

**What is Education for?**

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## **What is Education for?**

In our rapidly changing world, we are faced with systemic challenges that need a radical approach to go beyond what we have known so far. This is also the case with education. Institutionalised education is being seriously questioned for its validity in a world where information is easily accessible to all through technology and on the other hand where education has drifted far from addressing deep human seeking. It has even been suggested that the institutionalisation of education to the point we experience today is counterproductive and has led to diminished learning (Ivan Illich, 1971). A new paradigm for education is the call of a new world. But before we begin to understand what this paradigm could be, we must reflect on ‘what is education for?’, and to answer this question, it is important to ask ‘what education is’. This paper explores these questions by charting the evolution of learning and its relationship with the evolution of the psycho-social stages of humanity. This model is used to arrive at an understanding of our world today which, as we will see, can be referred to as the *subjective age*, and explore what education in this age would mean and look like. The exploration of an integral education of *becoming* leads us to possibilities for finding a synthesis in our divided world through transformation and self-realisation.

## **Learning, Education and Human cycle**

Learning is an innate aspect of Life. As we grow, we learn intentionally and unintentionally and continuously co-evolve with our environments. Not only humans, all animals learn in their environment through instincts, watching their kind and from memory and experience (Janmaat et al., 2021). There is learning also at a genetic level, the growth of life through evolution and adapting to the changing environment in every generation. For example, bacteria have an enormous capacity for learning as they reproduce every twenty minutes facilitating rapid gene (and knowledge it contains) transfer from one generation to the next (Margulis, 1997). Even our entire planet learns over time, it forms a synergetic and self-regulating system with all life on earth and co-evolves, changes and adapts to the conditions giving rise to new conditions, which in turn influence further adaptations (Lovelock, 2004). But what is the goal of this growth and learning? Nature evolves, it seems, towards more and more complexity of highly interdependent relationships. Such diversity and interdependence make a system resilient and less prone to dramatic changes (Capra, 1996).

If we take this goal of learning of ever-expanding complexity for higher resilience, how can we apply it to social systems? And how then can we understand the psychological evolution of humanity which has, understandably, co-evolved with its social configuration, for the way we see ourselves defines how we see each other and that defines how we organise

ourselves as a society. Learning in the field of the individual and collective consciousness of humanity seems more complex than it is in natural systems. To explore how humanity has learnt in different periods of its growth, the evolution of this learning itself, let us study the evolution of the human psyche and social organisation as the manifestation of what is learnt. Karl Lamprecht (1891), in his seminal work on socio-psychological historiography, describes the evolution of civilisation, based on the collective psychical condition of the society, from the stages of *symbolic, typical, conventional, and individualist to subjective*<sup>1</sup> (Sri Aurobindo, 1949). In the realm of psychology, Jean Gebser (1949-1953) has proposed evolving structures of consciousness as moving from *archaic, magical, mythical and mental to integral* (Feuerstein, 2018). While all these stages and structures can be discussed at length in themselves, we will only use them in this paper to map the evolution of learning. A superimposition of these stages can help us to understand their dominant learning paradigm. The paradigms of learning have been interpreted and discussed by several scholars in different ways. We do not have the space or time to introduce all of them here. For our discussion, we will consider these paradigms as *being, sensing, doing, knowing and becoming*. These notions themselves are not new and have become popular in contemporary discourse. Their usage here can be considered neutral to any previous interpretation and we will make meaning of them as we go along. I will, now, attempt to map the psycho-social stages with these paradigms of learning.

**Table 1**

*Co-relating the Evolution of Society and Psyche with Learning*

Periods of history <sup>2</sup>	Lamprecht's stages	Gebser's structures	Paradigms of learning
Pre-classical	Symbolic	Archaic	Being
Classical	Typal	Magical	Sensing
Medieval	Conventional	Mythical	Doing
Modern	Individualist	Mental	Knowing
Post-modern	Subjective	Integral	Becoming

Note. This table maps the stages proposed by Lamprecht and Gebser with the paradigms of learning proposed in this paper. The relationship of these stages to each other is discussed below.

