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The Axial Revolution: A Detailed Examination

Introduction

The Axial Revolution, a period ranging from 800 BCE to 300 BCE, marked a crucial point in human cognition and societal organization. It followed the Bronze Age collapse, considered one of the greatest collapses in civilization history. The Axial Revolution is important because it led to new psycho-technologies like alphabetic literacy, expanded human cognition, and drove significant shifts in societal meaning-making processes.

The Importance of Flow Experiences and Shamanism

Shamanism and flow experiences played a vital role in the Upper Paleolithic transition. These flow experiences integrate altered states of consciousness, creating a continuum with mystical experiences. They fostered enhanced insight, intuition, and meaning-making, resulting in an elevated capacity for metaphorical cognition. This, in turn, heightened human cognition's creativity and its ability to generate connections in meaning, driving a culture and technology explosion during the Upper Paleolithic transition.

The Neolithic Revolution and the Rise of Civilizations

The Neolithic Revolution marked the advent of agriculture, leading to the rise of civilizations and heralding the Bronze Age. Societies during this period were generally smaller in scale, offering a greater opportunity for experimentation and facilitating the creation of new psycho-technologies.

The Axial Revolution: The Game Changer

The axial revolution was significant because it introduced new psycho-technologies, with alphabetic literacy being a key one. Originating in Canaan, it was rapidly adopted by the Hebrews, Phoenicians, and Greeks. This psycho-technology revolutionized literacy, making it more effective, easily learned, and powerful. It increased literacy rates, enhanced distributed cognition, and got internalized into our meta-cognition, producing second-order thought.

Coinage: The Abstract Symbolic Thought

The invention of coinage was another influential development during this period. Coins helped manage mobile armies and trained people in abstract symbolic thought and rigorous mathematical reasoning. This too was internalized into second-order thinking, leading people to become more aware of themselves, the meaning-making nature of their cognition, and its capacity for self-deception and self-transcendence.

The Mythological Framework Change

The Axial Revolution led to significant changes in the mythological framework, altering how people perceived themselves and their world. People became more aware of their responsibility for their life's violence, chaos, and suffering. They realized the transformative potential of their minds and hearts in alleviating suffering.

Continuous Cosmos vs. The Axial Age

Before the Axial Age, people lived in what Charles Taylor called a "Continuous Cosmos." In this cosmos, people experienced a deep connection between the natural, social, and divine world. The shift brought about by the Axial Age transformed this perspective. The world was now viewed as divided into an everyday world, marked by illusion and chaos, and a real world, characterized by a clear understanding of reality.

The Role of Wisdom and Self-Transformation

In the continuous cosmos, wisdom was power-oriented. With the Axial Age, the notion of wisdom changed. It no longer meant fitting into the world, but rather transforming and transcending oneself to alleviate suffering and reduce violence. This resulted in a fundamental change in self-perception, emphasizing self-transformation and growth.

The Great Dis-embedding and The Two Worlds

The Axial Revolution was characterized by the "Great Dis-embedding," a shift from the continuous cosmos to the understanding of two separate worlds - the everyday and the real world. The new mythological worldview saw wisdom as a means of self-transformation and self-transcendence, rather than conforming to the everyday world.

The Influences of Greece, Ancient Israel, and India

Greece and ancient Israel were the two major influences that helped shape our present-day perception of due to large message size and then replaced the Bronze Age continuous cosmos mythology with the Axial Age two-worlds mythology. The former view provided a sense of continuity between the natural world, the social world, and the divine world and interpreted time as cyclical. The latter, however, broke this continuous cosmos view and introduced a perception of two separate worlds: the everyday world and the real world.

In the everyday world, humans are generally considered to be untrained and constantly in a state of self-deception, illusion, violence, and chaos. This world represents how things appear when we're out of touch with reality, causing suffering and conflict.

Conversely, the real world represents a state of enlightened and wise perception. Here, we are in touch with reality, free from illusions and delusions, which leads to less suffering and violence. This is how things genuinely are and should be perceived when our minds are not distracted or deluded.

