

# **All and Nothing: Reflections on Experience and Transcendence in the Eurasian**

## **Axial Age, c. 800-200 BCE**

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Salt Lake City , the place where my wife and I and our cats live, is roughly equidistant from the three states of Nevada , Idaho , and Wyoming . Ignoring the admonitions of local church authorities, every weekend thousands of Salt Lakers travel by car, bus, or plane to these neighboring states to gamble in casinos, buy lottery tickets, or (during the summer) bet on horse races. For better or worse, even some of my University of Utah colleagues cannot refrain from practicing a little mundane magic, by visiting their favorite slot machines or betting windows. Secularism has arrived in Zion .

With this rather quotidian example, I want to draw your attention to the fact that experience followed by transcendence pops up in the strangest places (no *double entendre* intended with my reference to Salt Lake City ). In the Voegelin Society we normally expect to hear only about peak occurrences of experience and transcendence in noetic and revelatory thought. For the moment, however, bear with me and reflect, if you will, on the gambler's peak moment: When the dice are rolled, the lottery drum is turned, or the horses break from the starting gate, he or she experiences the thrill of All and Nothing, that is, of being at the brink where winning and losing are still indistinguishably intertwined and only moments before the two separate into either luck or loss. Once *les jeux sont faits* the two move so far apart that the gambler wonders how he/she could ever have experienced them as a continuum.



For those of you who are familiar with contemporary science, the above gambling scenario is a trivial version of Schrödinger's Cat thought experiment. As is well known, in this hypothetical case a cat is enclosed in a box with a mechanism that will release poison and kill it as soon as a uranium atom decays. As long as the physicist does not open the box the cat inside is both indeterminately dead *and* alive. But once the physicist does, the indeterminate reality of life/death turns into the transcendent reality of *either* life or death. This thought experiment seeks to illustrate the quantum-physical fact that freedom in the sub-nuclear realm determines when the particle/wave continuum collapses and the transcendence of either the particle or the wave is established.<sup>i</sup> [1]

Let me generalize from the two examples presented above, the one trivial and the other hypothetical. At any moment in our lives, we experience continua and think transcendentally. As soon as we awake in the morning we face immediate decisions or lengthy deliberations about matters large and small, during which multiple options are inchoately real in our mind before we decide on one option and proceed to action. The continua of experience are followed by transcendent reflection and then execution. From this perspective of routine and often unconscious daily experiences and reflections it would follow that the peak meditations on the noetic or revelatory Ground of Being, central to the discussions of the Voegelin Society, are special cases of a much more general and pervasive reality. As will become clearer below, I am suggesting that the experience-transcendence complex is a basic condition of human existence.

I emphasize the ubiquity of the experience-transcendence complex in order to set the stage for my discussion of the Axial Age in Eurasia which is the focus of this presentation. In the first part I shall present a brief summary of the concept as developed by Karl Jaspers, criticized by Eric Voegelin, and restated in expanded form by Shmuel Eisenstadt. In the second part I shall examine

the commonalities as well as the incommensurabilities among the Axial Age thinkers themselves. As already implied above, my main point is that Axial thought was merely one many episodes in the historical process of shifting conceptualizations of experience and transcendence.

### (1) Jaspers, Voegelin, and Eisenstadt on the Axial Age

The primary contribution of Karl Jaspers  in two books written in 1949 and 1953  was to move the focus of the intellectual historian away from the Western-centric Hegelian notion of Jesus as the hinge of world history.<sup>ii</sup> [2] Instead, he looked at the trans-Eurasian phenomenon of the first persons commemorated *not* for their imperial achievements but for their pioneering intellectual efforts (undertaken between 800 and 200 BCE ). Jaspers enumerates such Axial thinkers as Confucius, Laozi, the authors of the Upanishads, the Buddha, Jeremiah, Elijah, Deutero-Isaiah, Zoroaster, Homer, Parmenides, Heraclitus, the tragic poets, Thucydides, and Archimedes.<sup>iii</sup> [3] A long list of accomplishments is attributed to these figures, from which I would like to mention one rather singular achievement, described in the following quote from Jaspers: "The new element of this age is that man everywhere became aware of being as a whole, of himself and his limits... He experienced the Absolute in the depth of selfhood and in the clarity of transcendence."<sup>iv</sup> [4] The sweep of the Jasperian existentialist gesture in this quote is breathtaking indeed and one wonders who among the Axial Age thinkers would possibly want to recognize himself in it.

