

# Historical Evolution of Consciousness and Human Understanding

## Tom Lombardo

*“...we are living in history and history is living in us.”*  
Carter Phipps

In this article I examine theories of possible historical stages of human understanding and the potentialities for further evolutionary development of the conscious human mind in the future.

To set the context, the general theory of cosmic evolution implies that the universe has moved through stages or levels of increasing organization and complexity, starting from the sub-atomic and progressively integrating at chemical, stellar/planetary/geological, biological/ecological, cultural, and technological levels (Chaisson, 2005, 2009, 2012; Kelly, 2010). Following Kurzweil (1999, 2005), this process could be described as increasing levels of information embodied and processed within increasingly more complex natural systems.

Emerging within this physical process of stages of increasing complexity, the human mind (inclusive of consciousness) has evolved, emerging out of simpler forms of awareness, intelligence, and understanding found in the animal kingdom. Human awareness and understanding has become progressively more abstract, complex, and penetrating into the depths of reality (facilitated through technological evolution) within this evolutionary psychological process. The central theme of the evolution of epistemology and approaches to knowledge can be fitted into this general model of mental evolution within human history (See my website article “Knowledge, Consciousness, and the External World.”)

The question to be addressed below is whether we can identify fundamental evolutionary stages in the history of human understanding and consciousness. And based on such a historical perspective, what can we say about the contemporary structure of human understanding and consciousness, as well as the future of human psychology and the psychology of the future?

There are numerous stage theories of the historical evolution of human consciousness and understanding, but there seem to be a number of common themes and points of agreement among these theories.

Consider first, Julian Jaynes’s (1976) well known two-stage theory that limits itself to roughly the last three thousand years. Jaynes hypothesized a fundamental transformation that occurred roughly three thousand years ago, ushering in the emergence of the modern human mind. He hypothesized, based on historical evidence found within ancient works of literature and other written documents, that the human mind shifted from a consciousness in which action was initiated through experienced “inner voiced directives” attributed to deities/spirits/ancestors and a consciousness with

a sense of self-initiation and self-responsibility. True modern consciousness only arose when the human mind developed a sense of ego or self as the originator of action. Prior to this new level of awareness, humans experienced their lives as directed, informed, and inspired by personae external to themselves. Voices spoke to them; nature itself was animated, enchanted, and personified, where the human mind sensed external spirits and communicated with such beings. Jaynes points out how much of ancient writings conveyed this sense of gods/deities/spirits speaking to humans (and often sensed as emanating from nature) and directing their actions. The sense of a self-responsible ego—a master of our own fate—to be held accountable for our actions did not yet exist.

This view of psychological evolution aligns with Baumeister's (2011) view that self-responsibility was "outsourced" in primitive humanity, and it is only more recently that the capacity and ability for inner self-control has become sufficiently developed, at least in the minds of some humans. Yet, if we were to understand this polarity of consciousness in terms of the distinction between internal versus external experienced locus of control, then it appears that this polarity is more like a continuum than an either-or dichotomy.

Not only do individuals experience lesser or greater degrees of sensed control over their actions in their individual lives, but across the globe people from diverse ways of life may differentially experience their actions and their mode of understanding as to lesser or greater degrees informed and inspired by spirits/deities/personified natural forces/and voices of their ancestors. God (or gods) still routinely speak to many groups of people around the world, giving them enlightenment and guidance in life (Wright, 2009).

Moreover, it is not altogether clear whether a strong sense of outer-directed cognizance and guidance is unequivocally more primitive than an inner-localized sense of identity and control. Self-responsibility and a distinctive self-identity are clearly important, but what about our sense of connection with nature, history, and the cosmos? Should we see the emergent independent self as transcending, or complementing the earlier communal or relational self (O'Hara, 1997)?

