

# The Emergence of Evolutionary Panentheism

By Michael Murphy

## Part I

Through that which to others seems a mere dead mass, my eye beholds this eternal life and movement in every vein of sensible and spiritual Nature, and sees this life rising in ever-increasing growth, and ever purifying itself to a more spiritual expression. The universe is to me no longer what it was before—the ever-recurring circle, the eternally-repeated play, the monster swallowing itself up only to bring itself forth again. It has become transfigured before me, and now bears the one stamp of spiritual life—a constant progress towards higher perfection in a line that runs out into the Infinite.

- Johann G. Fichte<sup>1</sup>

I posit God as both the first and the last, as the Alpha and Omega, as the unevolved, Deus implicitus, and the fully evolved, Deus explicitus.

- Friedrich Schelling<sup>2</sup>

God is God only so far as he knows himself: his self-knowledge is, further, a self-consciousness in man and man's knowledge of God, which proceeds to man's knowledge in God.

- G.W.F. Hegel<sup>3</sup>

If it be true that Spirit is involved in Matter and apparent Nature is secret God, then the manifestation of the divine in himself and the realization of God within and without are the highest and most legitimate aim possible to man upon earth.

-Sri Aurobindo

In the early eighteenth century, Isaac Newton, the most famous scientist of his day, supported the claim of Archbishop James Ussher, the Anglican Primate of All Ireland, that by various means it could be calculated that the world was created by God on Sunday, October 23, 4004 B.C. Newton's assent to this proposition may surprise us, but he wasn't alone among prominent thinkers in believing that the Earth was only a few thousand years old.

Within decades, though, this foreshortened perspective became increasingly untenable for thinking people. Astronomy, geology, biology, and other fields began to show that the history of our planet and the universe stretched back not for thousands but for millions of years. This recognition of our world's great age, which by 1800 had been accepted by scientists and philosophers as diverse as Lamarck and Immanuel Kant, comprises one of history's swiftest and most fundamental alterations of worldview among intellectual elites.

With this there emerged a growing realization that sentient creatures had developed on Earth over an immense stretch of time. Evidence for this had grown enormously since the early 1600s, giving rise to theories of life's development which, as the eminent historian of ideas Arthur Lovejoy put it, could "in a broad sense, be called evolutionistic."<sup>4</sup> Though such theories had elements that seem naïve or even outlandish today, they were based on irrefutable evidence that increasingly complex forms of life had emerged on our planet since the distant past.

And in conjunction with these discoveries there came an increasing belief in social advance. The growth of science and technology, the advent of constitutional democracy, and the burgeoning prosperity of America and Western Europe prompted

many to celebrate the idea of general human progress. In the mid-nineteenth century this belief, that humankind was capable of widespread development, was reinforced by the eventual acceptance of evolution as a fact by scientists around the world. After Darwin's publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859, more and more people came to see that life on Earth had developed for eons and might continue to develop for many more.

With the dawning of this evolutionary perspective, many thinkers began to reframe philosophy's most fundamental and enduring questions: What is the relation of this (ancient and evolving) world to God? What is humankind's role in its further advance? And since the Earth has given rise to increasingly complex and conscious creatures, can human nature itself evolve? In the 1790s and early 1800s, a compelling response to these and related questions emerged among philosophers such as Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel which, briefly, can be stated like this: While remaining transcendent to all created things, the divine spirit manifested itself through the birth of the physical world, so that the process that followed--the often meandering but seemingly inexorable emergence of new forms of existence from matter to life to humankind--is the unfolding of hidden divinity. What is implicit is gradually made explicit, as the "slumbering spirit" within all things progressively reveals itself. In Schelling's famous phrase, the *deus implicitus*, in the long course of time, becomes the *deus explicitus*. Or in the words of the philosopher Sri Aurobindo, "apparent nature is secret God."<sup>5</sup>

Arthur Lovejoy called this shift of worldview "the temporalizing of the Great Chain of Being," through which the manifest world with all its hierarchies was

conceived “not as the inventory but the program of nature.”<sup>6</sup> The vision of this “temporalization”--let us call it “evolutionary panentheism,” (the term “panentheism,” in distinction to pantheism, refers to the doctrine that the divine is both immanent in and transcendent to the universe)--has been given different names and elaborated in different ways by the philosophers Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel; by Henry James, Sr., the father of Henry and William James; by the philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce; by Frederic Myers, the great pioneer of psychical research; and by well-known twentieth century thinkers such as Henri Bergson, Teilhard de Chardin, Paul Tillich, Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne, and Sri Aurobindo.<sup>7</sup>

Here I would like to propose that the worldview represented by thinkers such as these constitutes an emerging canon of sorts which, though it lives today on the margins of academic, scientific, and religious opinion, is giving rise to a vision that will eventually capture the world’s imagination. The essential set of ideas that comprise this still-developing body of thought has fundamental implications for philosophy, psychology, religion, and everyday life. For example:

It provides us with a unifying account of our evolving world’s relation to the deepest source of things, an account that makes sense of our spiritual yearnings and desire for ultimate meaning. For if it is indeed the case that the entire universe presses to manifest its latent divinity, then we must share that impetus, which is evident in our desire for the illuminations, self-existent delight, self-surpassing love, and sense of eternal freedom and identity we experience in our highest moments. And it does this in a way that neither reductive materialism nor ascetic denials of the world’s emerging

Godhead can. It tells us that the universe has an aspiring heart, that human nature is primed for self-surpassing, and that our will to grow is supported by the world's inexorable drive toward a greater existence.

