

LEARNING HISTORY AND LEARNING FROM HISTORY THE CASE OF THE AXIAL AGE

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ABSTRACT: The paper deals with the concept of the Axial Age and its extremely ambiguous nature. A general overview of its history, from Karl Jaspers to present times, shows that it has been extensively discussed and employed by not only philosophers but also (and mostly) historians and sociologists. This is due to the structure of the notion itself, which in Jaspers' version relies on both an empirical thesis and an article of faith, allowing for both descriptive and normative accounts. We therefore argue that the notion of transdisciplinarity contributes to a better understanding of the Axial Age, by highlighting its reassessment of theoretical boundaries. The final part of the article explores the philosophical implications of this result. Drawing on Martin Heidegger's distinction between *historisch* (historiographical) and *geschichtlich* (historical), we contend that the notion of the Axial Age offers the opportunity to coordinate the ontic (*historisch*) together with the ontological (*geschichtlich*) layer of history.

L'articolo si occupa del concetto di età assiale e della sua natura estremamente ambigua. Da Karl Jaspers sino ai contributi più recenti, una panoramica storica mostra che la nozione è stata ampiamente discussa e utilizzata non solo da filosofi, ma anche e soprattutto da storici e sociologi. Ciò è dovuto alla struttura stessa dell'idea, che nella versione di Jaspers si fonda tanto su una tesi di carattere empirico quanto su una ispirazione fideistica, dando luogo a riletture sia descrittive che normative. Si sostiene allora che la nozione di transdisciplinarietà può contribuire a una migliore comprensione dell'idea di età assiale e della sua capacità di rimettere in discussione i confini tra discipline. L'ultima parte dell'articolo discute le implicazioni filosofiche di questo risultato. Attraverso la distinzione di Martin Heidegger tra *historisch* (storiografico) e *geschichtlich* (storico), si afferma che il concetto di età assiale offre una opportunità di articolare il livello ontico (*historisch*) della storia con quello ontologico (*geschichtlich*).

KEYWORDS: Axial Age, Karl Jaspers, Historiography, Transdisciplinarity, Martin Heidegger

PAROLE CHIAVE: Età assiale, Karl Jaspers, Storiografia, Transdisciplinarietà, Martin Heidegger

1. Axial Age and axially: an overview

Recently, the concept of Axial Age has received an impressive amount of attention within the field of human sciences. It has not only sparked in-depth discussions among a selected group of scholars but also been employed with more divulgatory intents (Peet 2019, Stephens 2020); sometimes one can find a reference to it even in general magazines and newspapers. Limited to academic circles, what surprises is the number of contributions in which the concept of Axial Age is not merely presented or even discussed in itself but is rather actively employed as a tool from both an epistemic and a normative standpoint (this will be further explored in the following pages). And yet the concept is far from new. A minimal reconstruction of its history would require a detailed article if not a book and has been already accomplished (Joas 2014; Assmann 2018; Arrigo 2023; Boy and Torpey 2013; Deodati, Miano and Wagner 2015); however, it is still possible to provide some limited hints, necessary for an adequate understanding of its philosophical implications.

Karl Jaspers, who is widely considered the first to discuss and thematize it extensively (although he did not invent the term or its meaning from scratch⁽¹⁾) placed it in a central position in his book on philosophy of history called *The Origin and Goal of History*, originally published in 1949 (Jaspers 2014)⁽²⁾. It is true, though, that this is hardly one of his most famous and frequently cited works. The author remained much more famous for his previous existentialist philosophy (Jaspers 1932); and later gained attention — and sometimes polemics (Clark 2002) — for his explicitly political reflections (Jaspers 1946, 1958). It is therefore not so puzzling that aside from a few exceptions — Jurgen Habermas being the most illustrious one (Habermas 2019; Allen and Mendieta 2019) — the notion of the Axial Age has been largely overlooked by continental philosophy, if not by philosophy in general.

