

Concept of the “Axial Age” in Modern Philosophy in Russia

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Abstract—The article shows the principles of K. Jaspers's concept of “axial age” that were stressed and developed in modern philosophy in Russia. It analyzes ideas expressed from philosophers and historians including M.K. Mamardashvili (universalism of “axial age”), A.V. Semushkin (the ruin of myth and the birth of reflection), P.P. Gaidenko (break to the transcendent reality), A. Men' (Bible prophetism as an integral part of the “axial age”), P.K. Grechko (infinite communication). This piece of work opens a certain generality in positions of the mentioned thinkers, universalism of their thought and openness to other cultures, readiness for dialogue.

Keywords—“axial age”; prophetism, dialogue; universalism; transcendence; existential; philosophical belief; communication; spiritual revolution

I. INTRODUCTION

The “axial age” concept, coined by the great German philosopher Karl Jaspers in his 1948 “The Origin and Goal of History”, is in demand concerning contemporary Russian philosophy. Many Russian thinkers have addressed this concept, used it in their philosophical and historical-philosophical studies and constructions. Consciously or subconsciously, a modern individual guesses his ancestral homeland inside. To return to the once-discovered ideas and the restoration of their original depths and universal significance is the first step on the path to the spiritual unity of the mankind, without which it is impossible to solve the current global problems.

II. “AXIAL AGE” AS THE BREAK TO THE TRANSCENDENT DESTROYING THE MYTH AND OPENING UNIVERSALISM

According to Piama Pavlovna Gaidenko (b. 1934), Karl Jaspers sought “...to interpret the world-historical process from the standpoint of philosophical faith. Jaspers' philosophy of history grew out of his desire to find the historical origins of modernity, to relate the threads, torn by the cruel 20th century, connecting the contemporary mankind with more than two thousand years' worth of development, sort of to rebuild the time that is out of joint”. However,

Jaspers criticized the existing concepts of historical development: “...in his dispute with Spengler, Jaspers insists on the cohesion of the world's historical process, and in his dispute with Marxism – on its “spiritual component”. This is due to Jaspers' comprehension that “... a genuine connection among the peoples is a *spiritual* one, not *hereditary* or *natural*”. This cohesion, according to P. Gaidenko, the thinker sees in a “transcendent source” [1. P. 310-311, 314]. For Jaspers “Social conditions clarify the fact, but not give it the causal explanation. For a certain social state belongs to the aggregated spiritual phenomenon of the axial age” [2. P. 39]. P. Gaidenko comments on this: “Jaspers' axial age is a sacred era in world history. Sacred history is sacred because, although it is happening on the Earth, its roots are empyreal. On the contrary, for the believers the history is the ultimate interpretation of all that was, is and will be done on Earth” [1.P. 314-315].

Anatoly Vasilyevich Semushkin (1939-2013) paid particular attention to an important concept in the genesis of philosophy and spiritual culture as the “Axial Age”:

“In its key importance in the history of mankind, the Axial Age is comparable to the event of formation of man as a rational being: it relates to all the preceding history the same way as the origin of man relates to the entire preceding organic evolution. Historically, man seems to be born and live twice: the first time lasts from his origin to the Axial Age (traditional man), while the second time lasts from the Axial Age to the present (new man). The epicenter of the Axial Age is in the middle of the 1st millennium B.C. During this term (about 800-200 B.C.), ‘the sharpest turn in history took place’, which was a steep break in the chain of cultural and historical duration demarcating the entire cultural history into the two phases irreducible to each other: the pre-axial culture facing the past, and the past-axial culture open to the future” [3. P. 25].

It is paradoxical that philosophy synchronously emerges in the various regions of the world genetically independent from each other. In this regard, the concept of the “Axial Age” is introduced by Karl Jaspers, the prominent 20th-century German philosopher, in his work titled *The Origin and Goal of History* (1948). During the “Axial Age”, the cultural and world outlook space develops, linking East and West into a single “axis” of spiritual kinship. Philosophy and

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religion of this era demonstrate eagerness to communicate and join the dialog. When these teachings contact each other, it turns out that “each of them is about the same things”, and “humanity has a common origin and a common goal” [4. P. 31]. The memory of this creative era accompanies mankind throughout the entire subsequent history. Consciously or subconsciously, modern man guesses his spiritual ancestral homeland within it. Returning to it and restoring its primordial depth and universal significance is the first step on the way to spiritual unity of mankind essential to the solution of global problems of our epoch.

