

“Don’t Swim Upriver to that Shallow Pond, Bataille! There’s an Oceanic Lake Ahead”:
A Theory of Two Oceanic Forms of Being
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Two European contemporaries from the first half of the 20th century, Georges Bataille (1897-1962) and Jean Gebser (1905-1973), created impressive theories that chart humanity’s form of being from an original state of oceanic existence to modernity’s fragmented form. Both thinkers postulate humanity’s earliest mode of being as one of non-differentiation and continuity, after which humanity underwent various disruptions or mutations, which resulted in the modern form of insurmountable differentiation. As presented, the initial oceanic of archaic continuity was broken and humanity fell into the modern mode of divisive mental structures, thinghood, and lost its original intimacy. In all these regards, Bataille and Gebser generally agree and concur that the oceanic of non-differentiation is the only ‘solution’ to the modern condition. Yet, their conceptualizations diverge around the nature of *which* oceanic is needed, whether it is ‘behind’ us or ‘ahead’ of us, and how this state can be realized; Bataille suggests a retreat into the original continuity, whereas Gebser proposes a leap forward into an integral oceanic. Their theories suggest two kinds of oceanics, a pre-fallen and a post-fallen oceanic; Bataille believes the archaic former is still attainable through ecstatic immersion, whereas Gebser claims the latter is viable and the former is no longer accessible by way of backtracking. Paradoxically, both alternatives hold the essential character of the oceanic as non-differentiation, yet they also appear dissimilar. In short, a comparative investigation into these theories reveals two distinct oceanic forms of existence founded on dissimilar logical sequences, and it opens the door for many new fascinating questions about a multiplicity of oceanic existences distinguished by depth as well as a new possible explanation for traditions that conceptualize an initial unity once broken.

Before commencing, a quick structural overview will be provided for clarity. Overall, this paper will follow a comparative format to introduce the theories at hand while attesting to their remarkable commonalities. The second task will be to reflect about how these theories deviate despite parallel beginnings and especially what this divergence reveals. To begin the comparison

and background portion, Georges Bataille's *Theory of Religion*¹ will be examined with an emphasis on his view of humanity's original state. Then, Jean Gebser's section titled "Origin or the Archaic Structure" in *The Ever-Present Origin*² will be discussed to substantiate the unity of these authors' conceptualizations about the pre-fallen, continuous oceanic; these conceptualizations of an archaic oceanic are typical and even interchangeable, as they point to the same sort of continual non-differentiation at humanity's origin. Notably, these two main texts will be the foundation of analysis. After the oceanic origin, the authors agree that certain changes altered humanity's consciousness and state; these mutations will also be reviewed. Afterwards, elements of Gebser's integral oceanic will be examined to demonstrate how he is suggesting a different state of non-differentiation. Consequentially, this postulates two nearly indistinguishable oceanics: an archaic oceanic and an integral oceanic. Lastly, reflections will be made concerning what these theories convey about the nature of oceanic existence. Methodologically, this paper has set certain parameters for itself. For the sake of consolidation, some features of these theories have been shortened or omitted, and a choice has been made to primarily focus on two texts.

Georges Bataille begins his *Theory of Religion* by describing humanity's "descendance" from an initial state termed "animality", equated also with "immediacy", or "immanence"³. Via a poetic description, he overcomes conceptual hurdles to describe this form of being. Bataille writes, "every animal is *in the world like water in water*"⁴. Using the example of an animal eating another animal, Bataille theorizes that there is no distinction between the eater and the eaten because no "discernible difference" exists without a "positing of the object", by which a mental qualitative difference is necessary⁵. This qualitative difference, generated by a distinction between a subject-object, does not exist in animality⁶. Hence, animality is an oceanic state of qualitative sameness. In prediction of possible skepticism towards this assertion, Bataille acknowledges that *quantitative* differences exist. For example, there is an obvious unequal

¹ Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 2012).

² Jean Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, trans. Noel Barstad and Algis Mickunas (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1984).

³ Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 2012), pp. 17-20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

proportion of strength between animals. However, this is simply, “a higher wave overturning the other, weaker ones”⁷; the water, the qualitative, is the exact same, but the wave, the quantitative, is different. Due to non-differentiation, there is no “relation of *subordination*” in the same way that an object, or tool, relate to a human subject⁸. In addition, Bataille characterizes animality as a “continuity”⁹. There is an “intimacy” or “deep subjectivity” present in this continuity¹⁰. Bataille admits that humans may not have been completely immersed in this world of animality, suggesting that perhaps humans distinguished themselves from animals in some minor sense; nevertheless, the “first men” were undoubtedly very close to this “continuity” and a sever occurred only after the “discontinuous object”, tools, were introduced¹¹. In many ways, Bataille’s conceptualization of an oceanic existence is archetypal because it is a proposed reversal to a state before mental divisions were created, and a self-induced Fall away from origin. Prior to examining Gebser’s comparable views about an archaic oceanic origin, it should be mentioned that Bataille perceives a continual connection between animality and humanity in the depths of our being.

