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*What is Axial about the Axial Age? **

THE AXIAL AGE, the middle of the first millennium B.C., saw dramatic cultural changes in several societies across the Old World. Before considering these changes we must look briefly at the kinds of societies that preceded the axial age, that is, tribal and archaic societies as I have used those terms, and the kind of religion that characterized them (1). Ritual in tribal societies involves the participation of all or most of the members of the group – in classic Durkheimian fashion, if the ritual goes well, it leaves the group filled with energy and solidarity. Some are more active than others, but many are involved, and even when, as in the case of the Navajo, the ritual centers around someone who is being cured, the whole network of people with whom that person is involved participates in and benefits from the ritual.

In stark contrast, ritual in archaic societies focuses above all on one person, the divine or quasi-divine king, and only a few people, priests or members of the royal lineage, participate. The rest of society acts sometimes as audience, but sometimes knows only of the great rituals by hearsay, since their presence would profane the high mysteries. Whereas tribal societies consist of small face-to-face groups, or of a few adjacent ones, archaic societies were territorially extensive and could include millions of people. It would seem that maintaining the coherence of such large and extensive societies required that the attention and energy that tribal ritual focused on the whole society now be concentrated on the ruler, elevated beyond normal human status, in relation to beings who were now not only powerful, but required worship. The elevation of rulers into a status unknown in tribal societies went hand in hand with the elevation of gods into a status higher in authority than the powerful beings they were gradually replacing. Of course, most people in archaic

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(1) Robert N. Bellah, "Religious Evolution", *American Sociological Review*, 29 (3), 1964, pp. 358-374. In that article I used the

term "primitive" for what I now call "tribal", because of the possible pejorative implication of the word primitive. The present article is drawn from a chapter in a larger work in progress that probes more deeply the themes laid out in that article of over forty years ago.

societies continued to live in small face-to-face groups and to have a ritual life of their own only loosely articulated with the great royal rituals at the imperial center, and resembling in many ways the ritual life of tribal societies.

Both tribal and archaic religions are “cosmological”, in that supernatural, nature, and society were all fused in a single cosmos. The early state greatly extended the understanding of the cosmos in time and space, but, as Thorkild Jacobsen argued, the cosmos was still viewed as a state – the homology between socio-political reality and religious reality was unbroken (2). The establishment of the early state and the beginning of archaic society destroyed the uneasy egalitarianism of hundreds of thousands if not millions of years of hominid evolution, but in so doing made possible much larger and more complex societies. A dramatic symbolism that combined dominance and nurturance produced a new sense of divine power combined with social power, enacted in entirely new forms of ritual, involving, centrally, sacrifice – even human sacrifice – as a concrete expression of radical status difference.

If the balance of tribal egalitarianism had never been easy to maintain and began to give rise to modest status differences long before the emergence of the state, the state itself and its religio-political symbolization gave rise to new forms of instability. Intermittent periods of state breakdown raised serious questions about the cosmological order: Where is the king? Where is the god? Why are we hungry? Why are we being killed by attackers and no one is defending us? Once political unity was reasserted these questions could be smoothed over, but the cracks remained, and new insights appeared, such as the idea that rule is conditional on divine favor and may be withdrawn from wicked rulers, or that individuals might appeal directly to the gods without the mediation of the ruling cult. Such insights would be clearly expressed in the axial age, but in archaic society they remained only cracks in a continuing cosmological unity (3).

(2) Thorkild Jacobsen, “The Cosmos as a State”, in Henri Frankfort, Mrs. Henri Frankfort, John A. Wilson and Thorkild Jacobsen, *Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Harmondsworth, UK, Pelican, 1949 [1946], pp. 137-199).

(3) Marcel Gauchet in his *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997 [1985], see especially Chapters 1 and 2, pp. 23-46) makes the point that the emergence

of the state focusing on a divine or quasi-divine king, destabilizes the equilibrium of what he calls “primeval religion”, which he describes as both egalitarian and immobile. Though his notion of pre-state religion as “the reign of the absolute past” is hardly adequate, failing as it does to catch the openness and diversity of such religions, his emphasis on the emergence of the archaic state as the essential precondition for the axial age is surely correct.

In dealing with the axial age, roughly the middle centuries of the first millennium B.C., we will need to consider a number of definitional issues and the degree to which apparently parallel developments were really similar. But I would like to begin the consideration of the axial phenomena rather concretely. As we have seen, king and god emerged together in archaic society and continued their close association throughout its history. It is not surprising, then, that the axial age sees some dramatic new twists in the relation between god and king. It is not that these symbols or the close relation between them were abandoned, but they were transformed in remarkable new ways. One of the questions that recurs is who is the (true) king, the one who really reflects divine justice?

In Greece, Plato tells the Athenians not to look at Achilles, the hero of aristocratic Greek culture (we should remember that Achilles was a kinglet and his mother a goddess), but at Socrates, not an aristocrat at all, but a stonemason and a busy body, asking questions people would rather not think about. For it is Socrates, the lover of wisdom, the philosopher, who should be king, who would be the only truly legitimate king.

In China, it is Mencius, living about 200 years after Confucius (conventional dates, 551-479 B.C.), who tells us that Confucius, the failed official who gathered a few followers as he traveled from state to state in ancient China, never achieving real influence anywhere, who was the uncrowned king, the one around whom the empire could have been rightly ordered, and by implication, he, Mencius, was another who ought to have been crowned, though his worldly success was no greater than Confucius's.

In India, who was the Buddha? He was the son of a king and ought to have succeeded his father, but instead he abandoned his kingdom and his family to become an ascetic in the forest seeking enlightenment.