A.V. Semushkin emphasizes that, “The ‘Axial Age’ predetermines the fate of the myth. Since that moment, it seems to dissolve or, rather, lose its title function – it ceases being a means and an instrument of practical and spiritual consolidation of prehistoric society” [3. Pp. 29-30]. However, the collapse of the myth does not imply its disappearance. It is used in art and literature as a motive, a timeless plot, or a reason for inspiration. Simultaneously with the critical “dethronement” of mythology, speculative transformation of myths was taking place: mythological characters were dissolving within the element of thinking and gradually transforming into philosophical universal concepts. The living myth as a set of symbols, according to Mamardashvili, does not speak of existence yet constitutes it, “It transcendently constructs human existence; within the myth, human beings are born” [5. P. 30]. The meaning of the myth is not reflecting something, yet constituting human existence. Man is being created in the endless transcendentalism of the myth or symbols.

A new quality of consciousness, inconceivable in the pre-axial era, emerges – this is *reflection*, i.e. the ability of consciousness to get free from the traditional knowledge and beliefs and find a foothold in itself: “the thought acquires an unlimited number of degrees of freedom, and with them, endless possibilities for creative self-expression” while “self-consciousness unfetters the slumbering depths of the spirit”; “standing above the abyss, it asks radical questions, and demands liberation and salvation” [4. P. 33]

A.V. Semushkin remarks that the intellectual activity of selected spiritual persons transforms into a professional activity at this time: it is “in the blooming and dramatic times of the ‘axial’ break of history when philosophers emerged for the first time” [3. P. 31]. These are Greek philosophers, prophets of Israel, Indian rishis, and ancient Chinese sages – instead of getting mixed into a single faceless mass, they demonstrate something substantially common and related. All of them are concerned about the valuation of human existence by means of non-traditional spiritual values they discover, offering man a saving way out of the fatal unpredictability of the historical process. This is the code of universal thought, faith, and morality.

The “Axial Age” is the beginning of the conscious history of humanity.

“...it happens when the Western and the Eastern man become simultaneously aware of the mysteriousness and the secrecy of their existence and awaken to search for the worldview truth of their existence and their destination. This

is the awakening Jaspers refers to as ‘spiritualization’ [2. P. 21] ... The spiritual life and activities of the first philosophers and prophets (as recorded in ancient manuscripts) is the ‘holy scripture’ of philosophical faith, or its ‘gospel’. The subsequent civilization betrayed the covenants of the first teachers of mankind; it effaced the profoundness of the world outlook fear and concern from man and transformed him into a careless consumer and a progressing conqueror of nature. Now, an existential challenge is restoring the lost faith of the fathers of the universal ‘philosophic church’, and returning to man’s original concern about his own self which is related to the meaning of life” [6. Pp. 300-301].

III. “AXIAL AGE” AS THE TIME OF BUILDING HUMAN BEING AND FUTURE CIVILIZATION

The “Axial Age” takes place practically at the same time in ancient China, India, and Greece, though independently. Man discovers the horror of the world and his own helplessness; existence awakens, and transcendence is comprehended. Merab Konstantinovich Mamardashvili (1930-1990), following Jaspers, highlights universalism as a characteristic feature of the “Axial Age”, which reveals itself in emerging world religions and science in addition to philosophy.

“This is the time when what can be called a universal concept of culture emerges. Prior to this milestone, we have to deal with local cultures, cultural regions, and local or ethnic religions. After the emergence of philosophy, we can speak of world religions, some new, special universal dimension of culture, which is constructed as the human one, above and apart from local cultural differences...

The same statement refers to science. After all, science is primarily a form of knowledge and activity, which, due to its mere definition, is outside culture or above culture, or universally cultural. It is mental crystallizations, mental formations, or systems of concepts and ideas which have value apart from and outside of the culture they are empirically shaped in. In this sense, Greek science is something independent from Greek culture. It seems that a certain type of consciousness, a type of thinking, and a type of work were supposed to emerge for producing concepts which had no local cultural value yet were common to the human mind – apart from and above cultural differences. In other words, science emerges as the universal dimension of humanity. Therefore, there is some point in using such term as ‘human mind’ as something that is common to everyone, which somehow unites everyone or makes everyone similar” [5. P. 72].

The entire philosophical activity of Merab Mamardashvili may actually be construed as clarifying what philosophizing is. He treats the latter as the awakening to the responsibility, primarily the moral one, and, as a consequence, the political one. It was of particular importance in the Soviet era, when philosophy actually died turning into a servant of ideology. Mamardashvili was one of the few who dared to recall what true philosophy was all about: he tried to give it back to man. It turns out, however, that his “thinking out loud” is extremely relevant today,

when every possible kind of “positivism” and “postmodernism” destroys the specificity of philosophical cognition.

