

Becoming an Ecological Self Through Contemplative Ways

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I agree with R. S. Peters' conception of education, which centralizes developing awareness as an important and essential aim of education. Indeed, awareness has to be the foundation of educational aims, to the extent that humans are beings of consciousness whose perceptions and actions are deeply influenced and shaped by conditions of awareness.¹ "Having" knowledge, information, and skills cannot replace operating conditions of awareness. If my awareness "shrinks" in reaction to fear or panic, my surrounding world "shrinks" too, compromising my ability to see what's in front of me and from accessing knowledge stored in my memory. Certainly, repeated tendencies and habits of dimming awareness profoundly shape a person's epistemic, ontic, and axiological relationship to the world.

Psychological conditions, too, affect one's awareness. What about beliefs? How does "knowing that" or "knowing as" affect awareness? For instance, if I am aware of myself as a symbiotic being, thickly collaborating with many trillion microbial cells in *this* body, would I see, feel, and interact with the world very differently than if I were to be aware of myself as a computational machine — a computer made of meat, as Marvin Minsky quipped — or an angel trapped inside an animal body? I should think so, but then it raises the question about the nature of awareness.²

Presumably, we can't have awareness of what is not there (Or, can we?). I can't be aware of my being a wooden horse, being a horse, a chair, or a coat hanger, or can I? Now, there are people who not only think that they are such objects but have the "awareness" that they are these entities. They have the felt-sense of being such (and don't just abstractly think that they are). In light of this sort of "experience," we would need to refine our understanding of what awareness is, prior to developing awareness as an essential or founda-

tional educational aim. We can't take awareness as some kind of singular "thing" (entity or item) that we can just get hold of, somehow, and then broaden it and deepen it in some mysterious way. At least, the above examples suggest that we would need to distinguish "true" awareness from imaginative consciousness. Within the context of the latter, a person can imagine that they are a wooden horse, a butterfly, and so on.

In light of the above, let us look at James Bigari's proposal for post-humanist identity construction (with help of biology); namely, an ecological self/identity that experiences itself not as an atomistic individual, separate and independent from the rest of the world, but as a symbiotic being embedded in the biological matrix of interdependence. Concretely, Bigari reminds us that the function and health of our gut — that seven to eight meter-long tube — totally depends on trillions of foreign microbes that inhabit the tube. Now, I learned (thanks to modern scientific research) that I am a colony of beings, and that I have the possibility to see, feel, and experience myself as a symbiotic being. If I could realize this possibility, I would then feel that I'm never alone. How can I even think of being alone or feeling alone when I am a crowded community of tiny entities myself?

Despite my having the knowledge of my being a symbiotic creature in terms of "me" and "my microbes," however, I continue to *feel like* ("felt-sense") a singular individual. I feel existentially alone, especially on the days I lean towards being an atomistic individual. In terms of my symbiotic relationship with my microbes, I am nowhere near being an ecological self: at least, not experientially. Yes, I have a philosophical conviction that I am an ecological being, but I don't experience myself as an ecological self. I need something more than having the knowledge and convictions. I will need an *embodied awareness* of my being intimately interconnected with my microbes, or some other biotic beings.

Suppose that I do not have such awareness. Two interconnected possibilities exist: 1) my awareness is blocked, and therefore is denied access; or it is underdeveloped, in which case, I may, at most, have compromised and partial access. In either case, my awareness does not reach the level of reality pertaining to my symbiotic relationship with my microbes; or 2) I am exploring

the wrong place or the wrong relationship to gain an awareness of symbiosis. Microbial company doesn't cut it. My microbes may help me survive physically, but I don't feel them the way I feel the intimacy of connection with respect to my husband, my children, my friends, my colleagues, my students, and so on. I feel such connection with non-human beings, too. At present (and this may change), microbes are not my "people": I don't *feel* consanguineous with them.

