



THE "AXIAL PERIOD"  
AS A GREAT MENTAL REVOLUTION  
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In this paper, I would like to demonstrate the perspectives of Karl Jaspers' conception of the "Axial Period" in the light of thematic analysis when culture is treated as an objective value-mental space. The structure and specific characteristics of culture are conditioned by the aggregate of initial, basic mental intentions and objectives. We call them *dominant themes*.

According to this approach, in every culture at any stage of its evolution, it is possible to define a multitude of dominant themes that express the absolute values unconsciously accepted by the majority in the culture. The dominant themes form stable systems, which we call the fundamental thematic structures (FTS). It would be correct to consider FTS as a core of culture, which generates and determines all the thematic variety of the life world of culture. It is also possible to understand FTS as a system of coordinates defining the integral and close character of the mental space of culture, where the dominant themes serve as its axes. FTS form a basic system of evaluations, which determines the value-mental system of coordinates for the human mental activities, and ideals and patterns, with which is correlated and to which is, consciously or unconsciously, compared any phenomenon of the cultural life. Thus, any reconstruction of mental culture as an integral structure presupposes the discovery of FTS, its system of coordinates. Therefore, the thematic analysis of culture makes it possible to research, using the written sources, the structure of the value-mental space of a culture or region of any epoch in their stasis or dynamics.

If we turn to the philosophy of history, we find that the history of world culture is divided into two large periods: archaic and classic. Jaspers has called the transition from one to another as the "Axial Period," which was a great mental revolution.

The sixth century B.C. became a turning point the world history. The thematic analysis of the written sources we have (before the sixth century B.C.) conclusively shows us a naturalistic character of mental spaces of all the cultures without exception. It means that no culture before the sixth century B.C. had any notions of reason and virtue as purely spiritual

realities: in this period, such notions have been included in a syncretic system of mythological views. As sensible images, they have been connected with the material world that was identified with nature and with the elements of earth and heaven. Analyzing the mental spaces of cultures in the archaic period, we discover that they (in spite of all their variety) have one system of coordinates with such dominant themes as "nature," "power," "genus," and "Eros."

The semantic field of the theme "nature" was determined by a complex of the vital purposes crucial for satisfaction of sensual desires, lusts, and insatiable thirst for sensual pleasure, which are often reflected in the theme of "loot." The naturalistic way of life imperatively presupposes an erotic attitude to reality as a fundamental value-mental orientation. It means that the mental space was erotically saturated. There was no other way to explain the origin and genesis of anything except through mythological conceptions of gods, heroes, ancestors, etc. An erotic saturation of the mental space of culture necessarily presupposes an organic connection with the theme of "genus" ("origination," "fertility"). The significance of this theme as a fundamental value-mental orientation finds its expression in the comprehension of reality in terms of generic relationships.

The theme of "genus" was the most important means of organizing and structuring the human life space. The world perception in the context of the universal generic relationships is an effective means for defining the place of any object (divine, natural, social) in the universe. Such "generic thinking" is functionally analogical to contemporary determinist thinking. If we perceive the world in terms of cause-effect relations, then the universal generic relationships lead to an understanding of the generic system of the world organization. This theme is also an absolute value of the naturalistic mental space of culture.

In the archaic world, a physical power was the core of a god's or hero's character. All the rest is a derivative phenomenon, or, so to say, a coma of the powerful tree. The axial significance of physical force finds its expression in the notion of the ideal: the force cult was directly influenced with indomitable, prevailing powers of nature. Under the naturalistic way of life, social status mainly depended on physical abilities. In the pantheon of ancient gods (especially of the supreme ones), an unlimited, triumphant power of their physical strength induced the most veneration and adoration. The force cult was an attribute of the naturalistic space of culture: however, "force thinking" weakened with the culture's development.

According to Jaspers, the axis of history is to be found in the spiritual process that occurred between 800 and 200 B.C. In my view, the revolutionary explosion of the value-mental transformations took place in sixth century B.C. in four historical centers of the world's cultural process: Persia, Ancient Greece and Rome, India and China. That is why the "Axial Period" can be divided in three stages: the preparatory stage (before the sixth century B.C.), the epoch of the great mental revolution (the sixth to the first half of the fifth centuries B.C.), and post-revolutionary stage (the second half of the fifth to the second centuries B.C.).

The gist of the revolutionary overturn was in the discovery of an objective reason-virtue reality that was pure, magnificent and sacral in its essence. From the very beginning, it was realized as an expression of the truly divine reality. If today the dominant mental orientations present subjectivism, at that period it was the contrary: it was a kingdom of total objectivism. In fact, there was no terminology to designate a subjective field of perception. The reason-virtue subspace was initially treated as an objective, over-personal, immediately perceivable reality. There were no words for its designation. Only later did people begin to understand the essence of this reality.

