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THE AXIAL AGE



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INTRODUCTION

The concept of an “Axial Age” was developed by the philosopher and psychiatrist Karl Jaspers, in his “The Origin and Goal of History”¹ – the term refers to the idea that there was a period of time which was a kind of pivot point, a line around which things began to turn. Jaspers’ idea was that this age was broadly the eighth to the third centuries prior to the Common Era – and he listed a range of civilisations that developed key ideas in which world changing ideas were developed. These developments were – give or take a century or two – simultaneous. Perhaps better thought of contemporaneous. They were also independent, developments in India were not influenced by developments in Judea for example. Jaspers was not the first person to remark on the extraordinary confluence of world changing ideas that dated from that time, neither was the last. Ideas about and critiques of the idea of an Axial Age continue to be debated to this day.

THE TROUBLE WITH NORMAL IS THAT IT ALWAYS GETS WORSE

It is certainly curious to note that so many of the ideas that shape the way we live today share a heritage that is rooted in a certain period of time. Some scholars of the Axial Age seek to restrict their view to those specific religions and philosophies which became ‘world changing’, in other words – the survivors. The Abrahamic traditions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam are three of these, as are Buddhism, Daoism and Hinduism. Similarly the impact of Greek philosophy can still be felt all over the place, so it too is counted as a product of the Axial Age. More controversial, however, are ideas about other schools of thought. Ancient Egyptian thought for instance, is no longer influential, and Zoroastrianism never really got beyond the borders of the Persian empire. (Baumard, et al., 2015) In discounting these and other contemporary (in the broadest sense) schools of thought however, there is a danger that we lose sight of the all-important context of the time.

As with anything, the way we choose to define an idea determines how we come to understand it. What this means is that we must first decide what we think the Axial Age was – before we can begin to come to terms with what caused or influenced it. Taking a

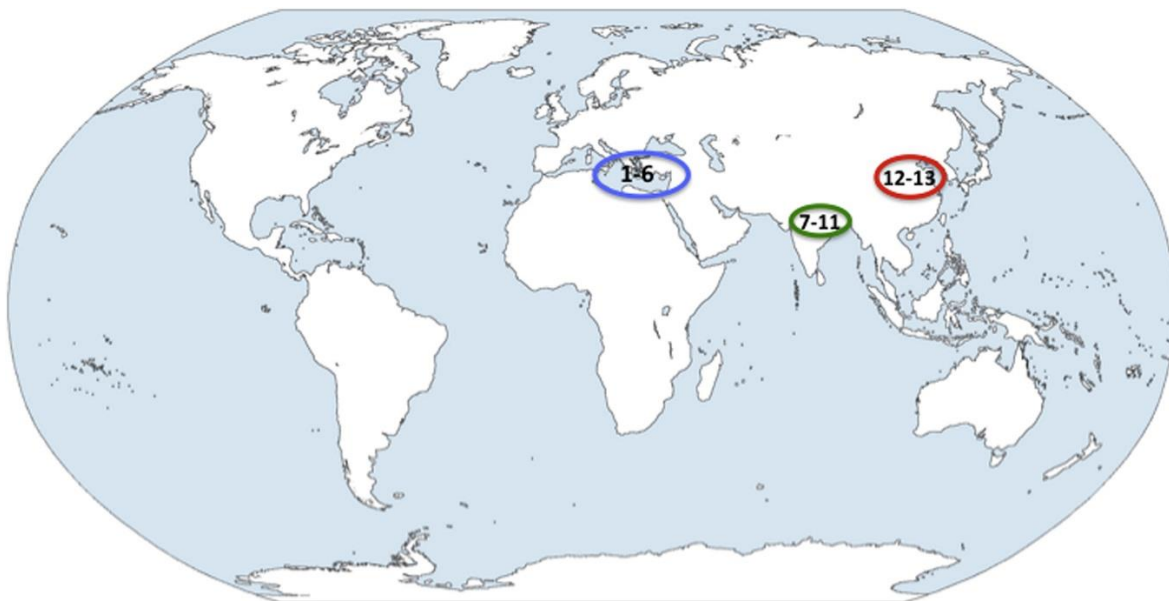
¹ It is notable that Jaspers was writing at something of an Axial Age himself – in the aftermath of the Second World War, when Jaspers (a German) was one of many seeking a way to re-understand Europe itself. If context is important in understanding what the Axial Age represents, it’s also important in understanding how it was later conceived.

