The Social Sources and Environmental Consequences of Axial Thinking: Mesopotamia, China, and Greece in Comparative Perspective

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THERE IS A CERTAIN course in human social evolution that started with the Palaeolithic emergence of our species 250,000 years ago and lasted until the rise of the first civilization centres. At first, small, egalitarian, bands of hunters and gatherers roving the planet lived in a cosmos made of conscious, dynamic entities, human and non-human alike, arranged in mythopoic forms. The Old Stone Age world-view, a mirror-image of the band's amorphous and flexible social structure, did not prevent ecological degradation, but it did provide adequate environmental information and normative solidarity, both necessary for the survival of the fragile band (1). As human communities became sedentary, so did their cosmic order. The amorphous cosmology lost its infinite flexibility and became confined as it took the certain, finite forms of human, animal, or mythical creatures, residing in the domestic, acculturated space of the sedentary tribe. In some places proto-elites managed to consolidate their selective powers and claimed special ties with the *numinous*, opening the road to the full development of the "theocentric" world-view (2). Theocentrism and cultural caging facilitated a world-view of upper and lower domains between gods and humans, as well as between "wilderness" and its inhabitants ("barbarians" and "wild lands" beyond the borders of civilization) on the one hand, and the domesticated and tamed space on the other; the Nature-Culture divide.

(1) Manussos MARANGUDAKIS, "Harmony and Tension in Early Human Ecology", *Human Ecology Review*, 11, (2) 2004, pp. 133-152.

(2) Michael MANN, *The Sources of Social Power*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 34-69).

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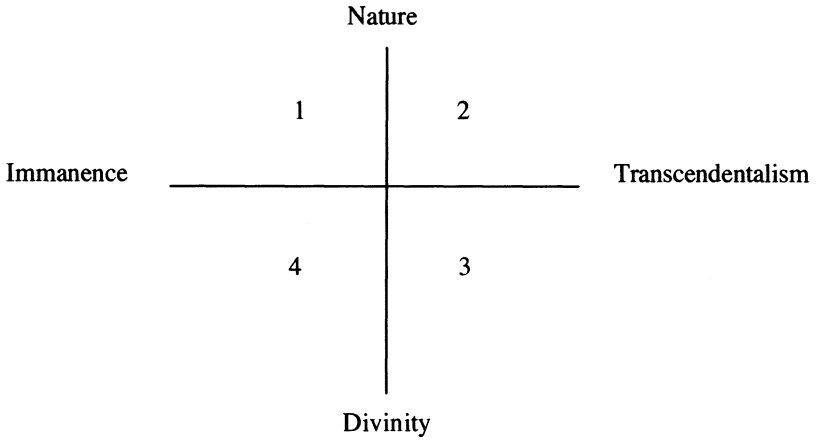
During the first millennium BC the ecumenical "evolution" of cosmic order broke down, as a few civilization centres experienced a cognitive revolution, the coming of the Axial Age (3). While some civilizations remained bound to immanent theocentrism (e.g., Mesopotamia), others developed transcendental cosmic images distinguishing between appearance and truth, as well as between brute force and high morality giving birth to axial thinking. Axial civilizations developed particular transcendental orientations. Some of them attributed the source of high morality to a supreme personal cognizant entity (e.g., Judaism, Zoroastrianism), some to a spiritual domain (Buddhism, Taoism, Zen philosophy), and others to moral orders (Confucianism), while the Greek city-states explored "rational naturalism", the proposition that morality is bound to a rational "Nature". The implications of these alternative cognitive developments were both immediate and long-term as they were crucial to promoting certain forms of political order and social action.

Positioning nature into a certain delineation of the world, some axial civilizations moved beyond the parochial neolithic "Nature/Culture" bipolarity, developed notions of transcendentalism, and set in motion a novel bipolarity: "Nature/Divinity". In contrast to the prior, the latter bipolarity encouraged major variations that we detect in various civilizations. As transcendentalism is simultaneously ontological, moral, and political, it questions and rearranges what the first bipolarity took for granted, that is, rules of personal contact, institutions and structures that guarantee social order.

In short, Axial Age thinking gave birth to two sets of cross-cutting bipolarities and thus of four possible combinations of the new cognitive categories (see Scheme 1). Each one of the four quadrants represents a possible world-view. Quadrant 1, "Immanent Nature", that material and sentient substance is the only cosmological truth; quadrant 2, "Transcendental Nature", that nature is permeated by some form of ordering agent (*logos*); quadrant 3, "Transcendental Divinity", that human behaviour is monitored and judged by a supreme moral agent and creator of the Cosmos; and quadrant 4, "Immanent Divinity", the pre-Axial belief in the fusion of supernatural, natural, and social domains in a hierarchical scheme of gods as immortal aids to the king,

(3) Samuel N. EISENSTADT, ed., *The Origins and Diversity of the Axial Age Civilizations* (New York, State University of New York Press, 1986); Robert BELLAH, "What is Axial About the Axial Age?" *Archives of European Sociology*, 46, 1 (2005), pp. 69-87. For a more recent review of the study of Axial civilizations see J. P. Arnason, S. N. Eisenstadt and B. Wittrock, ed., *Axial Civilizations and World History* (Brill Academic Publications, 2004).

SCHEME I
Emerging Bipolarities of Axial Age Thinking



rulers of cosmic order, but not the source of absolute moral principles or the gate-keeper of a blissful afterlife.

In the following pages we will examine some crucial social conditions that shaped the formation of particular Axial Age discourses focusing on China (Shang to Han dynasties), Archaic and Classical Greece, and our reference case, the civilizations of Mesopotamia, where no Axial breakthrough occurred. Which social conditions and factors affect the dominant intellectual orientation a civilization will "choose" in relation to the two axial bipolarities? Furthermore, did cosmic images have any noticeable effect on economic practices and the treatment of the environment? In other words, did Axial thinking make any difference in matters of economic appropriation and environmental management?

Mesopotamia — Content in Environmental Anxiety

The southern Mesopotamian region, where Sumerian civilization under the form of city-states developed, is characterised by environmental features that "caged" its horticulturalist inhabitants into immobile and permanent settlements, forcing them to develop, as early as the 4th millennium, social hierarchies and centrally controlled economic

structures and institutions (4). Thus, large scale irrigation, a centrally administered function, was practised from the very early period of the early 4th millennium and the major canals built in the region required about 5,000 man-hours of construction time. This complex pattern was fully exploited after about 3,500 BC with the emergence of large settlements which could provide the numbers of people and the social cohesion required for the construction and maintenance of complex and expensive irrigation systems.

Adams suggests that between about 3,900 and 3,400 BC half of the population in southern Mesopotamia was living in permanent settlements of about one thousand inhabitants or more, concentrated in areas of at least ten hectares, thus heralding the beginning of urbanization (5). In general, it has been recorded that the density of the Mesopotamian population by 3,500 BC was 10 persons per square kilometre, 20 by 3,200 BC, and 30 by 3,000 BC (6).

Agriculture originally resulted in the growth of several cities and numerous villages, altogether numbering one million inhabitants. This was combined with developments in technology, especially the production of copper tools. Yet, in ecological terms, cultivation of the Mesopotamian soil was a highly precarious enterprise. Due to local ecological conditions, fertile lands could easily become salinized or waterlogged. "The only way in which this process can be avoided is by very careful use of irrigation, not over-watering, and leaving the ground fallow for long periods" (7). Ecologically, Mesopotamia remained the most fragile of all the pristine civilizations' lands, a reason for the steady and long-term move of the centre of political gravity from the south to the north of the Mesopotamian valley.

City-states were developed out of the gradual "soaking" of society into hierarchical and spatially permanent arrangements. People fell into a permanent stratification scheme because they became territorially, economically and socially caged; moving away from the cage was a pre-

(4) The "environmental" and "social circumscription" theses were first suggested by Robert L. CARNEIRO *in* "A Theory of the Origin of the State', *Science*,169, 1970, pp. 733-738. Later on it was positively tested in a series of proto-state cases *in* J. GLEDHILL, B. BENDER, and M. T. LARSEN, ed., *State and Society; The Emergence and Development of Social Hierarchy and Political Centralization* (London, Routledge, 1988).

(5) John ADAMS, "The Institutional Theory of Trade and the Organisation of Intersocial Commerce in Ancient Athens", *in* M. DUNCAN and D. TANDY, ed., *From Political Economy to Anthropology*, (Montreal, Black Rose Books, 1994, pp. 80-105).

(6) Colin RENFREW, M. J. ROWLANDS and B. A. SEGRAVES, ed., *Theory and Explanation in Archaeology* (New York, Academy Press, 1982).

(7) Clive PONTING, *A Green History of the World* (London, Penguin Books, 1992, pp. 68-69).

carious endeavour (8). There was no compatible, fertile, land outside the socially stratified space. Migrating to the hinterland would mean a return to slash-and-burn horticulture, or a shift to pastoralism; a change of life-style and a possible reduction of the standard of living was not a popular solution. Hard labour and long-term investment would also have to be abandoned. Finally, leaving behind the social group with which people were by now identifying themselves, was not an attractive possibility.

