

**TRANSCENDING POSITIVISM:
THE AXIAL AGE CONSCIOUSNESS OF PSYCHOLOGY**

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Reflections on Psychology's Metanarrative and its History**

How significant is the Axial Age?

Joas and Bellah (2012): “the question of the Axial Age is not just academic: the deep self-understanding of educated people of all the world’s cultures is at stake. How we think about the Axial Age is to some extent how we think about ourselves and the human project at this perilous moment in history.” (p. 6)

Joas (2012): “the Axial Age debate of the last decades is... one of the most important developments in the area of the comparative-historical social sciences” (p. 9)

How significant is the Axial Age?

‘Only this much seems certain to me: Our present-day historical consciousness, as well as our consciousness of our present situation, is determined, down to consequences I have only been able to hint at, by the conception of the Axial Period, irrespective of whether this thesis is accepted or rejected.’ (Jaspers, 1953, 21)

‘Nothing much has happened during the last 2500 years’ (Voegelin, 1974, 331)

The Axial Age thesis & scholarship

“The notion that in significant parts of Eurasia the middle centuries of the first millennium BCE mark a significant transition in human cultural history, and that this period can be referred to as the Axial Age, has become widely, but not universally, accepted.”

Bellah & Joas, 2012, p. 1

The Axial age literature

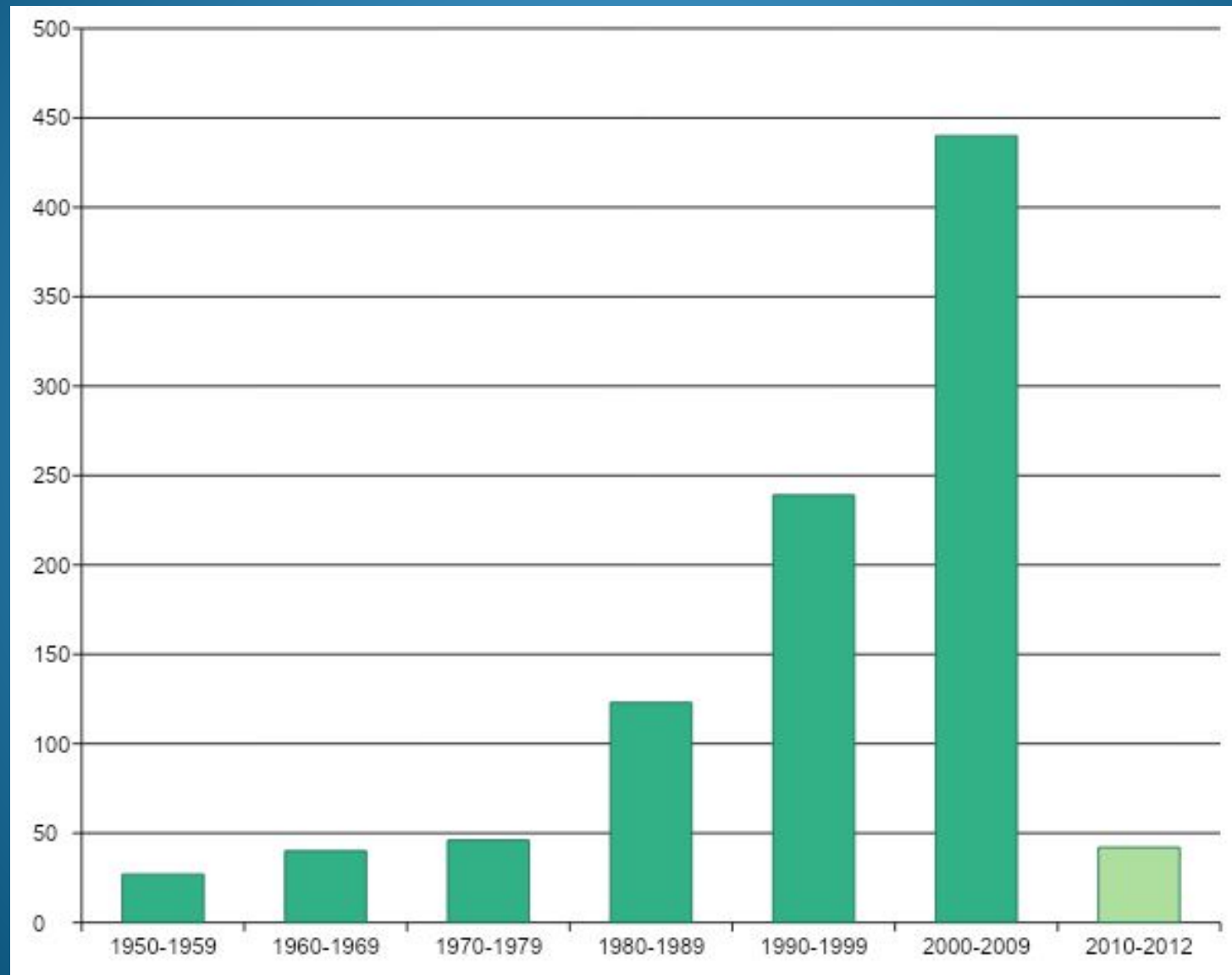
(adapted from bibliography in Bellah & Joas, 2012,
The Axial age and its consequences, Cambridge & London: Belknap)

