Is a New Consciousness Emerging? Reflections on the Impact of an Integral Perspective[1]

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Abstract

Every era embodies a perspective or worldview. In a time of profound change, what is the worldview that describes our current era? At the frontiers of the culture an integral way of thinking has started to form. An integral model looks to incorporate and embrace knowledge into a unified framework, and to cast a new light on the transformational processes that are at work both in human consciousness and in the culture. Evolutionary principles such as directionality and the ceaseless movement towards increasing complexity and wholeness have influenced not only science, but now also psychology, culture and spirituality. As we look back at the stages of our development in history with an ever-sharper lens and contemplate our present and our future, we ask: is a new consciousness emerging as we transition an increasingly inclusive and holistic worldview? This paper looks at some of the ideas of thinkers such as Ken Wilber, Jean Gebser, Michael Murphy, Teilhard de Chardin and Sri Aurobindo, and suggests further ways of advancing integral thought by reviewing the work of one of the greatest early integral thinkers and spiritual giant, Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi, and his teaching on the Logos as a principle for emergence.

Introduction

Any broad universal perspective invites meaningful engagement with the big questions of life. But meta-narratives in general do not readily find popular acceptance in our academic institutions today – our intellectual climate is one of deconstruction and reductionism, and postmodern scholars tend to privilege pluralistic and subjective perspectives over unifying narratives that attempt any

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holistic or meaningful interpretation of the human experience and the world that we inhabit.

However, something is stirring within the culture, and taking root in the mainstream of our society. It is these contemporary voices that are the subject of this paper, and it is an attempt, with very broad strokes, an outline of an emerging meta-narrative that embraces a *spiritual perspective of evolution*, suggesting new ways of thinking about our place in history, and what our potential for future evolution might be. This is clearly an immense study, thus the tenor of this presentation can be thought of as journalistic reporting, rather than the analysis of an expert, on some influential contemporary thinkers whose ideas are percolating into the cultural consciousness of our time, with the intent to review the broad impact of their ideas on both the current era and its future potential.

The Evolutionary Context

The New York Times columnist David Brooks said in an article recently:

> "And it occurred to me that while we post-moderns say we detest all-explaining narratives, in fact a newish grand narrative has crept upon us willy-nilly and is now all around. Once the Bible shaped all conversation, then Marx, then Freud, but today Darwin is everywhere"[2]

Darwin published his theory of evolution in 1859, yet there were others that preceded him that nevertheless grasped the power and importance of the concept of development and change over time. Any philosophy of creation or becoming, such as those put forward by Plato and Plotinus, for example, involved ideas of the progression from the One to the Many, what is called *involution*, and the inverse or return from the Many to the One, what we call *evolution*. The matter of the "becoming" of the world and the troublesome relationship of a perfect transcendent reality that somehow manifests in connection with a world of changeable and

[2] Brooks, David (2007-4-15). *The Age of Darwin*. New York Times

imperfect forms has challenged and consumed thinkers throughout history. In the Western philosophical tradition German idealists such as Hegel and Schelling predated Darwin yet expressed their ideas in evolutionary terms. For Hegel, the truth of any era was not static but followed a developmental or dialectical process of unfolding in the context of history, and Schelling was perhaps one of the earliest thinkers to view evolution as an open-ended, spontaneous and creative process, while at the same time affirming the divine as both transcendent from the world and immanent in its unfolding through evolution.

Teilhard de Chardin, a remarkable evolutionary thinker and one of the scientists on the team that discovered Peking Man, asserted that evolution follows a clear trajectory towards higher and higher levels of unity and organization. While not all scientists might agree with conflating the idea of directionality or purpose with a theory of evolution, the idea of natural selection alone as the engine of evolution has come into question. Other theories of the mechanisms of evolution have emerged, for example the principles of self-organization arising from *complexity theory* and *chaos theory* that are found at both the genetic and the cultural level, gives rise to the notion of hierarchical governance as a way to achieve higher forms of organization, from cells to tribes to planetary systems. The way complex systems coalesce and self-organize allows for the emergence of novel new forms that transcend and are always more than the sum of their parts, and these principles are understood to apply generally to any complex system. Spontaneous order has been observed to emerge from systems such as a human community, an organism, swarming behavior in nature, a traffic circle, or the development of a city. Reductionism alone is not sufficient to explain emergence – a fragmented view of the world does not adequately explain the emergent whole, nor can it make sense or meaning of the astonishing plenitude and creativity of life.