It helps explain our world's inexhaustible creativity. If the entire universe is a play, revelation, or unfolding of divinity, creativity must be accessible to us all. Novel organizations of energy and matter, new creatures and consciousness have emerged on Earth in countless ways, and it can even be said that when life arose from matter and mind from life, evolution itself evolved. The recognition of novelty permeating and re-shaping the world contradicts the Solomonic doctrine that "there never was nor ever will be anything new under the sun."<sup>8</sup> From its inception, the universe has been in the habit-breaking (as well as habit-making) business in its relentless self-surpassing.

The best things we experience often seem to be given rather than earned, spontaneously revealed rather than produced by laborious effort (though contemplative, artistic, athletic or other practices usually set the stage for them). This sense of grace in human affairs, which is shared by people in every land, is more understandable if we hold that life's highest goods were involved in the world from its start, waiting for the right conditions to make their appearance. This understanding can alert us to the richness and complexity of grace and the constant, though frequently unpredictable leadings of our subliminal depths. And with this support for belief in grace, it undercuts doctrines of human alienation that are embedded in many faiths. If we view ourselves to be one with the cosmos in our beginnings and our

essential aims, we will be less inclined to war and world-weariness than we are if we see the world as fundamentally hostile or illusory.

It gives us a compelling reason for the resonance between human volition, imagination, cognition, emotion, and physiological processes through which psychosomatic transformations (as well as the influence of mind over inanimate matter evident in psychokinesis) appear to be mediated. Our cells, feelings, and thoughts resonate with each other because they share the same omnipresent reality, responsive to the same indwelling spirit. Mind and matter, consciousness and flesh, inform each other because they have evolved from (and within) the same ever-present origin. Recognizing this, evolutionary panentheism helps us account for the transformative effect that awareness of our essential divinity can exert on all our parts, the synergetic effectiveness of practices that embrace the whole person, and the contagious inspirations of groups that are joined in creative endeavor.

It gives us a theoretical basis for understanding why human attributes such as perception, cognition, volition, and love can rise to self-surpassing levels. If we are secretly allied with the source and impetus of this evolving universe, we must to some degree share its all-encompassing powers of transformation. We can actualize capacities beyond our present existence because that is our basic predisposition.

Thus it opens the world before us, broadening our conceptions of further advance without requiring us to accept unwarranted religious or metaphysical truth

claims. If we harbor a secret divinity that presses to manifest on Earth, there's no telling how far our transformations might reach. We don't know the limits of mind and will. The flesh itself might reveal the glories of spirit. Evolutionary panentheism implies possibilities for humankind beyond those that science and religion have yet given us.

No philosophy or worldview by itself can eliminate evil in our world today, but this one gives us advantages over reductive materialism, "post-modern" relativism, and religious fundamentalisms in the relief of suffering on this planet. By orienting us to our essential divinity, it helps open us to our greatest sources of inspiration, the healing powers of grace, the unitive awareness that helps heal conflict, and the greater adventures of spirit we most deeply seek.

And in doing all this it can remain open and elastic enough to accommodate discoveries about our further reaches, including our post-mortem existence. It may well provide a conceptual gathering place for the global village from which to launch an unprecedented exploration of the greater life that awaits us.

## Part II

Nature herself ascends gradually in the determinate series of her creations. In rude matter she is a simple existence; in organized matter she returns within herself to internal activity, - in the plant to produce form, in the animal motion; (and) in man, as her highest masterpiece, she turns inward that she may perceive and contemplate herself, - in him she, as it were, doubles herself, and, from being mere existence, becomes existence and

consciousness in one.

- Fichte<sup>9</sup>

.....And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.

- William Wordsworth<sup>10</sup>

Evolutionary panentheism, as I'm framing it here, emerged with new clarity and sweep in the thinking of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. But the worldview it comprises is developing still and had countless predecessors. In section four I will speculate about its future possibilities but here will note some of the naturalists, philosophers, mystics, and visionaries who anticipated its various features. These forerunners can be seen to comprise two streams of thought, one in the developing science of post-Renaissance Europe, the other in those schools of visionary speculation variously characterized as Neo-Platonist, Hermetic, Kabbalistic, or Pietistic. I will start with the first.

Humans had gathered knowledge of the inorganic world, sentient creatures, and human nature since pre-historic times, but such discovery greatly accelerated during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. With the advent of modern science, an increasingly organized community emerged in Europe and around the world in which countless new ways were found to observe the heavens, the fossil record,

animal life, and the complexities of human nature. As this worldwide enterprise grew, it revealed a long development on Earth of increasingly complex life forms that eventually gave rise to humankind. Nature, it seemed, had a long and stupendous story to tell. Life appeared to be going somewhere, step by step, in spite of meanders, cataclysms, and the annihilations of entire species. By the mid-eighteenth century, countless naturalists viewed this process as a fact. That all living things had originated in a small number, or perhaps a single pair of original ancestors, was proposed by Maupertuis, the President of the Berlin Academy of Sciences, in 1745, and by Denis Diderot, the famous editor of the *Encyclopedie*, in 1749.<sup>11</sup>

But differing theories emerged to account for this epic story. In 1669, for example, the Dutch insectologist Jan Swammerdam proposed in his *Historia insectorum generalis* that among insects the female “semen” already contained a pre-existing adult form, and he generalized his theory to embrace other animals including the human race.<sup>12</sup> After an English reviewer of Swammerdam’s book described this process of embryological change as “a gradual and natural Evolution and Growth of the parts” the term “evolution” was attached to a theory of preformation that eventually moved from embryological to species change.<sup>13</sup> In this view, a miniature version of a creature’s form, or “homunculus,” was enclosed in the egg or sperm. But subsequent discoveries challenged this idea, and a rival set of theories, to which the term “epigenesis” was given, held that the embryo began as a formless mass that grew into a definite structure. Though eminent naturalists such as Albrecht von Haller and Charles Bonnet refined their own preformationist views in the light of empirical discovery, their theory eventually gave way to the increasing evidence for epigenesis. And other theories of species

development were found wanting as discoveries multiplied in the biological sciences, among them proposals that certain “archetypes” shaped the development of life forms and the Lamarckian doctrine that acquired characteristics are passed genetically from one generation to the next.

