

Integral Philosophy and the Evolution of Consciousness

By Steve McIntosh

From a scientific perspective, how do we explain the phenomenon of the evolutionary appearance of human society and culture? If humans are simply highly intelligent animals, why is it that our culture evolves and develops in such a dramatic fashion? The social organization of other intelligent animals does not generally evolve unless there is a corresponding evolution in their biology. So what is it about humans that gives us this unprecedented ability to do things like build cities, fly to the moon, compose symphonies, and contemplate the nature of reality? The clear answer is that the *consciousness* of humans can evolve in ways that do not depend on the biological evolution of our brains. Unlike other animals, humans have demonstrated the ability to extend our consciousness by developing our society and culture.

The special evolutionary significance of human consciousness is currently disputed by some scientific materialists and postmodern academics, who often label such thinking as “species-centric.” However, once we face the fact that human consciousness evolves in unique and unprecedented ways, we have to acknowledge that there is indeed something special about humans that sets us apart from other animals. And if we want to better understand why and how human consciousness evolves, we have to look beyond science alone for explanations. Recently, a number of philosophical breakthroughs have arisen that shed new light on the evolution of consciousness. These insights have come from the enlarged understanding of consciousness and culture provided by *integral philosophy*. So in this article we will take a brief look at integral philosophy’s new understanding of evolution and suggest how this perspective promises to help us address the growing global problems we face here at the beginning of the 21st century.

Integral philosophy is a new theoretical synthesis that combines previous spiritual philosophies of evolution (such as those promulgated by Alfred North Whitehead and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin) with the fresh insights of system science, the perspectives of developmental psychology, and the inclusive values of postmodernism. Currently, the most significant proponent of integral philosophy is the American author Ken Wilber, but important contributions are also being made by other integral thinkers. Integral philosophy’s value is found in the way it helps us better understand the connection between the evolution of human consciousness and the evolution of human culture. From an integral perspective, the solution to almost every human problem can be achieved by *raising the consciousness* of those who are creating the problem. Thus, integral

philosophy's enlarged understanding of the evolution of consciousness can help us make real strides in the improvement of the human condition.

Human Consciousness Is Continuously Evolving

As integral philosophy looks at science's story of the universe (setting aside any consideration of the ultimate source or destiny of this creative unfolding), it can see in the timeline of evolution from the Big Bang onward, long before the appearance of life, how matter came to be organized in increasingly complex arrangements, eventually resulting in the formation of our solar system and our planet. For example, we can see how the very structure of the periodic table of elements provides a kind of biography of pre-living matter as it passed through its sequential stages of increasing complexification. Then, once our planet had consolidated, material evolution continued to progress until it produced the dramatic emergence called life. Once life appeared, evolution demonstrated new capacities. Life used new methods of development and evolved at a faster pace than matter. Life became increasingly more organized and complex until it produced what can now be recognized as the dramatic appearance of human consciousness.

The evolutionary novelty of humans was not really a biological breakthrough. In fact, the biological differences between early humans and their immediate animal ancestors were barely noticeable. The evolutionary leap constituted by the appearance of humans was *internal*—it came about through the advent of self-consciousness. This self-awareness, this consciousness of consciousness itself, appears only in humans. And it is the emergence of this new self-reflecting ability in humans that marks the real beginning of the developmental domain of cultural and historical evolution.

The integral perspective thus rejects the contention that there is nothing particularly unique about human awareness, arguing that human consciousness can indeed be distinguished from other types of observable consciousness. In fact, according to integral philosophy, the appearance of human consciousness is an evolutionary event which has a significance equivalent to the original emergence of life from inanimate matter.

So why does this self-consciousness in humans make such an evolutionary difference? It is because with self-awareness comes the ability to take hold of the evolutionary process itself. Through self-reflection, humans have the unique ability to see themselves in perspective within the scale of evolution, and this creates both the desire and the ability to improve their condition

relative to the state of their animal cousins. And for generation after generation humans have generally continued to improve their conditions.

The evolutionary significance of human consciousness is clearly demonstrated by the now obvious fact of global human culture. Development in the complexity of human cultural structures is undeniable. And like the previous evolutionary breakthrough seen in the appearance of life, the appearance of human culture is accompanied by new methods of development and a new pace of progress. Just as life evolves much faster than inanimate matter, human consciousness and culture evolve much faster than life. However, even though the emergence of human consciousness and culture constitute a new domain of evolutionary progress, many of the methods, habits, and laws of evolution still apply.¹ Indeed, integral philosophy achieves much of its power through its ability to recognize how the influences of evolution are affecting human consciousness and culture in a manner very similar to the way they influence the development of matter and life.

Scientists have found that the biology of the human brain has been evolving continuously since pre-history, yet the brain size and overall DNA of the humans who inhabit the world today are very similar to the humans who lived during the last ice age. So even though our brains are still evolving, this cannot by itself account for the tremendous evolution of human consciousness during this same period. Although there has been very little biological evolution, there has nevertheless been significant progress in what can best be described as the evolution of the human mind.