What these theories suggest is that the directionality of evolution from lesser to more complex and inclusive structures is an inherent characteristic to evolutionary growth, a built-in blueprint containing the principles for emergence. A key operating

principle has been called *transcend and include* – in other words, as structures develop from simpler to more complex, the simpler form is subsumed within the higher, newly-emerging whole, in the same way that molecules transcend and include atoms, organisms transcend and include molecules, etc.[3]

It would not be entirely correct to call this the *logic* of emergence, since evolution does not follow logical progression as we might normally think of it, but I would offer that it *is* a kind of *logos of emergence*, an inherent order that spontaneously unfolds according to the conditions and place of its appearance. This organic activity of self-generating and self-organizing is also called *autopoeisis*, self-creation, originally applied in biology to define the self-maintaining chemistry of living cells, but now extended to the fields of sociology, systems theory, and of consciousness itself.[4] This notion of a principle or order embedded both in matter and within the evolutionary process will be revisited shortly in connection with the Logos doctrine found in the teachings of the great Sufi thinker, Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi.

A perspective of evolution as a guiding force in the world is one that views all life forms, including human consciousness and human societies, as evolving according to the same internal structures that guide the evolution of all living things. The evolution of consciousness is thus tied to the evolution of all forms in a unified and integrated way. Amongst Western cultural creatives and influencers, this is becoming increasingly accepted as a new paradigm, one that is seen as progressive and unconstrained by the worldviews of both the traditional and modern mindsets – a new kind of thinking that finds its roots in the postmodern and now increasingly what is being called the *integral* worldview.

The word *integral* is often used in the same way as *evolutionary* – both terms pointing to an emerging paradigm. The word *integral* started appearing around the

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[3] Wilber, Ken (2011). *A Brief History of Everything*. Shambhala, p. 43

[4] Coombs, Allan & Goerner, Sally (1998). *Consciousness as a Self-Organizing Process: An Ecological Perspective*. In Biosystems 46(1-2):123-7

beginning of the 20th Century, used by Jean Gebser and Sri Aurobindo, and whose works were highly influential on Ken Wilber, the contemporary philosopher whose body of work is called Integral Theory which attempts to map the domains of science, philosophy, psychology, cosmology and religion into a unified model of knowledge. This exercise of correlation across multiple specialized domains requires one to be a generalist in order to discern and discover patterns of meaning. However, being a generalist is more than just being a pluralist and in fact the integrative, cross-disciplinary activity of making space for multiple perspectives and points of view has itself been called a higher level of functioning that represents a new stage in the evolution of consciousness, and the development of a capacity to embrace multiple perspectives is seen as a significant evolutionary leap.[5] Wilber argues that holding many perspectives is essential to developing a correct view and indeed a hallmark of integral stage development.[6]

The assertion is that consciousness is the internal subjective dimension of the cosmos, a real space where we experience the world and which is not separate from the ontological fabric of the universe, and that it evolves as physical forms do. Equally, we inhabit a *collective* field of consciousness, not just as an *individual subjectivity*, but also as a communal *inter-subjectivity*, which is an actual place where worldviews form and develop. Others have also formulated concepts to account for this idea of inter-subjectivity, such as Carl Jung's notion of the *collective unconscious,* described as the structures of the unconscious mind shared and inherited by our species and containing instincts and archetypes. Teilhard de Chardin proposed the idea of the *noosphere,* which he described as a thinking layer that surrounds the earth and acts as the sum total of humanity's interior life. [7] This shared experiential dimension of *inter-subjectivity* is also what we call culture.[8]

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[5] Phipps, Carter (2012). *Evolutionaries: Unlocking the Spiritual and Cultural Potential of Science's Greatest Idea*. HarperCollins, p. 31

[6] Wilber, Ken (2007). *Integral Spirituality*. Integral Books, p. 113

[7] Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre (2008). *The Phenomenon of Man*. Harper Perennial Modern Thought

[8] Phipps, op cit, p. 167

Human Development

According to this emerging way of integral thought, human evolution is seen as a progression of levels or stages that have both psychological and cultural dimensions. We start life as children and progress through a series of developmental stages that have been found to correlate closely with stages of cultural development. By cross-referencing many developmental models, ranging from childhood development, values, religious beliefs, cultural worldviews, cosmology and the like, integral thinkers have mapped structural similarities and patterns and connected the dots in increasingly more holistic ways. Stages of cognitive development within a lifespan from infancy to adulthood, for example, are thus mapped to stages of cultural development, which in turn are mapped to stages of consciousness.

At the individual level, developmental psychologists such as Jean Piaget revolutionized the way we think about the way children develop. The discovery that children go through a recognizable cognitive stage development process was a significant breakthrough in understanding the way in which cognition unfolds, showing that mind is not static but follows a progression that can be described in evolutionary terms. Various researchers have labeled the stages slightly differently, but again typically follow the stage development model of simple to more complex, as in Piaget's description of the sensorimotor, pre-operational, concrete-operational, and formal operational stages. This progression is understood to describe not only a biological developmental process, but also the nature of cognition and consciousness and how humans come to acquire it. Ken Wilber, for example, has embraced Piaget's work and mapped the stages of infant development to the stages of cultural development in an effort to identify common structures underlying the emergence of both individual consciousness and cultural systems.

