

Seeing through Symbolic Form into the Integral

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Foundations of Integral Philosophy

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Abstract

For the past 2500 years philosophical thinking has been the most common way in which Western societies have oriented themselves to the search for truth in the cosmos. Philosophy attempts to answer basic questions such as Who am I? What is my role here? Where did I come from? Up until the 16th century, with the approach of the Enlightenment, philosophy as a “love of wisdom” shifted from an exploration of wisdom and interiority to knowledge and a focus on the externality of life.

Through the more modern philosophical form of inquiry we continually seek a truth somewhere “out there” leaving us unable to witness and experience the answers already within us. This current philosophical way of connecting to the vast mystery of existence has become an outdated mode of expression in need of transformation. Our illusion of self-reflectivity becomes revealed in our attachment to language as the way we create a world with our words and then conclude it has fact. It is only through a new way of understanding our relationship to symbolic form that we can move more fully into the Integral era.

Introduction

Jean Gebser’s book *The Ever-Present Origin* (1949) describes the unfolding of human consciousness through five structures, or mutations: Archaic, Magical, Mythic, Mental (the most common in our current moment in time), and Integral/Aperspectival. In this work, Gebser details how each mutation is accompanied by a corresponding form of expression; a mode of interaction among humans that characterizes each structure. For example, philosophy as a collection of ideas and abstractions has been the Mental mutation’s mode of perceiving the

cosmos and imparting information about it for the past 2500 years. However, each mutation is not simply a matter of perceiving the cosmos differently, but also concerns specific modes of interaction. In this sense philosophy would not be possible without a simultaneous development in language to convey thoughts.

According to Ernst Cassirer, a German philosopher who lived between 1874 and 1945, symbolic form as language gave us this capability to have ideas and communicate them to one another.ⁱ According to Cassirer, it is the use of symbols that differentiates the human from other animal species. I disagree with Cassirer and argue it is not just the creation of symbolic forms, but the human ability to transcend and question the meaning of specific symbols that differentiates us from other species. Further, I believe, without the process of inventing and contemplating the meaning of symbolic form, we would not have the freedom or capacity to enter into the Integral mutation of consciousness.

Animal Symbolicum

Cassirer refers to humans as *animal symbolicum*, or symbolic being, describing the way in which we construct culture through creating representational communication.ⁱⁱ Cassirer distinguishes between “signs” and “symbols” as an important part of the difference between humans and nonhuman animals.ⁱⁱⁱ He states “...a signal is a part of the physical world of being; a symbol is a part of the human world of meaning.”^{iv} An additional distinction would be between the human “propositional,” or offering, language and that of nonhumans as expressing through emotive signs.^v

The difference between a sign and symbol is an important part of Cassirer's philosophy. A sign or signal may have only one meaning while symbols have many. Symbols also have the capacity to refer to something outside of a given moment, whilst signs do not. Humans use symbols to help us *interpret* our external world by creating meaning and concepts. In the next level of Cassirer's philosophy, meaning and concepts are represented through the use of specific symbolic forms – either through myth, art, science, or history.^{vi} In their own way each of these modes of expression demonstrates how a complex system of symbols can produce an entire culture and way of reflecting upon existence.

Language is the predominant symbolic form used in the thinking process, as the other subsequent forms of thought (e.g., science and history) would not be possible without it. The question then develops in two ways, why do we need symbolic form? And why, in particular, do we need language? Cassirer suggests that the human is the creature in constant search of himself.^{vii} This quest for self-knowledge consists of the obligatory, and alienating, process of differentiating between externality and internality. Symbolic form, an especially language, produces this process of creating an “outer” world because it establishes relationship and therefore, objectification.

Giving everything a name and having a systematic order, as found for example in scientific taxonomies, separates what is named from the being that does the naming (i.e., the human) and produces a relationship of externality that at the same time generates the conditions for relationality. This labeling of things in our experience ultimately reflects our seeking a relationship to Self/whole/God/Origin; we would not have the desire to orient to it if

we already believed ourselves to be already included. In this way language structures our thinking to then see what we have said. This powerful symbolic form transforms our very way of being in the world.

With language we moved into a mode of being and consciousness that divides us from our environment, each other, and ourselves. It is in the context of the emergence of language that we can move away from Cassirer and consider Gebser's insights on the effect language has on the human condition. For Gebser language creation began as precursor to the Mythic during the Magical mutation because it "renders the soul visible so that it may be visualized, represented, heard, and made audible."^{viii} The Magical consciousness was characterized by a dream-like, one-dimensional unity.^{ix} Within this structure existed no distinction between self and other since individuals operated from a place of connection and group-ego. The Archaic, Magical, and Mythical mutations all share this un/pre-perspectival where being was characterized by *inter-being*.