But though various theories of organic development rose and fell as discoveries in geology, biology, and other fields multiplied, the evolution of sentient creatures on Earth grew more and more evident, leading naturalists and philosophers to seek overarching principles, patterns, or forces to account for it. Johan Friedrich Blumenbach, a physician and physiologist, for example, proposed that:

there exists in all living creatures, from men to maggots and from cedar trees to mold, a particular inborn, lifelong drive [*Trieb*]. This drive initially bestows on creatures their form, then preserves it, and, if they become injured, where possible restores their form. . . It shows itself to be one of the first causes of all generation, nutrition, and reproduction. . . I give it the name *Bildungstrieb* (*nisus formativus*).<sup>14</sup>

Blumenbach extended his theory to embrace the origination of species as well as individual organisms, attributing the *Bildungstrieb*'s effects to the “great changeability of Nature,” which resulted from the “most beneficent and wise direction of the Creator.”<sup>15</sup> These ideas resonated with many thinkers of the day, among them Johan Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), a widely educated man of letters, who constructed a vast, naturalized version of the cosmic advance from nebulae and planets to life on Earth and human history. “Could we but penetrate to the first periods of creation,” he wrote, “we would see how one kingdom of nature was built upon another. What a progression of advancing forces would be displayed in every development!”<sup>16</sup> The entire world, in

Herder's cosmology, advanced with deliberate intent toward the perfection of human nature. "The purpose of our present existence," he proclaimed, "is directed to the formation of humanity [*Bildung der Humanitat*], and all the lower necessities of the earth only serve and lead to this end."<sup>17</sup> Friedrich Schelling would adopt ideas close to Blumenbach's and Herder's in his *Naturphilosophie* and dynamic evolutionism.

In the 1790s, such visions of world development were gaining increasing support from discoveries in various fields of science. But the evolutionary panentheism that emerged in Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel was influenced too, directly or indirectly, by a long line of religious mystics and visionaries who believed that the Divine is progressively unfolding on Earth. Though these forerunners framed their visions in different ways, they agreed that cosmic history was impelled by God's inexorable desire to manifest in the physical world. In the late twelfth century, for example, Joachim di Fiore, a Calabrian monk, saw history comprising three stages of the Christian Trinity's manifestation, an Age of the Father, an Age of the Son, and an Age of the Holy Spirit, each of which advanced humankind's freedom and nearness to God. This progression would result in the triumph of spirit over the flesh, contemplation over worldly preoccupations. In history's third and culminating age, organized religion would end. The Church would "wither away," replaced by individualistic forms of worship and a worldwide spread of religious joy.<sup>18</sup>

Some four hundred years later, Jakob Boehme (1575-1624) developed a similar vision. A native of Gorlitz on the borders of Bohemia, he was a shoemaker who in 1600 had a vision of the world's fundamental essence:

The gate was opened to me so that in one quarter of an hour  
I saw and knew more than if I had been many years at a University . . .

For I saw and knew the Being of all beings . . . the birth or eternal Generation of the Holy Trinity; the descent and origin of this world.<sup>19</sup>

Through such vision Boehme saw that God “others Himself” by creating this world so that He can progressively incarnate Himself through a history that reaches consummation in Christ. In this consummation, His desire for self-revelation is fulfilled through humankind’s knowledge of Him through his Son. But Boehme’s worldview was often clothed in obscure language. In Hegel’s words, “Boehme’s great mind is confined in the hard knotty oak of the senses—in the gnarled concretion of ordinary conception—and is not able to arrive at a free presentation of the Idea.”<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, his vision of God and the world resembles (and anticipates) Fichte’s vision of “eternal life emerging in every vein of sensible nature,” Schelling’s “slumbering spirit,” and Hegel’s dialectical advance of the Geist. In the words of the Boehme scholar David Walsh, “Boehme is the herald of the self-actualizing evolutionary God.”<sup>21</sup>

But Boehme was not alone in this. Several thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw the Divine emerging in world history. Friedrich Oetinger, a theologian and naturalist, claimed that “God is an eternal desire for self-revelation” who emerges “from Himself and returns to Himself in the course of time.”<sup>22</sup> Embodiment is the goal of His work (*Liebllichkeit ist das End der werke Gottes*), and Spirit (*Geist*) comes to its fullest actualization through corporeality (*Geistliebllichkeit*).<sup>23</sup> We can apprehend this basic fact of existence, Oetinger believed, through a *sensus communis*, an “unmediated cognition” of things-as-a-whole that reveals their fundamental identity with God.<sup>24</sup> This capacity lies at our “very center,”

beyond the separative consciousness we usually inhabit. The *sensus communis*, as Oetinger framed it, resembles the higher faculty, or “intuitive thinking” by which we see things in a supra-intellectual light, that would be described (in various ways and with different terms) by Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. Like them and evolutionary panentheists such as Bergson, Teilhard, and Sri Aurobindo, Oetinger saw a higher consciousness emerging in humankind through which we can progressively perceive and embody our latent divinity.

