

# Jean Gebser

## The Ever-present Origin.

### Part One

#### *Chapter 1* Fundamental Considerations

Anyone today who considers the emergence of a new era of mankind as a certainty and expresses the conviction that our rescue from collapse and chaos could come about by virtue of a new attitude and a new formation of man's consciousness, will surely elicit less credence than those who have heralded the decline of the West. Contemporaries of totalitarianism, World War II, and the atom bomb seem more likely to abandon even their very last stand than to realize the possibility of a transition, a new constellation or a transformation, or even to evince any readiness to take a leap into tomorrow, although the harbingers of tomorrow, the evidence of transformation, and other signs of the new and imminent cannot have gone entirely unnoticed. Such a reaction, the reaction of a mentality headed for a fall, is only too typical of man in transition.

The present book is, in fact, the account of the nascence of a new world and a new consciousness. It is based not on ideas or speculations but on insights into mankind's mutations from its primordial beginnings up to the present - on perhaps novel insights into the forms of consciousness manifest in the various epochs of mankind: insights into the powers behind their realization as manifest between origin and the present, and active in origin and the present. And as the origin before all time is the entirety of the very beginning, so too is the present the entirety of everything temporal and time-bound, including the effectual reality of all time phases: yesterday, today, tomorrow, and even the pre-temporal and timeless.

The structuration we have discovered seems to us to reveal the bases of consciousness, thereby enabling us to make a contribution to the understanding of man's emergent consciousness. It is based on the recognition that in the course of mankind's history - and not only Western man's - clearly discernable worlds stand out whose development or unfolding took place in mutations of consciousness. This, then, presents the task of a cultural-historical analysis of the various structures of consciousness as they have proceeded from the various mutations.

For this analysis we shall employ a method of demonstrating the respective consciousness structures of the various "epochs" on the basis of their representative evidence and their unique forms of visual as well as linguistic expression. This approach, which is not limited to the currently dominant mentality, attempts to present in visible, tangible, and audible form the respective consciousness structures from within their specific modalities and unique constitutions by means appropriate to their natures.

By returning to the very sources of human development as we observe all of the structures of consciousness, and moving from there toward our present day and our contemporary situation and consciousness, we can not only discover the past and the present moment of our existence but also gain a view into the future which reveals the traits of a new reality amidst the decline of our age.

It is our belief that the essential traits of a new age and a new reality are discernible in nearly all forms of contemporary expression, whether in the creations of modern art, or in the recent findings of the natural sciences, or in the results of the humanities and sciences of the mind. Moreover we are in a position to define this new reality in such a way as to emphasize one of its most significant elements. Our definition is a natural corollary of the recognition that man's coming to awareness is inseparably bound to his consciousness of space and time.

Scarcely five hundred years ago, during the Renaissance, an unmistakable reorganization of our consciousness occurred: the discovery of perspective which opened up the three-dimensionality of space. This discovery is so closely linked with the entire intellectual attitude of the modern epoch that we have felt obliged to call this age the age of perspectivity and characterize the age immediately preceding it as the "unperspectival" age. These definitions, by recognizing a fundamental characteristic of these eras, lead to the further appropriate definition of the age of the dawning new consciousness as the "aperspectival" age, a

definition supported not only by the results of modern physics, but also by developments in the visual arts and literature, where the incorporation of time as a fourth dimension into previously spatial conceptions has formed the initial basis for manifesting the "new."

"Aperspectival" is not to be thought of as merely the opposite or negation of "perspectival"; the antithesis of "perspectival" is "unperspectival." The distinction in meaning suggested by the three terms unperspectival, perspectival, and aperspectival is analogous to that of the terms illogical, logical, and alogical or immoral, moral, and amoral. We have employed here the designation "aperspectival" to clearly emphasize the need of overcoming the mere antithesis of affirmation and negation. The so-called primal words (Urworte), for example, evidence two antithetic connotations: Latin *altus* meant "high" as well as "low"; *sacer* meant "sacred" as well as "cursed." Such primal words as these formed an undifferentiated psychically-stressed unity whose bivalent nature was definitely familiar to the early Egyptians and Greeks. This is no longer the case with our present sense of language; consequently, we have required a term that transcends equally the ambivalence of the primal connotations and the dualism of antonyms or conceptual opposites.

