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AN OPTIMISTIC FUTURE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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We live in a cosmos alive with growth and transformation. Though not always obvious to our ordinary state of mind, a little tinkering with the time scale of our perception discloses to us the fact that all of nature is in constant motion. We see this in the swift flight of a bee and the blinding flutter of a hummingbird wing, and even the glacially slow movement of the Earth’s tectonic plates.

In the living world of nature, nothing is static, and seen clearly, everything seems to express growth and change. This appears to be a rule of nature, seen all about us in plain sight. Human infants are born to slowly grow into children, adolescents, adults, and finally, old age. This is true for all mammals. Birds and reptiles go through similar life cycles, though less easily seen by our human eyes. Insects and crustaceans as well, and indeed all Earthly life.

Adjusting our eyes to longer perspectives, we see that all life forms evolve over time. In virtually every instance, this evolution moves toward complexity and wholeness. The ancient ant seen in a block of amber may look like the one on your sidewalk, but though the external form was already optimal for this creature long ago, inside of it, the biology has continued to evolve. The speed and efficiency of nerve cells that control the muscles, and vision and chemical sensitivity have continually improved over time. A modern ant may look like its ancient relative, but it is a more complex and efficient creature (Grimaldi & Engel, 2005). The same can be said for many other life forms when viewed from a long temporal perspective.

Indeed, transformation through increasing levels of complexity seems a rule of thumb for complex systems in nature. Beginning as far back as we know with the big bang, the cosmos evolved over vast periods of time through a series of increasingly complex levels of organization. A simple tracking of this trajectory reaches forward from an early universe of pure energy or plasma to the formation of elementary particles, on to heavier particles and the early constellation of the first galaxies, the earliest stars, and finally planetary systems, including planets such as our own Earth.

The universe yearns for complexity

Throughout this entire history, there has been a pull toward complexity and wholeness (Laszlo, 2017). According to past western scientific thinking, this trend was assumed to be a
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bottom-up process, one in which physical laws operating at the atomic and molecular levels resolve into increasingly dynamical structures and activity at the organic level of ordinary observation. Today, there are many reasons to question this mechanistic or “Newtonian” view of how nature works. It is apparent that the organizational dynamics of complex self-organizing systems, and in particular living organisms, experience strong pulls from higher levels within such systems, as well as influences arising out of the organism as a whole (e.g., Goodwin, 1994).

The latter is not well understood but is unquestionably part of the experience of living organisms. This process of pulling forward and upward to increasing levels of complexity and wholeness yields the appearance of a kind of will, even intelligence, to the evolution of natural systems. Standing back and looking at the big picture, this seems to permeate all of the cosmos and in Newton’s classic terms, is part of the “furniture of the universe.” Like gravity and inertia, it sees beyond explanation in terms of any more basic process or reality. Few scientists argue with this “anthropic principle” today, though there are many proposed explanations for it. I will not review them here but note the presence of a kind of universal tug that moves complex self-organizing systems toward increasing complexity and wholeness. And along with these, increasing suppleness and creativity.

Consciousness

Somewhere along the evolutionary path from the simplest particles to complex nervous systems is found the emergence of conscious experience. A few decades back, most scientists and philosophers believed that consciousness emerged out of great neurological complexity, often limiting it further to organisms with advanced language skills, in other words, human beings. Nowadays, this view is held by relatively few, and consciousness, even self-awareness, is seen to be apparent in many organisms other than ourselves (Koch, 2019). These range from large-brained octopi to birds such as the African Gray Parrot, and especially on to large-brained primates. I don’t need to make a list here, but it grows each day.

In terms of our evolutionary history, just where consciousness began is hard to say, but an increasing number of scientists and philosophers are now thinking it is already a fundamental aspect of reality, undergirding matter itself (Nagel, 2012). Much more could be said, but at this point, note that consciousness seems strongly associated with highly complex self-organizing dynamical systems, suggesting the possibility of conscious experience in each. Stars such as the sun, for instance, are dynamic and highly complex energy systems, so as strange as it may seem, these properties nominate them as possible conscious beings (Sheldrake, 2021). Indeed, the idea of stars, and the sun in particular, as living godlike beings has been nearly universal outside the mechanistic doctrines of the modern worldview, reaching all the way back at least to Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten in 1300 BC and before (e.g., Hornung, 2021).

