

SPIRIT AND MATTER

*'Everything emerges from the One
in order to return to the One.'*

Michel Conge

Philosophical Perspectives

Throughout history, human beings have pondered the apparent dual nature of phenomenal reality and human experience, recognizing that both have a material aspect and a spiritual component. This cosmic perspective has been expressed in myths, symbols, fables, teaching stories, art and architecture, and passed on from generation to generation.

The Hermetic philosophical tradition is associated with the quasi-mythical Egyptian magus Hermes Trismegistus. He taught his followers that humanity has a dual nature, living in two worlds simultaneously: "Man is, according to Hermes, a creature of the natural world, of the body and the senses, and as such is subject to all the laws and limitations that come with 'living in the material world.' But he is also an inhabitant of another world, that of mind, spirit, the soul, consciousness, which, in essence, is free from the limitations of his other nature."

When Asclepius asked Hermes Trismegistus why man has a dual nature – one of matter and one of spirit – Hermes explains that it is so that he can 'raise his sight to heaven while he takes care of the earth,' and so he can 'love those things that are below him' while he is 'beloved by the things above.' Asclepius himself, when asked about man's need for a body, explains that it is necessary so that we can take care of creation. Asclepius tells his listeners that Nous [Mind] gave man a 'corporeal dwelling place' and 'mixed and blended our two natures into one,' doing justice to our twofold origin, so that we can 'wonder at and adore the celestial, while caring for and managing the things on earth.' For Hermes, man finds himself on earth because he has a particular mission to accomplish here. But this was not in order to escape from creation, but in order to take our rightful place within it: to embrace the obligations and responsibilities that come with being 'caretakers' of the cosmos. (1)

In more recent times, German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) argued that human consciousness develops through a progression of stages culminating in increasingly higher forms of expression. In *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807), he writes: "The human being contains, infolded and enshrouded within, the spirit of the Absolute. This indwelling spirit, emanating as consciousness, comes to know itself as infinite only by assuming the limitations of finite existence and triumphing over them. In other words, the human is the vehicle by which God, the infinite spirit, comes to self-recognition."

A century later, French paleontologist and philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) proposed that the evolution of complexity in the physical world was paralleled by the evolution of conscious experience at all levels of creation, from atoms to humans. In his seminal work *The Phenomenon of Man*, he explored this theme in depth:

Teilhard de Chardin believed that the cosmos presents us with two faces. One is the exterior, material reality of conventional science, and the other is an interior reality, or consciousness. He thought this to be true of all levels of material existence, from the single atom through complex chemical structures and simple living organisms such as bacteria, on up to highly complex organisms, leading in a direct line to humankind. "The exterior world," he wrote, "must inevitably be lined at every point with an interior one." Thus, a progression is established in the exterior world running from the simple to the vastly complex and simultaneously in the interior world of consciousness, from the separate and elemental to that which is large and rich in quality. Such notions, while contrary to the conventions of materialistic science, are not unknown to many of today's physicists and biologists, as well as certain philosophers. For instance, the prominent philosopher Karl Popper observes that "Dead matter seems to have more potentialities than merely to produce dead matter." Likewise, Thomas Nagel, a philosopher who has spent many years considering the problem of how a physical system like the brain can give rise to conscious awareness, concludes that matter must contain some kind of "proto-mental" properties. He further suggests that matter and mind are essentially two sides of the same coin. This understanding would "have the advantage of explaining how there could be necessary causal connections in either direction, between mental and physical phenomena." (2)

According to the philosophical school of *panpsychism*, both matter (*physis*) and mind (*psyche*) were present even at the birth of the universe. Psyche, then, is the essence of consciousness and is a universal presence in the world. "All things in the world – quanta and galaxies, molecules, cells, and organisms – have 'materiality' as well as 'interiority.'" Matter and mind are not separate, distinct realities; they are complementary aspects of the reality of the cosmos." Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead reached the same conclusion: everything in the world has both a physical and a mental "pole." Similarly, Nobel laureate biologist George Wald felt that mind existed since the universe began, rather than emerging at some point during the evolution of life.