For Possibility 1, I would need to work on broadening and deepening my awareness so that I can actually *feel* their intimate presence and their symbiotic nature. For Possibility 2, my microbe partners are no help to me and my aspirations for becoming an ecological self, even if there are many trillions of them, and I need to cultivate closer and more extensive partnership with beings (human or non-human) whose presence or absence impact, not just my physical health, but my psychic wellbeing. I really don't know where to go with Possibility 1. But for Possibility 2, I may get a pet or pets (dogs, cats, bunnies ...); and I may seek a closer union with my intimates. (Doesn't this kind of intimate sharing relationship qualify as symbiosis?)

At this point, I wish to bring in the work of British psychiatrist, Iain McGilchrist, on bi-lateralization of the human brain.³ According to his research, the two separate brains, the left brain and the right brain, have two different ways of attending to the world. The left brain is all about generating abstract and reductionistic representations of the world, with separate and distinct parts. The world seen through the left brain is disembodied, atomistic, static, reductionistic, linear, and discrete. Hence, the awareness or consciousness that accompanies the left brain function would not belong to an ecological self. On the other hand, the world seen (predominantly) through the right brain looks and feels very different: fully embodied, permeating, fluid, limitless, timeless, dynamic, interpenetrating, and interconnecting through and through. Comparing the two brains and their functionality side by side, I would wager that right brain consciousness is the right home for the ecological self. That is, awareness associated with the right brain would best contribute to shaping the ecological self.

Iain McGilchrist's bi-lateralization hypothesis comes with a further thesis: that our civilization has privileged left-brain functions, resulting in an

environment that in turn matches and favors left-brain functions. Concomitantly, this civilization has marginalized right-brain functions. Following this train of speculation, then, I would say that this hypothesis explains the challenge of cultivating an ecological self in the current cultural environment, which includes schooling with its usual paraphernalia: indoor-ism, school bells, tests, grading practices, discrete grades, and so on.

The implication of the bi-lateralization hypothesis for cultivating ecological selfhood is rather clear: engage right brain awareness and functions vigorously and extensively. Now, it's tempting to ask: "So, what are the kinds of activities that will stimulate right brain awareness and function?" If I were to provide a list of activities (or even how-to instructions) that purport to engage the right brain, that would, however, be a self-defeating move in that, with this move, I have gone to the left brain functionality, and provided, as it were, a left-brain solution for a right-brain problem. The question is more about the "how": how do we approach and experience the world? Or, more specifically, in terms of McGilchrist's understanding of differentiated modalities of paying attention, the question is *how do we pay attention so that we experience ecological ways of being?* Are there ways of paying attention that enable me to feel interpenetrated, consanguineous, participating, and coupled with the world?

Yes, such a way has been known traditionally as contemplation. We move into this mode of awareness whenever we quiet the habitual agitated "chattering" of the discursive mind (of the left brain), and pay attention to what arises here-and-now in the field of sensorium, using breaths to regulate our nervous system, and noticing with increasing subtlety the nuances, the patterns, layers, rhythms, dynamics, shades, and feel just what it is that you experience. To magnify and accelerate the effect and benefit of contemplation, we may also place ourselves in a physical environment rich with ecological connectivity among its inhabitants: e.g., (relatively undamaged) forest, mountains, prairies, desert, and so on. The cultivation of awareness would be carried out by the environment itself, non-didactically and non-discursively. The environment would "teach" the individual how to be an ecological self.

1 Heesoon Bai and Charles Scott, "The Primacy of Consciousness in Philosophy: A Role for Contemplative Practices in Education," *The Korean Journal of Philosophy of Education* 33 no. 4 (2011): 129-145.

2 Roger Walsh, "Can Western Philosophers Understand Asian Philosophies? The Challenges and Opportunities of States-of-Consciousness Research," in *Re-visioning Philosophy*, ed. James Ogilvy (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992).

3 Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven and London, UK: Yale University Press, 2009).