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Between facts and myth: Karl Jaspers and the actuality of the axial age

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Karl Jaspers's axial age thesis refers to a demythologizing revolution in worldviews that took place in the first millennium BCE. Although his philosophy has been pejoratively described as '*Werk ohne Wirkung*', this idea has attracted considerable scholarly attention in recent years. This article aims to critically engage with the very notion of the axial age by looking first at contextual issues, then at the key claims Jaspers makes, before examining the actuality of the thesis and the problem of its characterization as an 'age'. The conclusion is that Jaspers's attempt to unify the complex processes of demythologization under the notion of the axial age has produced a myth, and that this continues to have consequences today.

Keywords: axial age; Karl Jaspers; transcendence; religion; Jürgen Habermas

*'Du bleibst am Ursprung.
Ursprung ist das Ziel'*
– Karl Kraus

Introduction

The idea of the axial age has garnered increasing attention amongst philosophers and social scientists in recent years and has even entered more mainstream discussions.¹ As a concept, it is meant to name a fundamental shift in cognitive orientation that took place in various locations across ancient Eurasia around 500 BCE. This shift is supposed to constitute a rupture with previous mythological forms of consciousness and to provide the primary basis for all subsequent developments in world history; both the major world religions and philosophy itself have, as Jürgen Habermas has put it, a 'shared origin' in this period.² The current interest in this alleged epoch is by no means disinterested. As the Egyptologist Jan Assmann has recently stated, the axial age belongs to the discourse of modernity: it is the 'quest for the roots of modernity'.³ The appeal of this non-Eurocentric historical narrative is clearly related to the globalized conditions of contemporary societies. In claiming that the plurality of world religions that constitute or have constituted the cultural identities of the majority of people can be identified as part of the same epochal shift, it is possible to posit some sort of original unity in order to facilitate future communicative interaction and undercut the apparent inevitability of a *clash of civilizations*.⁴ Viewed in this way, the axial age thesis seems to sit uneasily between history and normative theory: it seeks to describe a common origin in order to prescribe a

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future solidarity. In this regard, and with a certain irony, it seems as though the idea of the axial age as a single demythologizing turn instantiated across different parts of ancient Eurasia bears affinity with that most common of myths, the myth of origin.

The idea of the axial age or period (*die Achsenzeit*) is first developed by the existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers as the empirical basis for a theory of universal history.⁵ Jaspers is frequently referred to in contemporary discussions of the notion of the axial age. Yet too little attention has been paid to his explication of the idea. I wish to examine Jaspers's original articulation of the thesis and to draw together some of the current research on this theme. The aim is not only to emphasize the problems inherent in Jaspers's notion of the axial age, but also, taking the recent work of Habermas as an example, to show that these problems persist in its philosophical deployment. The analysis will first look at the prehistory and context of the idea of the axial age in the work of Jaspers. It will then closely examine some of the key claims Jaspers makes in the text itself. A key problem for Jaspers's approach lies in the combination of existential notions of selfhood and interiority with the positivity necessitated by historical analysis. His account often seems vague when it comes to drawing a relation between these aspects; it falls between two stools, philosophy and historical sociology. The analysis of Jaspers's text will be followed by some more general criticism concerning the actuality of the concept and the limits of its continued deployment.

Precursors and context

Reflections on the parallel emergence of prophets, sages and philosophers of world historical significance long precede Jaspers's explication of the axial age thesis. Jaspers himself identifies two precursors in the nineteenth century, Ernst von Lasaulx and Viktor von Strauss, and one in the twentieth, Alfred Weber.⁶ He provides a citation from a Lao-tse commentary of 1870 in which Strauss identifies Confucius and Lao-tse with 'a strange movement of the spirit [that] passed through all civilised people', which includes the prophets in Israel, the Pre-Socratics in Greece, Zarathustra in Persia and Sakyamuni in Greece.⁷ Lasaulx makes a similar claim concerning the simultaneous emergence of such 'reformers' in Persia, China, India, Israel and Greece (but also Numa in Rome) around 600 BCE.⁸ These claims anticipate those later made by Jaspers about the period in a significant manner. Nevertheless, Lasaulx and Strauss speak in terms of a 'strange concurrence' and 'mysterious laws', respectively.⁹ It is worth bearing in mind that Strauss is an author of extant hymns whose interest in the pre-Christian era was motivated by a negative assessment of D. F. Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu*, whereas the Catholic Lasaulx sought, as Hans Joas claims, 'to reconstitute a Christian perspective in the writing of universal history'.¹⁰

While some have speculated that Vico's *Scienza Nuova* is the earliest precursor,¹¹ a more convincing claim, made by Jan Assmann, is that the 'long prehistory' of the concept finds its earliest attestation in the work of the eighteenth century French Orientalist, Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron.¹² Based on the same source, Hans Joas maintains that, already in 1771, the 'deeply Catholic' Anquetil-Duperron 'claimed that the ideas articulated by Zoroaster probably in the sixth century BCE were part of a more general "revolution" in different parts of the world'.¹³ If nothing else, this shows that notions akin to the axial age appeared plausible to scholars of 'the Orient' long before they entered general discourse. Yet, and this is the central claim Joas makes, it also seems that the appeal of such a thesis is bound up with the religious convictions of these interpreters.

It is important to stress that a significant formative influence on Jaspers was Max Weber, with whom he was closely acquainted from his time in Heidelberg.¹⁴ In the years prior to his death, Weber had written extensively on Indian and Chinese religion as well as on Ancient Judaism. He speaks loosely of a ‘prophetic age’ in Israel, Babylon, China, India and Greece between 800 and 500 BCE.¹⁵ Hans Joas claims that for Weber this era of prophets comprises ‘the crucial event in the history of religion – the turning point between tens of thousands of years of “magical” religion and the new age of post-magical “salvation religions”’.¹⁶ Yet although Weber was a relatively sober thinker – indeed one who purported to be ‘religiously tone-deaf’¹⁷ – Joas identifies a surreptitious Protestant polemic within his work whereby Catholic sacrament is identified with pre-axial magic. If one accepts this and Weber’s overriding interest in the uniqueness of the Occident, the idea of a decisive break achieved in the Eurasian ‘prophetic age’ is enmeshed in a narrative that is nevertheless at once Protestant and Eurocentric.