Learning in the *symbolic* age of the pre-classical period, the age of the *archaic* consciousness seems to occur simply by *being*. The transmission of knowledge in this stage was through lived experience. The mysteries of the world were celebrated and symbols were created to relate the Human to the Divine in everyday life. As we move to the *typal* age of the classical period, the age of the *magical* consciousness, we see an emergence of priests, saints, and philosophers who make meaning of the world through their imagination outside the world of being. Only wise men could access these imaginative worlds and therefore held the power of seeing and showing. Learning in this age moved from *being* to *sensing*. This is the beginning of the separation of the knowledge and the knower, of learning and education—a way of passing knowledge held by only a few. In the *conventional* age of the medieval period,

of the *mythical* consciousness, we see the crystallisation of these power structures, of orders and categorisation into conventions of a grand narrative, a myth, and the learning (or rather education) becomes ritualistic and repetitive. The grand success of this age was due to its fidelitous repetition as knowledge was transmitted and learnt by *doing*. Eventually, a rebellion of the individual spirit against the bondages of authority and conventions led to the *individualist* age of the modern period, the age of the *mental* consciousness which is characterised by learning by *knowing*, where the world is not imagined anymore, it is reasoned- the rational mind creates a rational image of the world. The inadequacies of this world in addressing the places beyond the mind lead us to the *subjective* age of the post-modern period, the age of the *integral* human who seeks learning by *becoming*, an idea we will discuss in more detail as we go further in this paper.

### **The Coming of the Subjective Age**

It was the impetus of breaking out of the religious conventions of the medieval ages that led to the European renaissance during 14-16<sup>th</sup> CE, and an establishment of a rational order. *Man*, himself becomes, *the measure of all things* (Protagoras, 5<sup>th</sup> BCE) and Being becomes a function of human reason with popular adages like Cartesian "*Cogito, ergo sum*" (I think, therefore I am). This shift in ontology<sup>3</sup> of the world necessitated a shift in epistemology<sup>4</sup> and, in glorifying the mind, other ways of knowing and experiencing were discredited. Nature became, as Heidegger (1977) would call it, a *standing reserve* at the

disposal of the human mind, to be used, analysed, and categorised- its silent workings and treasures being mined for knowledge. Education, as knowledge of the world, becomes power over the world, over others, and even over our own nature leading to a quest for reaching (or being) God, not through faith or the authority of the church, but by omniscience, a universal-total-knowledge. As is evident from the history of the last two centuries, this power of knowledge has been abused to create imperial and colonial projects, to disempower the *other* and limit life and its expressions beyond what the human mind can understand. As we wake up to the damage of this approach towards ecology, society and self, the mind is finally forced to turn the gaze onto itself leading to the dawn of the subjective age.

The subjective age can be seen as the post-modern, post-colonial, post-positivist, post-individualist world which is asking us, as Spanos (1993) proposes, to *de-centre* the supreme authority of human reason from the current paradigm. The call of this era is to remove science and other forms of socio-political authorities from the centre of our worldview and create multi-centred paradigms that go beyond the mind, wherein a diversity of thoughts and voices can become a part of the of human experience. In describing humanity's shift from the individual to the subjective, Sri Aurobindo (1949) says,

The need of a deeper knowledge must then turn him to the discovery of new powers and means within himself. He finds that he can only know himself...by putting himself into conscious harmony with that which lies behind his superficial mentality and psychology and by enlightening his reason and making dynamic his action through this deeper light and power to which he thus opens. In this process the

rationalistic ideal begins to subject itself to the ideal of intuitional knowledge and a deeper self-awareness; the utilitarian standard gives way to the aspiration towards self-consciousness and self-realisation. (p. 29)

The vision here is of an enlightened reason which does not separate and divide human life but rather works in service of an aspiration of self-consciousness and realisation. And what can we say of this concerning education? The ideas of self-consciousness and self-realisation are not confined to esoteric discourses anymore. bell hooks (1994) puts emphasis on theory as liberatory practice as she calls for a culture where education can be practised as a tool for dismantling power structures held by the mind, men, and colour of skin, for an individual and collective transformation. hooks asks students and teachers to engage with knowledge through critical consciousness<sup>5</sup> for self-determination, self-realisation and self-actualisation.

