

The Heritage of the Axial Age

Resource or Burden?

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In this volume the contributors are focusing on the Axial Age and my chapter will do likewise. However, my work on the Axial Age comes out of a larger project concerning religion in human evolution from the Paleolithic to the Axial Age.¹ I will therefore begin with a word about evolution itself as a concept. I assume that none of the contributors to this volume has a problem with the theory of biological evolution, even though we may have some different ways of interpreting it. Problems arise when we speak of social and cultural evolution: Is that even a valid idea and, if we think it is, what do we mean by it? Here I will briefly state my position insofar as it is fundamental to my whole project, before turning to a consideration of the Axial Age and its consequences.

Although I will want to qualify it, my conception of social and cultural evolution is basically neo-Darwinian, with variation and selection operating not with genes but with cultural traits and institutional structures. For example, no tribal society, and so no tribal religion, anywhere in the world today can survive without some kind of state protection. That says nothing about the value of tribal societies or their religions, only that they cannot compete against state societies and today must be protected by them. This does not at all mean that state societies are better than tribal societies. Left alone, tribal societies might have survived for millions of years, whereas state societies seem to have a strong tendency toward mutual extinction. I believe that progress, even ethical progress, is an important issue. However, an evolutionary increase in complexity, and, in the short term, viability, tells us nothing about the ethical quality of the apparently more viable society, or

about its long-term fate. There have been and surely will be again cases in which increased complexity and apparent viability turn out to be an evolutionary dead end, leading to extinction.

I can certainly understand the anxiety that speaking of social evolution would reduce culture and society to biology, an anxiety not unwarranted in a world where sociobiology and the selfish gene have become popular ideas. As a defense against that kind of reductionism, there has been an effort to distinguish evolution and history: evolution occurs in nature, history occurs in culture. This distinction is, I think, a somewhat modified version of the old distinction between *Naturwissenschaft* and *Geisteswissenschaft*. And, as in this older distinction, there is the sense that evolution involves determinism, whereas history involves freedom, or at least a degree of contingency that is incompatible with deterministic natural science.

I believe this whole distinction is misplaced: evolution is historical; history is evolutionary. Evolutionary biologists have come to recognize that they often deal with contingent events—global warming or cooling, for example—that have major consequences for the survival or extinction of species. They also realize that species play an active part in their own future, having an impact on their own environment. Both biologists and historical sociologists recognize path dependence. Species and societies are enormously flexible, but once they go down a certain path, some alternatives become difficult or impossible. This can be seen as a historical fact with evolutionary consequences. We do not have to choose: evolution and history are two mutually compatible ways of looking at long-term development in nature and in culture.

The most complete discussion of the several ways of thinking about social evolution that I know of is an early essay of Jürgen Habermas, “Toward a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism.” Habermas, while accepting the validity of neoevolutionist approaches in their own terms, still finds them in need of supplementation. He believes, if I understand him rightly, that we human beings are involved in our own evolution and cannot escape making judgments that are evaluative as well as cognitive. The evolution of complexity is one standard of evolutionary development, but, Habermas writes, “Social scientific neoevolutionism is usually satisfied with the directional criterion of increasing steering (or adaptive) capacity. . . . [However] even in natural evolution the degree of complexity is not a sufficient condition for placing a species in the evolutionary rank order; for increasing complexity

in physical organization or mode of life often proves to be an evolutionary dead end.”² Habermas argues that in the very use of linguistic communication we have built-in standards that are not only cognitive but normative, and that lead us to view human evolution not only in scientific but in moral-practical terms, that is, in terms of increasing capacities for social learning. He concludes his essay by saying, “The development of productive forces, in conjunction with the maturity of the forms of social integration, means progress of learning ability in both dimensions: progress in objectivating knowledge and in moral-practical insight.”³

Habermas argues that in studying social evolution we will inevitably be governed not only by cognitive standards but by normative ones, though I am sure he would not want to confound the two levels. Even if we can speak of normatively lower and higher levels of social learning capacity, we can never assume that there is anything inevitable about attaining the higher levels. If we are going to talk about levels at all, as I am prepared to do, we must expect to find regress as well as progress and face the possibility that the human project may end in complete failure.⁴

This brief discussion of the idea of social evolution provides a prelude to my real subject: whether the heritage of the Axial Age is a resource or a burden in our current human crisis. I remember that Louis Dumont long ago pointed out that intellectuals specialize in crises and can always find one to talk about. True though that may be, I have lived long enough to experience a sea change with respect to popular sentiments about the human future. William Sullivan, in our collective book *The Good Society*, wrote about the 1939 New York World’s Fair and about the General Motors exhibition, “Futurama,” that had over five million visitors and set the tone for the Fair. Futurama was a celebration of the technological advance, material abundance, and rewarding leisure that the future was assumed to hold, if not for the world, at least for the United States. It was about fleshing out the progress that most Americans took for granted and making it come alive. I was twelve years old in 1939 and visited the San Francisco World’s Fair, which rivaled New York’s in celebrating the brave new world that was expected. That 1939 was on the verge of World War II, which saw the worst horrors in human history up to that time, was an irony lost on the millions of visitors to these two fairs.