Some theorists draw a distinction between the level of consciousness or mind in entities at different gradations of reality. They hold that consciousness is not limited to human beings, but is present in some degree throughout nature, from atoms to molecules, to organic life, to ecological systems. Ervin Laszlo makes this point in *Science and the Akashic Field*: "In the great chain of evolution, there is nowhere we can draw the line, nowhere we could say: below this there is no consciousness, and above there is."

The view from the in-formed universe goes beyond the classical panpsychist view by adding an evolutionary dimension. Psyche is indeed present throughout the universe, but it is not present everywhere in the same way, at the same level of development. Psyche evolves, the same as matter. In the living organisms of this planet they both are relatively highly evolved, and in our species they are the most highly evolved of all. In we human beings psyche is highly articulated: it is our personal consciousness. Evolutionary panpsychism does not reduce all of reality to structures made up of in-themselves inert and insentient material building blocks (as in materialism), nor does it assimilate all of reality to a qualitative nonmaterial mind (as in idealism). It takes both matter and mind as fundamental elements of reality, but (unlike dualism) does not claim that they are radically separate; they are different aspects of the *same* reality. What we call "matter" is the aspect we apprehend when we look at a person, a plant, or a molecule *from the outside*, "mind" is the aspect we obtain when we look at the same thing *from the inside*. (3)

Contemporary consciousness theorist Ken Wilber has developed a model of consciousness which forms a spectrum linking the gross and subtle levels of reality through involutory and evolutionary processes: "All levels of phenomena form a continuum of matter and energy in which the material and the subtle realms are but two opposite extremes of the spectrum."

Wilber notes that involution, as well as evolution, can be understood in at least two senses. In the first instance, it can mean the descent of the spirit into matter, creating the manifest universe. This means that forms are constantly created in the most subtle realms of being and flow downward, as it were, into the manifest cosmos, giving shape and forms to the lower realms. This idea reminds one of the Neoplatonic realm of *nous*, the source of universal archetypes that pass down as manifest patterns, for example in the psychic, mental, and gross realms. Thus, the most subtle realms of being are the great creative wellsprings of creation. Wilber stresses that this fount of creativity, cascading down through the realms of being, is not limited to the habits of the physical world but applies to human experience as well . . . Wilber's new understanding of cosmic creativity, flowing from the deep subtle springs of being, offers boundless creativity; and it is not in conflict with the seemingly obvious facts of evolutionary research in biology, cosmology, and psychology. In other words, it recognizes and understands that the cosmos is an unending and rich source of continuing creation. In this cosmos, evolution becomes the movement of the spirit back towards its origin, a reaching of the lower realms, especially in the form of life itself and human life in particular, back toward the spirit. But the form that path back will actually take is always open to the creative outflow of the very wells of creation. (4)

Scientific Paradigms

The so-called 'body-mind problem' has challenged philosophers and scientists for countless centuries. The quandary of the distinction between matter and mind is neatly summed up by a double-meaning aphorism: "What is matter? Never mind! What is mind? No matter!" In *The Sphinx and the Rainbow*, Professor David Loye expands on this perennial dilemma:

On the one hand is this thing of no known substance, that cannot be seen or felt or smelled or weighed – the wholly invisible but obviously very powerful entity that we call our consciousness, our awareness, our mind. On the other hand is this thing of very well-known substance, that can be seen, felt, smelled, weighed – this wholly visible and also powerful entity that we call our body. But what is the connection between the two? How does the visible give rise to the invisible – or vice versa? How does body cross the gulf to mind – or mind cross the chasm to body? To resolve this contradiction, it has been argued that everything is body, or matter – that mind is simply an illusion, a by-product of the physical. This is the materialist position that has dominated all Western science. It has also been argued that everything is mind, or spirit – that body and matter are simply illusions, Maya, a by-product of the mental. This is the spiritual position that has dominated Eastern metaphysics. It has been argued (by William James and Bertrand Russell, among others) that both mind and body are different aspects of the same thing and thus there is no real gulf between the two. (5)

The concept of different levels or degrees of materiality, ranging from the very coarse to the very fine, finds expression throughout the natural world. For example, matter of different densities can interpenetrate one another – a solid can be saturated with liquid and a liquid, in turn, with a gas:

