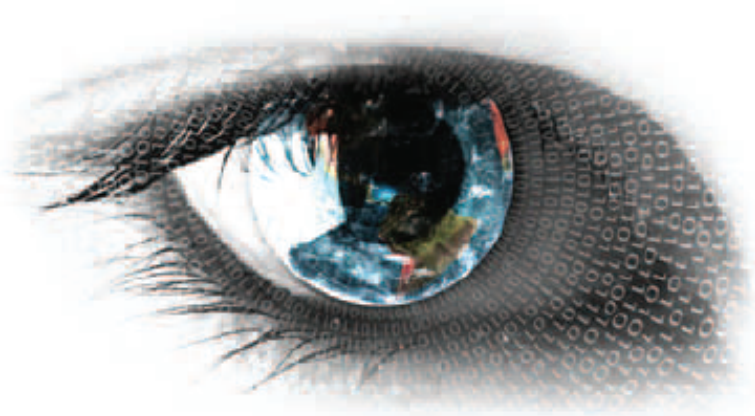


"Brilliantly expands our understanding of evolution." —DEEPAK CHOPRA

EVOLUTIONARIES

Unlocking the Spiritual and Cultural
Potential of Science's Greatest Idea



CARTER PHIPPS

CHAPTER TWO

Breaking the Spell of Solidity

In laying hands upon the sacred ark of absolute permanency, in treating the forms that had been regarded as types of fixity and perfection as originating and passing away, the Origin of Species introduced a mode of thinking that in the end was bound to transform the logic of knowledge, and hence the treatment of morals, politics, and religion.

—John Dewey, *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy*

Worldview” is a popular term these days, and for good reason. The word comes from the German *Weltanschauung*, and is used in common parlance to signify the framework we use to interpret the world around us. In our postmodern world, we have come to recognize just how important these interpretive frameworks are in shaping our perspectives and the perspectives of others. Some of this is a natural result of globalization and our increasing proximity to peoples and cultures that see the world through dramatically different eyes. “Why do they hate us?” asked President Bush in the

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week following 9/11—a question echoed on numerous magazine covers and newspaper headlines around the country and on the lips of stunned Americans who had never even considered such a thing as a worldview before. America was forced to come to terms with the fact that there were other people who see the world through a completely different lens—a lens so different that what to us was unthinkable, to them became horribly necessary. Even within our own diverse country, it is becoming increasingly clear that the differences between us are not just surface political or religious affiliations, they are more fundamental differences in how we interpret and experience the world around us and within us.

We may think that we simply have a direct perception of the world, but in fact, every perception is filtered through our particular perspective, as becomes clear in moments when we are confronted with someone whose perspective is dramatically different from our own. As philosopher Ken Wilber puts it, “What our awareness delivers to us is set in cultural contexts and many other kinds of contexts that cause an interpretation and a construction of our perceptions before they even reach our awareness. So what we call real or what we think of as given is actually *constructed*—it’s part of a worldview.”

There is actually a place where they study amorphous things like worldviews—the Center Leo Apostel, a research institute affiliated with the Free University of Brussels. They define a worldview in the following way:

A world view is a system of co-ordinates or a frame of reference in which everything presented to us by our diverse experiences can be placed. It is a symbolic system of representation that allows us to integrate everything we know about the world and ourselves into a global picture, one that illuminates reality as it is presented to us within a certain culture.

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A worldview is not so much a value; it is the very conglomeration of conclusions about the world that will determine what kind of values we hold. It is not just a collection of thoughts or ideas; it is the very structures of the psyche that will help determine what kind of thoughts or ideas we will have. Worldviews are like invisible scaffolding in our consciousness, deep conclusions about the nature of life that help shape how we relate to just about everything else around us. As the Christian scholar N. T. Wright explains, worldviews “are like the foundations of a house: vital, but invisible. They are that *through* which, not *at* which, a society or an individual normally looks.”

We don’t choose worldviews the way we choose a set of clothes or decide on our musical preferences. Worldviews are built on the cognitive and psychological architecture of the self and are heavily informed by the culture in which we live. They are not simply tastes we pick and choose at the cultural buffet line, conscious augmentations to our personalities—a dose of conservatism here, a helping of religion there, a plate of social liberalism on the side. No, worldviews are bound up in the very development of the self in the context of any given culture. We don’t have them; for the most part, they have us. They are deep structures that determine the very way we make meaning in the closeted capacities of our own consciousness.