somewhat pluralist approach to readings of ideas about history means that we may accept the validity of competing ideas, but notwithstanding the worth of alternative hypotheses, I propose to talk about the Axial Age in the following terms:

The Axial Age was a period of time in which a number of theories and ideas about how to live arose, in a variety of different settings and cultures, which gave shape to the way that people today see the world. The ‘theories and ideas’ referred to here are of a ‘higher order’ – that is they transcend the immediate physical and material concerns of humanity. Accordingly, we might use ill-defined or ambiguous terms such as ‘spirituality’ or ‘wisdom’ to describe them.

The regions in which the development of Axial Age thought is documented are specific, and shown in **Figure 1** below (apologies for the use of a map which shows the UK as being the same size as India!). However, this is problematic, as there is no comparable data from a range of other civilisations – some of the African and Island states for instance, may have also developed thinking of similar type, but we do not have the records of it.

Fig. 1



Caption: Some Axial Age religions and spiritual movements: 1, Pythagoreanism; 2, Orphism; 3, Platonism; 4, Stoicism; 5, Epicureanism; 6, Second-Temple Judaism; 7, Ajivika; 8, Samkhya; 9, Buddhism; 10, Jainism; 11, Hinduism; 12, Taoism; 13, Confucianism.

(Baumard, et al., 2014)

So what was the nature of the Axial Age thought? What does it look like? For one thing, there is a strong element of asceticism involved. In India for instance, where a number of Axial age movements developed in just a couple of centuries (500 – 300 BCE) ascetic movements were fundamental to the development of the religions we now know as Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism. Within another century, these schools of thought had spread beyond the Ganges valley to the rest of India. But asceticism wasn't limited to India, Greek philosophers and Hebrew prophets were similarly self-denying. This was part of a wider idea that people should learn to live well, an idea which was codified in religious terms as the way to please God, or in Zoroastrian terms - the way of God. Some Axial Age thinkers reckoned that virtue would be rewarded in the afterlife – Plato's 'Republic' concludes with a story with just this message. (Plato, 1997) Similarly, Axial Age thought in China has the same sort of themes, stemming from Daoist and Confucian thinking.

One of the key Axial ideas was the so called "Golden Rule"² – put simply: treat others the way you want to be treated. This might be said to sum up a lot of Axial Age thinking, and certainly came to be seen as the summary of much of the moral teaching of Jesus, whose life fell just beyond the reaches of the Axial Age as normally understood. One might say then that what all of these thinkers were calling for, was a movement away from selfishness, and towards an ethic of caring for others, and living a good life. That this should need to be a conscious effort is testament to the fact that without making a conscious choice to live accordingly, human societies had tended to default to petty rivalries and destructive conflicts. The problem with normal, as Bruce Cockburn put it around 2500 years later, is that it always gets worse.

CAUSE AND EFFECT

A number of things were happening during this period in history. Jaspers himself noted the emergence of a class of priests and scholars (Baumard, et al., 2014) who were released from the immediate concerns of feeding and protecting themselves, long enough to

² The Golden Rule is found in a host of different places, but one of the earliest recorded instances is in an Egyptian artefact. Egyptian thought is not usually held to be part of the Axial Age, because it hasn't resulted in a 'world religion' or enduring school of thought. That it reflected the spirit of the time however, seems clear.

be able to develop sophisticated religious systems and beliefs. But of course this is just one aspect of a much greater picture of social change. In other writing I've previously pointed to the development of cities and city states as a key generator of the Axial Age philosophies, but on its own this too is an oversimplification. In order to recognise what was happening one has to take a broader view: cities were developing, and along with them came a host of new necessities. Communication was key – an ability to talk and trade with people who had a different language and different ideas – the near Eastern myth of the Tower of Babel found in the book of Genesis refers to the idea of a city in which people all spoke a common tongue, highlighting the perceived world changing potential of such a skill. This story would probably have been collated into the Hebrew canon whilst the Judeans were in exile in Babylon (the Hebrew name for which was Babel) – which happened to be during the Axial Age. Going hand in hand with this ability to trade came a new era of prosperity for some – and this prosperity would have given rise to a greater level of literacy.

