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## Ethical Growth in History: Good News and Bad

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One of the things Rosen's very interesting and wide-ranging book shows is why history and the goal of moral advance in history have become so important. We want to believe in moral advance (I am shunning the word "progress" with its resonance of steady uninterrupted forward movement), but we feel incapable of affirming this. What the Lisbon earthquake did to the eighteenth-century versions of Providence, Auschwitz has done for us. Rosen cites Adorno to good effect.

There has been what I call ethical growth in history, but this is a complex story, and almost inevitably accompanied by forms of regression, and of the most horrifying type (Stalin, Hitler, Pol Pot, etc.). This ethical growth has been related to religion, but not to any single faith alone, and it is also the doing of people who confess no faith. From its beginning it was in this sense ecumenical. We could take as its starting point what Karl Jaspers called the Axial period.

Jaspers noted that around the middle of the last millennium BCE, important changes occurred in four cultural zones which were as yet not really in contact: ancient Greek philosophy; the prophets of Israel; the rise of Upanishadic and Buddhist religion in India; and the thought of Confucius and Mencius in China.<sup>1</sup> Taking the innovations of the Axial period as an important step in mankind's ethical growth, we should note the feature that struck Jaspers: for all their differences, there is a strong analogy between the new doctrines which arose at close to the same time in very different civilizations, between which there was little or no contact. We can see here the germ of what we now recognize as the ecumenical sources of ethical growth: this is not sustained and furthered by any one spiritual source alone.

The common feature of these new doctrines was that the good they were trying to define was seen as universal, offering a standpoint outside the existing society from which that society could be criticized, even condemned as inadequate or defective. So Plato severely condemned the existing *poleis*, the Hebrew prophets denounced the actual practices of the people and

<sup>1</sup>Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953). See the important discussion of the Axial period in Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

kingdom of Israel, Confucius set a standard which contemporary Chinese society fell short of, and Buddhism, for instance, at least implicitly, showed up contemporary powers as in various ways deviant. The force of the Buddhist critique shows up clearly a couple of centuries later in the attempts at reform of the ruler of the Mauryan empire, Asoka, and finds expression in his famous "Rock Edicts."<sup>2</sup>

This eruption of radical criticism into human history has been noted by a number of thinkers in recent decades. Robert Bellah enumerates several formulations of this: Arnaldo Momigliano's "criticism," Yehuda Elkana's "second order thinking," Merlin Donald's "theoretic culture" and "metacognitive oversight." Each of these notes the identification in the Axial Age of conceptions of truth against which the invalidity of contemporary norms could be shown up, conceptions which claimed to be universal, not simply local.<sup>3</sup>

This calling-to-account opened the possibility that the standard of criticism might evolve: markers are laid down which will serve later to criticize and alter the standards we now accept. So the prophets can question what previously was accepted as good practice: in Israel, ritual correctness is no longer enough—one must also deal justly with one's fellows; in Greece, Plato and Aristotle will question ongoing practice in the polis; Buddhist doctrine was, at least implicitly, critical of caste discrimination in Indian society; and a Buddhist king, Asoka, will call on his subjects to refrain from the rivalrous mutual denigration practiced by many sects.<sup>4</sup> This process of critique is, moreover, potentially open-ended. The crucial standards—Plato's justice, the prophets' justice and compassion, Buddhist-Upanishadic *moksha*, Confucius's *ren*—all are potentially open to new definitions. A new philosophical insight; a deeper judgment of a prophet; a more rigorous definition of what Buddhism or Confucianism requires; these will move critique forward and raise more stringent standards.

Of course, these sources of critique were often—even usually—at odds with power: Asoka was an exceptional case. Effective power resisted. And the result was that the carriers of critique were often in a sense marginal figures; sometimes rejected, even persecuted; but even when they did not suffer at the hands of rulers, they could be outsiders, what Louis Dumont called *individus hors du monde*;<sup>5</sup> figures whose role and importance (as we now understand it) went unrecognized by society as a whole. We need only think of what the average *bien-pensant* Athenian thought of Socrates,

<sup>2</sup>See the very interesting account of Asokan reforms in Rajeev Bhargava, "The Roots of Indian Pluralism: A Reading of Asokan Edicts," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 41, no. 4–5 (2015): 367–81.

