

Jean Gebser and the Spirit of Cooperation

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Epochs of great confusion and general uncertainty in a given world contain the slumbering, not-yet-manifest seeds of clarity and certainty. The manifestations of the aperspectival world... show that these seeds are already pressing toward realization. This means that we are approaching the "zenith" of confusion and are thus nearing the necessary breakthrough.

Jean Gebser, 1953

*The Ever-Present Origin*¹

Experience teaches that it is not disarmament that points the way to peace, but rather that peaceful relations open the door to disarmament. Peace is the consequence of practical cooperation.

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It is evident that the continued success of the human species into the opening decades of the twenty-first century will require a spirit of cooperation. This means a spirit of working together between individuals, a spirit of working together between political units such as nation states and international collectives, and a spirit of working together between the human and the many other species with which it shares the Earth.

Gebser's evolutionary model of consciousness³ provides a uniquely valuable framework from which to examine the topic of cooperation. The very meaning of cooperation as well as its forms of expression change with each successive evolutionary structure of consciousness. The potentials, qualities, and limits of cooperation thus depend on the structures of consciousness from which it is born. These potentials, qualities, and limits form the subject of the present discussion.

Cooperation is a topic that is more than tangential to human survival in the decades to come. As suggested in the second opening quotation above, it is at the heart of process of reconciliation and peacemaking among otherwise ambivalent or even hostile factions. Based on extensive behavioral investigations of four species of nonhuman primates (chimpanzees, rhesus monkeys, stump-tailed monkeys, and bonobos) as well as careful observations of human behavior, Frans de Waal⁴

suggests that the failure of cooperation in the form of conflict is a natural part of life among primates. He also suggests, however, that reconciliation is just as natural, and as much a part of the primate constitution as is conflict. He finds that what leads to reconciliation is not the absence of strife but the presence of a valuable relationship, whether this relationship is between individuals or between nation states. Many friendships, for instance, are fraught with conflict, but both parties continue to reconcile their differences as long as the relationship continues to meet their intellectual, emotional, economic, or political needs. What this means in plain English is that both parties are involved in a mutually beneficial interaction.

It is apparent from even a tertiary survey of modern biological literature that cooperation is almost as widespread as life itself.⁵ Even at the level of single cell organisms cooperation in the form of symbiosis is common place if not, in fact, the rule.⁶ The meaning as well as the mechanics of cooperation are modulated, however, by the complexity of the particular organisms involved. With the evolutionary advent of large brains, behavior becomes more flexible and dynamic. Intelligence allows for increasingly higher order interactions in which separate organisms join together in elaborate behavioral exchanges. At the human level, such exchanges create higher order systems such as families, communities, cities, nations, economic networks, and so on.⁷

Within the full spectrum of human activity there are many forms of cooperative exchange. One way to understand these is to examine the major structures of human experience and their implications for cooperation. In Gebser's terms this means to explore the worlds of human reality implicit in the principal structures of consciousness, each with its own implications for cooperation as well as for hostility and aggression. The following pages will undertake this examination.

The Structures of Consciousness

The archaic structure.

On a historical scale, this structure is essentially prehuman. It is a form of consciousness which, though it knows it not, experiences a primal unity with the light of the *origin* itself. According to Gebser, this structure is the historical analog of the mythological state of purity at the beginning of history, life in the Garden of Eden before the fall. It represents a time when our hominid ancestors were entirely at home in the world of nature.