The states of matter known to us – solid, liquid, gaseous, plasma, radiant energy certainly correspond to different kinds of materiality and obey different laws, have different degrees of freedom. The law of gravity may apply to everything, but a rock, a stream, a wind, and the light from the sun are not affected by it in the same way. Were a rock to move almost instantaneously from one place to another, as light does, this would constitute a miracle. An ordinary man cannot walk on water, but the wind can. Many of the classic miracles consist of substances undergoing transformations which are ordinarily forbidden to them, but are not forbidden to substances of a different materiality. Loaves and fishes cannot multiply rapidly, but shadows can if we turn on more lights, and sounds can if there are sufficient echoing surfaces. We cannot see through suitcases or flesh, but x-rays do, providing one of the miracles of modern science. (6)

The same principle of levels of materiality also extends to the human realm:

In us, many levels of materiality exist. Our solid skeletons, subject to mechanical forces, move about the joints, pulled by muscles which require nutrients dissolved in our bodily fluids. Oxygen, also carried in those fluids, and available because of the interaction of sunlight with plants, provides energy for the muscles and other organs. The energy of life is fundamentally electric in nature, made of potential differences across cellular membranes, and stored in molecules which release their energy by assuming less energetic configurations of their electrons in relation to their atomic nuclei. The nervous system operates by means of electromagnetic signals. Our thoughts are not restricted in space and time in the same way our bodies are. And beyond that, somehow consciousness arises, in relation to complex electromagnetic patterns. It is miraculous that life can animate our flesh, and that consciousness can illuminate our life. (7)

Traditionally, science has taken a materialistic perspective, asserting that the universe is primarily physical in nature and that all phenomena can be explained in terms of physical processes. But this *quantitative* approach disregards the presence of *quality*, such as intention, purpose and consciousness. In *You Are the Universe*, Deepak Chopra and Menas Kafatos provide a useful metaphor to illuminate the importance of including both physical and metaphysical aspects of reality in fully describing any external forms in the universe:

Consider a cathedral in place of the universe. Studying the materials that the great Cathedral of Notre Dame is made of, such as stone, metals, and stained glass, can give hints about the building's construction methods and the historical times during which it was built; but by no means is Notre Dame merely the sum of these parts. It was created by conscious beings and reveals an alive presence that "dead" physical objects cannot account for. Stone, metal, and stained glass are the materials of architecture but not its art. So, when it comes to describing Notre Dame, the parts tell us about the quantity of "stuff" that a cathedral is made from; the architecture tells us about the qualia of the building, including its beauty and religious significance. Closing this gap between quantity and qualia would get us to step two of discovering the "real" reality of the universe. (8)

Modern physics has discovered that the apparent "solid" forms and objects that constitute the phenomenal world are, at a more fundamental level, patterns of energy and vibration of a more ethereal, less material reality. Systems theorist Ervin Laszlo: "Material forms are actually vibrations of a more subtle and invisible energy that our senses perceive as solid, physical forms. Both the material forms and the energy of which they are constituted are themselves perceptible, measurable vibrations of the more subtle and universal Akashic field, in-formed by consciousness."

Physicist David Bohm has developed a theoretical model to describe the “undivided wholeness of all things.” His starting thesis is that the world is ultimately a whole or unity, which he termed ‘the implicate order.’ From this primal order the forms of the manifest universe emerge as ‘the explicate order.’ In *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, he writes: “Everything in the cosmos is made out of the seamless holographic fabric of the implicate order. It is as meaningless to view the universe as composed of ‘parts’ as it is to view the different geysers in a fountain as separate from the water out of which they flow.”

Instead of a fragmented universe, Bohm proposes a dynamic, interconnected cosmos of “relatively independent sub-totalities.” Each material form in the universe is part of an undivided whole while retaining its own unique qualities: “Despite the apparent separateness of things at the explicate order, everything is a seamless extension of everything else and part of a continuum. Ultimately, even the implicate and explicate orders blend into each other.”