In Israel, the tension between God and king was endemic in the period of the monarchy: at times God seems to have made an eternal covenant with the House of David, giving the monarchy quasi-divine status, but often kings, including David, are portrayed as sinners or even enemies of Yahweh who were punished for their bad deeds. Yet in the Babylonian exile when the Davidic monarchy, the Jerusalem temple, and the land itself were all lost, Yahweh was proclaimed as the only God there is, and a God who can chose whomever he wants to serve his purposes – even the Persian king could be God's messiah. Christianity played its own changes on this theme, using the old royal epithet of the king as Son of God (and Jesus's Davidic lineage was affirmed) in a new way, proclaiming the reign of Christ the King even on the cross. And

Muhammad, God's chosen prophet, was, like Moses, a king and not a king, but surely a ruler of a people. Those who led the community after Muhammad's death would affirm their claim to rule as successors (*khalifa*) to the prophet (4). The old unity of God and king was broken through dramatically in every case, and yet reaffirmed paradoxically in the new axial formulations.

At this point it might be worth noting a central principle that has governed all my work on religious evolution: Nothing is ever lost. Just as the face-to-face rituals of tribal society continue in disguised form among us, so the unity of political and religious power, the archaic "mortgage", as Voegelin called it (5), reappears continually in societies that have experienced the axial "breakthrough". Kings who ruled "by divine right", are obvious examples, but so are presidents who claim to act in accordance with a "higher power". At every point as our story unfolds, we will have to consider the relation between political and religious power. However, but one thing is certain, the relationship never goes away.

As a first approximation to an understanding of the axial age, let me turn to the elegant prose of Arnaldo Momigliano, who has this to say of "the classical situation of the ancient world between 600 and 300 B.C.":

It has become a commonplace, after Karl Jaspers's *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* – the first original book on history to appear in post-war Germany in 1949 – to speak of the *Achsenzeit*, of the axial age, which included the China of Confucius and Lao-Tse, the India of Buddha, the Iran of Zoroaster, the Palestine of the Prophets and the Greece of the philosophers, the tragedians and the historians. There is a very real element of truth in this formulation. All these civilizations display literacy, a complex political organization combining central government and local authorities, elaborate town-planning, advanced metal technology and the practice of international diplomacy. In all these civilizations there is a profound tension between political powers and intellectual movements. Everywhere one notices attempts to introduce greater purity, greater justice, greater perfection and a more universal explanation of things. New models of reality, either mystically or prophetically or rationally apprehended, are propounded as a criticism of, and alternative to, the prevailing models. We are in the age of criticism. (6)

Momigliano points to two aspects of the axial age that we will have to consider in more detail. One refers to the background features of societies that are in several ways "more developed" than the societies that preceded them. The other refers to new developments in the realm of thought – political, ethical, religious, philosophical – that he sums up with the significant term "criticism".

(4) Christianity and Islam fall outside the axial age chronologically, but are historically intelligible only as developments of Israel's axial breakthrough.

(5) Eric Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*,

Vol. 1 of *Order and History* (Baton Rouge, LA, Louisiana State University Press, 1956, p. 164).

(6) Arnaldo Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization* (Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1975, pp. 8-9).

If we turn to Jaspers himself we will find that he, like Momigliano, is interested in a historically empirical description of the axial age, but his concern is primarily existential – where are we in history? – as the title of his book, in English, *The Origin and Goal of History* implies. His dates are slightly different: He finds that the “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, he writes, that “Man, as we know him today, came into being” (7). Both Jaspers and Momigliano say that the figures of the axial age – Confucius, Buddha, the Hebrew prophets, the Greek philosophers – are alive to us, are contemporary with us, in a way that no earlier figures are. Our cultural world and the great traditions that still in so many ways define us, all originate in the axial age. Jaspers asks the question whether modernity is the beginning of a new axial age, but he leaves the answer open. In any case, though we have enormously elaborated the axial insights, we have not outgrown them, not yet, at least.

Before attempting to define more carefully the nature of the cultural innovations of the axial age, we must consider in slightly more detail the social context in which they arose. Several features mentioned by Momigliano – central government, town-planning, international diplomacy – were already present in archaic societies, as were literacy and metallurgy. But there were significant changes in these last two features. Iron was replacing bronze in both agriculture and warfare, but the transition was uneven and gradual: the “Iron Age” was not itself the cause of the other changes. In particular it would seem that iron was more important in increasing the efficiency of warfare than in transforming the means of production. Still, the use of iron tools must have contributed to the gradual increase of population that characterized the first millennium B.C., and the use of iron weapons to the ferocity of first millennium warfare. And although literacy goes back as far as 3000 B.C., it is true that it remained largely a craft literacy, confined to small groups of scribes, until well into the first millennium. Alphabetic scripts were replacing Mesopotamian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphics, and were in use in Greece, Israel and India, considerably widening the circle of literacy. China maintained the use of characters that might seem to rival cuneiform and hieroglyphics in difficulty, but that, while requiring a great deal of memory, were easier to use than the archaic scripts of the West, and literacy was clearly growing in late first millennium China.

(7) Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953 [1949], p. 1).

An important feature emphasized by Jaspers is that none of what he calls the axial “breakthroughs”, a term we will need to consider further below, occurred in the centers of great empires. Rather, in all cases, “There were a multitude of small States and cities, a struggle of all against all, which to begin with nevertheless permitted an astonishing prosperity, an unfolding of vigour and wealth” (8). One would have to examine more carefully how this situation worked out in each case, but in general the competition between small states created the possibility for the emergence of itinerant intellectuals not functioning within centralized priesthoods or bureaucracies, and therefore more structurally capable of the criticism that Momigliano found central to the axial age, and that Jaspers defined as the capacity for “questioning all human activity and conferring upon it a new meaning” (9).

Jaspers’s mention of the combination of prosperity involving an increase in wealth and vigor with incessant warfare raises two additional points about the axial age that require mention. Although standard weights of precious metals had been used in economic transactions in archaic societies, it is only in the axial age that coinage became widespread, originating perhaps in Asia Minor, but rapidly coming into use in the Greek and Phoenician cities, the Middle East, India and China. The Phoenicians invented the earliest form of the abacus. What these developments tell us is that trade was increasing all across the old world. The market economy was surely only incipient in the middle of the first millennium, and many rural areas were largely unaffected by it, but we know that market relations tend to destabilize long-established kinship and status relationships, so this too has to be added as a background factor contributing to the social volatility of the axial age (10).

