



Cultural and Anthropological Patterns in the Axial Age

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Abstract: In *The Origin and Goal of History* Karl Jaspers describes the rise of civilizations by using the phrase "Axial Age" to refer to a phenomenon that is not reducible to direct causal relations between different cultures. This essay addresses the question of how the new level of self-consciousness of mankind that has been achieved during the Axial Age can best be explained. Three possible explanations are being discussed, which comprise firstly, seeing the parallel cultural developments of the axial age as a pure temporal coincidence; secondly, identifying the simultaneity of the axial civilizations as a sign of destiny or as the work of God; and thirdly, identifying concrete cultural and anthropological patterns that have shaped the axial cultures. While the third explanation does not exactly correspond with Jaspers' original philosophical intentions, it is arguably the most defensible one.

Keywords: Jaspers, Karl; Axial Age; civilizations; cultural anthropology; cultures; humankind; philosophy of history; cultural origin.

Jaspers' Original Introduction of the Axial Age Hypothesis and its Reception

Karl Jaspers' Axial Age hypothesis regarding the simultaneous origin of significant worldviews in China, India, and the Occident between 800 and 200 BCE has brought considerable and lasting attention to this concept.¹ Based on earlier considerations from Ernst von Lasaulx, John Stuart-Glennie, Alfred Weber, and others,² it was moved to center stage in Jaspers' book *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*

(1949).³ Here, the Axial Age thesis appears right at the beginning of a longer development of ideas concerning a comprehensive but nevertheless open philosophy of history that addresses the infinite, indeterminate horizon of human possibilities in the future. Human beings do not actually know what an origin and goal of history possibly might be; but for the need of orientation in the wide and confusing field of historical events, the necessity of detecting crucial periods in history arises, in which humankind had changed in significant aspects.

Jaspers presents the OGH in three sections, *World History, Present and Future*, and *The Meaning of History* in order to stage the Axial Age hypothesis and explains it primarily in the first part as an empirical

¹ A version of this essay was presented at the Eighth International Jaspers Conference, Beijing, August 2018.

² 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.

³ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, transl. Michael Bullock, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953. [Henceforth cited as OGH]

matter of fact. If one considers the treatise as a whole, it becomes apparent that Jaspers did not have the intention to present an isolated hypothesis about some cultural developments in the historical past, but rather that he was interested in elucidating the tendencies and structures of his own time and of the future history of humankind. For Jaspers, the main challenges of the present time and of future times are found in science and technology and the unknown destiny that their application will bring to humanity. It is with this contemporary view in mind that Jaspers looks back into the depths of human history in order to discover cultural structures in the first millennium BCE that might help to bring about an understanding of current and future conditions of mankind. Nonetheless, the initial reception of *OGH* shows that his perspective has been taken into account neither in philosophy nor in historical studies.

Against this background and starting approximately from the late 1970s, the Axial Age hypothesis has become an important source of inspiration for ambitious research programs in historical social sciences, cultural anthropology, and comparative civilization studies.⁴ The aim of these programs is mainly to explore empirical evidence for or against the Axial Age hypothesis, as well as its cultural and sociopolitical conditions and consequences by drawing on interdisciplinary research related to sociology of religion, classical philology, sinology, or indology, to name just a few. In addition, scientific studies related to the feasibility of an Axial Age complement the turn to global history and cross-cultural inquiries in contemporary historiography, and similarly the Axial Age hypothesis is also fruitful for the sociological investigation of what Shmuel Eisenstadt refers to as multiple modernities in the age of globalization.⁵

How Many Axial Ages are There?