In this sense, education becomes not ‘of the teacher’ and ‘for the students’, but a shared experience of learning and growth towards the self-realisation of both. The orientation of such learning would be as objective towards the outer as it would need to be subjective towards the inner<sup>6</sup>. Voss (2009) calls it ‘transpersonal research’ which involves “reflexive attention to one’s own participation in the process being studied, looking at it from different angles both inner and outer” (p.7). This widens the scope of education from merely understanding matter- to also an understanding of our relationship with it, of what it evokes in us. Such research and education could help us learn more deeply about ourselves, and transform human life into a divine practice of becoming.



## **Integral education of becoming**

We are now arriving at a larger goal of education which points to goals of realisation and transformation and a paradigm of learning and education which calls for becoming<sup>7</sup>.

Becoming what? I would propose ‘becoming’ as our conscious journey on the adventure of the unfolding world. In this adventure, we are called to create anew, discover what has been neglected, and remember what we have lost. It requires bringing the spirit *back* into learning, but we must be careful not to make the mistake of ignoring the mind completely.

The “truth has to be found halfway between the two extremes” (Shirazi, 2015, p. 23), the two extremes of objective-subjective, theory-practice, reason-emotion, fact-intuition, universal-particular by exploring the spectrum of possibilities between and beyond these extremes.

Montuori (2006) calls it ‘creative inquiry’<sup>8</sup> where,

Creative Inquirers seek to navigate and integrate the skill building, knowledge base development, scholarship, and critical thinking of traditional academia with the emphasis on self-reflection, the excavation of values, the integration of the knower in the known, and the stress on transformation—personal and social—of alternative approaches, without falling into polarized excesses.” (p. 5)

Becoming requires paying attention to the marginal and the excluded middle between these polarised excesses, which need a radical synthesis of all human faculties so that we can experience ourselves and the world in all its forms. This is the vision of an *Integral*

*Education* by Sri Aurobindo and Mira Alfassa (aka Mother) where the purpose of education is to cultivate all aspects of being and life- physical, vital, mental, psychic and spiritual.

Although we don't have the space to explore this philosophy in depth, I will only introduce its five foundational aspects. *Physical education* is for the body, to prepare the vehicle of our consciousness and use it as a tool for our material work on earth, to cultivate *beauty* in the human body and matter. *Vital education* is the education of the character cultivating dynamism and *power*, firstly over oneself and one's emotions. *Mental education* is for the preparation of the mind, to receive knowledge and manifest it, to understand the limitation of the mind itself and reach to go beyond it. *Psychic education* is for the *psychic being*<sup>9</sup> - to help one "realise the *truth* of one's being and unite with it" and in "the consecration of the individual to his eternal principle" (Mother, 1952, p. 122). And finally, *Spiritual education* fulfils the highest goal of education- the development of the spiritual being, the realisation and experience of the interconnectedness of the one with the many and the One, and the cultivation of *love* that sustains these relationships. This vision of integral education is the vision of an integral human, an integral life for which "The ideal of human existence personal and social would be its progressive transformation into a conscious out flowering of joy, power, love, light, and beauty of the transcendent and universal Spirit" (Sri Aurobindo, 1949, p. 62). Thus, integral education is the possibility for the preparation towards this ideal of human existence.

