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A Matter of Perspective The Philosophy of Jean Gebser and Integral Leadership

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Nowadays, leading managers in all kinds of companies and institutions are being challenged more than ever before. Due to an enormous growth in networking and a flood of new information, every situation has become so complex that no one is able to really see or grasp all aspects of those situations. Sometimes, decisions have to be made intuitively and from a perspective beyond traditional rational thinking. In this context, some ideas of the philosopher Jean Gebser (1905-1973) might be helpful.

Gebser introduced the concept of the *Integral*, which is now being applied more and more in leadership and intercultural trainings. Although Gebser did not consider these kinds of seminars or the dimension that globalisation has taken today, his philosophy puts its finger precisely and effectively on the jump (he uses the term “mutation”) that is crucial: the shift from a dualistic and rational perspective (worldview) to a new integral understanding of man and the world.

The Mental Structure

Gebser’s main subject was the history of human culture. He analyzed the tools, statues, scripts and paintings from the Stone Age up through modern times, and drew new conclusions about how people see and understand both themselves and the world around them. This view changes, obviously, and that shows that our ideas of time and space change as well. According to Gebser, the mental consciousness appears in the Greek Antique—after the archaic, the magic and the mythical consciousness. In this phase, man for the first time sees himself as an “I” —as a single individual, one who is opposed to an outside world that he tries to overcome more and more with his rational mind.

One of the characteristics of mental consciousness is goal-oriented thinking and planning, attempting to free and abstract itself from the soul’s mythical world of images. When Thales of Milet (600 B.C.) ordered the famous saying “Know Thyself” inscribed in the Apollo Temple at Athens, he had the letters run from left to right. This was different from before, and shows (according to Gebser) a specific intention of moving from the subconscious or dreaming consciousness (left) to waking consciousness (right). This radical change of directions—from left to right, from female to male, from imagination to rational think-

ing—would prove to be very powerful and fruitful over the following centuries. New insights in geometry, astronomy, biology and psychology became possible.

Today it has reached an extreme with catastrophic consequences. While in Plato's time man had started to measure the world and to become aware of space in which he could move and act, today in Western culture the principle of measuring has become a one-sided fixation, an obsession. The right measure has inflated into immoderateness (and self indulgence).

Without judging, Gebser describes this mental structure:

It is a world of man...in which he himself thinks and directs his thinking, and it is a world that he measures, that he is after, a material world, a world of objects, which is opposite to him.

(Jean Gebser: Ursprung und Gegenwart, Erster Teil, Novalis 2007, S. 132, quote translated from the German edition by C.S.)

However, just as with all the other or former structures of consciousness that still reside in us and are more or less alive and effective, there is an "efficient" phase in the beginning and a "deficient" phase in the end. We are now in the deficient phase of Mental Consciousness.

Even by the end of the 1960s Gebser put the computer as an example for the deficiency of the mental-rational and wrote:

Any indulgence in quantification leads to lack of power, emptiness and helplessness. Where this becomes obvious the structure of consciousness which is not sufficient any more, has already been overcome.

(Jean Gebser: Ursprung und Gegenwart, 2. Teil, Gesamtausgabe Novalis, 1977/2002, S. 684, quote translated by C.S.)

As English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) once said: "Thinking is counting in words."

Surpassing the Perspective

Let us come back to a fundamental concept of Gebser's: perspective is a basic feature and expression of our structure of consciousness. It shows where we stand and how we perceive the world and ourselves. In our culture we see ourselves as a point, as an individual in three-dimensional space. This perspective is shown already in antique pictures on Greek vases or on the walls of houses in Pompeii. However, it is only in the époque of the Renaissance that artists, especially Leonardo Da Vinci, put a detailed attention on perspective and created those wonderful paintings with their wide horizons.

Here something is shown clearly which we now feel as normal: I am here, in my position in space, from where I perceive the world. The more distant things are, the smaller they appear. I am in the world, in space and time, but at the same time it is opposite to me. I can try to dive deeper into it by means of a microscope or a telescope, but the separation, the dualism will always remain. Objects are out there, the perceiver is here.

Perspective is an important step in becoming more conscious, but we have now reached a point where it limits our freedom, fixates us to a view that doesn't represent our potential:

The perspective fixates the perceiver as well as the perceived...On one side man who due to this isolating fixation has to stress his I more and more, on the other side the world as an opposite, an enemy which becomes stronger by taking more and more space.

(Jean Gebser: Ursprung und Gegenwart. Erster Teil, Novalis 2007, S. 160, quote translated by C.S.)

Can this perspective—“my” position—somehow be loosened or even dissolved? Gebser’s answer to this question is the essence of his philosophy: The A-perspective. (That is not *no* or *non*-perspective; the A means “freedom from.”)

As an example, he presents the art of his friend Pablo Picasso. In some of Picasso’s paintings, bodies and forms seem to dissolve into geometrical structures and are not graspable any more as “things”—in a way comparable to the descriptions that physicists give nowadays of the world: as a dance of atoms and energy.

Gebser’s interpretation is that this is a new adventurous journey into a consciousness beyond time and space. If our ideas and concepts of time and space have changed so much in our history, why should it not be possible to overcome them altogether?

Gebser’s extensive analysis leads us to an unavoidable change of consciousness, to an integral consciousness that overcomes time and space and at the same time integrates the separating “I” into an all-including wholeness. Here, only a rough sketch can be given.

Integral Consciousness: Freedom of Time and Space

Freedom of time (“a-chronon”): We can reach this state (of consciousness) if we become aware of the former structures (archaic, magic, etc.) and if we search for the origin of time. The A-chronon is an understanding

...which is aware of the different forms of time—timelessness, time in nature, clock time. To be able to apply that in our life makes us free of them and puts us into freedom of time, into the consciously realized and always present origin. This freedom of time is the conscious form of the archaic state of being before time.

(J. Gebser: Die Welt ohne Gegenüber, Gesamtausgabe Band V/I, Novalis 2002, S. 271, quote translated by C.S.)

Jean Gebser’s concept of the evolution of consciousness is not fixed on a linear timeline of a past and a future mankind. Consciousness is not in time but rather creates time and therefore unforeseeable possibilities. Gebser’s vision is remarkably free of valuations and ideologies—it leaves us with a wide and open horizon. That’s why it encourages us to be free in our way of thinking and acting.

About the Author

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