Recent commentators have also suggested that Jaspers draws more heavily on Alfred Weber’s ‘notion of a (near-) global spiritual turning’ than he himself admits.¹⁸ Citing his *Kulturgeschichte als Kultursoziologie* (1935), Torpey and Boy convincingly demonstrate that this text ‘contained the axial thesis *in nuce*’.¹⁹ Unlike the previous examples, Alfred Weber provides a hypothesis as to why these changes occurred concurrently: ‘the penetration of the nations of charioteers and horsemen from Central Asia’ into China, India and ‘the West’ are supposed to have had ‘analogous consequences in all three regions’.²⁰ Yet while Weber wishes to posit the influx of equestrian warriors as a primary cause of the shift in worldviews, Jaspers only entertains such a thesis insofar as it ‘demonstrates the existence of real uniformity within the Eurasian bloc’.²¹ Ultimately Jaspers thinks this may be a necessary causal factor, but it is not sufficient to explain the ‘remarkable and all-embracing’ achievements of the axial age. Torpey and Boy spell out Jaspers’s unwillingness to commit to a sociological explanation for the parallel developments in the three regions and emphasize his suggestion of an ‘immaterial cause ... a movement of the human spirit that is not accounted for by sociological factors such as social actors, organizations, or institutions’.²² It now seems clear that while there is robust evidence as to the existence of the *Reiter-Völker*, their incursions appear too early to provide the explanatory force Alfred Weber ascribes them.²³ But if better historical knowledge has proved Jaspers’s hesitancy correct in this regard, this can hardly be described as a virtue of his analysis. As the claim by Torpey and Boy suggests, Jaspers’s interest in spiritual or immaterial factors makes his approach to history rather peculiar.

While the general idea of a concurrent change in worldviews in various locations in China, India and the West is not new, examining the context within which Jaspers articulates it may aid in determining its specificity. It is noteworthy, then, that Jaspers first presents the idea of the ‘Axial Age’ (*l’époque-axe*) at the inaugural meeting of *Rencontres internationales*, which was held in Geneva in 1946 on the topic, ‘What Is Europe?’²⁴ Here, he addresses the need for Europe to lose any ‘absolute’ sense of its importance and suggests that the distinctly European advances of modernity pale in comparison to ‘the parallel evolution of three independent and great spiritualities’.²⁵ Jaspers continues: ‘For the Christian, it is Christ who represents the axis of universal history ... But from an empirical point of view – which is not by necessity in conflict with religious belief – the axis of world history is situated in the period between 800 to 200 BC’.²⁶

The introduction of this rather global concept in a conference held on European identity at the end of the Second World War suggests that Jaspers is attempting to undermine the Eurocentric emphasis of previous approaches to historiography.

Nevertheless, the idea does not find its full articulation until several years later in *The Origin and Goal of History*.²⁷ With this ambitious title, Jaspers announces nothing less than a postulate of historical reason or 'article of faith': 'mankind has one single origin and one goal'.²⁸ These notions remain at the level of faith because they are outside the scope of human experience.²⁹ Instead of wishing to abandon or radically overhaul the theory of universal history in the wake of the catastrophes of totalitarianism, war and the death camps, Jaspers's intention is to provide it with new foundations. As a concept that purports to unite three distinct regions, the axial age is deemed capable of providing an *empirical* re-grounding for the project of universal history. This is significant because Jaspers wants to avoid two tendencies that can characterize the philosophical underpinnings of historiography. On the one hand, traditional approaches to the philosophy of history can seem both Eurocentric and Christian in character. In making sense of the preconditions for the modern age, earlier historians have often ascribed too much significance to Jerusalem and Athens. Jaspers holds such conceptions of history to be too particularistic: 'World history was the history of the West'.³⁰ On the other hand, a positivist conception of history would lack the unifying, teleological emphasis that Jaspers thinks must be postulated if one is to grasp the meaning of history or attribute significance: 'positivism aimed at according equal rights to all men ... Battles between negroes in the Sudan were on the same historical plane as Marathon and Salamis'.³¹ Thus, if historicism is blind to historical processes that did not directly lead to European modernity, positivism suffers a dearth of the conceptual resources necessary for discerning significance and articulating a cohesive narrative. Jaspers seeks to chart a course between these twin perils:

The meaning of empirical history, so far as it is empirically accessible – whether it possesses such a meaning, or whether human beings only attribute one to it – we can only grasp when guided by the idea of the unity of the whole of history. We shall examine empirical facts in order to see to what extent they are in accordance with such an idea of unity or how far they absolutely contradict it.³²

In conceiving of the central tenet of his philosophy of history as an article of faith and nonetheless proposing the empirical basis of such a view of history, Jaspers lets slip a certain tension between the existential suppositions of his thought and the more staid demand for empirical positivity necessitated by his wish to avoid the Eurocentric bias of previous philosophies of history. This desire to move away from accounts of universal history that look partisan at the global level can be seen as Jaspers's attempt to present a pluralistic vision of humanity in the wake of the atrocities associated with the war, specifically those linked to a belief in a non-universal historical destiny. While one cannot fault Jaspers's intentions, it remains open to question whether the idea of historical analysis being guided by faith is not itself part of the problem.

In the beginning of the first chapter of the book – where the main account of the axial age is given – Jaspers rearticulates the principal problem of the philosophy of history as being linked to its overwhelmingly Christian character. He identifies a line of historical thinking running from Augustine to Hegel which 'visualised the movement of God through history'.³³ From this perspective, the Christian kerygma is deemed an incontrovertible historical demarcation. Jaspers indirectly cites Hegel as the last great exemplar of this tradition and one for whom the 'appearance of the Son of God is the axis of world history'.³⁴ At a formal level, our measurement of historical time is obviously related to Christianity. Yet the idea that Christ constitutes an 'axis of world history' in a more

substantial sense, which is the claim Jaspers attributes to Hegel,³⁵ is problematic because such a conception of history obviously cannot be valid for those whose beliefs differ.³⁶ Thus, while the Christian view of history is universal in scope, it is certainly not universal in appeal: ‘the Christian faith is only one faith, not the faith of mankind’.³⁷ What remains significant is that the temporal structure of Christianity for believers, namely, one in which a prehistory leads to an epochal event which both breaks from this past and is the point of reference for future developments, is deemed to be an important resource for the development of a universal history. In order to overcome the problematic aspect of the Christian picture, it seems, what is required is a compelling account that relies on empirical evidence rather than a specific faith.

An axis of world history, if such a thing exists, would have to be discovered empirically, as a fact capable of being accepted as such by all men, Christians included. This axis would be situated at the point in history which gave birth to everything which since then man has been able to be, the point most overwhelmingly fruitful in fashioning humanity; its character would have to be, if not empirically cogent and evident, yet so convincing to empirical insight as to give rise to a common frame of historical self-comprehension for all peoples – for the West, for Asia, and for all men on earth without regard to particular articles of faith.³⁸

Thus, on the basis of his faith in an origin and goal in history – that is, a single meaningful overarching narrative – Jaspers seeks a historical focal point that is empirically plausible and therefore acceptable in principle to the plurality of peoples. To this end he points to the parallel emergence or religious and philosophical figures and texts as marking an autochthonous but structurally similar cognitive shift that took place in China, India and ‘the West’ (i.e. Iran, Israel–Palestine and Greece) between 800 and 200 BCE.³⁹

By looking at the precursors to Jaspers’s account of the axial age, it was possible to show that the idea, if not the term itself, has had a long prehistory and that this was bound up with certain other religious or Eurocentric claims. The post-war context within which Jaspers develops the idea makes clear his more pluralistic approach. Jaspers wants to stress the empirical basis of his approach in order to avoid the disguised theology of previous forms of universal history. Nevertheless, there is something obscure about the positivity of the evidence to which he appeals. As the above quotation makes clear with its puzzling distinction between *empirical cogency* and *empirical insight*, Jaspers shies away from a strong claim to validity. This was already seen in his unwillingness to affirm Alfred Weber’s claim about the impact of equestrian warrior tribes. Jaspers’s caution regarding empirical facts is understandable if what he seeks is evidence for an ‘article of faith’, which in the context of his own existential philosophy would be therefore beyond positive representation.⁴⁰ Jaspers’s basic approach is thus guided by his immediate historical context as well as by his own philosophical commitments. It will become clearer that these commitments determine not only his general approach to the philosophy of history, but also his interpretation of the material.