And yet, how are we to imagine an academy which treats knowledge as well as beauty, power, truth and love in their proper right and relationship with each other? What

does it mean for the scholar, the teacher and the student, to enlarge their inquiry and practice in these fields? The answers to these questions lie not in reaching a solution but in their constant pursuit and their continuous emergence in ourselves, through a critical dialogue between what was/is and what could be. In this landscape of new education, there are several beacons, which we have not had the space to discuss in this paper, like Waldorf education inspired by Rudolf Steiner, the philosophy of Jiddu Krishnamurthy, learning communities set up on the ethos of integral education like those of Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville (India) and California Institute of Integral Education (U.S.A), and a multitude of scholar-teachers around the world, who are transcending the boundaries of conventional pedagogy and academy, and inspiring this movement by demonstrating a new way of learning and becoming.

## **Conclusion**

The coming of the subjective age brings with it opportunities for a new world. To establish the foundations of a new education in this new world, we must critically reflect on the purpose and meaning of education and its relationship to learning. The separation of learning and education, of being and knowing is a reflection of the divisions between our inner and outer worlds. Understanding the evolution of learning paradigms and their relationship with the psycho-social consciousness of humanity, can help us find a new way of relating to our world and ourselves, where finally the separation between the teacher-

student, researcher-research, and matter-spirit is dissolved and where we find a greater synthesis between being, sensing, doing and knowing, towards an integral life of *becoming*. Such a paradigm of learning as becoming is not of a unidirectional education where information is transferred from the teacher/academy/context to the student/researcher but a critical and creative dialogical process where both the teacher-student, scholar-academy/society can move towards transformation and self-realisation. Education thus becomes a *practice* of becoming, an ever-progressing out-flowering of our individual, collective, inner and outer nature which realises the plurality of life, of thought, feelings and expressions. Mustn't education be for this and anything less unworthy of our pursuit?

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Sri Aurobindo (1949) has discussed these stages proposed by Lamprecht in detail and has himself proposed a final stage beyond the subjective- a spiritual age. The subjective age is then only the preparation towards the spiritual age which we have not had the space to discuss in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> These are the popularly known periods of history and have been used here only to put the psycho-social stages in context. These are named and interpreted differently by historians depending on their scientific, political, technological and economic dispositions.

<sup>3</sup> Ontology here refers to the understanding of the nature of the world. In the individualist age, the ontology of the world is of a rational image.

<sup>4</sup> Epistemology here refers to the nature of the knowledge of the world and how we access that knowledge to find our relationship with the world. In the individualist age of the rational world, epistemology becomes overpowered by the analytic and reductive approaches of the mind.

<sup>5</sup> hooks (1994) uses the idea of critical consciousness inspired from Freire's (2000) concept of *consientisation*, a process of development of critical consciousness through self-

reflection and action. Freire deems this process absolutely essential for transformation of the self and society.

<sup>6</sup> The notion of the outer-inner has become common in today's discourse but it can hold many meanings. Here, it is used to describe the outer world of matter that can be grasped using mental and rational approaches and the inner world of consciousness that can only be grasped by contemplation and experience. It must be noted that this does not suggest a separation between these two worlds. Rather, these can be seen as two aspects of the same world.

<sup>7</sup> When I first used the term *becoming* in this paper, I did it intuitively and solely for how I understand it. However, in my research, I came across its history from its use by Plato describing the world of becoming as the phenomenal world being perceived by our senses and the more current philosophical meaning given to it by Deleuze and Guattari as a process of transformation, a becoming of, which is perhaps closer to what I have proposed in this paper. I am not intimately familiar with either of these interpretations and this has opened a new door of inquiry for me.

<sup>8</sup> Montuori (2006) contrasts creative inquiry with *reproductive inquiry* where education is about "reproducing existing social and academic order". (p.5)

<sup>9</sup> The concept of the psychic being is an essential idea in Sri Aurobindo's (2012) philosophy. "The psychic is a spark come from the Divine which is there in all things and as the individual evolves it grows in him and manifests as the psychic being, the soul seeking always for the Divine and the Truth and answering to the Divine and the Truth whenever and wherever it meets it." ( Sri Aurobindo 2012, p. 105) For our discussion, the psychic being can be considered as a complex projection of the inner being.

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