Jaspers’s reference to warfare amounting almost to a war of all against all seems to refer to the incessant warfare between small states as we see it in early Greece, the Israelite monarchies, Northern India, and Northern China in the axial age. But there was another factor adding to military instability: the rise of large territorial states militarily more

(8) Jaspers, *Op. cit.*, p. 4.

(9) Jaspers, *Op. cit.*, p. 6.

(10) Susan and Andrew Sherratt (in “The Growth of the Mediterranean Economy in the Early First Millennium BC”, *World Archaeology*, 24 (3), 1993, pp. 361-378) describe the remarkable economic growth of the first half of the first millennium in the Middle East and the Mediterranean: “In 1000 B.C. most of the Mediterranean was effectively prehistoric; by 500 B.C. it formed a series of well differentiated zones within a world-system”. There was

not only a significant growth of trade, but an increase in manufacturing, urbanization and literacy throughout the Mediterranean basin. The Sherratts attribute the driving force of this change to Phoenicia, under Assyrian pressure, especially from the tenth through the eighth centuries. Only from the seventh century do the Greeks begin to rival the Phoenicians in trade and colonization. Similar developments, though perhaps a few centuries later, have been observed in northern India and Northern China.

efficient than their Bronze Age predecessors, especially in the Middle East. These impinged on and acted to destabilize the incipient axial societies. The first obvious example is the Neo-Assyrian Empire (934-610 B.C.) (11). As anyone familiar with the Hebrew Bible knows, Assyria destroyed the northern Israelite kingdom, the Kingdom of Israel, in 722 B.C. and made the southern kingdom, the Kingdom of Judah, a vassal state through most of the seventh century. Assyrian pressure on the Phoenician cities on the Mediterranean coast stimulated Phoenician colonization on the North African coast, where the most important colony, Carthage, was founded early in the millennium, in Sicily and throughout the Western Mediterranean. Though the Assyrians did not impinge directly on the Greeks, the Phoenician expansion helped to stimulate Greek colonization from the Black Sea coast to the Western Mediterranean. While it was the brief Neo-Babylonian expansion that finished off the Kingdom of Judah in 587 B.C., it was the immediately following Achaemenid Persian Empire (c. 550-330 B.C.) that became the territorially most extended empire in history up to its time, powerfully influencing Judah in the post exilic period, thoroughly challenging the Greeks in their homeland, with major cultural consequences, and ruling the Indus Valley in India at just the moment of axial efflorescence in the Ganges Valley. Thus all the axial cases except China experienced Persian pressure at critical moments in their development. Persia itself is often included as an axial case, but everything about Zoroaster (including his dates which vary according to different authorities from the middle of the second millennium to the middle of the first), Zoroastrianism (including the contents and dating of Zoroastrian scriptures), and the degree to which and the way in which Zoroastrianism was institutionalized in Achaemenid Persia, is in dispute due to enormous problems with very limited sources. For this reason I will regretfully omit Zoroastrianism from my discussion of axial cases. We are left in the uncomfortable position of recognizing a significant Persian impact on three of the four well-documented axial cases, while Persia itself remains largely a historical cipher (12).

Although Jaspers credits Alfred Weber as one of the sources of the idea of the axial age, almost certainly Max Weber, an important early associate of Jaspers's, was also an influence. Though Max Weber's comparative treatment of the world religions implies something like the

(11) "Neo-Assyrian" to distinguish it from the Old Assyrian state (c. 1900-c. 1830 B.C.) and the Middle Assyrian state (c. 1400-c. 1050).

(12) See Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom* (Ch. 6,

"Iranians and Greeks," pp. 123-150), on the disappointing quality of the surviving Greek observations of the Persian Empire, as well as the severe limitations of all other forms of documentation.

axial age hypothesis, the only place in his writings where I have found a definite assertion of something like the axial age is his reference to a “prophetic age”, involving prophetic movements in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C., reaching even into the sixth and fifth centuries, in Israel, Persia and India, with analogues in China. Such movements appear to be the background for the later emergence of the world religions (13).

After mentioning Max Weber as a precursor, I need to mention two other scholars who developed Jaspers’s idea further after he had put “the axial age” on the map. One of these is Eric Voegelin in his massive five volume *Order and History* (14), where he speaks of “multiple and parallel leaps in being” in the first millennium B.C. More specifically, a leap in being describes a movement from compact cosmological symbolization, characteristic of what we have called archaic societies, to a differentiated symbolism of individual soul, society and transcendent reality in the axial cases. Voegelin does not mention Jaspers until Volume 2, and then critically, but he appears to owe him a larger debt than he acknowledges (15).

The other scholar influenced by Jaspers who deserves mention is S. N. Eisenstadt, who has done more than anyone to make the axial age significant for comparative historical sociology. Eisenstadt focuses on one central aspect of Jaspers’s analysis, the “basic tension between the transcendental and mundane orders”, and on “the new type of intellectual elite” concerned with the possible restructuring of the world in accordance with the transcendental vision (16). He emphasizes the new

(13) Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, eds. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978 [1921-22], pp. 441-442, 447).

(14) Eric Voegelin, *Order and History* (Baton Rouge, LA, Louisiana State University Press, 1956-1987, 5 Vol.).

(15) Eric Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, Volume 2 of *Order and History* (Baton Rouge, LA, Louisiana State University Press, 1957, pp. 19-23). In volume 4, *The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge, LA, Louisiana State University Press, 1974, pp. 2-6), Voegelin abandons the idea that leaps in being can be located at any specific period in history, while admitting his earlier debt to Jaspers.