Animal Philosophicum

Mythic consciousness bridges the Magical and Mental mutations making language more prominent because of its use in chanting, prayer, and storytelling. Life becomes a series of cyclical journeys with causal loops requiring explanation for their continuity.^x While the Magical structure is highly emotional, the Mythical one is characterized by the use of imaginative, symbolic interactions, generated in order to create stories that narrate a richly qualitative cosmos. During the Mythic structure of consciousness the individual becomes noticeable as a unique entity, but still lacks a sense of personal responsibility within the larger group. Gebser

believes the formation of philosophy originated when consciousness was shifting out of this mythic mutation into “efficient” mental when the word became demythologized and “freed from the wealth of imagery.”^{xi}

It is important here to distinguish between the “efficient” and “deficient” phases of the Mental structure of consciousness. The Magical, Mythical, and Mental mutations all have “efficient” and “deficient” expressions as a varying degrees of intensity of each structure.^{xii} The extremely rational intellectualism dominating the human experience since the Enlightenment exemplifies the “deficient” Mental, as it represents a shadow and extremism of our particular time period.^{xiii} The “efficient” Mental occurred before the Enlightenment with the Renaissance. It was characterized by more of transitional phase between the Mythic and Mental as it carried more imaginative qualities as well as an interest in intellect.^{xiv}

As Gebser scholar Allan Combs reminds us, “Each of Geber’s structure of consciousness has its own positive and negative features.”^{xv} On the one hand, through philosophy we experience ourselves through a separate “lens” and, on the other, language has given us the ability to reflect upon our words making the creation of new ideas possible. Without abstractions we could not find our way out of our own symbolic creations. Since language requires “an other,” perceived to be outside of ourselves, in order to have meaning, the more externally we look we cannot help but participate in the necessary process of simultaneously looking back at ourselves.

Gebser credits the first important philosophemes—a philosophical statement or theorem—to Aristotle, Pythagoras, Plato, and Socrates. These philosophers, according to Gebser, were the first to embody the forms of expression that characterize the Mental mutation of consciousness^{xvi} Humanity during this time leapt from the two-dimensionality of myth into the three-dimensional world of perspective. The Mythical mutation had a “pre-perspectivity” that allowed for perceptions through a community. In the modern, deficient Mental mutation, philosophy takes humans to the extreme form of separation from experience because it requires a highly individualized, rational mind for constant analysis. This mode of relating also creates strong attachments to self and the development of an ego. We start to conceive objects, events, and phenomena in terms of our own perspectives completely disconnected from others. Our current stern mental stances lead to constant disputes over small things such as academic squabbles or larger issues such as war.^{xvii}

The Mental structure of consciousness brings about the distinction of an “I” and marks the point when humans become aware of their existence as individual subjects separate from the world around them. It seems no mistake with the Mental mutation that “I” and “eye” sound the same. As the eye develops into the most important organ for gathering information, our language acquires a more and more visual nature. Gebser points out that in the Mythical structure one “pondered” or “held” something in one’s heart, today we “keep an eye on something.”^{xviii} In contrast to the Mythic structure of consciousness with its accentuation of the auditory sense (needed for listening and storytelling), the Mental mutation “focuses” upon literacy, such as reading or writing, which favors the visual perception. As this language shaped

our lives, so did our vision. This current deficient Mental mode with an imagery of distinction develops into loneliness and alienation.

The larger the disconnection from the whole, the stronger the drive for unity becomes.^{xix} In this way separation acts as a necessary part of the unification process -- without this division we cannot recognize oneness. When we find ourselves as separate we can only then have the willingness and desire to stop orienting to others and the external world and instead orient to ourselves as a part of it. In the end it seems this desire for orienting ourselves requires us to share and communicate our shared experience of isolation through symbolic form, as philosophy.

Philosophy permits us to do this and then reveals we are not just a “social animal” of a magical groupthink or “symbolic animal” and instead an animal in constant search for an identity.^{xx} The creation of philosophy was about the many ways we used language to place ourselves, and ultimately separate ourselves, from the rest of existence. We needed philosophy to somehow save us from this uncomfortable “world of our own making.”^{xxi} This reason was what made the creation of philosophy essential during the Mental mutation; it has become our chief way of exploring, relating, and orienting to our outer experience.