Hence we have used the Greek prefix "a-" in conjunction with our Latin-derived word "perspectival" in the sense of an alpha privativum and not as an alpha negativum, since the prefix has a liberating character (privativum, derived from Latin *privare*, i.e., "to liberate"). The designation "aperspectival," in consequence, expresses a process of liberation from the exclusive validity of perspectival and unperspectival, as well as pre-perspectival limitations. Our designation, then, does not attempt to unite the inherently coexistent unperspectival and perspectival structures, nor does it attempt to reconcile or synthesize structures which, in their deficient modes, have become irreconcilable. If "aperspectival" were to represent only a synthesis it would imply no more than "perspectival-rational" and it would be limited and only momentarily valid, inasmuch as every union is threatened by further separation. Our concern is with integrality and ultimately with the whole; the word "aperspectival" conveys our attempt to deal with wholeness. It is a definition which differentiates a perception of reality that is neither perspectivally restricted to only one sector nor merely unperspectivally evocative of a vague sense of reality.

Finally, we would emphasize the general validity of the term "aperspectival"; it is definitely not intended to be understood as an extension of concepts used in art history and should not be so construed. When we introduced the concept in 1936/1939, it was within the context of scientific as well as artistic traditions. The perspectival structure as fully realized by Leonardo da Vinci is of fundamental importance not only to our scientific-technological but also artistic understanding of the world. Without perspective neither technical drafting nor three-dimensional painting would have been possible. Leonardo -scientist, engineer, and artist in one - was the first to fully develop drafting techniques and perspectival painting. In this same sense, that is from a scientific as well as artistic standpoint, the term "aperspectival" is valid, and the basis for this significance must not be overlooked, for it legitimizes the validity and applicability of the term to the sciences, the humanities, and the arts.

It is our intent to furnish evidence that the aperspectival world, whose nascence we are witnessing, can liberate us from the superannated legacy of both the unperspectival and the perspectival worlds. In very general terms we might say that the unperspectival world preceded the world of mind- and ego-bound perspective discovered and anticipated in late antiquity and first apparent in Leonardo's application of it. Viewed in this manner the unperspectival world is collective, the perspectival individualistic. That is, the unperspectival world is related to the anonymous "one" or the tribal "we," the perspectival to the "I" or Ego; the one world is grounded in Being, the other, beginning with the Renaissance, in Having; the former is predominantly irrational, the later rational.

Today, at least in Western civilization, both modes survive only as deteriorated and consequently dubious variants. This is evident from the sociological and anthropological questions currently discussed in the Occidental forum; only questions that are unresolved are discussed with the vehemence characteristic of these discussions. The current situation manifests on the one hand an egocentric individualism exaggerated to extremes and desirous of possessing everything, while on the other it manifests an equally extreme collectivism that promises the total fulfillment of man's being. In the latter instance we find the utter abnegation of the individual valued merely as an object in the human aggregate; in the former a hyper-valuation of the individual who, despite his limitations, is permitted everything. This deficient, that is destructive, antithesis divides the world into two warring camps, not just politically and

ideologically, but in all areas of human endeavor.

Since these two ideologies are now pressing toward their limits we can assume that neither can prevail in the long run. When any movement tends to the extremes it leads away from the center or nucleus toward eventual destruction at the outer limits where the connections to the life-giving center finally are severed. It would seem that today the connections are already broken, for it is increasingly evident that the individual is being driven into isolation while the collective degenerates into mere aggregation. These two conditions, isolation and aggregation, are in fact clear indications that individualism and collectivism have now become deficient.

When we have grasped this it is at once apparent that we can extricate ourselves from our dangerous situation only by ordering our relationships to ourselves, to our "I" or Ego, and not just our relationships with others, to the "Thou," that is to God, the world, our fellow man and neighbor. That seems possible only if we are willing to assimilate the entirety of our human existence into our awareness. This means that all of our structures of awareness that form and support our present consciousness structure will have to be integrated into a new and more intensive form, which would in fact unlock a new reality. To that end we must constantly relive and re-experience in a decisive sense the full depth of our past. The adage that anyone who denies and condemns his past also abnegates his future is valid for the individual as well as for mankind. Our plea for an appropriate ordering and conscious realization of our relationships to the "I" as well as the "Thou" chiefly concerns the ordering and conscious recognition of our origin, and of all factors leading to the present. It is only in terms of man in his entirety that we shall achieve the necessary detachment from the present situation, i.e., from both our unaperspectival ties to the group or collective, and our perspectival attachment to the separated, individual Ego. When we become aware of the exhausted residua of past or passing forms of our understanding of reality we will recognize more clearly the signs of the inevitable "new." We will also sense that there are new sources which can be tapped: the sources of the aperspectival world that can liberate us from the two exhausted and deficient forms which have become almost completely invalid and are certainly no longer all-inclusive or decisive.

