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On the Nature of Consciousness and Reality

An Overview of Jean Gebser's Thoughts on Consciousness

Georg Feuerstein

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"Consciousness," argues psychologist George A. Miller, "is a word worn smooth by a million tongues . . . Maybe we should ban the word for a decade or two until we can develop more precise terms for the several uses which 'consciousness' now obscures."^{[1](#)}

He is of course right, but the solution he suggests is impractical. When one thinks about it there are few key words in our vocabulary that do not share the same polysemy. Should we also dispose of "life," "existence," "time," "love," "humor," or "holiness"? They all invite idiosyncratic interpretations, even by professional users of these terms. Consequently they all are surrounded by a haze of ambivalence.

But ambivalence is not necessarily a drawback in human communication, because speech is only part of our total language system. And the inbuilt flexibility of words like "life," "love," and "existence" can even be advantageous. What is more, unless our emotional nature is stultified by an inflated rational pose, we can always empathize and reach out into the psyche of others and resonate with their feeling state or intended communication. Thus we may quibble about the definition of the word "love," but unless we are particularly callous or intransigent we know very well what it is to love. We also have a sense of what it means to be alive or to exist, notwithstanding the sophisticated word-splitting of philosophers.

I propose that the concept of "consciousness" falls in to the same category. We all intuit what it stands for, though our descriptions may not always match in every detail. Miller agrees: he writes: "Despite all its faults, however, the term would be sorely missed; it refers to something immediately obvious and familiar to anyone capable of understanding a ban against it."^{[2](#)}

He then goes on to discuss various critical properties that should be considered in a minimal definition of consciousness, such as its connection with living beings, which are mobile, which can react/respond to their environment, which can learn, remember, and hence profit from their experience, and so on. Miller pensively observes that these different capacities could be displayed by man-made machines as well, such as computers, tape recorders, servomechanisms. Unfortunately, he leaves it at that, though he does make a point of the fact that we seem to be able to intuitively distinguish between degrees of conscious existence, as between a mouse, a dog, child, and an adult human.

The criteria enumerated by Miller could all be subsumed under the category of "mind." His list conspicuously lacks the one quality that is most often intended when we speak of consciousness.

And that is the "double-mirror" capacity of the human mind, namely self-consciousness as the curious ability to be aware that one is aware.

The common argument that self-consciousness is, like all other conscious processes, exclusively a function of the brain-mind leaves one with the conundrum of how a supposedly discontinuous function could apperceive or witness other equally discontinuous functions. It also contradicts the evidence of the permanent consciousness-identity of those who are traditionally known as "awakened" or "enlightened" beings. In the works of Vedanta the witness-consciousness is, significantly, referred to as the "fourth" (*turiya*), because it is held to transcend the three "states" of waking, dreaming, and sleeping. This witnessing consciousness is said to continually apperceive the mental contents of all three states.

The extraordinary condition of the "awakened" or "realized" person goes beyond what is ordinarily labeled a "mystical experience." It is a perpetually self-transcending state of being in which all kinds of experiences may arise but which is itself nonexperiential. This superlative condition is virtually unknown in the West, even to Western esotericism. Mircea Eliade therefore rightly observes in his classic study on Yoga that the idea of "consciousness as witness, of consciousness freed from its psychophysiological structures and their temporal condition"^[3] is one of India's greatest discoveries and one that cannot possibly be disregarded.

If consciousness (in the sense of the witness of conscious or mental functions) is one's true identity, the *Atman* or "Self," as the authorities of Advaita Vedanta and Samkhya insist, the only wise response is: to cease identifying with the occurrences of the body-mind and to live as consciousness by means of constant self-transcendence. This is indeed the underlying rationale of all authentic spirituality. However, the traditional stance of dissociating from the body-mind and the "body" of the world at large is unwarranted and even illogical. Hence the British philosopher Pratima Bowes proposes that the paradox (and, one might add, reductionism) of the traditional attitude of negating material existence can be overcome by adopting an "as if" disposition toward the body-mind: as if the body-mind were not constitutive of essential humanness.^[4]

What this implies is that human life can be lived, from the "viewpoint" of consciousness (*or sub specie aeternitatis*), as play. It can be tacitly permitted to proceed and unfold, without being constantly subjected to the stranglehold of the ego, that is, the self-identification with bodily mental happenings.

