Introduction

What Was the Axial Age?

The years between 800 and 200 bce constitute one of the most astonishing periods in the history of humanity. During this epoch, a cohort of brilliant individuals appeared whose teachings radically changed the way human beings thought about themselves and the world around them. So pivotal and revolutionary were their ways of thought that we refer to this era as the Axial Age, a term coined by German philosopher Karl Jaspers.[1] Today, we are still living out and living through the ideas and ideals that were introduced in this period. In the Axial Age, observed Jaspers, "the spiritual foundations of humanity were laid. . . . And these are the foundations upon which humanity still subsists today."[2]

Remarkably, this burst of creativity occurred almost simultaneously in four separate areas on the Eurasian continent. In East Asia, Confucius and his followers laid the religious, philosophical, and political foundations for the next 2,500 years of Chinese culture. At the same time, Daoist philosophers produced a compelling alternative to Confucianism, affecting Chinese society in an equally powerful but very different way. In South Asia, a countercultural movement of ascetics and mystics composed a diverse collection of profound teachings that gave nascent Hinduism its characteristic features. Near the same time and place, the Buddha and Mahavira attained new insights that inaugurated Buddhism, the first major international religion, and Jainism, a small but highly influential Indian religion. In West Asia, Zarathustra inspired the religion of Zoroastrianism, which served as the state religion of three powerful empires and probably contributed decisive new ideas to the monotheistic traditions. In the Middle East, the nations of Israel and Judah witnessed the rise of the prophets and the emergence of the religion later known as Judaism. Finally, in the region north of the Mediterranean Sea, thinkers such as Thales, Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle

1. "Axial Age" is the usual English translation of *die Achsenzeit*, Jasper's actual term.

2. Karl Jaspers, The Origin and Goal of History, trans. Michael Bullock (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953).

invented the Western philosophical tradition.[3] Rarely in human history do we find such a dense concentration of creative individuals in such a short period of time, especially those whose lives and teachings have had such an extensive and long-lasting impact. And just as fascinating as the density of genius in this era is the similarity of the ideas and the modes of thinking these individuals developed, despite their geographical distance from one another. Although they did not always come to the same conclusions or advocate the same practices and beliefs, they grappled with many of the same fundamental issues: the nature and destiny of the self, the character of ultimate reality, the basis and practices of morality, and the highest goods of human life.

What was happening at this particular time and in these particular places that might account for the prodigious output of decisive ideas and the appearance of some of the greatest individuals known to the world? To begin to answer this weighty question, let us consider some of the significant social and political developments occurring in the axial centers during this period.

Urbanization and Mobility

The Axial Age occurred at a time and in places of increasing urbanization. More and more, persons were living nearer to one another, establishing new towns and cities and enlarging older ones. People had lived in urban settings prior to the Axial Age, of course, but now that practice accelerated and expanded. Nomadic peoples began to settle, take up agriculture, and enjoy the benefits of a more sedentary existence. Those who had lived in villages moved to larger towns and cities to take advantage of new economic opportunities.

The rise of urbanization was significant because of its effects on social structures and the human psyche. Urban life often disrupts one's sense of identity and places traditional values and beliefs in doubt. In towns and cities, one often meets others quite unlike oneself, and that fact frequently challenges a person to look at him- or herself in different ways. Conventional beliefs and ways of being are thrown into flux. Some persons are challenged by such conditions to entertain new ideas, while others cling more resolutely to their old beliefs. In either case, customs and traditions often lose their taken-for-granted character.

Higher densities of people also intensify exposure to the realities of life. In urban areas, one sees more sickness and suffering, more death, more instances of

3. Alfred North Whitehead exaggerated only slightly when he said, "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato." Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 39.

our inhumanity to one another. Reinhold Niebuhr's classic work *Moral Man and Immoral Society* argued quite persuasively that persons who ordinarily behave very morally as individuals are often moved to act immorally as members of a collective.[4] It is almost as if we humans tend lose our moral bearings when we congregate and engage in "groupthink."[5]

Political Disorder and Instability

The axial centers were generally characterized by political and legal upheaval. The Chinese Axial Age overlapped an epoch in Chinese history known as the Period of Warring States. The traditional and relatively stable feudal system was disintegrating, and small principalities began to vie for hegemony. Hundreds of thousands of Chinese lost their lives in the ensuing conflicts. Profound and rapid political and economic transformation in the area surrounding the Ganges River set the stage for the Indian ascetic movement. The Axial Age in the land of Judah proceeded under the constant threat (and eventual actuality) of the tiny kingdom's engulfment by the larger empires that surrounded it. And Zoroaster's reform of Iranian religion was undertaken at a time of great lawlessness in West Asia, as his society was plagued by independent warlords and bands of warriors with little respect for human life.

Rapid political and social change generates great uncertainty and insecurity for many. But interestingly—and this is observed less frequently—such times are often the most creative and innovative for religious and philosophical thought. The context of political and social instability fosters just the right conditions to evoke the best (as well as the worst) in human beings. With their worlds in flux and their received traditions under question, the bold thinkers of the Axial Age experienced freedom to ponder and live their lives in new ways.

Selfhood and the Transience of Life

Sages in all the axial centers became increasingly anxious about death and preoccupied with what, if anything, lay beyond it. Preaxial humans, to be sure, were not unconcerned with death, but they seemed more generally to accept death as a natural part of life and rarely gave attention to the idea of an afterlife. For the most part, they valued a long life with many descendants but hardly expected anything more than that. One's sense of identity prior to the Axial Age was more firmly rooted in participation in the family, the clan, or the tribe.

4. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013).

5. This term was coined in 1952 by William H. Whyte in *Fortune* magazine.

Ideas about whom and what one was and what life was about were derived from being a part of a larger human reality. Accordingly, death could be accepted, knowing that the family would survive one's personal demise.

By the Axial Age, however, attitudes toward death began to reflect a greater concern with the experience of dying and what occurs after it. Increasingly, death was regarded with dread and fear, and speculation about what might lie beyond was filled with both hope and terror. Every conceivable possibility for the afterlife seems to have been entertained, from continued existence in a delightful place, to life in the most unpleasant realms of the underworld, to rebirth in this life, to the decomposition of body and soul back to the elements of the earth, to resurrection of the dead at the end of the age. These issues and proposals were passionately debated—an indication that something of great importance was at stake, something that marked an important change from the preaxial age.

Reflected in this shift in attitudes about death is the rise of a sense of individuality and selfhood. The Axial Age was the time when people began to experience themselves as separate, autonomous individuals—as selves. With this developing sense of selfhood came a greater consciousness of the human being as a moral agent, one who is accountable and responsible for his or her own actions. Although we today take individuality, moral agency, and personal responsibility as givens in life, the concept of a "self," in the sense just described, emerges at a particular point in time: the Axial Age. Humans have not always been "selves."

As humans began to think of themselves as separate, autonomous individuals, death became a more dreaded reality. Selfhood promotes a feeling of isolation, or at least differentiation, from the rest of the human community and the rest of reality, making it more difficult to accept dying as a part of the natural process of living, as merely a passing event in a greater reality. When we have a sense of self, death means the end of the thing we hold most dear: ourselves. Knowing that the world, our descendants, or even our accomplishments live on after us is hardly any consolation. Woody Allen spoke in the spirit of this attitude when he said, "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. . . . I want to achieve it through not dying."[6] The self does not wish to die, and it looks for ways to avoid death or to survive it.

6. Eric Lax, *Woody Allen: A Biography* (Boston: Da Capo, 2000), 183.

Transcendental Consciousness

The growing sense of selfhood and anxiety about life's transience stimulated conjectures about the nature of the person and spurred the search to discover something within the human individual that might endure the dissolution of the body, something eternal or immortal. As part of this quest, axial sages developed a new way of thinking about the world and the place of humanity within it. S. N. Eisenstadt, one of the first scholars to study the sociological dimensions of the Axial Age, calls this way of looking at life "transcendental consciousness,"[7] the ability to stand back and see the world more comprehensively, as a totality, and to look at it more critically and reflectively, not merely accepting the world as it appears or as tradition says it is. Transcendental consciousness produced novel conceptions of the world's ultimate reality. In some cases, the axial sages were not content to accept the old anthropomorphic gods and goddesses as the highest realities or powers governing the universe. They often conceived ultimate reality in terms that transcended the ancient gods of the older, preaxial religions. They imagined sublime conceptions of ultimate reality, such the Hindu Brahman and the Chinese Dao, so great that they exceeded the human capacity to think or speak of them.

Thinking about the highest or deepest realities led these individuals to reflect more consciously on the process of thinking itself. Axial sages became progressively more interested in what we call epistemology: how we know what we know and what the limitations of our knowledge are. Attention to epistemology promoted a greater sense of self-consciousness and awareness of humanity's place in the universe.

From Cosmic Maintenance to Personal Transformation

Finally, the Axial Age marks a dramatic change in the very function of religion in human life. During this era, the purpose of religion shifted from what John Hick calls "cosmic maintenance" to "personal transformation."[8] When a religion's purpose was cosmic maintenance, the religion functioned chiefly as a ritual means for human beings to collaborate with the divine powers to assist in keeping the world in good working order. The gods and goddesses relied on humans to help them provide the means to ensure reproduction and the productivity of the land, and to keep the sun and the seasons on course.

7. S. N. Eisenstadt, *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

8. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

Humans believed they had to provide sacrificial food and other pleasantries to the divinities to enable and encourage the gods to promote the processes of life. Divine and human beings worked together to maintain the well-being of the world upon which they both depended. To understand this view of religion, one has to set aside the belief that gods are omnipotent and completely self-sufficient; the gods and goddesses certainly surpassed humans in power and dignity but were usually not considered supreme entities.

During the Axial Age, however, religion took on an unprecedented new role in human life: providing the means for the individual human being to undergo whatever change was necessary to achieve immortality, happiness, or whatever that religion considered the highest good in life. Selfhood and the heightened awareness of suffering and death prompted some religions to imagine wonderful afterlife experiences as ways to overcome the painful realities of this life. The achievement of these goals was connected to transforming the self from its ordinary state to another. It might mean accepting a new vision of the way the universe works, accepting the demands of a particular god with the power to bestow immortality or paradise, or subjecting the self to a discipline that reshaped it in more wholesome ways. However it was imagined, the rise of the self in the Axial Age meant that religions were faced with new problems. In response to this novel predicament, religion began to facilitate personal transformation by helping people understand the nature and cause of their problems and providing innovative ways to solve them.

Jaspers was certainly correct in his contention that the Axial Age laid contemporary humanity's spiritual foundations. In this book, we will probe this idea in much greater detail by carefully examining the specific and distinctive developments within the axial centers. The focus of our attention will be the axial centers in West, South, and East Asia.