The key features of the axial age

It might be hoped that having articulated the need for an empirically grounded conception of universal history, Jaspers would proceed by developing a rich account of the key features of the axial age that would link together details from the different textual sources into an illuminating constellation. Unfortunately, this is not the case; an effusive existentialist jargon scatterguns statements, but becomes elusive with regard to anything as prosaic as facts. Jaspers’s two most basic claims seem to be that for the first time

transcendence became a human possibility and that the capacity to transcend brute existence allowed for *critical reflection* on mythological or quasi-natural forms of authority and sense-making practices. Yet Jaspers does not present straightforward arguments or theses, so it will be necessary to skip along with his thoughts, commenting upon and criticizing them where necessary.

Assmann holds that with his axial age thesis, Jaspers is making a claim regarding the origin of 'general consciousness'.⁴¹ It certainly seems that the capacity to take a kind of speculative or reflective perspective from which to survey existence in general is assumed to be characteristic of all the figures from the different regions:

What is new about this age, in all three areas of the world, is that man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations. He experiences the terror of the world and his own powerlessness. He asks radical questions. Face to face with the void he strives for liberation and redemption. By consciously recognising his limits he sets himself the highest goals. He experiences absoluteness in the depths of selfhood and in the lucidity of transcendence.⁴²

The totality of existence comes into view and is reflected upon for the first time in the axial period. Such a level of reflection seems to imply transcendence. Thus, Benjamin Schwartz, one of the forerunners to the current discussion of the axial age thesis, claims that the 'common underlying element' which might unite these emerging philosophical and religious traditions is the 'strain towards transcendence'.⁴³ Nevertheless, it is simply not clear why this necessitates 'terror', why such fear is conceived as a new feature of the age, nor how the 'void' is applicable to all axial cases.⁴⁴

It could be that the void in question is a chink within the formerly immanent (i.e. mythic) framework, which enables the individual a reflexive space from which to survey the whole. Or, it could be that this the gap that opens up after the individual goes beyond such a nexus. Jaspers fails to clarify this issue. Nevertheless, the focus on selfhood makes us aware that it is not simply consciousness of the whole, but a reflexive or second-order consciousness that is in question. Thus, Jaspers also claims that 'thinking became its own object'.⁴⁵ As Charles Taylor articulates it, this form of reflexive cognition means that 'the formulae we use to describe or operate in the world themselves come under critical examination'.⁴⁶ Taylor wants to link this to the idea of a moral revolution, which 'disembeds us from the cosmic sacred and posits a new relation to God, as [the] designer' of a moral order oriented towards 'human flourishing'.⁴⁷ An aspect of this idea will be explored a little later in the discussion of critical reflection, but it is worth noting that – in view of the persistence of the caste system in India⁴⁸ – this can by no means be simply equated with the emergence of a universal morality. The notion of transcendence or reflexivity might best be seen as the emergence of a *capacity*. Such a conception of the axial age has been thematized in terms of cognitive evolution by some thinkers in the recent debate. The emergence of a reflexive consciousness in the axial age is the move from a mythic form of 'cognitive governance' to a theoretic one.⁴⁹ The transcendental breakthrough associated with the axial age leads both to a consciousness of being as a whole and to self-consciousness. Yet Jaspers fails to provide examples, and it is highly unclear how reflexive consciousness is to be applied in all cases. Although the geometric proofs of Pythagoras can be considered second-order thinking, there is no evidence to suggest that those pre-Socratics who present cosmological theories reflect on their own cognitive processes.⁵⁰ Similarly, reflexivity for the Hebrew prophets can only mean a reflective appropriation of a tradition within a given historical context.

The capacity for individual reflection is what is thought to have led to disagreement, contestation and communication. Jaspers claims that the axial age allowed for experimentation with the most ‘contradictory possibilities’.⁵¹ This may be generally true, but it would be harder to apply it specifically to the prophetic tradition, for example, because, while their writings exhibit their different personalities, the individual prophets can hardly be thought to occupy radically different positions from one another.⁵² The notion of conflict at the level of worldviews, which he terms ‘spiritual chaos’, is important and can be thought to lead to the critical function of emerging consciousness:

hitherto unconsciously accepted ideas, customs and conditions were subjected to examination, questioned and liquidated. Everything was swept into the vortex. In so far as the traditional substance still possessed vitality and reality, its manifestations were clarified and thereby transmuted.⁵³

Reflexive cognition is dissolvent of traditional ties to the extent that their arbitrary nature is revealed and they can no longer function effectively. Thus, while Schwartz’s title refers to the axial age as the ‘age of transcendence’,⁵⁴ his contemporary Arnaldo Momigliano sees it as ‘an age of criticism’.⁵⁵ The dissolvent effect nascent consciousness has on tradition does not mean it is abandoned – it can be refigured as Jaspers suggests. While no examples are given, they certainly abound in Plato’s adaptations of myth and in the heightened moral consciousness attested to in the prophetic engagement with Deuteronomic law.⁵⁶ Thus, the critical function ascribed to consciousness means Jaspers views the axial age as one of radical demythologization because even where tradition was being upheld and retained, its basis was transformed:

Rationality and rationally clarified experience launched a struggle against the myth (*logos* against *mythos*); a further struggle developed for the transcendence of One God against non-existence demons, and finally an ethical rebellion took place against the unreal figures of the gods. Religion was rendered ethical, and the majesty of the deity was thereby increased. The myth, on the other hand ... was turned into parable.⁵⁷

The emergence of a reflexive second-order consciousness leads to rationalization. Such a process changes the function of myth. This changed of function is evident in Plato’s many uses of myth as it is in Homer’s aesthetic restaging of mythic narratives in the *Odyssey*. Whether in the latter case it is best explained as a result of second-order consciousness will be returned to in due course. Nevertheless, for the moment it should be pointed out that even though Jaspers conceives the axial age as a demythologizing revolution in consciousness, he has also to admit that myth remained ‘the continued belief of the mass of the people’.⁵⁸ As Shmuel Eisenstadt notes, initially at least, it is only ‘small nuclei of ... cultural elites or of intellectuals [that] developed the new cosmologies’.⁵⁹ For Jaspers, the decisive break that these elites effect is conceived as a process of ‘spiritualisation’ in which the ‘calm polarities’ of mythological thinking are transformed into the ‘disquiet of opposites and antinomies’.⁶⁰