Yet, on the other hand, one should not ignore the initial status and the context of the Axial Age hypothesis within Jaspers' philosophy of history. Jaspers is fully aware of the fact that the Axial Age was not the only historical watershed of mankind but that it is rather, as

depicted in Hans Schelkshorn, one of four significant points of departure.⁶ In Jaspers' scheme of world history, the first departure goes from prehistory or "the Promethean era" as Jaspers calls it, the second one starts from the foundation of the ancient civilizations in Babylonia, Egypt, India, and China, the third one is represented by the Axial Age, and the fourth one is the scientific and technological age of modernity. However, the Axial Age bears his name because it is, in Jaspers' view, the one and unique central axis of human history that gives history a comprehensible structure: "The Axial Period assimilates everything that remains. From it world history receives the only structure and unity that has endured—at least until our own time" (*OGH* 8). Unlike the other three stages in Jaspers' scheme of world history, the Axial Age did not produce a material progress in human history that could be proved empirically. It rather brought with it an intellectual and spiritual breakthrough through which humanity in its entirety changed its shape. The Axial Age assimilated the ancient civilizations that had emerged in an earlier stage of history and continues to exercise a deep influence on world cultures and civilizations still today. That is why, for Jaspers, there has been only one Axial Age in human history until now. But seen from an even higher scale, all human history from prehistory over the Axial Age to current times has been a mere preparation for the genuine world history which has only just begun, or, as Jaspers states: "We are just setting out" (*OGH* 24).

While in Jaspers' philosophy of history five thousand years of exploration of history shrink down to one first breath of humanity, a second breath has already started with the scientific and technological revolution since the middle of the eighteenth century. And the universal communication of humanity that was made possible by the technological revolution might eventually lead in the far future, as Jaspers cautiously suggests, to a second Axial Age. Jaspers describes this as "a new, second Axial Period...which is still remote and invisible to us" (*OGH* 25) and in which humanity could finally evolve.

The presence of two Axial Ages in Jaspers' philosophy of history has already been noted by Thomas McPartland, one of them situated in the

⁴ See for example the collection of articles, "Wisdom, Revelation, and Doubt: Perspectives on the First Millennium B.C.," *Daedalus* 104/2 (Spring 1975).

⁵ Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities*, 2 Vols., Leiden, NL: Brill, 2003.

⁶ Hans Schelkshorn, "Die Moderne als zweite Achsenzeit. Zu einer globalen Geschichtsphilosophie mit und gegen Jaspers," *Polylog* 38 (Winter 2017), 81-102.

past and knowable as an empirical matter of fact, the other one situated in the future and thus being merely a vague possibility.⁷ The sociologist John Torpey suggests that there have already been three Axial Ages in history: the first one being the Axial Age that Jaspers named thus and that Torpey calls the moral revolution, the second one being the technological and scientific revolution that took place around the 1750s, and lastly, the third one being the mental revolution "that is taking place today on the basis of rapid improvements in information and communications technologies (ICT), artificial intelligence, robotics, and the like."⁸ If one compares these three Axial Ages with Jaspers' scheme of world history, one can doubtlessly find some similarities between the two conceptions. Apart from the fact that the first two stages of world history in Jaspers, the periods of prehistory and of the ancient civilizations, do not figure in Torpey's conception, Jaspers clearly emphasizes too the role of the industrial, scientific, and technological revolution which started around 1750. Jaspers did not anticipate the rapid developments in today's communication technologies, instead he probably would have thought of them as being logical consequences of the modern age, something like a second Promethean era. Hence, what Torpey calls the material and the mental Axial Age is only one of several historical periods in Jaspers' scheme of world-history. Furthermore, there is a good reason for Jaspers' assumption that there has been only one axial age in the past, namely the astounding parallelism of several foundational beginnings in different regions of the world during a relatively short period of time. And this makes these centuries so unique in world history. Whereas the modern revolution of science and technology tends to unify the world in the name of naturalism and progress, 2500 years ago the Axial Age has given birth to diverse cultural worldviews. And it was from these different perspectives that sophisticated civilizations and religions had emerged as if they were manifesting fundamentally different ways to organize human life.

Productive and Problematic Aspects of Jaspers' Thesis

Jaspers' thesis certainly permits to understand culturally different forms of modernization in the age of globalization, the so-called "multiple modernities" that obliterate the one-sided Eurocentric perspective on the history of philosophy and on the history of ideas. Furthermore, it proposes a classification matrix for world history that is pluralistic and multidimensional. So there are definitely good reasons for defending the original version of Jaspers' Axial Age hypothesis against recent attempts to multiply the number of Axial Ages in history or to replace the concept by a generalized axiality that is based on unhistorical cultural and anthropological patterns. If I speak of such patterns in the following, they are always being related to the time period between 800 and 200 BCE, that is, to the original Axial Age as Jaspers describes it in *OGH*.