As an interesting footnote, Nobel laureate physicist Roger Penrose and quantum brain researcher Stuart Hameroff (2013) comment:

Sentient creatures might have evolved in parts of the universe that would be highly alien to us. One possibility might be on neutron star surfaces, an idea that was developed ingeniously and in great detail by Robert Forward in two science-fiction stories (Starquake in 1985 and Dragon’s Egg in 2000). Such creatures (with metabolic processes and OR-like events occurring at rates of around a million times that of a human being) could arguably have intense experiences.
Returning to our evolutionary theme, however, throughout the universe, there seems a subtle but persistent pull toward increasing complexity and with it, increased consciousness and richer experience. This urge in the cosmos itself has been noted by many observers over the course of history. The great French thinker, Henri Bergson, writing in the mid-19th century, believed that consciousness evolves systematically, always pushing for increasingly complex nervous systems capable of sustaining greater awareness and intelligence (Bergson, 1959/2012). He attributed the forward momentum of this inner process of evolution to be a kind of intelligent force beyond ordinary physical energy, which he termed the *élan vital*. Following Bergson in the mid-20th century, the theologian and anthropologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1959) proposed similar ideas concerning the forward growth of consciousness supported by the enormously complex human brain. Attempting to stay within the western reductionistic framework of his day, he suggested a minute but key influence, which he termed *radial energy*. Operating at the lowest structural level, it could almost effortlessly influence the nascent shape of a forming snowflake or the pattern of a neural network in an embryonic brain.

Ideas along these lines are mirrored in much contemporary thought emerging from quantum physics and cosmology. Without going into detail, these all point to an urge or pull throughout the cosmos that acts against the universal drag of entropy and points toward a tendency for increasing complexification and wholeness (Laszlo, 2017).

**The developing mind**

One does not have to look far in terms of modern psychology to see an undergirding urge for growth and development. It expresses itself in many forms. Perhaps the impulse for mental or cognitive growth is the most obvious. However, we also see a clear movement toward emotional maturation and interpersonal development as well. This was first recognized by psychologist Abraham Maslow in the 1960s, who postulated a hierarchy of needs or motivations, said to be universal in human nature (Maslow, 1962). The hierarchy begins with basic necessities for safety and food. As these needs are fulfilled to at least a minimal degree, one moves on to social affiliative needs such as love and belonging. Afterward comes self-respect, and finally, the original highest need, that of self-actualization. This is a true hierarchy in the sense that each need must be satisfied, at least to a moderate degree, before the person moves on to the next higher type of motivation.

For example, a person whose life is in immediate danger on the battlefield does not concern themselves with their next meal, though when they are again out of danger, the need to eat will come swiftly. First, however, is the matter of staying alive. And, though steak and potatoes might be on the imaginary menu, just about anything edible will do in a pinch to satisfy the body’s basic need for nutrition. Many modern Americans, for instance, are “overfed and undernourished” because of the poor nutritional quality of inexpensive foods that can be purchased on a relatively low budget at local fast-food restaurants.

Having satisfied these basic creature needs, however, there is a tendency to seek to satisfy social needs by seeking affiliations with other people, and at least one intimate personal relationship. The former is often fulfilled by church or other community activities. Many types of employment provide opportunities to be part of a community in the office or shop. Likewise, military service, and involvement in sports teams, provide networks of friendships and social connections. Through them, one establishes a sense of home. For many people, this level of affiliation, along with an intimate partner or spouse, is sufficient for a satisfactory life.

If all these needs have been met, however, as often is the case in modern affluent countries, there eventually arises an urge for personal pride, prestige, and a feeling of accomplishment. It
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is at this level that individuals are motivated to become business executives, political leaders, respected scientists, and such. People may compromise the lower values in terms of friendships and intimate relationships, for example, to achieve such goals.

If life goes reasonably well, however, somewhere around midlife, there often arises a yearning for something more deeply meaningful, a purpose for living, or even a sense of destiny. Along with this may come a feeling of dryness and emptiness regarding past goals and achievements. This time of transition may also be accompanied by disturbing dreams and a wandering search for the fulfillment of dreams or values that one knew as a youth. Psychologist Carl Jung referred to this transitional time as a midlife crisis, during which we seek a more fulfilling future. One may pursue the guidance of a therapist or counselor, but ultimately the new direction must come from our own soul or deeper self. Those who find this new purpose and are fortunate enough to be able to pursue it in their daily lives are indeed fortunate and will live into a rewarding old age. Those who are not so fortunate can end up acting like senior adolescents in a kind of desperate attempt to cling to the life they once had as a youth. They are perhaps the most tragic victims of the modern financially fluent world’s failure to embrace the grace and wisdom of age.

Unfortunately, Maslow died at the age of 62, depriving us of the senior wisdom he might have shared. His personal journal, kept until his death, however, discloses a man who had come to question the original hierarchical framework he had created and for which he was destined to become famous (e.g., Kauffman, 2020). In Kauffman’s excellent book, we discover that Maslow had come to recognize a type of personality, which he referred to as transcendent, that goes beyond self-actualization.