(1) Jaspers himself explicitly acknowledges the contribution of XIX century historians and scholars on the subject: the names of Ernst von Lasaulx and Viktor von Strauss are made, together with that of Alfred Weber.

(2) Direct quotes will be taken from the most recent English edition. A hint on the same notion was already present in Jaspers' speech at the *Recontres internationales* held in Geneva in 1946 (AA.Vv. 1947), and even before in 1942 (now Jaspers 2019).

From where, then, comes the current interest? Historians and sociologists have been the most active researchers concerning the notion of the Axial Age. The definition written by Jaspers himself helps us understand both the concept and the reason for such an in-depth curiosity:

It would seem that this axis of history is to be found in the period around 500 B.C., in the spiritual process that occurred between 800 and 200 B.C. It is there that we meet with the most deepcut dividing line in history. Man, as we know him today, came into being. For short we may style this the “Axial Period”.

The most extraordinary events are concentrated in this period. Confucius and Lao-tse were living in China, all the schools of Chinese philosophy came into being, including those of Mo-ti, Chuang-tse, Lieh-tsu and a host of others; India produced the Upanishads and Buddha and, like China, ran the whole gamut of philosophical possibilities down to scepticism, to materialism, sophism and nihilism; in Iran Zarathustra taught a challenging view of the world as a struggle between good and evil; in Palestine the prophets made their appearance, from Elijah, by way of Isaiah and Jeremiah to Deutero-Isaiah; Greece witnessed the appearance of Homer, of the philosophers — Parmenides, Heraclitus and Plato — of the tragedians, Thucydides and Archimedes. Everything implied by these names developed during these few centuries almost simultaneously in China, India, and the West, without anyone of these regions knowing of the others.

What is new about this age, in all three areas of the world, is that man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations. He experiences the terror of the world and his own powerlessness. He asks radical questions. Face to face with the void he strives for liberation and redemption. By consciously recognising his limits he sets himself the highest goals. He experiences absoluteness in the depths of selfhood and in the lucidity of transcendence (Jaspers 2014, pp. 1–2).

As Paolo Costa (2015) argues, there is a lot to unpack here⁽³⁾. The Axial Age is presented as an empirical event (or, better, as a sum of events collapsed in one significant development) that took place in five distinct regions in the world (roughly equivalent to China, India, Middle East, Palestine, and Greece) and bear witness to a decisive leap

(3) See also Costa 2014a and Costa 2014b.

in human evolution. Its essential feature is man's discovery of Being and the consequent realization of his own problematic and finite existence in the world. The two elements are connected, and this fruitful tension generates for the first time a clear distinction between the mundane and the divine. This breakthrough has far-reaching effects, transforming not only existential but also social, cultural, and political scenarios; axial civilizations set themselves apart from previous institutions — and in doing so they pave the way for further developments. The whole process can be read in two different ways. The Axial Age can be viewed as the “age of transcendence” (Joas 2014, Schwartz 1975) or as the “age of criticism” (Momigliano 1975), depending on whether the emphasis is placed on the spiritual or cognitive aspects of the shift. These two options are not mutually exclusive, and their traces are equally present in the passage mentioned above from Jaspers' *oeuvre*.

From this, we can already assess a crucial point concerning our question. It is exactly its empirical feature that makes Axial Age something more powerful than an abstract idea, however inspiring or insightful: rather than relying solely on speculation, a very “factual” foundation is here proposed. As debatable as it may result, the concept of the Axial Age is first understood by Jaspers as an empirical description of a certain period of history. And it is its thickness of consistency, if such expression could be adopted for a concept, that makes the Axial Age more appealing to historians and sociologists than philosophers. Moreover, the lack of precision that could be easily imputed to Jaspers' thesis — as well as to many of his most famous outputs⁽⁴⁾ — might be negatively judged from a historical perspective but has the significant advantage of being open to endless uses and reinterpretations. Even if one deems this thesis as completely inadequate, its very nature encourages original directions of research.