Apart from the positive aspects of Jaspers' Axial Age hypothesis there are also some difficulties, inaccuracies, and even incoherencies to it. For example, Jaspers insists repeatedly on the fact that in the Axial Age there were three origins, namely the one in India, the one in China, and the one in the Occident. The reader even gets at times the impression as if there were some sort of holy character to these three, a cultural trinity capable of replacing the notion of trinity in Christianity. And indeed, the main intention of Jaspers' conception of world history was the demise of the Christian perspective on history where God's incarnation in Jesus Christ represents the event at the core, the pivot of world history (*die Angel der Weltgeschichte*), as G. W. F. Hegel calls it in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, a formulation that Jaspers erroneously quoted as the axis (*die Achse*) of world history. However, one could ask if the cultural trinity of the Axial Age – India, China, and the Occident – is indeed more plausible than the Christian trinity. The observation may seem quite trivial, but when counting in Buddhism in India, Confucianism and Daoism in China, the first Greek philosophers, the Jewish prophets, and Zoroaster in Persia, one obviously does not get a total of three, but rather five important developments in the Axial Age. So why does Jaspers always mention three rather than five origins? In his scheme of world history, he simply puts the last three developments (Greek philosophers, Hebrew prophets, and Persian Zoroaster) into one cultural sphere that

⁷ Thomas J. McPartland, "Philosophy of History and A Second Axial Age: Bernard Lonergan and the Differentiation of Interiority," *Thesis Eleven* 116 (June 2013), 53-76.

⁸ John Torpey, *The Three Axial Ages: Moral, Material, Mental*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 2017, p. 2.

he names Orient-Occident: "From the midst of the ancient civilizations...during the Axial Period from 800 to 200 B.C., the spiritual foundation of mankind arose in three mutually independent places, in the West—polarized in Orient and Occident—in India, and in China" (*OGH* 23).

It is difficult to follow the positing of an Occident (*Abendland*) that is itself polarized into Orient and Occident. One would have to identify cultural or anthropological patterns common to Greek philosophy, Hebrew prophecy, and Persian Zoroastrianism that would justify presenting them as representing one cultural origin. And even if one were to presuppose such similarity (although it is more likely to dismiss such positing on grounds of a lack of empirical evidence), it would beg the question to assume these kinds of similarities by combining Indian and Chinese cultural developments to only one origin, say the East-Asian cultural origin of the Axial Age. Counting subsequently any of these combinations, one either arrives at two or at five axial origins, rather than three of them. Jaspers' insistence on three original sites is perhaps the result of an attachment to the number three given its relevance in Christianity or in Hegelian philosophy of history.

Another problem of Jaspers' insistence on three original sites of the Axial Age is the exclusion of large parts of humanity, especially of people inhabiting Africa. Comparable to Hegel also Jaspers views these cultures as remaining at the level of primal people (*Naturvölker*) until the onset of the modern era. Hence, the Axial Age hypothesis doubtlessly promotes advancing toward a less Eurocentric historiography, yet Jaspers' perspective is nevertheless far from being sufficiently inclusive. Closely connected to this point is a contradiction in Jaspers' estimation with respect to the extent of the mental revolution that the Axial Age brought about: On the one hand, the Axial Age was meant to represent a spiritual leap for humanity as a whole so that human history could never be the same again as it had been prior to the Axial revolution. On the other hand, this same revolution was carried out by a very small number of people, and even if one takes into consideration the multiple institutionalizations of Axial Age ideologies in the ensuing times, it still concerned only a small part of humanity. Jaspers claims both the universal and the restricted extent of the axial revolution to be true, but this indeed cannot possibly be the case.

Three Possible Explanations as to How the Axial Age Came About

One of the most debated topics concerning the Axial Age hypothesis is the question of how the simultaneity between the multiple cultural origins may be interpreted. If one does not have empirical evidence at disposal regarding direct influences and transitions from one culture to another, how can one make sense of the synchronicity of those parallel intellectual and mental developments? I think that there are three possible interpretative approaches.