Yet, centralized, state authority does not seem to have been particularly authoritarian. It seems that this first permanent political form of governing was a mixture of kingship, temple power, and the assembly of freemen (9). Households were augmented and stratified, self-contained landed organisations, either "private" or "public" (10). The private households formed around descent groups together with dependent non-kin. The public households formed around temples with their institutional structures. The temple households brought together cultic performance, social storage and economic co-ordination, and temple lands were a "community reserve" worked by community members. The ceremonial centre, the temple, and the priesthood came to play a central role in these fairly decentralised economic and political realms. The priests were central functionaries of social and economic administration redistributing wealth, as they were irrigation managers and diplomats. The fact that temples became the centres of production and redistribution cycles and that priests were cataloguing goods more than cosmogonies and epic stories, testifies to the social and in-worldly significance of the normative solidarity priests were exercising. Normative solidarity was expressed through a common Sumerian pantheon, cosmogony, and epic stories reflecting a very distinct idea of the cosmological position of humans in the world and their relation to the divine. But religion was exercising decentralised authority with each city-state worshipping its own resident deity as the *owner* of the city and protector of the city-dwellers. In cases where divine authority overlapped with territorial control (Adams suggests a radius of about seven to ten kilometres around the major cities) any authoritative influence of the priesthood was weak. Thus, during the 5^{th} and 4^{th} millennia Sumerian religion was significantly free of the influence of any particular elite (11).

(8) Michael MANN, *op. cit.*, pp. 73-86.

(9) Thorkild JACOBSEN, "Primitive Democracy in Ancient America" in W. MORAN, ed., *Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1970, pp. 157-173).

(10) Charles Keith MAISELS, *The Emergence of Civilization* (London, Routledge, 1990).

(11) Leick GWENDOLYN, *Mesopotamia: The*

At this period, and until the beginning of the third millennium, the major religious metaphor in the surviving texts could be understood as an *élan vital*. It centred on worship of powers in natural phenomena essential for economic survival, personified in the myths of the era as the dying god. Jacobsen suggests that there was a tendency to experience divinity, the numinous, as an *immanent* force, embedded in some specific feature, a revelation of indwelling spirit, as "power at the centre of something that caused it to be and thrive" (12). Essentially, to attribute command of a natural phenomenon to an intelligent, objectified spirit is a Neolithic attitude as it gives impetus to differentiation. Since many phenomena are practically irreducible to one principal cause, they should be triggered by equally as many indwelling spirits. Apparently, the Sumerians did develop such a pantheon, and were worshipping these divinities in common before settling in lower Mesopotamia around 5,000 BC (13). In addition, there was a myriad of lesser supernatural forces, not real gods but nameless demons, ghosts of the "netherworld" and spirits of illness. These were not worshipped but incantations and prayers were employed to keep them away or to ensure their presence according to their conduct. Their action could affect both humans and gods, but they were ruled by and received orders from a commanding god; for example, to pursue and hurt another god or human. This reveals a certain cosmic hierarchy, but one that was not originally rigid or fixed. There was a certain reciprocity between humans and gods based on two principles: transformation of substance and cosmic ordering.

Transformation of substance meant the ability of a Sumerian to incarnate a god or a goddess. Since the divine was immanent, bound up with a specific natural phenomenon, bringing the phenomenon into being meant bringing up its *élan vital*, its divinity. This was reinforced by the creation of the "outer form", the "external habitation" which invited the presence of the god or goddess. Thus, in the ritual of the "sacred marriage" taking place during the celebration of the New Year, the divine bridegroom, Dumuzi-Amaushumganna, was represented by the king Iddin-Dagan in a fashion implying identity of the two, while the high priestess played the role of the goddess.

As urbanisation developed, each city focused on one divine patron. They usually lived in the sky, but when rituals were performed in their temple they became immanent in cult images. For example Enlil became

Invention of the City (London, Penguin, 2002).

(12) Thorkild JACOBSEN, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven, Yale University, 1976).

(13) Mircea ELIADE, *The History of Religious Ideas* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982); JACOBSEN, *op. cit.* pp. 104-131.

the god of Nippur, Enki the god of Eridu, and Inanna the goddess of Ur. The city gods at this period represented the basic economic features of their region. For example, Eridu was a city located in the south marshes; its God Enki, is the *élan vital* of fresh water and marsh animal and plant life. In Uruk, a sheepherders' city, the chief deity is Dumuzi the shepherd, and his bride Inanna. Nippur, a city of farmers, worshiped Enlil, wind god, and god of the hoe, and his son Ninurta, god of the storms and the plough.

The gods do not act during this period; they do not order, or demand. They are personifications of the *élan vital*: wherever they go, their power (for good or for evil) is revealed. Thus, Dumuzi the god of fertility comes into being in the spring, and dies in the fall. Nidaba, the goddess of grain, is where and when the grain is, and she is not when it is absent.

This passivity reflects one, but not the only, prominent character of the Mesopotamian religion in the 4th millennium: the worship of forces *in* nature. Though a neolithic belief, we still identify an important novelty: the natural powers that were worshipped are those important for human survival, central to the early economies. Later on, during the Early Dynastic times, we discover a progressive humanisation of deities, a growing anthropomorphism both in form and style: gods become familial figures; they have an occupation, and individual life cycles. The pattern is what Jacobsen calls sociomorphic, reflecting both the social pattern of the period and the growing belief that humans and gods share some common ground. This was triggered by two tendencies: firstly, the growing centrality of the mysteries of life/death, cosmos/chaos, fertility/sterility, which apparently affect both gods and humans. Secondly, the growing control of natural resources and the immediate environment by the aid of accumulated experience and technological innovation. The human-led control of the environment was combined with the gradual (but not complete) "anthropo-morphisation" and thus "objectification", and spatial restriction of the forces that *give* life to nature.

The passive, economic existence of gods changed at the beginning of the 3rd millennium. This is a period of warfare between about twelve principal Sumerian cities for meadows and pastoral lands, probably triggered by the growing infertility of the land, population growth, and the intensification of production for prestige-exchange between the Mesopotamian kings and the periphery (14). Lagash and Umma fought a war for 150 years over a dispute about fields along their boundaries. In

(14) Christopher EDENS, "Dynamics of Trade in the Ancient Mesopotamian 'World System'", *American Anthropologist*, 94,1992, pp. 119-139.

any case it is certain that wars like this became endemic, considerably intensifying social stratification and strengthening the centralized functions of the state. Defence became critical and led (c. 2,700 BC) to the disappearance of the small, open village, the concentration of the population in the larger cities of the region, and the construction of massive city walls around them, like the ones at Uruk which were 6 meters thick and had a circumference of about 10 kilometres. The pattern of life changed. Famine was no longer the population's major fear since irrigation had reduced the risks of drought. Violent death became at least as feared as starvation. Leaders at this stage became warriors, glorious commanders of armies in battle, and consolidated their temporary authority into proper kingship. Alternatively, war leaders began to concentrate the power previously dispersed among elite groups (e.g., elders, councils, temples).

Gradually the king and the palace became prominent over the temple, and the institution of kingship itself was deified, believed to have been "lowered from the sky" together with its emblems, the throne, mace, and tiara Frankfort (15). The art changed, and ritual motifs were replaced by depictions of war and victory.

Kings became the central figure of society, its hope for survival and domination, and the concentration of power they achieved brought novel concepts into play, such as "ruler", "majesty" and "grandeur". These provided new cognitive grounds on which to speculate about and experience the divine: the mere feeling of their existence with the aid of these new metaphors turned to the "awe" and "energy" they started to radiate. The central metaphor that emerged out of this cognitive shift was "ruler". Kings ruled people, and they did so with the aid, and in the name of, their city-gods. Obviously, gods could not remain passive residents of their temples manifested through a natural feature or phenomenon. Nor could they remain administrators of dull, repetitive economic activities, guarantors of good harvests, or proper social contact. Gods changed roles, and new functions were added to the old ones: they became rulers too, active in both the economic and the political spheres; powerful allies of armies and cities, as well as owners of estates, productive activities, and natural phenomena.

The Mesopotamian gods became politically organised, and their assembly decided on matters of justice for both humans and gods. The object of punishment could be a king, a god, or a city. The law, understood as in a cosmic order framework, applied to "heaven and earth";

(15) Henry FRANKFORT, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1948).

everyone, and everything in existence was under the same law, connected by the same substance. Thus, when Ur was destroyed by barbarian mountaineers from the East, the texts described its fate as a god's decree carried out by Enlil's destructive forces.

Was this transformation of the gods politically manipulated by the elites? The relationship between political and religious elites did not follow a certain model. On some occasions at least, priests and kings clashed over the issue of authority. Whether it be a clash of elites competing for control of resources, or a growing need to integrate more complex polities, the balance of power between them shifted against the priesthood. In the 4th millennium long stretches of peace and managing functions of the temple guaranteed the primacy of the priesthood and political decentralisation. In the 3rd millennium, friction and warfare gave ideological primacy to the kingship and strengthened the state. Jacobsen insists that these changes do not hide a crude political legitimisation but constitute a sincere intellectual effort to understand the cosmos, and thus the position of the community and the individual in the world. We cannot entirely dismiss this thesis, since the kings did not have the tools to force their predominance — the conviction about the kings' special status was probably widely accepted. Furthermore, there is no evidence of kings actively and radically changing the Sumerian ideological landscape. None of them claimed divinity, or distinctive kin relations to past generations.