Where does Jean Gebser stand in relation to all this? Toward the beginning of his *Ever-Present Origin* Gebser tentatively circumscribes consciousness as "wakeful presence," adding somewhat obscurely that it "excludes as a contradiction any kind of future-oriented finality."^[5] The qualifier is explained much later in his work when he

comments that "consciousness is not identical with intelligence or rational acuity."^[6]

For Gebser, as will be seen, reason (*ratio*) is that propensity of the mind which is goal-oriented and hence directed toward the future. He insists that it must not be equated with consciousness. Rather, *ratio* is one of the contexts in which the "wakeful presence" may manifest itself, if only deficiently.

In this connection Gebser also observes that the unfolding of consciousness, as traced by him, should be understood not in terms of an expansion but of an intensification of consciousness, that is, a growth in wakefulness. It is clear from what follows that he understands this intensification or "strengthening" as increasing "dimensioning" of consciousness. Gebser writes:

. . . the increase of dimension by which consciousness gains extent and scope is inversely proportional to the qualitative character of the individual structures, which undergo in each instance a reduction or diminution of value or intensity. The incrementation of consciousness does not correspond to an increase within the relationship to the whole, even if that were possible, but rather to a lessening or weakening of this relationship.^[7]

In other words, the mutative unfolding of consciousness appears to represent both "progress" insofar as there is an accrual of new capacities or modes of responsiveness and "progression away" from the simplicity of origin, the whole. In the course of the history of consciousness we witness the emergence of the known world of space-relationship of consciousness to the spatio-temporal world.^[8]

Now, this suggests that consciousness is not merely "wakeful presence," but wakeful presence that is structured in a certain way and which structures its experienced universe. Another way of putting it is that consciousness is intentional, in the phenomenological sense. It is associated with a context or what one might call a "psychic environment." The fundamental features of that environment correspond to the brightness or dimness of consciousness: the simpler the psychic environment, the dimmer the consciousness. Gebser, as we have seen, distinguishes four major contexts or environments, which he calls "structures" or, occasionally, "frequencies" and "mutations." These are the archaic, the magical, the mythical, and the mental-rational modes of consciousness. A fifth such structure the arational-integral consciousness is in the process of emergence.

Almost halfway through *The Ever-Present Origin*, Gebser offers a further explanation of consciousness which complements his earlier circumscription and which one would have expected toward the beginning of his book. Trying to account for the fact that as new structures or modalities of world-experience emerge they are integrated with the already existing structures, he writes:

The role of consciousness in this process is evident: consciousness makes it possible to retract the projection^[9] that once took place. In more exact terms, the reintegration of the projection is itself an act of the awakening consciousness. Thus consciousness always has a reintegrative capability because it can reveal a lesser-dimensioned structure whose events can be realized in us only through the directive ability gained from an additional dimension. Consciousness is therefore a function which reacts to the visible course of events in reality. These events are able to manifest

themselves within the world of dimensions which correspond to the particular consciousness structure and are thus accessible to our perception.^[10]

He continues:

We can therefore dispense here with several of the previously proposed definitions, notably the most rationalistic of them all, the Cartesian, which equates consciousness with soul. Recent psychology, especially psychoanalysis, has demonstrated that this equivalence is untenable. Consciousness has also been equated with the contents of knowledge; in this sense, a historical or a moral consciousness and the like were posited on the assumption that the knowledge of historical or moral matters or values is tantamount to their actuality. To us this definition seems equally untenable; consciousness is more than mere knowledge, recognition, or cognitive faculty.^[11]

Gebser then goes on to debunk the psychoanalytic notion of the unconscious possibly the big bone of contention between him and his friend Carl Gustav Jung: "*There is no so-called Unconscious. There are only various modalities (or intensities) of consciousness . . .*"^[12]

He next writes:

Consciousness is the ability to survey those interconnections which constitute us: it is a continuous act of integration and directing. And we must observe the fundamental point that there is more to consciousness than mere formal or reflective knowledge. Consciousness is not identical with the process of thinking, nor is it limited to awareness of the ego. Its illuminative function is definitely not restricted to spatialization and temporalization. It is not a mere counterpart to objects and appearances; rather, it is an observant onlooker and an active agent with regulatory functions.^[13]