Eric Voegelin deals with Jaspers' Axial Age concept mainly in volumes two and four of *Order and History*, published in 1957 and 1974.<sup>v</sup> [5] His main objection to the concept is Jaspers' treatment of the various thinkers as being of equal intellectual status. According to Voegelin, one must make distinctions between incomplete breakthroughs to transcendence, as in China or India

, and complete ones, as in the Middle East or in Greece , where in his judgment transcendence was fully differentiated. Voegelin does not analyze the Chinese and Indian cases in great detail and for China refers the reader to the 1968 work of his student Peter Weber-Schfer who makes a forceful case for an incomplete breakthrough, relying on comparisons with Plato.vi [6] Furthermore, in Voegelin's view one must distinguish the history of order under God from the political history of the empires, regarding the two as being incommensurable. Overall, Voegelin agrees with Jaspers on the history of order as a process of intellectual differentiation, but he does not view this differentiation as evenly distributed across Eurasia .

In the collective work on the Axial Age edited by Shmuel Eisenstadt (1986), the emphasis shifts back to the Jasperian individuals who, with the exception of Confucius, are seen as having achieved complete "breakthroughs."vii [7] Similar to Jaspers, Eisenstadt does not identify to *what* these individuals broke through and simply refers in generic terms to "transcendental visions." In the special case of Confucius, Eisenstadt cites the Sinologist Benjamin I. Schwartz who identifies the *Dao* of the *Analects* as Heaven's "transcendental will [which is] interested in Confucius' redeeming mission."viii [8] (Schwartz preceded Eisenstadt in 1975 with his own collective work devoted to the Axial Age discussion.ix [9] ) In contrast to Jaspers, Eisenstadt shortens the Axial Age to the period around 600-400 BCE and relegates Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to the category of "secondary breakthroughs." The bulk of Eisenstadt's introductions to the five parts of his book (although not the contributors' essays) is devoted to aspects of institutionalization which the "transcendental and mundane orders" of the Axial thinkers underwent. In contrast to Voegelin, none of the authors distinguishes between history under God and political history, and all follow, more or less closely, the conventional scheme of intellectual history.

## (2) The Experience-Transcendence Complex and Its Historical Articulations

The concepts to which the Axial thinkers "broke through" are well-known. For Parmenides it was Being (*To Eon*), for Zoroaster and Deutero-Isaiah God (*Ahuramazda* and *Yahwe*), for the Upanishad Hindus Self (*Brahman*), for the Buddhists Self-Emptying (*Sunyata*), for Confuciusx [10] and Laozi the Way (*Dao*). On first sight, these concepts appear heterogenous. Does an analysis reveal common features? Since I argue that the experience-transcendence complex is both pervasive and ubiquitous in human history, a glance at hunter-gatherer (c. 34000-8000 BCE ) and early agrarian-urban societies (c. 8000-800 BCE ) forming the background to the Axial Age seems in order. This glance, even if cursory, will help to understand the Axial Age concepts.

The evidence from hunter-gatherer societies, of course, is only of a pictorial, and not yet literary nature. Nevertheless, one can comfortably argue that the great majority of animals painted by hunter-gatherers on cave walls represent experiential continua of the general type described in the introduction. From the plenitude of objects in the hunting and gathering world present in the mind, the painters abstracted a few, predominantly large and powerful animals for depiction. Many animals were superimposed on others and appear as vague outlines within larger herds, forming more or less differentiated continua on the available rock surfaces. The reduction in differentiation must have been enhanced by the dim, smokey light produced by the torches and lamps taken into the caves. In other words, whoever the individuals were (masters and disciples?) who assembled in these caves, so for whatever purposes (rituals?), they partook of experiential continua that were both selective and semi-undifferentiated.