Yet in the immediate years after the war, when I was an undergraduate and then a graduate student in the Department of Social Relations at Harvard, I

experienced an extraordinary euphoria about how good things were going to be. We had fought the good war. Though the Cold War was already underway, we assumed that “modernization” was the wave of the future, that what was then called “the developing world” would soon become more or less the same as “the advanced world,” and that convergent development would even gradually minimize the differences between the Soviet Union and the West.

It took the sixties to puncture that dream and, one might say, it has been all downhill ever since. Cultural pessimism (*Kulturpessimismus*) goes back a long way—Max Weber was not immune to it—but until relatively recently it remained a property of one section of the intellectual elite. What has become ever clearer to me in recent years is that the old dream of progress in popular culture is being replaced by visions of disaster, ecological catastrophe in particular. If, as I believe, we human beings are at least to some extent in charge of our own evolution, we are in a situation of high demand. The social learning capacity that might enable us to deal with our current challenges does not seem very adequate at the moment.⁵

If I am right, there is today a feeling of crisis that is first of all ecological, but also social and cultural, having to do with global inequality and instability that is deeper and more widespread than has been the case for a long time. It is in this context, then, that I want to inquire whether the Axial heritage can help us or hinder us in our current crisis. Here I would like to return to Habermas’s previously cited essay, “Toward a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism,” as a point of departure. In speaking of the transition from tribal societies organized by kinship to the emergence of the early state, he writes:

Social integration accomplished via kinship relations . . . belongs, from a developmental-logical point of view, to a lower stage than social integration accomplished via relations of domination. . . . Despite this progress, the exploitation and oppression *necessarily* practiced in political class societies has to be considered retrogressive in comparison with the less significant social inequalities *permitted* by the kinship system. Because of this, class societies are structurally unable to satisfy the need for legitimation that they themselves generate.⁶

It is true that the early state and its accompanying class system emerge in what I have called archaic societies well before the Axial Age and generate a

degree of popular unhappiness that can be discerned in the texts we have from such societies, but the legitimation crisis of which Habermas speaks arises with particular acuteness in the Axial Age, when mechanisms of social domination increase significantly relative to archaic societies and when coherent protest for the first time becomes possible. It would surely be far too simple to interpret the Axial transitions as forms of class struggle, but that they all involved social criticism and harsh judgments on existing social and political conditions cannot be denied.

In answer to the question of where this criticism was coming from there has been a tendency to speak of intellectuals, though what that term means in the first millennium BCE is not obvious. Scribal and priestly classes come to mind, but we can assume that most of them were too tied in to the existing power systems to be very critical. Even though the kind of state that existed then tried and in some important ways succeeded in overriding kinship relations, various kinds of particularistic and ascriptive associations were widespread. It is not easy to imagine the social space for criticism in such societies. It is in this context that we have to consider the role of the renouncer, to take a term most often used for ancient India.

There are renouncers already in late Vedic India; perhaps the first of whom we have an account is Yajnyavalkya, who appears in the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad. What the renouncer renounces is the role of the householder and all of the social and political entanglements that go with it. Buddhism provides a radical form of the renouncer, whose initial act is to “leave home,” and to be permanently homeless. If the renouncer is “nowhere,” he, and sometimes she, can look at established society from the outside, so to speak. It is not hard to see the Hebrew prophets as, in a sense, renouncers, though I have also called them denouncers. They too stood outside the centers of power, attempting to follow the commandments of God, whatever the consequences. Even in opposition, they were more oriented to power than were Buddhist monastics, to be sure, but, as we will see, the Buddhist monks also had a radical critique of worldly power. It is easy to see the Daoists who appear in Warring States China as renouncers, and they too have a critique of power, though perhaps more satirical than ethical. But there is a sense in which the Confucians, especially the greatest ones who never held office or held only lowly ones briefly, and were in principle opposed to serving an unethical lord, were renouncers, criticizing power from the outside. And finally

I will argue that Socrates and Plato were, in different ways, also renouncers, who were in but not of the city and also criticized it from the outside, so to speak.⁷

For all the differences in what can in most cases only loosely be called renouncers in the several Axial cultures, the one thing they shared was that they were teachers, and founders of schools or orders, thus more or less, and often less, securely institutionalizing a tradition of criticism. Ultimately their power was exercised through the extent to which they influenced or even controlled elite education, as, to some degree paradoxically, many of them ultimately did.⁸ And inevitably their survival depended on what they charged for their services or what they were freely given. By pointing out the significance of renouncers we in a sense return to our original question. How did renouncers garner the support that allowed them to survive in their outsider position? It seems apparent that some degree of unease about the state of the world must have been relatively widespread, even among the elite, to provide the support without which renouncers would simply have faded away into the wilderness.

