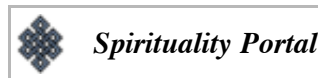


Spiritual evolution

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Spiritual evolution is the philosophical, theological, esoteric or spiritual idea that nature and human beings and/or human culture evolve along a predetermined cosmological pattern or ascent, or in accordance with certain pre-determined potentials.



This predeterminism of evolution concept is also complemented by the idea of a creative impulse in human beings, known as epigenesis.

Within this broad definition, theories of spiritual evolution are very diverse. They may be cosmological (describing existence at large), personal (describing the development of the individual), or both. They can be holistic (holding that higher realities emerge from and are not reducible to the lower), idealist (holding that reality is primarily mental or spiritual) or nondual (holding that there is no ultimate distinction between mental and physical reality). All of them can be considered to be teleological to a greater or lesser degree.

Philosophers, scientists, and educators that have proposed theories of spiritual evolution include Nader Angha, Schelling, Hegel, Max Théon, Henri Bergson, Sri Aurobindo, Jean Gebser, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Arthur M. Young, Edward Haskell, E. F. Schumacher, Erich Jantsch, Clare W. Graves, Alfred North Whitehead, Terrence McKenna, P.R. Sarkar, and Ken Wilber. These theorists tend (for the most part) to be non-materialistic or non-reductionistic.

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Precursors to the idea

The cyclic cosmos

Mircea Eliade has suggested that in many pre-modern cultures one finds the concept of the Fall and a "nostalgia for paradise". However for those cultures that have a cyclic cosmology, the concept of a progressive deterioration of the universe (as in the Hesiodic, Hindu, and Lurianic cosmologies of a degradation from a Golden Age to an Iron Age or Kali Yuga) might be balanced by a corresponding ascent to more spiritual stages and a return to paradisaical conditions. This is what one finds in Buddhist and especially Jain cosmologies.

Emanation

Many premodern cosmologies and esoteric systems of thought are based on an emanationist view of reality. If the Cyclic view is temporal, then emanation is a non-temporal precursor to the theory of spiritual evolution.

According to this paradigm, Creation proceeds as an outpouring or even a transformation in the original Absolute or Godhead. The Supreme Light or Consciousness descends through a series of stages, gradations, worlds or hypostases, becoming progressively more material and embodied, before finally turning around to return to the One, retracing its steps through spiritual knowledge, contemplation and ascent.

A supreme example of this form of thinking is the Neoplatonism of Plotinus and his successors. Other examples and interpretations might be found in Kashmir Shaivism and Tantra in general, Gnosticism, Sufism, and Kabbalah. The Hindu idea of the Chakras might also be considered here as the "microcosmic" counterpart of macrocosmic involution and evolution (the Yogi raises the Kundalini or life force through and thus transcends each chakra in turn, until he reaches the crown chakra and liberation (Avalon)).

Samkhya

An early example of the doctrine of spiritual evolution is found in Samkhya, a teaching that goes back more than two and a half thousand years (although its present form dates to around the 4th or 5th century c.e.). Unlike classic Hinduism, the traditional Samkhyan philosophy is atheistic and dualistic. Pure spirit (called *purusha*) comes into proximity with *prakriti* (psychophysical nature), disturbing its equilibrium. As a result the original root-prakriti (*mulaprakriti*) undergoes a series of progressive transformations or unfoldings, in the form of successive essences called *tattvas*. The most subtle tattvas emerge first, then progressively grosser ones, each in a particular order, and finally the elements and the organs of sense. The goal of evolution however is, paradoxically, the release of *purusha* and the return to the unmanifest condition. Hence everything is tending towards a goal of spiritual quiescence (Larson 1979).

