

## Evolutionary Consciousness

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When Charles Darwin published his treatise “On the Origin of Species” in 1859, he unleashed a tsunami of change in human self-understanding that rocked the scientific, philosophical, religious and political institutions of his time. So profound was this revolution that its reverberations have continued up to present times. The core of Darwin’s argument was that all of life, including human life, emerged from a primordial soup of an evolving Earth in the long distant past. This view was vigorously contested at the time, particularly from a theological perspective, because it challenged prevailing beliefs and certitudes about the literal truth of the Bible.

According to Darwin, primitive life evolved from the matter of the Earth, and what now constitutes the biosphere of the planet evolved gradually over time through random mutation and natural selection. By and large, the findings from many scientific disciplines over the past century and a half have endorsed this revolutionary insight. Given the quasi-religious and materialist pre-suppositions of modern science, explaining the emergence of human consciousness has posed a major challenge for the scientific community. How can inert, dead matter be the source of human knowing and self-understanding? How can a purely material reality give rise to a non-material reality all by itself?

Biological science has discovered that a persistent trend towards greater and greater complexity characterises the evolutionary unfolding of life. Allied to the emergence of greater complexity is the trend toward deeper awareness. The more complex the life form, the more highly developed are its powers of awareness. Science also reveals that the more complex the species, the more complex the brain structure that it requires. It was also discovered that in the evolution of the hominoid species, the size of the hominoid brain increased at an enormous rate compared to the rate of brain increase in all other species. The conclusion the scientists drew from this research was that human consciousness only emerged when the hominoid brain had become sufficiently large and complex to facilitate its emergence. Science, however, was not at all clear on how this emergence happened

Early In the twentieth century, intense preoccupation with the origins of human consciousness was aroused by the findings of Quantum Theory. This theory, in formulating an acceptable explanation of how the world of sub-atomic particles worked, was forced to the conclusion that human consciousness influences scientific outcomes. What scientists discovered in the arcane world of quantum physics was that the outcome of their experiments was dependent on the kind of questions they posed. The idea that human consciousness influenced the outcomes of scientific investigation was anathema to the classical scientific community because it threatened two fundamental principle of their belief system, the absolute objectivity of the scientific enterprise, and the inert nature of matter.

Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit priest, palaeontologist, philosopher and staunch believer in the evolutionary process, broke new ground when he proposed that there was no such thing as inert matter. From the very beginning, every scrap of matter has an inner dimension as well as an outer dimension. The outer dimension is amenable to the investigations of science. Within is the germ of consciousness, the potential for transcendence and complexification. If this “within” potential did not exist from the very beginning, consciousness could never have

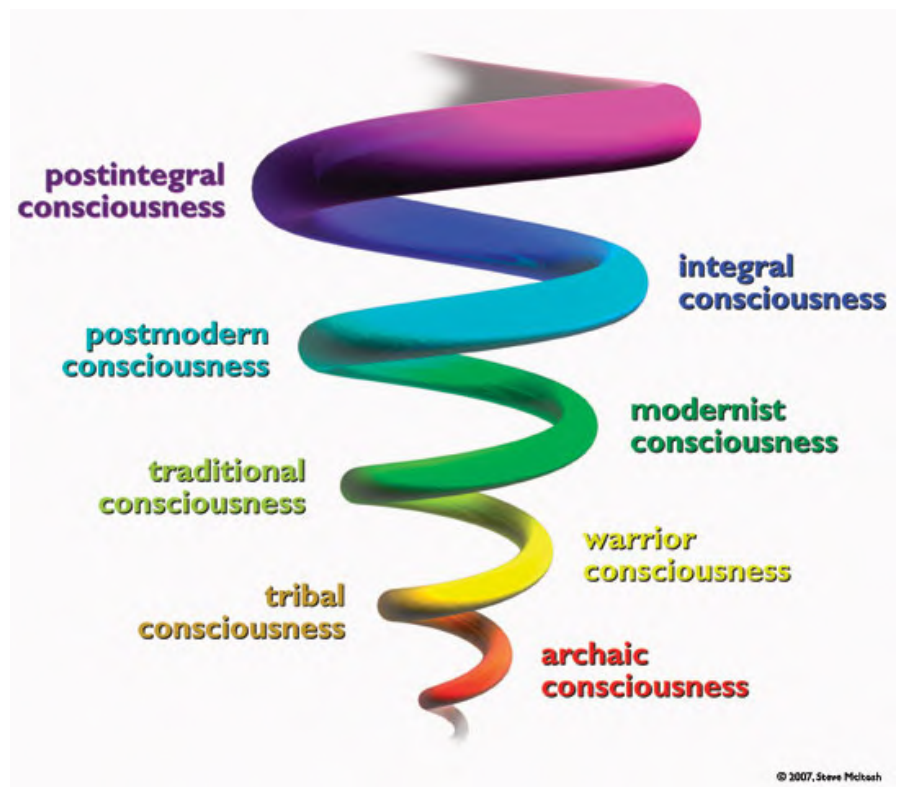
emerged at a later stage. Theologically speaking, this was not a denial of the participation of the Divine in the creation story. It was a new way of understanding how Divine creativity works. The God of the New Story is the God explored in process theology – the God who manifests in and through creation, but who is not limited or confined by creation.