Paradoxically, Maslow wrestled with the realization that many “transcendent” people or “transcenders” had not met all the criteria for completing the lower needs in his hierarchy and sometimes were surprisingly beset with neuroses and other psychological difficulties. He was still struggling to understand this fact at the time of his unexpected death (Kauffman, 2020).

Maslow had many definitions for transcendence, which were yet to be worked out in detail, but here is one that seems helpful:

Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos.

Maslow, 1971, p. 30

It seems that self-transcendence, as Maslow sometimes called it, is a fluid state, prone to human flaws and weaknesses. On reflection, perhaps this is not surprising. In my own research, and somewhat to my surprise, we discovered that many selfless people, perhaps the best citizens of their communities judging from public service records and selfless caring work for others, are not true self-actualizers at all. The latter tend, rather, to be absorbed in their own lives, while the caring work for others is done by friends and neighbors at the social affiliation, loving, and belonging level. Somewhat paradoxically, the highest levels of self-development are more often than not achieved by persons who dedicate their lives to spiritual practices such as contemplation and meditation. Perhaps this is no surprise either, given the extent that mystical traditions in virtually all religions have emphasized the value of withdrawing from the world, while one must be prepared to deal realistically with the “slings and arrows” of the real world to do significant good work in it.

At the same time, my own research has shown that the very highest degrees of personal development, as measured by psychological scales, are found in long-term spiritual practitioners.
who have detached from the world in a different way. That is, by becoming selfless to such a degree that they may find more joy in serving others than in helping themselves (Havens & Combs, 2016). Such individuals are indeed rare and usually the fruit of years, even decades, of spiritual practice in supportive communities.

In his book Kauffman gathered some of Maslow’s recommendations for living in the “Being Realm” of self-actualization and transcendence. Here are a few outstanding examples:

• Sample new experiences and avoid familiarization.
• Deliberately seek uplifting experience, for example, in music and art. And also in nature, depending on your own preferences.
• Cultivate periods of quiet, meditation, relaxation, and reflection.
• Develop a Taoist attitude of accepting the order and laws of nature and the cosmos.
• Seek a sense of the miraculous.
• Be passionate with yourself. Accept your past, your failings, and your feelings.
• Don’t be ashamed to be a good person in a cynical world.
• Never underestimate the power of a single individual to affect the world.
• Find realistic solutions to basic Deficiency Needs such as security, making friends, and making a living.
• Use the artist’s or photographer’s trick of seeing the object in itself.
• Imagine yourself to be dying. Then imagine how vivid and precious everything and everyone looks.

Since Maslow’s pioneering work, there have been literally dozens of authors writing about personal growth and development. These are lined up in tables in Ken Wilber’s comprehensive book, Integral Psychology (Wilber, 1994). For those readers with an academic orientation, however, I would especially recommend Robert Kegan’s examination of the stages of consciousness that undergird the growth and development of the whole person starting from childhood. I suggest his first major book, In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life (Kegan, 1998). He is not easy to read, however. A number of years ago, when he told his wife that the book was to be translated into French, she replied, “Why don’t you try translating it into English?!” Kegan has written several books since then, which tend to be about organizational development and not so much personal growth and transformation. Good work, but we will not go deeply into it here.

For my part, after conducting much research on personal transformation and thinking about what one can do to facilitate our own personal growth and transformation, I cannot recommend any activity more highly than a daily practice of meditation. This can be just about any form of meditation, from classical TM to obscure Tibetan Buddhist techniques. The only proviso I add is that the practice you choose should involve a quiet inner focus. “Moving meditations” such as Tai Chi, or various forms of hatha yoga, are excellent for cultivating holistic health and balance but, at least according to my own findings, do not move the mind to higher levels of growth and realization.

The reason is that contemplative meditation of virtually any type opens the mind to wider and deeper perspectives. This occurs in a series of steps, each viewing the mind from higher and more inclusive viewpoints. Developmental psychologists, such as Robert Kegan above, have shown that as we grow from childhood to adolescence, on to young adulthood, and finally to senior age, we come to see ourselves and the world around us from increasingly broad and insightful perspectives. Quiet reflective meditation simply facilitates this process, moving awareness forward in steps that bypass the slower process of ordinary development.
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and work to dismantle periods of stagnation that without meditation could last the remainder of one’s life.

I refrain from recommending particular meditation practices. Each person has to find what is best for them individually. But in the absence of a teacher or calling, I often suggest Ken Wilber’s little book, Integral Meditation: Mindfulness as a Way to Grow Up, Wake Up, and Show Up in Your Life (2016). I recommend this only for starters. There are many others. For example, a recent compendium of Asian and western techniques for developing quiet inner focus can be found in Tantric Psychophysics (Joye, 2021), a book by my friend and previous student Shelli Joye.