It is our task in this book to work out this aperspectival basis. Our discussion will rely more on the evidence presented in the history of thought than on the findings of the natural sciences as is the case with the author's *Transformation of the Occident*. Among the disciplines of historical thought the investigation of language will form the predominant source of our insight since it is the pre-eminent means of reciprocal communication between man and the world.

It is not sufficient for us to merely furnish a postulate; rather, it will be necessary to show the latent possibilities in us and in our present, possibilities that are about to become acute, that is, effectual and consequently real. In the following discussion we shall therefore proceed from two basic considerations:

1. A mere interpretation of our times is inadequate. We must furnish concrete evidence of phenomena that are clearly revealed as being new and that transform not only our countenance, but the very countenance of time.

2. The condition of today's world cannot be transformed by technocratic rationality, since both technocracy and rationality are apparently nearing their apex; nor can it be transcended by preaching or admonishing a return to ethics and morality, or in fact, by any form of return to the past.

We have only one option: in examining the manifestations of our age, we must penetrate them with sufficient breadth and depth that we do not come under their demonic and destructive spell. We must not focus our view merely on these phenomena, but rather on the humus of the decaying world beneath, where the seedlings of the future are growing, immeasurable in their potential and vigor. Since our insight into the energies pressing toward development aids their unfolding, the seedlings and inceptive beginnings must be made visible and comprehensible.

It will be our task to demonstrate that the first stirrings of the new can be found in all areas of human expression, and that they inherently share a common character. This demonstration can succeed only if we have certain knowledge about the manifestations of both our past and our present. Consequently, the task of the present work will be to work out the foundations of the past and the present which are also the basis of the new consciousness and the new reality arising therefrom. It will be the task of the second part to define the new emergent consciousness structure to the extent that its inceptions are already visible.

We shall therefore begin with the evidence and not with idealistic constructions; in the face of

present-day weapons of annihilation, such constructions have less chance of survival than ever before. But as we shall see, weapons and nuclear fission are not the only realities to be dealt with; spiritual reality in its intensified form is also becoming effectual and real. This new spiritual reality is without question our only security that the threat of material destruction can be averted. Its realization alone seems able to guarantee man's continuing existence in the face of the powers of technology, rationality, and chaotic emotion. If our consciousness, that is, the individual person's awareness, vigilance, and clarity of vision, cannot master the new reality and make possible its realization, then the prophets of doom will have been correct. Other alternatives are an illusion; consequently, great demands are placed on us, and each one of us have been given a grave responsibility, not merely to survey but to actually traverse the path opening before us.

There are surely enough historical instances of the catastrophic downfall of entire peoples and cultures. Such declines were triggered by the collision of deficient and exhausted attitudes that were insufficient for continuance with those more recent, more intense and, in some respects, superior. One such occurrence vividly exemplifies the decisive nature of such crises: the collision of the magical, mythical, and unperspectival culture of the Central American Aztecs with the rational-technological, perspectival attitude of the sixteenth-century Spanish conquistadors. A description of this event can be found in the Aztec chronicle of Frey Bernardino de Sahagun, written eight years after Cortez' conquest of Mexico on the basis of Aztec accounts. The following excerpt forms the beginning of the thirteenth chapter of the chronicle which describes the conquest of Mexico City:

The thirteenth chapter, wherein is recounted  
 how the Mexican king Montezuma  
 sends other sorcerers  
 who were to cast a spell on the Spanish  
 and what happened to them on the way.  
 And the second group of messengers -  
 the soothsayers, the magicians, and the high priests -  
 likewise went to receive the Spanish.  
 But it was to no avail;  
 But it was to no avail;  
 they could not bewitch the people,  
 they could not reach their intent with the Spanish;  
 they simply failed to arrive.

There is hardly another text extant that describes so succinctly and so memorably the collapse of an entire world and a hitherto valid and effectual human attitude. The magic-mythical world of the Mexicans could not prevail against the Spaniards; it collapsed the moment it encountered the rational-technological mentality. The materialistic orientation of present-day Europeans will tend to attribute this collapse to the Spaniards' technological superiority, but in actual fact it was the vigor of the Spanish consciousness vis-à-vis the weakness of the Mexican that was decisive. It is the basic distinction between the ego-less man, bound to the group and a collective mentality, and the individual securely conscious of his individuality. Authentic spell-casting, a fundamental element of the collective consciousness for the Mexicans, is effective only for the members attuned to the group consciousness. It simply by-passes those who are not bound to, or sympathetic toward, the group. The Spaniards' superiority, which compelled the Mexicans to surrender almost without a struggle, resulted primarily from their consciousness of individuality, not from their superior weaponry. Had it been possible for the Mexicans to step out of their egoless attitude, the Spanish victory would have been less certain and assuredly more difficult.