Yet, on the other hand, we cannot ignore the fact that the role of the warrior-king and the mediator-priest did merge when their roles were accommodated by the strengthening of the state; and that the power of the kings as individuals, and the aura of kingship as an institution were intensified. And though we cannot argue for a brutal manipulation of ideology, it did make a difference, both in the political and the cognitive realms as the king could now enforce his will on the people by claiming special communication with the gods. This power of manipulation was further utilised in the next period of the Mesopotamian civilization.

The rise of Sargon of Akkad (2,300 BC) represents the rise of the empires of domination. Aggressive expansionism and total war demanded total subjugation of the enemy, both at the physical as well as at the symbolic level. The former was accomplished with the relocation of the defeated peoples, and the latter with the subjugation of the defeated gods. Warfare "necessitated" the spatial confinement of gods as symbols of political supremacy. Numerous texts reporting Assyrian kings' deeds confirm the spatial restriction and material immanence of divinity in that later period. Gods are "captured", "carried off", and "invited" to

dwell in new places (Reign of Sargon II (16). The Babylonians (1,700 BC), the Kassites (1,525 BC), and later on a series of Assyrian empires repeat the story of ethnic gods subjugating the captured gods of neighbouring and enslaved people.

Religious texts developed a canonical form, and myths became pessimistic and individualistic as the "Story of Atrahasis", the "Epic of Gilgamesh", and the "Enuma elish", the three "existential" myths of the time indicate. Simultaneously, the gods became increasingly cultural. Inanna became the goddess of love affairs as well as of the storehouse; Utu was called the god of justice as well as of the daylight, and so on. Gods might still be city-protectors, but they also became upholders of righteous behaviour. Other, lesser gods became protectors of individuals, and receivers of fears and anxieties. The gods were to protect their faithful from harm, as if they were moral agents, yet they were precariously so, since there was no precise moral code to guarantee. As to the control of natural phenomena, they had become just one among their many features, and not a particularly prominent one. The paradox of Mesopotamian religions is that the more "immaterial" gods were becoming in form (increasingly disassociated from natural phenomena) the more "tangible" and compartmentalised they were becoming in social matters, and thus less able to unite people under one ideological project.

Let us closely examine the developments again: during the 4th millennium there was probably a small surplus production, low population density, a spontaneous division of labour, recognised family-property, and a fairly decentralised political system. In this social context, ideology, embedded in religious beliefs, was diffused throughout the realm, unifying people. As the stakes rose with surplus production, specialisation, and demographic growth, political decentralisation became unable to cope with a more aggressive "international" environment. Defence of the cities made warfare paramount and religion, corresponding to the new circumstances, became elitist, more immanent, closer to, and confined within the state. This occurred in two ways: first, the king-warriors became privileged vis-à-vis the gods as saviours of their cities; second, religion became more political than before, as gods personified the struggle of cities and people for power and survival.

While anthropomorphic gods moved closer to the palace, the role of the people in political matters became more passive. Order was not

(16) The three quoted terms are cited in Daniel LUCKENBILL, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* (New York, Greenwood Press Publishers, 1968, pp. 32, 214, 163).

derived from their actions, but from centralised political authority. True, the reflection of divine power in centralised authority made sense of the new economic, military, diplomatic, and political realities. But how were the ordinary people shaped cognitively by this new, politicised religion? Oppenheim argues that, since the beginning of extended warfare between the Mesopotamian cities, religion became particularistic and fragmented, so that no religion of that civilization as a whole existed. The mysteries of the high, official religion were performed away from public view, in the privacy of the temple or of the palace, satisfying the psychological urge of rulers and courts to make sense of their new responsibilities and might. On the other hand, there is evidence of another religion at the fringes of Mesopotamia, which ignored the cosmic order that the palaces and the temples were advocating. In this cosmic order we find non-anthropomorphic gods, magical practices, and fertility rituals of the Neolithic kind, and pre-deistic concepts of life in which luck, demons, and the dead rule. They resemble the same natural forces of inertia and stasis as those of Tiamat and Apsu that we encountered in the cosmogonic poem Enuma-Elish. In this cultural context nature remained alive in a primitive sense, since objects and subjects (i.e. a rock and its resident spirit) were indistinguishable (17).

To put the argument in a political context, the state did not make a comprehensive effort to bring its subjects into an ideological sphere of influence, and religion was not, at that point, a major source of the state's power over its subjects. Its primary role was to make the universe comprehensible to the rulers and to bind together the otherwise weakly linked ruling class. Communication difficulties, logistical obstacles, and indirect control of territories via loyal representatives made propaganda an ineffective tool for manipulation. Far more attractive, and effective, was the military route. A garrison stationed in towns helped the commander to collect taxes and keep order in the area — nothing more was needed.

Between the small rural communities of farmers and the elites lay the numerous city-dwellers. Inhabitants of Uruk, Babylon, Kish, Lagash, or Assur were in close proximity to the political praxis of kingdoms. Living in the cities, they were directly influenced by the primary tools of imperial propaganda, such as public religious celebrations (New Year's Festival), and after Ur III, depiction of kings on coins and epigraphs, and monumental houses of the gods (Ziggurats). There is some evidence that the city dwellers actively shared the elites' cultural identity. Some of

(17) Leo A. OPPENHEIM, *Ancient Mesopotamia-Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (London, University of Chicago Press, 1977).

them, depending on who the rulers were, enjoyed special benefits such as tax immunities and military relief, and could even successfully protest to the king about unjust behaviour toward them (18). A third route to sharing the elites' world-view was peculiar to a city-dweller's psychology. Living in an urban environment, surrounded by gardens and farmland, they could not feel any affinity to amorphic and pre-deistic supernatural forces of growth and decay. The cities were nurturing personal life and personal affairs and the city-dweller was asking for a personal relation to the gods in order to obtain guidance and aid that only specific and morphic gods could provide.

The spatial confinement of the high gods, deities of action, free-will, and history, was a process brought about mainly by political and military developments affecting the vast majority of the Sumerian, and later on, the whole of the Mesopotamian peoples. It certainly affected the perception of the natural environment, since it took some *élan vital* out of trees, rocks, and cereals, making them more passive than they had been at the beginning of the process. This was the unintended consequence of the attention people paid to military action and agents of political change. Yet, there was no definite movement toward either the development of high morality, or toward the emancipation of nature from supernatural agents. The reason for such a "failure" will become clearer as we move to the following cases.

China — Harmony through Warfare

The ecological cradle of the Chinese civilization was the Huanghe (Yellow) River. The river carries alluvial silt enriched with a second fertiliser, loess. It is rich in minerals and able to generate large cereal yields. Farmers started to cultivate the area in about 5,000 BC and by 2,500 BC they began to establish permanent, walled settlements. The major feature of social organisation was kinship ties and loyalty, and the extended family was the all-important political unit.

The Neolithic culture that was developed out of these settlements appears to have been an autonomous development. The social structure of the farming communities was egalitarian and their world-view was focused on reinforcing and controlling the social cohesion on which their survival depended. Thus, the religious beliefs of this period were

(18) OPPENHEIM, *op. cit.* pp. 102-103.

concerned with sacred space, fertility and death, and above all the worship of ancestors, a worldview similar to other Neolithic civilizations. As in Mesopotamia we find a myth of primordial chaos, Earth and Heaven being formed out of a dismembered anthropomorphic being (P'an-ku), and of paradise being lost when heaven separated from earth.

Two beliefs of this period played a particularly important role in shaping the Chinese cognitive universe. The first was that ancestors were a source of power in affecting and controlling natural elements and people. This cult was an outcome of the agricultural, immobile, but crucially decentralised social life, in conjunction with the patriarchal arrangements of family structure. The second was the "conjunction of contraries", connected to the mythology of the "cosmic cycle" (19). It is also found in other Neolithic cultures, but in the Chinese civilization the anthropomorphic depiction of male and female deities remained too abstract to "humanise" the universe. The cognitive categories were expressed as "elements" rather than persons, manifested in binary oppositions, such as bright-dark, male-female, and hot-cold. When they were organised and systematised in later times, they produced the ideal of the unity/totality of cosmic life.

During the beginning of the 4th millennium, these agricultural communities became interlinked with a wide network of trade over long distances, triggering developments in technology as well as more complex social structures. Trade was combined with warfare, and widespread violence became endemic to China for a protracted period of time. It is quite probable that the highly stratified society that emerged was a result of militarism, which precipitated the social inequalities of wealth caused by trade. Even more intriguing is the way the natural environment was used to legitimise sharp social stratification. New, powerful rituals emerged, the most important one being a cosmology based on animals and birds and the use of divination to communicate with ancestors. Divination became a crucial means of communication with ancestors, spirits, and gods, as well as consolidating the power of those who performed the ritual. As Fagan notes, "a skilful diviner could control the extent and the direction of the cracks. Thus, divination provided an authoritative leader with a useful and highly effective way of giving advice; a leader could regard disagreement as treason" (20).