Here Gebser highlights the witnessing function of consciousness, in which the Eastern traditions recognize the transcendental identity of the human being and of existence itself. Gebser's is a more dynamic model of consciousness. And yet, as the next quotation evinces, it clearly goes beyond current materialistic explanations. For Gebser looks upon consciousness as a rope, so to speak, stretched between the human personality and what he calls the "itself" (*Sich*):

Since consciousness is subject to (and a co-initiator of?) the mutations which seemingly transfer a pre-given originary presence to man, it expresses with each new mutation that this presence of origin can be realized through man. Thus consciousness does not depend only on the ego, but also on the itself, although it does not for this reason take on the nature of numinosity (unlike the mythical structure where there is no insight into the effectivity of recollection). Consciousness, because it is bound to both the ego and the itself (which are neither a unity, nor a complementarity, nor an antithesis), is the intensity capable of integrating the mutations in their entirety in man.^[14]

There is much in this somewhat obscure passage that stands in need of explication and elaboration. Suffice it to comment on what seems to me the most important point. Gebser sees consciousness not merely as a witnessing function but as an active or directive force. He even considers the possibility of consciousness being the co-initiator of the different "mutations" or structural changes. Positing himself in the mental-rational consciousness, but without stating so explicitly, he regards consciousness as mediating between the ego (at least in the mental-rational structure) and the "itself" (*Sich*), which is the suprapersonal spiritual reality. He even speaks of consciousness as being "bound" to the ego and the "itself" respectively.

This dual "indebtedness" of consciousness explains its tensional nature. It is a dynamic function that constantly "intends," as phenomenologists would say. But in its association with the "itself" it simultaneously transcends this intentional proclivity which is responsible for the whole play of attention. It is undoubtedly this transcending aspect of consciousness that defines its capacity as self-consciousness. Perhaps we can say that insofar as consciousness is aligned with the "itself," which is the spiritual, it assumes a witnessing function, whereas its alignment with the self-sense (either as the mental-rational ego or its pre-forms in historically more primitive structures) is generative of the intentional dynamics.

It is not difficult to see why Gebser should regard consciousness as a possible co-trigger for its own mutational changes. Elsewhere he suggests that the impulse for the mutations of consciousness may be found in the origin itself.^[15]

So we may see the history of consciousness as an ultimately unfathomable interplay between, on the one hand, an originary impulse and, on the other hand, a "genetic" readiness in human consciousness together with the momentum of the sociocultural forms created by consciousness. But with this consideration we have undeniably crossed over into metaphysics and theology. Gebser is always conscious of doing so, but never embarrassed by it. I intended to follow his example in this. Without wanting to anticipate too much of the explorations of Chapter 8, it might be useful to consider at this early stage some of the "extra-scientific" concepts that Gebser brings into play in his depiction of the structures of consciousness.

As has been noted already, Gebser distinguishes four basic psychic environments or structures of consciousness. These may be arranged chronologically, but, as he repeatedly emphasizes, together they are constitutive of the total consciousness of modern humanity. Thus, the archaic structure of consciousness, as the name suggests, historically precedes and psychically underlies, all others. It is the least complex or the least dimensionated; therefore it is also the dimmest (from the vantage point of the mental-rational consciousness). Its persistent effectiveness in us is demonstrated primarily by the phenomenon of deep sleep and secondarily by phenomena associated with mysticism. Similarly, the other structures the magical, the mythical, and the mental-rational are co-present in the human psyche, and their interplay is responsible for the multidimensionality of

human experience. Practical examples of this are given in Chapter 9.

The brightest structure is the mental consciousness, with its fully crystallized center of experiencing (the "ego"). But its brightness is the very reason that it is also the most removed from the originary presence. Not that the origin is dim. Rather, the focused luminosity of the egoic mental consciousness acts as a distraction by which the "spiritual light" which, he insists, is a "concrete fact."^[16] originary radiance and here we are again approaching theology is blocked out. In *Verfall und Teilhabe (Decline and Participation)*, Gebser writes freely of the He steadfastly refuses to equate this originary light, which is the "uncreate light" of the monks of Mount Athos or the "radiance" (*jyotis*) of Hindu mystics, with consciousness.