The Shift in Perception of Wisdom and Self

The axial revolution not only introduced a new worldview but also influenced the perception of wisdom and self. The continuous cosmos concept of wisdom was power-oriented, while in the two-worlds mythology, wisdom took on the role of facilitating self-transformation and transcendence from the everyday world to the real world. This change transformed the shamanic concept of soul flight into a symbolic journey from illusion to reality.

Similarly, our perception of the self underwent a profound change. In the Bronze Age continuous cosmos view, individuals were defined by how they fit into their surroundings. However, in the Axial Age, individuals began to define themselves based on their capacity for self-transformation and growth. Meaning no longer referred merely to connectedness but became a special kind of connection to the real world, as opposed to a detrimental bond to an illusory world.

The Great Disembedding

The axial revolution's new worldview is often referred to as "The Great Disembedding." This metaphor represents our altered relationship with the everyday world. While the continuous cosmos view found comfort in fitting in, the axial age gave rise to the notion of being strangers in the everyday world, with our true home being in the real world. This radical change signified a shift from trying to fit into the world to a drive for self-transformation and transcendence.

Although some interpreted the two-worlds mythology literally as two separate worlds, many saw it as a symbolic representation of the journey towards self-transformation. This reinterpretation of shamanic abilities and wisdom within a new mythological framework can be considered another instance of exaptation.

Focal Points of the Axial Revolution: Greece, Ancient Israel, and India

The axial revolution was a global phenomenon, with significant occurrences in many parts of the world. However, Greece and Ancient Israel stand out as key regions where the Axial Revolution occurred in a way that has deeply influenced our current perceptions of self and world. Similarly, India plays a vital role in this narrative as the source of the confluence between Buddhism and the Western world.

Conclusion

The Axial Revolution, marked by its profound cognitive and cultural transformations, plays a crucial role in shaping our contemporary understanding of self and world. It introduced a new worldview, influenced the perception of wisdom and self, and redefined the concept of meaning. Even as we move forward in time, the echoes of this revolution continue to shape our minds, our societies, and our narratives, underscoring its enduring influence.

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The Axial Revolution and the

Transformation of Psycho-Technologies

Understanding the Axial Revolution

The Axial Revolution, marked by the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, brought with it unique psycho-technologies, like literacy and coinage, that drastically altered human cognition. These psycho-technologies, once external tools, were internalized by cultures and perceived as innate components of the human mind. A profound example is the act of reading and writing, which has become second nature to literate individuals, making it hard to imagine a world without these abilities.

The Historical Origins of Our Thinking

Many cognitive abilities that we consider inherent are actually culturally internalized over time. Recognizing the historical origins of these psycho-technologies is crucial to understanding and addressing the ongoing meaning crisis – the struggle to find purpose and significance in life. Historically, mythologies played a key role in training these psycho-technologies, enabling self-transcendence, fostering wisdom, and enhancing meaning.

The Role of Science and Mythology

Science, with its grounding in empirical evidence, has led to a shift away from mythology and towards a continuous cosmos. This worldview emphasizes the continuity between humans and other creatures, eliminating radical distinctions between mind and body.

Despite this shift, the narrative structures of mythologies continue to shape our actions and perceptions. The challenge we face is reconciling our modern, scientifically informed worldview with the psycho-technologies birthed in an era dominated by mythologies.

The Ancient Israel's Contribution

In the quest to reconcile these diverging perspectives, a significant contribution came from Ancient Israel. A key psycho-technology developed here was the idea of time as a cosmic narrative. In stark contrast to cultures with cyclical time views, where life was a series of repeated events without purpose, the cosmic narrative presented time as an open future where human actions could influence outcomes. This framework of history offered an ongoing creation through which humans could participate in the shaping of the future.

The Understanding of God in Old Testament

The God of the Old Testament symbolized this open future. Unlike pre-axial gods associated with specific locations or functions, the God of the Old Testament transcended space and time. His identity was tied to the promise of a future that was open to change and progression.