The great chain of being

The concept of the great chain of being developed by Plato and Aristotle whose ideas were taken up and synthesised by Plotinus. Plotinus in turn heavily influenced Augustine's theology, and from there Aquinas and the Scholastics. The Great Chain of Being was an important theme in Renaissance and Elizabethan thought, had an under-acknowledged influence on the shaping of the ideas of the Enlightenment and played a large part in the worldview of 18th century Europe. And while essentially a static worldview, by the 18th and early 19th century it had been "temporalized" by the concept of the soul ascending or progressing spiritually through the successive rungs or stages, and thus growing or evolving closer to God. (Lovejoy 1936) It also had at this time an impact on theories of biological evolution.

E. F. Schumacher, author of *Small is Beautiful*, has recently proposed a sort of simplified Great Chain of Being, based on the idea of four "kingdoms" (mineral, vegetable, animal, human) (Schumacher, 1977). Schumacher rejects modernist and scientific themes, his approach recalling the universalist orientation of writers like Huston Smith (Smith 1976), and quite likely contributing to (unless the latter developed his ideas completely independently) Ken Wilber's "holonomic" hierarchy or "Great Nest of Being" (Wilber 2000).

German idealism

See text at German idealism section of Evolution (philosophy)

Occult concepts

Theories of spiritual evolution are important in many Occult and Esoteric teachings, which emphasise the progression and development of the individual either after death (spiritualism) or through successive reincarnations (Theosophy, Hermeticism).

Spiritualism

In the 19th century Anglo-American Spiritualist ideas emphasize the progression of the soul after death to higher states of existence, in contrast to the French and Brazilian Spiritualism of Allan Kardec, which admits reincarnation.

The Anglo-American position recalls (and is presumably inspired by) 18th century concepts regarding the temporalization of The Great Chain of Being. Spiritual evolution, rather than being a physical (or physico-spiritual) process is based on the idea of realms or stages through which the soul or spirit passes in a non-temporal, qualitative way. This is still an important part of some spiritualist ideas today, and is similar to some mainline (as opposed to fundamentalist) Protestant Christian beliefs, according to which after death the person goes to "a better place" or "heaven" (in English Spiritualism, Summerland).

Theosophical conceptions

Theosophy presents a more sophisticated and complex cosmology than Spiritualism, although coming out of the same general milieu. H. P. Blavatsky developed a highly original cosmology, according to which the

human race (both collectively and through the succession of individual reincarnation and spiritual evolution) passes through a number of Root Races, beginning with the huge ethereal and mindless Polarian or First Root Race, through the Lemurian (3rd), Atlantean (4th) and our present "Aryan" 5th Race. This will give rise to a future, Post-Aryan 6th Root Race of highly spiritual and enlightened beings, and an even more sublime 7th Root Race, before ascending to totally superhuman and cosmic states of existence.

Blavatsky's ideas were further developed by her successors, such as C.W. Leadbeater, Rudolph Steiner, and Alice Bailey, each of whom went into huge detail in constructing baroque cycles of rounds, races, and sub-races.

Although including elements of the science of her day as well as both eastern and western esoteric thought, Blavatsky rejected the Darwinian idea that man evolved from apes, and most subsequent esotericists followed this lead. Darwinism, with its explanation of evolution through material factors like natural selection and random mutation, does not sit well with many spiritual evolutionists, for whom evolution is initiated or guided by metaphysical principles or is tending towards a final spiritual or divine state.

Despite this, Theosophists and Anthroposophists have tried to incorporate the facts of geology and paleontology into their cosmology and spiritual evolution (in Anthroposophy Hermann Poppelbaum is a particularly creative thinker in this regard). Some have attempted to equate Lemuria with Gondwanaland, for example. Today all these ideas have little influence outside their specialised followings, but for a time Theosophical concepts were immensely influential.

Theurgy

Theurgy has a clear relationship to neo-Platonism and Kabbalah and contains the concept of spiritual evolution and ultimately unification with God or the Godhead at its core. Theurgy is considered by many to be another term for high magic and is known to have influenced the members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn many of whom considered the order to be Theurgic in nature. Aleister Crowley also considered his Thelemic system of magical philosophy to be a Theurgic tradition as it emphasized the Great Work, which is essentially another form of spiritual evolution. The Great Work is believed to result in communication with one's personal angel or higher self.