Since selectivity and reduced differentiation imply mental activity, the cave paintings tell us not only about experience but also about transcendence. From the fully differentiated continuum of daily experiences, paleolithic transcendent mind singled out a select few objects, blurred them through abstraction into a less differentiated continuum, and thereby ♦ presumably ♦ provided meaning to their daily life. The adjective "presumably" needs to be emphasized since in the absence of literary documentation the assumption of cave paintings occupying a place in, for example, shamanic rituals of understanding and manipulating reality is no more than speculation based on much later cave paintings.xi [11]

During the subsequent early agrarian-urban period, attention shifted from the narrow reality of animals to reality's broader expanse. The experience of vast continua of things seen and unseen in daily life was conceptualized in the form of transcendent Totalities or Alls, such as Earth and Heaven, as they were uniformly called across Eurasia in the early literary documents. "Earth" is the concept for the home of all sentient beings endowed with personhood and subject to mortality. "Heaven" is the concept for the abstract, less differentiated abode of everything personified as immortal and, therefore, divine. Thus the two Alls are seen as populated with countless Ones, mortal persons on one hand and personifications of immortality, or divinity, on the other. The characteristic feature of persons and personifications of the divine, of course, is that their personhood or Oneness implies the unity of their subjective and objective features. Hence, much care is taken to describe feelings and thoughts as well as appearances and deeds of such persons and personifications as the Sumerian hero Gilgamesh, the Chinese giant Pangu, or the pantheon of gods and goddesses of Eurasia . The agrarian-urban fashioners of myth possessed a remarkable understanding of the transcendent concepts of the All and the One.

Agrarian-urban Eurasia also possessed creation myths in which the continua of experience were formulated into the concepts of the Nothing, Inchoate, One, and All. Creation begins with either an unequivocal Nothing, as in Egypt or India , or with a Unity identified as an Inchoate. An immortal, Personified One sets in motion the process which transforms the abstract and undifferentiated Nothing or Inchoate, and gives birth to the concrete and differentiated All of immortal and mortal personal Ones as well as inanimate things. The story lines of these myths seem to suggest that the Nothing, Inchoate, One, and All are vastly divergent and separated by time.

Both Heaven-Earth and Creation myths present an array of Unity conceptualizations for the continua of experience. Unity appears to have such different and contradictory faces as the Nothing, the Inchoate, the One, and the All, concealed in myth through the assumption of a time dimension. Whatever the specific changes in the institutional and literary conditions after 800 BCE were (and they have to remain outside the purview of this short presentation<sup>xii</sup> [12] ), these changes made the explanatory power of the two types of myth questionable. Axial thinkers emerged who searched for a new solution for the contradictions. Their search involved the two steps of (a) asserting limits to the comprehension of Unity and of (b) privileging specific aspects of Unity, thereby ignoring the limits and making them comprehensible.

(a) Axial Age thinkers are nearly unanimous in asserting that the contradictions in the broadest dimensions of Unity impose limits on conceptual articulation. As one moves from experience to transcendence, a limit of comprehension seems to appear, casting doubt on one's ability to arrive on the other side of this limit, reach the Beyond, and thereby complete the process of transcendence. The Axial literature abounds with such adjectives for what is in the Beyond as

"unnameable," "incomprehensible," "invisible," "unapproachable," or "ineffable." Accordingly, no breakthrough to transcendence seems possible. Although the continua of experience suggest conceptual Unity, this same Unity, with its contradictory synonyms of Nothing, Inchoate, One, and All, appear to defy all articulation.

(b) This bald assertion of the incomprehensibility of Unity was untenable because it condemned its Axial proponents to silence. And this, as we know, did not happen. Depending on different choices made among the continua of experience, methods of abstraction, and conceptualizations of Unity, the Axial thinkers developed distinct and incommensurable modes of thought in Greece , the Middle East , India , and China . In Greece , Parmenides, the early Plato, and Aristotle privileged continua of perception, abstraction from observation, and the concept of the All, for the articulation of Being as an intelligible cosmic principle of order. A highly perceptive Plato mused in his later years, as evidenced in *Parmenides*, whether one would not have to supplement the concept of Being with that of Nothing.xiii [13] However, in his final work, the *Timaios*, he discarded the Nothing, denigrated the Inchoate as being accessible only to what he called "bastard thinking," and replaced Being with Mathematics.xiv [14] Since in Plato's generation Greek mathematics was still embryonic, Aristotle had no difficulty in dispensing with it, returning to Being as reflecting the All but not the Nothing. An Aristotelian philosophy of Being became the orthodox mode of thought for almost two millennia, lasting well into the 17<sup>th</sup> -century.