Simultaneous to any growth in material wealth is its opposite: wastage or scarcity. Value and scarcity are, after all, two sides of the same coin. So with the growth of economic wealth came the development of an underclass, the destitute and downtrodden. A key task for Axial Age thinkers was to work out how to deal with this disparity. For Siddhartha Gautama, a wealthy young noble born in Lumbini, modern day Nepal, an encounter with poverty was enough to send him on a lifelong quest to understand the nature of the human condition. His eventual enlightenment about the nature of suffering would form the basis of Buddhism, one of the most significant of all the Axial Age schools of thought. In Buddhism we find so many of the developing themes of the Axial Age: this encounter with poverty sent Siddhartha Gautama, also known as Buddha Shakyamuni or Gautama Buddha on an ascetic quest. After renouncing his privilege he journeyed away from the Himalayas down to the burgeoning cities of the Ganges valley, where he met with a host of spiritual teachers. None of them could give him what he needed however. So here is the story of wealth and poverty contrasting, urbanisation and education leading to a range of possibilities for cultural interaction, and a retreat into asceticism. Just as with so many of the other Axial Age thinkers, it is out of this extraordinary cultural melting pot that comes an experience of enlightenment which continues to shape the world today.

CONCLUSION

So often we find ourselves thinking in a vacuum. As if the rest of the world doesn't exist. But of course it does – always has in fact. When we think about the development of religious ideas and frameworks, it is not just dishonest to pluck them from their respective contexts, but also dangerous. We set up a false sense of individuality and particularity that seems to promise something that a religious worldview then struggles to deliver. The great claim of Christianity is sometimes proposed as 'love God and love one another' – but this is not particular to Christianity – such an idea is to be found in a host of other philosophies and traditions which stem too from the Axial Age or its aftermath. Rather, if we are to look for the particular or peculiar concerning religious traditions like Christianity, we must work harder, it's not hard after all for the laziest scholar to realise that the same ideas are abundant in varying traditions. We must also acknowledge that what is so often described as divine revelation arrives in a certain place and time, under a certain set of circumstances. That is not necessarily to detract from the special nature of the revelation, but it is to say that our ability to hear and understand new ideas is difficult if not impossible to abstract from our culture, its values and its language.

It was an unprecedented level of cultural change that brought on the welter of Axial Age thinking: a move away from a rural and nomadic society dominated almost entirely by chieftains and patriarchs to a more diverse and multicultural society replete with people and families unknown to each other. A society that felt full and seemed to be growing fuller, of haves and have nots as economic inequality began to grow. Change of this sort, and at this scale is troubling, and when combined with the space, time, education and economic resource that allowed some individuals to devote themselves to trying to understand it inspired a wave of new thinking and religious devotion that sought to understand it, and to somehow mitigate against its problems.

Returning to the definition I proposed for the Axial Age, the idea that Axial ideas are of a 'higher order' should not mean that they fail to understand the fundamental needs of the world around them, but that they aren't concerned with the immediate gratification of those needs on an individual basis. Axial thinkers weren't concerned about meeting their basic needs. If they were, they'd have been too busy hunting or foraging to do all that thinking. This corresponds directly with the idea that this was a time of wealth – of economic prosperity for some. Those who embarked on ascetic quests were able to do so because in the world around them, there were those who could afford to spare a little extra for them.

This gave them the extraordinary gift of space and time to develop ideas about the human condition, who we are, how we can live together, and how we should conceive of one another. Today we call this spirituality or wisdom, by which we mean to say that this thinking goes beyond the confines of knowledge, and enters a new realm of thinking. It is on this wisdom that the world turned, and continues to turn.

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