Jaspers did not live long enough to see the revival of his concept, but from the late Seventies and the following decade to the very present an impressive amount of contributions, with varied quality, results, and ambitions, has been published (Halton 2014; Armstrong

(4) Ironically, the indistinct character of definitions and arguments is a very distinctive feature of Jaspers' philosophy, as it is evident with the concept of *Grenzsituation* (Boundary situation): originally devoted to the four cases of guilt, death, struggle, and suffering, it has been employed for a countless number of applications. See for example Alessiato and Quante 2022.

2006; Arnason, Eisenstadt and Wittrock 2005; Bellah and Joas 2012; Kozlarek, Rüsen and Wolff 2012). The decisive input was given by sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt — although Talcott Parsons (1966) had also strongly contributed before — with his focus on the institutional and social order of so-called Axial civilizations. In 1983, with a congress in Bad Homburg, he brought together a diverse group of scholars, each with their own specific research focus, but also all exploring this important concept; this event marked an important milestone in the study of Axial civilizations (Eisenstadt 1986, 2003). Among the other most famous contemporary authors (some of them still very active), at least the names of Robert N. Bellah (2011), Hans Joas, Jan Assman, Johann Pall Arnason (2003), Charles Taylor (2007) and Björn Wittrock (2005) must be mentioned. Although it is not possible to synthesize here the efforts of each of them (and many other deserving scholars), it is important to acknowledge that this diverse group of authors is concerned with interests and problems that are not extremely different but also may not have intersected if not for a point of mediation — that is, the concept of Axial Age.

The notion being discussed here opens up several research perspectives that can be categorized into a few groups. However, it is firstly important to note that there are two levels — not always adequately distinguished — to consider: a descriptive intent (especially pointed to a historiographical purpose), and one that is involved in normative judgments (with the debating of a second Axial Age while the ancient one is posed as the model to imitate, as Roetz 2012 shows). With that in mind, a broad and merely preliminary categorization could look like the following:

- Discussions on the concept of the Axial Age and its historical validity as it is described by Jaspers in its characters and chronological range. Themes here discussed include: the simultaneity of Axial Age civilizations; contacts (or absence of communication) between these civilizations; causes and effects of Axial Age (with a look at the timeline and the historical events between pre-Axial and post-Axial empires and societies); transcendence and/or criticism as the main features of this period: significance of this period in the broader cognitive evolution of humanity.

- Global and comparative history, with a focus not only on (and between) Axial Age civilizations but also bringing into consideration other societies, to highlight similarities and differences, common factors and specificities. A typical move is here that of applying or evaluating the notion of axially or axialization (Assmann 2012)⁽⁵⁾ to later (Roman and Islam empires) previous (ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia) or — generally considered — non-Axial civilizations (Japan, African and pre-Columbian American societies).
- Studies on the relation between axially and modernity, with a strong accent on the normative or paradigmatic potentiality of the former for shaping current times. Themes here discussed include: Axial Age as a heritage and the origin of contemporary socio-cultural orders and structures; axially and cultural memory; axially as a model for intercultural and interreligious dialogue axially and secularization (or post-secularization); axially as a future goal or as a false and problematic myth. In many of these subgenres, the reference to axially is not devoid of political implications.

These short hints only offer a pale idea of the thriving variety here at disposal. Nonetheless, they should be enough to highlight the potential implied in the concept and the multiple employments it can serve, even with potential risks (Provan 2013): it can work as an epistemic tool for the most diverse historiographical studies, but it can also tell us something regarding the state of the societies we live in, its conflicts and crisis — and therefore inspire political and moral reflections about changes that are needed to improve them.

In conclusion, it appears that the notion of Axial Age has to do with many different subjects, themes, and scopes. But how does that happen precisely? The only element that instantly appears is that different disciplines are here in action, and they are somehow “held together” by one singular idea. Likewise, a sense of “complexity” is implicitly present, but perhaps not fully grasped. To clarify our problem, a further step must be taken, and a new concept must be introduced.

(5) “Instead of an Axial Age, we should speak of axially and axialization in the sense we speak of globalism and globalization, as a tendency that appears under different conditions in different *ages* of human history”.