Reading visionaries such as Joachim, Boehme, and Oetinger, it becomes evident that evolutionary panenthism had been dawning for several centuries before its advent in the 1790s. But with Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel it found an enduring place in the canon of Western philosophy, largely because it was more acceptable to post-Enlightenment thought than esoteric visions such as Fiore’s and Boehme’s. And its central tenets have been developed in various ways during the last two centuries. Hegel, for example, like Boehme and Oetinger, viewed human life as a progressive embodiment of God, but added a rich history of its emergence by identifying successive forms of consciousness (*Gestalten des Bewusstsein*) that transcend and integrate (*aufheben*) the ones that precede them. Jean Gebser extended a panentheistic vision of human development back to the stone age, drawing on historical and anthropological discoveries not available to Hegel.<sup>25</sup> The philosopher Ken Wilber has shown ways to integrate the findings of dynamic psychiatry, developmental psychology, general systems theory, and other fields into an overview of the divine unfoldment.<sup>26</sup> And Sri Aurobindo, the greatest practicing contemplative among the thinkers I’ve noted, outlined an elaborate psychology of our further development, a

phenomenology of supernormal consciousness, and an “integral yoga” to transform all our faculties as instruments of the divinity we harbor.<sup>27</sup> Many thinkers besides these--too many to enumerate here--have added something new to this lineage-in-the-making, partly from their unique inspirations but also because they could draw upon knowledge of various kinds not available to their forerunners.

One reason that evolutionary panentheism has attracted thinkers such as these, even though they’ve come from different cultures with disparate philosophic commitments, is that it is based on just a few fundamental principles, among them: first, that evolution is a fact (though its discovery has given rise to various theories about it); second, that our universe arises from and is constituted by a world-transcending supernature, call it the One, God, Brahman, the Absolute, Buddha-Nature, Allah, Geist, or the Tao; and third, that humans have a fundamental affinity or identity with that supernature, which can be known through immediate experience either spontaneously or by means of transformative practice. Because this worldview is so basic and so broad and because it can be embraced without superstitions, dogmas, or metaphysical abstractions one cannot accept, it has been adopted, implicitly or explicitly, by countless men and women who have recognized its power to illuminate our human nature and destiny. However, its development has had a complex and meandering history and remains on the margins of intellectual opinion today. While gathering support from the wisdom traditions, psychical research, depth psychology, and other disciplines that are giving us ever-greater understanding of our subliminal depths, its acceptance has been impeded by the reductive materialism that’s accompanied the advance of science. And it has been obscured as well by philosophic

disagreements among some of its primary exponents and their followers (including a cacophony of competing truth claims stimulated by Hegel ranging from the materialism of Feurbach and Marx to the metaphysical idealism of T. H. Green and F. H. Bradley). Evolutionary panentheism, as I'm framing it here, has been largely obscured in the fog of paradigm wars that have raged among scientists and philosophers for the last two hundred years even as discoveries from many fields give it increasing support. It has, in short, sailed a zigzag course into powerful headwinds but with significant tailwinds. But the story of its journey, I believe, will eventually be described with scholarly depth and find a generally accepted place in the history of ideas.

But however it comes to be viewed by historians, it will continue to be framed in various ways--and given different names--as it is adopted by people with different backgrounds and temperaments. Since that is the case, perhaps it is better to call it a "basic vision" or "worldview" rather than a "philosophy" as that term is typically understood today by professional philosophers. And we need to distinguish it as well from most versions of panentheism that have existed since ancient times. The vision of a Divinity that is both immanent in and transcendent to worldly things has animated spiritual life for millennia but has taken a dynamic and historic turn, I propose, since around 1800, a turn that embraces the facts of evolution as they've been revealed by modern science. Such an embrace brings new coherence and meaning--a better story in short--to our understanding of the world's advance. Unlike most past versions of panentheism, it sees the entire world as "slumbering Spirit" pressing insistently toward a greater existence on Earth, and it views supernormal capacities

that appear in the course of spiritual practice not as hindrances to higher life but as emerging attributes of our latent supernature. From its vantage point, all personal and social advance, every “vein of sensible and spiritual Nature” as Fichte put it, can be coherently viewed as divinity manifesting in the world at large.

And yet, in spite of the fact that it carries enormous promise and has been enriched by discoveries of many kinds, this worldview does not command an allegiance as widespread today as the reductive materialism, postmodern relativism, and religious fundamentalisms prevalent in our universities, religions, and opinion elites. Indeed, among historians and laypeople alike it does not have a commonly accepted name. It remains on the margins of contemporary thought and only grows by fits and starts. Though it will, I believe, capture a wider following one day, orienting us to the greater life that awaits us, it remains largely invisible to most thought leaders. As it emerges from the mists of modern opinion, we might call it a “stealth worldview,” appearing as if on a fuzzy screen, pixel by pixel for those with eyes to perceive it. Here I will briefly describe some of the ways in which it has developed since 1800 and in doing so will argue that its emergence is made possible by certain human advances, such as the advent of science, that appear to be irreversible. Barring global catastrophe, evolutionary panentheism is here to stay.