We might say that worldviews help us make sense out of the experience of being alive; they are, in other words, epistemological. They are also ontological, meaning that they speak to the way in which we understand the fundamental nature of being itself. But before you start thinking that worldviews are abstract ideas, let me disabuse you of that notion. Growing up in a small town on the edge of the Bible Belt, one learns at an early age that worldviews are frighteningly practical. To a teenager, they determine critical things like who can dance at parties, who is OK with premarital sex, and who thinks both things are an act of Satanic possession. They inform who goes to your church, or if one goes to church at

all. They answer questions pertaining to race and sexuality. They help establish how one views ethics and morals. They delineate the possibilities inherent in manhood and womanhood. They liberate and constrain, give confidence and are cause for doubt. They are, we might say, the true tectonic plates of our global culture, and their movements determine a great deal about the direction and development of our society over time.

A TOUCHSTONE PROPOSITION

So where do we start in defining a new evolutionary worldview when its contours are as yet unformed? We can begin by asking: what is such a worldview based on? Indeed, at the center of any worldview is a core conviction or set of convictions about the nature of what is real, true, and important. So while worldviews may very well be complex psychosocial beasts, they are also, paradoxically, simple. I don't mean that they are simplistic, but rather that they are built on simple foundations, deep convictions that set the parameters and define the terms on which we construct self and culture. A worldview might express itself through individuals in hundreds of thousands of ways, but each of those expressions will carry with it the character of that foundational conviction.

Philosopher William H. Halverson suggests that “at the center of every worldview is what might be called the ‘touchstone proposition’ of that worldview, a proposition that is held to be *the* fundamental truth about reality and serves as a criterion to determine which other propositions may or may not count as candidates for belief.” For example, we might say that the touchstone proposition of a modernist scientific worldview is that the universe is objectively comprehensible using rational inquiry and scientific methodology—a conviction that informs its interpretations of every dimension of life, from religion to art to economics.

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I believe that the touchstone proposition for an evolutionary worldview is best captured in a passage by Teilhard de Chardin. It is from the first paragraphs of his classic collection of essays, *The Future of Man*, and sums up not only the basic distinction that lies at the heart of an evolutionary worldview but the essential spirit of it as well:

The conflict dates from the day when one man, flying in the face of appearance, perceived that the forces of nature are no more unalterably fixed in their orbits than the stars themselves, but that their serene arrangement around us depicts the flow of a tremendous tide—the day on which a first voice rang out, crying to Mankind peacefully slumbering on the raft of earth, “We are moving! We are going forward!” . . .

It is a pleasant and dramatic spectacle, that of Mankind divided to its very depths into two irrevocably opposed camps—one looking toward the horizon and proclaiming with all its newfound faith, “We are moving,” and the other, without shifting its position, obstinately maintaining, “Nothing changes. We are not moving at all.”

We are moving. I keep coming back to that fundamental insight, and appreciating how profound it really is. The things that we think are fixed, static, unchanging, and permanent are in fact *moving*. In so many areas of human knowledge, we are discovering that reality is part of a vast process of change and development. Like geologists discovering plate tectonics for the first time, we are beginning to look out at this extremely solid, seemingly permanent world that feels so stable underfoot, and intuit a radical truth: nothing is what it seems. *We are moving. We are going somewhere.* It is a slow but irrevocable revelation, dawning on our awareness. Our bedrock assumptions, it tells us, our most basic instincts about life and the universe are in error. Whatever solid ground we are standing on is itself

in motion. We are not just being; we are *becoming*. That's part of the revelatory power of an evolutionary worldview. It's an ontology of becoming. We do not just exist *in* this universe; we are caught up in its forward movement, intrinsic to its forward intention, defined by its drift forward in time.

So many of the critical insights that people have come to in relationship to evolution boil down, in essence, to this one simple proposition. But even for those of us who accept and appreciate the basic principle of evolution, I don't think the extent of its influence has penetrated very deeply into our conscious awareness.

Several of my Californian friends have described the profoundly disconcerting experience of being in an earthquake, suddenly finding that the ground was moving under them for the first time. Nothing can prepare you for that moment, they told me. Psychologically, it is hard to take in, because something you considered so unquestionably solid—the earth underneath your feet—is *moving*. That which you considered absolutely fixed and stationary, is in fact not stable at all. And that seismic shift can create tremendous shock waves, not just in the surrounding landscape but in the fabric of the human character, because we have spent a lifetime unquestioningly trusting that solid foundation.