The relation between transcendence, tension and criticism is best articulated by Eisenstadt’s claim that ‘in the axial age civilizations, the perception of a sharp disjunction between the mundane and transmundane worlds developed’.⁶¹ This ‘chasm between the transcendental and mundane’ is potentially bridged through the ‘reconstruction of human behaviour’ on the basis of ‘higher moral precepts’.⁶² Nevertheless, it worth noting that although Jaspers has emphasized the divisive and conflicted nature of the axial developments, he subsequently speaks of a speculative union, an ontology which is ‘without

duality' and features 'the disappearance of the subject and the object, the coincidence of opposites'.⁶³ It might be that overcoming the division is based on activating higher moral principles. Yet Jaspers's examples – and these are *the only concrete examples* provided in which multiple sources are related – suggest meditative flight rather than ethical zeal:

in soaring toward the idea, in the resignation of ataraxia, in the absorption of meditation, in the knowledge of his self and the world as *atman*, in the experience of *nirvana*, in concord with the *tao*, or in surrender to the will of God. These paths are widely divergent in their conviction and dogma, but common to all of them is man's reaching out beyond himself by growing aware of himself within the whole of Being and the fact that he can tread them only as an individual on his own ... What was later called reason and personality was revealed for the first time during the Axial Period.⁶⁴

In pointing towards a series of actual doctrines found within axial age thinkers, Jaspers finally makes us aware of axial characteristics that have some empirical foundation. Nevertheless, simply taking these features as synonymous with subsequent cultural developments suggests either anachronism or an ahistorical core to Jaspers's conception of universal history. It seems that the stress on individuality itself may in part come from the survival of so many canonical texts attributed to individual authors from this period. 'Hermits and wandering thinkers in China, ascetics in India, philosophers in Greece and prophets in Israel all belong together, however much they differ from each other ... Man proved capable of contrasting himself inwardly with the entire universe'.⁶⁵ If the cosmic dualism was overcome, this was accomplished in the minds of individual thinkers. These thinkers achieved a 'step into universality', but the age itself becomes less calm because there occurs a jostling between such universals.⁶⁶ Of course, this is only related to a disproportionately small group of thinkers because a gulf separates 'the peaks of human potentiality and the crowd', who were 'unable to follow in their footsteps'.⁶⁷ The authentic few nonetheless open up new possibilities for the species: 'The whole of humanity took a great leap'.⁶⁸

Jaspers claims that there is further correspondence between the different axial zones insofar as there is a similarities between the social environments within which the purportedly analogous developments took place. The chief characteristic is the co-existence of small city- and nation-states in the three axial regions. The axial thinkers are not conceived as sedentary scribes, but as dynamic individuals who moved from place to place or encountered different positions within bustling cities. Jaspers contrasts the dynamism and potential volatility of the small states with the obdurate 'spiritual conditions' of the major civilizations.⁶⁹ Apparently, the lack of spiritual progress made in these older civilizations meant that the potential for development 'did not enter consciousness', whereas the rapid changes in worldview that smaller states underwent 'reaches consciousness'.⁷⁰ This leads to reflection on history and an awareness of the newness and precariousness of their age. Nevertheless, this could lead to a sense that the present age was one of 'decadence' or that 'catastrophe' was on the horizon.⁷¹ It is this concern about catastrophe that leads to the reformist programmes of some figures associated with the axial age, and Jaspers, following Max Weber, sees a parallel between the educational ambitions of Confucius and Plato in this regard.⁷² Of course, neither of these figures was capable of successfully maintaining the ear of a tyrant, and the author must therefore admit of a disconnection between the new axial figures and contemporary political authorities. Thus, in general the cognitive revolutions of the axial age did not find sustainable institutions and insofar as they were institutionalized they lost their dynamic quality:

What began as freedom of motion finally became anarchy. When the age lost its creativeness, a process of dogmatic fixation and levelling down took place in all three cultural realms. Out of the disorder that was growing intolerable arose a striving after new ties, through the re-establishment of enduring conditions.⁷³

Thus, Jaspers seems to suggest that the radical demythologization which he associates with the axial age led ultimately to the breakdown of society. In reconstituting itself, society adopted some of the traits of the older major civilizations and produced expansive and highly organized empires.⁷⁴ While these new social formations lacked the cultural inventiveness of their predecessors, they maintained a '*relation to the spirit of what had gone before*'.⁷⁵ Unlike the previous civilizations, then, those that emerged in the wake of the axial age are marked by 'spiritual tension'. In these civilizations the imperial form returns explicitly: it enables social stability 'in the form of conscious despotism ... merely to preserve a culture in icy rigidity'.⁷⁶ Thus, the achievements of the axial age were already held up as 'a model and an object of veneration',⁷⁷ undoubtedly due to their 'purity ... clarity, ingeniousness and freshness'.⁷⁸ For Jaspers, the axial age has become a kind of mine for the subsequent developments in world history. 'In each new upward flight it [humankind] returns in recollection to this period and is fired anew by it'.⁷⁹

The actuality of axiality

The two key traits associated with the axial age are *transcendence* and *critique*. Transcendence seems to imply *individuals* capable of *reflexive thinking*, whereas critique is linked to progressive *demythologization* or *rationalization* and a *tension* between worldviews. Nevertheless, it has been shown, albeit in a piecemeal fashion, that many of the ways in which Jaspers describes these different characteristics cannot convincingly be applied to all of the axial zones. A case in point would seem to be the central idea of transcendence, which seems ill-suited to the Chinese case. It may be argued that in such a case that transcendence as such is not required, merely the emergence of a cosmic principle. While this may be so, the alleged tension between the transcendent and the immanent – the spiritual conflict that is supposed to differentiate post-axial from pre-axial civilizations – is apparently not evident in the case of China, where 'the sharp demarcation between the worlds of the sacred and of the secular never does occur'.⁸⁰ A second challenge to Jaspers's thesis is that the figure of Zoroaster seems to belong to the second millennium BCE and hence to significantly pre-date the period in question.⁸¹ This might be hugely problematic insofar as it could be seen to undermine the parallelism that seems important to Jaspers's conception of the historical axis. The claim that the emergence of transcendental reflection enabled axial figures to critically reflect on myth such that it was reduced to parable seems not to be the case with regard to Homer, where no such transcendence is offered.⁸² In Homer's *Odyssey* myth becomes the material for epic poetry. As such, the cycle of mythic fate is in some sense broken. Yet this undermining of myth seems to occur aesthetically, rather than through a critical purchase first afforded by transcendence. Furthermore, the pre-eminence of Homer's work for subsequent generations indicates the preponderance of the aesthetic undermining of myth for subsequent demythologization. These three different examples show how some of Jaspers's definitions are ill-suited to the content, how some of the content indicates a broader temporal spectrum, and how the relationship between his concepts could be conceived differently.