Since there are no detailed records of life in this epoch, perhaps the best appraisal of it is obtained from observing the natural state of nonhuman primates. These tend to live in relatively small groups within which complex patterns of social interaction are common place, including cooperative

behavior exhibited, for example, in defense of the group, foraging for food, and establishing social hierarchies.⁸

Aggression is not uncommon within and between such groups, but it is often followed by reconciliatory efforts, so that there seems to be a natural counterpoint among primates between conflict and peacemaking.⁹ Waal concludes that this counterpoint is probably characteristic of most if not all primates, including humans, and probably has genetic roots that extend back at least thirty million years to a time before the modern primates, including humans, divided from a common ancestor. Interestingly, nonhuman primates, like their human relatives, may bear grudges for considerable periods of time, but tend not to exhibit them while cooperation dominates social interaction.¹⁰ Welker, for example, comments on the capucine monkey's "ability to suppress enmities, and its inability to forget them."¹¹

When fighting breaks out among nonhuman primates it is in response to present causes such as territorial pressures or imbalances in the social structure within the group,¹² and does not escalate into sustained conflicts such as are typical in human society. We might well suspect that life was similar among archaic humankind as that described above for nonhuman primates.

The magic structure.

We have no pure example of a solitary structure of consciousness in the human being because, like functional systems of the human brain, each new one as it emerges forms a governing system over the older ones, which in turn continue to function at their own level. From the perspective of the modern human, Gebser's structures are, in fact, *ontogenic* rather than *phyletic*, that is, each forms part the deep structure of the modern psyche.

Historically, as each new structure emerges it becomes dominant over the older ones, until it itself becomes secondary to another emergent structure. We may look for examples of dominantly magical consciousness, for example, in African Bushmen or Australian Aboriginal cultures, but such cultural outlanders of the modern world, while exhibiting a greater awareness of magical possibilities than is characteristic of industrialized cultures, are still products of unique and long evolutionary histories in which the mythic and mental structures have had more than enough time to develop in their own right. Gebser himself was quick to point out the inappropriateness of directly equating, for example, ancient Europeans with modern tribal peoples.¹³ Still, it is the opinion of the present writer that something is to be learned from such comparisons if they are made cautiously and in the context of the available archeological records of our own history.

Gebser noted that the dominant magic structure of consciousness expressed a tribal or group identity rather than the personal or individual one characteristic of the mental and especially perspectival consciousness. This suggests that cooperation in the dominantly magical human was a matter of immersion in the ethos of the group or tribe. Strong relationships between individuals may well have existed--pair-bonding is not unknown even among nonhuman primates--but this would have been secondary to psychological absorption in the collective.

Magical consciousness, however, also implies a first awakening to a sense of separation from nature, and thus the beginning of the drive for power and control. Cultures dominated by this structure would seem capable of power motivated conflict within and especially between tribal or collective units. If such conflict arose, it seems more than likely that magic played some role in it, possibly in the form of spell casting or witchcraft. Large scale and sustained aggression, however, would appear unlikely in the absence of a developed mental structure to organize and carry it over long periods of time.

The mythic structure

The mythic consciousness is characterized by story telling. In it the imagination is projected outward as imagery, then transformed into narrative. Imagination expressed through myth, in Gebser's words, "renders the soul visible so that it may be visualized, represented, heard, and made audible."¹⁴ This brings into the spotlight the vastly important process of language.

While Gebser tended to focus on the centrality of the imagination in his discussions of the mythic structure of consciousness, the advent of articulate language no doubt played an important historical role in the appearance of the great societies of the mythic epoch, all of which relied heavily on social cooperation. These included the neolithic society of Old Europe,¹⁵ as well as the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Crete, the Indus Valley, and the Yellow River in China.

Cerebral asymmetries in the skull casts of *Homo habilis* suggest that the beginnings of human language may date as far back as four million years.¹⁶ The elaboration of language into an exquisite and powerful vehicle of social control and coherence probably did not come about, however, until much later. This may well have occurred as recently as a period from about fifty thousand to perhaps ten thousand years ago.¹⁷ This corresponds roughly to the development of the mythic imagination. It includes the the flourishing of the imagination expressed in the paintings found in the great cave sanctuaries of southern Europe,¹⁸ as well as the spread of the widely held mythology of the goddess beginning at about 20,000 to 18,000 B.C.¹⁹