A second stage theory of the evolution of human consciousness and understanding, taking a much more temporally extensive view, can be found in Merlin Donald's *Origins of the Modern Mind* (1991). Donald distinguishes four stages of cognitive evolution, beginning with the "episodic" which can be found in higher apes; the "mimetic" which emerges in *Homo erectus* roughly one and a half million years ago; the "mythic" coinciding with the emergence of spoken language roughly fifty thousand years ago; and finally, the "theoretic" mode of understanding that develops with the appearance of external symbolic systems (written language) and modes of external memory storage (records, manuscripts, books, etc.). In Donald's model, each new level does not replace those earlier stages but is added on as an additional mode of understanding. Moreover, stages two through four involve modes of knowledge representation that go beyond simple experiences and memories of concrete episodes in the world, all distinguishing human consciousness and understanding from the rest of the animal kingdom.

There are several noteworthy points to make about Donald's evolutionary model. Modes of understanding and consciousness are intimately tied to systems of representation of knowledge; *what* we think with or know with influences and structures *how* we think and know. Humans have evolved systems of knowledge representation that empower us to greatly exceed the capacities and processes of understanding and knowledge found in other animals. Second, Donald argues that stage two (the mimetic) introduces the capacity to voluntarily recall, rehearse, and refine knowledge gained from the past. Basically, the mimetic capacity is the ability through varied motions of the body to represent or symbolize knowledge. Hence, volitional control becomes a key factor in the nature of human understanding and consciousness at this stage. Third, as modes of historical and future consciousness, the mimetic, mythic, and theoretic (encompassing visual, motor, and linguistic modes of representation and understanding), all co-exist within the human mind. These modes of consciousness can be combined together in such representational experiences such as cinema/video and story telling through text.

The philosopher Jean Gebser (1986) articulated an influential five-stage theory of the historical development of human consciousness that critiques contemporary modern consciousness, and consequently raises issues regarding the preferable future evolution of the human mind. Gebser identified five major structures of consciousness that have emerged within human history: The archaic, magic, mythical, mental, and integral. The archaic arises out of the "ever-present origin;" it underlies all human consciousness. There is no distinction of the self and the world at this primordial level. At the magic level, events and objects in the experienced world are connected together, but symbols and icons are identified with the things they represent. With the emergence of the mythic level, consciousness and the experienced world is given coherence through story telling. The mental structure of modern consciousness seeks to understand the world (existence) through logic; its extreme and dysfunctional form is rationalism which denies the validity of all other modes of consciousness. Gebser attributes many of the present contemporary problems within the world (a view shared by many others) to the dominance of the modern-rational structure of consciousness. According to him, materialism, excessive action focus, reliance on technology, and the loss of ethical values all follow from the dominance in modern life of this structure of consciousness. He also connects this mindset with an excessive emphasis on objectivity, which he believes also generates human problems and unhappiness. Finally, Gebser proposes the integral stage of consciousness, which, for one thing, recognizes and integrates all previous structures of consciousness. Gebser sees our preferable future development of consciousness involving the embracing the integral structure of understanding.

Two noteworthy features of the integral stage are: First, moving beyond the rational structure of divorcing reality from time, which represents the world as atemporal static entities, the integral stage reintroduces time and dynamism into the nature of things. Second, from an integral perspective, identity is conceptualized holistically; instead of analytically dividing reality into separate entities each of which can be understood in and

of itself, within an integral mode of consciousness, the realities of existence are “transparent” to each other; the interconnectivity of things is seen.

Another point that should be mentioned is that Gebser is critical of using the concept of evolution to describe the development of these mental stages, since in his mind, the concept of evolution implies some direction to the process of change—a goal or end point—whereas he believed that the future of human consciousness is open-ended and uncertain. But evolution need not imply some ultimate goal. Regardless, whatever term gets used, Gebser believed in an open-ended view of human mental evolution without some definitive or final state of perfection.