### Part III

Science has spread to every continent, influencing each nation’s agriculture, industry, and cultural practices. It has stimulated new lines of critical thought, leading more and more people toward fact-based rather than faith-based inquiries related to

our deepest concerns. It increasingly informs athletic, therapeutic, contemplative, and other practices to liberate body and soul. It has a pervasive (though not universal) influence among the world's leading thinkers. And without it, we wouldn't continue to discover the often-astonishing facts of cosmic, biological, and human evolution. Those facts and the stupendous story they reveal have confirmed the intuition of pre-Darwinian thinkers such as Fichte, Schelling and Hegel that human development is rooted in the world's general advance. As our understanding of the world has grown, science has expanded our awareness of the world's age far beyond the belief that it was created in 4004 B.C.E., showing that it has developed for billions of years. And we've also learned that cosmic evolution had a definite start, in a colossal explosion from a tiny seed followed by an instantaneous and stupendously rapid expansion that continues still, with a future that stretches beyond our mind's reach. This picture of our universe is more detailed and empirically grounded than those held by the pioneers of evolutionary panentheism, adding powerful support to their view that evolution is a fact and that it becomes conscious of itself in us.

But the evolution-story is not limited to discoveries in the physical and biological sciences, which cannot by themselves reveal human nature's further reaches and transformative capacities. For these we need psychology, anthropology, comparative religious studies, and other fields that reveal the great scale and depth of our latent supernature. Through a multi-disciplinary, synoptic empiricism that embraces subjective reports, observable behaviors, and bodily processes, we are learning more than ever before about humankind's possibilities for extraordinary life.<sup>28</sup> Research on meditation, imagery practice, somatics, and other transformative

disciplines; discoveries about our bodily functioning (including the brain's neuroplasticity); growing acquaintance with the varieties of mystical experience; and our increasing access to the lore of shamanism and the wisdom traditions have given us more publicly available information than humankind has ever possessed about our capacities for creative transformation. Data from these and other fields show that men and women since the Stone Age have experienced grace-laden energies, illuminations, and ecstasies that give credence to beliefs such as Schelling's that we harbor a "*deus implicitus*." Evolutionary panentheism gives us a compelling--and for me the best--context within which to understand such experience.

Today, the collection of such data comprises a natural history of sorts, not of fossils or living creatures as in paleontology and biology, but of extraordinary human capacities. A few thinkers, moreover, have made attempts to classify these. William James, Frederic Myers, Herbert Thurston, Marghanita Laski, Abraham Maslow, and others have proposed taxonomies of supernormal capacities, and I have continued this work by gathering some ten thousand studies of them in fields ranging from sport to shamanism.<sup>29</sup> Working with this material, it is possible to identify supernormal expressions of perceptual, kinesthetic, movement, cognitive, and communication abilities, love, volition, memory, sense of self, bodily structures and other attributes we've inherited from our primate ancestors. Viewed in their entirety, these still-developing capacities reveal a continuous advance across the separate domains of the world's often meandering evolution. The fact that the progress they exhibit has been produced through different means—in animals by mutation and natural selection, for example, and in humans through transformative practices—suggests that evolution has

a telos of sorts, a creative tendency toward greater life on Earth that works through the different evolutionary processes operating in the inorganic, animal, and human domains.<sup>30</sup> This overarching pattern of development, which connects the earliest forms of life to our highest moments, is consonant with a vision that sees a “*deus implicitus*” emerging to become the “*deus explicitus*.” The worldwide gathering of knowledge upon which such insight rests--in its scale, richness, and growing exactitude--is something new in human history. Taken as a whole it suggests that humankind harbors possibilities greater than most people have guessed, and it has helped to inspire a worldwide adoption of transformative disciplines.

Thus science today promises to extend its reach into regions of human transformative experience that have been limited by the dogmas and superstitions of earlier times. It still meets resistance in this, some of it fierce, from established religions, new age cults, common attachments to familiar social practices, and the reductive materialism of many scientists. But the habits of data-gathering and critical inquiry it nurtures, with their power to reveal once-hidden facts of body and soul, drive it ever further into the undiscovered countries of our latent supernature. In doing this it is giving rise to newly sophisticated research methods for the exploration of consciousness in its further reaches, paranormal phenomena, post-mortem survival, and bodily changes that support ecstatic states and superordinary functioning. For example, sport psychology, somatics, and medical science now provide newly efficient ways to increase fitness, health, and longevity as well as sensitivity, coordination, strength, and balance to facilitate peak performance. Psychology has given rise to new insights and methods that can increase awareness of self and others,

broaden our behavioral repertoires, foster emotional intelligence, and facilitate family, organizational, and ethnic understanding. And once esoteric scriptures--Tibetan, Chinese, Indian, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian--are available at internet sites, libraries, and bookstores worldwide. Countless men and women today, including leaders of long-established religious traditions, are affected by the worldwide spread of such teachings. Father Pedro Arrupe, the much-esteemed Director General of the Jesuits, for example, practiced meditation in the lotus position and when questioned about it by fellow Catholics said that he found God while doing so in ways he did not while kneeling in prayer.<sup>31</sup> The two practices, he said, complement one another. Whether we know it or not, most of us are to some degree influenced like Father Arupe by cultural practices other than ours, which can bring recognitions that we have more latent capacities than we had once realized. In addition, many of us are learning that spiritual experiences don't require the acceptance of superstitions and dogmas that may be associated with them. For more than a century now sociologists, cultural anthropologists, and religious scholars have described this social dynamic, this winnowing of exalted experiences from the limiting beliefs that may accompany them, and have thus contributed to a growing sophistication about unwarranted truth claims, moral bullying, high-minded cruelties, and other liabilities of traditional religious practice.<sup>32</sup> And such cross-cultural learning has been strengthened as well by analytic philosophy, general semantics, cognitive psychology, and the cultural criticism of philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, all of which can help free us from crippling habits of thought and the everyday limitations imposed by our immediate culture.