If Habermas is right about the legitimation crisis of the Axial Age state brought on by the dissonance between the developmental-logical advance and the moral-practical regression, as I think he is, I would like to illustrate the response to this legitimation crisis by referring to the utopian projections of a good society that the various kinds of renouncers offered in criticism of the existing order. These utopian projections took quite different forms in the four cases, but each one of them was harshly critical of existing social-political conditions.

In ancient Israel the prophets sharply criticized the behavior of foreign states, but also conditions within the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. According to Amos, the rich and the rulers “trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and turn aside the way of the afflicted” (Amos 2:6–7). In contrast, the prophets look forward to the Day of the Lord when judgment will come to the earth and justice will “roll down like the waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). The prophets admonish rulers and people alike to change their ways, but look forward to a divine intervention that will finally put things right.

In ancient China Mencius, for example, but many Confucians before and after him, bemoaned the sad state of society, the corruption of the rulers and

the oppression of the peasantry, and offered an alternative form of government: rule by moral example, by conformity with the *li*, the normative order, and not by punishment. The Confucian hope for an ethical ruler who would follow Confucian injunctions did not involve any idea of divine intervention, except a vague notion that Heaven would eventually punish behavior that was too outrageous, but it was in its own way as utopian as was the prophetic hope of ancient Israel.

Plato, in the *Gorgias* and in the first book of the *Republic*, is a critic of a politics in which the strong could inflict harm on the weak with impunity: for him, despotism was always the worst form of government. In the *Republic* and the *Laws* he depicted a good society in contrast to the one he criticized, but which he knew was a “city in words,” or a “city in heaven,” and not one likely to be realized on this earth.

The Hindu epic, the Ramayana, can be seen as a critique of existing society, offering a different ideal of kingship. The early Buddhist canon describes an ideal society so different from existing reality as to be perhaps the most radical utopia of all, the most drastic criticism of society as it is.

In each Axial case, what I am calling social criticism is combined with religious criticism and the form and content of the Axial symbolization take shape in the process of criticism. I will take the Greek case as exemplary because our term “theory,” which I, following Merlin Donald, take as diagnostic of the Axial transition, first appeared there. I argued in my chapter on ancient Greece that it was Plato who completed the Axial transition: it is therefore not surprising that it was Plato who took the traditional term for ritual *theoria* and transmuted it into philosophical *theoria*, which, as I will attempt to show, is not the same as what we mean by theory, but is its lineal predecessor, and we can also see the beginning of the transition to what we mean by the term in Aristotle, Plato’s pupil.

My discussion of theory in Plato would not be possible except for the remarkable book by Andrea Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in Its Cultural Context*, from which I will draw extensively. Nightingale describes *theoria* before Plato as “a venerable cultural practice characterized by a journey abroad for the sake of witnessing an event or spectacle.” It took several forms, but the one which Plato took as the analogy for philosophical *theoria*, most extensively in the Parable of the Cave in Books V–VII of the *Republic*, was the civic form where the *theoros*

(viewer, spectator) was sent as an official representative of his city to view a religious festival in another city and then return to give a full report to his fellow citizens. Nightingale notes that by its very nature *theoria* in this sense was “international,” Panhellenic, and that Athens itself attracted many *theoroi* from other cities to view its great festivals, the Panathenaia and the City Dionysia.⁹ She notes that Plato himself begins and ends the *Republic* with examples of traditional *theoria*. The dialogue begins with Socrates going to the Piraeus, the port of Athens, to attend the festival of the Thracian goddess, Bendis, suggesting that the festival was more “international” than the short distance to the Piraeus might indicate, especially in view of Socrates’ remark that the Thracian procession was as fine as the Athenian one, expressing a Panhellenic viewpoint. And the *Republic* ends with the Myth of Er, which turns out to be a most remarkable *theoria*, since Er, who had been killed in battle and was about to be cremated, awoke and told his fellow countrymen about a journey he had made to the land of the dead and the festival he had attended there.¹⁰

Nightingale notes that in *Republic* Books V–VII Plato for the first time has Socrates give an account of what he meant by “philosophy,” a term which confused his interlocutors, who only knew it in its previous sense of broad intellectual cultivation, but which is now to be understood in the context of a new meaning of *theoria* as the “quintessential activity of the true philosopher.”¹¹ The traditional *theoros* was a lover of spectacles, particularly of religious rituals and festivals, while the philosophical *theoros* “loves the spectacle of truth.”¹² Plato puts great emphasis on vision, on seeing the truth more than hearing it; it is also a special kind of seeing, seeing with “the eye of the soul.” It is this kind of seeing that requires a protracted philosophical education to prepare for, but it ends with the “*theoria* [the “seeing”] of all time and being” (Rep. 486d).