Primary Sources

Secondary Sources

Dates	# of publications	Dates	# of publications
1771-1900	11 ⁺	1950-1959	27
1900-1948	16	1960-1969	40
1949-1989	13 [*]	1970-1979	46
		1980-1989	123
		1990-1999	239
		2000-2009	440
Totals	40		889 [∅]

Growth of secondary source literature on Axial age by decade (1950-present)



Central works on Axial Age, chronological order

Jaspers K (1949) *Vom Urspruch und Ziel der Geschichte*. Zurich: Artemis.

Jaspers K (1953) *The Origin and Goal of History*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Voegelin E (1956-74) *Order and History: 5 volumes*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

----. (1975). Wisdom, revelation, and doubt: Perspectives on the first millennium B.C. Special Issue of *Daedalus*, 104 (2).

Eisenstadt SN (ed.) (1986). *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Arnason J, Eisenstadt SN and Wittrock B (eds). (2005). *Axial Civilizations and World History*. Leiden: Brill.

Bellah, R. (2011). *Religion in human evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*. Harvard, MA: Belknap.

Bellah, R., & Joas, H. (2012). *The Axial Age and its consequences*. Cambridge & London: Belknap.

What is Jaspers' Axial Age thesis ?

Hegel has said, "All history moves toward Christ and from Christ. The appearance of the Son of God is the axis of history." ... The flaw in this view of history is that it can have meaning only for believing Christians.

...If there is an axis in history, we must find it empirically in profane history, as a set of circumstances significant for all men, including Christians. It must carry conviction for Westerners, Asiatics, and all men, without the support of any particular content of faith, and thus provide all men with a common historical frame of reference. The spiritual process which took place between 800 and 200 BC seems to constitute such an axis. It was then that the man with whom we live today came into being. Let us designate this period as the "axial age." (Jaspers, 1951, p. 99)

The 'spiritual process' is the 'simultaneous' (i.e. from ~800-200 BCE) revolution against, & reformulation of, their [religious] traditions by sages, prophets, philosophers:

China: Confucius, Mozi, Mencius

India: Buddha, Mahavira, writers of Upanisads

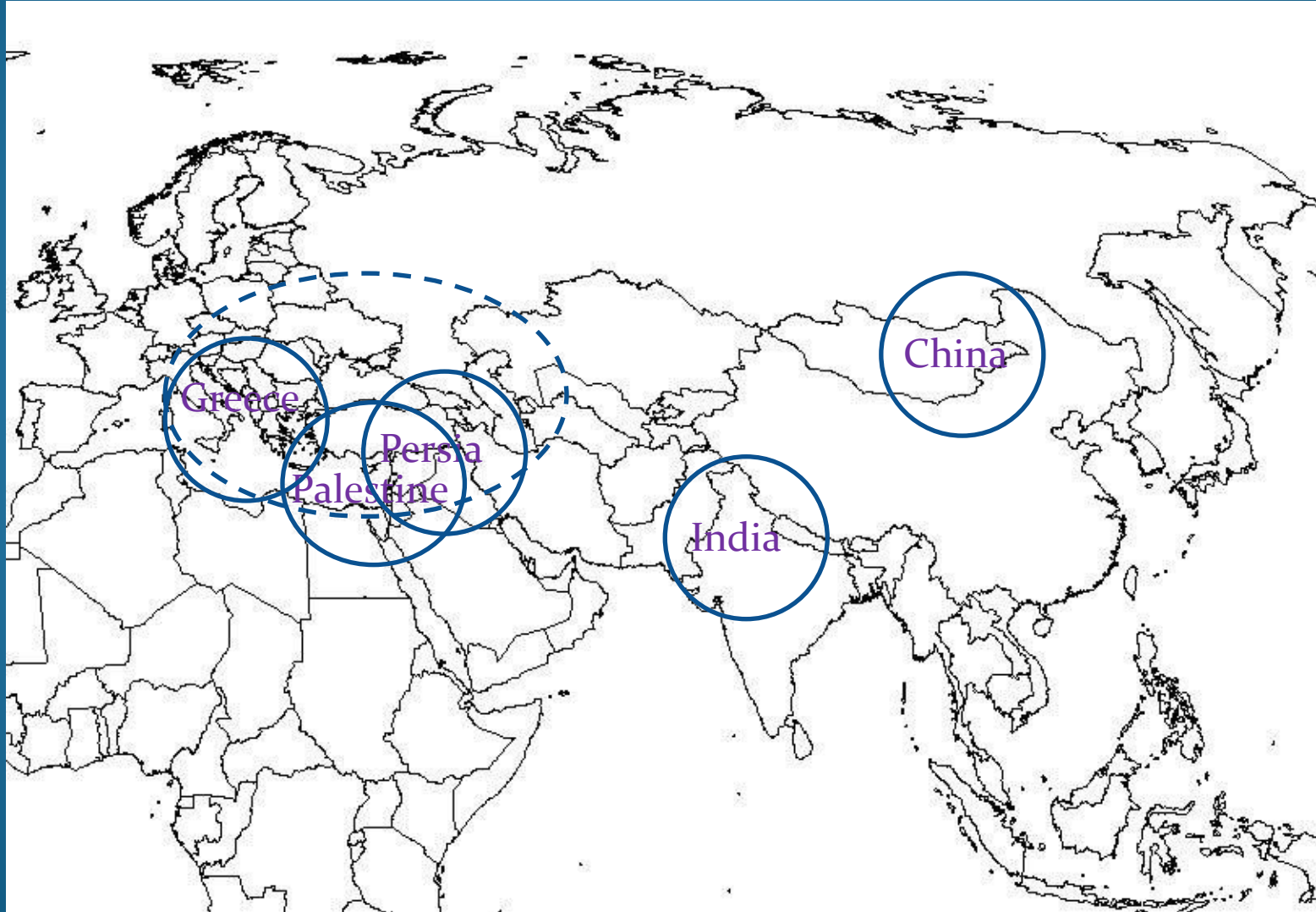
Persia: Zoroaster (*later scholarship: rejects)

Palestine: Ezekiel, Deutero-Isaiah, Amos

Greece: sophists, tragedians, Socrates, Plato

What is new about this age, in all three areas of the world [China, India, the West, i.e. Greece-Palestine-Persia], 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 recognizing his limits he sets himself the highest goals. He experiences absoluteness in the depths of selfhood and in the lucidity of transcendence. ...This overall modification of humanity may be termed *spiritualisation*. (Jaspers, 1953, p.2-3)