But for countless men and women today, this expansion of consciousness calls for a conceptual framework, a worldview, a basic vision to connect the many complexities it reveals. Because the opportunities for greater life emerging in the global village today bring new challenges as well joys, new problems as well as new spiritual openings, many of us seek a guiding philosophy with which to pursue them and are thus led to some version of evolutionary panentheism. However, attraction to this worldview does not require that we reject every philosophic or religious allegiance we hold. Its basic simplicity and breadth make it compatible with various religious traditions. Faithful Protestants and Roman Catholics, for example, can find such vision in Paul Tillich and Teilhard de Chardin, Indian aspirants in Sri Aurobindo, believing Jews in Abraham Kuk, faithful Buddhists in the Dalai Lama's evolutionary thought. Arguably, this adaptability allows it to operate as a progressive influence in the world's religious communities by leading some believers beyond the limitations their faith entails.

Given this complexity of spiritual practice and belief, it's hard to say how many people now embrace the emerging worldview I'm describing. Nevertheless, we know with certainty that many men and women today share an unprecedented availability of insights and disciplines that inform their spiritual pursuits. Many are battle-tested in the paradigm wars, having experienced suspect gurus, destructive cults, flawed practices, and failed enthusiasms of various kinds while being graced by illuminations beyond those they've experienced in the cultures they were born to. Their belief in the divine immanence draws upon an embrace of science as well as religion and a broadly empirical approach to their respective disciplines. In this, their

faith is increasingly fact-based, more so than it was for earlier generations. Many say their worldview is “spiritual” not “religious” and share an ever-broadening common ground in the foothills of contemplative experience.

The physical, biological, and human sciences have contributed profoundly to these developments, through both their discoveries and the empirical spirit they’ve stimulated among thinking people worldwide. But there is a complexity here. With these gifts, science has also erected barriers to explorations of our latent supernature. The reductive materialism it has given rise to has generally rejected the study of paranormal phenomena and the truth claims of mystical practice. Studies of telepathy, clairvoyance, and psychokinesis; research on “reincarnation-type” memories, mediumship, and post-mortem survival; and related inquiries are out of fashion today (and hard to fund) in academia and professional science associations. And such resistance isn’t new. It was already growing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Frederic Myers, Edmund Gurney, and other scholars founded Great Britain’s Society for Psychical Research to promote the disciplined study of supernormal experience and the possibility of life after death. Eminent philosophers and scientists joined this effort in succeeding decades but their efforts were eventually engulfed by the now-prevalent reductionism of neuroscience and psychology. Today, such reductionism rules the human sciences.

For this reason, among others, evolutionary panentheism lives now on the margins of intellectual life. Though it is more empirically grounded and richly articulated than it was in 1800, it remains largely unrecognized—and sometimes actively resisted or suppressed—by countless thought leaders and laypeople alike. But

perhaps this invisibility will turn out to have an adaptive advantage. Just as new species typically evolve on the margins of their original habitats, which allows them to develop without being reabsorbed by their ancestral populations, cultural advances often begin on the peripheries of established social orders where there is room to experiment and learn from trial and error. This is the case, I believe, with the emerging vision I'm describing, which is taking shape out of sight of most opinion elites while fostering practices and institutions that have begun to embody it.

## Part IV

Having briefly described the emergence of evolutionary panentheism, I want to propose that it gives us a special vantage point from which to predict further human advances. For example, its increasing acceptance will almost certainly give rise to newly imaginative visions of the greater life we harbor. Indeed that's been happening for more than two centuries. Henri Bergson, who was awarded a Nobel Prize in literature for his philosophic writing, famously called the universe "a machine for the making of gods" and deemed mystics to be at evolution's cutting edge.<sup>33</sup> Jean Gebser believed that an emergent "integral" consciousness will comprehend life on our planet with new richness and depth.<sup>34</sup> 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 irradiate life on our planet.<sup>35</sup> And Sri Aurobindo, one of India's foremost independence leaders as well as a richly educated intellectual and realized mystic, proclaimed the emergence of "Supermind," a level of existence in which the

divine is realized in its primordial ecstasy, transforming mind and flesh in the light of God.<sup>36</sup>

Such visions herald a philosophic boldness and breadth that will accompany discoveries that reveal human nature's further reaches. But the truths they embody will not, I believe, find their primary expression through intellectually abstract, overburdened, muscle-bound metaphysics that provide descriptions of the cosmos and human life too thin and constrictive for thinking people today who've been influenced by ideas and practices from around the globe. Going forward, I believe, empirical disclosures of our latent supernature will take precedence over speculative philosophy, while suggestive art and language will be more persuasive than logic in spreading the worldview I'm describing. In *The Future of the Body*, I listed a wide range of extraordinary human attributes described in fantasy literature, movies, science fiction, and other artworks,<sup>37</sup> and the historian of religions Jeffrey Kripal has explored this subject at length in his book *Mutants and Mystics*.<sup>38</sup> Such visions aren't new, of course. From its inception, evolutionary panentheism, however named, has influenced and found powerful expression among poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Yeats, Hölderlin, Novalis, Victor Hugo, and Walt Whitman; philosophers such as Emerson and Nietzsche; historians such as Thomas Carlyle; and naturalists such as Henry David Thoreau.