(16) S. N. Eisenstadt, “Introduction: The Axial Age Breakthroughs – Their Characteristics and Origins”, in S. N. Eisenstadt, ed., *The Origins and Diversity of the Axial Age* (Albany, New York, State University of New York

Press, 1986, p. 1). Eisenstadt recognizes the contribution of Jaspers, Voegelin, and also of the Daedalus conference on the axial age organized by Benjamin Schwartz and published as *Wisdom, Revelation, and Doubt: Perspectives on the First Millennium B.C.*, Daedalus, 104, 2, Spring, 1975. In particular, Eisenstadt noted Schwartz’s emphasis on “the strain toward transcendence” in the axial age in his essay “The Age of Transcendence”, in *Daedalus*, Spring 1975, pp. 1-7. See also S. N. Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities*, two volumes, Leiden: Brill, 2003, especially the essays in Vol. 1, Part II, “Axial Civilizations”. The most recent collection of work on the axial age in which Eisenstadt has been engaged is Johann P. Arnason, S. N. Eisenstadt and Björn Wittrock, eds, *Axial Civilizations and World History*, Leiden, Brill, 2005.

degree of what he calls “reflexivity”, the capacity to examine one’s own assumptions, in the axial age, similar, I believe, to what Momigliano meant by “criticism.” Eisenstadt has stimulated scholars in many fields to write about the axial age, and I will in what follows often be drawing on their work as well as on that of Eisenstadt himself.

How are we to characterize slightly more specifically the cultural content of the axial age? In a word, what made the axial age axial? It is this question that has stimulated more than a little disagreement and some questions about whether we can even speak of an axial age at all, given the differences among the several cases. For example, Eisenstadt’s emphasis on the distinction between transcendental and mundane has been questioned in the case of China because of its inveterate “this-worldliness” (17). Johann Arnason has pointed out that Jaspers’s “most condensed statement” of the axial age, describing it as the moment when “man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations”, and “experiences absoluteness in the depths of selfhood and in the lucidity of transcendence”, is remarkably similar to Jaspers’s own version of existential philosophy (18). In discussing the axial age it is all too easy to read in our own presuppositions or to take one of the four cases (usually Israel or Greece) as paradigmatic for all the others. Is there a theoretical framework in which to place the axial age that will help us avoid these pitfalls as much as possible? I believe there is: the framework of the evolution of human culture and cognition.

Merlin Donald describes the evolution of human culture as unfolding in four stages. Earliest is episodic culture, with which humans along with all higher mammals learn to understand and respond to the immediate situation they are in. Then, perhaps beginning as early as two million years ago, came mimetic culture, the pre-linguistic, but not necessarily pre-vocal, use of the body both to imaginatively enact events and to communicate with others through expressive gesture. Then, some 100,000 or more years ago, with the development of language as we know it, came mythic culture, which Donald describes as “a unified, collectively held system of explanatory and regulatory metaphors. The mind has expanded its reach beyond the episodic perception of events, beyond the mimetic reconstruction of episodes, to a comprehensive modeling of the entire human universe”. Every aspect of life, he says,

(17) For doubts about China see Mark Elvin, “Was There a Transcendental Break-through in China?” in Eisenstadt, *Origins*, pp. 325-359. Similar arguments have been made with respect to Greece.

(18) Johann Arnason, “The Axial Age and its Interpreters: Reopening a Debate”, in Arnason, Eisenstadt and Wittrock, *Axial Civilizations*, pp. 31-32. He refers to a passage in Jaspers, *Origins*, p. 2.

“is permeated by myth” (19). While myth provides a comprehensive understanding of life, it does so exclusively by the use of metaphor and narrative. Also, mythic culture until very late in its history was, except for drawings of various kinds, an exclusively oral culture. Theoretic culture is the fourth and most recent of Donald’s stages. Since it will be my argument that the axial breakthrough was essentially the breakthrough of theoretic culture in dialogue with mythic culture as a means for the “comprehensive modeling of the entire human universe”, I must now turn to a description of theoretic culture.

Donald begins his description of theoretic culture negatively, telling us that it involved “a break with the dominance of spoken language and narrative styles of thought” (20). However, a break with dominance does not mean the abandonment of earlier forms of cognitive adaptation. Humans are still episodic, mimetic, and mythic creatures, although, as in earlier transitions, the emergence of a new form of cultural cognition eventually involves reorganization of the earlier forms.

The key elements of theoretic culture developed gradually; they consisted in graphic invention, external memory, and theory construction (21). Graphic invention began relatively early, with body painting, sand painting, the great Paleolithic cave painting, etc., but its key contribution to the emergence of theoretic culture was its ability to provide external memory storage, that is, memory outside the human brain. Early writing is clearly a significant step beyond painting in the amount of cognitive information that could be stored, but the unwieldy early writing systems and the limited number of people who could use them meant that they were precursors to, rather than full realizations of, the possibilities of theoretic culture. Donald sees, not surprisingly, Greek culture in the first millennium B.C. as the place where theoretic culture first clearly emerged, and the efficient external memory system provided by a fully alphabetic writing system as an aspect (not a cause) of that emergence. He describes the importance of external memory as follows:

External memory is a critical feature of modern human cognition, if we are trying to build an evolutionary bridge from Neolithic to modern cognitive capabilities or a structural bridge from mythic to theoretic culture. The brain may not have changed recently in its genetic makeup, but its link to an accumulating external memory network affords it cognitive powers that would not have been possible in isolation. This is more than a metaphor; each time the brain carries out an operation in concert with the external symbolic storage system, it becomes part of a network.

(19) Merlin Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 214).

(20) Donald, *Op. cit.*, p. 269.

(21) Donald, *Op. cit.*, p. 272.

Its memory structure is temporarily altered; and the locus of cognitive control changes. (22)

But graphic invention and the external memory it makes possible are only the essential prerequisites for the development of theoretic culture, which is the ability to think analytically rather than narratively, to construct theories that can be criticized logically and empirically. Donald cites Bruner as describing the two modes of thinking evident in modern humans as narrative and analytic (23). And Bruner himself recognizes a distinguished precursor when he uses as the epigraph for his book the following passage from William James:

To say that all human thinking is essentially of two kinds – reasoning on the one hand, and narrative, descriptive, contemplative thinking on the other – is to say only what every reader’s experience will corroborate. (24)

So analytic or theoretic thinking does not displace, but is added to, narrative thinking, a point essential to our understanding of the axial age.

