

Religion in the Age of Kant and Bacteria

In the wake of Germany's surrender to the Allies on May 8th, 1945 and the subsequent occupation of the country by the US, Great Britain, France and Russia, the occupying powers had to weigh the benefits to be secured by reopening German universities with the risks of restoring Nazi academics to their positions.¹ By the summer of that year, however, the deteriorating health of the war-weakened German population and the severe shortage of doctors forced the hand of the officials in charge. It had become apparent that the medical schools, at least, would have to be reopened, despite the fact that their faculties unquestionably still harbored Nazis. On August 14th, 1945, then, the School of Medicine at Heidelberg was reopened, with a ceremony featuring a speech by German philosopher Karl Jaspers.

In his address, Jaspers exhorted his audience to feel “confidence and fortitude in the face of a grim reality,” and to rededicate themselves to the pursuit of truth. At the same time, he warned against overconfidence, observing that there was no way of going back to pre-war Weimar illusions: “we shall not again betray ourselves boasting that now everything is going to be perfectly wonderful... We are not given to self-intoxication in the midst of the ruin.”² Even if the external ruin could be undone, the internal change was too great to be reversed:

Too many things have happened... we ourselves are no longer the same as we were in 1933... We might have sought death when the crimes of the regime came to light on June 30th, 1934; when our Jewish friends and fellow-citizens were robbed, deported, and murdered; when to our everlasting shame the synagogues of all Germany were blazing... Thousands of Germans, most of them anonymous, have sought—or found—death in opposition to the regime.

We, the survivors, did not seek it. As our Jewish friends were taken away, we did not demonstrate in the streets, we did not shout until we, too, were destroyed. We chose to survive on the weak but correct ground that our death would amount to nothing. Our guilt is to be still alive.³

Jaspers suggests that whatever sense of solidarity the survivors might have felt with their Jewish friends did not extend to insisting upon sharing their fate. The war had exposed the relative frailty of the bonds of friendship and citizenship, and raised the question of whether any innate fellow feeling between human beings of sufficient force to overcome the desire for self-preservation existed in the first place.

For Jaspers, this was a problem not only for Germany but for the whole world. In *The Question of German Guilt*, the published version of remarks he made to students at Heidelberg in the winter of 1945-1946, Jaspers proposed a means by which individuals within Germany and the world itself could begin to see themselves as bound to one another in a single moral community.

It is only now that history has finally become world history—the global history of mankind... What is taking place is a crisis of mankind. The contributions, fatal or salutary, of single peoples and states can only be seen in the framework of the whole, as can the connections which brought on this war, and its phenomena which manifested in new, horrible fashion what man can be.⁴

Jaspers employs the rhetoric of crisis to suggest that the world stood in need of a new mode of global historical consciousness, one which would allow individuals to perceive people who belonged to groups other than that of their own as being at once individuals in their own right and fellow members of a common whole. Additionally, in his view, the worst of “what man can be” needed to be seen in light of what human beings have been and could be, not just in the sphere of the world then dominated by Western Christianity, but across geographical and religious boundaries.

In his 1949 book, *The Origin and Goal of History*, Jaspers attempt to foster just such a new mode of historical consciousness. In order to do so, he first had to displace

the still lingering idea that world history meant Christian history. As an alternative to the notion that “the Son of God is the axis of world history” (which he imputes to Hegel, with a slightly inexact textual reference) Jaspers suggests an axis of history that he hoped would be relevant to people of different faiths.⁵ His concept of the “Axial Period” denotes a “spiritual process that occurred between 800 and 200 B.C.,” during which “Confucius and Lao-tse were living in China, all the schools of Chinese philosophy came into being... India produced the Upanishads and Buddha... in Palestine the prophets made their appearance... and Greece witnessed the appearance of the philosophers” (1-2). Jaspers sought to show that humanity as a whole was affected by the dramatic shift in human consciousness that occurred for some individuals during this time in China, India, Greece and Israel. Yet his concern for the whole of humanity notwithstanding, he seems singularly unconcerned with the problem of how we are to understand those who, to his mind, never experienced anything akin to the axial shift for themselves. In this sense, Jaspers’s narrative divides humanity into two classes (only one of which merits his attention) even in seeking to bring human beings together.

Jaspers’s hope was that an empirically ascertainable series of events suggestive of spiritual commonality could serve as a focal point to which seekers of the war-torn world, as well as readers of the future, could turn to as a source of ultimate meaning, a prompt to communication, and a shared story of what it means to be human. A moment in which extraordinary events were concentrated, rather than a divine-human figure, a place, or a unique act of divine self-disclosure, was to serve as a spiritual and conceptual equivalent of Jerusalem or Mecca, an “ever-recurrent” (*The Origin and Goal of History*, 7) point of figurative ingathering. Yet the Axial Period is understood by Jaspers to have “ended in

failure” (20) in historical terms, its putative persistence as a perduring point of spiritual and intellectual orientation notwithstanding.

As it turned out, Jaspers’s hopes were not realized. If his version of world history prompted an uptick in the specialized mode of communication that he called *liebender Kampf* it was not readily discernable. Almost no one but a small group of academics (and more recently, readers of Karen Armstrong’s popular book, *The Great Transformation*) refers to the axial age. And conversation between those scholars who are concerned with the notion of an axial age is not remarkable for its loving nature. In that context, the axial age does not primarily serve as the basis of a shared story of what it means to be human. Rather, it is the subject of a wide range of vigorous and occasionally acrimonious debates, including the debate over the question of whether it is appropriate to speak of a common human “metanarrative” (meaning a story that includes everyone, whether we like it or not) and that concerning the more basic question of whether the axial age is properly understood as a turning point in history or a myth about what such a moment might entail.