Thinking of this kind of vision from an Indian or Chinese perspective, one might imagine that the way to attain it would be through some form of meditation, probably involving breath control. Although Socrates is portrayed twice in the *Symposium* as in some kind of trance, it is not meditation that Plato finds to be the way to philosophical vision. The education that ends with “seeing reality,” or “seeing Being,” begins with number and calculation, which “enables the mind to ‘view’ the great and the small in themselves, abstracted from their concrete manifestations.”¹³ Geometry and as-

tronomy follow, each of which involves “seeing” higher truths. What Plato meant by astronomy is not so much stargazing as “the mathematical principles that govern the motions of the heavenly bodies,” which one “sees” when “gazing with the mind and not the eyes.” Finally comes “dialectic,” which Socrates never plainly defines but uses metaphors to describe, speaking of the “journey of dialectic” toward the contemplation of “true being.”¹⁴ What is involved is not “implanting vision in the soul,” but turning the vision in a new direction, “away from the world of becoming and toward true being” (521d).¹⁵

At the critical moment, then, Plato turns to narrative, what Nightingale calls the Analogy of the Cave, but which is not simply an allegory that can be translated into propositional language, but a kind of myth that reveals truth on its own terms, and that I would rather call the Parable of the Cave. The Buddha too uses stories, often referred to as “similes” in the secondary literature, to make a point, as in the famous Parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant. It seems that at the very point when thought was moving from myth to theory, narrative still had to function as the midwife.

I cannot here give an account of the beauty and complexity of the Parable of the Cave, but only allude to those aspects of it that relate to my argument. It begins with a person who is “at home,” though home in the *Republic* is more apt to be the *polis*, the city, than the *oikos*, the household. Home, however, turns out to be a dark cave that is in fact a prison where one is in bonds so that one is forced to look at shadows on the wall cast by people (ideologists?) behind one’s back projecting images by holding various objects in front of fires. Still, those shadowy images are what one is used to, so that in a situation where one is freed from one’s bonds and, in Plato’s words, “compelled to suddenly stand up and to turn [one’s] head and to walk and turn upward toward the light” (515c), one will be confused, in a state of *aporia*, that is, profound uncertainty, the opposite of *poria*, certainty. One will have entered, in Nightingale’s words, “a sort of existential and epistemic no-man’s-land,” being able no longer to recognize the old familiar shadows nor yet to see anything in the blinding light above, so that one would be tempted to flee from the whole journey and return to the old familiar prison.¹⁶

Yet the would-be philosopher does not flee back, and even gets used in some degree to the condition of uncertainty, *aporia*, which Nightingale describes as “(among other things) a state of homelessness.” She goes on to

describe the new state as basically similar to the renouncer position in other cultures:

In addition to the state of *aporia*, the philosopher's departure from home leads to a permanent state of *atopia* [no place, nowhere]. For the person who has detached himself from society and gone on the journey of philosophic *theoria* will never be fully "at home" in the world. *Theoria* uproots the soul, sending it to a metaphysical region where it can never truly dwell and from which it will inevitably have to return. As a *theoros*, the Platonic philosopher must journey to "see" truth (in various degrees of fullness) and bring his vision back to the human world.¹⁷

In a good city he will be given civic office and expected to serve, even though he would rather spend his time in contemplation, yet even in office he is still a kind of foreigner in his own city. But if he returns to a bad city, his report of what he has seen will be mocked as foolish and nonsensical: he will be abused, he may even be killed. Nightingale sums up: "When he returns to the human world, then, he is *atopos*, not fully at home: he has become a stranger to his own kind."¹⁸

We still need to understand what philosophical *theoria* itself is; the ritual *theoros* sees the festival; what does the philosophic *theoros* see? Here we need to discount the caricature of classical theory, which assumes that the philosopher is a disengaged spectator, viewing at a distance what is an object different from himself as a subject, a kind of premature Descartes. Plato does not help us understand what the philosopher sees, that is, the "forms," *eide*, and in particular the "form of the good," *agathon*, which seems to be truth and reality itself, because he stays in the myth to talk about them. In the myth, Plato compares the form of the good to the source of all light, something like the sun to the eye of the soul. But if we gazed at the sun very long with our physical eye, we would go blind, whereas the soul who gazes at the form of the good sees all things as they really are.

Nightingale shows us that the forms are not abstractions, but are, to the eye of the soul, ontological presences, "beings" or "substances." Further, the vision of the forms is not disengaged, but involves participation, for part of ourselves, our *nous*, inadequately translated as "rational soul," is akin to the forms. The vision is genuinely interactive: as Nightingale puts it, the vision

is “granted to us as a gift.”¹⁹ Furthermore, it is anything but cool and detached: it is affective and emotional, it brings intense pleasure and happiness, it is erotic, even sexual. The soul, says Plato, “draws near to and has intercourse with (makes love to) reality.” (490b) Furthermore, the experience of the vision is utterly transformative; one becomes a different person as a result.²⁰ One could speak of the soul as “enlightened,” but if, as in translating *nirvana* or *moksha*, one wanted to avoid eighteenth-century terminology, one could speak of the soul as “awakened,” or even “released,” for has the transformed soul not been released from the prison of the cave in order to participate in the really real?