In one sense something like theoretic thought, the capacity to draw conclusions from instances outside a narrative context, goes all the way back: mimetic stone flaking surely required a degree of inferential thinking. At a practical level, “primitives” were as logical as we are, a major reason why Lucien Lévy-Bruhl’s idea that they were “pre-logical” has attracted such scorn (25). Even if we narrow our definition to something like conscious rational reflection, we can find instances earlier than the axial age. The practical need for calendrical accuracy in agriculture led even some pre-literate societies to a kind of “primitive astronomy”, in which, Donald argues, many elements of modern science were incipient: “systematic and selective observation, and the collection, coding, and eventually the visual storage of data; the analysis of stored data for regularities and cohesive structures; and the formulation of predictions on the basis of these regularities... Theory had not yet become as reflective and detached as it later would; but the symbolic modeling of a larger universe had begun” (26). Begun, but, as perhaps in such fields as metallurgy as well, theory remained at the level of craft specialization,

(22) Donald, *Op. cit.*, p. 312.

(23) Donald, *Op. cit.*, p. 273.

(24) Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1986, p. xiii). I discovered the source of the James quotation in “Brute and Human Intelligence”, in William James, *Writings 1878-1899* (New York, Library of America, 1992 [1878], p. 911).

(25) Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *La mentalité primitive* (Paris, Librairie Felix Alcan, 1922); *Primitive Mentality* (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1923). A careful reading of Lévy-Bruhl will disclose that he was not as ridiculous as he has been made out to be.

(26) Donald, *Op. cit.*, pp. 339-340.

not challenging myth at the most general level of cultural self-understanding; there myth in the sense of ethically and religiously charged narrative remained largely unaffected by the new developments.

What made first millennium Greece unique in Donald's eyes was "reflection for its own sake", going "beyond pragmatic or opportunistic science", and eventuating in "what might be called the theoretic attitude" (27). While Donald does not relate his argument to the problem of the axial age, since he singles out Greece alone as the place where the theoretic attitude first arose, Yehuda Elkana, while also focusing on Greece, relates his argument to the general axial problem in his contribution to the 1985 book edited by Eisenstadt, *The Origins and Diversity of the Axial Age*. His paper is entitled "The Emergence of Second-Order Thinking in Classical Greece", and his use of "second-order thinking" is close to Donald's "theoretic attitude" (28). Following Donald, I am using the term "theory" in distinction to the term "narrative". Elkana is concerned less with the distinction between narrative and theory than with, in Donald's terms, the distinction between theory and "the theoretical attitude". For Elkana, first-order theory can be quite complex, as for example mathematics and the beginning of algebra in Babylonia, or the calendrical astronomy noted above, but it involves only straightforward rational exposition, not reflection about the basis of the exposition. Second-order thinking is "thinking about thinking", that is, it attempts to understand how the rational exposition is possible and can be defended. One of the earliest examples is geometric proof, associated with Pythagoras in early Greece. Geometric proof not only asserts geometric truths, but the grounds for thinking them true, that is, proofs that in principle could be disproved, or replaced by better proofs. For Elkana the arguments of several of the pre-Socratic philosophers that the universe is formed from water or fire or mind, while clearly theories and not myths (one could well ask about the relation between such theories and myths), do not imply second-order thinking, as they do not seek to disprove the alternatives. One would think they did so implicitly, as each pre-Socratic offered in turn his alternative theory. The value of Elkana's position, however, is not in the details, but in the help he gives us in seeing that "theory" precedes the axial age, at least in selected areas such as astronomy and mathematics, but that it is precisely the emergence of second-order thinking, the idea that there are alternatives that have to be argued for, that marks the axial age.

(27) Donald, *Op. cit.*, p. 341.

(28) Yehuda Elkana, "The Emergence of Second-Order Thinking in Classical Greece",

in Eisenstadt, *Op. cit.*, pp. 40-64. Eisenstadt frequently uses "second-order thinking" as a synonym for his term "reflexivity".

Elkana quotes a passage from Momigliano that I cited earlier to make the decisive point: “New models of reality, either mystically or prophetically or rationally apprehended, are propounded as a criticism of, and alternative to, the prevailing models” (29). Here we have not theories about limited realms of reality, not even second-order thinking about a limited area of reality such as geometric proof, but second-order thinking about cosmology, which for societies just emerging from the archaic age meant thinking about the religio-political premises of society itself. It is second-order thinking in this central area of culture, previously filled by myth, that gave rise to the idea of transcendence, so often associated with the axial age: “Transcendental breakthrough occurred when in the wake of second-order weighing of clashing alternatives there followed an almost unbearable tension threatening to break up the fabric of society, and the resolution of the tension was found by creating a transcendental realm and then finding a soteriological bridge between the mundane world and the transcendental” (30). But here Elkana, a historian of science, is, I think, skipping a beat. In the history of science the effort to “save the appearances,” that is to make sense of empirical anomalies that don’t fit existing ideas, leads to the creation of a new abstract theory, a new “order of reality” if you will, that succeeds in making sense of the anomalies. But “creating a transcendental realm” involves something more substantial than a scientific theory. Because transcendental realms are not subject to disproof the way scientific theories are, they inevitably require a new form of narrative, that is, a new form of myth. Eric Voegelin has introduced the idea of “mythospeculation”, that is, myth with an element of reflective theory in it, which already appeared in several archaic societies (31). The transcendental breakthrough involved a radicalization of mythospeculation, but not an abandonment of it.

Akhenaten’s religious revolution in the middle of the fourteenth century B.C. vividly illustrates the difference between myth and mythospeculation. It is not at all true that in a mythic culture there is no

(29) Momigliano, *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

(30) Elkana, art. cit., p. 64.