However, Gebser does speak of the "itself-consciousness" (*Sich-Bewusstsein*), or simply the "itself" (*Sich*), as both the innermost nucleus of our being and the intensity "within" us which shapes our individual destiny and which is identical to the origin. He explains:

This "core"-to use our tentative designation so as to avoid such concepts as essence, essentiality, substance, superego, self, divine spark, and the like--we should like to describe more appropriately with the term "the itself."The itself can become visible in the reflexivity of the ego, without succumbing to the autism or narcissism of a "self" and without a psychic coloration inherent in the mystical "divine spark," which shows its indebtedness to the psychic-mythical structure by virtue of the fire-spirit symbolism.^[17]

Gebser continues:

. . . the itself is that which pervades or "shines through" everything and in which the diaphanous spirituality, in its originary presence, is able to become transparent.^[18]

This matter, which must appear recondite to the rational consciousness, is obvious from within that structure of consciousness which Gebser toiled hardest to document: the aperspectival or arational-integral consciousness which is emerging today. This nascent structure of consciousness, for the first time in human history, permits the conscious integration of all previous (but co-present) structures, and through this act of integration t he human personality becomes, as it were, transparent to itself so that the originary presence, "the spiritual" (*das Geistige*), is directly "awared."

This "awaring" or unmediated perceiving is possible because the spiritual origin is not mere temporal beginning, the first member of the historical chain of consciousness mutations. Rather it is, as the title of Gebser's *magnum opus* indicates, ever-present and not space or time-bound. We might say it is sheer presence. In the integral structure of consciousness this fact becomes self-evident: the originary presence is "presentiated" (*vergegenwärtigt*). And this presentation of the spiritual origin enables the human being to transcend the potential exclusivity of all structures of consciousness.

Clearly, the integral event of "awaring" the spiritual reality must not be equated with a relapse into

unconsciousness or, barring the use of this term, into the dimness of lesser-dimensioned types of consciousness. And this is exactly what has for centuries been claimed by the great spiritual figures of the world, who have always spoken of a "super-consciousness." For the enlightened beings of Hinduism the *atman*, which can correctly be rendered as "itself," is flawless consciousness (*cit*) or the "witness" (*s_ksin*) of all contents of what could be called the conditional consciousness (*citta*). According to their testimony this witness-consciousness is utterly unqualified, transpersonal, absolute.

Gebser makes no such claims for his "itself." He admits to using this term, rather than the more common "self," in order to prevent the confusion of his concept with "the notions of India, the merely psychological definition by C. G. Jung, or its mental-rational misinterpretation by Buber."^[19] And yet, in a little known talk published in India, Gebser uses the term *atman* in a way that is suggestive of the "itself,"^[20] but we must presume that he does so as a concession to what was presumably a predominantly Hindu audience. Looking at the totality of his work, I venture to propose that his concept of the "itself" and the Indian notion of *atman* are possibly far more compatible than he cares to concede.

The main reason for his reluctance to speak of the spiritual or originary presence as consciousness, which is the constant reiteration of the Hindu authorities, is that he wishes to dissociate himself from the reference to "being" (*Sein*) contained in the German word *Bewusstseiner* consciousness and possible Hegelian implications.^[21]

Gebser also cautions us not to hastily repeat Hegel's mistake of reading the history of consciousness as a self-actualization of world reason (*Weltvernunft*).^[22] But, as is so often the case, he does not want to pin things (and himself) down by furnishing a precise alternative. For the same reason he tends to avoid definitions, which are perspectival fixations in the domain of language. In his writings he takes on the formidable task of trying to communicate intelligibly while not allowing himself to be hampered by the rational conventions of our language. At times this is like riding a train off its rails--an audacious, possibly foolhardy adventure, yet one that is potentially rewarding, because it radically opens up new vistas.