This emerging vision of heaven and earth, this stealth worldview, has unfolded in many ways since 1800. There's no telling what shape it will take in the years to come. And we can guess that its emergence will accelerate. It is, I believe, like a coiled spring waiting for release from its compression. Just as Einstein, Niels Bohr, and their colleagues did not immediately see that their theories would lead to the atom bomb, the

discovery of black holes, and the mysteries of quantum entanglement, we cannot see everything that evolutionary panentheism entails. But we can guess that as the evidence supporting it grows, it will command an increasing allegiance and excitement as it co-evolves with the knowledge that science and transformative practice bring. In this it will resemble scientific theory that catalyzes empirical discovery while being reshaped by it. Many activities will drive this co-evolution of vision and practice, among them comparative studies of extraordinary human capacities. These, however, will not be limited to academia. Sri Aurobindo's *Record of Yoga*, for example, which contains a wide-ranging, richly detailed, self-critical account of illuminations and powers that appeared in his yoga, heralds such accounts now appearing among spiritual explorers both inside and outside universities and research centers.<sup>39</sup> According to several sociological studies and public opinion polls, more and more people are becoming amateur comparativists, as it were, comparing practices from different traditions without formal studies of culture or spiritual life.<sup>40</sup> With the perspective evolutionary panentheism gives us, supernormal faculties such as those these seekers are experiencing today can be seen as budding capacities of our emerging supernature rather than hindrances to our further development as many religious traditions have deemed them. If our world is embraced as an arena of divine disclosure rather than *maya*, or illusion, as certain Hindu and Buddhist philosophies assert, or as essentially a vale of suffering from which spiritual life will release us, then such capacities, I believe, will become central to our further advance.

And for this reason the spread of evolutionary panentheism will further the integral development of human life. Countless seekers experience benefits such as Father

Arupe did from once-foreign insights and practices, and considerable scientific research has demonstrated the synergies produced through the joining of once-separate disciplines.<sup>41</sup> We've learned, for example, that physical fitness can improve the results of one's meditation practice, and that meditation can, in turn, strengthen athletic performance. Likewise, psychotherapy can help clarify and energize many kinds of transformative disciplines. Such discoveries will encourage a many-sided approach to transformative practice, one that embraces body, mind, heart, and soul. That perspective is fundamental to Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga, Ken Wilber's integral epistemology, the Integral Transformative Practice I've developed with George Leonard, and many other ways of growth.<sup>42</sup>

And as interest in such practices spreads, it is likely to stimulate research on phenomena that to date have eluded mainstream science, among them the "subtle energies" (*prana* in Sanskrit, *pneuma* in Greek, *ki* in Japanese, *chi* in Chinese) that have long been evident in the lore of transformative practice.<sup>43</sup> These are deliberately employed in the martial arts and have been dramatized in action movies. They inform Eastern architecture and landscape design through the art of *feng sui*. And they are evident in the halos of medieval and renaissance European art, the luminosities of Roman Catholic sanctity, the radiance of the Sufis' Man of Light, the "boiling num" of Kalahari Bushmen, and the "magical heat" of Siberian shamanism.<sup>44</sup> But they haven't been studied with significant depth by modern researchers, in large part because they aren't commonly perceived with regularity and because they have not been recorded with the certainty of physical instruments. Yet their existence has been testified to for millennia by shamans, yogis, and monastic contemplatives, and in recent times by artists, athletes,

and laypeople alike.<sup>45</sup> Given this indubitable fact, we can predict that ways will be found through which science can study them. Even if they can't be detected with today's physical devices, their frequent occurrence can be increasingly documented through systematic collection of subjective reports.

We can also predict that other once-esoteric manifestations of transformative practice will be studied more intensively in the years to come. These will inevitably include the *vibhutis* and *siddhis* of Hindu-Buddhist yogas; the “charisms” of Roman Catholicism; the “adornments” of Sufi mysticism; the extraordinary powers of shamanism; and other supernormal phenomena now described and compared by religious scholars. Translations of Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan, Chinese, Japanese, and other religious texts continue to multiply, broadening our acquaintance with such experiences, among them radical transformations of the flesh such as the physical elasticities (or “elongations”), incorruptability, and luminosities of Roman Catholic sanctity; the radiant eyes and skin noted in Tibetan lore of the “rainbow body;” and accounts of bodily “shape-shifting” to be found in shamanism, Taoists texts, and accounts of Asian martial artists.<sup>46</sup> This long-standing witness to human nature's capacity for dramatic transformation is supported by the ever-increasing demonstration of the brain's neuroplasticity and the growing recognition of our capacity to renew any part of our body through exercise and strong mental intention.<sup>47</sup>

It is highly likely as well that sports will continue to appropriate such research. Athletes often use mental training derived from yoga and the martial arts in conjunction with advances in fitness training discovered by medical science; and Olympic committees as well as national sport federations have incorporated such discoveries in their training

regimens, for both profit and enjoyment.<sup>48</sup> Today, we see a worldwide proliferation of sports both old and new that push the edges of human capacity, with an attendant acceleration of record-breaking in all age groups. The dramatic appeal of this self-surpassing activity will only increase, I believe, if sport is imbued with a worldview that embraces the wide range of supernormal phenomena it evokes.

The arts, too, will further the ideas and practices I've described. Architecture, landscaping, and town planning already anticipate this with their growing appreciation of design's effects upon mood, consciousness, and behavior. Novel-writing possesses more means of expression than ever before with which to express the surprise, complexities, and scale of higher powers. And cinema is ripe for such change, not only because its worldwide audience constantly seeks excitement and inspiration, but because it has developed new technical means with which to dramatize phenomena that are usually invisible to us. For millennia, humans have turned to dark spaces in which they can enter new depths of the soul, whether in caves such as those at Lascaux or in the enclosures that housed the Eleusinian Mysteries. The pioneering film editor Walter Murch argues that movie houses can have a similar effect, which comes into play with special force in films such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*.<sup>49</sup> In the future, more films of such scale and depth may appear in response to a culture that seeks new adventures of consciousness.