By 2,500 BC social differentiation and stratification had turned the decentralised and diffused political network of villages into small rival political units, as warlords turned certain key villages into political and

(19) ELIADE, *op. cit.* pp. 4-7.

(20) Brian M. FAGAN, *People of the Earth* (New York, Harper Collins College Publishers, 1995, p. 434).

ceremonial provincial centres. By default, the same individuals became all-powerful ancestral spirits, creating a similar other-worldly hierarchy of spirits linking the living with the dead and the gods. All official divinations were addressed to the royal ancestors who acted as intermediaries between the community and the ultimate ancestor, the ruler of creation, Shang Di (literally, "above-dead-royal-ancestor"). In a nutshell, the cultural imperative was kinship ties in a cognitive framework of abstract opposites which guaranteed cosmic well-being. Such an infrastructure supported the pretensions of the king as the "father of all people". Since he was also the son of the supreme god Shang Di, the Chinese people turned into a single imagined family superior to others by the grace of their divine lineage.

The Shang kings of the first Chinese civilization were warlords who achieved prominence after generations of bitter struggle with their neighbours. The Shang dynasty dominated China from 1,766 to 1,027 BC. From the beginning it incorporated high degrees of inequality, as indicated by the presence of a military aristocracy, imperial central rule, royal tombs, large palaces and ceremonial centres. Administrative centres were fortified with massive walls, and warfare and ritualistic human sacrifice were intensified. As militarism became pronounced, the Shang dynasty forced the inhabitants of large areas to acknowledge its authority though politically they may have remained autonomous. Stratification and coercion developed quickly, and the monarchy soon felt confident enough to make divine claims.

In this early period Chinese civilization was expansive in a culturally homogenous rural space. It was the great openness of the terrain (not circumscribed as sharply as in Egypt or Mesopotamia), and the great similarity of the activities of the inhabitants that accommodated a dual religion, one for the agrarian masses, and one confined to the homogenous Chinese ruling-class. Thus, the Neolithic cosmic cycle remained alive and focused on the periodic renewal of time and spiritual regeneration, as in the Sumerian New Year rituals. The pre-deistic belief-system incorporated a supreme celestial god, Ti (Lord) or Shang Ti (The Lord of High). Ti commanded cosmic rhythms and natural phenomena (rain, wind, drought, etc.). He granted the king victory and insured the abundance of crops, but he also brought disasters, illness and death. This was a segmented, militaristic religion, still based on Neolithic beliefs. Ti was offered two kinds of sacrifices: those in the open and those in the ancestors' sanctuary. Interestingly enough, Ti was less active than the ancestors of the royal lineage, and was offered fewer sacrifices. Yet, he was the supreme Lord of the universe and the only

authority in matters of war and rain, the sovereign's two major preoccupations. The king himself held a special status among men toward the divine. He was the only one able to communicate with his ancestors while his ancestors were the only ones able to act as mediators with Ti. As Keightley remarks, the king strengthened his authority by means of the widely used ancestral cult. By identifying his own ancestors as being directly descended from Ti, he was granting himself absolute authority vis-à-vis other strong families and individuals (21).

When the Zhou, a western tribe, deposed the last Shang ruler and founded their own dynasty (c. 1027), their lord justified his action by arguing that he was ordered by Ti to put an end to a corrupt domination. This reveals the strength and the homogeneity, as well as the assimilation capacities, of Chinese culture. During the western Zhou dynasty (1,027-771 BC) Ti, or T'ien (Heaven), became clearly anthropomorphic and more of a personal god. He resided in the Great Bear, he observed everything, he was clairvoyant and omniscient, his decrees were infallible, and he was invoked in agreements and contracts. Most of all, he was the protector of the dynasty: The king was the "son of T'ien", and the "regent of Shang Ti". Due to his special relation with the divine, the king was exclusively responsible for cosmic order in the world. In case of disaster he subjected himself to expiatory rites, and during the essential moments of the agrarian cycle the king represented T'ien (22). T'ien was not the only god; there were many others, gods of the soil, organised around the political hierarchy of the time.

It is interesting to note that passive and abstract theocentrism and animism remained alive in China as long as the land itself remained unified and to a large extent pacified under the Zhou. They maintained a strong government and army, organized in a quasi-feudal system, by which a thousand local states paid fealty to the monarch as the Son of Heaven. Yet, the social setting started changing in the "Spring and Autumn" periods (770-476 BC) as the great Chinese nobles started an endless war against each other seeking to gain control over the monarchy. In the final warring period, that of "Contending (or Warring) States" (475-221 BC), the great fief holders who had taken over their smaller neighbours, fought among themselves in a series of unstable and shifting alliances, each hoping to himself become the Son of Heaven through the defeat of all his rivals.

(21) David KEIGHTLEY, "The Religious Commitment: Shang Theology and the Genesis of Chinese Political Culture", *History of Religions*, 17, 1978, pp. 211-224.

(22) ELIADE, *op. cit.* pp. 9-11.

The period of Contending States ended with the victory of the Qin between 256 and 221 BCE. Like the early Zhou, the Qin came from Shensi and they were thought of as semi-barbarians by other Chinese. They had become militarily and economically strong by abolishing the quasi-feudal system in their own domains, and mobilizing all sectors of the population directly under their rule. On setting up his new dynasty, Shi Huangdi (the first emperor), extended this principle to the whole of China. The old noble families were relocated to the emperor's court, and their private armies disbanded.

Philosophy first appeared in China during this period of radical transformation. Political disorder and intense warfare swept away chivalry ideals giving way to ruthlessness. Armies expanded from small, professional bodies of knights to massive peasant armies. Regional states levied masses of workers to state-sponsored public works such as the construction of defensive walls, roads, canals, and the clearing of swamps. The acephalous political system, similar to the one Medieval Latin Christendom experienced a thousand years later, facilitated trade, metal coinage, and a more rational, bureaucratic system of tax collection. Political-social organization intensified creating a new centralized structure superimposed upon, but not replacing, the earlier Neolithic societies of clans and chiefdoms.

War among the contending states was aimed at alliances that only skilled people specialized in letters and argumentation, that is "diplomats", could negotiate. They were obliged to travel around China engaged in a rather cosmopolitan diplomatic network to negotiate treaties, brake deals, drawing on arguments that were at once culturally comprehensive and polemically convincing. Court politics gave birth to an intellectual "space" where people of similar education, concerns, and aims were necessarily concentrated producing intellectual networks (23). The autonomy of these networks, as well as the autonomy of the arguments that these networks produced, which ultimately became Chinese philosophy, was achieved by the formation of a distinctive network structure: the intersection of intellectual/diplomatic factions at a few political centres ruled by warring kingdoms.

Confucius and his followers emerged from this maze as a distinct group around 500 BC criticising the dominant political and religious practices. They were scholars, educated men, specialists in compiling and interpreting documents which legitimated political authority. They sought to legitimize their employment and gain status among the courts by arguing for a doctrine of religious and ritualistic correctness that

(23) Randal COLLINS, *The Sociology of Philosophies* (Cambridge, Belknap Press, 1998).

could overcome strife and anomie. Confucius was critical of the excesses of the nobility as both politically arrogant and magically ineffective. They struggled to purify the old, and in the process they turned their argument into a sophisticated worldview. Confucius himself was religious after the manner of religious men of his age and land. In not appealing to rewards and punishments in the life to come, he was simply following the example of his Chinese predecessors, whose religious beliefs did not include this element of afterlife retribution. The Chinese classics that were ancient even in the time of Confucius have nothing to say about hell, but have much to say of the rewards and punishments meted out in the present life by the all-seeing heaven. Various texts, such as the "Shao-king" (Book of History) and the "She-king" (Book of Songs), show that he did not depart from the traditional belief in the supreme Heaven-god and subordinate spirits, in divine providence and retribution, and in the conscious existence of souls after death. These religious convictions on his part found expression in many recorded acts of piety and worship.

However, in Confucianism the anthropomorphic Lord on High became an impersonal Heaven, or Destiny. The latter, also interpreted as "Mandate of Heaven", became a principle of in-worldly retribution. If the Emperor neglected the correct sacrifices, he would lose the Mandate and rightly be replaced by a ritually correct dynasty. External correctness was supplemented with inner, spiritual, and moral correctness. Proper attitude and respect spread from rituals and magical performances to permeate all aspects of social contact and personal behaviour.

The Mohists emerged two generations later with doctrines that were polemic to Confucian ones. Ceremonies, rituals, and the like were condemned as unnecessary expenses. Instead of ethical obligations to kin and ruler, they spoke of a universal altruism. Instead of the impersonal Heaven, Mo Ti (the founder of the school) spoke of a personal god, Heaven, who rewards the righteous and punishes sinners.