Plato then goes on to describe the good city to which the fortunate philosophic *theoros* returns. To discuss that in detail would take us too far afield, but I want to allude to a couple of aspects of the good city. The good city, as we noted, is ruled by the philosophically liberated, even though they would rather be doing something else. Why then do they take on political responsibility? Nightingale interestingly discusses this issue:

If there is an ideal city—and it is by no means clear that Plato believed in its possibility—then it can and must be ruled by philosophers. In this case alone, the philosopher must live a double life (as it were): he will practice philosophy and serve as a ruler. To qualify for this position, an individual must possess theoretical wisdom and practical virtue; in addition, he or she must not want to rule or lead a political life (347c–d, 521a–b, 540b). A person who does want to rule is, by definition, not a true philosopher and thus disqualified from ruling. The philosopher in the ideal city, however, will agree to rule, in spite of his disinclination to do so. Since he is a “just” person responding to a “just command,” the philosopher is “willing” to return and rule the city (520d–e).²¹

This is all the more odd since, as Nightingale notes, the philosopher remains a foreigner in his own city, a “non-mercenary mercenary” who is supported but not paid, can own nothing, and can never touch gold or silver. Many scholars have been puzzled by this situation, but Nightingale, drawing on the work of Christopher Gill, points out that because they are “‘just men obeying just commands,’ they are eager to pay back their city for the education and rearing that has been granted them.”²² And remember that it had

been the obligation of the ritual *theoros* to return and give an account of what he had seen to his fellow citizens.

The rulers, or as they are often called, the “guardians,” are an ascetic lot, and have been compared to a monastic order. Not only are they committed to a life of poverty (they live on what the city gives them, not on anything of their own, and can be considered in a way to be beggars), but their sexual life is so regulated that, though they have children, they have no family life, no personal household: the children are raised in common. They embody the virtue of wisdom, but they preside over a city that is characterized by the virtues of justice and moderation, and, not insignificantly, where there are no slaves. A democracy the ideal city is not, and I’m sure we wouldn’t want to live in it, and perhaps even Plato would have had his doubts.

In Books VIII and IX of the *Republic* Plato describes a steady decline from a mythical first regime that is a version of his ideal city, a decline that begins because some of the guardians go astray, desiring personal enrichment, even though that involves, for the first time, the enslavement of fellow citizens. This produces timocracy, the rule of honor, with Sparta as an actual example. But unchecked desires lead to a further downward spiral, first to oligarchy and then democracy. While Plato’s argument compels him to say that democracy is the worst regime short of tyranny, he also says it is the freest of regimes, and the freedom of democracy is what makes it the only regime where philosophy is possible. Within the multicolored variety of democratic ways of life, the philosophical life can be pursued, at least until the democratic lack of self-control leads to tyranny, the worst of all possible regimes. Outside the rigid logic of decline, it would seem that Plato has more sympathy with democracy than he admits. In any case, in the only great dialogue in which someone else takes the part of Socrates, the *Laws*, the central character is an Athenian philosopher, not a Spartan, that is, someone from what in the scheme of decline should have been a better city than Athens. But then, there were no philosophers in Sparta, and besides, no Spartan could ever have talked as much as the Athenian in the *Laws*.

Compared to the cities of his day, Plato was holding up an ideal. It has often been called an aristocratic ideal, but aristocrats on the whole favored oligarchy, which Plato despised, and Nightingale argues that Plato used aristocratic ideals against the aristocrats, who were not “real” aristocrats in his

eyes, just as the Buddha criticized the Brahmins for not being “real” Brahmins.

Which takes us to the Buddhist case, where religious reform and political criticism also went hand in hand. I have been presenting a more Buddhist Plato than usual before turning to the Buddha himself. There are some interesting parallels between them: recent revisions of the dates of the Buddha bring him into the fourth century BCE, and make them possible contemporaries. One striking parallel is the degree to which each one threw out his respective inherited tradition and attempted to replace it with an entirely new one. Plato composed a huge corpus intended to replace the entire poetic, dramatic, and wisdom traditions that preceded him. Fortunately, he did not succeed in eliminating his forbears, but start a new tradition he did, as the famous quip of Alfred North Whitehead that all of Western philosophy is nothing but footnotes to Plato indicates. The Buddha similarly threw out the entire Vedic tradition, from the Rig Veda to the Upanishads, and in its place left us with a collection of sermons and dialogues, the Buddhist canon, that is several times bigger than Plato’s complete works. We can be relatively sure that all that is attributed to the Buddha is not his, that successive generations added to the tradition in his name. It is not improbable that the Platonic corpus is similarly layered. But here we are interested in the degree to which both men succeeded in starting something quite new.