2. Axial Age and transdisciplinarity, part one. An intrinsic connection?

However popular in recent years has become, the concept of transdisciplinarity is still not a clear one. A definitive definition of it is not available; it is much easier to find direct applications in the most diverse fields and areas of research — be that of comparative literature or quantum physics, digital humanities or engineering mechanics. It has been admittedly affirmed that the whole related debate is “open and not yet ready for closure”; what we, therefore, have here is a concept “in flux” (Pohl 2010; Frodemann 2017; Cockell, Billotte, Darbellay and Waldvogel 2011). Now, it is important to note, as a preliminary assessment, that we do not aim to offer any contribution to such a complicated discussion; we only bring it up because we have a sense that its employment might be fruitful for a better understanding of Axial Age and axially, its problematics, and its philosophical implications⁽⁶⁾. A quick look at the matter is therefore needed if we want to assess whether the Axial Age can be read as a transdisciplinary notion and — perhaps much more important — what we might learn from the subject even if the question receives a negative answer.

If we consider transdisciplinarity as what “grasps the complexity of the issue”, “takes the diverse perspectives on the issue into account” “links abstract and case-specific knowledge” and “develops knowledge and practices that promote what is perceived to be the common good” (Pohl 2010, p. 69), a lot from this definition sounds pertinent — albeit still loosely — to the present discussion. Although there are various approaches to the notion of transdisciplinarity, it is important to note that the concept has been usually associated with the key terms of “transcending”, “transgressing”, and “transforming” (Thompson Klein 2017, p. 22). Transdisciplinarity is therefore not only a matter of “juxtaposing”, “sequencing”, and “coordinating” disciplines (as a multidisciplinary perspective would imply), nor only one of “interaction”, “integration” and “blending” between them (that would characterize an

(6) We leave aside the only slightly less challenging notions of multi and interdisciplinarity, that would lead us too far and not contribute to the main point. Among the many contributions on the topic, see Karanika–Murray and Wiesemes 2009.

interdisciplinary gaze). A transdisciplinary approach is somehow more ambitious in its aim to surpass traditional boundaries and, in doing so, embrace a mode of knowledge production characterized by complexity, non-linearity, and heterogeneity. This approach has the potential to make significant contributions to problem-solving efforts (Thompson Klein 2017, pp. 29–30).

Again, a lot of this sounds familiar. By ways of embracing complexity and considering diverse perspectives, the Axial Age surely links its specificity and particularity to general epistemic problems, at least in the fields of historiography, sociology, and philosophy. Equally importantly, by ways of reflecting upon the past and the origins of humanity, it forces scholars to face “practical” problems related to the current condition of our societies and the future of humanity: as noted, much literature about the Axial Age draws to this exact direction. But there is something more — and perhaps more crucial — to it. Upon realizing that the essence of the Axial Age is not readily apparent, we get the sense that boundaries are indeed broken: beginning as a factual and temporally specific narrative, the concepts of the Axial Age and axiality transform into something else entirely. They tell us a story that is not only — and perhaps not mainly — that of our past, but rather a depiction of how humanity can possibly become.

However, the process and consequences of this phenomenon are not yet fully understood. From this brief sketch, it is only possible to draw an initial conclusion: transdisciplinarity, as it is often defined, offers valuable insights into the concepts of Axial Age and axiality. More precisely, it achieves this by highlighting their inherent ambiguity: they cannot be reduced to one single discipline (be that of history or philosophy), not to their combination alone. There is much more to it: it is precisely because axiality is both a philosophical and historiographical intuition — from the very start of its formulation and in the subsequent discussion — that transdisciplinarity is especially pertinent here: a serious theoretical re-evaluation of discipline boundaries is much needed. We therefore must delve deeper into this unique feature of the Axial Age.