And these many ideas and activities will inevitably give rise to supportive social structures. That is the case because every great human advance has required institutions to support it. The Academy, the Lyceum, and the Stoa nurtured philosophy in ancient Greece. Indian ashrams and Christian monasteries have fed contemplative life for three millennia. The modern university arose among churchmen of the late Middle Ages who

sought freedom from Church dogma for scientific inquiry and humanistic studies. Silicon Valley incubates the largest, most innovative teams of engineers the world has ever seen. “Growth centers” such as the Esalen Institute were organized to further the exploration of human potentialities without the inhibitions of mainstream religion and academia. If the vision and practices I’m outlining here continue to spread, institutions to nurture them will be invented

These many advances, I believe, will have an increasingly cumulative effect, leading more and more people into undiscovered countries of body and soul. To repeat, such explorations could accelerate in the decades to come, inspiring breakthroughs we do not foresee. In the long history of our universe, evolution has often accelerated, breaking long-established laws while giving birth to new forms of existence. Could that happen again, on Earth, *among us*? Given the advances I’ve noted and the increasingly liberated sensibility emerging around the world today, it is conceivable that humankind now approaches another rebirth. To quote the playwright Christopher Fry, “Affairs are now soul size. The enterprise is exploration into God, where no nation’s foot has trodden yet.”<sup>50</sup>

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> J. G. Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, trans. William Smith (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1910), 174.

<sup>2</sup> This is a poetic paraphrase of a statement by Schelling that was quoted by Arthur O. Lovejoy: “I posit God as the first and the last, as the Alpha and the Omega; but as Alpha he is not what he is as Omega, and in so far as he is only the one – God ‘in an eminent sense’ – he can not be the other God, in the same sense, or, in strictness, be called God. For in that case, let it be expressly said, the unevolved God, *Deus implicitus*, would already be what, as Omega, the *Deus explicitus* is.” See Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), 323.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Glenn Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 226.

<sup>4</sup> Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, 268.

<sup>5</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine* (Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 2005), 698.

<sup>6</sup> Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, 244.

<sup>7</sup> For further background on panentheistic philosophers, see Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

<sup>8</sup> *Ecclesiastes 1:9. The Bible. Revised Standard Version.* New York: American Bible Society, 1952.

<sup>9</sup> Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, 34.

<sup>10</sup> From *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*. Quoted in *The Heath Introduction to Poetry*, Third Edition, Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company, 1988), 160.

<sup>11</sup> For further background on mid-eighteenth-century evolutionary theories, see Peter J. Bowler, *Evolution: The History of an Idea* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), 50-89.

<sup>12</sup> Robert J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002), 211-12.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in *ibid*, 211-12.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 218-219.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 222.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 223.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in *ibid*, 223.

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- <sup>18</sup> Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition*, 236-240.
- <sup>19</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 36.
- <sup>20</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 49.
- <sup>21</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 39.
- <sup>22</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 65.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.
- <sup>25</sup> Jean Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1985).
- <sup>26</sup> Ken Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution* (Boston: Shambhala Press, 1995).
- <sup>27</sup> Peter Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).
- <sup>28</sup> In 1992 I published a thoroughly researched study of the cross-cultural evidence from past and present that supports the contention that several normal human capacities often display supernormal expressions and possibilities. See Michael Murphy, *The Future of the Body: Explorations into the Further Evolution of Human Nature* (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1992).
- <sup>29</sup> See *ibid.* (I have an email and phone call into David Gartrell, the curator of the special collections at the UC Santa Barbara library to see if Mike's "Esalen Transformation Project" archive is there. <http://www.library.ucsb.edu/special-collections/hpa#holdings>)
- <sup>30</sup> See *ibid.*, 24-35, 171-200.
- <sup>31</sup> George Bishop, *Pedro Arrupe, SJ* (Herefordshire, England: Gracewing Publishing, 2007), 200.
- <sup>32</sup> This trend dates to William James's groundbreaking study of religious experience at the dawn of twentieth century. See James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Signet Classic, 1958).
- <sup>33</sup> Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton (London: MacMillan and Co., 1935), 275.
- <sup>34</sup> Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 277-281.
- <sup>35</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Harper and Row: 1959), 180-184, 257-260.
- <sup>36</sup> Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 374-375.
- <sup>37</sup> Murphy, *The Future of the Body*, 211-213.

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<sup>38</sup> Jeffrey Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>39</sup> Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 242-245.

<sup>40</sup> For background on this comparative trend, see Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 153-174.

<sup>41</sup> Murphy, *The Future of the Body*, 541-586.

<sup>42</sup> George Leonard and Michael Murphy, *The Life We are Given: A Long-Term Program for Realizing the Potential of Body, Mind, Heart, and Soul* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1995).

<sup>43</sup> Murphy, *The Future of the Body*, 451-457.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 201-210, 505-508.

<sup>45</sup> For evidence of such experiences by artists and lay people, see Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*.

<sup>46</sup> Murphy, *The Future of the Body*, 464-477, 511-517.

<sup>47</sup> Jeffrey M. Schwartz and Sharon Begley, *The Mind and the Brain: Neuroplasticity and the Power of Mental Force* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002).

<sup>48</sup> See the Association for Applied Sports Psychology, <http://www.appliedsportpsych.org/>, accessed October 12, 2012.

<sup>49</sup> Walter Murch, *In the Blink of an Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing* (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 2001).

<sup>50</sup> Christopher Fry, *A Sleep of Prisoners: A Play* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), 48.