One of Bohm’s most startling assertions is that the tangible reality of our everyday lives is really a kind of illusion, like a holographic image. Underlying it is a deeper order of existence, a vast and more primary level of reality that gives birth to all the objects and appearances of our physical world in much the same way that a piece of holographic film gives birth to a hologram. Bohm calls this deeper level of reality the *implicate* (which means “enfolded”) order, and he refers to our own level of existence as the *explicate*, or unfolded, order. He uses these terms because he sees the manifestation of all forms in the universe as a result of countless enfoldings and unfoldings between these two orders. For example, Bohm believes an electron is not one thing but a totality or ensemble enfolded throughout the whole of space . . . Put another way, electrons and all particles are no more substantive and permanent than the form of a geyser of water takes as it gushes out of a fountain. They are sustained by a constant influx from the implicate order, and when a particle appears to be destroyed, it is not lost. It has merely enfolded back into the deeper order from which it sprang.
(9)

Some scientists and researchers in the field of neurophysiology, who study the nature of mind and consciousness, are proposing a holistic, integrative model to understanding how we experience reality. They recognize that our body, mind and emotions need to be considered as a *whole*, rather than distinct and separate entities:

In 1995, philosopher of consciousness David Chalmers posed two questions. The first, which he defined as the “easy” question, asks how the material brain operates and how it binds together the plethora of sensory data to form our coherent perception of the world. The second “difficult” question is: How can the material brain “generate” immaterial mind and the reality of our experience? Chalmers’ questions sum up the approach of a materialistic science that sees consciousness merely as the result of random evolutionary processes . . . However, the emerging vision of integral reality offers a comprehensive worldview

and points the way to answering both the “easy” and “difficult” questions posed by David Chalmers. For instead of perceiving “materiality” as separate from “immateriality,” and mind from matter, it recognizes that all that we term *reality* is an integrated tapestry of co-evolving and co-creative processes. (10)

Wolfgang Pauli, who received the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1945, believed that in the science of the future, “reality will neither be ‘psychic’ nor ‘physical’ but somehow both and somehow neither.” This suggests that the apparent mind-matter dualism may be resolved through a higher integrative perspective that allows for both to co-exist in the realm of consciousness:

Mind and matter are considered so different from each other because that is our habit of thinking, but really, mind and matter are different states of the same thing: the field of consciousness. You can follow them as they morph from one to another by looking at the brain, where mental events create brain chemicals in one seamless motion. Thus, if a near collision on the highway causes you to be frightened, that mental event translates into molecules of adrenaline, which in turn translate into physical changes such as dry mouth, pounding heartbeat, and tight muscles. When you notice these changes, you are back in the realm of mind. Likewise, all kinds of signals travel on a journey of transformation from physical to mental that has no definite endpoint. Life is transformation itself. What happens in our bodies is also happening in the universe, where any event belongs to the constant transformation of consciousness into either mind or matter. (11)

The apparent split between material and nonmaterial reality may not be truly real. In *The Caretakers of the Cosmos*, Gary Lachman suggests that we live in a “participatory universe” in which human consciousness bridges the phenomenal and spiritual worlds: “Our own minds are involved in actually creating the world we experience and subsequently care for.”

From a variety of different perspectives – quantum physics, neuroscience, phenomenology, the philosophy of language – it is becoming more and more clear that the universe we live in is a ‘participatory’ one, in which mind and matter, the inner world and the outer one, are not, as our commonsense view suggests, radically different and opposed realities, closed off from each other, but are different aspects of a single shared reality. It seems increasingly clear that the barriers to these two worlds are not as impermeable as we have believed. Our inner worlds, it seems, are not isolated islands of consciousness, floating on the surface of a dead, material world that is oblivious of them, and on which they have no effect. In some strange, still inexplicable way, our inner worlds *participate* in the world outside us, something less modern, more ‘primitive’ people still experience . . . At an earlier stage in our evolution, human consciousness was much more ‘embedded’ in nature, and we did not experience then, as we do now, separate outer and inner worlds, but a free flowing movement between the two. (12)

Spiritual Traditions

There is only one eternal Being or Absolute which is ultimately unknowable and ineffable, independent and encompassing all that exists. Michel Conge, a student of Gurdjieff, gives eloquent expression to this seminal fact in his book *Inner Octaves*: "Life is sacred. Everything is animated by the One and contained in it. Everything is maintained reciprocally and is connected by life. All that exists serves Creation and has its place in the order of the Universe. *Creation is love.*"

In the *Upanishads*, the physical universe is described as the external body of the Divine Being: "A transcendent, indefinable, timeless and spaceless Being alone renders time and space possible." And in *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo writes: "An omnipotent Reality is the truth of all life and existence whether absolute or relative, whether corporeal or incorporeal, whether animate or inanimate, whether intelligent or unintelligent; and in all its infinitely varying and even constantly opposed self-expressions. From That all variations begin and all variations return."