Cultural Development

To explain development at the cultural or collective level, few have been more influential than Jean Gebser. He demonstrated that human cultures can be traced

through four distinct phases or *structures of consciousness*, and, positioned as he was between two world wars, he believed he was witnessing the birth of a fifth stage, that of a new kind of consciousness he called *integral*. This new consciousness he also referred to as *aperspectival*, since one of its primary attributes was that it was not limited to its own perspective, but was able to re-integrate all the perspectives that came before it and allow them to "become present to our awareness in their respective degrees of consciousness."[9]

He believed that consciousness had an atemporal, immaterial source that he called *origin*, and that this origin contains in itself, in a form of latency, the structures of consciousness that would unfold over time. The first consciousness structure Gebser identified is the *archaic* level; he suggested that it is zero-dimensional and pre-temporal, where man was still indistinguishable from the world and the universe, living in a state of consciousness with no differentiation between self and other. The second structure is the *magic* level where man is released from his identity with the whole, representing an egocentric level of development where identity is of self and everything is seen as meaningful only to one's own self. Here the magic world is a real world, where consciousness is single-dimensional and timeless with point-like unity and where the point or part can stand for the whole, as seen with the interfusing of a cave painting of a bison with the spirit of the bison itself. The third or *mythic* stage marks the beginning of time and history, whereas the magical stage is pre-history. The mythic is characterized by polarity. Language and imagination flourish, and the oral tradition that emphasizes the Word takes hold. This is a traditional worldview, or ethnocentric, where identity is with the tribe, and there is a new inner awareness of a larger, richer world of the soul. Here man steps into the two-dimension world of the circle, defined by the cyclical and repeating cadence of the cycles of nature, such as winter/summer, day/night, and the orbits of the planets. The fourth stage of the *mental* or *rational* is also known as the *modernist* stage that was truly birthed during the Enlightenment, though Gebser speculates

[9] Gebser, Jean (1984). *The Ever-Present Origin*. Ohio University Press, p. 268

that its earliest structures appeared around 1225 BCE. Thinking or thought forms in the way we know of them today are the characteristic of this stage, in that there is an unambiguous "I" doing the thinking. Humans step out of nature and out of the circle of congruity with their world into the three-dimensional space epitomized by the European Enlightenment and the scientific revolution that followed it. This level is also called world-centric, where identity is with humanity at large.

For Gebser the *integral* stage was just emerging in his time. It represented a new worldview, a new way of integrating in consciousness all the historical stages of development that preceded it. It also heralds a new relationship to space and time. Here identity is seen as cosmo-centric, where identity is with nature, the manifest world and oneness. In the integral stage, origin becomes perceivable, the spiritual becomes concretized, and the uncreated light becomes manifest.

With each degree of evolution the perspective is said to advance by *transcending and including* the degree before it, becoming increasingly expansive and capable of comprehending a wider and deeper perspective. As noted earlier, these same stages are applied equally to childhood development, thus stage development describes both the interior as individual structures, and the exterior as worldviews that are applied to the culture.

Gebser's ideas were further expanded in the Spiral Dynamics model developed by Clare Graves and Don Beck in order to account for cultural developments that emerged in the 1960's, particularly by identifying the *post-modern* stage that was inserted between the *rational/modern* stage and the *integral* stage, plus an additional *holistic* stage after the *integral* stage that is yet to emerge, arriving at a total of eight stages.[10] These stages are described as worldviews but also as *value systems*, and are said to inform the basic structures of psychology and sociology. The

[10] Roemischer, Jessica (Fall/Winter 2002). *The Never-Ending Upward Quest*. In What Is Enlightenment Magazine

stages make up an ascending evolutionary spiral through which individuals and cultures pass as they develop – psychologically, culturally, morally, spiritually.

These values, moreover, can be seen at play in our world today, and Spiral Dynamics emphasizes the practical importance of understanding how these structures exist as stable organizing systems for cultures around the world. There is some research to demonstrate that three worldviews are currently active, at least in the West, those of *traditionalism*, *modernism* and *post-modernism*. They subsist side-by-side, and we can observe these dynamics within our culture. As Carter Phipps wryly notes, think Billy Graham, Bill Gates and Oprah, or Opus Dei, IBM and Greenpeace.[11] These are broad generalizations, but they make a point, and can be helpful tools in understanding the culture wars of conflicting worldviews that we see daily in the media.