Cassirer not only acknowledges the way in which we use symbolic form to give us a way of understanding, he also recognizes it as “artificial.”^{xxii} This is where we begin to glimpse how Cassirer represents pre-Integral thought; he accepts that language, and the other ways we use to orient ourselves, were self-created and therefore cannot be merely objective. The beauty and ultimate paradox of symbolic form remains that even with the facts and knowledge created

by symbolic form; we still do not have clarity. As humans we have shaped and invented a world in which we live into through our language as philosophy -- one which may or may not be accurate. Yet, even if our understanding may not be precise, we still need symbolic form. Symbolic representation is the only way we have to grasp and structure our versions of the world.^{xxiii} In Cassirer's words:

In language, in religion, in art, in science, man can do no more than to build up his own universe – *a symbolic universe* that enables him to understand and interpret, to articulate and organize, to synthesize and universalize his human experience.^{xxiv}

Cassirer mentions several times this capacity to construct an ideal world as what provides symbolic form with its power. He hints at the idea that our thoughts and ideas eventually transcend and surpass themselves through examination – the exact process he participates in and also the great task of philosophy. As humans we have built up a universe and then question what we have built.

Philosophy has a deep need not only to generate a sense of orientation, but also to reflect upon and explore the constitution of this orientation; philosophy establishes a relationship with the cosmos and then seeks the assumptions living behind it. Without symbolic form humans could not have this skill, other animals do not (that we know of) analyze the signals they generate in the same way. This could be the unique trait of human beings: the interpreters of our interpretations and, even further, as destroyers of our creations. Language is, in its human form, an externalization of thought and also an internal analysis of thoughts

making up the conditions of existence. This capacity enables us to recognize the symbolic forms we already employ, and thus consciously participate in their ongoing reformulation.

With Cassirer the hard work is done for us by establishing the distinction of the symbolic forms and reflecting upon it; in this way we are able to identify as an animal philosophicum, instead of a mere animal symbolicum. In doing so we do not just reflect upon who we are, we actually create a new world for us to live into, and then once again through philosophy question whether or not it even exists. This transcendence and change of humanity's symbolic form comes about in contemplation. We escape mistaking the symbolic systems for "just the way things are" and, open up into a new dimension of freedom – a freedom to participate in the creation of new symbolic forms and also transform or shed the old ones.

Through the work of Ernst Cassirer we are able to observe the ways in which our symbolic form, as language, has created our world and simultaneously the potential for us to go beyond it. Using language and symbolic form, we can see through philosophy and establish a new way of relating to all that is. In this way words do not release us into a new world of symbolic form by giving us a way to objectify reality, rather, words liberate us by enabling us to see through them rendering them transparent.

Animal Eteologicum

To see things as they are, instead of through our lens of language provides an opening between the Mental and the fifth mutation of consciousness -- the Integral. Gebser himself speaks to the difficulty of elaborating upon something new within the confines of our current

language.^{xxv} We do not have a way to speak to the arationality, atemporality, and aperspectivity exemplified by the Integral, even now I have great difficulty expressing it. Our communication assumes a world of individual, logical perspectives existing in linear time. Rationality, temporality, and perspective all arise with time, a concept the Integral cannot co-exist with.

Therefore, the Integral structure of consciousness has the distinct capability to include all the former structures and at the same time honor them independently within the context of the whole.^{xxvi} Integrality holds a way of being, and not thinking. It is a way of being that has a fluid understanding of the multiplicity of perspectives available without attaching to any one of them for relationality or answers. In Gebser's approach the process of knowing and knowledge itself become essential aspects of reality. The elucidation of what was not previously understood, that is philosophy, must then yield to eteology, or being-in-truth. "The Greek word *eteos* means 'true, real'; as an adverb, *eteon* means 'in accord with truth, truly, really' and comes from the root "se:es," meaning "to be."^{xxvii}

The new Integral structure of consciousness we are transitioning into demands new processes and reasoning free of abstractions and symbolic language. Since most philosophy by nature must observe an outside to find answers, it cannot be our mode of expression in the Integral era. Gebser argues that the age of systematic philosophy is over and eteology must replace philosophy as not a mere "theory of being" (such as ontology) but a freedom from the objectivism of the deficient mental mutation.^{xxviii} Within the integral perception of truth, the world is pure statement, and thus "verition."^{xxix} Eteology becomes the statement of truth in lieu

of the philosophical statement about truth. Gebser also declares to do this we must be free of a subject and an object.^{xxx} In this way we move from imparting certainty via language and philosophy to already knowing and being able to recognize an “Origin” (or source) as ever-present.