Whether those who live in developed societies have minds that are “more evolved” than humans who lived in the Stone Age is certainly controversial. But it seems to me that the amount and complexity of information—the sheer number of words and images—processed by the average citizen in the developed world is orders of magnitude greater than the quantity of information processed by our prehistoric ancestors. And not only are most modern humans conscious of a greater quantity of information, they are also conscious of fine distinctions of quality that would have been lost to their forebears. A modern human’s sense of smell or ability to recognize animal tracks may be less than her ancestors, but her ability to discriminate the myriad types of aesthetic experience available today is unquestionably more complex—her access to food, music, art, media, travel, and technology give her a range and degree of choices that are significantly greater than those available to people who lived in the Stone Age.

Moreover, educated moderns have a conceptual ability that is not found in tribal peoples; moderns are able to think about themselves and their society from enlarged perspectives that Stone Age peoples do not have. But you may ask, how do we know this? How can we say for sure that the consciousness of a modern human is “more evolved” than the consciousness of a person living in 8,000 B.C.? Well, numerous studies² involving extensive interviews with contemporary indigenous tribal peoples confirm that their thinking and perceiving is largely “representational,” that the words they use can usually only match individual objects, not entire categories or larger, more general types of phenomena. This research indicates that the consciousness found in most tribal peoples is generally not capable of thinking in syllogisms or logical types. Comparisons between objects are made on the basis of physical attributes with functional or conceptual similarities being largely ignored. This research does not suggest that there are any biological or racial differences between peoples who live “in different times in history,” but it does provide evidence that there are significant, measurable differences in the development of their respective stages of consciousness.

So how does this happen? How is it that our minds can evolve without the corresponding evolution of our brains? As noted, an infant born today has pretty much the same biological equipment as an infant born ten thousand years ago. Yet an infant born today in the developed world will be able to stand on the shoulders of the giants of history and assimilate the lessons of the last five thousand years of human cultural evolution by the time she graduates from college. Obviously, the reason that the consciousness of moderns is measurably more developed than our prehistoric ancestors is that the achievements of each generation have been accumulated and passed on through the development of things such as language, art, and technology. As human culture develops and evolves, human consciousness evolves along with it.

Domains of Evolution

Integral philosophy recognizes that the evolution of human consciousness actually occurs in a distinct “domain of evolution” that is connected to, yet partially independent from, biology. Although there are measurable differences in neurological activation (electrical and chemical activity) between the brains of primitives and moderns, the biological structure of the brain is effectively the same. Again, before the appearance of humans, an organism’s inside mind and outside brain evolved together in lockstep—for an animal to become appreciably smarter it has to evolve biologically. But with the advent of humans, the internal domain of consciousness is

partially liberated from its biological constraints and is able to embark on the path of a wholly new type of mental, emotional, and spiritual evolution. However, the essence of this development is *within* consciousness and culture; it is occurring in a domain that is best described as the internal universe.

Rene Descartes' philosophical distinction between mind and matter (now known as "dualism") has been largely rejected by the scientists who maintain that mind is just an aspect of matter. So as integral philosophy attempts to include and transcend the scientific worldview, it takes notice of the problems of dualism, and thus avoids naively proposing a return to this way of seeing things. According to integral philosophy, the reality we are familiar with does not consist of a natural world and a supernatural world—the external and the internal are both essentially natural. But although the internal and external are recognized as different phases of the same thing, that "thing" is not merely particles of matter.

The diagram shown in Figure 1, below, illustrates the nested nature of the internal domains of evolution. The concentric circles show how life emerges from inside matter, how consciousness emerges from inside life, and how culture develops, in a way, inside consciousness through the relationships found in the internal domain that exists "in between" the consciousness of individuals. Figure 1 also shows human-made artifacts in the objective domain (such as languages, technologies, art, architecture, etc.), because even though artifacts are not natural evolutionary systems (like organisms or ecosystems), they are significant in the way their development "stands in" for the lack of biological evolution and provides the external physical complexity that supports the internal evolution of culture and consciousness. Figure 1 thus charts all the various types of evolution—the chemical and geological evolution of matter, the biological evolution of life, the personal evolution of consciousness, the collective evolution of culture, and the corresponding development of material artifacts. Figure 1 also shows how these different types of evolution fall into three main categories: objective, subjective, and intersubjective; or put more simply: nature, self, and culture.

Integral philosophy's explanation of the evolving universe, which relies on the recognition of these three evolutionary domains—nature, self, and culture—could be criticized as a kind of metaphysics. And to the extent that "self and culture" are not observable objects, to the extent that these realities are distinguished from "nature," their investigation does literally go "beyond physics." Thus the exploration of these realms can be characterized as "metaphysical," as that term was originally understood. However, scientific philosophies that insist that nothing is

essentially beyond the laws of physics are themselves highly metaphysical in their assumptions about the nature of being. So no matter how you try, when you ask questions about the nature of the universe—when you ask questions about the real nature of evolution—you can't avoid metaphysics. Whether your viewpoint is informed by pre-modern mythology, early modern dualism, late modern materialism, postmodern subjectivism, or integral philosophy's recognition of objective, subjective, and intersubjective realms, it is framed by assumptions that are essentially metaphysical. Yet the idea of the objective, subjective, and intersubjective domains of evolution seems far less metaphysical when we see how these categories are simply descriptions of the different types of evolution. Matter evolves, life evolves, consciousness evolves, and human history evolves, and these different types of evolutionary activity are what make these categories real.