With Gebser’s theory serving as one example, there is a general pattern of thinking that repeatedly shows up within theories of the historical evolution of human consciousness and understanding. Innovative and revolutionary thinkers will propose a new way of thinking and mode of consciousness in conjunction with criticizing the existing dominant mode of consciousness. The dominant mode, in one manner or form, is described by critics and revolutionaries as outmoded, too narrow in scope, lopsided in focus, and destructive to the human spirit, whereas the new mode of thinking proposed by them presumably addresses and solves the existing deficiencies and problems of the status quo. The argument is made that we should purposefully embrace the new mode of thinking because it is more true, up-to-date, and/or beneficial to the human spirit. The ongoing evolution of understanding and consciousness, at least throughout recorded history over the last few millennia, has repeatedly involved this process of critique of the present way of thinking and the purposeful adoption of a solution through a new mode of thinking.

*“We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking  
we used when we created them.”*

*Albert Einstein*

The “new” paradigm of Western Enlightenment and modern science critiqued and intentionally advanced beyond traditional Western religion and royal authority along such lines, but in turn, Western Enlightenment and science was critiqued and purposefully transcended by Romanticism and Naturalism, and then all Western modes of thinking and understanding were critiqued and presumably improved upon by twentieth century Postmodernism. Similarly, when Gebser looks at integral consciousness he sees this new mode of understanding as *preferable* to previous modes of understanding, since previous modes had identifiable limitations, whereas according to him, integral consciousness synthesizes together all earlier modes of understanding and is better than any one form alone.

Theories of the evolution of mind, such as in Gebser, that presumably provide a descriptive and predictive analysis of what has happen, is happening, and will happen in the future, get guided and informed by prescriptive theories of how human minds *should* develop in the future. History gets intertwined with purpose and value. This is understandable, since humans engage in the purposeful evolution of their minds, using

arguments and values to both critique present modes of understanding and advocate for new and supposedly improved frameworks of consciousness. The stories we tell ourselves about our past serve as a basis for our purposeful direction into the future.

Another influential theory of conscious evolution that brings into the picture the social dimension of the human mind is “Spiral Dynamics,” presented by Don Beck and Christopher Cowan, in their book, *Spiral Dynamics: Mastering Values, Leadership, and Change* (1996). This theory proposes that humanity has developed through a series of increasingly more complex bio-psycho-social stages in coping with the challenges of existence. Each new stage envelops and transcends the previous stage; hence, there is evolution and conscious progression. Also, the envisioned developmental process is seen as open-ended, with no final stage of perfection, since each new stage may solve old problems, but inevitably has to confront new problems, questions, and challenges; adaptation never reaches perfect equilibrium with the environment. Moreover, through successive stages there is a fundamental oscillation between focusing on the external world, the group, and self-sacrifice (interdependence mode of consciousness) and focusing on the inner world, the individual, and self-expression (independence mode of consciousness).

Beck and Cowan identify eight stages, encompassing basic values and modes of thinking for each level, in the history and ongoing evolution of human consciousness:

- Loose clan-based groups dominated by nature, instinct, and basic survival needs —“based on biological urges/drives; physical senses dictate the state of being.”
- Tribal groups that are animistic, magical, superstitious, and ritualistic with strong ancestral and blood bonds—“threatening and full of mysterious powers, spirit beings which must be placated and appeased.”
- Exploitative and authoritarian groups with strong “Big Boss” leaders, heroic figures, slavery and repression, and rigid social hierarchies that are power and action-driven and egocentric—“like a jungle where the tough and strong prevail while the weak serve; nature is an adversary.”
- Strong group norms and group discipline, social control through guilt and obedience to authority, absolutist views of truth and value, high discipline, and an emphasis on self-sacrifice—“controlled by a Higher Power that punishes evil and eventually rewards good works and Right living.”
- Entrepreneurial, calculating, individualistic, success-driven, materialistic, competitive with a drive to control the environment—“full of resources to develop and opportunities to make things better and bring prosperity.”
- Communitarian, egalitarian, the need for social approval and contact, facilitative leaders, the importance of social harmony, and an attention to the environment —“the habitat wherein humanity can find love and purposes through affiliation and sharing.”
- Systems thinking, an emphasis on mutuality, intrinsic love of learning, the ecological, and the importance and reinforcement of unique talents in individuals—“a chaotic organism where change is the norm and uncertainty a usual state of being.”