The full sweep of the mythic imagination, however, did not break free of the older structures and come into its own until the advent of the neolithic farming revolution around 8,000 to 9,000 B.C. During the next few millennia the entire Old European civilization based on farming developed in

regions now largely in Eastern Europe and the Near East, bringing with it artistry, commerce, copper metallurgy, and even what appears to be a rudimentary script.²⁰

Historically, the pouring forth of rich visual imagery characteristic of the mythic structure of consciousness was the internal combustion engine behind the rapid acceleration of technology that was so characteristic of the first millennia of the neolithic era. *Homo erectus* had lived for over one million years making no technological statement beyond a few modestly well crafted stone tools. Later the Neanderthal spent half a million years developing what appears to be a moderately rich culture, but one still lacking in rich aesthetic and technological expression as judged against modern standards. With the Cro-Magnon man these aspects of culture began to gain speed, and with the advent of full blown mythic consciousness artistic and technological development accelerated exponentially. Feuerstein point's out that this enormous creative energy needs to be made explicit because Gebser, in his own works, tends to stress the introverted aspect of mythic consciousness.²¹

One might suspect that societies dominated by the mythic structure of consciousness, like those earlier ones dominated by the magic structure, would, without the direction that the mental structure can provide, be subject to no more than occasional conflicts of the type observed in nonhuman primates. This would indeed seem to be the case for the Old European civilization, for which virtually no evidence of violent conflict has yet been found.²² If we look, however, at the more recent, but still ancient civilizations, for instance of Mesopotamia, Greece, and China we find quite a different picture. It would seem, in fact, that war as we know it today was virtually invented in Sumer around the third millennium B.C. A chronicle of that period reads:

Sargon, King of Agade ...the city of Uruk he smote and its wall he destroyed. With the people of Uruk he battled and he routed them. With Lugal-zaggisi, King of Uruk, he battled and he captured him and in fetters he led him through the gate of Enlil. Sargon of Agade battled with the man of Ur and vanquished him; his city he smote and its wall he destroyed. E-Ninmar he smote and its wall he destroyed, and its entire territory, from Lagash to the sea, he smote. And he washed his weapons in the sea...²³

What could motivate such destruction? The chronicle itself seems, indeed, to swagger with the answer. No matter what social or economic reasons might be offered, part of the answer would seem to be the appearance of rulers such as Sargon, who were intoxicated with egotism. Thus, while we are viewing a historical epoch that is, for the most part, still characterized by domination of the mythic structure of consciousness, the mental structure, and even the ego has surfaced with a vengeance.

If there is any doubt about the appearance of the ego in ancient Mesopotamia, it is put to rest by a reading of the epic of Gilgamesh. Here we find the ancient hero blatantly parading his masculine ego to the express humiliation of the representatives of the ancient tradition of the goddess,²⁴ and in the end voicing his frustrations with the limitations human life in a thoroughly self-consciousness manner that carries a distinctly existential flavor.

In the ancient campaigns of king Sargon we have the oldest known record of the emergence of an equation that will occur again and again throughout the history of warfare and conflict. The mythic structure alone would most likely be incapable of sustained and systematic conflict of the kind we see in the campaigns of king Sargon. It would be more likely to engage in more or less sporadic flourishes of fighting, and these with an emphasis on heroic actions of individual warriors. We see what we find in many tribal peoples such as the Native Americans, and it is the style of fighting depicted by Homer in the Iliad. What we see in Sargon, however, is the play of the ego as a modulating influence on the tendency of the mythic consciousness to create great issues, that is, to polarize differences in perspective and magnify them into "mythic proportions." In Sargon's case, and many to follow him, this is accompanied by an inflation of the ego to the point that it sees itself as vastly larger than life. Sargon was a megalomaniac.