Both moralistic schools were soon challenged by Yang Chu, with his anti-moralistic and anti-activist alternative of withdrawing from society into individual selfishness. Mencius in turn counter-attacked the Yang Chu movement with an explicit defence of the goodness of human society. Hsun Tzu counter-attacked in turn arguing against Mencius that human nature is evil and requires the imposition of social and ritual restraints. Intellectual oppositions refined these abstractions: idealism vs. naturalism, sophistry vs. transcendent standards, and the rectification of names vs. the anti-conceptual nameless of the Tao Te Ching.

The political unification of China into the Qin and Han dynasties at the end of the 3rd century BC into a highly centralized and bureaucratic imperial regime laid the ground for the cultural unification of the country with the subjugation of regional sub-cultures to the court-sponsored Confucianism. Cultural unification required the incorporation of the previously mentioned competing schools of thought prevalent during the era of Contending States. Out of this eventually emerged a complex theology-ideology which emphasized the constant interaction between humans and cosmic systems (Dong Zhongshu, mid-2nd century BC). It was an organic, multi-level system pronouncing a dynamic equilibrium between humans, nature, and heavenly forces. Any changes occurring in one level would bring changes to the rest of cosmos. It follows that cosmic order, or disorder was predictable as long as someone knew the cosmic principles, or laws, and that humans could affect it. The vision of the cosmos was strongly transcendental as it emphasized an awareness of the tension between the cosmic ideal of harmony and any given reality of the imperfectability of the mundane world (24). Yet, the fact that Confucian intellectuals enjoyed a strong and direct link with palatial authority, filling the bureaucratic ranks of the imperial state, meant that Confucianism remained pragmatic, in-worldly as far as the mode of resolving the tension is concerned, and "secular" in defining the tension between transcendental and immanent domains. As Eisenstadt notes, "[T]he political-cultural centre and sphere were seen in Confucian-legalist China as the major focus of the resolution of the tension between the transcendental and the mundane orders" (*ibid.* p. 296).

This vertical axis of tension was accompanied by the horizontal axis of boundaries between culture and wilderness exemplified both by the Long Wall, built during the reign of the first Chinese Emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi (221-206 BC), as well as the imperial ideology of China as the centre of the earth lying in the midst of barbarians and lesser peoples.

The Han synthesis absorbed pre-existing local beliefs and vernacular faiths and organized them into a comprehensive worldview led by the Yin-Yang dynamic equilibrium. A sage could predict the future and explain the past by deciphering the signs found in nature, and revealed by the heavens in oracular rituals. For several generations Confucian scholars interpreted the Mandate of Heaven through which Han emperors legitimized their rule. In all, the enduring "cosmic cycle" scheme did not break, but rather served as the foundation of further

(24) Samuel EISENSTADT "The Axial Age Breakthrough in China and India", *op. cit.*, pp. 291-305.

developments in Chinese philosophy. Indeed, political upheavals, such as peasant uprisings at the end of the Han dynasty, were organized around religious movements that were using anti-Confucian arguments; an embryonic Taoist church, the mystical naturalist school of later times, rose out of such political clashes, once again by freelancing intellectuals patronized by secessionist princes located in the Chinese periphery (e.g., the prince Liu An of Huainan, 2nd century BC). Yet, the stamina and stability of Chinese bureaucracy and central administration guaranteed the centripetal attraction of contesting ideologies toward the palatial centre to either become the official imperial ideology, or, as an alternative, its opposition. Notwithstanding the status that Chinese ideologies were enjoying, they did acknowledge pre-Axial practices. The latter remained active, not on the side-lines, but shaping the process of rationalization, and guaranteeing the uninterrupted yet evolving continuation of the primeval Chinese world-view to later times.

Greece — The Land of Multiple Realities

The Greek developments took place around the Aegean Sea, a geographical setting very different from those of Mesopotamia and China. It is an archipelago of small, arid islands in close proximity to one another. On the western shores lay mainland Greece proper — a land of mountains, narrow valleys, long gulfs, and a few rivers that turn to streams, or dry up altogether, in the summer. On the eastern side of the Aegean Sea lay the shores of Asia Minor, Ionia — marginally more fertile but still the same sort of terrain as the western coasts. Its significance owes less to its fertility and more to its *proximity* to the Asian centres of civilization. The relative infertility of the land was, and still is, accompanied by a predictable climatic variety. Hot and dry in the summer, mild and wet in the winter. Tree crops like olives and vines grow well, but grass is not abundant and hay is scarce. Mediterranean and sub-Alpine conditions exist in the close proximity of only a few miles. Fertile valleys inhabited by farmers are enclosed by mountains where shepherds dwelled. Since most of these small valleys are coastal, people such as fishermen and sailors, who could transcend local barriers, were, from the beginning, an integral part of the local Greek communities.

Under these land and sea conditions, the Greek economy was a mixture of horticulture, light agriculture, fishing, manufacturing, trading, and mining. The variety of geographies, climates, and economies made

local self-sufficiency possible, yet kept surplus production low. It was a flexible and frugal economy that allowed the growth of interlocking specialised activities but not the concentration of productive activities. Centralisation of social life in strictly hierarchical structures, as in Mesopotamia, or even China, was virtually impossible. Social stratification was fluid and multifaceted, and a given social group that held the high ground at a given time could be challenged by another in a matter of decades, rather than centuries. An organized priesthood could not be consolidated in a land that was not producing any significant surplus, people were neither environmentally circumscribed nor homogenised, and the economy did not invite authoritarian supervision. The short-lived Mycenaean kingdoms that tried to imitate their Near East counterparts collapsed soon after they copied the latter's centralized bureaucratic patterns. The social fluidity, the combination of Aegean shores and Alpine mountains, coupled with the rise of commoners and the military revolution of the 7th century BC, the *hoplite phalanx*, made up of free peasants armed with iron weapons, ensured that authoritarian power institutions — political, military, ideological, or economic — remained precarious, weak, and uncertain. Self-sufficiency and the plurality of power centres and power-networks took place in ecologically semi-circumscribed sites. Circumscription was strong enough to consolidate small residential communities to city-states, fundamental points of cultural and political identity, but soft enough to allow "exit" and communication among Greek as well as between Greek and alien localities.

The inability of any particular power network to impose its will and dominate the Aegean archipelago is reflected on the three alternative and co-existing cosmologies of the period, equally accessible, and meaningful to the Greeks: the *Olympian* pantheon, the *Dionysian-Orphic* cults, and the *rational-secular* inquiries. In Greece, the solitary paradox of cosmic order and otherness was three-faceted allowing the development of a complex kaleidoscope of world-views that resisted Chinese total cosmologies.

Let us examine them in term. The Olympian world-view, formulated mainly in the Mycenaean and Dark periods (13-7th centuries BC), perceived the world as being commanded by a wide kinship network of gods, goddesses, and other non-human beings that have a vested interest in humans. As was the case with the Sumerian pantheon, the Olympians gods were anthropomorphic and spatially confined, their existence intrinsically linked to the well-being of humans; it was a co-existence of give-and-take. They were not superior to humans in any intrinsic way

other than being immortal supermen and superwomen; they could be cheated, and beaten (with the aid of another divinity, or through trickery). If they were wiser, it was because they lived longer. Even with all these attributes, they were not supreme rulers: the fundamental force which commanded the universe was *Moira*, Fate, the sum of the rules that commanded the development of any beings, humans and gods alike.

Next to the Olympian pantheon stood the echoes of an unnamed, "naturalist" religion. Central to it was the fig-tree, the sacred tree of life, and the worshipping of figures related to this tree on the top of hills. Scattered evidence suggests that these figures represented the Mistress of the Beasts and a hermaphrodite being, probably Dionysus (25). The cult was connected to an older, animistic world-view which embraced both the large, almost mythical, natural elements, such as the heavens and the ocean, as well as smaller objects, such as islands, rivers, rocks, tress, etc. Animation did not necessarily mean being immortal, but it did signify personality, emotions, and volition. It was only potentially an orderly society, since strife and conflict among these animated objects, gods, and humans were the rule rather than the exception.

There is no certainty about the relationship between the Olympian and the animistic "religion" — whether they were complementary or competitive world-views. Yet, the *locus* of the Olympian and the animistic religions is suggestive of the social structures of the day. The cornerstone of the Olympian religion was the worship of ancestral, heroic figures, inside the palace walls. The worship of the Great Being, the Mistress of the Beasts, took place in open-air settings, in caves, traces of which are later to be found in Arcadia associated with the name Dionysus. Immediacy and spontaneity were the strength as well as the weakness of the cult. The female followers of Bacchus were "transformed"; respected matrons and maidens were turning into frenzied Maenads, running naked in pastoral lands, symbols of civilization's boundaries, eating the raw flesh of their victims (animal and human), to be transformed again into civilised matrons and maidens at the end of the ritual. The existence of a double understanding of the numinous, the Olympian and the Dionysian, one mainly aristocratic, the other without a certain gravitational force, almost silent, suggests both social and cognitive fluidity. The boundaries of these world-views overlapped, blurring the social sources of animism.