According to Bataille the animal world profounds humanity. There is something mysterious about it, “a depth that attracts me and is familiar to me. In a sense, I know this depth: it is my own. It is also that which is farthest removed from me, that which deserves the name depth, which means precisely *that which is unfathomable to me*”¹². Against this depth of commonality is the discernment function of consciousness which, “will move me farthest away, finally, from that unknowable truth which, from myself to the world, appears to me only to slip away”¹³. Animality is closed to us because we cannot “discern in it an ability to transcend itself”¹⁴, nor access it through the clear consciousness of modernity. Nonetheless, there is something about it, a felt connection, that persists in the depths of consciousness which hints that it is somehow more fundamental. From these speculations, a lasting tension persists between

⁷ Ibid., 18-19.

⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁹ Ibid., 24-25.

¹⁰ Ibid., 33.

¹¹ Ibid., 35.

¹² Ibid., 22.

¹³ Ibid., 23.

¹⁴ Ibid.

animality and rational tool-using humanity. Next, Gebser's similar conceptualization of an archaic oceanic will be discussed.

In *the Ever-Present Origin*, Jean Gebser's theorization of an archaic origin parallel Bataille's animality. Termed as the "archaic structure", this form of consciousness and being is a, "full identity between inner and outer...a microcosmic and macrocosmic harmony" comprising of a "perfect identity of man and universe" which at its core is a consciousness of qualitative sameness¹⁵. Already this is a signaled discussion of an archaic, original oceanic form of being. Interestingly, Gebser quotes a passage from the Daoist text, *Zhuangzi*, to describe the archaic state, 'Dreamlessly the true men of earlier times slept'¹⁶; this seems quite blatantly akin to Bataille's "deep subjectivity". Subsequently, Gebser emphasizes the important phraseology of "true men" because it reflects the Daoist admiration for the archaic oceanic¹⁷. Moreover, the quote reveals the element of non-disruption, or non-differentiation, related to an "emphatic absence of dualistic opposition in archaic man"¹⁸. Like Bataille theorizes, there was no subject-object dichotomy nor a dichotomy of any kind. Gebser reluctantly uses language, a medium structured around division, to define the archaic structure as, "zero-dimensional, pre-spatial, pre-temporal, integral, a deep sleep"¹⁹. Also, the "external", "objective" world is termed as an "unconscious spirit" in which 'archaic man' lacks any awareness of a separate "subjective", "internal" world²⁰; he terms this relation as integrality analogous with Bataille's "continuity"²¹. Gebser imagines the archaic structure as still existent within us and accessible to human consciousness, but often overpowered by other consciousness structures; this is like Bataille's assertion about the continual existence of this continuity as a mysterious depth within humans. Now it is critical to outline how each thinker, starting with Bataille, map humanity's form of existence as we mutated away and separated from our oceanic origin. It is particularly relevant to mention what changes affected humanity's consciousness and how these triggered a domino-effect bringing humanity ever further from its oceanic source.

¹⁵ Jean Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, trans. Noel Barstad and Algis Mickunas (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1984), 45.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 117-149.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 120.

²¹ Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 2012), pp. 24-25.

For Bataille, the thorn of humanity's existence is "the tool". Upon its creation, "tools" threw humanity from its oceanic existence into a state that posited an object, and henceforth shattered the non-differentiated continuity²². A "nascent form of the non-I" and an exteriority in the world was created²³. Due to animality's qualitative sameness, there was initially no "relation of subordination"²⁴. Then, however, tools introduced many complications including an unequal relationship of subordination amongst the entire external world. With tools, humanity premeditated a thing's utility during creation, began evaluating everything through a practical lens, valued things as qualitatively unequal, bent the world to human liking by way of things, and subordinated the tool, a category that now applied to everything in the external world, to its ego-oriented user²⁵. Fatefully, tools altered humans wherein a farmer or worker also became a mere "thing" while working²⁶. Although the tool becomes the subject's property, or thing, it also remains "impervious" to the subject²⁷. In this tension, the tool becomes a subject-object in which it "receives attributes of the subject" and returns to the animal world, but yet it is forever withdrawn from the continuum because it retains its separateness "in the mind of the one who created it"²⁸. Bataille considers this shift closely, "a man can regard this object, an arrow say, as his fellow being without taking away the operative power and transcendence of the arrow...this arrow, in his eyes, is capable of acting, thinking, and speaking like him"²⁹; this appears to be Bataille's account of phenomena other theories have called 'magic' or 'fetishism'. Once tools split the oceanic continuity, a chain-effect began.

Toolhood was a qualitative differentiation which prompted a fundamental polarity between subject-object, internal-external, means-ends, human-tool, and introduced relations of subordination. In this split and "against the poverty of the profane tool", humanity needed an opposite, the sacred³⁰. A hierarchy of things called for a hierarchy of spirits; the idea of spirits was already present in the reduction to thinghood when things held a "creative power", an

²² Ibid. 27.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 18.

²⁵ Ibid., 28.

²⁶ Ibid., 41-41.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 32-33.

²⁹ Ibid., 33.

³⁰ Ibid., 35.