So we pass individually and collectively through these waves of development, which should be thought of as "not rigid levels but flowing waves, with much overlap and interweaving."[12] They are significant generalizations that help us orient our understanding of the human experience. Equally, there are both healthy and unhealthy expressions of each wave of development. Development brings new potentialities but it can also bring new pathologies and excesses, as we see in our postmodern society where individual truths are honored and respected, minority rights are protected, etc., but its weakness can be seen in the individualistic manifestations of narcissism, the resistance to hierarchies, the over-romanticizing of pre-modern societies, and political impotence.[13] Additionally, one has to guard against inappropriate value judgments of one stage over another, which could lead

[11] Phipps, op cit., p. 217
[12] Wilber, Ken (2001). *A Theory of Everything*. Shambhala, p. 7
[13] Phipps, op cit., p. 175

to alarming conclusions about cultural or racial superiority. Gebser himself did not consider any structure of consciousness superior to any other.[14]

Integral Theory

No discussion of the field of Integral Theory can be complete without a nod to Ken Wilber, one of most influential contemporary philosophers. He has attempted what essentially amounts to a "theory of everything", an effort to

> "… try to create a vocabulary for a more constructive philosophy. Beyond pluralistic relativism is universal integralism… I sought an integral philosophy, one that would believably weave together the many pluralistic contexts of science, morals, aesthetics, Eastern as well as Western philosophy and the world's great wisdom traditions. Not on the level of details – that is finitely impossible; but on the level of orienting generalizations: a way to suggest that the world really is one, undivided, whole, and related to itself in every way…"[15]

He has drawn on the ideas and philosophies of many integral and evolutionary thinkers, and painstakingly mapped hundreds of developmental and knowledge systems into a unified epistemology. According to him, every phenomenon, event or idea can be mapped to an integral epistemological model that posits that all knowledge falls into one of four quadrants, each of which represents a perspective – the individual interior (the "I" or subjective perspective), the collective interior (the "we" or inter-subjective perspective), the individual exterior (the "it" or exterior bodily perspective) and the collective exterior (the "its" or exterior systems perspective).[16]

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[14] Combs, Allan and Krippner Stanley (1999b), *Spiritual Growth and the Evolution of Consciousness: Complexity, Evolution, and the Farther Reaches of Human Nature*. In The International Journal of Transpersonal Studies (22, 47-60)

[15] Wilber, Ken (2000). *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality.* Shambhala, p. xii

[16] Wilber, Ken (2007). *Integral Spirituality*. Integral Books

As an example, we can say that I have an individual interior experience, such as my thoughts and feelings; I also have an interior collective perspective, such as the cultural beliefs and values that I share with others which contextualizes that experience; and, I have an exterior individual dimension, such as my brain, body and physiology; finally I also have an exterior collective perspective, such as the economic, social and political systems that I participate in.

According to Wilber, not only does this epistemology cover all possible kinds of knowledge, but also that evolution happens within each of the four quadrants. As an example, as the human brain developed corresponding developments can be mapped to the interior development of consciousness, as well as developments in cultural organization and values, and of course political, economic and trading systems. It's less certain if one can say that any one of the quadrants *leads* the evolutionary thrust, but what does seem appropriate is to view this model as a "web of connection, a matrix of interconnected structures,"[17] where an event in any one quadrant resonates, shifting the whole dynamic matrix.

Wilber also collapses the right-hand quadrants of It and Its to a single quadrant, resulting in what he calls the Big 3: in addition to the perspectives of I, We and It/s, he overlays the three-ness of the perspectives of Consciousness, Culture and Nature, as well as the Beautiful, the Good and the True.[18]

Wilber's integral evolutionary model is perhaps the most comprehensive example of the emerging integral perspective, signaling a paradigm shift in that it embraces the unity and interdependence of all things that is not just the transcendent unity of some traditional perspectives, but a very real and all-encompassing integral unity of everything, accommodating the discoveries of the modern sciences and humanities. As more and more people travel down this path of unity, the integral stage of evolution is said to start taking shape. The initial outline of the structures of any

[17] Phipps, op cit., p. 241
[18] Wilber, Ken (2011). *A Brief History of Everything* (p. 180). Shambhala

stage are at first thread-like with the barest of shapes. As the paths are more travelled they start to become better formed and more evident within the culture, like a dirt road that starts out smooth and featureless but over time becomes rutted with use and more easily recognizable as a path or roadway. Wilber says this does not preclude the great earlier pioneers and realized beings of earlier historical periods from exploring and realizing these higher potentials, but that these integral evolutionary structures are as yet lightly formed. Wilber refers to our current time as the "frothy, chaotic, wildly creative leading-edge of consciousness unfolding and evolution, still rough and ready in its newly settling contours, still far from settled habit."[19] Fully realizing the potential of the era depends on more humans traveling the path until it becomes established as structure.

This highlights an important point that what we do individually and collectively truly matters. We are not individuals residing in a static pre-created universe; instead we are actually participants contributing to the process of evolution. Not only are we created beings but also co-creators. Thus there is a moral dimension to the newly emerging consciousness, what Wilber calls an "evolutionary imperative", as humanity awakens to the new dimensions of the truths of our internal and external universe. We are inescapably tied to the era as the inner world of psyche and consciousness develops and transforms in concert with the larger world of cultural influences and evolving worldviews.