As stated earlier in this paper, we depend upon our eyes for the responsibility of coming into relationship with our surroundings, cultivating sensitivities, and locating ourselves in our environment. A new way of seeing becomes necessary to experience ourselves as more of the truth we seek in the Integral. For Pierre Teilhard de Chardin the way to truly orient ourselves requires us to see not only with new eyes, but with entirely new senses, as way of uniting with the whole. Teilhard beckons us to see more, not only through the layers as revealed by our eyes and our symbols, but instead through a kind of seeing that can perceive the within of things not visible through physical sight alone. He beckons us to see more, not the superficial layer as our eyes and language permit, and instead view the within of things not visible through vision alone. Teilhard says if we “lack these qualities of sight” we will remain an “erratic object of a disconnected world.”^{xxxi} Relying less upon our eyes allows true “insight” to evolve, one that brings us more closely with the answers we perhaps had hoped to find through thought alone.

The capacity to catch glimpses of more and more than what meets the eye moves us into a new way of being that reveals to us the importance of all the former consciousness mutations in moving us towards the Integral structure. Symbolic form and philosophy were important precursors for our shift from the subject/object dualism into a more connected worldview. However, the problems of our divisive language do not lend itself to eteology, and

now we can create our words to reflect what we know to be true. We no longer just reflect about reality and instead become the truth we seek. Our philosophical mode of thinking assumes a “not-knowing” and we have become stuck within this paradigm without being able to see way out.

The transparency brought about with the Integral structure of consciousness offers a new way of seeing not dependent upon our words, eyes, or philosophy for that matter. The questions remain what will we see when we no longer have our language and abstractions getting in the way? Is there a truth without our thinking about it? For Gebser, we will finally see the “ever-present origin” in the background of all that is and know it to be true.^{xxxii} With each mutation of consciousness the spiritual dimension of existence becomes more realizable and recognizable.^{xxxiii} This “concretation” of the spiritual dimension of reality is not a rational, logical experience and also not an intellectual accomplishment.^{xxxiv} This transparency allows us to feel and recognize the many parts of the past alive within us today. Rather than place importance upon our current rational, Mental structure Gebser’s work creates awareness of all the other structures -- bringing them into the present as outside of time.

Conclusion

The progression and future of being human unfolds through the works of Gebser and Cassirer. By seeing through the illusions created by symbolic form, as language, we access a world not fully seen before. Within this transparency the “spiritual comes to perception: origin is present. In truth we ware the whole, and the whole wares us.”^{xxxv} Now, instead of a life filled with separation and isolation, humanity has the opportunity to advance into an integral way of being with the whole of existence. The realization of a truth is a process of discovery, which

each human will have to undergo in his or her own way. A process in which we finally become the truth we have been seeking.

Endnotes

ⁱ Ernst Cassirer, *Essay on Man* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1944), 21.

ⁱⁱ Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 22.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 32.

^{iv} Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 32.

^v Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 30.

^{vi} Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 25.

^{vii} Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 5-6.

^{viii} Jean Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, trans. Noel Barstad with Algis Mickunas (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1949), 67.

^{ix} Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 118.

^x Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 166.

^{xi} Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 83.

^{xii} Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 542.

^{xiii} Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 95.

^{xiv} Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 94.

^{xv} Allan Combs, *Consciousness Explained Better* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2005), 71.

^{xvi} Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 84.

^{xvii} Combs, *Consciousness Explained Better*, 74.

^{xviii} Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 146.

^{xix} Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 1955), 75.

^{xx} Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 223.

^{xxi} Eric Weiss, Lecture, August 25, 2011.

^{xxii} Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 209.

^{xxiii} Hans Lenk, "Symbols, Interpretation and the Nature of Thought," *Philosophy Now*, September/October 2011, 35.

^{xxiv} Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 221.

^{xxv} Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 143.

^{xxvi} Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 157.

^{xxvii} Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 312 note 4.

^{xxviii} Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 309.

^{xxix} Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 309.

^{xxx} Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 309.

^{xxxi} Teilhard, *The Phenomenon of Man*, 5.

^{xxxii} Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 76.

^{xxxiii} Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 542.

^{xxxiv} Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 278.

^{xxxv} Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 543.

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