“isolated individuality”, and things had a spirit of agency³¹. Existence turned into a hierarchal chain where humanity self-entrapped itself between the “supreme being” of pure spirit on one side and mere matter on the other³². In this polarity, humanity perceived itself as existing in a fallen state. At this point the mind was viewed as divine and the body vile³³. Since humans are corporeal beings, we inherently exist in the world of things and bodies despising this part of existence in a form of bodily self-loathing³⁴. Bataille writes, “it is man’s misfortune to have the body of an animal and thus to be like a thing, but it is the glory of the human body to be the substratum of a spirit”³⁵. Bataille sums up this existential jump, “within the limits of continuity, everything is spiritual; there is no opposition of the mind and the body”, but then, “real animals and plants separated from their spiritual truth slowly rejoin the empty objectivity of tools; the mortal body is gradually assimilated to the mass of things...”³⁶. Bataille aims to emphasize that the tool-world broke the oceanic continuity and seeped into all areas of consciousness including self-perception. Fortunately, there are moments when the oceanic intimacy can be recovered such as through ecstatic immersion during rituals, festivals, and sacrifices³⁷. Over time, the initial polarity exacerbated into a dualism that splintered entities into ever-smaller fragments.

After polarity differentiated human consciousness, dualism increased division on an even greater, more fundamental level. An example has already been mentioned, how humans divided and positioned themselves between the sacred and the profane, between spirit and matter. Moreover, dualism permeated all conceptual spheres, sub-splitting every distinction, where an opposing ‘other’ is placed at every conceptual core. For example, the sacred itself is divided, “...the dark and malefic sacred is opposed to the white and beneficent sacred...”³⁸; self-evidently, this is a slight jab at many religious traditions and especially monotheistic systems who maintain this good-evil, light-dark juxtaposition within the sacred. In this dualistic format, humanity becomes the antithesis of “archaic man in that there is no longer any intimacy between

³¹ Ibid., 33.

³² Ibid., 36-37.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 40.

³⁶ Ibid., 38.

³⁷ Ibid., 43-57.

³⁸ Ibid., 72.

him and this world”³⁹. Dualistic humanity is “reflective”, yet ironically this reflexivity separates oneself from everything at the most basic level⁴⁰. This limited overview suffices at summarizing Bataille’s view on how the human being went from oceanic continuity into today’s fragmented form. Next, Jean Gebser’s theory will be sketched while accentuating certain commonalities.

Gebser charts humanity’s history as a path of consciousness that originates from an oceanic “archaic structure” and then mutates into other structures while retaining them in some unintegrated form. Following the archaic, there are the “magic”, “mythical”, and “mental” consciousness structures⁴¹. The mental structure is modernity’s dominant consciousness. Gebser extrapolates key features of these structures and delineates them from one another, but also acknowledges that there are many in-between mutational moments like a ‘post-archaic’ and a ‘pre-magical’⁴². Prefacing remarks should first be given. Consciousness should be taken in its broadest sense as “wakeful presence” and a mutation constitutes an intensification of that presence⁴³. Crucially, Gebser remarks that he is discussing a “spiritual”, not a biological or historical mutational process⁴⁴. He explains that mutations occur, “in leaps...spontaneously, indeterminately...discontinuously...” and “the apparent continuity is no more than a sequence subsequently superimposed onto overlapping events to lend them the reassuring appearance of a logically determinate progression”⁴⁵. Therefore, Gebser terms this process as a series of “mutations”, or leaps from origin (*Ur-sprung*) to reflect a fundamental “discontinuous nature”, and to distance his theory from value-laden terms including “progress, evolution, and development”⁴⁶. Significantly, Gebser writes about the omnipresent nature of these structures in that they are, “not merely past, but are in fact still present in more or less latent and acute form in each one of us”⁴⁷. Having provided the bones of Gebser’s framework, I shall now outline each individual structure as briefly as possible, assuming that the reader is unfamiliar with his theoretical model.

³⁹ Ibid., 74.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Jean Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, trans. Noel Barstad and Algis Mickunas (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1984).

⁴² Ibid., 45.

⁴³ Ibid., 42.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 38.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 42.

Whereas the archaic structure was an oceanic of identity or non-differentiated sameness, the magic structure was a unity that “released [man] from his harmony or identity with the whole” and “magic man” was for the first time “*in the world*”⁴⁸. However, “magic man” is not yet an individual in the modern sense since, “all things and persons are interrelated” in the form of a “group-ego”⁴⁹. Furthermore, a “plurality of souls” exists to help ‘him’ cope with ‘his’ confusion about this new outer world⁵⁰. Conscious of the “transcendent power of nature”, humans used “witchcraft and sorcery, totem and taboo” and tools as “natural means by which he [sought] to free himself” from its inferiority to nature⁵¹. In sum, there are five characteristics of the magic structure: “egolessness”, “point-like unitary world”, “spacelessness and timelessness”, “a merging with nature”, and “his magic reaction to this merging (giving him power and making him a ‘Maker’)”⁵². It is pre-rational, pre-causal, emotional, and instinct-driven⁵³. The magic structure occurred mainly in prehistory, which linguistically highlights an essential element, namely, “it lies *before* time, before our consciousness of time”⁵⁴. The mythical structure’s mutation emerged with the determination of temporality.