While arguing for a post-modern re-interpretation of wisdom spirituality, Wilber nevertheless holds that key principles of the nondual wisdom traditions hold true; before evolution can occur, *involution* or the emanation of Spirit, must occur. The higher levels *appear* to emerge out of the lower during evolution – order appears to emerge out of chaos, life appears to emerge out of base matter – because they were

[19] Phipps, op cit., p. 255

already deposited there by involution. The higher order has to be already there in potential for it to emerge.[20]

Evolutionary Panentheism

Michael Murphy, the iconic founder of the Esalen Institute and an astute contemporary observer and commentator on cultural trends, also suggests that these ideas in evolutionary thinking constitute a new worldview, a fresh way of looking at the current human condition and the trajectory of our potential growth into the future. With the advent of the theory of evolution he contends that many philosophers began to reframe their most fundamental questions regarding the relationship of our evolving world to God, to the role of humankind in the advance of the world, and whether human nature itself could evolve and if so to what end. Murphy points to the German idealists such as Fichte and Schelling who posited that the divinity, while remaining transcendent to its creation, emanated or projected itself into the world and that the process of evolution is itself the process or manner for the unfolding of the hidden divinity. Evolution follows involution – involution as the descent of the divine into the world from transcendence through the layers of existence to the world of matter, and evolution as the meandering yet seemingly inexorable emergence of new forms of existence from base matter to our current human species, and into the future to the forms that are yet to be evolved. This idea he calls *evolutionary panentheism*.[21] We note that *panentheism* is the doctrine that the divine is both immanent and transcendent to the universe, unlike *pantheism*, which states that nature is identical with God.

Murphy posits that one reason why the idea of *evolutionary panentheism* has attracted many people from different backgrounds and temperaments is that it is based on just two fundamental principles – first, the fact of evolution, and, second, that the universe arises from a transcendent principle be it called God, Allah,

[20] Wilber, op cit., p. 216

[21] Murphy, Michael (2013). *The Emergence of Evolutional Panentheism*. In Panentheism Across the World's Traditions. Oxford University Press, pp. 177-197

Brahman, Tao, or whatever name is given to it. Given the wide range of expressions that many contemporary writers and thinkers have given to this movement, Murphy suggests that it may be more accurate to call *evolutionary panentheism* an emergent worldview or vision rather than a philosophy per se.

With the wide range of spiritually transformative practices that have entered the cultural mainstream in the last fifty years or so and their propensity to challenge and stretch the boundaries of limiting beliefs and dogmas, Murphy believes that this shift in consciousness calls for a worldview or conceptual framework to connect the diversity and complexity that this expansion reveals, and which more readily embraces a dramatic vision of the future potential of a world and of humankind that is entirely unprecedented.

The Anthropocentric Question

This short summary of these new conceptual frameworks reveals some powerful tools for understanding where we've been, where we are now, and how we got here. The great questions of life are being re-framed, including the particular significance of the emergence of Humankind.

Placing humankind at the center of evolutionary theory makes some thinkers uncomfortable, not wanting to privilege an anthropocentric perspective in a process that, while purposeful in its emergence, in the minds of some may or may not assume a directionality or orchestration of evolution towards an emergence of Humankind. In the area of deep ecology, for example, human beings are seen as the scourge of the planet, which would be far better off without them. Richard Dawkins concedes directionality in the evolutionary process, but not at the expense of making any assumptions about a human end product.[22]

[22] Dawkins, Richard (2005). *The Ancestor's Tale*. Orion Publishing Group

Equally, many evolutionary thinkers feel the same way about the idea of God: what need is there for the traditional notion of a creator God in an evolutionary context? Or indeed, can one simply say as some neo-Atheists such as Sam Harris do, that since science has now displaced religion we can dispense with ideas of transcendence since surely consciousness simply emerges or evolves from matter as an attribute of mind, without needing to ascribe any divine purpose or design to its emergence?[23]

At some point in our evolution, there was a huge leap forward in consciousness and the interior universe of the self-reflective human mind was born. This step forward has been likened to the third big bang – the first being the birth of the cosmos, the second being the explosion of life on our planet billions of years later.[24] The emergence of human autonomy and agency in this third big bang became the hallmark of the biological life form called Man, and increasingly this emergence transitioned from being the consequence of an evolutionary process determined by natural selection and adaptation, to a process involving conscious agency, an ability to stand apart from instinct, and with freedom of choice.

Carter Phipps argues that our problem is not that we are anthropocentric, but that our anthropocentricism is insufficient and impoverished. We do not yet fully understand our position, the dynamics of our emergence or the responsibility of our power. We stand at the threshold where conscious evolution is a must – he and others believe we can no longer rely on the blind forces of history to take us through this next stage of our evolution, otherwise there may be no evolution at all.