Of course, the Buddha, like Plato, owed a great deal to his predecessors, is inconceivable without them. But, as Richard Gombrich has pointed out, those who see Buddhism simply as a later school of Brahmanism and those who see it as a totally new conception are equally mistaken: Buddhism is a reformulation of Brahmanism so radical that it began a new and enormously influential tradition, even though it did not survive in India. Both men could be seen as in some ways visionaries; both also as great rationalists, adept in argument, superb in dialogue; and both were before all else teachers and, though we often fail to see this side of Plato because of the quite artificial distinction we make between philosophy and religion, or that we project back into premodern times, both were teachers of salvation.

The Buddhist version of the Parable of the Cave is in an important sense the whole elaborate story of the Buddha’s life as the tradition handed it down. Just as the philosopher had to leave his *oikos* and his *polis*, so the Buddha had

to leave his *oikos* and his *polis*, or rather his kingdom, the rule of which should have come to him. But, seeing sickness, old age, and death, the Buddha wanted to leave that cave and spent years of suffering and deprivation trying to do so. In the end, however, he found a middle way between the sensual indulgence of the world and the harsh austerities of the renouncers who preceded him, a way in which serene meditation could lead him to the truth and the release which he sought.

It was during his meditation under the Bodhi tree that he famously attained his vision of the truth and his release from this world of *samsara*. Sometime later when he was considering what to do next he almost concluded that there was no use in trying to teach what he had learned to a world filled with lust and hate. But just then he was approached by a Brahman, not the Upanishadic absolute, but one of the many high gods whose ultimacy but not whose existence Buddhism always doubted, who implored him to return to the world after all:

Let the Sorrowless One survey this human breed,
Engulfed in sorrow, overcome by birth and old age.
Arise, victorious hero, caravan leader,
Debtless one, and wander in the world.
Let the blessed One teach the Dhamma,
There will be those who will understand.

And so the Buddha undertook, out of compassion for all sentient beings, forty-five years of itinerant preaching to make sure that the truth he had seen would not be lost to the world.²³

That followers of the Buddha, like those of Plato, knew a lot about the legitimation crisis of Axial Age society is evident in many texts, but we can, following Steven Collins, take a particularly vivid example from one of the Jataka stories (stories of the Buddha's previous lives, among the most widely known genres of the Buddhist canon), long and fascinating, that I will all too briefly summarize.²⁴ "Once upon a time there was a king of Benares who ruled justly (*dhammena*). He had sixteen thousand women, but did not obtain a son or daughter from any of them."²⁵ Indra, the king of the gods, took pity on him and sent the future Buddha to be born as a son to his chief queen. The child was named Temiya, and his father was delighted with him.

When he was a month old, he was dressed up and brought to his father, who was so pleased with him that he held him in his lap as he held court. Just then four criminals were brought in and the king sentenced one of them to be imprisoned, two to be lashed or struck with swords, and one to be impaled on a stake. Temiya was extremely upset and worried that his father would go to hell for his terrible deeds. The next day Temiya remembered his previous births, including that in the past he had been king of this very city and that, as a result of his actions, he subsequently spent eighty thousand years in an especially terrible hell, where he had been cooked on hot metal in excruciating pain the whole time. He determined that this would not happen again, so he pretended to be lame, deaf, and dumb so that he could not succeed to the kingship.

Since he was beautiful and had a perfectly formed body, people found it hard to believe in his defects, but because he was a future Buddha, he was able to resist all temptations to give himself away, whether with loud noises, terrifying snakes, or beautiful girls. When he was sixteen, the soothsayers told the king that he would bring bad luck to the royal house and should be killed. His mother begged him to save himself by showing that he was without defect but, knowing his fate if he succeeded to the kingship, he refused. Temiya was sent in his chariot to the charnel-ground where he was to be killed, but the gods saw to it that the charioteer took him to the forest instead. At that point Temiya revealed his true self, showing himself strong and fit. His charioteer offered to take him back to the city so he could claim his succession to the throne, but Temiya explained to him the dreadful fate in hell that awaited him if he did so and declared his intention to become an ascetic instead. At that point, “the chariot-driver, seeing that Temiya had cast kingship aside ‘as if it were a dead body,’ wanted to become an ascetic also.”²⁶ Temiya ordered him instead to return to the city and tell his parents what had happened.

When Temiya’s parents received the news, they rushed to the forest where he was, and overwhelmed with his new self, proceeded to renounce the world themselves. Soon the whole city had come out to the forest and everyone became a renouncer. They left gold and jewels in the streets of the city as of no more use. Soon a neighboring king, hearing what had happened, decided to annex Benares and scoop up the gold and jewels, but once in the city, he felt an overwhelming impulse to find the ascetic prince and his parents. Upon

finding them, he, too, and his subjects following him, became renouncers. Another king followed his example. Soon it was clear that Temiya was, after all, a *cakravartin*, a universal ruler, though his rule was renunciation.