The structural leap to the mythical is indicated in the emergence of calendars in ancient civilizations, demonstrating humanity’s successful interpretation of natural rhythms of nature, or a “coming-to-awareness of nature”⁵⁵. Consequentially, nature was slightly less unpredictable and could be understood to an extent via patterns. Additionally, the mythical is distinguished by an “emergent awareness of soul”, or the internal world of the subject⁵⁶. In general, the mythical structure can be viewed as, “irrational”, “imaginative”, and a “parental world” organized around a matriarchy⁵⁷. Furthermore, the mythical represents a “two-dimensional polarity”, where this polarity still comes forms a type of unity unlike a duality; for example, the seasonal opposites of summer and winter are knit together into a circular whole of a calendar year⁵⁸. Like Bataille,

⁴⁸ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.t

⁵² Ibid., 48.

⁵³ Ibid.,144-146.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 61.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 66.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 144-149.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Gebser perceives a detrimental shift when polarity becomes a duality. The polarity is no longer bridgeable in a unity and subdivision saturates life⁵⁹. Dualism is an indicator of the mental structure.

Gebser traces the mental structure's emergence to around the Axial Age (~500 BCE) when all the interconnected cultures of the world experienced a noticeable intellectual bloom. The 'West' relied primarily on Athenian minds to awaken the mental structure, but its slow emergence can be deciphered in multiple settings and traced at least as far back as Moses⁶⁰; Gebser cites Moses' law-giving, patriarchal centrism, and proclamation of reflective self-judgement as evidence⁶¹. According to Gebser, attributes of the mental are present in many figures including Confucius, Laozi, and Zhuangzi in China, Lycurgus, Sophocles, Euclid, and Parmenides in Greece, Zarathustra in Persia, and countless others including the usual icons of Greek antiquity: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle⁶². The mental structure consists of "mental abstraction", "dualism", "rationalism", "finalism", "utilitarianism", "materialism", and causality⁶³. A further realization of the mental structure occurred during the European Renaissance when perspectivity was attained⁶⁴. In the mental structure, duality is rampant and Gebser sees a synthesis as insufficient⁶⁵. Gebser comments about dualism:

"duality is the mental splitting and tearing apart of polarity...duality abstracts and quantifies the oppositions or antitheses...from duality, only a deficient, because unstable, form of unity can be realized...Accordingly, it does not represent a new unity but merely a quantity that becomes dependent on its antithesis or opposite..."⁶⁶.

An important element mentioned is quantification. In duality and perspectivity, an inherent quantification exists that distorts the value or quality of things. As shown, qualitative differentiation, the opposite of the oceanic sameness, increases tremendously in the mental. Gebser illustrates the domino-effect of qualitative degradation, "an isolating perspectivation is inherent in every abstraction, and that perspectivation leads to sectorization", in which

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 79.

⁶¹ Ibid..

⁶² Ibid., 73-80.

⁶³ Ibid., 77.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 73.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 95.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 85-86.

phenomena whether mental or material “...are not only divided and measurable, but also quantified by a progressive subdividing and subsectoring”, wherein “abstraction and quantification ultimately lead to emptiness, indeed to chaos”⁶⁷. Bataille and Gebser agree that humanity exists in a barely habitable existential place, and the oceanic is the only true ‘solution’. However, Gebser views structural deficiency as responsible for problems rather than the process of leaving the archaic itself⁶⁸; his reasoning will be explained when I juxtapose the two oceanic ‘solutions’ for humanity’s divisive state.

Assuming it is valid to merge the assessments offered by Bataille and Gebser about modern humanity, a few vital characteristics can be summarized. The modern subject is isolated, ego-centric, in opposition with the world, faced with a division between itself and everything else, views itself as intrinsically imperfect, and exists in a thinghood but is also separated from all things. Likewise, a duality permeates perceptions. As a result, modern humans exist in a Gebserian deficiency, or as Bataille claims, as isolated tools repeatedly forgoing the intimate existence of continuity. Their understanding of humanity’s past is vastly similar, although Gebser might contest that Bataille conflates several structures of consciousness into a before-after dualistic model; Gebser prefers to delineate these changes a little closer. In Bataille’s defense, he views the introduction of tools as the problematic epicenter and therefore focuses wholeheartedly on this moment. Gebser is a much more ambiguous about the pre-magical, archaic oceanic and specifically why he supposes humanity necessarily underwent its first mutation. Although their theories overlap considerably at this point, their philosophies deviate at this next juncture apart from their general recommendation of a non-differentiative oceanic state.

Bataille declares that humanity must escape back into the oceanic and recover our lost intimacy⁶⁹. This is achieved by ignoring fears generated by thinghood like the concept of individuality, and by reconditioning oneself through certain practices⁷⁰. Re-immersion into the oceanic continuity can occur through methods including sacrifice, festivals, and occasions

⁶⁷ Ibid., 88.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 94-97.

⁶⁹ Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 2012), p. 58.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 51.

“where distinctions melt in the intense heat of intimate life”⁷¹. A keen secondary source summarizes this type of experience for Bataille:

“all genuine ecstasy is necessarily, and violently, negative...[ecstasy is] a laceration of the ego, a rupture that for a time dissolves the self-contained character of the individual as she exists in her everyday life. It is in the varieties of ecstatic experience – erotic fulminations, poetic effervescence, wrenching laughter, wracking sobs, and other excessive moments – that the self as defined and conditioned by the structures and strictures, the prohibition and taboos, of profane workaday life, is lost”⁷².