The first interpretation consists in arguing that the rise of Buddhism in India, Confucianism and Daoism in China, Greek philosophy, Hebrew prophecy, and Persian Zoroastrianism in the relatively short time period of a few centuries is nothing but a mere coincidence. If those spiritual developments are neither tied together by any causal relations nor by a common law, their connection might appear to be as insubstantial as, for example, the alleged connection between a number of high profile rock stars who all had died at the age of twenty-seven, thereby prompting the assertion of the 27 Club. Does the Axial Age represent anything more than just an ancient version of this 27 Club? A renowned researcher who would certainly dismiss this position is the Egyptologist Jan Assmann who argues that there were several other cultural developments in history that would merit a characterization as being axial. His main objection against the Axial Age hypothesis is that the shared traits between the five cultural developments are being rather few.⁹ The only trait that Greek philosophy, Jewish theology, Buddhism, and Confucianism really have in common is that they arose roughly at the same time, in the sixth century BCE. But this exclusively temporal coincidence does not provide any gain in knowledge. For this reason, Assmann criticizes the underlying essentialization of time and the chronocentrism in the conception of the Axial Age. And he further argues that the idea of a spiritual breakthrough which goes hand in hand with this conception and which today is still defended by, for example, Jürgen Habermas,¹⁰ has its roots in the

⁹ Jan Assmann, "Die Achsenzeit – Zur Geschichte einer Idee," *Polylog* 38 (Winter 2017), 23-39.

¹⁰ Sections II and III of Habermas' recently published history of philosophy refer explicitly to Jaspers' Axial Age hypothesis. See Jürgen Habermas, *Auch*

Christian theological conception of history and makes no sense outside this conception.

In the first chapter of *OGH*, Jaspers has already anticipated most of these objections and attempted to rebut them. Jaspers would probably argue against Assmann's main objection that the transformations during the Axial Age could not be reduced to any set of common cultural or anthropological patterns. Instead, what can be beheld in the Axial Age are distinct origins of mankind that emerged at the same historical moment as if they were to show simultaneously what is the human potential. For Jaspers, this moment in history could not be substituted, since what is decisive for a correct comprehension of the Axial Age is not the self-understanding of the Axial cultures by themselves in their time, but a retrospective conceptualization as seen from the vantage point of the technological age. Only in present times has it become possible to regard the origins of the Axial Age as a cultural treasure that belongs to humankind as a whole and which in its multiple originality prevents cultures from making dangerous claims fostering exclusivity and totalitarianism.

This Jaspersian idea provides me with a bridge to the second possible interpretation of the Axial Age's synchronicity that is rather metaphysical. Far from seeing the parallelism of the five axial origins as resulting from pure chance, one could regard their simultaneity as a sign of destiny or as the work of God himself. Jaspers explicitly denies that he sought to arrive at this conclusion (*OGH* 8). But the reasons he gives for this denial—firstly, assuming God's intervention would be unscientific, and, secondly, at the same time disrespectful toward God—do not preclude the possibility of a divine origin of the Axial simultaneity. This metaphysical possibility is maintained in *OGH* not only by the use of a quite mystifying language, through Jaspers' repeated mentions of a "growing secret" of the Axial Age that becomes more and more mysterious when one attempts to understand it. Jaspers also leaves the door wide open to a theological interpretation by way of stating that the plurality of Axial origins could be read as a warning from God himself against any claim of exclusivism: "It is as though the deity were issuing a warning, through the language of universal history, against the claim to exclusiveness in the possession of

truth" (*OGH* 20). Admittedly, this thought is formulated in the form of an analogy—"It is as though"—but the implied thesis resembles very much the theory of religious pluralism that was put forward, for example, by the British theologian John Hick.¹¹ According to Hick, the divine reality has revealed itself in several cultural forms that represent different, but equivalent interpretations of the one unattainable Real. Jaspers seems to support a similar point of view when he insists on the plurigenetic sense of the axial starting point. Consequently, his position faces the same problems as religious pluralism does: firstly, above all, the pluralistic view cannot be seriously accepted by religious believers if they do not want to relativize or completely give up their religious affiliation; and secondly, the divine Real or the common invisible ground of humanity in the Axial Age is such an abstract and vague concept that it is by definition hard, if not completely impossible, to provide any reasonable account of it. And if one tries to describe in more detail the divine reality behind the different worldviews, one risks inadvertently falling back into the conceptual scheme of specific cultures, as, for instance, those who uphold monotheism.