Two recent books offer us points of entry into those debates. The first, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*, by the late, eminent American sociologist Robert Bellah, attempts, over the course of 746 pages, with a considerable degree of success, not only to utilize the concept of the Axial Age in a novel theoretical framework but also, more generally, to recover the project of metanarrative, while inoculating it against the ostensibly destructive (because imperialistic or totalizing) tendencies that have so frequently been ascribed to it in the wake of postmodernism. The

second, more modestly-sized (but still hefty enough, at 548 pages) book, *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, is a collection of essays edited by Bellah and Hans Joas, in which a number of distinguished scholars in different disciplines (including Charles Taylor, Jan Assman, José Casanova, and Bellah himself) address the circumstance, ramifications, and inquiries attendant upon the period in question.

Does humanity as a whole have a story grounded in a common past, in which we all figure equally? Do we in fact need one? If so, why? According to Bellah's book, the answer to the first question is yes. To his mind, however, we are not the protagonists of that story (more on this later). The answer that the book gives to the second question is also yes, as anyone, it implies, can see from looking at the current state of affairs in a world and reflecting on the fact that stories about what we all share are variously embattled, defective, or exhausted. The answer to the third question, the book suggests, is that we need a metanarrative because we need to understand our place in the cosmos and that "we are all in this...together" (606). Bellah detects in the current moment a "crisis of incoherence and a need to integrate in new ways the dimensions we have had since the axial age" (xix). Additionally, in this account, we are in a period of environmental crisis which requires the study of deep history. In the wake of that study, he recommends that we take corrective action to stop ourselves from destroying ourselves.

As Bellah sees it, "our" metanarrative is not (contra Jaspers) world history but rather the theory of evolution. In *Religion in Human Evolution*, he remarks that "I do believe that we need to speak of evolution, which is the only shared metanarrative among educated people of all cultures that we have, but," he adds, "in a way that shows the dangers as well as the successes in evolution and is not afraid to make distinctions

between good and evil” (600). This means that the story of evolution is neither a story of progress nor of certain decline. For Bellah, “biological history—that is, evolution—is part of the human story all the way through, though quite a long time ago it gave rise to culture and has evolved with it ever since” (xi). The story of evolution in history is thus not a story beyond good and evil, as human culture is one in which good and evil, like fair and foul, are, as the poet Yeats observed in a different context, near of kin. But what can we say about the story of evolution aside from saying what it is not? What does it have to do with the story of religion? How does the metanarrative of evolution improve upon Jaspers’s metanarrative of a history the heart of which is the axial age?

Before turning to these matters, it is worth reflecting a bit on precedents for Bellah’s project, as well as on the process of how Bellah arrived at a book that is intellectually strong and capacious enough to give rise to such a wide range of inquiries. With respect to precedents, the closest, unmentioned interlocutor for Bellah’s project is Henri Bergson’s work on evolution and later, on religion and evolution. In his 1907 book, *Creative Evolution*, Bergson asks his readers to consider mollusks, and other shelled creatures. He does so in attempting to understand the obstacles that had to be surmounted in order for “the expansion of the highest forms of life” to be brought about over the course of millions of years.⁶ In what he calls “primitive times,” mollusks, he notes, “had a shell more universally than those of today.” The explanation for this phenomenon, Bergson suggests, “should be sought... in a tendency of soft organisms to defend themselves against one another by making themselves... undevourable.”⁷

The considerable practical benefits of making oneself less consumable by would-be

devourers would seem to render it an attractive option to anyone interested in survival. Yet those benefits notwithstanding, the process of encasing oneself in a protective coating has its costs: “the animal that shut itself up in a citadel or in armor condemned itself to a partial slumber. In this torpor the echinoderms and even the mollusks live today. “Probably,” Bergson speculates, “arthropods and vertebrates were threatened with it too. They escaped, however, and to this fortunate circumstance is due the expansion of the highest forms of life.”⁸ At the peak of vertebrate evolution, in his view, we find humanity. “But such are also,” he reminds us, “the insects and certain hymenoptera. It has been said of the ants that, as man is lord of the soil, they are lords of the sub-soil.”⁹

Lordship, for Bergson, does not demand the renunciation of fortifications allowing for slumber and defense; rather it entails their strategic use. To his mind, human beings are inevitably both hardened and soft, static and dynamic, closed and open. And so too, to varying degrees, are morals, societies, and religions. The earliest religions, he suggests, are defined by their static, closed nature; later religions are be higher than their antecedents to the extent that they are characterized by dynamism and openness.

In his 1932 book, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, Bergson sought to situate the process by which open and dynamic morality and religion emerged in the context of evolution. While affirming the putative moral and intellectual superiority of openness, he claims that “religious dynamism needs static religion for its expression and diffusion;” thus, the latter, with its emphasis on group cohesion can never be wholly renounced.¹⁰ Openness depends upon closedness even as, to Bergson’s mind at least, it morally transcends it. “The groupings of primitive humanity,” he remarks, “were certainly nearer the ants than ours are today.”¹¹

The act of re-reading Bergson's *Two Sources* (or, for most people, reading it for the first time) is a valuable prelude to reading Bellah's new book, not least of all because it gives us some sense of how much the discussion of the relationship of religion to evolution have changed since the early 1930s. In Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*, we find no critiques of the ostensibly limited sensibilities of ants or of the early groups of humanity that Bergson took to resemble them. Absent as well are notions that "primitive" is necessarily synonymous with "inferior" or that any one species, or group within the evolution of species is higher than another in the overall scheme of things. For Bellah, neither the sub-soil nor the topsoil is subject to the lordship of an evolutionarily favored, uniquely fit few. Indeed, we are reminded that the "fittest" notoriously favored by evolution *are* the many.

Among his many influential books and articles, Bellah's best known prior work on the topic of religion and evolution is his seminal 1964 essay entitled "Religious Evolution." That essay focused on "evolution in the sphere of religion." Comparatively speaking, his new book might be said to focus on religion in the sphere of evolution. Although Bellah is primarily concerned with human evolution, that process is treated as part of a larger evolutionary trajectory which has its origin long prior to the rise of religion and indeed, to human beings themselves. He does not just ask us to consider our "familiar cousins" (93) in the animal world, such as chimpanzees. Rather, we are asked to go back to the beginning, and consider "unicellular organisms in the primeval sea" (xi).