This mixture of the mental and the mythical structures, by which the mental makes distinctions--"I am important and you are not," "capitalism is good, communism is bad," "Christianity is right, Islam is wrong," etc.--and the mythic polarizes them into gigantic proportions, can readily ignite into uncontrolled hostility and war. The enemy may then be projected as a demonic *other*, deserving of less than human consideration. Combine this with the still extant tendency of the magical structure to be drawn into collective social movements such as the Nazi party or the Moral Majority and we have the full prescription for relentless and heartless aggression. All this is to say that already in the third millennium B.C. we see the basic pattern for war even as it comes to us today, involving a unique interaction of the magic, mythic, and mental structures of consciousness.

The mental structure.

This structure became the dominant way of incorporating reality during the final centuries before the birth of Christ, and remains dominant today. As Gebser points out, it first reached full expression in classical antiquity when Parmenides, in 480 B.C., could say *to gar auto noein estin to kai einai*, "For thinking and being is one and the same."²⁵ Plato, in the *Phaedo*, attributes a similar attitude to Socrates, who seems to equate the soul and the afterlife with pure thought. The identification of being with thinking would be expressed again in modern times by René Descartes.

Feuerstein²⁶ estimates that the roots of the mental structure of consciousness may actually go back many millennia before Christ and, as noted above, there is reason to postulate the emergence of the

ego in certain individuals well before Greek classical antiquity. As with the other structures of consciousness, however, there is an *efficient* and a *deficient* form of mental consciousness. The efficient form is represented by directive, discursive thought, as seen, for instance, in the dialogues of Plato. One suspects that such discursive thought carried the potential for the first time of cooperative interactions between relatively large numbers of individuals, interactions based on a mutual exchange of ideas. Indeed, this is precisely what we find in classical Athenian democracy.

The democracy of Athens was no less than an experiment in governance by intellectual discourse. The fact that it lasted for only a brief period of time does not take away from this fact, nor from its greatness. The reasons for its failure are complex, but clearly involved a loss of mental balance in favor of the greed and heady egotism that led the Athenians of the late fifth century into the disastrous naval campaign against Syracuse. It seems that, tragically, while the new democracy was able to triumph over the deep collective tendencies of magical consciousness and the larger-than-life polarities of mythic consciousness, it was unable to stand against the catalytic power of the emergent perspectival egoic structure.

The possibilities for thoughtful cooperation and governance offered by the mental structure were not unique to Greece. For example, the Roman Empire, despite its many political turmoils and its final decadence, gave the world its first great system of international government. This was founded upon an effective system of reasonably equatable international law that was unprecedented in history.

The deficient form of the mental structure is perspectival consciousness, associated with an ego focally located in the head. This perspectival posture did not move into the foreground of consciousness until the mid sixteenth century A.D. and the Italian Renaissance, but as noted above, its roots go back well into the ancient world. Perspectival consciousness is associated with rational thought, or *ratio*, characterized by divisive, immoderate and hair-splitting reasoning. Gebser wrote:

Ratio must not be interpreted...as "understanding" or "common sense"; *ratio* implies calculation and, in particular, division, an aspect expressed by the concept of "rational numbers" which is used to designate fractions and decimals, i.e., divided whole numbers or parts of a whole. *This dividing aspect inherent in ratio and Rationalism--an aspect which has come to be the only valid one--is consistently overlooked, although it is of decisive importance to an assessment of our epoch.*²⁷

As expressed so poignantly in this passage, our own age is as much beset by the faults and problems brought on by the rule of the ego as that of the ancient Athenians, and indeed more so.

Such problems include a tendency to adopt isolated and self-centered viewpoints, accompanied by wrangling and hair-splitting over trivial differences in opinion, and, with the help of the mythic and magic strata of the psyche, magnify these to monumental proportions and emotionally acting them out in blind collectives. The result has been everything from the holy crusades and the Holocaust to the present threat to world cooperation and peace posed by nationalist and fundamentalist factions throughout the globe.