Map of Jaspers' Axial age thesis



Jaspers' Axial Age thesis

Jaspers first proposes the thesis as such (1949, in German; 1953 in English: *The Origin & Goal of History*) in the wake of WWII, seeking an empirical basis for world history that could compel universal assent

- universality crucial for combatting the conflicts & violence between (particular) nations and religions, and to provide an objective reference point for critique of the technologizing of the world into a global monoculture

- basis for a critique of power, particularism & violence, and cultural homogenization

-Jaspers finds such a basis within history in terms of an “axis” round which history spins

-axis divides the traditions of the world into: “pre-Axial” : local & relatively limited in their capacity for reflection, self-questioning, & self-critique, & for history

-these are the ‘indigenous peoples’ of today (increasingly threatened, marginalized, assimilated or erased, by global-historical processes: colonization, conversion, ‘modernization’, globalization)

“post-Axial” : imperial-globalizing in their reach, universal in their claims, greatly increased capacity for reflection, self-questioning & self-critique, for history -their historical developments intertwined with those of the “great world religions” (of China, India, the middle East, the West) and show constant inexorable growth -these traditions collectively come to drive “world historical processes”, including contemporary globalization

-these traditions carry Axial age insights & articulations that define the horizon for thought & meaning for those traditions, and subsequently for us 'moderns' as well

Important qualification:

“post-Axial” traditions are NOT “Axial traditions”; they don't live up to Axial ideals, e.g. of universal love or compassion or reason

-Axial age an “interregnum between two ages of great empires” ... “The Axial period too ended in failure. History went on.” (Jaspers, 1953, p. 51, p. 20)

-but, these traditions do have Axial ideals built into their self-understanding, and these have an intellectual & critical power that has endured the rise & fall of empirical powers

-this self-understanding and its orienting ideals/insights are not necessarily practiced, but these define the horizon for thought & meaning, & for criticism of those practices

-i.e. the Axial insights once articulated seem irreversible (at least to date) and in perpetual dynamic tension with the traditions that carry them

The evolutionary importance of the Axial Age

Jaspers and others (e.g. Robert Bellah) consider it within the context of hominid evolution as one of a handful of epochal changes in human being (human society, consciousness) in line with:

- differentiation of hominid from ape (7-6 million years BP)
- first 'anatomically & behaviorally modern humans' & origin of speech/language (250,000-50,000 BP)
- the origins of agriculture & domestication (11 – 10,000 BP)
- first cities ('civilizations') (5,000 BP)
- the Axial Age (around 2,500 BP)

(Is the “modern age” another such epochal change?
Industrial age, post-1800? Atomic age, post-1945?)

The most cogent summary of the suite of changes characterizing the Axial insights: the theme of transcendence, or the 'breakthrough to transcendence'

- the idea of a transcendent reality is first coherently systematized, theorized, posited, realized (which includes, realized to be a problem) during "the Axial age", and is what constitutes "the Axial age" as a specific historical epoch

- Karen Armstrong uses the phrase “the Axial principle” to characterize the commonality across these different “spiritual revolutions”, the Axial principle being “that the ultimate reality was transcendent and ineffable. Nobody could have the last word on the subject of God”.
- Benjamin Schwartz: the Axial age is defined by “the strain toward transcendence” (‘strain’ b/c transcendence is not something we achieve or possess)
- Hans Joas argues “it would perhaps be even more precise, although maybe a bit pedantic, to speak of *the age of the emergence of the idea of transcendence*”

- Eric Voegelin: agrees in the “breakthrough to transcendence” notion as definitive for history and human consciousness
- However with a significant modification: he sees that revolutionary insight as exclusively happening within the Judaeo-Hellenic-Christian tradition and excludes the insight as having developed fully in China or India (outlines the history elaborating that insight in 5 vols)
- History: a complex dialectic within consciousness between experience & symbolization
- unfolds in terms of the mythologizing of answers to questions of ultimate meaning, moving from “compact” to increasingly “differentiated” mythicizing & reasoning
- The insight, btwn myth & its transcendent ground, catalyzes the historical process of differentiating