The Influence of Kairos

The turning points in the cosmic narrative were known as Kairos, moments where circumstances were ripe for change. These moments were linked with a sense of deep knowing – not knowledge based on facts, but a participatory sense derived from

experiencing change and evolution. This participatory knowing resonates with the sense of being on course, evolving, and identifying with change.

Biblical Terms Recontextualized

Biblical language illustrates this participatory knowing. The verb 'know' is often used in the Bible to denote sexual intercourse, signifying the deeply participatory nature of knowledge. This knowledge was associated with faith, but not faith as belief without evidence, rather as a sense of being on the right course, of evolving and transforming. Conversely, the concept of sin was understood as missing the mark, straying off course due to self-deception.

In conclusion, the Axial Revolution brought about profound shifts in psycho-technologies, altering human cognition and the sense of self. It introduced the concept of an open future, where human actions could influence outcomes, and a participatory knowledge that emphasised empathy, resonance, and transformation. While reconciling these principles with our current scientific worldview presents challenges, understanding their origins and impact can help us navigate the modern meaning crisis.

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The Hebrew and Greek Origins of Self-Understanding and Meaning

Historical Transformation and the Role of God

Hebrew traditions interpret the journey from the perceived world to the real world as a historical narrative, leading to the Promised Land. Human beings' sins and decisions impact this journey, often leading it astray from its destined course. This calls for divine intervention to recalibrate the path, bringing humanity back on track.

The Function of a Prophet

In the Old Testament, a critical role is played by prophets. Contrary to popular belief, the function of a prophet isn't to predict future events but to awaken people to their current deviations from the right path. Their task is similar to a therapist's in identifying how individuals are going astray and how they can correct their course. Over time, the prophetic tradition began to emphasize the moral consequences of human decision-making.

Moral Responsibility and Justice

As moral responsibility was increasingly stressed, there was a concurrent shift towards justice, righteousness, and a return to the right path. The notion of progress, moral improvement, and flourishing became central. This deeply ingrained way of thinking resonates with our self-conception today: we view ourselves as beings on a journey, striving for betterment and progress.

The Kairos Concept in Christianity

Christianity, emerging from this context, localized the concept of Kairos, or the opportune moment, in a single individual. This significantly personalized the whole narrative, imbuing it with a new dimension of intimacy.

The Influence of Ancient Greece

Meanwhile, in ancient Greece, another transformation was taking place. The Greeks refined the technology of alphabetic literacy, adding vowels to the alphabet, which significantly improved information processing fluency. This seemingly minor enhancement dramatically increased people's confidence in the information they could process, therefore enhancing their grasp of reality.

Cognitive Fluency and Its Implications

The Greeks' addition of vowels to the alphabet and standardization of reading from left to right increased cognitive fluency. This increased ease of processing made the information feel more real and trustworthy. As cognitive fluency improved, so did people's confidence in the information processed, ultimately enhancing their understanding of reality.

The Birth of Rational Argumentation and Mathematics

The Greek city-states, especially Athens, were environments ripe for the emergence of democracy, leading to a focus on argumentation and debate. This further accelerated cognitive

evolution and the development of rational argumentation and mathematics. These advancements laid the foundation for a new way of thinking and comprehending the world.

The Influence of Pythagoras and Socrates

Two individuals epitomize the axial revolution in Greece: Pythagoras and Socrates. Pythagoras was known for his mathematical achievements, shamanic practices, and the profound idea that abstract patterns, realized through rational reflection, could lead to self-transcendence.

Socrates, through the Socratic Revolution, played a significant role in epitomizing the Greek axial revolution. He highlighted the role of reason, self-reflection, and self-transcendence, influencing the foundations of Western thought.

The Legacy of Ancient Thought

The insights from the Hebrew tradition and the Greek axial revolution significantly shaped our current understanding of self and meaning. However, while these ideas form the grammar of our cognition and our concept of progress, they do not fully align with our contemporary worldview. As we strive for progress and transcendence, we must continue to reinterpret and reimagine these ancient wisdoms in the context of our current experiences and understanding.