In order to get from the primeval sea to such places as ancient Israel, Greece, China, and India in the space of one book, even one of considerable length, Bellah must

create a theoretical and narrative framework supple and expansive enough to accommodate radically diverse settings. Within that framework, he reflects upon the role of religion in each geographical setting in relation to the historical moment. Before doing so, however, he reflects upon evolution and its relationship to history and religion.

For Bellah, the story of evolution assumes the existence of variation and selection. He builds upon and complicates that story by attending, with the aid of the work of cognitive neuroscientist Merlin Donald, to the question of human cognitive evolution, understood as the process in which the physical evolution of the human brain occurs in tandem with changes in culture, with the effect that human beings develop new cognitive capabilities over time that create, shape, and are shaped by shared cultural resources. The mechanisms by which these developments occur are rooted in biological mechanisms, again, operating in tandem with culture, but Bellah wants to show that a metanarrative of humanity which takes evolution into account does not, for that reason, exclude questions of meaning and purpose. Evolution, in his account, has a fairly high level of tolerance for extravagance and freedom built into it; “it may even turn out,” Bellah suggests “that it is ‘functional’ to have spheres of life that are not functional” (xx).

To Bellah’s mind, religion arises within just such a sphere: that of play, understood as the exercise of freedom within a relaxed experiential field where ritual and other non-work-related activities can occur. He starts with a description of animal play and proceeds to that of the human play out of which he thinks religion emerges. This strategy reflects his broader sense that, when one begins thinking about the relative places of human and nonhuman beings in evolution, one is led towards territory that has traditionally been the province of religion: “What evolution as a whole means gets us into

larger issues, which almost inevitably become issues of ultimate meaning that overlap with religion” (xiii).

Bellah is not interested in generating a single overarching definition of “religion,” and indeed, he claims that the justification for his use of the term “will depend more on the persuasiveness of the argument of the book than on definitions; nonetheless, definitions help to get things started” (1). Thus he offers several of them. The first is paraphrased from his friend, anthropologist Clifford Geertz: “religion is a system of symbols that, when enacted by human beings, establishes powerful, pervasive, and long lasting moods and motivations that make sense in terms of an idea of a general order of existence” (xiv). Bellah cites as well in this context Geertz’s quotation of George Santayana’s remark that “The vistas [that a religion] opens and the mysteries that it propounds are another world to live in; and another world to live in—whether we expect ever to pass wholly over into it or no—is what we mean by having a religion” (xvi).

Bellah is taken enough with the concept of religion as a mode of world-making that he remarks of his own project: “How religion creates those other worlds and how those worlds interact with the world of daily life is the subject of this book” (xvii). In order to get at the implicit distinction between the sacred and the profane hinted at in this description, however, he brings in yet another definition of religion, this one derived from sociologist Emile Durkheim: “Religion is a system of beliefs and practices relative to the sacred that unite those who adhere to them in a moral community” (1).

We have, then, in Bellah’s book, an overarching narrative-historical framework that includes biological history. And within that narrative, which includes creatures ranging from bacteria to human beings, we have various modes of the activity of

articulating, through the enactment of symbols, a boundary between experiential worlds, one understood to be ordinary (the domain of daily life), and the other, non-ordinary (the sphere of the sacred, of something set apart). “One of the first things to be noticed about the world of daily life,” Bellah aptly observes,” is that *nobody can stand to live in it all the time*” (3). In order for the world from which we regularly flee to be identified as a settled state from which we seek to gain distance, it must be understood relative to some other vantage point, from which we might identify daily life as “ordinary.” There is no such thing as the ordinary world of everyday (and its characteristic activity, work) if there is no such thing as the extraordinary day, the holiday, with its characteristic cessation of work, and turn to rest.

The distinction between ordinary and extraordinary worlds is, of course, neither internal to nature nor eternal. It was first articulated in human religious practice, which changed over the course of time to accommodate a number of different means of securing distance—and freedom—from the ordinary, workaday world. Bellah argues that this distance was often secured through the renunciation of the ordinary world:

Buddhism provided a radical form of the renouncer, whose initial act is to ‘leave home’ and who thereafter remains permanently homeless. If the renouncer is ‘nowhere,’ then 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... 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... Socrates and Plato were, in different ways, also renouncers, who were in but not of the city and also criticized it from the outside. [574-575]

The axial age, for Bellah, is the age of the renouncer par excellence. In order to connect this notion to his metanarrative of evolution, he casts the renouncer in the role of theorist;

correspondingly, the culture influenced by the appearance of axial age theorists becomes “theoretic culture.”

Overall, Bellah accepts the notion that an axial age existed. He goes so far as to claim that “Our cultural world and the great traditions that still in so many ways define us, all originate in the axial age” (269). But he sees a problem arising from the fact that “In discussing the axial age it is all too easy to read in our own presuppositions or to take one of the four cases (usually Israel or Greece) as paradigmatic for all the others” (272). It is for explicitly for the purpose of correcting this tendency that Bellah invokes a theoretical framework informed by the previously mentioned work of Merlin Donald, according to which human culture and cognition evolved in three evolutionary stages spanning millions of years: the mimetic (which begins with the recognition of one’s immediate surroundings and extends to dance and music), the mythic (which depends upon the existence of grammatical language and entails the creation of complex narratives), and finally, theoretic culture (which allows for or depends upon the creation of means of “external memory” (273) such as writing, and for thinking outside of contexts of immediate experience and narrative).