- Holism and spiritual harmony, the integration of thought and feeling, the capacity to understand multiple points of view, and integral philosophy—“a delicately balanced system of interlocking forces in jeopardy in human hands.”

We should note that although this theory sees an evolutionary process going on that extends back thousands of years into humanity’s past, there are enclaves and groups of individuals across the globe in contemporary times in which one or more of any of the levels still dominate; social-mental evolution does not move universally and uniformly across all of humanity. We will also find, according to this theory, that although the postulated final (the latest) two stages have already emerged in the contemporary human condition (in the minds of some people) there are not many individuals or groups across the globe that have realized these stages in their modes of consciousness and behavior. Indeed, the preponderance of groups and individuals in the world are presumably at the fourth and fifth stages, corresponding roughly with the authoritarian tradition-dominated religious mode of consciousness (that arose in classical times) and the modernist individualistic-scientific-technological mindset that arose in the Western Enlightenment.

Although the focus is on distinctive American subcultures in contemporary times, Paul Ray’s theory of traditional, modern, and cultural creative subcultures aligns with some main themes in the spiral dynamics model (Ray and Anderson, 2000). What Ray describes as “traditional” aligns with Spiral Dynamics stage four; what Ray describes as “modernist” aligns with stage five; and what he describes as “cultural creatives” aligns with different aspects of stages six, seven, and eight. As noted by Ray, all three subcultures (traditional, modernist, and cultural creatives) exist simultaneously within the United States, but if we were to follow spiral dynamics, the three subcultures emerged in a certain chronological order. In Ray’s analysis, the cultural creatives evolved as a new group and mindset in reaction to (and dissatisfaction with) the traditionalist and modernist ways of thinking and living. We also get the sense within Ray’s theory, that the cultural creatives are a preferable advance over the traditionalists and the modernists. Again, description gets mixed up with prescription and proposed purposeful evolution.

Having now described a number of theories, it appears that frequently “magical, mystical, and mythological” modes of understanding and consciousness are identified as early stages in the evolution of the human mind. Furthermore, rational and abstract theoretical consciousness is frequently identified as a stage of thinking that emerged in more recent times, although the beginning point for this stage could be identified as anytime between the rise of written language and the rise of modern science and democracy (Donald, 1991; Shlain, 1998; Lombardo, 2006a, Chapter Three). Regardless of exactly when this mode of consciousness actually emerged, and whether its evolution has been holistic or piecemeal, and global or localized, there is also the view that there is some mode of consciousness either emerging or about to emerge that transcends the rational-theoretical. Given the purposeful dimension of the ongoing evolution of consciousness, it is fair to say that this new proposed mode of consciousness will incorporate learning and information gathering (for example through science),

philosophical argumentation, deep modes of understanding, ethics and values, cross-cultural comparisons, and attempted syntheses to validate and justify its preferability as an evolutionary direction for the future.

Also, although the mythic and narrative mode of consciousness is identified as an early stage in the evolution of consciousness, it seems clear that all more recent modes of consciousness and understanding bring with them narrative components that chronicle their own development. Humans do not seem to have transcended their mythic-narrative mode of consciousness so much as having assimilated it into more recently developed modes, with the narrative providing an explanation and justification for the higher level of understanding. Religious-traditional, Western modernist, Postmodernism, and Integral modes of consciousness all have narrative components (as expressed through their advocates) within their frameworks of thinking. This narrative dimension illustrates that world views always have grand narratives associated with them, and that the mode of understanding is conceptualized and explained, in the form of a story, as a dynamic and developmental phenomenon that emerged across the course of time.

Another general feature that shows up across the evolution of modes of consciousness and understanding is the ongoing tension and conflict of the old and the new, and correspondingly the human drives toward stability versus change. Running back for at least thousands of years, one can find innumerable and diverse conflicts that basically have to do with whether some feature of human life or human thinking should remain the same or whether it should change. And at least for those stages in the evolution of human consciousness in which one can examine written (and graphic) material expressing the thoughts and feelings of the time, the new way of understanding, which may transcend or replace the older way of understanding, emerges in the context of disputation with the old. Our contemporary “culture wars” pitting traditional and status quo mentalities against advancing, transformative mindsets is a long-term and continual feature of human societies and the human mind. Presently, traditionalists, modernists, cultural creatives, and postmodernists are fighting it out over which mindset is best, and which mindset is most progressive and innovative (Lombardo, 2006b).