What does seem clear is that the explosion of information and knowledge in our times is indeed challenging our traditional concepts of God and the biblical narrative of the privileged place of Man as the image of God. On the other hand, some great evolutionary thinkers such as Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard de Chardin have not shied

[23] Harris, Sam (2015). *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion*. Simon & Schuster
[24] Phipps, op cit., p. 310

away from affirming the tremendous importance of the place of human agency and consciousness in the created order.

Sri Aurobindo's system of Integral Yoga[25] was an attempt to embrace an evolutionary paradigm within the Yogic path. As he saw it, all created things are prefigured in a higher degree of existence before their appearance, and by a process of *involution* the original omnipresent reality in its desire to create a universe of forms extends itself to the degrees of Mind, which provides the energy for creation. Conversely, the process of *evolution* is the movement of that energy as it coagulates into progressively complex forms and ultimately into the human form.

As the Spirit pushes from above to manifest the new form of creation so does it simultaneously push from behind the veil of evolution to meet up in the gnosis he called *Supermind*. What he calls for is no less than a conscious transformation on a global scale – a conscious act of spiritual midwifery, to birth a new era and a new species of humanity, something that can take place by a comparatively swift conscious change. His vision extended beyond the transformation of the individual to include social evolution and the future transformation of human society into a life divine in which humans could find meaning and purpose.

Teilhard de Chardin saw a *noosphere* coalescing on Earth that will progressively unify the human race and converge to an "Omega point" through which the spirit of Christ will emerge with ineffable splendor. This noosphere is likened to a new "thinking layer", much like the geologic layers that have been identified over eons, and has spread over and above the world of plants and animals; in other words, over and above the biosphere there is the noosphere. The world develops a new skin. This Omega point towards which humanity is progressing is already in existence and at the very core of the thinking mass. For Teilhard de Chardin, the only universe containing the human person is an irreversibly "personalizing"

[25] Sri Aurobindo (1996). *The Synthesis of Yoga*. Lotus Press

universe, and thus he places human consciousness at the center of evolution – *man discovers that he is nothing else than evolution become conscious of itself*.[26] Man is not the center of the universe as we once thought according to the traditional biblical view, but even more wonderful, pointing the way to the final unification of life in the world.[27] Interestingly, he does not predict indefinite progress, instead seeing the Omega point as an eschatological end point for humanity, an ecstatic end of the world in which humanity finds it completion and oneness with the Omega point or God.

It is interesting to note that in recent years a proposal has been made to the Geographical Society of London to name our time the epoch of the Anthropocene, which in many ways can be seen as a layer of Mind or *noosphere*, and while not a geologic layer of rock it surely is a layer defined by human activity and consciousness.

Ibn 'Arabi and the Logos

This brief review covers some key contemporary ideas of the emergence of consciousness, the structures of consciousness, and the idea that we are somehow on the threshold of a new integral era in which the human species may play a special place. The potential for a future that many have glimpsed, hinted at, and hypothesized as a new consciousness, a new emergence of Humankind, is where the great 13th C mystic and philosopher Ibn 'Arabi has much to contribute. The trajectory of Western philosophy, theology and science that has contributed to these discussions has largely bypassed Islamic thought and important contributors as Ibn 'Arabi, an omission that is slowly being addressed as his work becomes increasingly available in translation and by scholars who are now starting to tackle the work of unpacking his ideas for wider consumption.

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[26] Teilhard de Chardin, op cit., p. 291

[27] Teilhard de Chardin, op cit., p. 224

While it may seem a bold and somewhat asynchronous pivot to leap back in time from the 21st to the 13th C, it is precisely Ibn 'Arabi's own integral philosophy and very deep humanism that places him as one of the pre-eminent thinkers in this field. The ideas we've discussed so far find distinct echoes in his Logos conception of the Complete Human or Perfect Human, which represents a continuation and perhaps summation of the idea of the Logos that appeared in Western thought from the pre-Socratics through to the Neo-Platonists and of course in Christianity with Christ as the physical embodiment of the Word. In Ibn 'Arabi, we find perhaps one of the most comprehensive formulations of this concept, and entirely deserving of being reinstated into the fertile overlapping discourse of the great monotheistic traditions and western philosophy.