Collins sums up by saying, “It is difficult to imagine a more explicit condemnation of kingship: despite the narrative voice’s assertion in the first sentence that Temiya’s father ruled justly, or ‘in accordance with what is right’ (*dhammena*).”²⁷ Collins points out that *dhamma* is used in two senses, worldly *dhamma* and *buddhadhamma*, and that it is the former that the kingdom embodied and the latter that it drastically violated. Temiya’s father’s kingdom represented what Peter Brown, the great historian of late classical antiquity, described as “the more predictable, but no less overbearing ‘gentle violence’ of a stable social order.”²⁸ In a class society, even if those who serve and are never served are not beaten or hungry, as in fact they often are, they are always at the whim of those they serve; they have no control over their own lives. If it is unlikely that Plato ever imagined that his ideal city could be realized, it is very clear that in this Buddhist story Temiya’s universal empire of renunciation could never be realized on this earth: it would involve not only the absence of violence; it would involve the absence of sex. Nonetheless, as with all the great Axial utopias, it stands as a measure of just how short life in this world falls compared to what it ought to be.

The great utopias served for the renouncers as stark contrasts to the actual world and their vision of that other world could be called “theory” in Plato’s sense. But the very distance they felt from the world to which they returned made possible another kind of “theory,” another kind of seeing, that is, a distant, critical view of the actual world in which they lived. The renouncer sees the world with new eyes: as Plato says of the ones who have returned to the cave, they see the shadows for what they are, not naively as do those who have never left. One could say that the ideological illusion is gone. One gazes at a distance, objectively, so to speak.

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. One thinks of the Legalists in China and of Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* in India. Although the Hebrew prophets saw and condemned the self-serving manipulations of the rich and powerful, we can find in the Bible no example of

someone arguing for such behavior in principle. Except possibly for some of the Sophists, whose surviving writings are fragmentary, we have nothing quite like Han Fei or Kautilya in Greece. Or do we?

Aristotle was not an amoralist; he was one of the greatest moral theorists who ever lived. Yet in Aristotle we can see the possibility of a split between knowledge and ethics that will, when it is fully recognized, have enormous consequences in later history. Pierre Hadot argues that Plato's school, for all its concern for mathematics and dialectic, had an essentially political aim: philosophers in principle should be rulers. Aristotle's school, however, is specifically for philosophers, those who do not participate actively in the life of the city, in a way a school for renouncers.²⁹ But in distinguishing the philosophical life from the political life so clearly, Aristotle threatens the link between wisdom (*sophia*) and moral judgment (*phronesis*), in which he still clearly believed. Most of his surviving texts were notes for lectures within the school and express aspects of the philosophical life, though the *Ethics* and the *Politics* were intended for a larger audience of active citizens. The link between the two realms is not direct but appears in the fact that both are oriented to good forms of life, one toward knowledge for its own sake, the other for the creation of a good city.

Although the highest form of *theoria* is contemplation of the divine and through it the philosopher, however briefly and partially, actually participates in the divine, *theoria* includes the search for knowledge of all things, including the transient ones. Hadot, however, argues that Aristotle's massive research project is not quite what it seems to modern minds:

It is thus indisputable that for Aristotle the life of the mind consists, to a large degree, in observing, doing research, and reflecting on one's observations. Yet this activity is carried out in a certain spirit, which we might go so far as to describe as an almost religious passion for reality in all its aspects, be they humble or sublime, for we find traces of the divine in all things.³⁰

He goes on to quote a passage in which Aristotle says, "In all natural things there is something wonderful."³¹ It is as though *theoria* in its highest form is close to what the developmental psychologist Alison Gopnik calls "lantern

consciousness,” the apprehension of reality as a whole, but in its lesser forms it becomes various kinds of “spotlight consciousness,” focusing on each aspect of reality, however humble, in an effort to understand it and what causes it.³²

So one possible split apparent in Aristotle is that between his metaphysics, where he describes the ultimate source of all knowledge, and the many particular fields of inquiry that he had so much to do with founding. But the second possible split is between *theoria*, contemplation, in all its various levels, as the best life for human beings, and the life of the city, of politics and ethics. *Theoria*, in his words, is useless. It is a good internal to itself, but it has no consequences for the world.

But perhaps we miss Aristotle’s point if we ask what the theoretical life is good for. Being the best kind of life, and good in itself, then the question is what kind of person and what kind of society could make this life possible. The *Ethics* and *Politics*, then, describe the conditions under which the theoretical life could be pursued. But unlike Plato’s *Republic*, Aristotle’s *Politics* is no utopia but an empirical and analytical description of actual Greek society, containing ethical judgments between better and worse, but objective, distant, as an analysis of the second best kind of life, one that has its final value in making possible the first kind of life. Aristotle was the founder of sociology, which Émile Durkheim recognized when he assigned the *Politics* as the basic textbook for his students when he first began to teach at the University of Bordeaux. What I am suggesting is that the distinctions between two kinds of *theoria*, pure contemplation and various fields of inquiry, and two kinds of ethical life, the intellectual and the practical, made possible, once the unity of Aristotle’s thought was broken, separate developments that could lead to autonomous sciences and utilitarian ethics in the long run.