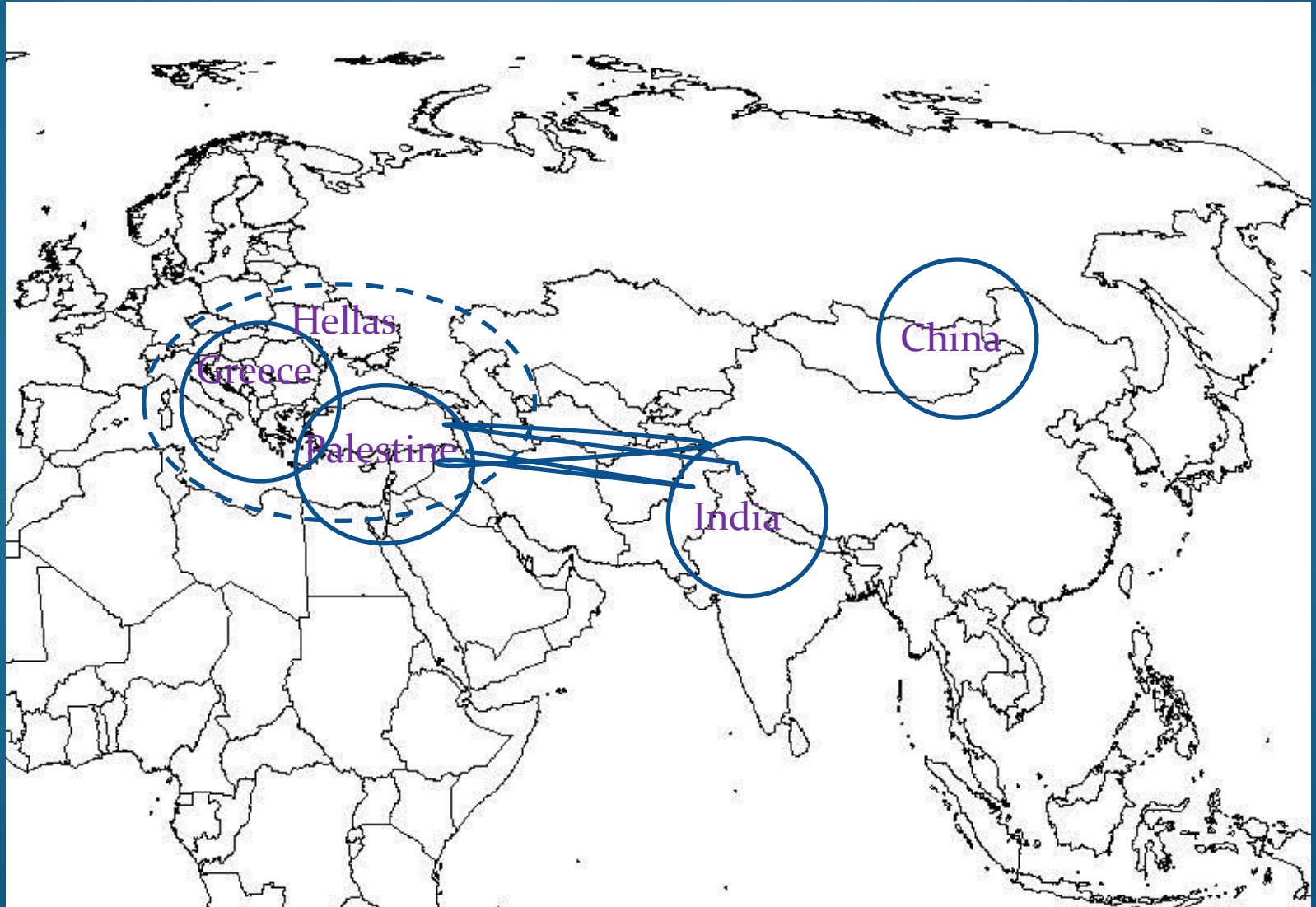
- Momigliano: “speaks of an “age of criticism” and emphasize[s] the relativization of all mundane realities as the crucial feature of the age”
- Eisenstadt: in line with the emphasis on criticism, but relative to a more specific focus: the Axial Age is about the desacralization of political domination that is a result of the emergence of transcendence
- Particular attention paid to how these visions of transcendent truth as articulated by particular individuals, become institutionalized: how specific elites are charged with the responsibility of upholding, maintaining, and disseminating these visions/institutions