According to Vedanta, the Absolute is the creative source of all forms and worlds for the purpose of self-expression and self-delight. Spirit needs form or matter to express itself, and matter needs Spirit to give it meaning. Sri Aurobindo: "If it be asked why the One Existence should take delight in such movement, the answer lies in the fact that all possibilities are inherent in its infinity and that the delight of existence lies precisely in the realization of all possibilities."

The self of things is an infinite indivisible existence; of that existence the essential nature or power is an infinite imperishable force of self-conscious being; and of that self-consciousness the essential nature of knowledge of itself is, again, an infinite inalienable delight of being. In formlessness and in all forms, in the eternal awareness of infinite and indivisible being and in the multiform appearances of finite division this self-existence preserves perpetually its self-delight . . . This delight is its own delight, this self is its own self in all; but to our ordinary view of self and things which awake and move only upon surfaces, it remains hidden, profound, self-conscious. And as it is within all forms, so it is within all experiences whether pleasant, painful or neutral. (13)

It is only through the unification of Spirit and matter that any cosmic development or evolution is possible. Gary Lachman: "What is real is the union of matter and spirit. In much the same way that for an idea or value to be actualized it must have form and be rooted in reality. For spirit to be perceived, it must be embodied. To the totality of all we perceive in nature there corresponds a unified being which we may assume is only immediately apparent to itself."

According to the Samkhya tradition, Spirit (*Purusha*) and matter (*Prakriti*) are two different aspects of the same Ultimate Reality. When Purusha descends into Prakriti – the phenomenal world of ‘Great Nature’ – it begins to manifest in a mechanical manner, obeying cosmic laws or principles. In *To Live Within*, Samkhya master Sri Anirvân describes this process: “Purusha is outside of time and beyond our understanding, whereas prakriti exists in time. It is at once the aggregate of the three qualities (*gunas*) and the aggregate of the movements and impressions of all those qualities that make up our life. An exact relationship exists between Prakriti, which moves spontaneously, mechanically, always in circles, and Purusha, outside of time, which merely looks on at what is happening.”

One cannot change the course of prakriti, which goes its way according to a determined plan in the order of universal things and according to immutable Laws that it does not know. It knows only its own law. It does its work excellently and faultlessly. The energies divide and subdivide up to the point of feeding the cells of our body. They penetrate the heart and penetrate every drop of blood. At this point the body is an expression of ‘That.’ So long as we are immersed in prakriti, in ourselves and in life, we are governed by it, by its movements, its sudden jumps and its cosmic rhythms. Without withdrawing into ourselves, we can have no control over our prakriti. (14)

Sri Aurobindo taught that Spirit and matter are complementary aspects of the one all-embracing Unity: “The real oneness is never abrogated, and, when we get back to the original and integral view of things, we see that it is never even truly diminished or impaired, not even in the grossest densities of Matter.”

The sharp division which practical experience and long habit of mind have created between Spirit and Matter has no longer any fundamental reality. The world is a differentiated unity, a manifold oneness, not a constant attempt at compromise between eternal dissonances, not an everlasting struggle between irreconcilable opposites. An inalienable oneness generating infinite variety is its foundation and beginning. The two are one: Spirit is the soul and reality of that which we sense as Matter; Matter is a form and body of that which we realize as Spirit . . . Thus is created a series descending from Spirit through Mind to Matter and ascending again from Matter through Mind to Spirit. (15)

Sufism also recognizes that all things emerge from ‘Divine Spirit’ and eventually return to it. Sufi teacher Inayat Khan describes this relationship through an analogy, comparing Spirit and matter to water and ice:

Just as ice and water are two things and yet in their real nature they are one, so it is with spirit and matter. Water turns into ice for a certain time, and when this ice is melted it will again turn into water. Thus matter is a passing state of the spirit; only it does not melt immediately as ice melts into water, and therefore man doubts if matter, which takes a thousand forms, ever really turns into

spirit. In reality matter comes from spirit; matter in its true nature is spirit; matter is an action of spirit which has materialized and has become intelligible to our senses of perception, and has thus become a reality to our senses, hiding the spirit under it. (16)

In one sense, there is no absolute difference between Spirit and matter; it is only a question of different degrees of density or materiality. For instance, when a piece of coal is heated white hot, it is impossible to describe whether it is burning matter or flames symbolizing the Spirit. Sri Anirvân: "The mystery of existence seems like a commingling of matter and spirit. They enter into each other and between the two poles of matter and spirit, or earth and heaven, infinite shades of co-existence occur in different degrees of densities." Sri Aurobindo concurs: "Within the physical cosmos there is an ascending series in the scale of matter which leads us from the more to the less dense, from the less to the more subtle."