3. Axiality and transdisciplinarity, part two. Back to Jaspers

Perhaps we have left Jaspers behind too soon. Let us go back to his depiction of the Axial Age. In *The Origin and Goal of History*, he declares that “an axis of world history, if such a thing exists, would have to be discovered empirically, as a fact capable of being accepted as such by all men, Christians included” (Jaspers 2014, p. 1)⁽⁷⁾. As already noted, empiricism is here the essential feature. Yet, the entire discourse displays from the beginning an uncertain status. From this perspective, a specific sentence in the *Introduction* should be read as a warning: “My outline is based on an article of faith: that mankind has one single origin and one goal” (Jaspers 2014, p. 1). While Axial Age is not here directly mentioned, it is particularly significant that right before criticizing the Western vision of history — at least partly because it remains Christianly-oriented (even when not intentionally so⁽⁸⁾) and therefore not universally valid — Jaspers admits that a “fideistic” element is present and inspires his vision of history.

It could be argued that the absence of this seemingly insignificant point would render the entire structure ineffective. The empirical “skeleton” that remains would not only be flawed and debatable but also, more problematically, lacking any positive meaning: Axial Age would

(7) More extensively: “In the Western World the philosophy of history was founded in the Christian faith. In a grandiose sequence of works ranging from St. Augustine to Hegel this faith visualised the movement of God through history. [...] But the Christian faith is only one faith, not the faith of mankind. This view of universal history therefore suffers from the defect that it can only be valid for believing Christians. But even in the West, Christians have not tied their empirical conceptions of history to their faith. An article of faith is not an article of empirical insight into the real course of history. For Christians sacred history was separated from profane history, as being different in its meaning”. Therefore, according to Jaspers the Christian theology of history is flawed *in a double way*: because it fails to express a universal dynamic of humanity and because it is not empirically grounded, but rather relies on an article of faith.

(8) A classical reference on the topic would be Löwith (1949). The fact that Löwith and Jaspers’ reflections on history, albeit opposed in their contents, came out in the same year is perhaps more than a curious coincidence; moreover, in the very same year, other two works that shared the same problem were published (Niebuhr 1949, Butterfield 1949). Löwith’s skeptical position — the thesis that history has no intrinsic *telos* or meaning — became the dominant one, and understandably so after two world wars and the death of millions of people. After all, it was Jaspers’ idea — that a *weltgeschichtlich* image was still possible — the one that looked against common sense. Löwith never showed any specific interest in Jaspers’ Axial Age, but it is to be remembered that his previous remarks on *Philosophie* were particularly critical (Löwith 1984a, 1984b).

become a perhaps fascinating but solely historical (if not straightforwardly mythical, as argued by Assmann 2012 and Bellah 2005) period that has no link with modernity and can offer no insight to contemporary man. The continuity of history that Jaspers is here arguing for would be broken. Employing one of the author's most known expressions (here in an exclusively negative sense), we would find ourselves in an intellectual and human "shipwreck" (*Scheitern*), one that leads to nothing but nihilism and despair⁽⁹⁾. No *telos* is available from an exclusively intellectual operation and a further kind of inspiration is needed; a certain faith — more in the possible existence (*mögliche Existenz*) of mankind and its historical path, rather than the kind typical of exclusivist religions — must be in action⁽¹⁰⁾.

As a result, the idea of the Axial Age as a key period for the entire history of humanity is both a matter of faith and historiographical evidence. We believe that this is also a direct reason for the noted presence of both a descriptive and a normative layer. Matters pertaining solely to the historical realm are descriptive and do not imply any normative ideas; the latter must therefore be associated with a different kind of motivation — such as that of faith. These two features, however opposed and tensile, not only coexist but also enhance each other. Although some might be disappointed by the lack of a clear and definitive account — namely, that of a purely historical or theological perspective — it is precisely thanks to the ambiguity surrounding the concept of the Axial Age that fruitful collaboration and reflections among historians, sociologists, and philosophers (to only name a few disciplines) are possible. The notion intrinsically encompasses and articulates various complex issues that might otherwise remain separate. Even though it would be probably far-fetched to affirm that Jaspers' original idea of the Axial Age implicitly has a transdisciplinary nature, we at least argue

(9) *Scheitern* is in Jaspers' philosophy an ambiguous term: it expresses the unescapable limits of human condition, in its finiteness, insufficiency and culpability, and yet shows a somehow "positive" outcome, as in an authentic shipwreck the existence becomes aware of itself and its link to transcendence. While there is no definitive definition of it, the notion of shipwreck is especially frequent in the second volume of *Philosophy*, titled *Existential Elucidation* (*Existenzerhellung*). For a recent study on this subject see Gerte 2021.