The third and final possible interpretation of the Axial simultaneity follows the more empirical research activities that had been fostered by Shmuel Eisenstadt and his school.¹² This approach makes it possible to identify specific cultural patterns that shaped the Axial civilizations in the first millennium BCE and might explain to a certain degree why original and new worldviews, former unknown conceptions of human self-understanding were generated in those civilizations and were transmitted over a long period of time. Such cultural-anthropological patterns are, for example, the self-delimitation of mankind from other living beings (especially from animals), the division of being into two ontologically separated spheres (the transcendental and the mundane), the claim of universal normativity of moral laws, the relating of political power to these laws and to the transcendental order, new possibilities of envisioning a different world and thereby being able

¹¹ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion. Human Responses to The Transcendent*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004.

¹² Johann P. Arnason, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, and Björn Wittrock, (2005). "General Introduction," in *Axial Civilizations and World History*, eds. Johann P. Arnason, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, and Björn Wittrock, Leiden: Brill, pp. 1-12.

eine Geschichte der Philosophie, Band 1, Die okzidentale Konstellation von Glauben und Wissen, Berlin, DE: Suhrkamp, 2019.

to criticize a given order according to the benchmark of the imagined other world, the use of scripture to compile sacred books that increase the potential for enduring communication channels, the constitution of new elites and collectives as social harbingers of the new spiritual and intellectual order.

Jaspers' Reluctance in The Face of Sociological Explanations and The Ongoing Relevance of Axial Patterns

To distinguish which cultural patterns are fundamental and originating and which ones are merely secondary effects, epiphenomena brought about by other patterns, is a difficult task. Possibly only the cumulative interaction of all the different cultural patterns might explain the spiritual and intellectual revolution of the Axial Age. Jaspers was quite reluctant in accepting sociological interpretations of the Axial revolutions. In the section "Examination of the Axial Period Thesis," Jaspers takes up a thesis from Alfred Weber which states that the invasion of Central Asian equestrian peoples could have been responsible for the breakthrough in several advanced civilizations (*OGH* 16). However, Jaspers is not satisfied with this explanation, this is especially so as it does not apply to ancient Israel. Later in his text, he lists some political and sociological facts that could help to understand the axial breakthrough, such as the existence of small states and cities or political crises in combination with simultaneous relative prosperity. It seems, however, that no sociological explanation at all could ever make the axial breakthrough completely comprehensible. One gets the impression that Jaspers wanted to keep the secret of the Axial Age at any price,

when he exclaims: "No one can adequately comprehend what occurred here and became the axis of world history!" [*OGH* 18]

In Jaspers' view, biology can contribute even less than sociology to the explanation of the history of humankind. He claims that scholars cannot obtain any certain knowledge about the development of the human species in prehistory (*OGH* 49). Of course, Jaspers cannot be accused of not having been able to foresee the further development of paleoanthropology. But if one wants to gain today well-founded insights into the nature of human development, this is probably only possible by a combination of findings from paleoanthropology, evolutionary psychology, and comparative cultural sociology, which, in turn, need to be referred back to a philosophically inspired conceptual framework such as the one contemplated by Jaspers.

In the contemporary age of universally possible communication, the cultural self-distinction of mankind that began during the Axial Age reveals itself to be of a highly ambiguous nature. It needs to be scrutinized whether the cultural-anthropological patterns of the Axial Age are still helpful and powerful in the age of globalization and digitization, and if they are, what this enduring powerfulness means faced with the possible auto-destruction of mankind of which Jaspers during his time was already well aware of. Or is modern technology so challenging that the resources of the Axial Age are no longer enough as digitization and climate change will alter human history in a way that it will shift fundamental cultural and anthropological patterns? I must leave this question as open as Jaspers' philosophy of history is arguably open, too.