The various life forms in the universe are created, supported and reciprocally maintained by two fundamental cosmic processes: evolution and involution. These dynamic processes "build up forms, energizes them by a constant stream of stimulation and maintains them by an unceasing process of disintegration and renewal of their substances."

The Vedanta tradition describes the evolutionary and involutionary processes as originating from, and then returning to, a primal nonmaterial Source or Spirit: "An infinite universal consciousness conceals itself in apparently inanimate material forms which then progressively evolve to manifest the rising forms of life and consciousness we find in the universe." Sri Aurobindo:

We speak of the evolution of Life in Matter, the evolution of Mind in Matter; but evolution is a word which merely states the phenomenon without explaining it. For there seems to be no reason why Life should evolve out of material elements or Mind out of living form, unless we accept the Vedantic solution that Life is already involved in Matter and Mind in life because in essence Matter is a form of veiled Life, Life is a form of veiled consciousness. Mental consciousness may itself be only a form and a veil of higher states which are beyond Mind. In that case, the unconquerable impulse of Man towards God, Light, Bliss, Freedom, Immortality presents itself in its right place in the chain as simply the imperative impulse by which Nature is seeking to evolve beyond mind. (17)

The involvement of Spirit in matter appears in evolved human beings as the realization of the divine within and without: "Perhaps our greatest spiritual achievement may lie in the total integration of the spiritual and the physical – in realizing that the spiritual and the physical are not two different aspects of ourselves, but rather, one unified whole." In higher states of consciousness, there is a meeting point where matter is spiritualized and spirit is grounded in physical reality. Gary Lachman: "For innumerable mystics, the outer world is a reflection or symbol of an inner one. For them the real world is this higher, spiritual interior reality, and the lower, physical universe is a sign or language of the spiritual realm which we can learn to read."

In traditional Eastern teachings such as Taoism and Buddhism, the three principles of 'heaven, earth and man' express the integration of humanity with the inherent order of the universe. In *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*, Tibetan Buddhist master Chögyam Trungpa reflects on the basic wisdom embedded in the relationship between these three principles: "There is a natural order and harmony to this world, which we can discover. We have to feel it – in our bones, in our hearts, in our minds. We can reawaken that intimate connection to reality. We begin to view the universe as a sacred world."

Heaven, earth, and man can be seen literally as the sky above, the earth below, and human beings standing or sitting between the two. Traditionally, heaven is the realm of the gods, the most sacred space. So, symbolically, the principle of heaven represents any lofty ideal or experience of vastness and sacredness. The grandeur and vision of heaven are what inspire human greatness and creativity. Earth on the other hand, symbolizes practicality and receptivity. It is the ground which supports and promotes life. Earth may seem solid and stubborn, but earth can be penetrated and worked on. The proper relationship between heaven and earth is what makes the earth principle pliable. Warmth and love also come from heaven. Heaven is the source of the rain that falls on the earth, so heaven has a sympathetic connection with earth. When that connection is made, then the earth begins to yield. It becomes gentle and soft and pliable, so that greenery can grow on it, and man can cultivate it. Then there is the man principle, which is connected with simplicity, or living in harmony with heaven and earth. When human beings combine the freedom of heaven with the practicality of earth, they can live in peace and harmony with one another. (18)

Consciousness and Evolution

The ancient Egyptians believed that the universe is nothing but consciousness, and that the primary goal of life is to attain an ultimate union with pure consciousness. They held to the principle that matter is a field of existence which "is responsive to and capable of being transformed by spiritual influences brought about through the evolution of embodied and individualized consciousness."