In India and China , the Axial thinkers of the Upanishads and Buddhism privileged continua of introspection, abstraction from subjective experience, and the concept of the One for the articulation of the Self as an intelligible principle of order. They also identified the Self with the Nothing through the idea of an "emptying" of the personal self, which required a rigorous



practice of meditation. Being as an abstraction from the All of perception was rejected as illusory. The individual Self as a One as well as a Nothing became central in Buddhism and Daoism, leading to the eventual coalescence of Buddhism and Daoism in China . A cosmic as well as an individual Self as All, One, and Nothing characterizes the Upanishads. However, when the Upanishads gave way to orthodox temple Hinduism during the Gupta empire (c.320-550 CE), thinkers privileged the All through a personification of the Self in the gods and goddesses of the Indian pantheon, moving introspection of the Self as the One into the background. A similar process occurred in China during the Sung dynasty (979-1279 CE) which sanctioned temple Daoism-Buddhism with its gods and goddesses for all those who found emptying of the self too rigorous and established Neo-Confucianism as the imperial code of ethics and law.xv [15]

In the Middle East , the Nothing, All, and One are all present in the Yasna, the oldest part of the Zoroastrian Avesta, and in the Pentateuch of the Hebrew Bible. The Yasna chronicles Ahuramazda's role as creator of the world, giver of laws for humanity, and leader in the cosmic struggle against evil.xvi [16] The Pentateuch is the record of the unnameable "I will be what I will be," who, nevertheless, also appears as the understandable Personified One with his two names, Elohim and Yahweh. He is creator of the world as well as lawgiver for his chosen people of Israel .xvii [17] Deutero-Isaiah conceived of him as the One who anointed the Persian Emperor Cyrus (ruled 559-529 BCE ) as the Messiah in order to restore the Israelites to Palestine .xviii [18] After their restoration, and the absorption of apocalyptic thought from Zoroastrianism, Yahweh turned in the book of Daniel into the cosmic ruler of the All who vanquishes evil empires at the end of history. In both Zoroastrian and Israelite thought, the concept of the Personified One is dominant and the Nothing and All are retained in their mythical roles as Beginning and End, the latter subject to transfiguration into the Heavenly Kingdom .

This admittedly compressed parade of Being, Self, and the Personified One as comprehensible identifications of transcendent Unity in post-Axial Age Eurasia is intended to demonstrate a final point with which I would like to conclude. By asserting a non-transcendable limit to transcendence while actually transcending it through Being, Self, and the Personified One the Axial thinkers and their successors appeared to have resolved the Unity contradictions. Their solutions provided for the establishment of stable orthodox cultures which lasted for millennia, as indicated above. Unfortunately, however, under different institutional and intellectual conditions, as they emerged in northwestern Europe beginning with the mid-17th century CE, the contradictions broke open again. A brief look at the logic of the assertion of limits of thought makes clear that the contradictions cannot be resolved. When, for example, Parmenides asserts that the Nothing cannot be thought he is also making the (true) statement that one can comprehend the fact that the Nothing cannot be thought. In other words, precisely because the Nothing's incomprehensibility is a meaningful concept, one has to retain it in one's reflections on Unity. Eliminating Nothing from the philosophy of Being in one place only meant that it cropped up somewhere else as it did, for example, in the concept of matter in Aristotelianism. As a substratum of pure potentiality for the imprint of form, matter is obviously a thinkable concept, even though it is a Nothing.xix [19] Any self-respecting philosophy of Being in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has to reckon with the Nothing from the start.

With the reconfiguration of the experience and transcendence complex in this presentation I hope to have stated the case for inconsistencies not only inherent in the modern Axial Age concept but also in the thought of the Axial figures themselves. Today, with the exploration of reality in its smallest dimensions in quantum physics, we have once again become aware of the full range of contradictory Unity concepts. The Nothing, the Inchoate, the All, and the Personified

One in reality at its most expansive are discovered to be mirrored in reality at the sub-atomic level.

It is through this mirror that we have reexamined the Axial Age heritage.

