture**" as a possible replacement term (*RHE* xix). But this term fails to capture the central role that religious-metaphysical thinking played in the period; it also struggles to distinguish first millennial developments from the theoretical processes that were well underway in several archaic civilizations.

Voegelin's notion of an ecumenic age is another option. The concept highlights the cosmopolitan context in which the period's parallel development of religious and philosophical reflection arose without positing any underlying spiritual unity or structure (*OH* 167-8). However, I find this way of using "ecumenic" less intuitively clarifying than "axial." For one cannot describe Judaism as an ecumenical religion or Confucianism as an ecumenical philosophy without significant further explanation, while the term "axial" suggests a resonant historical centrality that can be readily discerned from context.

What, then, about Jürgen Habermas' description of the axial age as the period during which "religious-metaphysical" worldviews arose?¹⁵ Positively, the term "religious-metaphysical" highlights the epoch's main movements without over-specifying their content. Hyphenating "religious" and "metaphysical" also captures these movements' tendency to defy contemporary distinctions between religion and philosophy. Yet, the term fails to distinguish the religious-metaphysical movements of the axial age from those that came before. It would be hard to argue that the vast mythical frameworks and schema of divine pantheons that one encounters in the great archaic civilizations were neither religious nor metaphysical in some meaningful sense of the terms.

The problems with all of these proposed alternatives loom larger still when the difficulty of altering periodizing terms that have already taken root in academic parlance is taken into consideration. We see the same challenge in scholars' ongoing failure to replace evidently problematic terms such as "antiquity," "middle ages," and "modernity." The failure can be partially attributed to the fact that these terms successfully orient one to the right set of historical phenomena. But their persistence also stems from the reality that proposed alternatives are almost always either equally flawed or less heuristically useful due to their increased specificity. This makes it difficult for scholars across disciplines to collectively agree upon new periodizing terms. Admittedly, the term "axial age" is not yet as widely accepted as "antiquity," "middle ages," and "modernity." But it does appear to have gained the kind of traction that will make it quite challenging to replace.

¹⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Volume One, Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, transl. Thomas McCarthy, Boston, MA: Beacon Press 1984, 202-12.

Conclusion

The above considerations lead me to conclude that we should not rename the axial age, at least not with any of the current options. Nonetheless, this still leaves open the question of how to use the term.

I suggest that scholars employ "axial age" as a vague, shorthand way of referencing the multi-faceted and complex set of resonant cultural transformations that advanced with particular clarity throughout Eurasia during the first millennium BCE. Such transformations include the appearance of moral universalism, marginal prophetic figures, ideas of transcendence, mature historical consciousness, ascetic orders, conceptually oriented religious and philosophical traditions, doctrines of salvation, a novel emphasis on the powers of human personality and theoretical reflexivity, and the use of religious-metaphysical frameworks to maintain social solidarity within vast, ecumenical empires that are not restricted by territorial political boundaries. However, whenever we examine one of these specific lines of transformation, we should expect a somewhat different comparative landscape to emerge. Thus, for example, if one charts the emergence of notions of transcendence, Akhenaten and the later developments of Christianity and Islam must be included in the analysis. One would also have to consider whether the Chinese example either constitutes an outlier or somehow fits into a broader pattern. But if one alternatively focuses on the appearance of ascetic orders, then the late Egyptian occurrences becomes irrelevant and the Chinese tradition returns to center stage. Seen in this light, the term "axial age" would find its greatest use as a framing tool, which would then have to be complemented by various terms that are more suited to specialized inquiry.

Scholars already use the term "modernity" in this way. They casually speak about the period without presupposing some unified theoretical account of what modernization entails. They then interrogate specific aspects of modernity by adopting diverse vantage points, each of which reveals a different comparative-historical terrain. Examining modernity from the angle of nation-state formation directs focus toward the Franco-Germanic tensions that culminated in the Treaties of Westphalia. Focusing on industrializing processes alternatively draws attention to the unique set of scientific, technological, economic, and political forces that crystallized in and spread from England approximately between 1760 and 1840. The same holds for efforts to understand modernity in terms

of the creation of an interconnected global economy: it requires investigation of the forces that led fifteen century Southern Europeans to use their burgeoning maritime powers to interject themselves into the wider Afro-Eurasian system of trade, and thus to haphazardly connect with the New World. Each lens is legitimate and yields valuable insight. But one still ends up using the term "modernity" to vaguely describe the broad historical epoch within which they all fit. This is how I think we should henceforth use the term "axial age."

I conclude by addressing the question of whether my proposal is more nominalist or realist in spirit. I find it useful to refer here to the concept of coherence that Brook Ziporyn locates at the core of ancient Chinese thought. Briefly, Ziporyn suggests that the Chinese concept of coherence constitutes a third way to Western doctrines of nominalism and realism. Realists claim that universal patterns exist. In contrast, Nominalists argue that humans project universal patterns onto the world. Chinese coherentists alternatively contend that reality crystallizes in patterned ways when approached according to specific purposes. The patterns are not entirely objective, as they depend upon human purposes. But they are also not entirely subjective; as they represent the way the world actually coheres when engaged in certain ways.¹⁶

I interpret the term "axial age" through a broadly coherentist lens. This means that I see the axial age as neither a universal truth nor a false projection, but rather as a coherent historical pattern that emerges when we comparatively investigate the resonant contexts and contents of the classical religious and philosophical lineages. From this angle, the middle centuries of the first millennium BCE do constitute a cultural axis or central turning point. But if we examine history from a different vantage point, for example, in terms of the advancement of agricultural technology, then the middle of the first millennium BCE no longer serves as the axis point. Additionally, whenever one examines history in terms of one of the various cultural transformations that are associated with the axial age, such as the emergence of moral universalism, different chronological and comparative landscapes will appear, none of which can be said to constitute the axial age. This proposal admittedly lacks the boldness of Halton and Torpey's positive suggestions about renaming the axial age. But I find it a much more clarifying and useful one.

¹⁶ Brook Ziporyn, *Ironies of Oneness and Difference: Coherence in Early Chinese Thought; Prologomena to the Study of Li*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press 2013, pp. 2-17.