Then, during the 6th and 5th centuries, social, urban developments, such as the democratic revolutions, and the spread of alphabetic literacy, undermined the religious practices of the traditional political life, and

(25) Sotiris VALLAS, *Mino-Mycenaean Dionysus* (Athens, Livanis Press, 1993).

for a while pushed aside the essentially rural Dionysian orgiastic mysteries of life and death. The earliest philosophy was formed in this political and social upheaval out of a variety of political "wise men" and questioners of traditional religious beliefs. The initial arena was cosmology — the structure, and purpose of the cosmos, and the intelligent nature. In the past, anthropomorphic deities defined the categories of the natural world in mythopoic ways parallel but not similar to those in Mesopotamia (26). Yet, as the old socio-political structure was attacked by new social forces, so did the old religious cults, opening new cognitive venues. The first secular intellectuals stepped into this vacuum. Thales (585 BC), the first naturalist, spelled out the obvious fact: anthropomorphic gods stand for natural phenomena, and are ultimately constituents of nature. If so, then inquiry should focus on the source of truth, naked nature, rather than its superficial reflections — the gods.

Soon, others followed in his steps developing their own contemplative schemes, finding gaps in each other's reasoning, developing their own counter-arguments, attracting in the process eager audiences, students, and critics. Before long, the community of political commentators developed a critical mass that allowed the development of a cognitive space not only vis-à-vis the "traditionalists" but also inside the philosophical community itself, which developed its own contested topics and cognitive arenas of competing and increasingly sophisticated arguments. Focal to naturalist thinking was the search for the element(s) that constituted the building blocks of nature. Candidates for elements were: 1) various physical elements such as water, fire, or the primary *archy*; 2) the *apeiron*, the non-physical and unbounded element of Anaximander; 3) the numbers of the Pythagoreans first conceived as physical entities to turn into abstract elements in later generations.

It is important to note that the intellectual activity of both the rationalizers of the old gods, as well as of the new naturalists unfolded and developed in adjacent, newly founded city-states of Asia Minor (Miletus, Colophon, Clazomenae, Smyrna, Pergamum, Cyzicus) and its adjacent Aegean islands (Samos, Chios, Lesvos), as well as in Magna Graecia, the Greek colonies of Southern Italy and Sicily, such as Elea, Syracuse, Croton, and Acragas. The rival cosmologists knew about each other either through personal contact, or through students and pam-

(26) A major difference between Mesopotamian and Greek mythology was that while in the former humans are servants of gods, in the latter the relationship evolved to be more like big men and their free-willing followers; see Paul VEYNE, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?: An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination*, trans. by Paula Wissing (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1983).

phlets which freely travelled between cities of a homogenous cultural hinterland. No such developments ever occurred in mainland, "old" Greece. Most of the philosophers were natives of colonies, and were never fully accepted by the citizens of mainland Greek city-states apart from the upper classes.

Increased sophistication and elaboration of doctrines, due to competing intellectual networks, brought a two-pronged attack on the cosmic elements of the first generation of philosophers. First, Heraclitus rejected the concrete level arguing that cosmic essence is a process, the flux, as well as a regulating pattern, the logos. Second, Parmenides, with his logical-deductive monism argued that Being cannot change without nullifying itself — thus change is not possible. Indeed, we could consider these two attacks on the concrete as the point of full emancipation of philosophy from Olympian naturalism and the beginning of a fully distinctive philosophical cognitive space.

The increasingly tentative and dynamic politics of the city-states, the Greek-Persian wars, the Athenian supremacy and the polarization of the Greek world between Athens and Sparta became a breeding ground for ambassadors and a stream of refugees travelling around the Greek world. In this milieu appeared the Sophists, educated men seeking fortune and fame. They charged fees for educating the young political pretenders to take a stand and defend their position, any possible opposition, in the agora. Devoted liberals and libertarians, they stressed techniques of argumentation rather than moral principles, and formed their teaching around some constants, such as *nomos* (law, custom, traditions) vs. *physis* (nature, power instinct), the limits and source of morality, and the instrumentality of rationality.

At the end of the 5th century we find four clearly distinct philosophical schools. The first three derive from the original element seekers: 1) the atomists, the most materialist ones, who held the existence of hard elements moving in the cosmic void; 2) the Pythagoreans, who incorporated Parmenidian exchangeability, and moved to a conception of numbers as an abstraction of forms; 3) the "four elements of Empedocles", which in medicine became the "four humours"; and 4) the "lower sophists", relativists and paradoxists.

Yet, urbanization and the rise of democracy did not destroy the old, pre-Axial worldviews. On the contrary, during the period naturalist philosophy made its appearance (7th-5th centuries), and the Olympian religion and the Orphic-Zagrean cults also went through significant modifications. Olympian religion had started its life as the religion of aristocratic pride and valour. Yet, during the 8th century it was rationa-

lised by Hesiod, during the 6th century it was standardized by Pisistratus, the tyrant of Athens, and during the 5th century it was popularised by the Athenian democratic party to include not just the leading aristocratic families, but all Athenians, males and females. Thus, old aristocratic festivals that excluded Athenian commoners (e.g., *Voukelandria*) were scrapped, and new, all-Athenian ones were introduced (e.g., *Panathenea*). At the peak of democracy Athenian social life became full of agricultural and urban rites of passage, and festivals centred on Olympian gods and goddesses. In fact so many public holidays made their appearance after the radical democratic Klesthenian reforms, that the Old Oligarch, in *Constitution of Athens* (3.2), mischievously inquired how it was possible to conduct public business when there were so many interruptions! We may well answer that public business was contacted *due* of all the festivals he complains about. Democracy is, in principle, about people with different interests trying to reach consensus. Athenians could only sense the centrifugal forces at work, and apparently the introduction of new and Athenian-only festivals was a solution to avoiding the break-down of social cohesion. As far as the Athenians were concerned Olympianism was exclusive. Particular gods and goddesses could easily fit the demand for rites and festivals that highlighted the importance of being Athenian, Corinthian, or Theban. Athena, Zeus, Hera, Apollo, became the images of an exclusive and proud citizenry.

Even more radical was the transformation of Dionysian cults. The celebration of the irrational, the passionate and boundless drive to unite with the divine *outside* the *polis* limits, in darkness and frenzy, promised and provided people with excitement. Yet, in times demanding new forms of supra-tribal social cohesion, as well as articulated meaning to social action, Dionysian *orgia* were irrelevant to the demands of the *polis*. In this critical situation the autonomous class of sages, with social characteristics similar to natural philosophers (educated, travelled, wealthy) shaped the ideological profile of the cities providing urbanites with a world-view which could render new social phenomena meaningful, guaranteeing social cohesion and instructing social action. They did so by transforming mystical, cultic religions, into the more rational "religion of Orpheus" (27). Orphism was a direct descendant of the Bacchus cult, and its main features were known to the Greeks since Mycenaean times. Orphism was not a "new religion" as many scholars believe; it was the mystical Dionysus of the Dark Ages in a renewed form (28). In the

(27) G. S. KIRK and J. E. RAVEN, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (London, Cambridge University Press, 1957).

(28) VALLAS, *op. cit.* in fn. 25, p. 128.

8th and 7th centuries BC, sages, social commentators inspired by this Dark Age mysticism, shaped it in such ways as to respond to the *polis* demands: sober, creative, egalitarian, and salvationist.

Orphic "theology" was based on the life of Zagreus-Dionysus. He was the son of the deities Zeus and Persephone. Furious because Zeus wished to make his son ruler of the universe, the Titans, chthonic deities, dismembered and devoured the young god. Athena rescued his heart and brought it back to Zeus. The latter swallowed it and gave birth to a new Dionysus. Zeus then destroyed the Titans with fire and from their ashes created the human race. Thus humans have a dual nature. Their earthly body is the heritage of the earth-born Titans. Their soul is divine, derived from Dionysus. Accordingly, people should endeavour to rid themselves of the Titanic, or evil element in their nature and should seek to preserve the Dionysian and divine nature of their being through purification and asceticism. Through a long series of reincarnations, people would prepare for the afterlife. If they had lived in evil, they would be punished; but if they had lived in holiness, their souls would be liberated from the Titanic, earthly, elements after death and reunited with the divinity.

Thus, Orphism was based on the promise of the reunification of the soul with the eternal One, from which life started at the beginning of time when the Cosmic Egg split into two parts (29). Though it retained the feminine features of Bacchism (e.g., predominance of the moon over the sun, the fertility rights), Orphism appealed equally to men and women, precisely because it promised not just the immediate "sense" of the divine, but a comprehensive course of living, as well as eternal salvation from the misery of this life; a promise based on the original understanding of the soul as a small god, able to escape the torturous wheel of re-birth. The Orphic religion from the time of its introduction to the polis life (6th century BC) onwards became the primary means to transcend social life to a metaphysical bond of people united in the belief of purity of life as a step to eternal life. Rites of purification became extremely important in defining the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, as well as in allowing the community of initiates to define themselves as holy. Solon the sage, aside his mildly democratic reforms in Athens, introduced Orphism to the city making sure that the new Athenian "people" would be bound by laws, institutions, and rituals closely linked to the Orphic concepts of *myasma* (dirt) and *katharsis* (cleanness). Athens, as much as any other city-state, notwithstanding

(29) Panagiotis LEKATSAS, *Eros: Interpretation of a Form of the Pre-Historical, Orphic-Dionysian Religion* (Athens, Difros Press, 1978).

their welcoming of philosophers, sophists, and rhetoricians, was bound to remain loyal to the old religions (30).