Epigenesis

Epigenesis is the philosophical/theological/esoteric idea that since the mind was given to the human being, it is the original creative impulse, epigenesis, which has been the cause of all of mankind's development.

According to **spiritual evolution**, humans build upon that which has already been created, but add new elements because of the activity of the spirit. Humans have the capacity, therefore, to become creative intelligences—creators. For a human to fulfill this promise, his training should allow for the exercise of originality, which distinguishes creation from imitation. When epigenesis becomes inactive, in the individual or even in a race, **evolution** ceases and degeneration commences.

This concept is based on the Rosicrucian view of the world as a training school, which posits that while mistakes are made in life, humans often learn more from mistakes than successes. Suffering is considered as

merely the result of error, and the impact of suffering on the consciousness causes humans to be active along other lines which are found to be good, in harmony with nature. Humans are seen as spirits attending the school of life for the purpose of unfolding latent spiritual power, developing themselves from *impotence* to omnipotence (related also to development from innocence into virtue), reaching the stage of creative gods at the end of mankind's present evolution: *Great Day of Manifestation*.^[1]

Evolution towards Godhead

A common vision

Although contemporaries, Sri Aurobindo and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin did not meet, or even seem to have been aware of each other's work. Nevertheless there are amazing similarities between the two in their respective evolutionary philosophies. (see e.g. Bruteau 1974, Sethna 1973). Both describe a progression from inanimate matter through life and mind to a future state of Divine consciousness, not as an otherworldly realisation but a consummation and Divinisation of the collective consciousness on Earth. Teilhard de Chardin refers to this as the Omega Point, and Sri Aurobindo as the Supermind (Teilhard de Chardin 1955, Sri Aurobindo 1977). Neither Teilhard nor Sri Aurobindo have a problem with Darwinism the way that the Theosophists, or even someone like Ken Wilber (Wilber 2000 p.20), do. For them this material process is merely part of a larger picture.

Teilhard de Chardin

Teilhard, who was a Jesuit Paleontologist who played an important role in the discovery of Peking Man, presented a teleological view of planetary and cosmic evolution, according to which the formation of atoms, molecules and inanimate matter is followed by the development of the biosphere and organic evolution, then the appearance of man and the noosphere as the total envelope of human thought. According to Teilhard evolution does not cease here but continues on to its culmination and unification in the Omega Point, which he identifies with Christ.

Surat Shabda Yoga

Surat Shabda Yoga esoteric cosmology depicts the whole of creation (the macrocosm) as being emanated and arranged in a spiritually differentiated hierarchy, often referred to as eggs, regions, or planes. Typically, eight spiritual levels are described above the physical plane, although names and subdivisions within these levels will vary to some extent by mission and Master. (One version of the creation from a Surat Shabda Yoga perspective is depicted at the Sant Ajaib Singh Ji Memorial Site in “The Grand Scheme of All Creation” (<http://www.santji.allegre.ca/planes-640.jpg>) .)

The constitution of the individual (the microcosm) is an exact replica of the macrocosm. Consequently, the microcosm consists of a number of bodies, each one suited to interact with its corresponding plane or region in the macrocosm. These bodies developed over the yugas through involution (emanating from higher planes to lower planes) and evolution (returning from lower planes to higher planes), including by karma and reincarnation in various states of consciousness (Holtje 1995).