(10) It is no casual chance, in our opinion, that in the same years Jaspers was presenting his enigmatic concept of "philosophical faith" (*Philosophische Glaube*): see Jaspers 1948, Ehrlich 1975.

that the way Jaspers assembled the pieces of his theory shares many similarities with the characters generally attributed to transdisciplinarity. The usage of the expression is somehow “transdisciplinary” from the start and continues to be so in subsequent authors and studies.

A final definition of transdisciplinarity throws an extremely insightful light on what we have just discussed. Let us try to look at it as “an exploration of ontology rather than a distinctive epistemological method” (Gibbs 2022). We have seen that the notion of the Axial Age transcends the traditional boundaries of each discipline involved by connecting abstract and case-specific knowledge, but it does so in a specific way. It does not diminish or undermine them in any way, as both the sociologist and the historian who study the Axial Age will continue to ask their customary questions. In the process of transcending the usual boundaries, the reflection on the Axial Age promotes the grounding of other boundaries at a deeper level: as neither the historical evidence nor the article of faith is enough to grasp the concept of the Axial Age in its complexity, it only seems appropriate to evoke an even more original layer. In this sense, we see here “an exploration of ontology” at work. It remains to be understood how this can happen at a specifically philosophical level of discourse.

4. *Historisch and geschichtlich*

It would be prudent to first refer to the specific field of study that pertains to our current inquiry — namely, philosophy of history. The fundamental issues that arise within this discipline are naturally different from those encountered in other areas of philosophy, such as semiotics or aesthetics.

In our case, it could be argued that the essential purpose of every philosophical speculation on history is to find (or attribute) a sense and direction to it, a task that no empirical evidence can fulfill. On the contrary, philosophy of history must always navigate the tension between irreconcilable extremes, whether it be the opposition between man’s individual freedom and the necessity of world history events (the individual and the universal, think of Kierkegaard *contra* Hegel) or the

dichotomy between man's active role in shaping history and the notion of a supernatural force (like divine Providence) that influences events at its whim. A philosopher who has a lot to say about (and against) history, the aforementioned Karl Löwith, puts it eloquently:

The problem of history as a whole is unanswerable within its own perspective. Historical processes as such do not bear the least evidence of a comprehensive and ultimate meaning. History as such has no outcome. There never has been and never will be an immanent solution of the problem of history, for man's historical experience is one of steady failure (Löwith 1949, p. 191).

While it is not necessary to agree with Löwith to a full extent, it is important to acknowledge that the challenges here are particularly serious and do not lend themselves to conclusive solutions. History appears to be subjected to a fundamental ambiguity between the observable and the concealed, the totality of historical events that can be documented and the subtle undercurrents that disrupt the expected outcomes and result in a heterogony of ends. This duality is somehow inherent to any Western (and therefore Christian) perspective on history, dating back to Augustine and his *De Civitate Dei*. It is a challenge that every philosophy of history is bound to confront.

The case of Axial Age and axiality, with their combination of historical facts and matters of faith that does not lead to a confessional view, suggests that there is no need to pose the problem at a theological level and that another and more neutral — see, strictly philosophical — way to discuss it might be available. The notions we are thinking of are those of *historisch* and *geschichtlich*. Heidegger is in this regard an essential author, as Chapter 5 of *Being and Time* is especially dedicated to the problem of *Temporality and Historicity*. As it is not possible to revisit here Heidegger's entire discussion on the topic (which would also require further references to related themes, both within and outside *Being and Time*), it is vital to clarify the limits and scope of this reference. Our only purpose here is to find a few useful ideas for a more in-depth discussion of Axial Age; when viewed in isolation as a presentation of Heidegger's argument, the few hints that will follow would be largely insufficient, if not misleading.