(31) In *The Ecumenic Age*, Volume 4 of *Order and History* (Baton Rouge, LA, Louisiana State University Press, 1974), Voegelin speaks of “mytho-speculation”, which becomes in Vol. 5, *In Search of Order* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1987), “mythospeculation” without the hyphen. What he means by the term, in his own phraseology, is as follows: “The dimension of reason in the symbolism [of mythospeculation] does not reflect the light

of a fully differentiated noetic consciousness; as far as their relevance is concerned, the pragmatic materials are illuminated rather by a speculation that remains subordinate to the cosmological myth. Mythopoesis and noesis combine into a formative unit that holds an intermediate position between cosmological compactness and noetic differentiation. It will suitably be called mytho-speculation, *i.e.*, a speculation within the medium of the myth” (*The Ecumenic Age*, p. 64).

change – even the gods change. Some are forgotten, some demoted, some elevated to primacy. In Egypt the position of highest of the gods was indeed unstable: first Horus, then Re, then Amun or Amun-Re, then Ptah, then, in Ptolemaic times Isis, and so forth. None of these changes was traumatic; none of the gods who lost their primacy were denied existence. The way to change a mythic culture is to tell a different story, usually only a somewhat different story, which does not involve denying any previous story. The commonly remarked “tolerance” of polytheism, as noted by David Hume for example (32), is not the moral virtue of tolerance as we understand it today, but is part of the very structure of mythic culture. Some myths and the gods whose actions they recount may be more central than others, but the issue of truth and falsity doesn’t arise. The very idea of myth as “a story that is not true” is a product of the axial age: in tribal and archaic societies believers in one myth have no need to find the myths of others false.

But that is just what Akhenaten did: he declared that all gods but Aten were false; he raised the criterion of truth and falsehood in a way that drove a dagger into the heart of traditional Egyptian religion. As Jan Assmann puts it:

The monotheistic revolution of Akhenaten was not only the first but also the most radical and violent eruption of a counter-religion in the history of humankind. The temples were closed, the images of the gods were destroyed, their names were erased, and their cults were discontinued. What a terrible shock such an experience must have dealt to a mentality that sees a very close interdependence between culture and nature, and social and individual prosperity! The nonobservance of ritual interrupts the maintenance of cosmic and social order. (33)

But though Akhenaten cut to the root of traditional myth, he did not leave the mythic mode and, in some ways, was even quite conservative. The prime source of our knowledge of Akhenaten’s thought is “The Great Hymn to Aten”, which is still fundamentally narrative (34). Yet the “cognitive breakthrough” is clear enough. The Aten, the sun disk, is the source of light, and light is the source of life and of time itself. Ritual and myth are not abandoned, but they focus exclusively on Aten. James Allen has argued that, in finding light to be the fundamental reality of

(32) See David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, Chapter 9, “Comparison of these Religions [polytheism and monotheism], with regard to Persecution and Toleration”, where Hume compares polytheistic toleration with monotheistic “zeal and rancour, the most furious and implacable of all human passions”, in Richard Wollheim, ed., *Hume on Religion* (New York, Meridian, 1964 [1757], p. 65).

(33) Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 25). See also Erik Horning, *Akhenaten and the Religion of Light* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1999 [1995]).

(34) “The Great Hymn to the Aten”, Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 2, *The New Kingdom*, pp. 96-100.

the cosmos, Akhenaten was more a “natural philosopher”, a precursor of the pre-Socratics, than a theologian (35). But Akhenaten was both. And what made him conservative was that he believed that Aten revealed himself only to him, the pharaoh, and only through the pharaoh to the people. In popular devotion, Aten was depicted together with Akhenaten and his wife, Nefertiti, all three as gods. In this respect Akhenaten’s religion reaffirmed the archaic unity of god and king, and however much a precursor of the axial age, it failed to raise the critical question of the relation between god and king, the very hallmark of the axial transformation. Moreover, Akhenaten’s claim to be the exclusive channel for the relation of god and people took place in an age when personal piety, the direct relation of individuals to the gods, was on the rise.

For many reasons, Akhenaten’s revolution failed: knowledge of his very existence was wiped out not long after his death, only to be rediscovered in modern times by archaeologists. The primary reason for the collapse, beside the fact that the revolution was far too radical for its time (other radical movements have survived on the margins of societies that rejected them) was that it was exclusively the intellectual product of its founder. When Akhenaten died, there were neither priests, nor prophets, nor a people to continue in the faith. Nonetheless, the fact that mythospeculation had made a cognitive breakthrough that would not be repeated for nearly a thousand years is indeed remarkable. It is an indication of the fact that, however slowly and painfully they emerged, the axial breakthroughs were the children of the archaic cultures from which they arose.

But what I want to focus on now, and what would become more evident from a close examination of the individual cases, is that “breakthrough”, that problematic word, does not mean the abandonment of what went before. Theoretic culture is added to mythic and mimetic culture – which are reorganized in the process – but they remain in their respective spheres indispensable. Theoretic culture is a remarkable achievement, but always a specialized one, usually involving written language in fields inaccessible to ordinary people. Everyday life continues to be lived in the face-to-face interaction of individuals and groups and in the patient activities of making a living in the physical world. It is first of all mimetic and not in need of verbal explanation.

(35) James P. Allen, “The Natural Philosophy of Akhenaten”, in W. K. Simpson, ed., *Religion and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt* (New Haven, Yale Egyptological Studies, 3, 1989, pp. 89-101). See also Jan Assmann, *Akhenaten’s Theology of Light and Time* (Jerusalem,

The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Proceedings, 7 (4), 1992, pp. 143-175); and *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs* (New York, Holt, 2002 [1996], pp. 214-228).

However, if linguistic explanation is necessary, it will most often be narrative, not theoretic.

I have mentioned the fact that the face-to-face rituals of tribal society continue in disguised form among us. As an example let me take the ritual handshake that is so much a part of our daily life. Arnaldo Momigliano tells us that the ancient Roman handshake, *dexterarum iunctio*, was an old symbol of faith, *fides*, that is, faith as trust or confidence, and that from very early times Fides was a Roman goddess. He says that there are good reasons for thinking that hand shaking in Greece was an expression of *pistis*, the Greek equivalent of *fides*. Though normally the handshake simply confirmed the trustworthiness of an agreement, with perhaps an aura of divine protection, Attic grave reliefs suggest a further extension of the idea for they “show handshaking as a symbol of Faith at the parting between the dead and the living. Thus handshaking was not only a sign of agreement among the living, but the gesture of trust and faith in the supreme departure” (36). While for us the handshake is hardly a conscious gesture, it is nonetheless the case that one does not expect to be attacked by someone with whom one has just shaken hands. A refusal of a proffered handshake, however, would make the ritual gesture conscious indeed: breaking the ritual raises ominous questions that would require an explanation.