In a sense, there's an earthquake happening in human culture right now, and there has been for the past couple of hundred years. We have been captivated by the spell of solidity, the fallacy of fixity, the illusion of immobility, the semblance of stasis, but the evolution revolution is starting to break that spell. We are realizing that we are, in fact, not standing on solid ground. But neither are we simply adrift in a meaningless universe. *We are moving*. We are part and parcel of a vast process of becoming. The very structures that make up our own consciousness and culture are not the same as they were one thousand years ago, and in one thousand years they will be substantially different from how they are today.

We see this insight in so many fields of study. Most obvious, perhaps, is biology. Only a few hundred years ago we related to bio-

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logical species as if they were more or less permanent. Species didn't change; they didn't evolve; they didn't go extinct—that's how we saw the biosphere. But Darwin's work demonstrated beyond any shadow of a doubt that the entire biological world is not fixed or static. Life is not just being; it is becoming.

The same is true at a cosmological level. Physicists used to think that we existed in what they called a "steady-state" cosmos—no beginning, no end. Suddenly, almost overnight, our picture has changed. The universe had a beginning. And it seems that it will someday have an ending. We are not drifting aimlessly in an immense cosmic sea but seem to be part of a vast developing process, the parameters of which we are barely beginning to grasp.

Similar revelations are dawning in our understanding of human culture. We now know that the socioeconomic systems and structures of society are not fixed or God-given or a result of unchangeable, eternal truths about human nature. They are adaptive structures that change and evolve over time. We can look back and begin to fathom the extraordinary transitions that have occurred in human culture in the last hundreds of thousands of years and see that the illusion of a solid, unchanging, static "way that human beings are" is up for question as never before.

This insight also has spilled over into psychology. In the nineteenth century, James Mark Baldwin, who was a pioneer in evolutionary theory, began to point out that even the categories of our psychology aren't fixed. He noticed that children are actually passing through developmental stages on their journey to adulthood. This was a radical idea at the time: the very structures of our psyche go through critical changes over the course of our lives. Today, we are realizing that not only do children change and develop but adults can as well. There is little if anything final or fixed about adult psychology.

Or consider neuroscience. We once thought the brain was static, fixed, and relatively unchanging; now we're discovering it to

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be more plastic and malleable than we ever dreamed. “Neuroplasticity” is a word on the lips of many these days, and for good reason. The spell of solidity is cracking in neuroscience and we are realizing that even the very gray matter so intrinsic to our sense of self is anything but permanent. It is developing in relationship to many factors, not the least of which are our own choices. In discipline after discipline, stasis is losing the battle to movement, process, change, and contingency.

Moreover, it’s not just the world *out there* that is moving; it’s also the world *in here*. It’s not just the objects you see that are moving and evolving; it’s also the subject, the perceptive faculty itself. The part of you that sees, listens, interprets, and responds is also not static or solid but rather is fluid, changing, caught up in a developmental process, non-separate from this fundamental characteristic of our evolving cosmos.

These are insights that go to the core of what it means to be human. They affect our own internal world, our deepest values, beliefs, and convictions. From the foundations of the self to the edges of the cosmos, we are starting to recognize that we are part of and, indeed, inseparable from this process. *We are moving too.* In fact, some might say that we are movement itself. In so many ways, this fundamental insight is emerging everywhere. One of my favorite metaphors for this shift of perspective comes from Henri Bergson:

Life in general is mobility itself; particular manifestations of life accept this mobility reluctantly, and constantly lag behind. It is always going ahead; they want to mark time. Evolution in general would fain go on in a straight line; each special evolution is a kind of circle. Like eddies of dust raised by the wind as it passes, the living turn upon themselves, borne up by the great blast of life. They are therefore relatively stable, and counterfeit immobility so well that we treat each of them as a *thing* rather than as a *progress*, forgetting that the very permanence of their form is

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only the outline of a movement. At times, however, in a fleeting vision, the invisible breath that bears them is materialized before our eyes. . . . allow[ing] us a glimpse of the fact that the living being is above all a thoroughfare, and that the essence of life is in the movement by which life is transmitted.