With all that in mind, what we take into consideration is that the philosopher of Meßkirch makes a distinction between a “vulgar” concept of history (*Historie*) and the authentic historicity (*geschichtlichkeit*) of Dasein (Heidegger 1996, pp. 341–369). This difference will be of utmost importance while evaluating the true character of the Axial Age. What is not needed is the explicit evaluation that lies under the distinction; it is not necessary, and perhaps it is harmful, for our discussion to affirm that one level — the *historisch* and visible one — is less authentic than the other. The natural outcome of this position would be to consider *Historie* as the layer to be overcome as soon as possible to get to the true core of beings, to their inner and grounding *geschichtlichkeit*. Compared to the experience of real *Geschichte*, *Historie* risks being reduced to a sort of distraction, albeit inevitable to the human condition. It would remain valid for an epistemic purpose but would not offer any insight into the profound historicity that distinguishes Dasein from the other beings.

With the help of the Axial Age, we can overcome this dualistic perspective. From this perspective it is easier to see the decisive advantage that the Axial Age can offer to a philosophy of history: it is both *historisch* and *geschichtlich*. We could perhaps describe it as an image that makes the invisible visible, a device that lets the *geschichtlich* reach the surface of the *historisch*. And again, this has a lot to do with the duality of its nature. As it is both empirically grounded and embedded in faith, it is also possible for the Axial Age to be both a concept that belongs to a detectably *historisch* scheme of things and one that is profoundly *geschichtlich* (and therefore indiscernible). A direct connection between *historisch* and *geschichtlich* emerges as the former is grounded on the latter, but the latter needs the former to express itself, though always partially and inconclusively. It is not untrue, as Heidegger would say, that *Historie* and everything that is *historisch* is so because it is originally *geschichtlich*, temporal (Heidegger 1996, p. 345)⁽¹¹⁾; but what is not sufficiently highlighted is that the *geschichtlich* shows a tendency to make itself visible — which is why it is also suitable for historiographical studies. Unlike Heidegger, who affirms that “the vulgar interpretation of the history of

(11) “The analysis of the historicity of Dasein attempted to show that this being is not “temporal” because it “is in history” but because, on the contrary, it exists and can exist historically only because it is temporal in the ground of its being”.

Dasein” covers the authentic temporality (Heidegger 1996, p. 244), we now seem to be able to break the spell and suggest the opposite path: the Axial Age is the *historisch* event that uncovers the first level — that of *Historie* — making it possible to see its hidden and intrinsic *geschichtlichkeit*⁽¹²⁾. This act of uncovering, which goes against the ordinary tendency to cover, can “happen” and “take place” because it is neither exclusively historical nor confined to an ontological and unintelligible historicity. On the contrary, with the Axial Age a fertile communication between the ontological and the ontic is promoted; we finally have a privileged place to show the problem of historicity because both levels are displayed in full action and the alterity that surrounds each of them is manifested. The use of the notion articulates the inner ontological historicity that historical events alone cannot display with the historical manifestations that a purely ontological account of temporality is not able to provide for.

These conclusions are somehow similar to other Heidegger’s remarks when the author of *Being and Time* affirms that “the historiographical disclosure of history is in itself rooted in the historicity of Dasein in accordance with its ontological structure” (Heidegger 1996, p. 358). The Axial Age could be very well interpreted as one “historiographical disclosure of history” among the others, as it could be argued for Renaissance or Enlightenment. As we have seen, many studies have already pointed that out. But the Jaspersian view is (at least potentially) much more ambitious: far from merely characterizing a certain philosophy of history, it leads us to reinterpret the notion as the very act of historical temporalization. The Axial Age is the openness of history because it is the only *historisch* and *geschichtlich* event of world history. Consequently, it is not only the chronological beginning of “man, as we know him today” (Jaspers 2014, p. 1), but also an active *origin*⁽¹³⁾ that continues to influence the present and the future of

(12) From this assumption it would be fascinating and perhaps very fruitful — as a proposal for future studies — to employ in this context another Heideggerian expression, that of *Ereignis* (event), which becomes significant after the *Kehre*; see in particular Heidegger 1989.