What is of interest to us within the present context is not the historical predicament occasioned by the collision of peoples of differing might, but rather the supersession of the magic group-consciousness and its most potent weapon, spell-casting, by rational, ego-consciousness. Today this rational consciousness, with nuclear fission its strongest weapon, is confronted by a similar catastrophic situation of failure; consequently, it too can be vanquished by a new consciousness structure. We are convinced that there are powers arising from within ourselves that are already at work overcoming the deficiency and dubious nature of our rational ego-consciousness via the new aperspectival awareness whose manifestations are surging forth everywhere. The aperspective consciousness structure is a

consciousness of the whole, an integral consciousness encompassing all time and embracing both man's distant past and his approaching future as a living present. The new spiritual attitude can take root only through an insightful process of intensive awareness. This attitude must emerge from its present concealment and latency and become effective, and thereby prepare the transparency of the world and man in which spirituality can manifest itself.

The first part of the present work, which is devoted to the foundations of the aperspectival world, is intended to furnish convincing evidence for this new spiritual attitude. This evidence rests on two guiding principles whose validity will gradually become clear:

1) Latency - what is concealed - is the demonstrable presence of the future. It includes everything that is not yet manifest, as well as everything which has again returned to latency. Since we are dealing here primarily with phenomena of consciousness and integration, we will also have to investigate questions of history, the soul and the psyche, time, space, and the forms of thought.

Since the second part of this work is devoted to manifestations of the new consciousness, the first part must clarify questions relating to the manifestations of previous and present consciousness structures. We shall attempt to demonstrate the incipient concretion of time and the spiritual dimension which are preconditions of the aperspectival world. We shall also attempt to furnish evidence of the increasing efficacy of that spiritual reality (which is neither a mere psychic state nor an intellectual-rational form of representation). This will bring out the validity of our second guiding principle:

2) Transparency (diaphaneity) is the form of manifestation (epiphany) of the spiritual.

Our concern is to render transparent everything latent "behind" and "before" the world - to render transparent our own origin, our entire human past, as well as the present, which already contains the future. We are shaped and determined not only by today and yesterday, but by tomorrow as well. The author is not interested in outlining discrete segments, steps or levels of man, but in disclosing the transparency of man as a whole and the interplay of the various consciousness structures which constitute him. This transparency or diaphaneity of our existence is particularly evident during transitional periods, and it is from the experiences of man in transition, experiences which man has had with the concealed and latent aspects of his dawning future as he became aware of them, that will clarify our own experiencing of the present.

It is perhaps unnecessary to reiterate that we cannot employ the methods derived from and dependent on our present consciousness structure to investigate different structures of consciousness, but will have to adapt our method to the specific structure under investigation. Yet if we relinquish a unitary methodology we do not necessarily regress to an unmethodological or irrational attitude, or to a kind of conjuration or mystical contemplation. Contemporary methods employ predominantly dualistic procedures that do not extend beyond simple subject-object relationships; they limit our understanding to what is commensurate with the present Western mentality. Even where the measurements of contemporary methodologies are based primarily on quantitative criteria, they are all vitiated by the problem of the antithesis between "measure" and mass (as we will discuss later in detail). Our "method" is not just a "measured" assessment, but above and beyond this an attempt at "diaphany" or rendering transparent. With its aid, whatever lies "behind" (past) and "ahead of" (future) the currently dominant mentality becomes accessible to the new subject-object relationship. Although this new relationship is no longer dualistic, it does not threaten man with a loss of identity, or with his being equated with an object. Although this new method is still in its infancy, we are nevertheless compelled to make use of it.

In summary, it should be said that our description does not deal with a new image of the world, nor with a new *Weltanschauung*, nor with a new conception of the world. A new image would be no more than the creation of a myth, since all imagery has a predominantly mythical nature. A new *Weltanschauung* would be nothing else than a new mysticism and irrationality, as mythical characteristics are inherent in all contemplation to the extent that it is merely visionary; and a new conception of the world would be nothing else than yet another standard rationalistic construction of the present, for conceptualization has an essentially rational and abstract nature.

Our concern is with a new reality - a reality functioning and effectual integrally, in which intensity and action, the effective and the effect co-exist; one where origin, by virtue of "presentation," blossoms forth anew; and one in which the present is all-encompassing and entire. Integral reality is the world's transparency, a perceiving of the world as truth: a mutual perceiving and imparting of truth of the world and of man and of all that transluces both.