It may nonetheless be possible to defend Jaspers's characterization of the axial age. It could be that although the plurality of worldviews that emerged at this time cannot be united under dominant characteristics that each share in common, there are nevertheless many shared features such that it would be possible to construct some form of conceptual constellation or family resemblances by which to characterize the age. The fundamental idea of the axial age as an era in which a whole host of cognitive orientations that claimed universal validity emerged and thereby broke with the mythic past would provide sufficient ground. Unity would reside in the fact of plurality. This is already apparent in Jaspers's assurance that the different figures 'all belong together, however much they differ from each other'.⁸³

Nevertheless, in asserting the unity of these emergent worldviews in such a fashion, Jaspers does little more than gesticulate. He does not provide a robust philosophical or sociological justification. In this sense, besides from coining the term 'axial age', he does not move beyond those other thinkers who have preceded him. Indeed, although Jaspers is dismissive because Lasaulx provides 'not an explanation' but 'merely a paraphrase of the mystery', little more can be attributed to his own position.⁸⁴ Hence, he speaks candidly of 'the enigma' and 'the mystery'.⁸⁵ He rebuts any suggestion that his discussion might allude to divine intervention 'without saying so directly'. But he does so not only because it would entail a leap into 'pseudo knowledge', but also 'an importunity against the deity'.⁸⁶ Shortly thereafter he refers to the deity again, in a manner that seems to contradict his previous statement. This occurs in the context of explaining how the 'historical fact of the threefold origin' creates tricky boundaries for communication.⁸⁷ For Jaspers moving beyond such boundaries 'into boundless communication' is the 'secret of being human' because it prevents dogmatism:

The claim to exclusive possession of the truth ... that disaster for the West – most intensely so in its secularised forms, such as the dogmatic philosophies and the so-called scientific ideologies – can be vanquished by the very fact that God has manifested himself historically in several fashions and has opened up many ways towards Himself. 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 the truth.⁸⁸

It is hardly worth noting why a doctrine regarding the plural manifestation of God will not *vanquish* such scientific foes. Nevertheless, the term 'as though' suggests a fictive or metaphorical device at play.

There is no evidence to suggest that Jaspers was a religious believer.⁸⁹ He nevertheless identifies philosophy with faith, albeit faith conceived of as openness to being and a non-dogmatic striving. The corresponding notion of truth is one which is never fully amenable to either philosophical or religious explication, it is subjective: 'Philosophical faith ... looks on all formulated and written philosophy only as preparation or recollection, only as inspiration or confirmation ...: it cannot become a credo'.⁹⁰ His definition of 'unbelief' is telling: 'any attitude that asserts absolute immanence and denies transcendence'.⁹¹ Nevertheless, even unbelief can be the starting point of belief: 'Transcendence seems to be accessible by all roads'.⁹² It is in this context that one can understand his conception of a 'perennial philosophy'. For Jaspers, the heroic individuals who make up the history of philosophy and the great religious traditions – though Buddha and Jesus are classed amongst *The Great Philosophers*⁹³ – are united in that they each wrestle with a transcendent truth. While philosophers 'strive to apprehend eternal truth ... the complete truth is not objectively accessible in time'.⁹⁴ The plurality of religious and philosophical ideas

presents kaleidoscope visions of an essentially incommensurable truth which authentic thinking forever circles. In this regard, Jaspers's religious philosophy stands in contrast to an *a la carte* deism, which he associates with the Enlightenment:

The Enlightenment sought to find the true religion by assembling the best from all religions. The result however was not the authentic truth, purified of historical accident, but a collection of abstractions watered down by rationalism. The source of this universal faith was only a critical, measuring intelligence. The profound meaning, the poignancy was lost. Trivial generalizations remained.⁹⁵

To return then to the problematic reference to God, it can be said that Jaspers's claim regarding God's historical manifestation is merely another way of expressing this constitutively transcendent conception of truth that all authentic philosophy purportedly circles. Something similar occurs in Heidegger's 1935 lectures on metaphysics, where it is claimed 'that in the history of philosophy all thinkers have at bottom said the same thing'.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, it is questionable how valuable Jaspers's philosophy of *history* is if its core is premised on an unchanging yet opaque metaphysical truth as 'an inexhaustible stream that flows from the history of philosophy as a whole from China to the West, yet flows only when the primal source is captured for new realizations in the present'.⁹⁷

Jaspers criticizes Hegel's philosophy of history for its unwarranted leaps in region and time⁹⁸ – the underlying problem being Hegel's reliance on a metaphysical macrosubject, world-spirit. Yet if Jaspers himself relies on metaphysics and in the process loses the key Hegelian advance, namely, thinking historical change, one may ask whether the pluralist gain is worth the new metaphysical promissory note. If true philosophical insight cannot ultimately be represented, it is little wonder that the revolutions in worldviews associated with the axial age fail to be institutionalized: 'The axial period too ended in failure. History went on'.⁹⁹

Even if one can swallow the idea that the unity of the axial age concept lies in the plurality of its manifestations and can choke down the attendant metaphysics, there are still problems regarding the very structure that the axial age is meant to take. As has already been said, Jaspers wishes to break with the Christian basis of traditional approaches to the philosophy of history. He does so while nevertheless maintaining the Christian temporal framework of a radical break with the past which sets all the coordinates for future developments. Yet this is a theological conception of the event as a revelatory rupture; one that is substantially shaped by the historical realities facing the early Christians. The wilful closing of the axial age 200 years BC further disguises what is already hidden in plain sight: that the axial age is a 'secularized version of the Christian opposition of true religion and paganism or *historia sacra* and *historia profana*'.¹⁰⁰ For Assmann, this reiteration can be seen not only in how the theory 'dramatizes a tendency, a development, a process of emergence in the form of a revolutionary break', but also because it 'personifies it in the figure of a great individual'.¹⁰¹ Given the problem of particularism which Jaspers associates with the traditional (Christian) philosophy of history, it remains to be seen why others should accept a crypto-Christian narrative.