(13) Again, we believe that the notion of Axial Age could vastly benefit from the Heideggerian use of *Anfang*, *Beginn*, *Ursprung*, to better distinguish the multiple historical levels pertinent to the analysis; and perhaps Heidegger’s argument, which admits a conscious disinterest in actual historical deeds (to favor *Seinsgeschichte*, the history of Being) could find an unexpected reinforcement thanks to a confrontation with the idea of Axial Age. On these topics see Schürmann 1982 and Zarader 1986.

humanity — be that in the way of a precise model to be followed, or perhaps as the feeling of an absence, of something that we are currently missing, and that we need to regain⁽¹⁴⁾. In this regard, the fascinating outcome is that we do not need the Axial Age to be a historically rigorous model in order for this potential to remain valid; we only need it to maintain its internal empirical feature. In a Jaspersian perspective, the condition is fulfilled.

5. Concluding remarks

Starting from Jaspers' reconstruction and proceeding to contemporary assessments, the notion of Axial Age shows an intricate and multi-layered character. It may serve exclusively epistemic functions, as it happens in much recent research, but its descriptive account often covers a hidden (or not so hidden) valuative core. The Axial Age is the time of man's discovery of himself, his problematic condition, and the encounter with Being. It is a breakthrough of both cognitive and spiritual capacities and for this reason, however difficult and painful, is always preferable to a stagnant state of "un-problematicity" and unchallenged comfort. It therefore often becomes a normative parameter through which it is possible to judge present times and propose new directions of thought or even practical solutions (especially in the fields of interreligious and intercultural dialogue). Its duplicity can and must be displayed on multiple levels: Axial Age is both an empirical description and a fideistic (or mythical) feature. We would not venture to state that the concept is transdisciplinary, despite calling upon historians, sociologists, philosophers, and other scholars from human sciences and promoting further reflections on the related theoretical boundaries; nonetheless, transdisciplinarity seems to capture many of its essential features.

(14) It is especially significant that Jaspers did not believe that in present times a second Axial Age was happening. The many technological novelties, however radical and important, could not alone assure renewal of the human spirit; for that reason, interestingly, contemporary times could be compared to the first and only other "Promethean Age", the one that happened in prehistory when man discovered fire, became able to manage tools and the first elements of language were generated (Jaspers 2014, pp. 96–125). Even in a "best-case scenario" the next Axial Age is set in an unspecified future.

We have then shown that this duplicity has a specific philosophical significance. From a Jaspersian perspective, the Axial Age is presented as both a historical — however debatable — event and an ontological claim that makes historical events possible; it includes both Heidegger's poles (*historisch* and *geschichtlich*) and it does not only hold them together but also shows a way to articulate their “ontological difference”. In a sentence: the Axial Age might be the opening of history as we know it today, but it is more important to note that axiality can be read as the openness of history itself, its original historicity. For this reason, it is a model — not necessarily the best or only, but still a highly effective one — to display the multiple levels related to what we summon under the word “history”: its virtuality, its possibilities, its necessities. It could be even suggested that Axial Age functions as a sort of “ecstasy”, a unit of temporality, as it narrates about a distant past (first layer) which sets a goal for the future (second layer) and still lingers in the present, as a “presence of the absent” (third layer) and for that reason can fully portray the historicity of human being, its constant tendency to go “outside of itself” (Heidegger 1996, pp. 297–306). Perhaps here lies the enigmatic and fascinating character of the idea of the Axial Age, one that continues to inspire new reflections.

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