The way to this enlightenment was laid by the multitude of unknown sages, well-known first philosophers, and the creators of great religions. The genesis of philosophy expresses a reflexive component of that way. The awareness of the objective mental reality is a process of its thematic structure getting. Since the reason-virtue subspace was plunged into the essentially different cultures of Ancient Greece, India, China and Persia, then its thematic structure getting within the value-mental spaces of those cultures also developed in different ways.

These revolutionary mental changes were mainly accomplished in all the mentioned regions between the end of the sixth century B.C. and the first half of the fifth century B.C. When the transition from the archaic nature-power life world to the reason-virtue mental space of classic culture was realized, it destroyed the naturalistic-power FTS and affirmed the new one, which set metrics for mental space based upon the absolute values of reason and virtue. The themes of "nature," "power" and "Eros" lost their dominant character, removed to the periphery of the thematic space and localized; their previous influence revealed itself only in archaic feasts and rituals.

Coming into the system of coordinates of the reason-virtue mental space induced a spontaneous rethinking of the mythological images: first of all, of gods and heroes. If, in the archaic epoch, hyper-naturalistic, hyper-forcist, and hyper-erotic characteristics were predominant in the

images of the gods and heroes, then in the classic period their other capabilities (wisdom, virtue, justice and legislation) came to the foreground. The gods and heroes were treated as a supreme spiritual reality, as a perfect, pure source of reason and virtues. The archaic myths are partly burdened with the meanings the reason-virtue type. This rethinking process was not simple and had a difficult, unconscious character. It was rather clearly expressed in the works of philosophers, dramatists and poets.

In the period of the mental revolution in the East during the sixth century B.C., a non-material, supernatural and over-reasonable divine reality, a metaphysical space of the inmost being was found. In world history, a Persian reformer named Zarathushtra (Zoroaster) was the first who discovered this transcendent reality with the god Ahura-Mazda. In ancient China, the inmost being was sought in the doctrines of Confucius and Taoism. But the adequate notion of the inmost essence of the divine reality was developed in the doctrines of Brahman and Atman (ancient India). Ancient Greeks came to understand transcendent reality as a reason-virtue being, which, however, was not treated as the inmost one.

Meanwhile, during the mental revolution (especially in the Post-Axial period), reflexive work was focused not only on the discovered transcendent reality and the newly-emerged life world, but also on rethinking the archaic mentality for its adaptation to the up-to-date system of coordinates of the value-mental space of culture. The images of gods and heroes were endowed with features of reason and virtue, which became dominant aspects of their characters. At that time appeared the myth of the "Golden Age," which was treated as the social ideal of the reason-virtue being.

Unlike Jaspers, we believe that the mental revolution has occurred in four regions of the world culture, i.e., not only in Ancient Greece, India and China, but also in Persia. It must be taken into account that among the "fathers" of the "Axial Period" was Zarathushtra—the Persian Empire spreading from India to Ethiopia was a bearer of Zoroastrian metaphysics. If we turn to the facts on Persia and its kings in Herodotus' *History* and in the books of the Old Testament, we find there other interpretations than the widespread stereotype of the Persian Empire as a barbaric oriental despotism.

The sermons of Zarathushtra have broken the horizon of naturalistic being and discovered another, purely spiritual dimension of the life world. For the first time in world history, divine reality emerged as a transcendent, over-personal being of Reason, the creator of any good. If in naturalistic mythologies the gods were bearers of naturalistic qualities, as a

rule, in their extreme degree (physical force, Eros, abilities of seeing, hearing, gluttony), then the god Ahura-Mazda was a bearer of ultimately pure spiritual reality. The attributes of reason and virtue are in him in the undivided unity.

As a transcendental ontological reality, Ahura-Mazda is not a sensually perceived light, but a spiritual light contemplated by spiritual vision. In Zoroastrian doctrine, for the first time, we find the metaphysical space, the reason-virtue by its essence. In the Pre-Axial Period mythologies, there was no metaphysics, not only due to the absence of a theoretical description of the divine reality (since there was no philosophy), but because that reality was thought naturalistically—i.e., non-metaphysically. The Greek, Egyptian and Hindu gods occupied heavens and earth (for example, the mount of Olympus), and the space beneath the earth. However, these places of their habitation were located within the same naturalistic-power space. The gods "live" in the same system of coordinates as people do. In Zoroastrian relation to the god, a new aspect was concerned with the permanent striving to moral self-development as a means of steady connection with the god, as a means of salvation. Later this moral relation with the god will become a crucial aspect of world religions.