“In the first millennium BCE,” Bellah observes, “theoretic culture emerges in several places in the old world, questioning the old narratives and their mimetic bases, rejecting ritual and myth as it creates new rituals and myths, and calling all the old hierarchies into question in the name of ethical and spiritual universalism” (xix). The axial shift is supposed to mark the arrival of the evolutionary stage of “theoretic culture” and of the universal, egalitarian ethics to which that stage corresponds. Bellah points out that “moral upstarts—prophet-like figures who, at great peril to themselves, held the

existing power structure to a moral standard” began to emerge prior to the axial age (573). It is only during the axial age, however, in his view, that “such challenges to the dominant cultural order became widely apparent” (573).

After reflecting upon tribal and archaic religion, Bellah launches into a sweeping account of the axial shift as it occurred in his four axial cultures. At stake in the chapters devoted to these cultures are questions of what prompted the shift in each case and how it was manifested. Of these four chapters, those on Israel and China are the most important, followed by the chapter on Greece, which goes quite a way towards suggesting the dimensions of a crucial problem with the interpretation of Plato (although not quite far enough), and by that on India, which is workmanlike and informative throughout.

Due to constraints of length, I shall necessarily focus here on only one of Bellah’s four chapters. I have selected his account of axial age Israel for the reason that it represents a major correction of Jaspers’s account of the same topic and, by extension, a correction of the other writers, both academic and popular, whose versions of the axial age have been influenced by Jaspers.

As is well known, Jaspers, in looking around for figures in the religion of ancient Israel whom he can fit into his model of axial age exemplars, zeroes in on select prophets, “from Elijah, by way of Isaiah and Jeremiah to Deutero-Isaiah”¹² He lumps them into a group (including the philosophers of the period) that, experiential differences aside, turns out to be very much in sync with the concerns of twentieth-century liberal German existentialists. Jaspers’s axial man confronts the void “face to face.” For the first time, “Human beings dared to rely on themselves as individuals.”¹³ One would never know from Jaspers that the prophets (even the ones he identifies as axial figures) are commonly

represented as having understood themselves to be profoundly dependent upon God.

All this changes with Bellah. The revolution with which he is centrally concerned is the Deuteronomic rather than the prophetic revolution. When Bellah does discuss the prophets, he correctly points out that “the prophet is never a ‘private individual’” (317). Indeed, given the familial and communal model of identity in ancient Israel, there are problems with assuming that our (post-Lockean) concept of the “private individual” may be found in that context. For Bellah, “What is critical... is that we try to understand what Deuteronomy, and by extension, the Pentateuch, the Torah, is doing, for that is the heart of all subsequent Jewish piety. If there was an ‘axial breakthrough’ in Israel it is here if anywhere that we shall find it” (313).

What does Bellah find? Not surprisingly, covenant. What is interesting here is not the unexceptionable claim that “What is fundamental here is that the Torah is a covenant between God and his people, constitutive of a new understanding of self and world” nor the related claim that “also key is that the covenant is contained in a text, a text that in critical respects supersedes kings, prophets, and sages, though not the necessity of interpretation” (314). This emphasis on Torah needs to be understood as being, among other things, a polemical correction of Jaspers’ narrow emphasis on the prophets as the biblical vehicles through which a new mode of being was opened up for humanity.

What does the triumph of the Deuteronomists, as Bellah would have it, have to do with the rise of theoretic culture that is supposedly the hallmark of the axial age? The answer to this question is not readily apparent, as Bellah himself is well aware. “To the extent that we have made theory... the criterion of axuality, Israel remains a problematic case” (321). Bellah invokes rhetoric as a sort of stunt double for theory (pointing out that

Israelite rhetoric entailed forensic argument, which in some sense entails putting theory into action under pressure) and then turns to narrative.

At the risk of generalizing, one might say that what individual reflection is for Jaspers, shared narrative is for Bellah. It is not just that narrative is, to his mind, “the way we understand our individual and collective identities” and the “source of our ethics, our politics, and our religion” (280) it is also the vehicle through which profound religious change happens and where it registers. According to Bellah, the axial shift in Israel “was attained through a cultural medium that never gave up narrative as the fundamental framework... This leads us to ask if the ancient Israelites were not using narrative in a new way... that was effectively a functional equivalent for theory not, to be sure, for the analysis of nature, but for the understanding of human existence” (322).

Bellah’s claim that “the historical framework of the Hebrew Bible is metanarrative big time” (322) should not be taken to mean that he is implying that it fails to do theoretical work: indeed, it prompts the question of just what it is that we take theory to do, especially in relation to narrative. In thinking about this matter, much depends upon the way that one understands theory as a precondition and product of critical distance. Bellah’s wonderful work on the topic of theory and narrative raises questions that extend well beyond the events and figures he discusses at length in his book. For example, if the point of theory as it pertains to the axial age is to attain some distance from the familiar so that things might be seen in a new way, then Benjamin Schwartz’s judgment (in his article from the well-known 1975 special issue of *Daedalus* discussing the first millennium BCE) that Abraham’s flight from Ur may be considered in the same category as “Confucius’ more radical renunciation... and the Greek strain for

an order beyond the Homeric gods” begins to look appealing as a rather abstract piece of midrash, albeit one that is problematic in other terms.¹⁴

Any effort to situate a figure like Abraham in an axial context would seem to invite the further articulation of an elusive category (such as Jan Assman’s “mythospeculation,” which Bellah employs) containing aspects of narrative and theory alike. In the end, one wonders how many theories from the axial age (if any) fall entirely *outside* of a hybrid category of narrative-theory. Bellah’s claim that the axial breakthrough “involved a radicalization of mythospeculation but not an abandonment of it” (276) is a strong formulation of his argument about the co-activity of theory and narrative in this period, as well as a powerful corrective to Jaspers’ abandonment thesis.

On one level, Bellah wants to suggest that narrative may do theory and that theory may require narrative. This makes sense, in light of the fact that, historically speaking, as Andrea Wilson Nightingale reminds us in her important book (which Bellah draws upon), theory has its origins in practice, and specifically, in a journey from one’s native setting to a place that is unknown. The theorist returns home as part of his pilgrimage; Abraham does not. Theory runs in a loop; Abraham’s journey, in a line.

