



Axial Age (800-200 BC)

the age of a moral revolution

The Axial Age is an era in which several places in Eurasia developed (a) ethical ways of thinking that (b) tended to be universalist (if not egalitarian).

In this era, Greek philosophers of the Ionian Renaissance on the Aegean coast of Anatolia, Jewish prophets in Palestine, Zoroastrianism in Iran, classical Hinduism & Buddhism in India, and Confucianism in China, all are representative of Axial Age thought. Compared to the religious beliefs before (from what historians can tell), each of these ways of thinking demonstrated an increased emphasis on ethical behaviors, and showed universalist tendencies (applying these teachings to everyone, and not just people of one's own nation or tribe).

It is difficult for modern peoples to think of religion without ethics, but that is because most of us are the product of religions that have their roots in the Axial Age. The vast majority of religious literature produced *before* this Age had little if anything to do with morality. This can be seen in Homer's epics; in the Epic of Gilgamesh; in the lack of ethical content in the civic religion in the Greco-Roman world, and in literature like the Vedas. While there are exceptions to this (the Wisdom literature of Egypt is dated a millennium before the Axial Age), the general pattern is clear—a remarkable flowering of different religions and philosophies all over Eurasia, promoting ethical behavior, in the same era.

Some historians have attributed other characteristics to Axial Age thought, but the problem is that the more criteria that are used, the fewer civilizations appear to have participated in it, and the more likely other non-Axial societies might appear to have participated. Other (possible) characteristics of the Age could be ideas about a higher purpose of life (or an afterlife), a diminished power of government, and a rationalist or naturalist world view. Because of this, it is best to limit the understanding of the Axial Age to the simpler definition given above.

Scholars are not sure what caused this. *The following is speculation, and present two different supposed causes of the Axial Age.* Some have said that it was simply a cognitive growth in second order thinking (in which you think about consequences further down the road); others say that it arose when a society was sufficiently advanced (which could be defined by energy capture per capita). For instance, one group of scholars concluded that Axial Age regions captured about 20,000 calories a day of energy, which surpassed that of hunter-gatherer societies (4000 calories of energy a day), and even Egypt or Sumer (some 15,000 calories a day).