<sup>3</sup>Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 268–82.

<sup>4</sup>See Bhargava, "Roots of Indian Pluralism."

<sup>5</sup>Louis Dumont, *Essais sur l'Individualisme* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983).

even before his condemnation; or what King Ahab and his entourage thought of Elijah and the prophets that criticized him and his wife.<sup>6</sup>

But if rulers, and even society as a whole, often looked askance at, and mistrusted and marginalized, these “extra-worldly” individuals, they had their own reasons to live on the margins; they often felt that they had to drop out of normal social life to fulfill their vocation: Indian “renouncers,” Jewish prophets, Hellenist “cynics.”

Jaspers found this convergence-in-difference between the four civilizations remarkable, and others have been similarly impressed (including the thinkers quoted above). Apart from the important step outside the ethos of established societies or civilizations, which allowed for their critical stance, these Axial moves had much in common. They called for an indiscriminating benevolence towards human beings—even, in some cases, living beings as such—regardless of rank or status. This would be the basis later on for more radical, egalitarian notions of justice.

For the majorities in these civilizations, these high demands were seen as binding on the marginal-critical individuals, but impractical for whole societies. Such institutions and practices as slavery, social hierarchy, law enforcement through violence, and war were understood as regrettable necessities. They perhaps should not exist in an ideal world, but in the really existent one, they are unavoidable; we cannot do without them. This gap between individual ethos and the “normal” way societies function is what Dumont was getting at when he described the faithful followers of these exceptional visionaries as individuals “*hors du monde*.”

In the post-Axial period, and particularly in recent centuries, some of these restrictions have been lifted, the justification of certain supposedly “necessary” institutions have been challenged, and the standards demanded become more challenging. The eighteenth century saw a powerful movement arise for the abolition of slavery, as well as movements of legal reform to abolish what US law calls “cruel and unusual” punishments. What has been called a “sacralization” of the human person is set in motion which culminates in the 1948 Universal declaration, and which generates such legal conceptions as the “untouchability” (*Unantastbarkeit*) of the human person which figures in the constitution of the Bundesrepublik.<sup>7</sup>

This is (one part of) the good news. But one part of the bad news is that these challenges provoke very powerful and often violent reactions from those who are deeply entrenched in the status quo, both in their privileges and their identity. As the situation in the United States today shows, you cannot just get rid of slavery by an Emancipation Proclamation; you can end one legal form of unequal dominance, but the dominance can survive and haunt the society. The second part of the bad news is that human beings can get a high from

<sup>6</sup>1 Kings 17ff.

<sup>7</sup>Hans Joas, *The Sacredness of the Human Person: A New Genealogy of Human Rights* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013).

violating taboos, and the more sacred the rule, the greater the high.<sup>8</sup> To choose examples at a safe remove in history, think of the orgies of killing and rape that accompanied the “sack” of a conquered city. But such excesses still happen today.

There is one other piece of good news: humans are capable of what I call ethical-political innovation, which can effectively reduce or obviate the sources of violent conflict. The outstanding example is Gandhi and nonviolent resistance to unjust domination, which has been taken up by Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement, and then in a host of revolts overturning tyrannical regimes, like that of Marcos senior in Manila, and most of the revolts against communist regimes at the end of the twentieth century.

But here is the problem: there is good and bad news, encouraging and disheartening considerations, but nothing whatever guarantees that, out of the gangle of interconnected struggles ongoing in any given period, the forces of light will emerge with an irrevocable victory. (This is what the victorious Allies thought they had achieved in 1945.) Just when you think you are on a roll towards universal peace, along comes a Putin. The conditions of a definitive victory for either good or evil seem difficult even to imagine.

<sup>8</sup>Dostoevsky understood this: cf. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*, trans. Robert A. Maguire (London: Penguin Books, 2008).