Philosophy did continue its course, and naturalism survived in the writings of Democtitus to finally find a secure niche in Aristotelianism, while Pythagorianism was incorporated into Platonism. Yet, by the 4th century it had lost its political sharpness and status when lesser sophists turned naturalism into a matter of oratorical trickery and opportunistic argumentations.

Axial Thinking and Cosmic Orders

There is a strong tendency of stone-age beliefs to remain attractive and meaningful among iron-economy peasantry and urban dwellers long after their "economic base" has withdrawn to the borderlines of civilized life, where culture meets wilderness. Spirits, possessive daemons, incantations and charms, in spite of their urbane insignificance, still attracted city dwellers in the wish to escape the constraints, the caging effects, of civilized life. The same could be said about beliefs in some kind of after-life, some kind of reality beyond what ordinary senses could capture. Here, we should not cede to the temptation to call it "transcendentalism". Pre-Axial beliefs of an afterlife do not speak of bliss but of a residual, dark and miserable existence. Was it not Achilles who said to Ulysses that he prefered to be a slave on earth rather than the king of Hades? Pre-Axial Cosmic Order and morality was immanent and of common sense. Mesopotamians, first the Sumerians, then the Akkadians, the Babylonians, and the Assyrians as they made their entry into history, remained loyal to their city-dwelling gods. Despite being attributed with some traces of high morality, they remained by large mighty rulers of the earth. The same is true, to some extent, for China. Ancestral spirits were protecting and guiding antecessors, but they were not morally superior to the living.

Axial thinking and high morality re-defined and re-shaped the "upper" and "lower" cosmic coordinates between transcendental and immanent domains by escaping the metaphoric projection of their own political conditions, but not the culture-wilderness bipolarity, which, as far as social imagination is concerned, remained unchanged: wilderness,

(30) G. VLASTOS "Theology and Philosophy in Early Greek Thought", in FURLEY and ALLEN, ed., *Studies in Presocratic Philosophy*, 1 (London, Routledge and Kegan 1970, pp. 92-129).

dark, mysterious, anarchic, rapturous, vs. civilization, bright, rational, moral, and proper, remained virtually untouched.

Naturalism endeavored to collapse both horizontal and vertical divisions into one homogenous space: no gods, no spirits, only matter that, either in constant fluidity and transition, or "spirited" by a superior principle, *logos* or *archy*, was uniting cosmos and society under the same rubric. It was a radical, even unique, cognitive development of our history. The Chinese philosophical developments dealt with morality, as did Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. What made the difference in the Greek case?

Let us consider those civilization factors that could promote and support intellectual networks: *Urban life* and literacy gives birth to and nourishes standardized education as well as organized networks of literati and intellectuals. *Trade and coinage* are crucial not only for creating a sense of cosmopolitanism, and triggering comparison, self-doubt and reflection, but of destabilizing kinship and status arrangements. *Warfare* shakes social structures and institutions, and, crucially iron warfare, mobilizes a great number of men in novel social structures and may well destroy cognitive and ideological certainties; after all, Greek warfare *did* give rise to hoplite democracy. *Diplomacy* facilitates debate, cognitive fluidity, intellectual contact, and increases the status of diplomats-literati who may take the opportunity to criticize the status quo and open new intellectual and cognitive venues. *Alluvial agriculture*, a definite feature of all pristine civilizations, creates surplus production, and facilitates scribal specialization, and the spread of urban centers. *City-states* nourish urban sensitivities, diffuse power beyond a small elite of the populace, and invite demotic audiences to orators with an interesting message. *Heterogeneity of cultural space* encourages reflection, competition, and argumentation (see Table 1).

Yet, none of these features proved to be critical in the development either of axial thinking or of naturalism, as a branch of axial cognition. Mesopotamia matches either China and/or Greece to all of the above, yet no axial developments took place there. We need to proceed to the last three features, that of "*organized priesthood*", "*freelance intellectuals*", and "*democratic revolutions*" to find some suggestive causes for the emergence of axial thinking in general, and naturalism in particular. If the organized pre-Axial priesthood is strong, that is, it provides social services *and* is loyal to the aristocratic ruling elites, no intellectual space is available for original, domestic, cognitive developments triggered by freelance intellectuals with no particular vested interests with political authority. If, on the other hand, political upheavals remain a matter

TABLE 1.
Factors affecting the emergence of Axial thinking as presence (y), or absence (n)

	Mesopotamia	China	Greece
Complex Urban Life	y	y	y
Trade/Coinage	y	y	y
Literacy	y	y	y
Warfare	y	y	y
Diplomacy	y	y	y
Alluvial Agriculture	y	y	n
City-States	y	n	y
Heterogeneity of Cultural Space	y	y	y
Organized Priesthood	y	n	n
Freelance Intellectuals	n	y	y
Democratic Revolutions	n	n	y

of military and political elites, reflective, second-order intellectual networks will be concentrated in palatial centers and become attached to patrons with vested paternalistic interests (see Table 2 below) (31).

In China the priesthood was weak, since rituals were performed by the aristocracy as well as by commoners. The new moral order that arose in this organizational vacuum should not be a surprising development, yet its transcendental orientation was weak with Confucianism giving a rather secular answer to the moral issues of the day. Eventhough the High God constituted a Judge, he was not a personal God, but rather an aristocratic one, concerned primarily with his counterpart on Earth, the Emperor. This is enough to make Confucianism a religion only mildly oriented toward our Transcendental-Divine quadrant (compared to the extreme Judaic case) but still its explanatory value retains its significance: the intellectual space developed was palatial, and the novel breed

(31) We could speak of a variation in this pattern in India and Israel where, *ceteris paribus*, strong, autonomous intellectual communities operated in environments characterized by weak state power and fluctuating social structures (such as Buddhism in India during the Maurya Empire, and the Prophets in both pre-Monarchic and Monarchic Israel). For the Israeli case, see EISENSTADT, "The Axial Age Breakthrough in Ancient Israel", *op. cit.*, pp. 127-134, and for the Indian case R. COLLINS, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

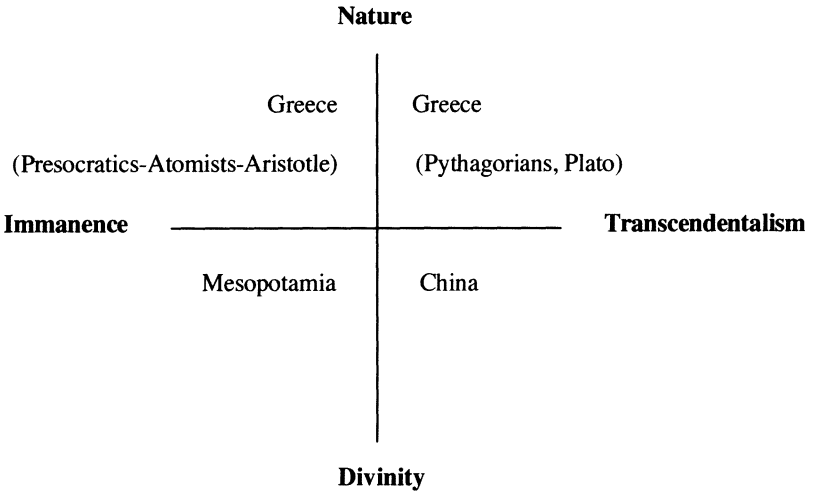
of intellectuals could only feel indebted for the prestige, protection, and status that were deriving from their aristocratic patrons (32). A personal God would be a threat to the privileges of the political elite and thus an unacceptable intellectual development. Rather than this, the dominant, that is Confucian-legal, axial thinking in China was channeled into moral and ethical arguments and propositions that incorporated the parochial pre-axial kingly cosmology into a strongly transcendental, anti-traditional, but with a strong in-worldly orientation, the condition of the Empire. Here, though, we detect a bifurcation with a definite axial tone: while the *numinous* remains remote from the common people, everyone under the Heavens is able to cultivate their social and moral conduct by education. Hereditary nobility was no longer a sufficient factor for a good society, as it remained in Mesopotamia.

In Greece, both the aristocracy and the priesthood were weak, while the populace was concentrated in urban centers in the midst of small, ecologically circumscribed valleys. Free peasants did have a political saying that turned aristocracies to tyrannies, and tyrannies to democracies. *Democratic revolutions* shook both tribal elites *and* Olympian cosmologies. It was only natural that original cognitive schemes would rethink the cosmos and its coordinates; thus the variation of Cosmic Orders, even within a certain civilization.