Dynamic evolution through successive kingdoms

Arthur M. Young and Edward Haskell have each independently incorporated the findings of science into a larger theory of spiritual evolution, and extended the traditional human, animal, vegetable, and mineral categories with kingdoms representing photons, atoms and molecules. (Haskell 1972, Young 1976). Arthur M. Young goes further in considering the human state as a subset of a larger kingdom of "Dominion", of which the sixth stage is represented for example by Christ and Buddha, and the seventh (final) stage an even higher level of Enlightenment or God-realisation. (Young 1976, see diagram pp.86-7). Moreover, both Haskell and Young present profound accounts of evolution through these kingdoms in terms of cybernetic principles. A more "mainstream" scientific presentation of this same idea is provided by Erich Jantsch in his consummate account of how self-organising systems evolve and develop as a series of "symmetry breaks" through the sequence of matter, life, and mind (Jantsch 1980). Although abiding strictly by the understanding of science, Jantsch arranges the various elements of cosmic, planetary, biological, psychological, and human evolution in a single overall framework of emergent evolution that may or may not be considered teleological (see Jantsch 1980 p.224).

Energy driven evolution

The book *Tuning the Diamonds: Electromagnetism and Spiritual Evolution* (<http://www.joyfirepublishing.com/index.html>) written by Susan Joy Rennison claims that evolution on Earth is driven by cosmic energy originating from deep space.

New Age ideas

New Age thought is strongly syncretic and based on a superficial but creative interpretation of previous spiritual and esoteric traditions, especially Eastern thought, Theosophy, and popular (mis)interpretations of science. A common theme is the evolution or the transcendence of the human or collective planetary consciousness in a higher state or higher "vibratory" (a metaphor taken from G. I. Gurdjieff) level.

There are also a group in northern California and since the late 1970's they have claimed to be channeling a teaching entity given the name Michael. Novelist C.Q. Yarbro has written a series of four books which presents a dialogue of sorts, between Michael and the group that claims to be channeling the information. The first of this series of books is titled "Messages from Michael." This teaching entity's primary lesson, is that we are here to learn how to choose, and each choice made is equally valid. From this once basic precept a comprehensive series of practical information is built upon. There is currently a number of discussion groups online where those who are interested in the "Michael material," may exchange their understanding of the material. As of September 2007, one of the core group members has been hosting an online study group. * Messages From Michael: Study Group (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/messagesfrommichael/>)

Among the better thinkings of the "New Age", David Spangler's communications speak of a "New Heaven and a new Earth", while Christopher Hills refers (perhaps influenced by Sri Aurobindo) to the divinization of man (Hills 1977, p.30).

Jonathan Livingston Seagull narrated the idea of evolution in a fascinating fashion. James Redfield in his

novel *The Celestine Prophecy* suggested that through experiencing a series of personal spiritual insights, humanity is becoming aware of the connection between our evolution and the Divine. More recently in his book *God and the Evolving Universe: The Next Step in Personal Evolution* (2002) co-written with Michael Murphy, he claims that humanity is on the verge of undergoing a change in consciousness.

Integral theory and spiral dynamics

An interpretation of social and psychological development that could also be considered a theory of spiritual evolution is spiral dynamics, based on the work of Clare W. Graves.

More recently the concept of spiritual evolution has been given a sort of respectability it has not had since the early 19th century through the work of Ken Wilber, in whose writings both the cosmological and the personal dimensions are described. In this integral philosophy, reality is said to consist of several realms or stages, including more than one of the following: the physical, the vital, the psychic, (after the Greek *psyche*, "soul"), the causal (referring to "that which causes, or gives rise to, the manifest world"), and the ultimate (or non-dual), through which the individual progressively evolves. Although this schema is derived in large part from Tibetan Buddhism, Wilber argues (and uses many tables of diagrams to show) that these same levels of being are common to all wisdom teachings. Described simplistically, Wilber sees humans developing through several stages, including magic, mythic, pluralistic, and holistic mentalities. But he also sees cultures as developing through these stages. And, much like Hegel, he sees this development of individuals and cultures *as* the evolution of existence itself. Wilber has also teamed up with Don Beck to integrate Spiral Dynamics into his own Integral philosophy, and vice versa.

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See also

- Esoteric cosmology
- Plane (cosmology)
- Hindu idealism
- Involution (metaphysics)
- Metaphysical cosmology
- Religious cosmology
- Evolution (philosophy)
- *The Celestine Prophecy*

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