The ties of subordination must be severed simultaneously with an escape from consumption, production, and the world of utility⁷³; a moment without the quantitative distinction of “duration” polluting quality⁷⁴. Since temporality, or “duration”, is “the foundation” of value in the tool world, an ecstatic escape away from duration is at least a momentary immersion in the oceanic⁷⁵. Yet, death through sacrifice is the only permanent solution because, “intimacy is violence, and it is destructive, because it is not compatible with the positing of a separate individual”⁷⁶. In these remarks, Bataille formulates his original contribution that the archaic oceanic is extremely violent and places the negative influence of tools at the forefront. But beyond this, Bataille’s formulation of the oceanic is not extremely original. It is a lost origin that humanity must rediscover since all problems derive from humanity’s original mistake and are self-created. The perfect oceanic identity must be sought after passionately, but this will not be permanent until death. In sum, Bataille’s recommendation for humanity is a typical model for the oceanic with some insightful, creative additions.

Gebser also promotes that modern humanity should submerge into the oceanic state, but his conceptualization differs crucially from Bataille’s formulation. Indeed, Bataille’s oceanic continuity and Gebser’s archaic structure are essentially identical. However, Gebser does not suggest humanity return to the archaic oceanic. Instead, humanity must reach the oceanic via its integral form. This contrasts with Bataille’s upriver, regressive efforts to exist before humanity’s descent into toolhood. Gebser’s proposed oceanic ‘solution’ is termed the integral structure. It is

⁷¹ Ibid., 54.

⁷² Jeremy Biles and Kent L Brintnall, “Introduction, Sacred with a Vengeance,” in *Negative Ecstasies: Georges Bataille and the Study of Religion* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), pp. 1-18.

⁷³ Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 49

⁷⁴ Ibid., 46.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 51.

both the same oceanic as the archaic structure and different; Gebser becomes increasingly ambiguous in this regard, yet I will attempt to dissect this after a quick summary about the integral structure.

Gebser argues that our various structures of consciousness sponsor a realization of the integral structure, which is already manifesting in various spheres of life. His overall scheme attempts to illustrate the essentials of integrality which are the following:

“1) All structures constitute us; 2) All structures must be lived commensurate with their constitutive values if we are to live a whole or integral life; 3) No structure may therefore be negated; negation enters when one structure or the other is overemphasized, whereby this accentuation is transferred to its deficient manifestations, which are always quantitative; 4) Certain designations, ascriptions, and characteristic concepts attributed to the individual structures render their effectuality evident”⁷⁷.

Knowledge of these elements can guide integration. This also reveals an efficient usage of the mental structure’s goal-orientation; if given direction, the mental structure’s focus can lead us towards an integral mutation and perhaps this is even necessary. Whereas Bataille villainizes all features of the mental including an end-means relation, Gebser believes that the mental structural framework can be efficient and is indispensable for a true integration. Significantly, any structure that claims exclusivity is deficient because it is a signal of “immoderation or excess”⁷⁸. In short, the integral structure of consciousness is “four-dimensional”, “aperspectival”, “space-free”, “time-free”, “diaphanous”, “arational”, “acausal”, “integrating”, “open”, “free”, “ego-free”, “amaterial”, and “apsychic”⁷⁹; the “a-” prefix indicates that the categorical distinction is no longer applicable to the integral structure because it pierces through such distinctions. Integral realization occurs when structural efficiencies are cohesive and presents itself as a clear consciousness. Notably, Gebser equates the Zen model of enlightenment, *satori*, with his integral structure⁸⁰. These characteristics are paired with some specific features that are particularly essential to the integral experience.

⁷⁷ Jean Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, trans. Noel Barstad and Algis Mickunas (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1984), p. 155.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 117-294.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 222-223.

In the wake of dissolution between previous dualities and divisions, the integral emerges with several important features. Temporality, a major crisis of differentiation, dissolves in the present moment of the integral structure. The “Present” is articulated as “the undivided presence of yesterday, today and tomorrow which in a consciously realized actualization can lead to that ‘presentation’ which encompasses origin as an ineradicable present”⁸¹; hence, a time-freedom is realized⁸². Additionally, an ‘aperspectival world’ emerges, “whose structure is not only jointly based in the pre-perspectival, unperspectival, and perspectival worlds, but also mutates out of them in its essential properties and possibilities while integrating these worlds and liberating itself from their exclusive validity”⁸³; the integral operates in this way. The world becomes a transparent reality, a diaphaneity, which Gebser characterizes as the integral structure’s essence⁸⁴. Naturally, Gebser equates “integrating” with “rendering diaphanous” in terms of the integral’s process of realization⁸⁵. At both the beginning and end of his text, Gebser focuses on cultural indicators during the early 20th century that reflect an emergence of the integral structure already underway. For example, Gebser cites Pablo Picasso’s paintings as an illustration of the integral structure because it visually integrates the typical division of past, present, and future into a Present while holding all three distinctions simultaneously together without barriers between them⁸⁶. Later, he cites examples in philosophy, architecture, music, the social sciences, etc.⁸⁷. A recollection of these representations falls outside this paper’s focus, and instead I will transition to a reflection on Bataille and Gebser.