In the context of Bellah’s specific interest in the Deuteronomists, the central question is how theory relates to law. In invoking rhetoric instead of law in his discussion of how to view ancient Israel with reference to theory as the criterion of axially, Bellah bypasses this question. That said, he persuasively revises Jaspers’ account of the axial age. For Bellah, the axial age marks the point in human evolution at which theory becomes available as an option *in addition to* practices and stories without invalidating the latter or becoming wholly disembedded from them. This means that, practices and

stories are as essential to an understanding of human beings as we know them today as is theoretical reflection.

The elegant and intricate structure of Bellah's extraordinarily impressive book is vast enough to accommodate a number of different formulations of this claim, some of which are more effective than others. It is not clear that theoretic culture emerged "in dialogue with mythic culture" (273) (a claim which suggests a rejoinder to Jaspers's notion that the axial age marks the end of "the Mythical Age"). With respect to Bellah's account of Israel, perhaps we do not so much see a "dialogue" of theoretic culture with mythic culture as we do the idea of narrative that, in his account, actually does something *like* theory without engaging with a discernably separate entity which we may clearly identify *as* theory. Bellah's "dialogue" could perhaps have been formulated differently with respect to his account of Greece, as well. There, he overestimates the extent to which we can separate Plato's theories from the dramatic depiction of the theoretical journey of Socrates, despite making the all-important point that "Socrates is not an argument" (393). Here, the distinction between what Farabi called "the way of Socrates" and "the way of Plato" matters a great deal. In the Platonic dialogues, narrative does theoretical work to the point that we arguably cannot extricate the latter from the complex of imagined particulars (names, places, actions) characteristic of the former without misunderstanding it.

Bellah's treatment of Israel sheds light on the challenges entailed in sorting out the relationship between particularistic narratives and universalistic theory and ethics from a different angle than that which applies in the Greek context. He wants to argue

that the axial shift in Israel did not unambiguously mark the triumph of universalistic norms. Thus, in his discussion of the idea of chosenness, he brings up the question of love:

...the recognition of love must be personal, it cannot be general. God must recognize someone, to begin with, and if from that someone something new comes into being, a people constituted not by loyalty to an earthly ruler but by loyalty to God, that too must be a particular people. Certainly the religion of ancient Israel moved powerfully toward the recognition of justice, and here, the beginnings of a larger context, how one treats the aliens for example, developed. But without the continuing insistence on particularity it is hard to see how the Israelite axial breakthrough could have been preserved. [320]

Particularity shows up as a precondition and product of love, but also as a preservative for the axial breakthrough to “the recognition of justice” both with respect to the idea of a God who is held accountable to justice (even as he is understood to be its source) and to the idea of just and loving treatment of resident aliens.

Here, particularity—even that associated with one group being singled out by God—is no scandal. In fact, from the perspective of human cultural evolution, “the continuing insistence on particularity” (as manifested in narrative content and structure) is a necessary safeguard to and vehicle for the transmission of what Bellah calls “the larger context.” Some measure of exclusiveness (here, registered as the unequally distributed personal recognition entailed in love) is necessary as a condition of the furtherance of norms entailing openness to others beyond one’s group. But is it desirable in and of itself? Bellah does not pursue this question. He does make the useful point that “the particularity of Israel is only relative: the two ‘universal’ religions that emerged from Israelite origins [Christianity and Islam] had their own quite particular origins that have defined them ever since” (320).

From the perspective of Bellah’s model of human evolution, the notion of

chosenness does not pose a problem because it preserves universal values, such as justice, that benefit everyone. Yet Bellah's model of evolution is a bit like one of those dolls from Russia that contain one wooden shell of a doll within the other. "Human evolution" pertains to humanity as (to borrow a concept from Spinoza) a state within the state of nature which has different laws than the larger state in which it is contained. With respect to culture, Bellah claims that what humanity was in the past is somehow transmuted into what it is today: history practices the virtue of thriftiness, as in Hegel. But the laws of evolution pertaining to the state beyond humanity work differently. There, particularity *is* a scandal: we are not to think of ourselves as special or as the center of anything at all. Bellah seeks to convert nature into a locus not only of egalitarianism but of solidarity as well: to his mind, we have "friends among nonhuman organisms" (xi). This may, however, be difficult to accept when it comes to bacteria. The certain knowledge that your "friend" will eventually consume your flesh tends to put a strain on even imagined intimacy.

Chosenness functions in Bellah's narrative as a point of intersection at which two strains of his argument collide. In the context of human evolution, chosenness is necessary. It plays the role of a carrier and preserver of Israel's axial breakthrough to universal ethics. In the larger evolutionary metanarrative, however, chosenness (whether of human beings or Jews within the category of human beings) is a problem. There, humanity itself is not special and must not be singled out in a manner suggestive of triumphalism. Is there, one wonders, a *non*-triumphalist way of singling out humanity, as one must do in order to support such notions as specifically human dignity? It is not clear from this book what that way might be.

Throughout the book, Bellah strives to “show that the distinction between ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ is always relative, that the bacteria, for example, could be seen as the most successful of all forms of life, and that we have no grounds for sneering at the dinosaurs” (600). This last claim is more puzzling than damning; has anyone, one wonders, ever sneered at a dinosaur? It would seem to be a behavior that would have to be imagined before it could be renounced. The particular gesture of contemptuous disapprobation from on high that is sneering requires common yet contested social space in order to be required or, for that matter, effective. While one may doubt whether concepts of friendship or enmity are especially useful in thinking about our relationship to dinosaurs and bacteria, it is important not to underestimate what Bellah sees as the ethical and practical dimensions of the failure to attend to our commonality with other creatures (whether dauntingly large or infinitesimally small) if we would seek to understand his project.