-there is no serious contradiction between the two above characterizations of either transcendence or criticism, but only a difference in emphasis.

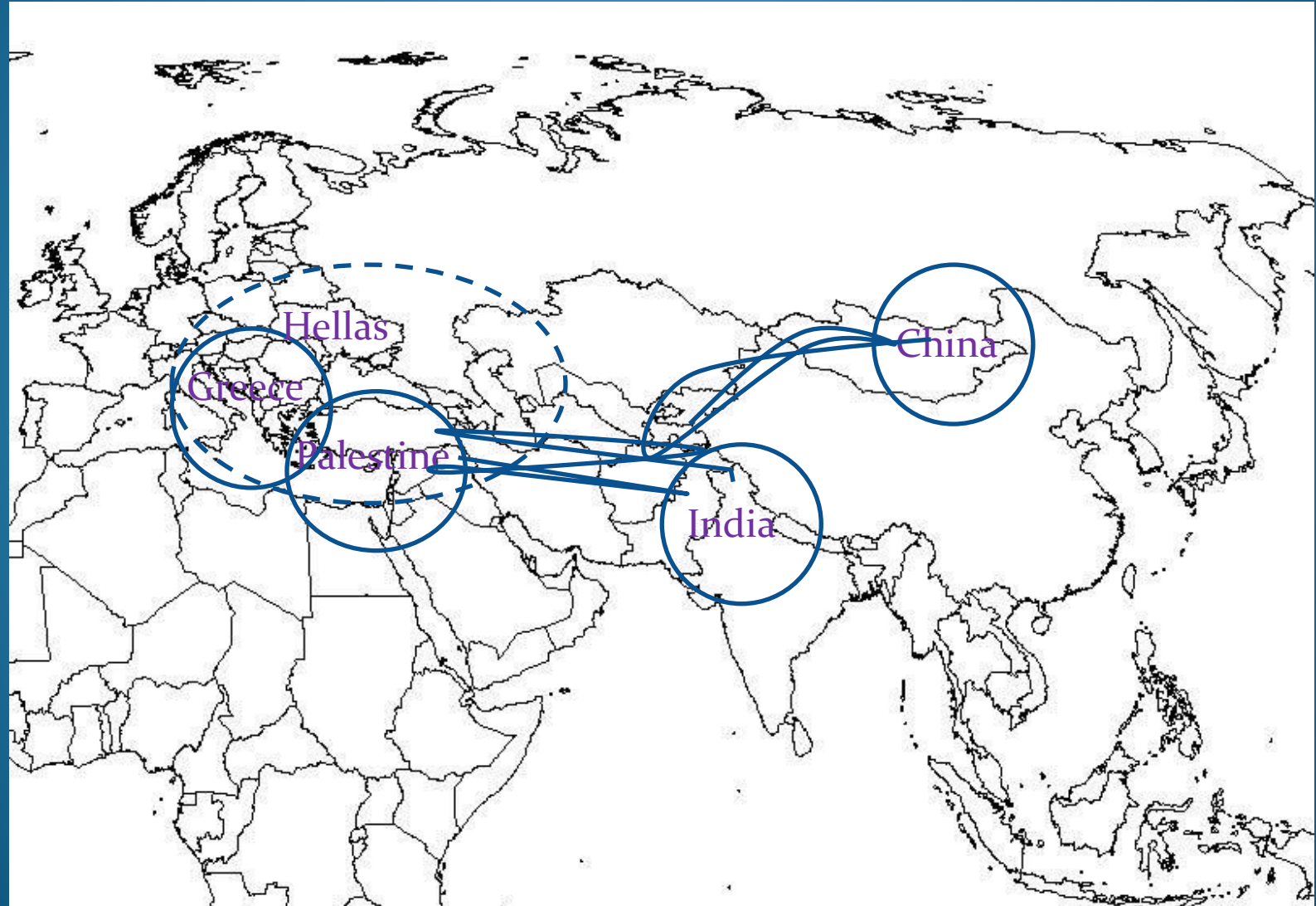
“Non” transcendence versions of the Axial Age thesis:

- Bjorn Wittrock has explicitly denied the view that the Axial Age can be characterized by its reference to transcendence; instead he emphasizes a greater degree of “reflexivity” that enables an “overcoming of bounds”
- Arnason, Eisenstadt, & Wittrock emphasize “creativity”; it is needed for, and enables, great expansions in the scale of civilizational identity and religious visions (positing of “universals”)
- There are also, of course, rejections of the Axial age thesis (e.g. Egyptologists Jan and Aleida Assmann)

Map of updated Axial age thesis: Significant interaction btwn India & Near-East



Map of updated Axial age thesis: in context of “world system” theory



Joas (2012) lays out some current options for interest of the Axial age:

1. Returning to the original claims of Axial Age: can be seen as a prophetic plea to return to (revive, renew) foundations that later interpretations have distorted/radicalized/misappropriated
 - a. Or such a return is a “dangerous regression to obsolete fanaticisms”
2. Different versions of Axial Age arguments can be replayed: e.g. within Christianity, Athens or Jerusalem (Greek or Judaic axis) ?
3. Nostalgia for pre-Axial myths and cosmologies
 - a. criticisms of transcendental aspirations of ‘world religions’ can be made in combination with ‘earth-based’ plea to return to pre-Axial foundations; e.g. Gimbutas’ Goddess thesis; new paganism, etc.
 - b. Importance of indigenous peoples’ spiritual traditions & revival; both Christianity & modern secular can be lumped together as ‘Axial Western’
4. Radical modernism that sees Axial heritage as preparation for a modernity that is in its core independent from it (e.g. positivism)
 - a. Critiques (anti-, post-) of modernism as NOT independent and that see Axial heritage as ambiguous & unfinished & opening the possibility of the ‘independence’ thesis of modernity, but also other unrealized possibilities (e.g. Jaspers: universal history; Bellah: re-embed theory)

- Robert Bellah, in his 2011 *Religion and evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*, is concerned with how the theoretic mode becomes so extreme in the modern West that it becomes ‘cut loose’ from its embodiment/dependence on ‘pre-theoretic’ modes, and ‘forgets’ or ‘loses’ them (Bellah’s thesis refrain in the book: “Nothing is ever lost.”)
- Bellah maps a developmental psychology view of consciousness, derived from Piaget & Bruner, onto evolutionary psychologist Merlin Donald’s ‘neuro-cultural’ thesis
- Donald: Human consciousness has evolved by the reciprocal feedback between individual brain and collective symbol-systems (language, culture)

Bellah's concern:

-within 'conceptual representation/theoretic mode', disengaged theory becomes possible that can lead to amoral destructive consequences

“Once disengaged vision... becomes possible, then theory can take another turn: it can abandon any moral stance at all and look simply at what will be useful, what can make the powerful and exploitative even more so.” (p. 593)

“Theory in the sense of disengaged knowing, inquiry for the sake of understanding, with or without moral evaluation...has given humans the power to destroy their environment and themselves.”