## Endnotes

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i [1] . John Gribbin, *In Search of Schrödinger's Cat: Quantum Physics and Reality* (New York: Bantam, 1984), pp. 2-3, 203-208.

ii[2] . Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press Reprints, 1977) and *Way to Wisdom: Introduction to Philosophy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.( New Haven : Yale University Press, 2003). *Origin* was published originally in Munich by Piper in 1949 and *Way* in Zurich by Artemis in 1950.

iii [3] . Contemporary scholarship is divided about the historicity and/or dates of Laozi and Zoroaster. The traditional view of Laozi as an older contemporary of Confucius is challenged by a critical view which, based on the heterogeneous character of the *Daodejing*, makes Laozi a composite figure of thinkers living after Confucius. See David Shepherd Nivison, "The Classical Philosophical Writings," in Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy, eds., *The Cambridge History of Ancient China : From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 802-805. The traditional view of Zoroaster having flourished in the 580s BCE (based on a reference in the Zoroastrian scripture *Bundahishn*) is being challenged on the basis of an abundant documentation presented by Mary Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism* (Leiden: Brill,1989), pp. 181-191. In her judgment, Zoroaster's dates are somewhere between 1400 and 1000 BCE . On the other hand, since the oral transmission of Zoroastrian teachings was beginning to be stabilized in the 500s BCE it is possible to speculate that Zoroastrianism as we know it is a product of the Axial Age. The stabilized oral tradition was not written down until the time of the Sassanid Persian Empire (224-651 CE) where Zoroastrianism was the privileged religion.

iv [4] . Jaspers, *Way*, p. 100.

v [5] . Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 2: *The World of the Polis* (Baton Rouge, La.: University of Louisiana Press, 1957), pp. 19-23; and vol. 4: *The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge, La.: University of Louisiana Press, 1974), pp. 2-11 and 308-316.

vi [6] . Peter Weber-Schfer, *Oikumene und Imperium. Studien zur Ziviltheologie des chinesischen Kaiserreiches* (Munich: Piper, 1968).

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vii [7] . Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, ed., *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1986).

viii [8] . Eisenstadt, *Origins*, p. 292.

ix [9] . Benjamin I. Schwartz, ed., "Wisdom, Revelation, and Doubt," special issue of *Daedalus*, 104, 2 (Spring 1975).

x [10] . Confucius, as implied in the citation from Schwartz above, presupposes the Dao as Unity but, contrary to Laozi, does not investigate it. On this presupposition see A.C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1989), pp. 15-18. Heiner Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age: A Reconstruction under the Aspect of the Breakthrough Toward Postconventional Thinking* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1993) follows the more general arguments of Eisenstadt and Schwartz cited above.

xi[11] . David Lewis-Williams is the leading proponent of the shamanic interpretation. His *The Mind in the Cave* ( London : Thames and Hudson , 2002) is a well researched and argued study on the meaning of cave art, except for what I consider the over interpretation of shamanism.

xii [12] . Robert N. Bellah, "What Is Axial about the Axial Age," *European Journal of Sociology*, 46, 1 (April 2005), pp. 69-89, is the one scholar who is most specific about these conditions. According to the article, Bellah is at work on a monograph dealing with the Axial Age.

xiii [13] . 163b-164b.

xiv [14] . 52d-55c.

xv [15] . For the Upanishads: S. Radhakrishnan, ed. and trans., *The Principal Upanishads* (New York: Harper, 1953) For Buddhist writings: Jay L. Garfield, ed. and trans., *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). The book contains a translation of Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamakakarika* (Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way ). Nagarjuna (c. 150 - 250 CE) was the founder of Mahayana or Middle Way Buddhism. For him, the transcendence of Unity is *Sunyata* (Emptiness), listed at the beginning of section 2. For Daoist writings: Lin Yutang, trans., *The Wisdom of Lao-tse* (New York: Harper, 1948). This book contains Laozi, *Daodejing* plus corresponding selections from Zhuangzi's collection of essays, the *Zhuangzi*. Zhuangzi's dates are c. 369-286 BCE .

xvi [16] . E.g., 44:7. *Yasna Excluding the Gathas: Visparad, Marriage Blessings, Afringans, Afrins*, Tehmurasp Rustamji Sethna, trans. (Karachi: Ma`aref, 1977).

xvii [17] . Exodus 3:14.

xviii [18] . Isaiah 40-55.

xix [19] . Graham Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Graham credits Hegel with the first correct formulation of Infinity as a comprehensible Incomprehensible. See pp. 113-121. In a recent publication ♦ *Doubt Truth to be a Liar* ( Oxford : Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 7-42 ♦ Priest takes Aristotle to task for inconsistencies in his discussion of the so-called Law of Non-Contradiction in *Metaphysics*, 5b18-9a6.