Still, naturalism did not replace the pre-philosophical worldviews of the Olympian pantheon and Orphism. For two reasons: the first was a problem internal to naturalist philosophy, that is, its inability to combine, and thus solve the paradox of the process of change *cum* immobility of eternal truth. In other words, the paradox of material change and moral solidness (thus the tendency of Platonism to drift towards Transcendental Divinity). Second, and more importantly, naturalism did not manage to become a gravitational force of social cohesion — rituals, identity, and culture were still defined inside pre-Axial, Dionysian-Orphic and Olympian frameworks. We should not thus conflate democratic regimes with any polemic affinity to rationalism. Natural philosophies found fertile ground in the city-state environment, but they did not become the identity of the *demos*. Indeed, they were utilized by political pretenders, fertilized aristocratic intellectual curiosity, and certainly promoted technological innovations, especially in civil and military engineering. Yet, the old cosmic coordinates proved resilient. The transformations of the Olympian and the Dionysian-

(32) For the conservative character of Confucian intellectuals under palatial control see C. Y. Hsu, "Emergence and Crystallization of the Confucian System" in Samuel N. Eisenstadt, ed., *The Origins and Diversity of the Axial Age Civilizations*, *op. cit.*, pp. 306-324.

TABLE 2.
Axial Orientations



Orphic religions into comprehensive belief-systems guaranteed their continuing significance for city-state life down to Hellenistic and Roman times, until they were both incorporated into the divine drama of Christianity.

Axial Thinking and Environmental Treatment

A final question: how did Axial perceptions of Cosmic Order transform the treatment of the environment and economic appropriation? It is reasonable to hypothesize that such a radical re-ordering of Cosmic Order would affect human-nature contact, that is, the economic appropriation of nature (33). Yet, existing evidence and literary sources suggest no significant changes in the mode of environmental contact of those ancient civilizations after Axial thinking took a hold in their high culture. Actually, both Axial (Greece and China), and non-Axial Mesopotamia retained their aggressive and exploitative stand toward their natural resources.

(33) For a comprehensive review of the relationship between Axial Age and ecology see *Daedalus* (Special Issue), *Religion and Ecology: Can the Climate Change?*, 130, 4, 2001; also *Confucianism and Ecology: The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Humans*, M. E. TUCKER and J. BERTHONG, ed. (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1998).

In Mesopotamia, agriculture was always a highly precarious enterprise. Ponting reasons:

> The extra water drains into the underlying water table and will, over differing lengths of time depending on local conditions, cause water levels to rise until the soil becomes waterlogged. The additional water also alters the mineral content of the soil: it increases the amount of salt, and may eventually, especially in hot areas with high evaporation rates, produce a thick layer of salt on the surface which makes agriculture impossible. The only way in which this process can be avoided is by very careful use of irrigation, not over-watering, and leaving the ground fallow for long periods. (Ponting, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-69)

This could not take place as demographic pressure demanded intensive production. Siltation and salinization were a constant hazard reducing the fertility of the land over long periods. Around the turn of the second millennium BC, during the Isin-Larsa era, protracted periods of famine took place. The downfall of agricultural production continued later on under the reign of Samsuiluna and his successors. Jacobsen (34) reasons that the cause of the ecological catastrophe was the "final salting up of the fields cultivated over millennia", a definitive process which "practically depopulated the South and changed it into wasteland and marshes" (35), a reason perhaps for the definite shifting of political developments to northern Mesopotamia and the rise of Babylon and Assyria. The Mesopotamians were relying on too narrow a range of foodstuffs and suffered the inevitable consequence of a diet relying heavily on cereals: deficiency diseases (36). In addition, urbanisation and permanent farming settlements led to an increased incidence of infectious disease such as measles and tuberculosis causing an astonishing 75% infant mortality rate (37).

Since the Mycenaean era the Greeks altered or damaged their natural environment in the process of constructing their artificial environment and extracting the agricultural products upon which their economy was dependant. If the scattered evidence bears any truth, then Greece experienced a first major environmental break-down during the 12th century BC, and a second, equally critical one during the 4th century BC. They both shaped Greek land into barren landscapes down to the present time (38). Pausanias mentions villagers being afraid to catch turtles that lived on a holy Arcadian mountain and no one could enter

(34) JACOBSEN, *op. cit.* in fn. 9 p. 156.

(35) Thorkild JACOBSEN, *op. cit.* pp. 156.

(36) T.MOLLESON, "The Eloquent Bones of Abu Hureya", in *Scientific American*, August 1994, pp. 60-66.

(37) J. GARATY and P. GREY, *The Columbia History of the World* (New York, Harper and Row, 1981, p. 51).

(38) Gordon EAST, *A Historical Geography of Europe* (London, Metheun and Co, 1966); Donald HUGHES, *An Environmental History of the World* (London, Routledge, 2001).

Lykeion, Zeus' grove in Attica, without dying in the next year (39). Yet, the economic praxis did not depend on turtles or game. It depended on the appropriation of fertile land and woodland, and most of it was Olympus-free. Among a myriad of technical accomplishments we only have to mention the Mycenaean isthmus and drainage system of Minyes swamps, the Corinthian conduit linking the Saronic with the Corinthian Gulfs, the Samian subterranean aqueduct (*Eupalineion Orygma*), and the drainage of Ptychoi lake in southern Euvoia, as evidence of the pragmatism of the Greeks. What became alarmingly significant in the classic period, during the Axial developments, was a globalisation of environmental degradation. This process incorporated economic and military reasoning. For example, the naval fleets of both Athenians and Spartans were built with timber extracted from local forests, and when that was depleted, imported from the Crimea and Macedon. As 1,000 sq. metres of high quality timber were needed on average for the construction of one trireme, the Greeks, in a hundred years, consumed 10,000,000-12,000,000 sq. metres of forest land just to wage war against each other. Indeed, Greeks attributed the Persian failure to capture Greece to the *hybris* of the Persian king, Xerxes, who dared to breach the isthmus of Athos (40). It is also true that the inhabitants of Cnidos were ordered by the Oracle of Delphi to stop digging their isthmus (41). Yet, cases like these are few and far between. Some of them could effortlessly be interpreted as mere propaganda, and in any case they become rarer after the 5th century. The rule was that humans could operate freely in nature as long as they did not disturb the sacred plots of land explicitly linked to a divine presence, his or her personal real estate.

Equally aggressive and disastrous was the economic appropriation of natural resources in China. Deforestation and removal of wildlife was wide as state policy commanded the expansion of agriculture and irrigation to achieve population growth, a way to increase the tax base of the imperial budget. Donald Hughes states:

> Some Qin policies continued, however, especially those dealing with agriculture, and the time to come would set an uneven but inexorable rise in population, a lamentable loss of forests, and continued danger from famine in spite of an expansion of agricultural land. The Yellow River Valley suffered severe deforestation and resultant erosion and flooding, a process that continued for centuries, spreading through hilly areas in the south with Han Chinese settlers affecting the Yangtze River Valley. China would become one of the most severely deforested centres of civilization. (Donald HUGHES, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-73.)

(39) PAUSANIAS, 8.54.5.
(40) HERODOTUS, *Histories*, VII, 141.
(41) PAUSANIAS, II. 1.5.

There is only one way to explain such a poor environmental record of all three civilizations, and, actually, of *all* civilizations: the State. Its functions and its logic applied structural pressure on economic appropriation that went beyond the needs, or the power of any individual economic producer, or single households. Pre-state societies, small bands of hunters and gatherers, or hoe-culturalists, had always put pressure on the environment but they were few in number, scratching the skin, but not bleeding the Earth (42). The State changed this relationship by developing an overseeing, managerial, and paternalistic view of the "people" and its agricultural needs (tackling the danger of famine, clearing land to absorb and encourage population growth, and founding new colonies), as well as by developing purely statist projects such as raising armies and fleets, waging wars of devastating ecological consequences, and absorbing peripheral societies and their material resources into its sphere or international politics and global economic exchanges.

Thus, in matters of philosophical ideas, and their significance in *directly* affecting environmental contact, we should be cautious. The analysis of pre-Axial and Axial worldviews suggests that concepts of Cosmic Order deal more with psychological-behavioural mechanisms (culture vis-à-vis wilderness), and moral guidance (transcendental vis-à-vis immanent domains); in other words with matters of institutional social cohesion and elite struggles, rather than with environmental contact. True, morality *does* involve treatment of nature, and in most cases preaches respect for non-human forms of life, such as Xenophon and Plato in Greece, and Mencius in China. Yet, these suggestions always remained on the side-lines of social-moral teaching, either as an extension of the human-to-human moral code, or as a rational way of treating natural resources without causing any *unnecessary* destruction or pain. Cosmic Orders were, as they still are, primarily about establishing long-term stable social relations, and not about nature. This was the reason for the failure of Greek rational naturalism to replace pre-Axial religions as they could not offer a transcendental and emotionally charged meaning of life. Only salvationist Orphism and traditional Olympianism could.

We had to wait for another millennium until Christianity itself, and for unintended reasons, brought naturalism to the fore once again (43). And this time naturalism was to become a permanent, though uneasy, force in social developments, up until today.

(42) MARANGUDAKIS, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

(43) Manussos MARANGUDAKIS, "The Medieval Roots of Our Ecological Crisis", *Environmental Ethics*, 23, 2 (2001, pp. 243-260).