Aristotle was really a stranger in his own city, if Athens was his own city: he was not a citizen. He had to set up his school, the Lyceum, in a public building because, as an alien, he could not own land in Athens and so could not buy land for his school. And when things turned grim, he, unlike Socrates, had no compunction about getting out in time. He was a teacher, one of the greatest who ever lived, but one of his (not very apt) pupils was Alexander, the greatest conqueror of the ancient world. Aristotle on the whole used the word *theoria* in Plato’s sense, but he also used it from time to time for “investigation,” or “inquiry,” that is, for the study of all things in the world, natural and cultural, to see how they worked and what they are for.

My point is that the Axial Age gave us “theory” in two senses, and neither of them has been unproblematic ever since. The great utopian visions have motivated some of the noblest achievements of mankind; they have also motivated some of the worst actions of human beings. Theory in the sense of disengaged knowing, inquiry for the sake of understanding, with or without moral evaluation, has brought its own kind of astounding achievements but it has also given humans the power to destroy their environment and themselves. Both kinds of *theoria* have criticized but also justified the class society that first came into conscious view in the Axial Age. They have provided the intellectual tools for efforts to reform and efforts to repress. It is a great heritage. I doubt that any of us would rather live in a tribal society than in one whose beginnings lie in the Axial Age; I know I would not. Yet it is a heritage of explosive potentialities for good and for evil. It has given us the great tool of criticism. How will we use it?

Notes

Portions of this chapter first appeared as the concluding chapter to my *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

1. See Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

2. Jürgen Habermas, “Toward a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism,” in *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Boston: Beacon, 1979 [1976]), 130–177, here 174.

3. *Ibid.*, 177.

4. Eli Sagan believes there is an inherent drive toward higher levels of morality, though such a drive may suffer blockage and regression. In chapter 4 of my book on the evolution of religion I speak of a biological drive toward domination on the one hand and toward nurturance on the other. Human culture has greatly elaborated these drives but has not eliminated them. We must face the reality that these remain two of our deepest motives. For Sagan’s views see his *Freud, Women, and Morality* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 222ff.

5. For a penetrating analysis of just where many of our problems lie in this respect see Jürgen Habermas, “The Postnational Constellation and the Future of Democracy,” in *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002 [1998]), 58–112.

6. Habermas, “Toward a Reconstruction,” 163 (emphasis in original).

7. Perhaps it would be best to call only Plato a renouncer. Andrea Nightingale argues with Simon Goldhill, who called Socrates a “performer in exile” because he did not display his wisdom in the assembly or other political gatherings (except on one important occasion). She holds that in his exchanges with his fellow citizens he remained intimately tied to the city. See Andrea Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in Its Cultural Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 73, n. 2. Can we call Socrates a “dissident,” who, like Václav Havel, criticized his city but refused to leave it at whatever cost? Fortunately for Havel, he only had to serve four years in prison.

8. Of course, as in many legitimation struggles, what began as a tradition of criticism could become a tradition of legitimation.

9. Nightingale, *Spectacles*, 40–41.

10. *Ibid.*, 74–77.

11. *Ibid.*, 78.

12. *Ibid.*, 98.

13. *Ibid.*, 80.

14. *Ibid.*, 81.

15. *Ibid.*, 80.

16. *Ibid.*, 105–106.

17. *Ibid.*, 106.

18. *Ibid.*, 106–107.

19. *Ibid.*, 111.

20. *Ibid.*, 110–116.

21. *Ibid.*, 134 (emphasis in original).

22. *Ibid.*, 135.

23. On the Buddha’s visions in his “meditative trance” on the night of his “Awakening,” see Gananath Obeyesekere, *Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformation in Amerindian, Buddhist, and Greek Rebirth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 158. For the words of the Brahman see *Ariyapariyesana Sutta* 19–21, in Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya* (Boston: Wisdom, 1995), 261.

24. This is the well-known “Birth Story of the Dumb Cripple” (*Mugapakkha Jataka*, Ja 6.1ff., 158) as recounted and partly translated in Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 425–433. For a complete translation see “The Story of Temiya, the Dumb Cripple,” in *The Jatakas: Birth Stories of the Bodhisatta*, trans. Sarah Shaw (New Delhi: Penguin, 2006), 179–221.

25. Collins, *Nirvana*, 426.

26. *Ibid.*, 430.

27. *Ibid.*, 233–234.

28. *Ibid.*, 417. The quote is from Peter Brown, *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 1995), 53. It is worth noting that the “gentle violence” of which Brown speaks was inflicted by an empire that had become “Christian,” just as “Buddhist” empires would do the same.

29. Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002 [1995]), 78. My discussion of Aristotle draws heavily from Hadot’s chapter on Aristotle in this book, pp. 77–90.

30. Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 82.

31. Aristotle, *De partibus animalium I* and *De generatione animalium I*, trans. David M. Balme (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 18, 645a.

32. Alison Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby: What Children’s Minds Tell Us about Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 129.