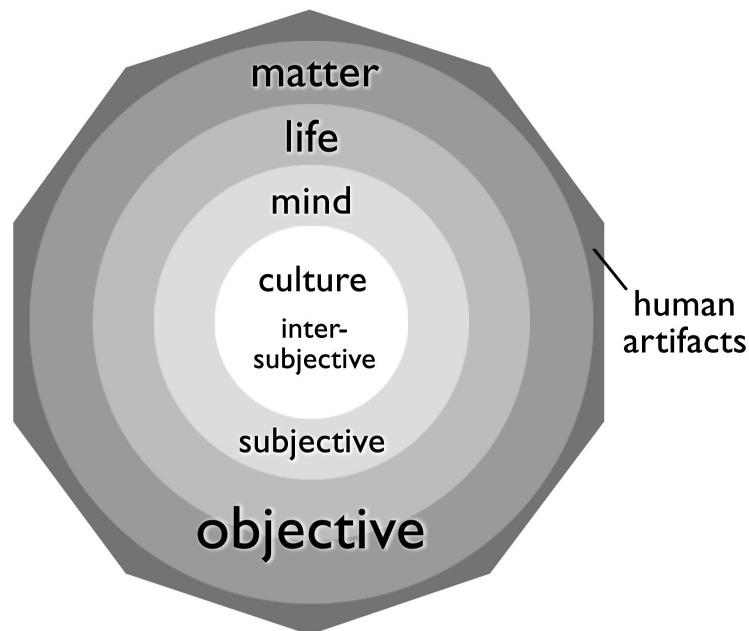


Figure 1. Types of evolutionary development.

The Promise of Integral Philosophy

Although a thorough explanation of integral philosophy and its applications is beyond the scope of this article, we can perhaps begin to see how the framing of human consciousness in this new

evolutionary light could be extremely useful. Once we recognize how the solution to almost every human problem involves the raising of consciousness, we can see the value of a philosophy that explains how consciousness is, in fact, raised. Integral philosophy reveals what might be termed “the physics of the internal universe.” It explains why some forms of culture have developed and others have stagnated or regressed. Moreover, it focuses on the times in human history wherein dramatic steps forward have been achieved through the rise of new worldviews, as was witnessed during the Enlightenment of the 18th century or during the progressive developments of the 1960s.

The integral perspective recognizes how human nature evolves primarily through the dialectical development of dynamic systems of values. For example, it is through the emergence of more inclusive and complex value systems that humans have been able to evolve their morality from egocentric, to ethnocentric, to increasingly more worldcentric conceptions. That is, as human consciousness evolves, the scope of those worthy of moral consideration expands from one’s blood kin, to one’s ethnic group, and eventually to a morality that includes all sentient beings. The new clarity that integral philosophy brings to our understanding of the evolution of human nature constitutes a kind of “Second Enlightenment.” Just as the first Enlightenment opened up the external universe of matter and energy to a new era of exploration and discovery, the emerging integral worldview is opening up the “internal universe” of consciousness and culture to a similarly significant era of new discoveries.

Once we begin to see the evolving universe from the integral perspective, we see how profound and all encompassing evolution truly is. Evolution isn’t just something that happened in the distant past; the same forces that turned rocks into rosebushes are actually more intense than ever now that humanity is beginning to understand how we are both the products of evolution and the agents of evolution. The first step was the Darwinian revolution in science; and now the integral revolution in philosophy is making it possible for us to become agents of evolution as never before.

Although the integral worldview is currently in its infancy, there are abundant opportunities to participate in this exciting cultural development. Wherever progressive, postmodern culture has become well established, there can now be found those who are beginning to investigate this intriguing new evolutionary perspective. The more you learn about the integral worldview, the more you may come to appreciate how its approaches are both idealistic and realistic. Browsing the web you will find a host of new books on integral philosophy, together with magazines,

websites, salons, and gatherings of those who are coming together to discuss this new way of understanding the evolution of consciousness and culture.

Ultimately, the best way to help those around us to evolve is to accelerate our own evolution by internalizing a larger spectrum of values. And this is what the integral perspective does—it helps us develop our ability to evaluate more effectively by using the healthy values of every significant worldview that has emerged along the timeline of human history. Thus, I heartily invite each of you to explore the integral worldview and begin using the power of this emerging perspective to make social progress and improve the human condition in meaningful ways.

Notes

1. Integral philosophy's arguments and explanations about the overall unity of evolution in nature, self, and culture can be found in Wilber (1995) and McIntosh (2007).

2. See Wade (1995) p. 77-96, Wilber (1995) p. 169-176. See also Habermas, (1979), McCarthy (1978), Luria (1976), Lundberg (1974), Scribner and Cole (1981), Werner (1940/1980), Levy-Bruhl (1910/1985).

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