According to him, “nature does not produce people”; they are artificial creatures. Therefore, to create man as a spiritual being, a certain crucible (constituting device) is necessary for him to “smelt” in. In this context, man is an “artificial creature that gives birth to its own self through the process named history and culture”. In a concentrated way, it is implemented and conceptualized by metaphysics, be it religious or philosophical, which applies certain symbols and concepts of some “higher objects” [7. P. 16-17] and “other worlds”. Mamardashvili explains it as follows.

Essentially, the spiritual revolution of the “Axial Age” marks man’s breakthrough towards the transcendent, eternity, awareness of the truth and its universal comprehension, which expresses itself in the emergence of both philosophy and world religions. Hence, philosophy is universal, “...there is (not ‘there exists’, but ‘there is’!) a single philosophy differently formulated in the texts from different countries, cultures, and personalities. In fact, the same power acting through it has been flashing all over the world under different names” [8. P. 19]. On the other hand, we can see the emergence of a “special kind of metaphysical religions” Mamardashvili refers to as the “religions of personal salvation”, the world religions, distinguishing them from the mass archaic, collectivist, and local ones. Analyzing the “Axial Age” in different regions, he speaks of a “unified style” which connects Buddha, Lao-Tze, and Parmenides. If we approach these seemingly disparate phenomena ‘phenomenologically’, ‘symbolic’ correlations become obvious [9. P. 14-15].

Peter Kondratievich Grechko (1947-2016) had his own look at the achievements and shortcomings of axial age, noting, following Jaspers, “the formation of an individual in his spiritual and communicative openness to the world” [10. P. 228]. He also granted the era the quality of “the spiritual gold standard in relation to the subsequent development ...”, stressed the spiritual openness as the main feature of axial age, described by “universality, transforming into transcendence”, which was interpreted by him as theoretical and practical “expansion of the boundaries of human existence”, that arose from the human need “to have in their life something bigger and more perfect” [11. P. 221, 219]. Yet, he had the greatest interest in such a characteristic of K. Jaspers’ axial time as an appeal for “unlimited communication” [4. P. 49], for the period “determined the nature and possibility of the subsequent communication among people”. Moreover, Peter Kondratievich, unlike, e.g., P. Gaidenko, doesn’t focus on the breakthrough in the transcendental sphere, but namely on communication as the most important testament to axial age: “There is no sole possessor of the ultimate truth, as the possessor is, in fact, the human communication... There is no other, more perfect and adequate authority in the world”; “involvement in communication makes people equal in the face of the endless search for the truth” [11. P. 228, 222-223]. It is the pursuit of truth that begets axial age and the unlimited communication among people as equal and free individuals.

However, the axial age for P.K. Grechko is decisional, moreover, the foundations of the spiritual nature of people, laid by the first “axial age”, are “worn out”, therefore he hopes for a “new axial age”, which was just brushed over by Jaspers. It should resolve highly complex and pertinent issues of the modern globalizing world, “induce a boundless, universal communication among people”, when it fully reveals its limitless historical potential [11. P. 224-227].

IV. CONCLUSION

To summarize, we have to mention that, during the “Axial Age”, a “spiritual revolution” starts, when individual types of creative work, developed forms of religion, philosophy, and independent art and science come to life. It is during the “Axial Age” that a “breakthrough to the transcendent” takes place, and an idea of Eternity and immortality of the soul emerges. The contact with Eternity gives birth to an indestructible sense of both history and man’s existence as a personality [12]. The “second birth” of man and mankind has taken place. Personality and morality, historical progress and civilization have appeared. Mankind still lives in the ideas born in that distant time. In that epoch, the wheel of history shifts, and humanity starts its conscious historic existence. Although the ideas that shaped the foundation of various world religions and philosophies were born at that time, their essence is based on that single transcendent breakthrough which generated the concept of the absolute good “independent from any specific religious content”. Due to it, the “common framework of understanding” was found on the basis of the universality of moral principles, hence the possibility of “unlimited communication” [4. Pp. 32, 49].

The “Axial Age” does not refer to the past. Its revelations shaped as philosophy and ideas serving as a basis for world religions create the horizon, the ideal of spiritual, personal, and historical development. Humanity makes its progress only to the extent to which the connection with the eternal values is preserved [13]. Disruption from them implies degradation and self-destruction. We, the heirs of this “universal gospel”, do not find ourselves at the height of the revelations it contains. Therefore, the “task of the modern and the future culture consists in ‘recalling’ it and restoring it in all its timeless truth and world significance” [4. P. 32].

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