No one has argued more persistently than Randall Collins, following Durkheim and Erving Goffman, that daily life consists in endless “interaction ritual chains”. “Ritual”, he says, “is essentially a bodily process”. He argues that ritual requires bodily presence, and asks, rhetorically, whether a wedding or a funeral could be conducted by telephone or videoconferencing. His answer is, clearly, no. One could videotape a wedding or a funeral, but without the physical presence and interaction of the participants, no ritual could occur (37). But mimetic (enactive, embodied) culture does not just continue to exist alongside theoretic culture: it reclaims, so to speak, some of the achievements of theoretic culture. Hubert Dreyfus has shown in detail how skills learned with painstaking attention to explicit rules, through becoming embodied and largely unavailable to consciousness, are in the end far more efficient

(36) Arnaldo Momigliano, “Religion in Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem in the First Century B.C.”, in his *On Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (Middletown, Conn., Wesleyan University Press, 1987, pp. 76-77). We do not know how far back the handshake goes, but Momigliano reports its existence at the time of the Persians and the Celts, as well as the Greeks and Romans.

(37) Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Princeton University Press, 2004, pp. 53-54). He also argues, convincingly to me, that genuine learning requires the physical presence of teachers and students, so that “distance learning” is ersatz at best.

than they were at the beginner's stage (38). His examples include driving a car and expert chess playing. In such cases the experienced practitioner knows "instinctively" what to do in challenging situations. "Critical thinking" (theoretic culture) at such moments would only disrupt the flow and produce serious mistakes. One can imagine such a process of embodiment going all the way back to Paleolithic stone chipping. What was initially learned by painful trial and error became, with practice, "second nature", so to speak, even before there was any language to describe it. If we imagine that "moderns" live in a "scientific world" and have left behind such primitive things as ritual, it is only because we have not observed, as people such as Goffman, Collins, and Dreyfus have, how much of our lives is lived in embodied rituals and practices. This is not to say that ritual has gone uncontested: anti-ritual tendencies and even movements occurred in most of the axial breakthroughs, and periodically ever since. But in every case, ritual, when thrown out at the front door, returns at the back door: there are even anti-ritual rituals. Our embodiment and its rhythms are inescapable.

If mimetic culture has interacted vigorously with theoretic culture once the latter has appeared, such is also the case with narrative culture. There are things that narrative does that theory cannot do. The psychologist, Jerome Bruner, has noted that narrative actually constitutes the self, "the self is a telling" (39). Not only do we get to know persons by sharing our stories, we understand our membership in groups to the extent that we understand the story that defines the group. Once theoretic culture has come into existence, stories can be subjected to criticism – that is close to the heart of the axial breakthroughs – but in important spheres of life stories cannot be replaced by theories. Because stories really have been replaced by theories in natural science, some have come to believe that this can occur in all spheres. Though efforts to create a science of ethics or politics or religion have rendered critical insights into those spheres, they have not succeeded in replacing the stories that provide their substance. When Aristotle, surely one of the greatest theorists of all times, begins his *Ethics* he asks the question, what do people consider the highest good, and finds that the common answer is happiness. In short, he starts from opinion, from the stories people tell about what leads to happiness, and though he criticizes those stories, he

(38) Hubert L. Dreyfus and Stuart E. Dreyfus, *Mind over Machine: The Power of Human Intuition and Expertise in the Age of the computer* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1986).

(39) Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1990, p. 111).

doesn't reject their substance. Aristotle agrees with the common opinion that happiness is the highest good – he brings his critical insight to bear in seeking to discern what will lead to true happiness. In short, he seeks to improve the common story with a better story, not with a theory. Some modern moral philosophers have sought to create an ethics based on “reason alone”. But when utilitarians say that ethics should be based on the consideration of the greatest good for the greatest number, they require a substantive account of the good to get started: they still need a story about the good. When deontologists try to get around this objection by distinguishing between the good, which is culturally variable, and the right, which is universal, they still require a story about the right which reason alone cannot produce. Efforts to create a “religion within the bounds of reason alone” run up against the same problem: they end up replacing old stories with new ones.

Narrative, in short, is more than literature; it is the way we understand our lives. If literature merely supplied entertainment, then it wouldn't be as important as it is. Great literature speaks to the deepest level of our humanity; it helps us better understand who we are. Narrative is not only the way we understand our personal and collective identities; it is the source of our ethics, our politics and our religion. It is, as William James and Jerome Bruner assert, one of our two basic ways of thinking. Narrative isn't irrational – it can be criticized by rational argument – but it can't be derived from reason alone. Mythic (narrative) culture is not a subset of theoretic culture, nor will it ever be. It is older than theoretic culture and remains to this day an indispensable way of relating to the world.

Donald noted that through most of its history narrative culture has been oral and that the development of writing as an external symbolic storage system is an essential precondition for the emergence of theoretic culture. The earliest writing seems to have been largely utilitarian, keeping accounts of income and outgo in temple and palace economies. However, when writing was used for extended texts, those texts were apt to be narrative not theoretic. They recorded, but did not replace, spoken language. Writing was meant to be read aloud (silent reading is quite a recent development), often because most people, even royalty, remained illiterate and needed scribes to tell them what was written. In short, though writing was a precondition for theoretic culture, and widespread literacy in a society does produce significant cultural change, oral culture has survived as an indispensable supplement to literacy.

We have noted that face-to-face culture always involves the body, even if only slight wariness about strangers in public places. Human

interaction is often physical: we have noted the common ritual of the handshake, but a pat on the back, a hug, or a kiss imply increasing degrees of intimacy. Spoken language is embedded in mimetic, enactive, culture. Walter Ong has noted that the spoken word “has a high somatic content”. He writes:

The oral word, as we have noted, never exists in a simply verbal context, as a written word does. Spoken words are always modifications of a total, existential, situation, which always engages the body. Bodily activity beyond mere vocalization is not adventitious or contrived in oral communication, but is natural and even inevitable. In oral verbalization, particularly public verbalization, absolute motionlessness is itself a powerful gesture. (40)

Not only the right gesture, but the spoken word is essential in many rituals. In a wedding it is the exchange of “I do’s” that makes the ritual effective. The words of consecration are equally indispensable for a valid Eucharist.