Ibn 'Arabi describes Logos as a rational principle, an underlying order or structure embedded in the very nature of all things.[28] In one of its aspects it faces the sheer undivided oneness of being, the supreme identity beyond any attribution, and in another of its aspects it faces the potential multiplicity of all the possible existent things in their state of latency. The Complete Human thus stands as a bridge or a connecting isthmus, serving to both unify and separate the two faces of reality, transcendence and immanence, which are understood to be complementary aspects of Oneness.[29]

Now, the diversity of "things", or possible existents as Ibn 'Arabi calls them, enter the world not through a single creative act at a moment in history, but through the ongoing act of self-creation, and they appear in time according to an inner necessity particular to their original nature. So one can say that the principles for each thing's manifestation, and evolution over time, are part of an inherent underlying order that may appear chaotic, opaque or mysterious, but nevertheless follow a directional unfoldment, an act of finding and discovery that causes the world to appear according to each potential thing's inner blueprint. Ibn 'Arabi does not admit

[28] Affifi, A.E. (1964). *The Mystical Philosophy of Muhyid Din Ibnul Arabi*. Ashraf Press
[29] Chittick, William (1989). *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*. SUNY Press

of creation *ex nihilo*, or of creationism *per se*, or even intelligent design – there is neither determinism nor true chaos in the divine order, but a creation that appears according to a logos. According to the well-known expression where God speaks, "I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known",[30] the impulse for creation is attributed to love, and the manner of its unfolding is according to the hidden treasure of potentiality, which self-manifests according to its original nature.

This begins to capture the flavor of Ibn 'Arabi's nonduality, which is typically affirmed in the expression Oneness of Being. In Hinduism we have the expression *sat-chit-ananda*, which translates as *being-knowledge-bliss*. The word in Arabic most commonly used to describe this Oneness of Being is *wujud*, which in its root variants contains also the notion of *finding* and which can similarly be expressed in the formula *wujud-wijdan-wajd,* translated as *being-consciousness-ecstasy*.[31] This idea is key since for Ibn 'Arabi the idea of consciousness is never separated from being, and as the One differentiates itself into the Many consciousness and indeed ecstasy are inherent to the process of beings uncovering and discovering their individuated reality as they emerge in evolution. These three attributes of being, awareness and bliss give rise to all the existential qualities that cause the world to coagulate out of seeming nothingness.

Now at some point in history, the man we all know as Adam emerges. Who is this Adam? Is he a mythical biblical figure created in God's image, or an outcome of a biological process of evolution? One can say that he is actually both, because from a certain point of view neither statement has to be mutually exclusive. In the evolution of our species, Adam can be understood to be the *first* human being whose interior structure evolved to become fully capable of a new kind of consciousness, an integrated and harmoniously formed whole. Adam is thus a prototype for the Complete Man, possessing for the first time a new architecture of being that evolved

[30] Divine Saying, attributed to the prophet Muhammad, in which the "I" is identified with the Divine Identity

[31] Chittick, William (2007). *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul* (p. 140). One World

over many millions of years, and in which the Logos, embedded in the evolutionary process, is now fully consciously realized. Adam is fully imaged as a divine form because his constitution has evolved to become capable of it.

Ibn 'Arabi's view of the unfolding of consciousness in history constitutes a kind of prophetology – the appearance of the divine wisdom and guidance to humanity is fulfilled through prophets. Adam is named a prophet, the first among many. Prophets are seen as conveyers of the Word, and the agency by which new degrees of knowledge are disclosed in the world. If the Logos is the *primordial* Word, then the prophets are *individual* Words and are like chapters of a book disclosed over the course of history.[32]

Ibn 'Arabi's historical timeframe for this chaptering of the Logos covers a period of perhaps some 5 or 6 thousand years from Adam to Mohammed and includes a total of 27 prophets, each of whom embodies and reveals a specific wisdom. In Adam, we see the emergence of a synthetic and integral nature capable of receiving all the divine names, a complete image of the divine for the first time. Abraham is the first man to be clothed with the affirmatory divine attributes, Jethro the quintessence of heart wisdom which unifies spirit, soul and body, Solomon the embodiment of compassion, and so on including Moses and Jesus, and finally ending with Mohammed who is seen as the pinnacle of this particular prophetic cycle of human emergence and the full realization of the Adamic prototype.[33]

Ibn 'Arabi's teaching of the gradual disclosure of knowledge in the course of history implies a proto-evolutionary way of thinking about human emergence, such that when a new wisdom enters the evolutionary stream by way of this human agency called prophethood, a new perspective or consciousness emerges and it becomes a

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[32] Ibn Arabi, *Fusus al-Hikam*, translated by Ralph Austin (1980). *Ibn Al 'Arabi: The Bezels of Wisdom.* Classics of Western Spirituality. Paulist Press

[33] Chittick, William (1984). *The Chapter headings of the Fusus*. In Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. II, 41-94

part of the collective consciousness, building the structures that over time become a platform for the evolution of the human collectivity. As individual prophets manifest new insights, so are their communities gathered up and invited to new ways of seeing as the culture embraces the emergent perspective.[34]

Overlaying an evolutionary framework on top of Ibn 'Arabi's thought is not an attempt at reductionism of the great teacher's work, but an effort to correlate his ideas on emergence, consciousness, and humanity with this growing body of work, and to suggest ways in which his tremendous accomplishments might contribute to the new vernacular arising from this discourse. His teachings on the *logos* find a deep resonance with the ideas of Teilhard de Chardin, Gebser, and Sri Aurobindo, in that the embedded principles for emergence can be seen as an inherent attribute of all creative activity, providing the underlying impulse and directionality of the evolutionary thrust. Ibn 'Arabi precisely contextualizes the activities of both involution and evolution as the reality of the *logos* and therefore of humankind.