It is partly in order to ward off forgetfulness of our commonality with our fellow creatures that Bellah posits an evolutionary framework for his theoretical argument. In *Religion and Human Evolution*, his humanism (in the minimal sense of concern for human futurity as well as in a more expansive sense), as much as his theoretical objectives, requires the renunciation of human triumphalism. By positing a cosmological and biological framework, he attempts to account for religious phenomena in the context of the evolving capabilities of human beings over time and in the world while modeling the renunciation of human time as the sole measure of those capabilities. It is rare in this day and age to encounter a scholarly book that takes up a compound theoretical-narrative-normative task on this scale, without nervousness or apology. There is

something refreshing about a book that aims openly not only to inform us but also to transform our understanding of where we are in the cosmos even if we happen to not stand in need of the particular transformation intended or perhaps even if we reject it.

In turning to the collection of essays entitled *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, we find ourselves on more familiar ground. These essays aim to clarify, explore, “interrogate,” argue, consider, reflect, examine, propose, and so on in the usual fashion of scholarly writing. Yet the publisher’s blurb for the book announces that “understanding the [Axial Age], the authors contend, is not just an academic project but a humanistic endeavor.” Here, in contrast to *Religion and Human Evolution*, the humanistic endeavor is pursued along multiple lines suggestive of diverse, if not competing humanisms. The book does not arise out of or depend conspicuously upon on the evolutionary framework, except as it shows up in the chapters by Merlin Donald and by Bellah himself.

In the introduction, the editors (Bellah and Hans Joas) note that they left the matter of what the authors would write about with respect to the Axial Age up to them. The upside of this decision is that the book offers a rich and rewarding panoply of widely varied perspectives and topics (including “The Axial Age as Religious Discourse,” by Hans Joas, “Axial Religions and the Problem of Violence” by David Martin, and “The Axial Conundrum Between Transcendental Visions and Vicissitudes of Their Institutionalizations: Constructive and Destructive Possibilities” by Shmuel Eisenstadt, in addition to fifteen more). The book is divided into five sections: Fundamental Questions, A Comparative Perspective, Destructive Possibilities?, Reevaluations, and Perspectives on the Future. Each of the essays is written from fairly deep within a specialized set of individual and disciplinary concerns and perspectives. The long essay by Assman and the

short essay by Taylor stand out; also important is that of Heiner Roetz.

The chapters in this book (notably, those by Joas, Charles Taylor, Ann Swidler, David Martin, W.G. Runciman, Johann Arnason, Jan Assman, William Sullivan, and Bellah himself) are likely to be of interest to general readers as well as specialists. The essays in the book that address the normative dimensions of the concept of the Axial Age are of particular interest in thinking about Bellah's project along the lines that we have been pursuing so far. In an essay entitled "The Axial Age Theory: A Challenge to Historism or an Explanatory Device of Civilization Analysis? With a Look at the Normative Discourse in Axial Age China," Heiner Roetz observes that "what makes Jaspers' Axial Age theorem stand out in comparison to forerunners is the systematic importance that he attributes to it for reorientating Western scholarship and, above all, its strong normative claim under the impression of the German crimes of World War II. Jaspers," he points out, "unlike most of the scholars who have adopted his theory, does not merely want to explain developments. He wants to draw lessons from the past and he is convinced that a new approach to history is one of these" (249). The aim is to cure the West of the infection of its "claim to exclusiveness" by applying the antiseptic of universal history.

Ambitious as this goal may be, it falls short, I think, of the even more expansive scope of Jaspers' project, which entailed nothing less providing a new point of orientation for the human race (or at least those members of it who were not, to his mind, so saturated in myth that they were beyond help and beneath the notice of history) that would serve as the basis for what Jaspers called "boundless communication" (*The Origin and Goal of History*, 221) and ultimately, by these means, to further the unity of the

human race and to bring about a secular, yet philosophical faith-infused, invisible church on earth.

Roetz notes that scholars “have singled out the empirical part of the Axial Age idea and neglected the normative framework that gave birth to it in the first place” (252) and that, given the disinterest in the concept by historically minded disciplines, it has, in the past, had to depend upon social scientists (notably, Shmuel Eisenstadt) for its survival. In the limited space of a single chapter, he does not have the opportunity for a broad discussion of that normative framework; his particular focus is on normative reasoning in Axial Age China.

In his conclusion, Roetz inadvertently demonstrates just how badly a full-blown account of Jaspers’ normative project is needed in claiming that Jaspers’ appeal to deep origins runs counter to the Axial preference for thinking *against* one’s own historical and cultural framework. To be sure, in Jaspers’ account, a hallmark of the Axial Age is asking radical questions and thinking against tradition. But the habit of asking radical questions and thinking against tradition was, even by his time, a comfortably established, much-lauded, and highly traditional bulwark of the post-Cartesian Western historical and cultural framework. How ought one to go about thinking against the tradition of “thinking against”? Perhaps by appealing to deep origins?

The Axial Age concept is, I think, best understood not only in light of Jaspers’ complicated commitment to enlightenment (and especially to Kant) but also within the context of his post-war salvage operation with respect to Western culture. It entails an affirmation of radically enlightened thought, to be sure, but he tempers the implicit radicalism of *The Origin and Goal of History* throughout. In that context, he attempts to

devise a politic and polemical *substitute for* rather than a wholesale *rejection of* foundational elements (such as origins, articles of faith, and sacred texts) of Western culture, his talk about everything being swept into a vortex notwithstanding. The task of understanding Jaspers's project demands addressing its dual status as what German historian Oskar Köhler called "secularized salvation history," on the one hand, and an attempt at an empirically grounded conception of history, on the other.

It is in Jan Assman's essay entitled "Cultural Memory and the Myth of the Axial Age," that the split between the normative and empirical dimensions of Jaspers' theory comes to a head. To Assmann and, he suggests, historians like him who specialize in "pre-Axial" civilizations "Jaspers appears as a teller of myths, narrating about beginnings where [historians] see slow developments, continuities, revisions, and recourses" (366-367). Assman observes that "In a normative perspective, the myth of the Axial Age has a clear function of orientation. As a reconstruction of the intellectual and social history of the first millennium BCE, however, it is highly problematic" (367).