The special significance of the spoken word in religious life long after the advent of writing is indicated by the widespread emphasis on memorization and recitation, sometimes involving the body, as in the forward-and-backward rocking of the torso in Orthodox Jewish prayer. The value attached to the spoken word could lead to a suspicion of writing, as though the highest truths could only be communicated orally – Plato’s Seventh Letter is perhaps the most famous expression of this qualm. Certain traditions – Zoroastrian, Hindu and Buddhist – have insisted on oral transmission of texts over extended periods even after writing was well known. None of this should make us doubt the importance of the written word; it should only make us aware that orality and literacy have always overlapped, and that the full cultural impact of literacy is quite recent. Nor do I want to equate narrativity with orality, even though narrative was long embedded in oral language. Once written down, narratives could more easily be perused and compared, thus increasing the possibility of critical reflection.

The axial age occurred in still largely oral cultures, with only incipient literacy and only the beginnings of theoretic reflection. Nevertheless radical conclusions, more radical than those of Akhenaten, emerged in each case. Once again we may ask, how did this happen?

Eric Weil in an interesting contribution to the 1975 *Daedalus* issue on the axial age asked whether breakthroughs are related to breakdowns; whether breakdowns might not be the necessary condition for

(40) Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Methuen, 1982, pp. 66-67). This is not the place to pursue the important issue of the relation between orality and literacy, but

Walter Ong in several books beside the one cited has made important contributions, as have Eric Havelock and Jack Goody.

breakthroughs (41). Breakthroughs involve not only a critical reassessment of what has been handed down, but also a new understanding of the nature of reality, a conception of truth against which the falsity of the world can be judged, and a claim that that truth is universal, not merely local. Why would anyone in a secure and settled society be tempted to make such radical reassessments? Weil's argument is that periods of severe social stress which raise doubts about the adequacy of the existing understanding of reality, in other words, serious breakdowns, may be the necessary predecessors of cultural breakthroughs. Necessary but not sufficient: "Unfortunately for those who crave general explanations, breakdowns in history are extremely common; breakthroughs extremely rare" (42). He suggests it was the threat of the Persians to the kind of city that the Greeks thought necessary for human life that may have stimulated the Greek breakthrough; the pressure of Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia on the ancient Israelites that made them seek a transcendent cause; and possibly similar disruptions in ancient China and India that lay behind the axial innovations there. The negative cases, however, are many. One of the most puzzling is the Phoenicians, who suffered from pressures from the great empires at the same time Israel, their linguistic cousin, did, and later, in Carthage, faced a life and death struggle with Rome. Yet this remarkably versatile, economically innovative, highly literate culture experienced no breakthrough, unless, and this is highly unlikely, all evidence of such a breakthrough has been lost.

It has long been evident that the cultural transformations of the several societies that define the axial age – Greece, Israel, China and India in the first millennium B.C. – are by no means uniform (43). All four exemplify or at least approach the capacity of theoretic culture for "second-order thinking", the capacity to examine critically the very foundations of cosmological, ethical and political order. But second-order thinking is, by its very nature, limited to an intellectual elite – it is never a popular enterprise. The invention of formal logic is surely an indication of the emergence of theoretic culture, but does not in itself signify a sociocultural breakthrough. If we take Plato as the prime exemplar of the Greek axial transformation we can see how the examination of the basis of argumentation went hand in hand with new cosmological and ethical conceptualizations. Formal logic appears in India

(41) Eric Weil, "What is a Breakthrough in History?" *Daedalus*, Spring 1975, pp. 21-36.

(42) Eric Weil, art. cit., p. 26.

(43) Eisenstadt has recently emphasized "multiple axialities" along with "multiple

modernities". See his "Axial Civilizations and the Axial Age Reconsidered", in Arnason, Eisenstadt, and Wittrock, *Axial Civilizations*, p. 561.

and China in the axial age, but in both cases more as a specialized inquiry than as central to the axial transformation. Formal theoretic developments seem virtually absent in ancient Israel. Compared to the other three cases, Israel approaches theoretic culture only asymptotically, yet it was there, perhaps, that the revolution in mythospeculation was most profound. And it is perhaps for this reason that biblical religion in its successor faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, was able to contribute to ethical and political transformations of society that Greek philosophy and its Hellenistic and Roman successor traditions, even when we view them not as purely concerned with argumentation, but as ways of life (44), never succeeded in doing. In ancient China and India formal theoretic developments were linked to transformations in mythospeculation in ways that require close examination, but were clearly quite different from one another as well as from the Western axial transformations. Deep comparison of the four cases is an as yet unfulfilled requisite for further progress in understanding the axial age (45).

Eric Weil in his essay on breakthroughs cited above reminds us of another point: those responsible for the most radical innovations were seldom successful. In the short run they usually failed: think of Jeremiah, Socrates, Confucius, Jesus. Buddhism finally disappeared in India, the Buddha's home ground. Jaspers sums it up starkly: "The Axial Period too ended in failure. History went on" (46). So breakthroughs were not only preceded by breakdowns, they were followed by breakdowns. History indeed. The insights, however, at least the ones we know of, survived. The very failures that followed them stimulated repeated efforts to recover the initial insights, to realize the so far unrealized possibilities. It is this that has given such dynamism to the axial traditions. But important though these traditions are to us, and Weil reminds us that any talk of an axial age is culturally autobiographical – the axial age is axial because of what it has meant to us (47) – they give us no grounds for triumphalism. The failures have been many and it is hard to gauge the successes. It is hard to say that we today, particularly today, are living up to the insights of the great axial prophets and sages.

(44) See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1995 [1987]). Philosophy was always an elite, seldom if ever a popular, movement.

(45) In my current work in progress I am making an effort at such deep comparison.

(46) Jaspers, *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

(47) E. Weil, art cit, p. 22.

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