If we consider the character of the passing and spreading of mental revolution in the area from India to the Atlantic Ocean, we may certainly affirm that the spiritual transformations are not localized in the mental spaces of Persian, Greek and Roman cultures. The discovery in the sixth century B.C. of a transcendent, purely spiritual, reason-virtue reality had a universal revolutionizing significance. Obviously, it has essentially changed the human worldview in every culture of the region including Egyptian, Babylonian, Phoenician ones, etc. Then it started the total process of spiritualization of mental spaces of those cultures.

In general, we can find the following logic in the historic development of the world cultural process: in every culture, the mental revolution resulted in the emergence of fundamental thematic structures. All the FTS were the reason-virtue in their essence; however, they were thematically very different. One of the trends of world history is an influence of those FTS on the cultures of other peoples. The various interactions of the cultures, which had naturalistic-power thematic space, with the "culture-giants" brought inevitably the same result: the "proselyte" peoples discovered for themselves the supreme, perfect value-mental space. By this, entrance into this higher sphere was accompanied by their experience of the great mental revolution, total re-evaluation of all the previous values, i.e., destruction of the naturalistic-power system of coordinates and

construction of the reason-virtue one. Obviously, the forms of "experience" of the cardinal mental changes were quite different. That is why Antiquity and the ancient Indian and Chinese cultures can be called "the three whales" of world culture, because they were generators of the fundamental thematic structures which, with no exceptions, more or less transformed mental spaces of all the cultures around them.

Since in the East the subsequent historical process of cultural development was a translation of the thematic structures of ancient India and China to the mental spaces of the South-East Asia, Korea, Japan, etc., then one may affirm that FTS of the ancient Indian and Chinese cultures were the initial thematic core of the oriental cultures in general. In the West, the historical logic of cultural processes have been developed in the same way, through translation, introduction, and assimilation of the thematic structures of Antiquity (Greece and Rome) and Christianity as basic components into the mental spaces of the Western Europe.

In the metaphysical aspect, the ancient Indians advanced much further than any other peoples did. In the sixth century B.C., Indians came the metaphysical way up to the very end, in accordance with which they established the social and political structure of the country. There was no way to go further. For the "external" observer, the mental space of the old Indian culture seems to be staying still within the steady value-mental structures. As for the mental revolution in Ancient Greece, it turned out to be metaphysically incomplete. Greeks did not come to the idea of salvation and remained in the earthly world of reason and virtue. Only half a millennium later (in fact, by the fourth century), Christianity has completed the movement of the Antique Spirit. That is why the mental space of Western European culture is based on two FTS: Antique and Christian ones. The Western European countries' history proves conclusively that the entrance into the value-mental space of Western European culture necessarily presupposes an assimilation of Antique and Christian FTS by the people-proselyte (acceptance as the dominant themes of "freedom," "law," "reason," "virtue," "beauty").

What is next? Obviously, the processes of globalization and transition to technological civilization have translated and transformed the dominant themes of Western European FTS (freedom, law, reason, virtue, beauty) into the universal categories of the secular order. At the same time one may see the process of erosion of the Indian and Chinese FTS. Today's intensive development of India and China is, in a certain sense, an entrance into the value-mental space of European civilization.

# FROM SUBJECT TO PERSON: THE ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION IN THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE HUMAN BEING

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## The Origin of the Modern Idea of Subjectivity

Modern Thought has many times been characterized as a period in which the interpretation of the problem of Identity has, at its roots, been closely related to the fact that at the core of such an interpretation is both the concept of the Subject and, linked to it, of Subjectivity itself. One way or the other, we can take for granted that the so-called Philosophy of the Subject constitutes one of the most significant expressions of the philosophical dimension of Modernity.<sup>1</sup>

Also, we must recognize that the idea of a Subject as a foundation for thought and thinking is undergoing a process of strong and radical questioning in the age of post-modernity.<sup>2</sup> This means that we also need to ask ourselves if a philosophy centered on the notion of the Subject can still be responsibly defended in the cultural context in which we are now living. For us, however, such a question only makes sense in the measure that we take for granted that the philosophical tradition is a complex reality when it comes to the understanding of the human being, and, therefore, that we cannot seriously go about it without entering into the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Walter Schulz, *Subjektivität im nachmetaphysischen Zeitalter: Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> The most important messengers and prophets of such a wave in contemporary thinking are philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche or Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida or Jean François Lyotard. Particularly suggestive in this regard is Vattimo's idea of a *weakening* (*Schwächung*) of the Subject, whereby he intends to express the real meaning of the contemporary *crisis* of the concept of Subjectivity [Cf. Gianni Vattimo, *Al di là del soggetto: Nietzsche, Heidegger e l'ermeneutica*, 4 ed. (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1991); Pier Aldo Rovatti, Leonardo Amoroso and Gianni Vattimo, *Il pensiero debole* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1990)].