At other times, however, Gebser's flexibility is both a boon and a drawback. Thus his characterizations of the different structures or modalities of consciousness tend to be too summary. He focuses on their essential morphology but only marginally discusses their chronology--a weakness he shares with Oswald Spengler. This neglect is not accidental either. For instance, he writes about the magical structure of consciousness:

How far back we may wish to place this magic time into prehistory is not only a question of one's predilection, but, on account of the timeless character of the magical, is essentially an illusion. One group will tend to date it back several hundred thousand years, another will be content to place it in the postglacial period . . . It is pure speculation if we attempt to locate something timeless in a temporal framework that we have subsequently devised.^[23]

The logic of Gebser's argument is manifestly spurious. Even in terms of his own multidimensional methodology, it would be perfectly legitimate to enquire into the chronology of a structure that is marked by timelessness but obviously can be located in space-time. Surely it is possible to remain sensitive to the psychic composition or structural "feel" of the magical consciousness, without having to sacrifice the mental-rational concern with time, so long as this concern is transparent to us.

It is my presumption that had Gebser shown more respect for the chronological aspect of the materials scrutinized by him, his portrayal of the history of human consciousness would have gained in definition. More importantly, it would have obliged him to take another look at his central notion that the different structures are sudden spontaneous mutations. For he would have had to acknowledge that there is a far greater continuity of

consciousness mutations than his four-structure model permits.

Right at the beginning of his discussion of the magical structure, Gebser himself concedes that we "should perhaps interpose one or even two further structures between the archaic and the magic, such as 'post-archaic' and a 'pre-magical' structure," adding "but the material at our disposal does not furnish any decisive evidence for precise delimitations of such intermediary structures."^[24] Clearly, this admission of sub-structures is founded in a recognition that there is in fact more of a continuity in the unfolding of human consciousness than his thesis of sudden mutational leaps suggests.

The reason for Gebser's rejection of a Darwinian-style evolutionary model for the unfolding of human consciousness is not far to seek. On the one hand, he wants to avoid any implications of progress toward the mental-rational as the neutral culmination of the history of consciousness. On the other hand, he wants to emphasize the fact that this process is not determined by biological (genetic) or sociological historical factors, but by the spiritual or originary presence. (Interestingly, the German word for "origin" is *Ursprung* which literally means "primal leap"). Gebser contrasts these consciousness mutations with biological mutations, arguing that whereas the former are "plus mutations" which lead to structural enrichment, the latter give rise to greater functional specialization.^[25]

His description of the various structures, however, suggests major evolutionary leaps known as "saltations" rather than mutations.

While the historical and prehistorical data allow one to postulate discontinuities in the unfolding of human consciousness, it should be remembered that the available evidence *is* incomplete. Therefore we must at least reckon with the possibility that any apparent discontinuities may only be gaps in our knowledge. But even if that were so, Gebser's broadly phenomenological model of the history of consciousness as a "spiritually qualified process"^[26] would, in principle, still be tenable.

In that case, the following explanation could be proposed: the spiritual origin, which is the perennial foundation of all spatio-temporal occurrences, exerts, by its very presence, a continuous "pressure" on space-time. Biologically, the human body-mind is most responsive to this originary "pressure," which leads to an intensification of consciousness through which the originary "pressure" gets internalized as it were. This effectively or deficiently. In the latter instance the tension elicits avoidance or reactive regression to a lower-level intensity (or more primitive structure of consciousness). In the former instance the body-mind becomes receptive to a yet higher level of intensification of consciousness, transcending the present level and condition and establishing a new state of tension. Possibly catastrophe theory can offer a formal model for this explanation.

The idea of an "efficient" and a "deficient" response, or cycle, in a given structure of consciousness is fundamental to Gebser's work. He applies it very successfully to the contemporary situation by identifying the rational consciousness as the deficient mode of the mental structure of consciousness. He thereby undermines the great evolutionistic ideal of the Enlightenment philosophers and their epigones, according to whom *ratio* is the pinnacle of all human development.

An example of a creative response in this process is readily available for the mental-rational consciousness: when self- or ego-consciousness reaches a certain degree of intensity or "condensation," it inevitably becomes involved in a struggle to resolve the inherent conflict between itself and all others. It begins to develop strategies for restoring psychic harmony or equilibrium. This may be expressed in terms of a quest for new self-understanding (thus emphasizing the affective aspect). However, this struggle or search always implicates the total person, and once the quest has begun, it reveals itself as having many different dimensions. In the final

analysis this search is always a movement toward self-transcendence.