The problem is not just that it echoes Christianity and will therefore encounter resistance from those who hold to other beliefs, but that in doing so it misrepresents historical reality. Thus, for Assmann, 'Jaspers seems to be blind to truly axial features in pre-axial civilizations'.¹⁰² Elsewhere Assmann has revealed how the Egyptian ruler,

Akhenaten anticipates Moses by making a monotheistic claim that distinguishes between false gods and a true one:

for Akhenaten, the fact that the totality of reality could be reduced to the workings of light and time made all the other deities appear as inert, superfluous, fictitious and false ... Akhenaten was thus the first in the history of mankind to apply the distinction between true and false to religion.¹⁰³

Bellah also points to Akhenaten's new religion as a 'precursor of the axial revolution' and suggests that the disappearance of such beliefs after his death result from his revolution being too exclusive, with 'neither priest, nor prophets, nor a people to continue in the faith'.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, Assmann provides numerous other ways in which Egypt anticipates some of the axial developments and suggests that the same is undoubtedly true of ancient Mesopotamia.¹⁰⁵ In denying Egypt any role in his considerations of the axial age Jaspers acquiesces with a Greek prejudice: 'Hellenistic Greeks preferred the fanciful images of an eternal Egypt to the Egyptian thought of their time'.¹⁰⁶ The view of historical phenomena that accords significance to that which survives, seems close to a kind of positivistic theodicy; a justification of what exists because it exists. At the very least it overlooks the manner in which the past is the site of ideological struggle, that it is constructed by subsequent generations, by 'the victor'.¹⁰⁷

The problems of the 'age'

In his lectures on mythology, Schelling warns us that due to a lack of a 'true, that is, internal difference' separating the historical from the pre-historical, it is not possible to assert a boundary between them. He continues by referring this problem of origins directly to the project of universal history: 'No one is able to say where the historical time begins and the other ends, and those compiling Universal History are in a noticeable difficulty about the point with which they should begin'.¹⁰⁸ With his concept of the axial age, Jaspers hopes to assert a universal point to which all subsequent developments can be traced. But historical phenomena are Janus faced and never fully available to us. 'Antiquity', Assmann reminds us, 'is much more than the not yet of modernity'.¹⁰⁹ As has been shown, Assmann suggests that the idea of the axial age can be pushed back to incorporate earlier events in Egypt. It has also been said that if Jaspers wishes to include Zoroaster, the period would have to be broadened. The exclusion of Christianity and Islam has also been seen as problematic by numerous authors.¹¹⁰ In fact, as Peter Wagner has emphasized, theorists with specific historical or sociological expertise have tended to dissolve the idea of the axial age both by highlighting the diversity of the different traditions involved and by expanding its historical range.¹¹¹ His suggestion is that instead of conceiving of a singular break dividing pre-history from history proper, the notion of an age should be dropped altogether in favour of 'axial transformations', which would also include modern events such as the French Revolution.¹¹² Such moments of transformation mark important passages in cultural evolution, but their significance should not be conceived in terms of a singular event, because it only acquires this status as they are institutionalized and passed on and recounted in cultural memory. In an important sense, Jaspers himself is trying to reconfigure this memory in the wake of historical catastrophe by appealing to a shared origin of modernity in order to emphasize the potential of a shared goal.

In spite of this, the metaphysical conception of transcendent truth to which Jaspers ascribes seems to blind him to the historical factors determining his own interest in the figures of the axial age. He conceives of the axial age figures as heroic individuals; they dare to reach out into the void, to transcend. In an early article on Jaspers, Habermas has shown that this heroic conception of the individual philosopher leads to ‘a historicity without history’.¹¹³ Habermas claims that a reflexive awareness of our own situatedness is necessary for us to connect with such figures, if they are not to become mere historical content interpreted arbitrarily. At the same time, shorn of its social context, the over-emphasis on individuality loses sight of the ‘normative content’ of their positions.¹¹⁴ Having examined some of the divergences between the axial age figures, it now seems clear that it is only by stripping them of their historical specificity and positing notions associated with his own existential philosophy that Jaspers is able to unite these figures under the concept of the axial age. Arnason articulates this issue clearly, noting that Jaspers’s descriptions are too ‘reminiscent of his own version of existential philosophy; he seems, in other words, to impose an anachronistic and uniformitarian model on historical experience that should first be analysed with all due allowance for diversity’.¹¹⁵ Thus, the very pluralist vision that Jaspers is correct to emphasize in the wake of the Second World War is threatened by the anachronistic, if not ahistorical, tendencies of his own thought.

Although scholars have sought to overcome Jaspers’s problematic account of the axial age and to develop an account that is more reflexive as regards its own normative presuppositions and more sensitive to the diversity of historical materials, the idea of the axial age as a single demythologizing turn has persisted. In his reconstruction of Weber’s account of religious rationalization, Habermas indicates that the process of religious rationalization still retained an element of myth in that the central cosmological, theological or ontological axiom that afforded a position of critical transcendence was not itself open to criticism.¹¹⁶ In his more recent turn to religion, Habermas speaks of this as a mythic core that inheres in religious beliefs and necessitates their translation into a more generally accessible language. Although his earlier reading of Weber affords him a more nuanced view of the rationalization processes, Habermas has frequently referred to the axial age as a ‘revolution in worldviews’,¹¹⁷ which following Jaspers, he conceives as a ‘cognitive breakthrough’ [*kognitiver Durchbruch*].¹¹⁸ He claims that between ‘800 and 300 BCE’, it is possible to identify the emergence of ‘universalistic structures of consciousness’ and ‘rationalized world pictures’ in the emergence of axial worldviews in China, Greece, India and Israel.¹¹⁹ Central to Habermas’s recent work is the claim that religious traditions ‘involve semantic potentials capable of exercising an inspirational force on society as a whole as soon as they divulge their profane truth contents’.¹²⁰ He thinks this is possible through translation as a process of non-destructive secularization. Significantly this means he wants to treat the axial age as a period that is determinative of religions that are translatable:

An unexhausted semantic potential, assuming that such exists, *can be found only in those traditions* which, although their mythic kernel was transformed into a thinking of transcendence through the cognitive advance of the axial age, nevertheless have not yet completely dissolved in the relentless acceleration of modern conditions of life.¹²¹

The idea of the axial age as a historical period thus continues to play an important role in Habermas’s thought. This is problematic due to the kind of triumphalism that is inherent in Jaspers’s articulation of the axial age: ‘The prehistoric peoples remain prehistoric until they merge into the historical movement that proceeds from the axial age, or die out’.¹²²

The normative function of the axial age can be questioned because, like any identity claim, it exhibits an exclusionary logic. Hence, Habermas also refers to the period as a line of demarcation in order to exclude philosophical positions that lack a reference to transcendence, which he labels 'neo-pagan'.¹²³ This would seem problematic not only because the very structure of a revolutionary break seems to owe its roots to Christian rhetoric, but also because of the difficulty that has been seen in any attempt to create something like an epoch out of the diverse manifestations associated with the axial age.