Both thinkers agree in a shared oceanic origin, the archaic continuity, along with the various non-oceanic forms of being that distanced humanity from this origin. However, they diverge at whether this split was necessary or not, and if humanity can go back to the original archaic oceanic. Gebser views the method of swimming back to the oceanic origin as misguided, and forgetful that a mutation from this origin cannot be undone without foregoing the efficiencies of consciousness structures; such an approach favors one mode of existence over

⁸¹ Ibid., 294.

⁸² Ibid., 297.

⁸³ Ibid., 294.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 148.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 269.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 24-29.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 367-527.

another. Alternatively, Gebser asserts that the oceanic can only be realized this time in its integral form. Taking Bataille's original continuity and Gebser's archaic structure as the conventional model of humanity's original oceanic, it is possible to distinguish this kind from Gebser's integral structure while also not qualitatively separating the two. In my reflection, I will trace why Gebser believes Bataille's suggestion is ineffective, try to untangle Gebser's ambiguity about how the archaic oceanic was deficient and thus sparked a mutation, explain how their logics differ from one another, and attempt to distinguish the oceanic archaic from the oceanic integral by outlining how they operate differently. Afterwards, I will demonstrate how this complicates typical viewpoints of the oceanic because it suggests the coexistence of multiple oceanic forms distinguishable by their quantitative depth or integral operating power.

In following a particular line of thought from Gebser, Bataille's regressive blueprint for a return to the archaic oceanic is undermined. Gebser indirectly critiques Bataille's alternative when he condemns those who attempt a retreat into a previous consciousness structure. He cites "surrealism and dadaism" as representative of such a retreat⁸⁸. This type of reversal is portrayed as a shoddy attempt to, "drive out the devil by invoking Beelzebub"⁸⁹. An exclusive return to the magic, mythical, or archaic is an illusory non-solution to the deficiencies of the modern, mental structure⁹⁰. Gebser imagines these structures of existence as deficient in the first place, otherwise a mutational leap would not have occurred. Mutations occur out of necessity, and so trying to go back to the oceanic via a regressive route would be illogical; in this view, even the archaic must have been deficient somehow. Endeavoring to go back to the oceanic via this method would be like swimming upriver, against the necessary flow of mutations. It would also effectively throw the baby out with the bathwater since all structures are essential. To resolve the necessity of a mutational leap, Gebser's argument becomes circular and left unsettled. Accordingly, proponents of Bataille's view hold one-sided notions about modes of being. Even if one were able to return to a magic or an archaic consciousness structure today, and completely forgo the magic, mythical and mental, which would result in "extremely obstructive consequences for us" because we would fail to notice the "inadequacy of our reactions and their negative effect"⁹¹. Such

⁸⁸ Ibid., 155.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 154.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 152-154.

⁹¹ Ibid., 154.

consequences are considered nonexistent in Bataille's model since they are simply fears derived from human toolhood that do not truly exist. On the other side, Gebser supposes that certain factors forced a mutation into the magic from the archaic in the first place; he leaves open the possibility that it was some unknowable entity, law, or process. Gebser views any attempt to roll back to a prior consciousness structure as romanticized, impractical, one-sided, dangerous, and importantly neglects the necessity of each structure. All structures have their efficiencies and deficiencies, whereby a proper mutation retains a prior structure's efficiencies and mutations satisfy deficiencies. Since these structures have never been fully integrated, eventually humanity's leading structure becomes deficient again due to its dominance over the others. Here, a clear split is discernible between Gebser's integral oceanic and traditional conceptualizations of an archaic oceanic. This divide is also rooted in two different sequences of logical argumentation.

In effect, Jean Gebser differentiates between two oceanic forms of being. If symbolized, his logic of consciousness structures would be in the following succession: A-B-C, where A is the Archaic Oceanic of Origin. B is Mutational Leaps and C is the Integral Oceanic. It becomes complicated since this qualitatively follows a logical puzzle of $C=AB$, $C=A$ and $C \neq A$; I argue that C must equal A qualitatively, but not quantitatively since this is the only logical choice wherein a difference may lie between non-differentiations. The logic becomes more and more convoluted because the integral contains the archaic, but supposedly not vice versa despite many shared characteristics. At this point, it remains unclear why Gebser does not describe the relationship of the archaic and the integral in more detail. His ambiguity points to his reluctance to speculate and tread into territory which quickly becomes a logical and linguistic nightmare. Before continuing further, it should be mentioned that Bataille's theory, along with most oceanic viewpoints, differ by proposing an A-B-A succession; "A" is the Archaic Continuity of the Oceanic, and "B" is Toolhood, or humanity's Fall from continuity. Therefore, these theories represent two oceanic paths of argumentation. The inclusion of both oceanic conceptualizations in Gebser's model is particularly fascinating. If we can interchange Gebser's "A" and Bataille's "A", and given their parallels this appears reasonable, we can extract from Gebser's model a positing of two states of non-differentiation that must somehow be distinguishable.