To Assman's mind, "the Axial Age is nothing else but the formative phase of the textual continuity that is still prevailing in our Western and Eastern civilizations" (399). While the concept of an Axial Age should, in his view, be shelved, the concept of "axiality," can and should be employed as an analytic tool. Assmann defines axiality with reference to German historian Eric Voegelin's concept of a "turn from 'compactness' to 'differentiatedness'" (371). In this formulation, to which Assmann is admittedly indebted, axiality "consists primarily in the introduction of new distinctions" (371). The discovery of new distinctions went hand in hand with the processes of what Assmann calls "distanciation" and "disembedding" through which human beings become capable of

“standing back and looking beyond” (here, he quotes the widely-used formulation of the notion of transcendence from Benjamin Schwartz’s essay on the Axial Age as the “Age of Transcendence”) (372).

Other crucial axial features, in Assmann’s account, are the rise of universalism as well as “the *rise of great individuals* and the discovery of individuality” (373). Assmann resists reducing axiality to a “consequence” of literacy, preferring rather to treat it as an “implication of writing, an option opened up by literacy of a certain quality, whose acceptance, exploration, and elaboration, however, depends on historical and cultural circumstances” (379). In contrast to his own theory of axiality, as conditioned by such phenomena as the different stages of canonization, Jaspers’s theory is made to look quite simplistic in terms of its attentiveness to history. Assmann identifies the first stage of canonization as the selection of authoritative texts from the body of extant texts. The second stage of canonization, he suggests, entails distinguishing texts that convey “the absolute and universal truth” from those which fail to do, “which now become excluded as paganism, idolatry, heresy, and error” (390). Reflection on this stage, he observes, may give us insight into Jaspers:

Some of this pathos of distinction and exclusion seems to me still present in Jaspers’ concept of the Axial Age, which in this respect appears as a secularized version of the religious distinction between paganism and true religion. His idea of Axial civilizations puts the pre- and extra-Axial world in a position similar to the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic construction of paganism. This aspect becomes even stronger with Schwartz’s definition of the Axial Age as ‘the age of transcendence’ and Eisenstadt’s concept of ‘transcendental visions’ as the hallmark of axiality. All of this is to a large extent a feat of cultural memory and an effect of writing and canonization. [390]

To be sure, Assmann is correct that the concept of the Axial Age creates a rift between axial and non-axial phenomena, but it is important to note that Jaspers treats the rift

created by axiality as a distinction within societies and within humanity as a whole that will not be ever be overcome through the conversion of all nations (as paganism can in theory be overcome in Christianity) or partially bridged by the construction of a universal, minimal code of ethics (as the gap between Gentile and non-Gentile ethics and *nomos* is bridged by the Jewish Noahide code). Given the varied treatments of paganism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, it is not clear how we are to understand the construction of the pre- and extra-Axial world in Jaspers's project as being equally similar to the constructions of paganism in all three religions.

For Jaspers, the Axial Age is characterized by a struggle between *mythos* and *logos*, but his comment that the axial age, like Christ, drew all men to itself notwithstanding, there is no claim that *logos* will at any point exert that pull with much success. The axial age leaves most men just as they were. In Jaspers's view, during the Axial Age, "the old mythical world slowly sank into oblivion, but remained as a background to the whole through the continued belief of the mass of the people (and was subsequently able to gain the upper hand over wide areas)."¹⁵ Beyond that, Jaspers suggests that myth was neither permanently excluded nor temporarily archived for later retrieval. Rather, "myths were remoulded, were understood at a new depth during this transition, at the very moment when myth as a whole was destroyed." The majority of people go on being governed by what had been destroyed, because "the highest potentialities of thought and practical expression realized in individuals did not become common property... the majority of men were unable to follow in their footsteps."¹⁶ Axial consciousness is not contagious but neither, apparently, is myth, at least with respect persons who have made the axial shift. For them, myth is not a source of

attraction to be resisted, ridiculed, or otherwise cut down to size. It is matter to be remolded.

For Assmann, the life on earth of such figures as the Hebrew prophets, Confucius, Laotse, etc. in and of itself does not mark a turning point in history. To his mind, “the decisive event is not the terrestrial existence of the great individuals but the canonization of their writings.” As he points out, “We don’t know anything about the transcendental visions of shamans, kings, priests, and seers unless they become not only written down but, above all, are received in a canon of sacred scripture” (390). This is true, but it is also the case that transcendental visions don’t get written down or canonized unless the person who experienced them comes into terrestrial existence. It does not seem necessary to the argument of Assmann’s important essay to view the latter fact (or the oddity of the fact that a number of highly influential figures existed during a particular period of time) as comparatively insignificant because one wishes, for very sound reasons, to stress the importance of the latter.

According to Assmann, “There were presumably always great individuals with ‘transcendental visions’” (399). On what basis are we to assume that this is the case? There is surely no historical foundation for this speculative presumption. Assmann’s excellent question of whether we are “still living in an ‘age of transcendence,’ and if so, in what sense” (371) invites us to consider his claim about the perduring existence of great individuals with transcendental visions in the context of the present. If there were presumably always such individuals in the past, there should be ones today as well. Who are they?

If one accepts anything resembling Bellah’s concept that the development of

axiality is tethered to a particular stage in human cognitive development, it is hard to see how it could have “always” been the case that such individuals existed in the past. It is equally difficult to see why there are so few (if any) such individuals compelling our attention today. For Assmann, at any rate, “The ideal of the Axial Age is not so much about ‘man as we know him’ and his/her first appearance in time, but about ‘man as we want him’ and the utopian goal of a universal civilized community” (401).

For Bellah, it is in the Axial Age that normative-theoretical standards by which the distinction between “man as we want him” and “man as we know him” begin to arise. One need not make the suggestion that pre-Axial thinkers had no comparable standards at all to observe that the period designated as the Axial Age was characterized by an profusion of ways of life (encompassing habits of thought and dialogue) that gave rise to such standards, as well as the texts in which they are generated, recorded, and conveyed.