Conclusion

In its original articulation, Jaspers's axial age thesis is riddled with problems. These problems stem from his failure to link up his more general conception of the age with an examination of the texts to which he refers. In this light, his claim to provide an empirical basis for universal history appears unsubstantiated. The very diversity of the sources to which he appeals seems to contradict the unity of the age. Jaspers can only unite such thinkers by drawing on ahistorical notions of truth from his own existential philosophy. It has also been shown that historical research would dissolve the assumed unity by pointing to earlier and later developments that seems to share some of the features ascribed to the axial age. To be sure, those ages whose unity is constructed by theoretical reflection, such as the Renaissance, are prone to being challenged by historical analysis. In the case of the axial age this is even more problematic because the supposed unity is already a very loose one in spatiotemporal terms: it covers a huge geographical distance, includes areas that had no contact with one another and spans a period of six hundred years. The very division between a 'before' and an 'after' that Jaspers's conception of the axial age utilizes draws on the semantics of the Christian historiography he sought to disavow. It has also been suggested that it implies a certain triumphalism in this regard. Yet if the axial age cannot be contained within a specific period, if its manifestations are diverse and cannot be united without recourse to metaphysics, and if its temporal structure is itself a transposition of Christian revelation, it does not seem to provide us with much of a theory. At best, the axial age can be seen as shorthand for a series of developments in cognitive orientation that share some similarities and exhibit many differences. Still, Habermas's recent deployment of the term has shown that even a philosopher with a profound grasp of social theory, a post-metaphysical outlook and a wariness for the philosophy of history can become ensnared in the seeming simplicity of this narrative. Rejecting Jaspers's thesis as incoherent does not mean denying the integral role the religious traditions to which he refers have played in the historical development of reason. Nor does it mean that such traditions will not continue to play a decisive role in shaping the moral intuitions of modern and increasingly secularized countries. Nor, finally, does it mean that the attempt to relate these different developments in comparative sociology is not a useful enterprise. Yet it should act as a warning against ambitious philosophical claims concerning universal history. If philosophy is part of a multifaceted process of demythologization, then it serves its function best by critically opposing myths, not creating new ones.

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Notes

1. For example: Boy and Torpey, 'Inventing the Axial Age'; Bellah and Joas, *Axial Age and Its Consequences*; and Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II*. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*; Kelly and Dreyfus, 'Saving the Sacred'; and Arnason, Eisenstadt and . Wittrock, *Axial Civilization and World History*. There has also been some popular exposure, e.g. Vernon, 'Are We Living'; and Armstrong, *The Great Transformation*.
2. Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What is Missing*, 17.
3. Assmann, 'Cultural Memory and the Myth', op. cit., 366.
4. Habermas has Huntington's thesis in mind in his acceptance speech for the 1995 Karl Jaspers Prize. Habermas, 'The Conflict of Beliefs.'
5. Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*.
6. Ibid., 8–9 and 16–7.
7. Ibid., 8–9.
8. Ibid., 8.
9. Ibid., 15.
10. Joas, 'The Axial Age Debate', 14.
11. Sheehan, 'The Altars of the Idols', 660–2.
12. Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism*, 121 n.3. Albeit axial *avant la lettre*.
13. Assmann and Joas both refer to an article by Dietrich Metzler, see *ibid.* Joas, 'The Axial Age Debate', 11. Textual analysis indicates that the language and social setting of parts of Zoroaster's writing are much older than this, circa 1200 BCE. So Zoroaster might not stand within the axial boundaries at all. (This claim is to be revisited.)
14. As he grandiloquently states: 'When Max Weber died in 1920, it was for me as though the world had changed. The great man, who had justified its existence to my consciousness and had given it a soul (and meaning) was no longer with us'. Jaspers, 'Philosophical Autobiography', 30. Dieter Heinrich has claimed that 'the philosophy of Jaspers originated in the life and death of Max Weber'. Quoted in Adair-Toteff, 'Max Weber as Philosopher', 17.
15. Boy and Torpey, 'Inventing the Axial Age,' 244.
16. Joas, 'The Axial Age Debate', 17.
17. Schuller, 'Forward', 11
18. Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism*, 121 n.3.
19. Boy and Torpey, 'Inventing the Axial Age,' 243.
20. Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, 16.
21. Ibid.
22. Boy and Torpey, 'Inventing the Axial Age,' 243–4.
23. Assmann claims their arrival follows two waves, first around 1800 then again around 1200 BCE. 'The first gave rise to the Hittite Empire, while the second destroyed it, and it also put an end to the Bronze Age in general'. Assmann, 'Cultural Memory and the Myth', 376.
24. The French text of the proceedings was published in 1947 and is available online. See, Benda et al., *L'Esprit Européen* which can be downloaded from: http://www.rencontres-int-geneve.ch/volumes_pdf/rig01.pdf (Last Accessed: 01.03.13). It is here that we find Jaspers's first reference to 'l'époque axe' (368).
25. See Benda et al., *L'Esprit Européen*, 366–7.
26. Jaspers's quotation continues by listing some of the major players comprising this period: 'C'est l'époque qui va d'Homère à Archimède, l'époque des grands prophètes de l'Ancien Testament et de Zarathoustra, l'époque des Upanishades et de Bouddha, l'époque allant des chants de Shiking, par Lao Tsé et Confucius, jusqu'à Tschang-Tseu'. Benda et al., *L'Esprit Européen*, 367.
27. Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, xv.
28. Ibid., xv.
29. 'If human history as a whole proceeds from the One to the One, it does so in such a way that everything accessible to us lies between these ultimate poles'. Ibid., 265.
30. Ibid., xiv.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., xv.
33. Ibid., 1

34. Ibid. See also: 'For the consciousness of the West, Christ is the axis of world history'. Ibid., 58.
35. In his published radio lectures on philosophy, Jaspers appeal to Hegel in this context is more explicit, though remains unreferenced: '... of the years around 500 bc Hegel has said, "All history moves towards Christ and from Christ. The appearance of the Son of God is the axis of history."' Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom*, 36. Joas has claimed that no equivalent to Jaspers's paraphrase has been found in Hegel's work. That is, Hegel does not use the term 'axis' in this sense. Joas does identify an English translation in which Hegel seems to refer to 'the axis on which the world turns' in a similar context. This is not a literal translation, however, as Hegel uses the word hinge or angle (*Angel*) rather than axis (*Achse*). See Joas, 'The Axial Age Debate', 10.
36. Bearing in mind that history is the working out of freedom, this becomes almost brutally clear in Hegel's more conservative work. 'The Christian religion is the religion of absolute freedom, and only for Christians does man count as such in his infinity and universality'. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, 241.
37. Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, 1.
38. Ibid., 1.
39. He refers explicitly to Confucius and Lao-tse in China; Buddah and the Upanishads in India; Zarathustra in Iran; the prophetic tradition in the Levant; and Homer, philosophy, the tragedians, and Thucydides in Greece. Ibid. 2.
40. Jaspers's idea of faith is philosophical and does not directly imply religious belief. It involves rationality, but it is not identical with positive knowledge. Bruno could not renounce his beliefs, whereas Galileo could because the facts remained unchanged: 'Bruno believed and Galileo knew'. Jaspers, *Perennial Scope of Philosophy*, 10.
41. Assmann, 'Cultural Memory and the Myth', op. cit., 370.
42. Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, 2.
43. Schwartz, 'The Age of Transcendence', 3.
44. Durkheim convincingly rejects the idea that fear was at the root of the most elementary forms of religious belief (i.e. totemism). Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 169. Nevertheless, such feelings are apparent in subsequent mythical beliefs and magical practices. Hence, responding in a very different way to the same context in which Jaspers proposes a new universal history, Adorno and Horkheimer view terror as a key component of primitive beliefs, which then become transcendent: 'The gasp of surprise which accompanies the experience of the unusual becomes its name. It fixes the transcendence of the unknown in relation to the known, and therefore terror to sacredness'. Adorno and Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 15. Of course, the terror that comes from facing 'the void' might be seen as of a more profound kind than a more primitive senses of helplessness in the face of the unknown. The problem may just be the existential jargon of which Jaspers makes use. Nevertheless, the lack of examples makes it difficult to ascertain the nature of this void, which seems absent from many of the sources.
45. Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, 2.
46. Taylor, 'What Was the Axial Revolution?' 30.
47. Ibid.
48. Bellah tries to say that there is no rational justification for the caste system, but he cannot ignore its prevalence within the Vedic tradition. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 521ff.
49. See Donald, 'An Evolutionary Approach to Culture', 64–75. See Table 3.3 (71) for a comparative adumbration of the different features of each cognitive regime. For a more general situating of religion in human evolution see: Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*. A similar distinction is already apparent in Cassirer, who speaks of the historical development of cognition through mimetic, analogical, and symbolic phases. See Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 190.
50. Bellah, 'What Is Axial,' 79.
51. Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, 2.
52. It could of course be argued that figures in the prophetic tradition take up ethical positions not previously assumed and come into conflict with existing societal norms. Nevertheless, this does not suggest a discursive field within which different legitimate prophets reach different positions and disagree with one another.
53. Ibid.