Even with all of this, however, the perspectival consciousness holds the seeds of a new form of cooperation, one that will reach completion only with the awakening of the aperspectival or integral structure. This is the ability to enter into cooperative exchanges with others while retaining a complete and developed awareness of one's own individuality. In relationships founded on such exchanges each party can pursue her or his own individuation while at the same time contributing to the goals held in common. Such relationships may involve a diad, as in the marriage relationship, a group of scholars with certain broad interests shared in common, or an economic community of separate nation states.

We may understand such collections of dynamic centers of self-initiated activity, engaged in exchanges that benefit both individual goals and mutual interests, as *synergistic* communities, in the general sense suggested by Ruth Benedict,²⁸ and in the recent specific formulation by mathematician and dynamical systems theorist Ralph Abraham.²⁹ Benedict defined synergy as a situation in which "any act or skill that advantages the individual at the same time advantages the group."³⁰ She contrasted it with the opposite social situation in which "every act that advantages the individual is at the expense of others." Abraham has modelled this notion in the mathematics of dynamical systems theory.

Riane Eisler has developed a *partnership model* of cooperative interactions between individuals "in which social relations are primarily based on the principle of *linking* rather than ranking."³¹ The essential notion here is that human relationships, individual, political, or otherwise, have historically tended to fall into one of two attractor basins, to use the terminology of dynamical systems theory. One of these she terms the partnership model, described above, and the other she terms the *dominator model*. The latter emphasizes hierarchical relationships in which a small elite controls the lives of the majority by virtue of political power, financial influence, or simple brute strength. Such elites, almost always male, have for the most part determined the destiny of humanity since the Endoeuropean invasions of the peaceful Old European culture right down to the present day.

The strength of the dominator system takes its origin from the ancient magical urge for power, an urge that undercuts all of the highest motives of compassion and reason. As Carl Jung observed, where there is will to power there is no love, and where there is love there is no will to power.

Even at its highest octave the best intentions of perspectival consciousness tend all too frequently to be undercut by self-centered egoic agendas, nit-picking, and failure to see beyond one's own perspectival limitations. If sustained cooperation is to be achieved in personal relationships, in national and international economic ventures, and in the local, national, and international political arenas, a more effective form of consciousness is needed. Such a form is integral or aperspectival consciousness.

The integral structure.

The models for peaceful cooperation that are possible for the mental consciousness are also possible for the integral consciousness which, however, can carry them forward without the self-destructive limitations of the perspectival structure. Indeed, integral consciousness is not a structure among structures. It is the ability to experience all of the structures in their fullness, without being consumed by any of them. It is a clarity of awareness that stands above and yet contains all other structures. From this posture it is possible to experience one's own motives and aspirations with increased transparency, and to see them in the context of the needs of others and of society and the world. It is also possible to overcome the ego's neurotic habit of concealing from itself its own self-serving agendas, while pursuing them with a vengeance in the world.

The freedom of this structure from the temporal and spatial constraints of perspectivity allow it a degree of objectivity that no previous structure of consciousness could enjoy. Such objectivity carries the potential of newfound nobility. Frithjof Schuon observes:

There is no knowledge without objectivity of the intelligence; there is no freedom without objectivity of the will; and there is no nobility without objectivity of the soul.³²

In Gebser's words, "the pursuit of power is replaced by the genuine capacity for love."³³

The integral structure may seem like the pipedream of a troubled world, or the provence of only a trivial few, but such may not be the case. Gebser saw evidence of its coming in many spheres of human activity, ranging from biology to music, from mathematics to jurisprudence, and from physics to poetry.

Though Gebser gave us relatively few suggestions regarding how to further the unfolding of consciousness to the level of the integral structure, he clearly perceived its development as an on-going and large-scale process within society, involving many more than a few isolated individuals.

Let us hope that his whole system of structures of consciousness shares something in common with levels of human moral development³⁴ in this sense, that by interacting with others more advanced than ourselves we may also be drawn upward to the highest levels.

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