On the Bellah-Donald reading:

Axial age is crucially important as the narrated myth of “transcendence”, minted by spiritual visionaries in revolt against their religious traditions, precedes/enables the theoretic mode that in modernity ‘disengages’ (forgets/cuts loose/believes itself independent) from its embodiment and its belonging to evolution and history

-the contemporary crises of our world, as above all evident in our technoscientific capacity for global violence & ecological destruction has evolutionary-historical roots that are given a particular configuration around “transcendence” during Axial age

Either: “transcendence” itself is the problem (e.g. Nietzsche); or some deformation, misuse, or misunderstanding of it is (e.g. Charles Taylor)

2 reasons for the growing interest in the Axial Age:

- 1) Historical basis for present: Our modern 'globalizing' moment, including its problems & perils & the anxiety these invoke, is constitutively dependent on Axial age thinking, categories, distinctions
- 2) Axial-modern parallels: The fear/hope that we are entering, or are already in, another "axial age" of epochal change, means we are in a repetition of / have the opportunity to learn from, the 'first' Axial age

Psychology ought to be interested, too, and contribute its insights into the anxiety, cognition, fear, and hope, of our present "perilous moment"

My reading: the modern revolt (1600-1900; natural philosophy → Enlightenment → positivism) against religious tradition creates & consolidates a new world-civilizational-power (“modern West”)

- increasing world-domination through science & technology
- new “axis” of history is not transcendence, but technology
- contrary to Axial visions: we do not ‘turn our backs on this world’ for the sake of something ‘higher’ or ‘transcendent’, but maximally exploit this world with technoscientific power (begging/raising the question: isn’t this power therefore higher? Or transcendent? technoscience as further manifestation of Weber’s “this-worldly asceticism”?)
- socially & politically: focus on the ‘inner self’ of the individual, economics becomes central source for value

Axial-Modern parallels

Conditions in place that ‘seeded’ the axial revolutions:
(cmp. to contemporary globalization)

Characteristics of the “archaic state”:

1. centralization of political power,
 2. class stratification,
 3. magnification of military power,
 4. economic exploitation of the weak,
 5. universal introduction of some form of forced labor for both productive and military purposes,
 6. political domination (kingship) sacralized as divine
- (from Bellah, 2011)

Axial-Modern parallels

The Axial sages & prophets: lived not in the center, but on the peripheries & margins, of these states

1. Endured “real historical experiences of a collapse of order” (paraphrase of Nietzsche)
2. Offered a resistance against rising global empires
3. Attempted to re-establish meaningful human life vis-à-vis an all-menacing situation
4. Searched for measures to ‘cool down’ human matters in the midst of a spiral of violence and limitless military-economic expansion

(from Thomassen, 2010)

To what extent are the “conditions in place that ‘seeded’ the axial revolutions” again in place, now on a global scale based on technoscientific dynamisms?

1. centralization of political power (superpowers; political blocs; transnational corporations)
2. class stratification,
3. magnification of military power,
4. economic exploitation of the weak,
5. universal introduction of global “free” market economy
6. political domination : not sacralized as divine, but naturalized & normalized in multiple ways (most dramatically/obviously “survival of the fittest”)

Therefore, to what extent do the following describe us?

1. We are undergoing “real historical experiences of a collapse of order”
 1. ● climate change, the 6th extinction, & the end or death of Nature
 2. ● the mass extinctions of indigenous cultures & languages
 3. ● tipping point scenarios for fossil fuel based “growth” economies and the plausibility of societal “collapse” scenarios
2. We feel need to resist rising global empires/powers
3. We attempt to re-establish meaningful human life vis-à-vis an all-menacing situation
4. We search for measures to ‘cool down’ human matters in the midst of a spiral of violence and limitless military-economic, technological-scientific, expansion

“...only a god can save us”
-Heidegger quoting Holderlin

Is Axial vision of transcendence the “only” way?
Is it feasible or viable?

Can we discard it?

Can we revive it, renew it , transform it?

Can we invent a new vision, a different one?

Whatever we choose, we can't ignore the Axial Age.