According to the 'sacred science' of ancient Egypt, the purpose of human life is to achieve an integration of human consciousness with the universal consciousness, thereby realizing that all that exists proceeds from a limitless, timeless and incomprehensible source, a primal Unity. Egyptologist R.A. Schwaller de Lubicz: "The Universe is nothing but Consciousness, and in all its appearances reveals nothing but an evolution of Consciousness, from its origin to its end, which is a return to its cause."

Interestingly, modern science seems to validate the ancient Egyptian teachings regarding the nature of consciousness. In *The Intelligence of the Cosmos*, Ervin Laszlo writes: "Consciousness

manifests as sensation, cognition, and self-awareness that emerges in the progressive evolution of the lower and higher forms of life, guided by an all-encompassing cosmic Intelligence." Laszlo has proposed a theory of the evolution of consciousness which integrates findings from physics, biology, psychology and cosmology:

The universe is a progressive manifestation of consciousness that is evolving toward super-coherence. Evolution is a double movement. Externally, it expresses in the evolution of physical and biological forms studied by science. Internally, the evolution of these forms is driven by and expresses an evolution of consciousness that seeks higher forms through which to more fully express its inherent powers. The evolution of coherent systems and the evolution of consciousness are complementary aspects of a unitary evolutionary process. Physics charts the physical evolution from infinitesimal atoms and molecules to the solar systems, galaxies, and other bodies that populate the known universe. Biology charts the biological evolution from infinitesimal, unicellular life-forms to the most complex, adaptive human species. We also see clear evidence of the evolutionary progression of mental capacities from the subconscious sensitivity and responsiveness of plants to the instinctive behaviors prevalent in the animal kingdom to the self-conscious awareness of human beings, with our capacity for complex language, abstract thinking and self-reflection. Cosmic evolution proceeds toward higher levels of organization, complexity, adaptability, and knowledge of self and the world. (19)

According to Samkhya teachings, conscious evolution starts from a state of darkness (*tamas*), passes through "the red-hot glow of active impulse" (*rajas*) before reaching the wholeness of awakened consciousness (*sattva*). In the full cosmic process, the descent of *Purusha* (Spirit) into *Prakriti* (matter) is then followed by an evolutionary ascent upwards to return to Spirit: "Thus, we have to raise ourselves up step by step from the plane of gross matter to the plane of awakened consciousness, and then come back to heavy matter, retaining in ourselves the light of illumination."

An impulse pushes us to follow the way of the spirit, Purusha. It is there so we may follow the ideal and constantly make it grow. This impulse has to be cultivated because it belongs to the ascending Law. Opposing this, prakriti holds us fast in the wheels of her perfect machinery. One can be satisfied there and sleep in peace. Prakriti asks no more of us. She has a very strong power of gravitation, and drags back to herself beings who were ready to escape. She brings them back very skillfully for she needs our lives for her own purposes, she needs humus composed of the constantly renewed heavy and fine matter which our lives bring to her . . . Creation starts in darkness. Out of nothing comes the force of shakti. Let yourself be carried by the stream; do not struggle. Not that you will reach the shore; your destination is to become the ocean itself. (20)

According to Gurdjieff, humanity is connected to and penetrated by many different levels of energies and influences. This makes it possible for individuals to move between these planes of reality through conscious activity. In *Inner Octaves*, Gurdjieff's student Michel Conge expands on this concept: "Man has been sown on Earth in order to transmit influences mechanically, in order to be a 'link' in this passage of energies. But man must evolve because, although the descending current is assured by his creation, only his conscious effort can allow an ascending current to appear. Without man's voluntary effort, there would not be any exchange of energy. Consequently, man has two roles to fulfill, a mechanical one and a conscious one."

Gurdjieff taught that it is necessary for the maintenance of the universe, at all levels from atoms to galaxies, that there be a circulation of energies. Such a circulation involves a return which connects downward involution with upward evolution. Humanity has an important role to play in this cosmic process: "Because his feet are on the ground – in an earthly body corresponding to 'dust' – and his head is at the level of the stars – the level of spirit, the center of gravity of man's consciousness is not fixed. He is at liberty to move along the full length of the octave of organic life."