This ongoing tension and debate over the preferability of existing mindsets versus some new mindset is another basic feature of our purposeful mental and social evolution. It is, as if, there was an evolutionary process at work, testing and comparing the old versus the new, keeping humanity relatively grounded, while at the same time exploring new modes of consciousness and understanding.

The term “integral” frequently shows up in discussions of the hypothesized new stage of consciousness and understanding. The term, taken literally, means to integrate or synthesize. But to integrate or synthesize what? Integral can mean the opposite of analytical, often associated with the modernist, scientific vision of humanity and nature. We have “integral science” (Goerner, 1999) which views nature and the universe in a holistic (as oppose to atomistic) fashion. In this case, integral means a holistic understanding of nature.

“Integral” is also used by the contemporary philosopher Ken Wilber (Wilber, 1996; Phipps, 2006; Cohen and Wilber, 2006), but here it means an integration of modes of consciousness (such as in Gebner), where the new stage is able to experience the world and the self without a bias toward any of the more limiting previous stages of conscious understanding (*Integral Life: Ken Wilber*).

Sometimes “integral” also seems to mean without perspective (which would limit and bias consciousness), but this seems psychologically impossible. At best, as our understanding advances, we achieve greater scope and flexibility in perspectives, but never an a-perspective view of things; there is no conceivable omnipresent observer or thinker.

Still, deriving from “Integral” writings (including Wilber and Spiral Dynamics), the following summary list of proposed stages can be offered (which pulls together the above previous lists of stages): Archaic, magical, mystical, mythological, traditional, rational/abstract, postmodernism, and integral. One might also need to place in this scheme a romantic/naturalistic mindset, that could be seen as either an early stage (pre-rational) or a reactive, more recent stage in consciousness.

Wilber also presents a different type of theory of conscious evolution, involving the general theme of growing expansiveness of consciousness of concern: The evolutionary stages of expanding consciousness begin with (as the most limiting) the egocentric and then move through the family-ethnocentric, the community/national centric, the world and global-centric, the natural and ecocentric, and the “kosmocentric,” the unique spelling of this last term used to signify the totality of existence and not just the physical cosmos. This model resonates with the theory that the evolution of consciousness moves from the relative egocentric here and now to greater and greater expanses and vistas in space and time (Shlain, 2003). This model is both developmental-descriptive and prescriptive-futuristic.

What Wilber highlights in his model is that it is not enough to simply epistemically grasp the expansive perspective, but it is critical that we make the totality of things a central concern (or value) of consciousness; this is a desirable and preferable holistic state of consciousness. The “cosmic” perspective engages emotion, motivation, ethics, and the personal; it is not simply a preferred cognitive evolution. Although the “kosmocentric” perspective may be highly desirable and represent both an ethical and cognitive advance over more limiting mindsets, how well have we in the past or now in the present achieved this level of consciousness? There is probably no end point to attaining a true “kosmocentric” perspective.

All told, it appears that human consciousness and understanding has evolved across time, and probably through a series of relatively distinct stages. These stages though transcendent over previous stages seem to be structured in an enveloping fashion (at least to some degree) with new stages layered on top of or around previous stages; the older modes do not seem to just disappear. Moreover, even if external (environmental) factors provoke new stages of evolution, there is clearly a purposeful and self-conscious

dimension to this evolution. We create and argue for new preferable stages in our mode of consciousness. Fascinatingly, we seem to have the capacity to transcend our present mode of consciousness and articulate (with struggle, tension, and debate) new forms of consciousness and understanding.