Following Gebser's train of thought, the archaic oceanic must have been deficient somehow, and something provoked a mutation into the magic structure. Regardless of what this was, it seems that humanity was designed to go towards the integral. Conveniently, he never provides a full account of his reasoning and seems to believe that we can only determine it as necessity; this treads the line to not foreclose if this archaic departure was self-produced, caused by certain influences, or followed a necessary movement of some greater purpose. A hint may lie in Gebser's choice to list "presentiment, foreboding" as the archaic structure's deficiency⁹². Since Gebser does not elaborate on this point, we can interpret this initial mutation to be a new intuition about danger posed in the future, perhaps an attack from a predator, which began a chain-reaction towards self-preservation, then selfhood, and eventually an ego-obsession. Interestingly, Gebser also lists a deficiency for the integral structure as well: "Void (atomizing dissolution)"⁹³. Again, he does not expand much on this point. However, Gebser does provide a few more distinctions between the archaic and the integral structures.

Gebser imagines an unconscious spirit and a conscious spirit classification, where the former is attributed to the archaic structure and the latter attributed to the integral structure. These distinctions are categorized as the structures' "Objective (external), (Aspect of World)"⁹⁴. However, he stresses that these are not to be taken as dualistic opposites⁹⁵. While the archaic is a deep, dreamless sleep of non-differentiation, the integral is a transparency beyond wakefulness and whose transparency infiltrates seamlessly through any differentiation⁹⁶. Hence, they 'arrive' at qualitative non-differentiation from different angles. Gebser determines another difference in the "subjective (internal) emphasis" between the archaic and integral; he proposes that the archaic has "None or Latency" and the integral structure is "concretion"⁹⁷. It is again unclear what exactly he means here, but the archaic standing of "none" is noteworthy because of its' character of absence is consistent. From these deliberations, it is possible to speculate further into the relationship of these two oceanic existences.

⁹² Ibid., 142.

⁹³ Ibid.,142.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 120.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 121.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 120.

The oceanic is above all considered a state of qualitative sameness, or non-differentiation. Gebser's theory posits that both the archaic origin and the integral consciousness are oceanic through this essential quality. Hence, they should be deemed interchangeable if their fundamentality is identical. It seems that they could be interchangeable in the same way that nothingness and absolute wholeness are equivalents; both are empty of differentiations. Whereas the archaic continuity's non-differentiation is 'before' any distinctions have been made, the integral oceanic transcends distinctions by mutating out of them, unites them and releases distinctions from their exclusivity. It is helpful to reiterate Gebser's linguistic distinction. Gebser uses an "a" prefix in characterizations of the integral to designate the inapplicability of such categories as causality and rationality, instead terming them "arational" and "acausal"⁹⁸. In the archaic continuity, none of these distinctions exist in the first place; it is even before a "pre-" state because no kernel of differentiation exists. Nevertheless, both are an oceanic of non-differentiation. Upon closer examination, a few more differences are decipherable from Gebser's theory. However, some of these examples also obscure the picture more than they clarify, which is probably Gebser's attempt to leave the two oceanics intertwined and inseparable, while staying ambiguous for fear of speculation.

Although Gebser avoided the territory of distinguishing the undistinguishable, at least in a straightforward sense, a couple differences between the archaic and integral oceanics can still be uncovered. In terms of their "essence", the archaic is termed "identity" and "(integrality)" but the integral essence is "diaphaneity", or "transparency"⁹⁹. Here is a distinction but Gebser also double dips by including "integrality" in parentheses for the archaic. By doing this, Gebser is maintaining his ambiguity but at the sake of delegitimizing his argument and its consistency. Similarly, he characterizes the archaic structure's properties as simply, "integral"¹⁰⁰. Under this category, Gebser lists the integral structure's properties as, "presentiating, diaphanous, 'rending whole'"¹⁰¹. Therefore, "A" is paradoxically given many overlapping features of "C". Some could interpret this blurring of distinction as lazy or inconsistent, but it seems to be Gebser's willful ambiguity and the nature of the subject that is mostly responsible for inconsistency. Frankly,

⁹⁸ Ibid., 117-294.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 118.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Gebser seems uncertain in this area of his work. Nonetheless, these moments show both a qualitative sameness and difference in an important way when discussing two oceanic structures of being.

The archaic and integral structures posit two oceanics that are identical like complete darkness and complete brightness, blackness and whiteness. Qualitative differentiations are meaningless in this regard because they either ‘predate’ distinctions or ‘transcend’ them. From of this separation emerge many threads of thought and questions.

If there are two oceanics in which the integral contains the archaic, is the integral structure therefore superior because of the extra layer of inclusion? If the oceanics can be separated along these lines of inclusion, how can they still qualitatively the same? According to Bataille’s example of two animals like two waves of unequal size, the oceanic holds only quantitative differences. With this theorizing, then is the relationship of the archaic and the integral a quantitative difference in which integrality is a bigger wave than identity? Are these oceanic waves just waves in a larger ocean that has yet to be discovered/imagined? Given the deficiency of the integral as “Void”, does this predict another oceanic wave, a bigger one without this deficiency? By distinguishing between two oceanics, are we effectively collapsing their essence and meaning? Another question unexamined is Gebser’s complicated sprinkling of purposivity by suggesting necessity.

