We are indeed approaching a culmination of sorts; our species seems to face a kind of test toward which basic forces of history have been moving us for millennia. It is a test of political imagination – of our ability to accept basic, necessary changes in the structures of governance – but also a test of moral imagination.1

— Robert Wright, Nonzero

As we write these words in 2014, political and financial leaders across the globe seem to have lost control of the societies they govern. In America, the most powerful and wealthiest nation on the planet has only recently discovered that it can pass a budget without a fiscal knife to its neck; its “top secrets” are openly discussed in the international press. China’s growing wealth comes hand in hand with an epidemic of corruption, frequent riots, increasingly dangerous levels of pollution, and widespread anger among its minorities. An uneasy calm in European markets belies profound differences in culture and economic policy across the European Union. Riots in Ukraine drove its president from office, in spite, or perhaps because of Russian support, and have now brought the country to the brink of civil war. In Syria, another civil war continues to tear that country apart. The Egyptian military convicted three Al-Jazeera journalists with no real evidence and appears to have betrayed the nation’s Arab Spring hopes for democracy, electing General El-Sisi its President. And a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian standoff seems increasingly unlikely, as Israel and Hamas in Gaza seem on the brink of war.

Even more upsetting, these same leaders face a series of challenges in coming years that none is prepared to address. Climate change and ecological spoliation, competition for limited food, water, and energy resources, nuclear proliferation, and terrorism – all these and many other looming issues demand more international coordination than the governments of the world can currently exercise2. The inability to address any of this sampling of the world’s challenges suggests that what we are experiencing is more than a random series of shocks. Something very basic in our governing institutions seems broken, and no one knows how to fix it. The only thing that is clear is the need to change the way nations cooperate, while how to do it effectively remains a mystery.

However, this is not the first such period in human history. Between 1000 and 800 BCE, several advanced societies across Eurasia – from Greece to India and China – found themselves unable to respond to the challenges of advancing technology, increasing wealth, and intensified warfare. The result was the period Karl Jaspers called the Axial Age (c. 800-200 BCE)3. In this book, we want to examine Modernity (c. 1500 CE-the present) as a second axial age. The similarities are striking: Just as advancing literacy transformed the axial world, the printing press transformed the modern world; as iron reinvented axial manufacture and warfare, the machine did the same for moderns; and the modern experiments in democracy and totalitarianism, capitalism and nationalism served the same purpose as the social experiments in democracy and advanced bureaucratic government, socio-economic systems and identity building of the Axial Age societies. All those experiments would unfold in both periods, as people relearned how to govern themselves in an increasingly complex social
world that demanded they develop a different set of rules.

Our purpose in this short book is threefold: First, we want to examine the Axial Age and Modernity as thoroughgoing, transformational periods of crisis in world history. Second, we want to suggest a theory of cultural evolution that helps explain these periods. Third, we want to consider what the similarities between these periods suggest about addressing the problems that face societies across the planet today.

In pursuing this purpose, our first chapter will examine the transformation, during the Axial Age, from bronze-age cultures with mythic religions, governed by “divine” kings and their loyalty lineages, to iron-age cultures, with universalistic, ethical “Religions of the Book,” governed by vast bureaucracies. The second chapter will turn to Modernity and its efforts to define ways of thinking and social institutions capable of governing an increasingly globalized world. For us, such globalization is not merely a contemporary, essentially economic process. Rather, the world is now experiencing the culmination of a process of intercultural interaction, immanent in world history, that has moved toward a global “federation” of local civilizations. In the third chapter, we offer a theory of cultural evolution to explain how a race of animals that must learn everything was able to expand from as few as 10,000 members in Africa about 70,000 years ago to the dominant species in almost every environment on our planet. Finally, a brief conclusion considers what our approach suggests about the challenges and decisions people all over our globe face today.

We present these ideas as what Foucault calls “game openings” so that “those who may be interested are invited to join in.” The analysis we present is clearly oversimplified. We do not present a thorough examination of the many questions our approach opens. Rather, we hope the reader will find this approach as provocative and worth pursuing as we have.

With that in mind, we turn to the great transformation of the Axial Age, which witnessed the birth of modern warfare, the process by which literacy transformed human consciousness, the rise of universalistic, ethical religions, and governments’ use of those religions as a form of social control.

References