In *Religion and Human Evolution*, Bellah picks up on the normative potential of the axial concept and uses it to bolster one of his overall aims: to articulate a metanarrative about our place in the cosmos, while downplaying a sense of human specialness, in the pejorative, self-aggrandizing sense. To his mind, “The theoretical breakthrough in each axial case led to the possibility of universal ethics, the reassertion of fundamental human equality, and the necessity of respect for all humans, indeed for all sentient beings” (606). He propounds the now familiar larger lesson that the earth is not the center of the universe and that, as he puts it, “the sun isn’t the center of anything much either.” He claims that “We like to think of ourselves, of human beings, as the most successful of all biological species, of our age as ‘the age of man’... whereas in fact we

live, as all life for 4 billion years has lived, in ‘the age of bacteria,’ as Stephen Jay Gould has put it” (58).

One wonders who, in this age of widely taught anti-anthropocentrism is included in the “we” who “like to think of our age as the ‘age of man.’” Closeted pre-Copernicans or furtive aficionados of Pico della Mirandola’s *De hominis dignitate* will find this book to be a hard read. Almost from the outset, Bellah’s universe tends, in the long run, towards an egalitarian cosmos, as secured by the uncontested hegemony of the overwhelmingly successful “many,” namely, bacteria. The few (human beings), while not pathetic failures, strictly speaking, are scarcely the parties to which any visiting aliens who say “Take me to your leader” should be directed.

The age of bacteria, for Bellah, is potentially also the age of Kant *redivivus*. Bellah’s book ends on a Kantian note, with a discernible hint of Bellah’s teacher Wilfred Cantwell Smith. “If we could see that we are all in this... together, even though we must contend through mutual discussion with abiding differences, we might just make a bit more likely the actualization of Kant’s dream of a world civil society that could at last restrain the violence of state-organized societies toward each other and the environment” (606). For Kant, nature—both in the sense of the state of nature and the perceived depravity of human nature—represents what must be overcome in order to bring about the ideal society, and perpetual peace. Ironically, nature itself is the guarantor of this transformation: “Perpetual peace is *insured* (guaranteed) by nothing less than that great artist, *nature* (*natura daedala rerum*) whose mechanical process makes her purposiveness visibly manifest, permitting harmony to emerge among men through their discord, even against their wills.”¹⁷

What is Kant doing in Bellah's concluding paragraph? His presence in a conclusion that invites us to see that we are all in this together, is a bit surprising, given what Bellah earlier describes as Kant's tendency to divide the world into "us (Europe, later Europe plus America) versus them" (598). Additionally, Kant's belief (unmentioned by Bellah) that "The fact that the human being can have the 'I' in his representations raises him infinitely above all the other beings on earth"¹⁸ seems to be a parade example of the anthropocentric thinking Bellah seeks to undermine. To Bellah's mind, Kant, despite his tendency "to deal with humanity in terms of a radical dichotomy" (598) proposes a version of metanarrative that according to one scholar whom Bellah quotes approvingly, is written from a point of view which ostensibly takes account of the world of data even as it aspires to look beyond it. As such, it would seem to have relatively clean hands with respect to the supposed damaging effects of metanarrative. (There is, however, a question as to whether Kant has clean hands or, as the French author Charles Péguy would have it, no hands.) In the end, Bellah's invocation of Kant tethers his project more closely to that of Jaspers, whose *Origin and Goal of History* was explicitly written in the spirit of a Kantian universal history with a cosmopolitan point of view.

For Bellah, nature in the sense of biological history gives us no guidance whatsoever as to how the capacities of living things can be used for good or ill but, at the same time, it cannot be overcome. His account of nature suggests two moral spheres, even as he posits the possibility that the sphere of necessity can in fact be the sphere of creativity and freedom. In one sense, this sphere is bounded and haunted by the prospect of absolute loss for all species save the most dominant. Particular things are lost all the time, and lost for good. As skeleton casts and models of Dodo birds and dinosaurs may

mutely attest, only some of “us” survive. Yet with respect to human cultural and religious history, Bellah wishes to maintain that “nothing is ever lost.”

Ultimately, “we are all in this together” suggests division *and* unity. It connotes exclusion as well as inclusion. “We humans,” unlike bacteria, are, Bellah’s book warns, hurtling towards extinction but “we organisms” will go on just the same, regardless. “We,” then, both will and will not be lost. To regard as primary our moral membership in the most inclusive “we” would seem to be the condition of the humility and sense of urgency urged upon us in this book. To put it aside would seem to be the condition of keeping Kant’s dream intact, insofar as it is grounded in a belief that rational, autonomous beings who are capable of morality have a monopoly on inviolate dignity.

¹ On the pressure to reopen German medical schools due to public health needs in 1945, see James F. Tent, *Mission on the Rhine: Reeducation and Denazification in American-Occupied Germany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 58.

² Karl Jaspers, “The Rededication of German Scholarship,” trans. Marianne Zuckerkandl, *The American Scholar* 15 (1946), 188.

³ Jaspers, “The Rededication of German Scholarship,” 181.

⁴ Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 17.

⁵ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 1953), 1.

⁶ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (Los Angeles: Indo-European, 2010), 78.

⁷ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 77.

⁸ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 78.

⁹ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 79.

¹⁰ Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra, Cloudesley Brereton, and W. Horsfall Carter (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 178-179.

¹¹ Bergson, *Two Sources*, 82.

¹² Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, 2.

¹³ Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, 3.

¹⁴ Benjamin J. Schwartz, “The Age of Transcendence,” *Daedalus*, 104 (Spring 1975), 3.

¹⁵ Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, 3.

¹⁶ Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, 5.

¹⁷ Immanuel Kant, *To Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), 18

¹⁸ Immanuel Kant, “On the Cognitive Faculty,” in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, ed. And trans. Robert Louden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 15.