I love this metaphor because I'm from Oklahoma, and in the dry, hot days of my childhood summers I remember seeing what we called "dust devils" rising up from recently plowed fields. These were tornadoes of dust, sometimes small and fleeting, sometimes hundreds of feet high and imposing, borne up by the great gusts of Oklahoma wind, helter-skelter tempests racing across the plains in a doomed and desperate search for permanence. In those "fleeting visions" that Bergson described, we can sometimes see, for a moment, that even the most seemingly solid forms in the world around us—our environment, our cultural institutions, our bodies, our minds—are in fact like that dust, held in place only by the power of the invisible current of evolution that carries us. They are not permanent. They are more motion than matter. *The very permanence of their form is only the outline of a movement.*

Alfred North Whitehead, the great English Evolutionary and process philosopher, also spoke to this point when he suggested that reality is made up not of bits and pieces of matter but of momentary "occasions" of experience that fall and flow into one another and create the sense of reality and time, just as cascading hydrogen and oxygen molecules create the actuality of a river. He called our failure to recognize this movement, our tendency to turn flow into fixity, "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness."

Today, that fallacy is slowly crumbling. The spell of solidity is breaking. But we have not yet embraced the implications. "Permanence has fled," writes scholar Craig Eisendrath, "but it has left a world conceived as process, contingency, and possibility. The more we understand it, the more it increases in wonder. It is a world which

we can help create, or lose, by our own actions.” As we start to incorporate this new way of thinking and understanding the world into our consciousness, it will profoundly affect not only how we see the cosmos but also how we see our own lives. Unlike a physical earthquake, which leaves one feeling out of control, breaking the spell of solidity, while disconcerting, is ultimately quite liberating. No longer the victims of unchangeable circumstances, trapped in a pre-given universe, we find ourselves released into a vast, open-ended process—one that is malleable, changeable, subject to uncertainty and chance, perhaps, but also, in small but not insignificant ways, responsive to our choices and actions.

The pioneering men and women whom I have called Evolutionaries express the touchstone proposition of this new worldview in diverse voices. But what they share is the fundamental recognition and embrace of its truth. Evolutionaries are those who have woken up, looked around, and realized: *We are moving*. And rather than bury their heads back in the sands of seeming stasis, they are ready to pick up the paddles and help steer that raft that Teilhard envisioned toward a more positive future.

As the fog of fixity lifts, we are finding ourselves much more than observers and witnesses to life’s grand unfolding drama. We are influential actors, newly aware of the immense tides that are shaping the world within and without, just becoming cognizant of our own freedom—and immense responsibility.

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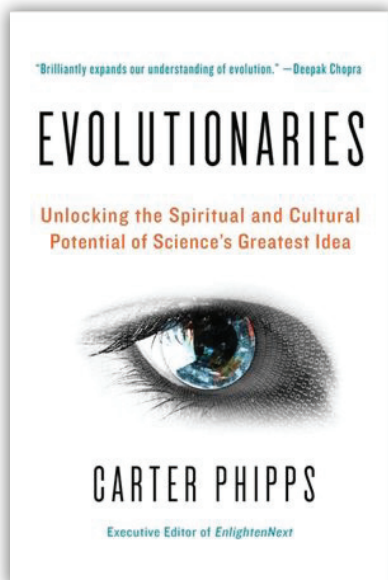
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About The Book:

When it comes to evolution, we've all heard about fossils and fruit flies, Darwin and Dawkins. But evolution embraces much more. Today, a movement of visionary scientists, philosophers, and spiritual thinkers are forging a new understanding of evolution that honors science, reframes culture, and radically updates spirituality. Carter Phipps calls them "Evolutionaries." His groundbreaking book provides the first popular guide to these exciting minds who are illuminating the secrets of our past and expanding the vistas of our future.

"A profound and profoundly important new work, covering the many ways that evolution has become an all-pervading and all-embracing worldview. With clarity and deep understanding, Carter Phipps walks us through the great pioneers and their ideas in this extraordinary philosophy, making the book absolutely indispensable for lay and professional alike. The very highest recommendation!"

—Ken Wilber, author of *The Integral Vision*

"This beautifully written book is not only a splendid survey of evolutionary thought and its spiritual implications. It is also a significant contribution to the increasingly important conversation between the natural sciences and our spiritual traditions. Enthusiastically recommended."

—John F. Hought, Senior Fellow at Georgetown University's Woodstock Theological Center

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About Carter:

Carter Phipps is an author, award-winning journalist, and leading voice in the emerging fields of evolutionary philosophy and spirituality. For the past decade, as executive editor of EnlightenNext magazine, he has been at the forefront of contemporary discourse on science and spirit, and his writings have played a key role in making important new thinking accessible to a wider audience.