There is further evidence to support that Ibn 'Arabi was fully aware of evolutionary implications in the development of human consciousness. In another of his works, he outlines a fascinating description of how knowledge develops over time, and tells of a future time when many more people will share in an abundance of enlightenment, with more frequent and more complete realizations. In the past, he says at the time of his writing in the 13th C, those closer to the time of the Prophet were characterized more by *practice* and *devotion* due to their historical proximity to his person, while the further away from that historical time we get, people become characterized less by practice and more by *knowledge* and *direct opening*. He says that fewer people in those earlier times had this knowledge and they were less likely to manifest it because *they* dominated *it*, but over time more and more

[34] Austin, op cit., p. 165

people come to bear this knowledge and whoever does manifests it because the *knowledge* dominates *them* due to its abundance.[35]

Ibn 'Arabi seems to be suggesting that consciousness itself is a constant like water, flowing into containers according to their capacity to receive it, and that over time the manner in which this consciousness is manifested will change according to the receptivity of the collectivity of human containers that will receive it. In this description is an implicit acknowledgement of an evolution of both consciousness and culture over time, with increasing numbers of people participating in its plenitude as the structure and shape of the approaching era becomes more discernable and tangible.

Conclusion

The field of integral philosophy is itself evolving and thus hardly free of contradictions and challenges. At the level of details it is clear much remains to be done, but the intent of this paper is an attempt simply to outline the generalizing orientations that help make meaning out of the complexity of so many disciplines and knowledge systems that this body of knowledge draws from.

To return to the original question posed in this paper: is consciousness evolving? Like so many tantalizing questions, simple answers do not come easy! In one sense, the answer is *no* – consciousness itself cannot be said to be evolving or changing, if it is considered the nondual ground of all reality, the space in which phenomena arise, or the emptiness and openness for all things to appear in. At the interior level of the self-identification of the One Being, according to Ibn 'Arabi, consciousness is singular, transcendent and uncreated, and therefore not subject to change or evolution.

[35] Ibn 'Arabi, *Kitab al-lsfar*. Cited in Suha Taji-Farouki (2007). *Beshara and Ibn Arabi.* Anqa Publishing, pp. 9-11

However, in another sense we can say that *yes* consciousness does evolve over time, in concert with human and cultural evolution. From the perspective of the world, it is clear that consciousness has evolved from our origins in the Big Bang to the present day. It has been suggested that the unit of evolution of consciousness and culture is perspectives, therefore *the evolution of human consciousness consists of a development of perspectives*, and that each new wave of consciousness, each worldview that emerges over time is a fundamentally new way of viewing the world and reality, and that it proceeds to ever-increasing levels of complexity, wholeness and inclusion.

The evolutionary movement questions the need for traditional origins such as a Creator God to explain the emergence of our universe. There is also an implied criticism of the perennialist stance, which, though honoring the unity of the great wisdom traditions, has not always found ways to integrate newer forms of knowledge into the older.

The cosmos is in any case unfolding according to evolutionary principles, and if there is a divine impulse in creation it can be seen emerging in the process of creation and according to the self-organizing principles embedded therein and thereby exposing the *logos* that is its origin. Contemporary formulations such as Evolutionary Panentheism and Integral Theory expose what can be called a growing acceptance of a *logos of emergence*, an unfolding and concretization and detailing of an embedded and previously unseen order that is the reality of all things and its blueprint for emergence. For Teilhard de Chardin, Sri Aurobindo, and Ibn ‘Arabi, an emergent world without the human being is inconceivable; these thinkers challenge precisely our inability to conceive what a human being truly is, and what human potential truly consists of.

We are asked in this era to integrate new forms of knowledge with the older, and to constantly question and validate our belief systems. Ibn ‘Arabi declared that any concept we can imagine, including that of God, is a concept that we ourselves create

according to our beliefs. He declared that "the People of Unveiling have been given an all-inclusive overview of all religions, creeds, sects, and doctrines concerning God,"[36] thus the cognizant person avoids limitation and accommodates in their inner structure all beliefs and perspectives, indeed embracing the *aperspectival* view articulated by Gebser that is capable of integrating all perspectives. This, we are told, is the potential of the Integral Human, the Complete Human, and increasingly, it seems, the potential for all humankind.

[36] Ibn Arabi, Futuhat III 398.11. Cited in Chittick, William (1994). *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity.* SUNY Press