Over the past century or so, scientists and philosophers have been systematically investigating the evolution of human consciousness. It is clear from the findings of this investigation that the kind of consciousness that manifests itself in any given era is dependent on a variety of factors. Brain size, environment, climate, culture, life-style, societal norms and values all play a part. The work of these scholars has given us a picture of the evolution of human consciousness from the dim and distant past to the present day. Naturally, the findings in relation to the distant past are tentative at best, given the lack of historical records. On the other hand, because of the abundance of evidence, conclusions drawn from an analysis of the more recent past are presented with much more conviction and certitude.

At this point, it seems appropriate to offer a definition of what is meant by human consciousness: “Human consciousness is our experiential awareness, consisting of feelings, thoughts, intentions and our personal sense of identity.”

Over the years, a number of scholars have endeavoured to articulate an evolutionary understanding of the emergence of human consciousness. Among the more influential names in this field are Jean Gebser, Clare Graves and Ken Wilbur. Graves’ work has been made available in a form more digestible than his own original writings in a book entitled *Spiral Dynamics* authored by Beck and Cowan. Gebser’s work “The Ever Present Origin” constitutes a significant challenge even for the most intrepid of readers. Ken Wilbur’s exposition can be found in *A Brief History of Everything*.

Spiral Dynamics, as the title suggests, argues that human consciousness has evolved in a continuous fashion, expanding and becoming more complex over human history, with earlier manifestations being absorbed and carried forward by later ones. The expanding arc of the spiral signifies the capacity of emerging consciousness to embrace the wisdom of the



past, while its dynamic upward movement signifies the capacity the spiral has to embrace and understand in greater depth the on-going revelations of an ever unfolding Universe.

What the spiral approach illustrates is how the forms of human consciousness reflect the cultural, social and environmental circumstances of particular times. A prevailing form of consciousness survives until such time as changing circumstances pose new kinds of questions that are not resolvable within the existing form. When humans began to settle down into Neolithic villages, for example, society required more complex social norms and understandings than were provided by the archaic form of consciousness. Thus, the new human situation, with its new challenges and difficulties, facilitated the emergence of the tribal form of consciousness. When territorial disputes gave rise to inter-tribal conflict, this set of circumstances facilitated the emergence of a form of consciousness characterised as the warrior type. The warrior form of consciousness produced strong, forceful leaders whose ability to protect the tribe earned them both loyalty and obedience. It also led to patriarchy, oppression within the community and a culture of aggression towards neighbouring tribes. These obvious limitations led inevitably to the emergence of a traditional form of consciousness that valued tried and tested norms that had worked well in the past. In brief, traditional consciousness expressed itself in a conservative culture which resisted change, and sought to perpetuate the status quo. The medieval period in human history illustrates this kind of consciousness. Inevitably, the certitudes of the medieval period wilted under pressure from a rapidly changing renaissance environment that simply bubbled with new questions crying out for new understandings and fresh answers. This opened up the way for the emergence of the modern form of consciousness and the culture of the Enlightenment. In due course, the optimistic hubris of the Enlightenment failed to deliver on its promises, paving the way for the emergence of the post-modern era which questioned profoundly the assumptions and arrogances of modern culture and dogmatism. Post-modern culture strongly emphasises tolerance, the rights of individuals and the relative nature of all moral codes. What is emerging in our current society is a form of consciousness that seeks to embrace all that has been positive in past forms of consciousness while entering more profoundly into the as yet unresolved questions that characterise the present era. Naturally enough, this type of consciousness is called the integral form of consciousness. It will bring with it a related culture and value system.

In brief, then, throughout history new forms of consciousness emerged whenever an existing form of consciousness no longer provided an appropriate map by means of which humanity could navigate its way into the future. It seems appropriate at this point to underline the fact that humanity has now arrived at another such juncture along the evolutionary journey. The road map into the future will be provided by an emerging integral form of consciousness whose nuances are as yet unclear to us. The challenge for our times is to articulate this philosophy more clearly and to embrace the cultural and value system that will inevitably accompany it. Beyond the horizon of the integral understanding there will be wider and more distant horizons whose challenges are as yet unformulated. Human consciousness is on a never ending journey of development and intensification. Teilhard de Chardin saw this onward, upward journey as the allurements of the Omega point, the ultimate assignation with Divine destiny, the consummation of our journey back to God.