For there to be a return, I have to wake up to my situation and consent to participate in this returning, upward movement of energies, or influences. We may come to understand that there really are currents of energies that pass from one cosmic level to another. In certain passages the flow is only possible if organisms are placed there. In the downward direction, the movement happens by itself. In the upward direction it will not happen unless there are men and women who become aware of their condition as seeds and acknowledge that they are placed there to enable the energies to return and thereby receive a new possibility. If I enable this return of energies, I am transformed. But I must understand that the higher levels have just as great a need of that as the lower levels do. In a single whole, everything has need of everything. (21)

According to Sri Aurobindo, the realization of Spirit and the manifestation of the Divine within is the highest aim possible for a human being: "The ascent of the divine life is the human journey, the 'Work of works.' This alone is our real purpose in the world and the justification of our existence." In *The Life Divine*, he further writes:

When we withdraw our gaze from its egoistic preoccupation with limited and fleeting interests and look upon the world with dispassionate and curious eyes that search only for the Truth, our first result is the perception of boundless energy of infinite existence, infinite movement, infinite activity pouring itself out in limitless space, in eternal Time, and existence that surpasses infinitely our ego . . . When we begin to see, we perceive that it exists for itself, not for us. It has its own majestic aims, its own vast desire or delight that it seeks to fulfill. And let us not form too strongly an idea of our own insignificance. That too would be an act of ignorance and shutting our eyes to the great facts of the universe. For this boundless Movement does not regard us as unimportant. (22)

The integration of spirit and matter is psychologically expressed as a feeling of relaxation and expansion, and a sense of "serene poise in the Void." This creates a movement of energy between the fine and dense levels of reality. Sri Anirvân elaborates: "The illumination of the highest realization of the seeker imperceptibly contains the dark matrix of nature, just as the dark matrix contains in itself luminous possibilities of spiritual evolution. To realize the two movements simultaneously in a single flash of awareness is to realize the Void of the life within."

Then all densities disappear and spirit and matter become one, being really the bi-une aspects of one total reality. However, the point of fusion between black and white is missed when the ego automatically divides the whole experience into subject and object. But when, in a spiritual experience, the two are fused, the self appears as the Void, embracing all. There is a feeling of boundless expansion, which covers all things and yet allows them to maintain their distinct individualities, and which are again an infinite number of points, each containing the matrix of another universe. This is Prakriti's attribute as a creative and executive force. It can be likened to an acorn which, with its innumerable tiny seeds, contains a whole oak-forest! (23)

Gurdjieff taught that humanity exists to fulfill a specific purpose in the cosmic scheme. This involves 'conscious service' by awakening to the higher dimensions of reality. Michel Conge: "If I am able to experience this, I will find myself in much fuller communication and communion with my fellow man and with the universe. To serve means acting as a passageway for the sake of evolution." In order to evolve spiritually, we must sacrifice and transcend our 'subjective I' in order to reach a 'greater Self' which reflects the will of the Absolute:

Evolution is a movement of substances in transformation. This is something that must, one way or another, be accomplished. What is important is this inner circulation. In a sense, life is entrusted to us. Below the initial movement of the Absolute, the Absolute no longer intervenes, which means that responsible beings must appear. There is a need for beings who become aware of this and have such a love for Creation and the Creator that, no matter what trouble it causes them, they awaken to be the ones through whom this accomplishment takes place. But it is not for oneself in the petty sense; perhaps for the 'I', but not for the selfish 'me.' (24)

Certain spiritual teachings claim that humanity originated from the stars and has descended through a progression of stages to the level of the Earth. Michel Conge: "All the traditions, in one way or another, give us to understand that man is truly the son of a king, that he came down for a certain purpose, that on the way he was assailed by a strange sleep, an invincible sleep, that he has completely forgotten the reason for his journey; and yet that he can emerge from his amnesia, realize that he is wandering about like a poverty-stricken beggar, and then set forth on the return to his origin."

Man has a possible destiny. Man occupies a unique and privileged place at the heart of Creation. Man's structure is analogous to that of the universe. Man has the possibility of a more rapid evolution. He is an unfinished world, representing a universe in a state of promise, like a tree within a seed, and he will reach fulfillment only as the whole Man in the image of God. Man is a living symbol. Only he stands upright, vertical, has the gift of speech, is a three-brained being, and can choose influences (whereas other beings are strictly conditioned). The dignity of man's state is that it allows Heaven and Earth to meet in him and the Glory of God to manifest in him. (25)

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