On the deficient side, a person may simply seek to drown his or her felt psychic dilemma or tension in alcohol, drug abuse, sex, or even work. Indeed, this is the reaction and chosen destiny of the majority of our fellow humans in the West as well as in those parts of the world to which our Western civilization has been explored. And yet, clearly, to safeguard the future of humanity as a whole there is an urgent need for a creative response to the "stimulus" that is continuously presented by the ever-present origin. Otherwise the already exhausted mental-rational consciousness will simply collapse together with all its numerous projections--our Western civilization as a whole--and in the process possibly devastate this planet for centuries to come. As Gebser observes: "We are on trial."^[27]

^[1] G. A. Miller, *Psychology: The Science of Mental Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 40.

^[2] Ibid. p. 40.

^[3] M. Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Princeton University Press, 1973), p. xx.

^[4] See P. Bowes, *Consciousness and Freedom: Three Views* (London: Methuen, 1971), p. xviii.

^[5] J. Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1985), p. 42.

^[6] Ibid. p. 99.

^[7] Ibid. p. 118.

^[8] Ibid. p. 137.

^[9] For Gebser each structure coincides with a particular reading of reality. He understands these different readings as projections. Since the arational-integral consciousness renders all other structures of consciousness transparent, we must assume that it also retracts all kinds of projections or single-choice interpretations of, and exclusive modes of participation in, reality.

^[10] J. Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, p. 203.

^[11] Ibid. pp. 203-204

^[12] Ibid. p. 204.

^[13] Ibid. p. 204.

^[14] Ibid. p. 204. I made one small change in the English translation which has simply "initiator" for "co-initiator," whereas the German original speaks of "co-initiating" (*mitauslosen*).

^[15] See J. Gebser, *Verfall and Teilhabe: Uber Polaritat, Dualitat, Identitat und den Ursprung* (Salzberg: Otto Miller, 1974), p. 122.

^[16] Ibid. p. 150.

^[17] J. Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, p. 134. I offer an emended reading of this passage.

^[18] Ibid. p. 135.

^[19] Ibid. p. 432.

^[20] J. Gebser, "The Spiritual Dimension of Modern Science," 1962 *Yearbook* (New Delhi: Max Mueller, Bhavan/German Cultural Institute, 1962), p. 18.

[21] In a letter to the author, dated May 10, 1972, Gebser writes: "Finally I can give you my answer to your question . . . why I do not identify--as does Aurobindo--the itself with consciousness (*cit*) and instead to say: 'The origin itself comes to awareness in discontinuous mutation. [*The Ever-Present Origin*, p. 39] Your question is answered by the preceding sentence where I speak of processes or relocation which made it possible for the spiritually accentuated origin to be assimilated into human consciousness . . . The source of the misunderstanding is our awkward German word *Bewusstsein* (as distinct from *conscience*: knowing-together!). Our intensifying consciousness is an increasing knowing-together about and with the origin; the origin itself is the first pre-form of a constellation [structure of consciousness] which is already close to time and which evolves out of that which underlies origin: the universal, as it were supraspiritual *Besustheit* [awareness]; and that of course one may identify with the itself insofar as the itself is expressive of a participation in the universal awareness, perhaps in the sense of Bohm's 'divine spark within us.' I believe I now know why earlier I did not express this identity more strongly: I was prevented by the concept of being contained in the word *Bewusstsein* [consciousness], because 'being' was transmogrified by Hegel and Heidegger, in a quite perverse way, into a secularized substitute for the concept of God. However, the origin or the *conscience universelle* have nothing to do with either the personified or the secularized God, nor with the personal or negated God idea. Furthermore, Hegel's declaration of God's death implied the concept of being as a substitute for the God concept. If I were to equate consciousness with the origin or the universal consciousness, then I would be removing the latter form from the 'divine' sphere, namely that of the *cit*."

[22] J. Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, p. 41.

[23] *Ibid.* p. 61

[24] *Ibid.* p. 45.

[25] See *Ibid.*, p. 38.

[26] *Ibid.* p. 40.

[27] J. Gebser, *In der Bewahrung: Zehn Hinweise auf das neue Bewusstsein* (Bern/Munich: Francke Verlag, 1969), p. 151.