We can ask: What is the most efficacious and valuable mode of consciousness for understanding and guiding the future? It seems to me self-evident that future consciousness guides the future, and in particular, it guides the future of consciousness. Future consciousness is the means by which we facilitate self-evolution. Given the ongoing evolutionary nature of human understanding, how should we self-consciously incorporate into our complex capacity of future consciousness those features that would thoughtfully and efficaciously facilitate further evolution in our modes of understanding?

What is noteworthy in all of the above models of the evolution of consciousness is the lack of incorporating or highlighting, what I argue is the central role of future consciousness in the historical evolution of the human mind. For one thing, in so far as all these models bring in the concept of preferable self-evolution as a critical feature in the evolution of consciousness, all the models miss the fundamental fact that the mindset of purposeful self-evolution toward preferable ends presupposes future consciousness. Second, future consciousness is a critical dimension of advanced adaptability to the environment: it structures and energizes proactive adaptation. Third, following Wilber's model of expanding spheres of conscious concern, the heightening of future consciousness is one key dimension in this overall process. The evolution of future consciousness is part of the fundamental shift away from the relative egocentric here and now. All in all, a key feature in understanding the ongoing and future evolution of consciousness and understanding is the central and distinctive role of future consciousness.

## References

- Baumeister, Roy and Tierney, John *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2011.
- Beck, Don Edward and Cowan, Christopher *Spiral Dynamics: Mastering Values, Leadership, and Change*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1996.
- Chaisson, Eric *Epic of Evolution: Seven Ages of the Cosmos*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- Chaisson, Eric "Cosmic Evolution: State of the Science" in Dick, Steven J. and Lupisella, Mark L. (Ed.) *Cosmos and Culture: Cultural Evolution in a Cosmic Context*. Washington, D. C.: NASA, 2009.
- Chaisson, Eric "A Singular Universe of Many Singularities: Cultural Evolution in a Cosmic Context" in Eden, Amnon, Soraker, Johnny, Moor, Jim, and Steinhart, Eric (Ed.) *The Singularity Hypothesis: A Scientific and Philosophical Assessment*. Berlin: The Frontiers Collection, Springer, 2012.

- Cohen, Andrew and Wilber, Ken “God’s Playing a New Game: Integral Spirituality, Evolutionary Enlightenment, and the Future of Religion” *What is Enlightenment*, Issue 33, June-August, 2006.
- Donald, Merlin *Origins of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Gebser, Jean *The Ever Present Origin*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, (1949, 1953), 1986.
- Goerner, Sally *After the Clockwork Universe: The Emerging Science and Culture of Integral Society*. Norwich, Great Britain: Floris Books, 1999.
- Integral Life-Ken Wilber*: <https://integrallife.com/contributors/ken-wilber>
- Jaynes, Julian *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976.
- Kelly, Kevin *What Technology Wants*. New York: Viking, 2010.
- Kurzweil, Ray *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*. New York: Viking Press, 2005.
- Kurzweil, Ray *How to Create a Mind; The Secret of Human Thought Revealed*. New York: Viking, 2012.
- Lombardo, Thomas *The Evolution of Future Consciousness: The Nature and Historical Development of the Human Capacity to Think about the Future*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2006a.
- Lombardo, Thomas *Contemporary Futurist Thought: Science Fiction, Future Studies, and Theories and Visions of the Future in the Last Century*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2006b.
- O’Hara, Maureen “Relational Empathy: Beyond Modernist Egocentricism to Postmodern Holistic Contextualism” in Bohardt, A. and Greenberg, L. (Ed.) *Empathy and Psychotherapy: New Directions in Theory, Research, and Practice*. American Psychological Association, 1997.
- Phipps, Carter “A Philosopher of Everything” *What is Enlightenment*, Issue 33, June-August, 2006.
- Ray, Paul and Anderson, Sherry *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People are Changing the World*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000.
- Shlain, Leonard *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image*. New York: Penguin Arkana, 1998.
- Shlain, Leonard *Sex, Time, and Power: How Women’s Sexuality Shaped Human Evolution*. New York: Viking, 2003.
- Wilber, Ken *A Brief History of Everything*. Boston: Shambhala, 1996.
- Wright, Robert *The Evolution of God*. New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2009.