If you find a teacher or community of meditators that seems right for you, though, then that is the best. I personally searched for many years before I found the right teacher for myself. He was standing in the parking lot and extended his hand to help me out of the car, saying, “Finally you have come!”

Let me briefly add that practices such as meditation were not created only to advance our mental or psychological growth and not as a solution to problems such as neuroses or depression. Using them for such purposes is getting the cart before the horse. Virtually all serious teachers recommend that one begin by getting one’s own psychological house in order, in other words settling the deficiency needs, before pushing ahead into spiritual work and transcendence. Failing to do so is a prescription for denial and failure to grow as a person.

As a point of interest, several of the spiritual teachers who first traveled to the US in the 60s encouraged their followers to ignore personal issues with the promise of solving them through spiritual practices. In fact, this advice failed badly, and in time more than a few of these followers became counselors and therapists themselves, with the full approval of their gurus and teachers.

The future

As we are learning from quantum physics, and indeed the world at large, the future is always indefinite until the wave function in all of its possibilities collapses and reality comes into being in plain sight. As a final thought, I would like to present my idea for a possible evolutionary future of human consciousness. It is not a new thought but seems to be appearing with increasingly frequency at this time in history. This is the growing presence of intersubjectivity. By this, I mean the strong sense of sharing a feeling of being together with another person in a single field of experience. If this experience includes more than two people, we may refer to it as an occasion of collective consciousness, taken here in the strong sense of a feeling of being together with others in a single or unified field of consciousness (e.g., Combs, 2017; Midgley, 2006; Ziman, 2006). We contrast this with the ordinary meaning originally suggested by Émile Durkheim in 1893 to identify shared beliefs and moral attitudes within a society (Jary & Jary, 1991).

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin famously made the evolution consciousness a central theme of his posthumous book The Phenomenon of Man (1959), where he embraced a teleological notion of evolution in which human experience will end in a collective conscious field called the noosphere. This would ultimately lead to the Omega Point, the maximum degree of shared consciousness, which he also identified with God. Teilhard de Chardin was a Jesuit priest and theologian, as well as an anthropologist of Darwinian persuasion, and so he brought religious beliefs to his notions about the future of consciousness, identifying the Omega Point with a kind of Christian love or agapē. He wrote in the mid-20th century, a time in which materialism almost completely dominated scientific thinking. Given this constraint and the fact that...
during his life, he was prohibited from publishing by his own clergy, after his death, he still managed to influence a whole generation with his thoughts about the nature and future of consciousness.

Impressive instances of collective consciousness have been reported in a variety of spiritual traditions such as the Hindu Kecak chanters of Indonesia (Eiseman & Eiseman, 1989), the “gathered” meetings of the American Quakers (Kelly, 1997), and have been associated with advanced states of group meditation (e.g., Dillbeck et al., 1987; Hagelin, 1987). Collective consciousness is also described in problem-solving groups in modern society (Kenny, 2004), especially in the business community (Hamilton & Zammit, 2008). Reports from oral cultures such as the Indigenous peoples of the Australian mainland suggest that collective experiences are not limited to modern societies at all but may, in fact, be more common in oral and traditional cultures (e.g., Hume, 2002).

Keeney (2005), who spent considerable time with the Bushmen or San people of Africa, wrote:

The Ju/'hoansi Bushman n/om-kxaosi (shamans) of Namibia and Botswana are quite familiar with ‘collective consciousness’ and one could say that experiential unions of relationship are the heart and soul of their healing work.

Keeney, 2008

Whether such intimate communication between minds is unique to human beings, or even large brained animals in general, is hard to say. It has been suggested that intersubjectivity is the fruit of the evolutionary development of mirror neurons in humans and probably other large mammalian brains. This idea makes good sense but might be questioned on the basis of the coordinated behavior, for example, of flocks of birds or schools of fish. It is difficult to imagine that these species have mirror neurons such as those located in the mammalian neocortex.

Not too long ago, such ideas as strong intersubjectivity could be dismissed as simply impossible. The contemporary postmodern scientific landscape, however, offers many possibilities that simply were not on the table for reasonable consideration a few decades ago. Research into quantum entanglement, for example, makes it clear that at the finest level of reality, radical separation is simply not part of the physical universe. Much could be said about this, but at a more practical level, consider the enormous amount of careful research by Rupert Sheldrake in support of morphic fields, subtle influences that modify physical and mental systems in a nonmechanistic fashion, and may lie at the root of psychic phenomena such as telepathy (e.g., Sheldrake, 2012).

Returning to our primary topic, however, my own experience as a long-time psychologist and consciousness researcher is that the frequency of credible reports of intersubjectivity seems to be on the rise throughout the world today. All of which suggests that the future trajectory of human consciousness arcs toward increasing growth and interconnection at the deepest levels.

References


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