By suggesting the necessity of mutations, Gebser is implying that a purposivity exists throughout humanity’s path from an oceanic to an oceanic. Consequentially, there is purposivity in mutational leaps and its directional flow. Yet, purposivity is not impartial nor non-differentiation. It contradicts the nature of the oceanic since it favors a certain path over another; it favors purposivity over purposelessness, qualitatively valuing the former more than the latter. This seems to be a blaring contradiction unresolved. Also, if the oceanic is left for a purpose to arrive at another oceanic, then either the journey of the flow is where the purpose exists, or humanity’s arrival into the integral oceanic; this suggests again that the integral is somehow superior. Nonetheless, this entire speculation is worthless until it is resolved how an oceanic, a state of non-differentiation, can be burdened with a differentiation like purposivity.

Assuming oceanic existences cannot be qualitatively different due to their non-differentiation, then the only available option per Bataille is that they must be quantitatively dissimilar. Therefore, does the unconscious spirit (archaic) flow through mutations into conscious spirit (integral) to expand the latter wherein the former is also retained? The only way to separate the two quantitatively seems to be via depth, or to imagine the integral as an entire body of water like a lake which has turned itself into a wave to absorb or integrate a shallow pond (archaic) into itself. Both would stay the same quality, but they would together be bigger and more intimate with one another.

Another issue that arises in Gebser's theory is around the concept that integral awareness must be reached through an integration of all consciousness structures. This suggests that humans living in the magic must undergo several consciousness mutations to reach the integral whereas modern humanity must only undergo only one and integrate previous structures. This appears to place a higher weight of responsibility on previous humanity than modernity, and to a great extent doomed previous humanity of ever reaching the integral oceanic; since Gebser, a few thinkers have tried to address this issue by adapting his model to include meditative states, which partially solves the problem¹⁰². Gebser conjectures that all the structures are accessible within us, so perhaps he views these as equally formidable tasks; this becomes plausible when one considers the ways 'developed' cultures have historically devalued other structures as inferior and underdeveloped. Despite the archaic oceanic is 'closer' to the magic structure, it is still inaccessible because of the magic's mutational necessity. But through all of this, the archaic is paradoxically always contained in us.

The integral is not an ability to see the archaic oceanic within us. This argument would follow the motif that in every drop is an ocean, and we must try to perceive that ocean. Rather, all the other structures are needed and must be brought together in integral harmony to usher in this integral oceanic. In this account, it is possible to temporarily tap into the archaic oceanic within us, so Bataille's system is still valid in the short-term, but this is ultimately uninhabitable without other structures. This suggests that the archaic oceanic is only temporarily accessible and therefore a limiting differentiation of duration is placed upon the oceanic which should not exist.

¹⁰² Ken Wilber, *Religion of Tomorrow* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications Inc, 2017).

Given that this positioning presents the integral as permanent, this again posits a potential hierarchy where a quantitative differentiation is the only solution.

From these questions, it becomes difficult to position the archaic oceanic and integral oceanic as absolute equivalents. It seems that these two states are interchangeable and yet distinguishable to a significant degree. Given that many of these reflections remain unresolved, a conclusive end seems impossible. Nonetheless, a recapitulation of this assessment is meaningful.

Due to their shared nature of non-differentiation, multiple oceanic forms of existence can be extremely difficult to articulate. The lines between them constantly blur to the point of their undoing. Entities can only be distinguished quantitatively in non-differentiation, following Bataille's suggestion. Following this, oceanic structures themselves can follow the same application as Bataille's analogy; two oceanics are like two animals in continuity, one of the waves is simply larger than the other. In this case, the quantifier of depth is perhaps more illustrative. They are the same water with deeper depths; perhaps like a pond that flows down a stream, through mutational crevasses, and into a lake. It is a flow from shallow to deep. Such a proposal about oceanics with different depths might even support a new line of argumentation for religious pluralism or perennial philosophy. Questions remain about if an earlier source then flows/flowed into the archaic oceanic, or if the integral flows into some watery pool of greater depth, but this falls nearly beyond the realm of human comprehension. Gebser's theory holds contradictions, relies on circular argumentation, and stays ambiguous in areas, but if these can be looked passed it seems to suggest an interplay between multiple oceanic structures. It also suggests that an oceanic's depth is determined by its power of inclusion; in this case, the integral is deeper because it also contains the archaic. With help of Bataille's suggestion that quantitative differences can exist within the oceanic, a new theory emerges about multiple oceanics qualitatively equivalent yet quantitatively different.

Georges Bataille and Jean Gebser have theories that overlap in considerable ways including their recommendation of oceanic non-differentiation as modernity's problem-solver. Nevertheless, their theories offer significantly different proposals for modern humanity. Although a comparison of their theories is fruitful, the ideas that emerge out of this comparison

are even more fascinating. On the one side, Bataille attempts to swim upriver to the archaic continuity by forgoing the inheritance of toolhood. On the other, Gebser predicts an oceanic immersion lies ahead and we should instead swim with the mutational current towards the lake of integrality. Whether you decide to swim back to Bataille's pond or onwards to Gebser's lake, both thinkers would probably agree that you will need a swimsuit either way to tread through so many water analogies.

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