54. Schwartz, 'The Age of Transcendence'.
55. Momigliano's, *Alien Wisdom*, 9. (Bellah also cites this 'What Is Axial', 72).
56. Plato's use of the myth of Er, which draws on Orphic sources, is one of numerous examples (*Republic*, XI.3).
57. Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, 3.
58. Ibid.
59. Eisenstadt, 'Axial Age Civilization', op. cit., 540.
60. Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, 3. Of course, the symbol of light and darkness that is developed from the thought of Lao Tzu (yin-yang) seems to be by definition the image of 'calm polarities' which Jaspers ascribes to myth.
61. Eisenstadt, 'The Axial Age', 296
62. Ibid., 297.
63. Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, 3
64. Ibid., 4.
65. Ibid., 3.
66. Ibid., 2.
67. Ibid., 4, 5.
68. Ibid., 4.
69. Ibid.
70. Ibid., 5.
71. Ibid.
72. Ibid., 5. Cf.: 'From Confucius, in whose temple even the emperor makes his obeisance, graded transitions lead to Plato. But both of them were [sic] simply a teacher of a school of philosophy, who differed chiefly in that Confucius was centrally concerned with influencing princes in the direction of particular social reforms, and Plato only occasionally'. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 53.
73. Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, 5.
74. He cites the Tsin Shi hwang-ti in India, the Maurya dynasty in India, and the Hellenistic and Roman empires in the West. Ibid.
75. Ibid., 6.
76. Ibid., 7.
77. Ibid., 6.
78. Ibid., 76.
79. Ibid., 7.
80. Schwartz, 'The Age of Transcendence', 6.
81. Assmann, 'Cultural Memory and the Myth', 398–9.
82. It is perhaps for this reason that Dreyfus and Kelly ignore Jaspers's inclusion of Homer and contrast Homeric polytheism with the subsequent monotheism. See: Dreyfus and Kelly, 'Saving the Sacred,' 197. Whereas their retrieval of polytheism, which seems to be a curious mix of Hölderlin and self-help, is not the position defended here, the opposition of Homer to the axial age that they enact is instructive insofar as it highlights a tension within Jaspers's concept. Robert Bellah excludes Homer (and Zoroaster) on largely sociological grounds. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 271 and 327.
83. Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, 3.
84. Ibid., 15.
85. Ibid., 13, 15, 16 and 18.
86. Ibid., 18.
87. Ibid., 19.
88. Ibid., 19–20.
89. Joas, 'The Axial Age Debate', 22.
90. Jaspers, *Perennial Scope of Philosophy*, 15.
91. Ibid., 116.
92. Ibid., 141.
93. Jaspers, *Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus*.
94. Jaspers, *Perennial Scope of Philosophy*, 150.
95. Ibid. 110. This seems to echo Hegel's famous claim regarding the pyrrhic victory ensuing from the confrontation between enlightenment reason and faith. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*,

55. What seems absent in Jaspers's account is the dialectical awareness that such a process transforms both terms.
96. He continues in a manner that reminds us of Jaspers – ironic given the infamy of certain portions of this text and the context of Jaspers's axial age thesis – by extolling the essential wonder proper to the philosophical attitude: 'Everything has already been said. And yet this 'same' possesses, as its inner truth, the inexhaustible wealth of that which on every day is as if that day were its first'. Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 102–3.
 97. Jasper, *Perennial Scope of Philosophy*, 26.
 98. Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, 10.
 99. *Ibid.*, 20.
 100. Assmann, 'Cultural Memory and the Myth,' 375.
 101. *Ibid.*
 102. *Ibid.*, 376.
 103. Assmann, 'Axial Breakthrough in Ancient Egypt', 143.
 104. Utilizing Assmann's work, Bellah claims that Akhenaten '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'. Bellah, 'What Is Axial', 82.
 105. Assmann, 'Cultural Memory and the Myth', 382ff.
 106. Momigliani, *Alien Wisdom*, 4. Later, on the other hand, one finds Clement claiming that Greek philosophy 'borrowed' from Egyptian wisdom. See Stroumsa, 'Cultural Memory in Early Christianity', 314.
 107. Benjamin, 'Theses', 256.
 108. Schelling, *Critical Introduction to the Philosophy*, 161.
 109. Assmann, 'Cultural Memory and the Myth', 401.
 110. Arnason, Eisenstadt, and Wittrock, 'General Introduction', op. cit., 3.
 111. Wagner, 'Palomer's Question', op. cit., 90.
 112. *Ibid.*, 103.
 113. Habermas, *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, 46.
 114. *Ibid.*, 49.
 115. Arnason, 'Axial Age and Its Interpreters,' 31–2.
 116. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 214.
 117. Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What is Missing*, 82.
 118. Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II*, 29.
 119. Habermas, 'Zum Thema', 349.
 120. Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 142.
 121. Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What is Missing*, 77–8 (emphasis added).
 122. Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, 8. The levels of suffering from domination, violence and disease that were caused by the colonial projects of axial civilizations should sober any such triumphalism. Furthermore, it was gunpowder and not the *Gorgias* that facilitated the conquest of new territories, and this was probably introduced to the West from China by the non-axial Mongols, whose world shaping influence might thus further undermine the thesis.
 123. See Allen, 'Having One's Cake and Eating It Too.'

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