An Integral Monism of Universal Consciousness: A Philosophical Manifesto

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Abstract

In the last few decades, there has been a resurgence of monistic theories of consciousness. Among the most notable ones receiving renewed attention are panpsychism, cosmopsychism, dual-aspect monism, and some variants of idealism. This article argues that while each of these frameworks accounts for some aspects of the relationship between consciousness and reality, they can be integrated into a perspective that can naturally accommodate and extend them to a broader ontology. The philosophical approach termed 'integral monism' extends these to a theory of universal consciousness based on a monistic, panentheistic, teleological, spiritual evolutionary emergentist metaphysical cosmology stemming from a multi-dimensional and trans-rational ontology of universal planes of existence. An ontology inspired by Sri Aurobindo's integral cosmology, adapted to the context of contemporary science and Western philosophy. The paper will also discuss how and why this extension has a greater explanatory power applicable to problems of contemporary natural philosophy and science, in particular to evolutionary biology and consciousness studies. Nonetheless, this philosophical manifesto does not present itself as a definitive theoretical framework; rather, it is offered as a working hypothesis and preliminary guiding principle that could provide a broader platform for reconciling science and metaphysics, allowing us to explore where it may lead.

I. Introduction

While the debate on the nature of consciousness and its emergence in the cosmos isn't new, its resolution remains more elusive than ever. For some reference points in the history of the philosophy of mind, one could start naming Plato, Aristotle, or Parmenides, who explored metaphysical questions relating to the soul and reason. Non-materialistic monistic approaches emerged with Neoplatonism, passing through Berkeley's ontological idealism, Kant's transcendental idealism, Leibniz's monadology, Descartes' substance dualism, or Spinoza's pantheism. Modernity highlighted Schopenhauer's 'World as Will,' Russel's engagement with idealistic themes, Whitehead's process

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philosophy, T. de Chardin's cosmic theology, Gebser's 'integral structure of consciousness,' and Steiner's anthroposophy, to mention just a few. Eastern philosophies started even earlier than the Western tradition with idealistic theories or worldviews based on a universal consciousness. For example, the Indian tradition considered the all-pervading, immutable and formless Brahman as the ultimate reality and eternal consciousness underlying all existence.

However, the 20th century dominated secular and naturalistic oriented Western analytic philosophy, chose a different path, with consciousness studies being less emphasized.

The debate received a new impulse in the late 1980s and the 1990s, the "decade of the brain," largely due to the extraordinary technological advances in brain monitoring techniques. Chalmer's seminal paper raised the so-called 'hard problem of consciousness,' highlighting the explanatory gap between our first-person subjective qualitative experiences (qualia) and the third-person neuroscientific perspective based on the empirical observation of neural correlates (Chalmers, 1995).[2]

Several attempts were made to come up with new naturalistic theories of consciousness in the frame of modern neuroscience, cognitive sciences, or computational or non-computational theoretical frameworks. Examples are Baars' 'Global Workspace Theory' (Baars, 1988), Penrose's and Hameroff's 'Orchestrated Objective Reduction' ((Penrose, 1994), (Hameroff & Penrose, 2014)), Hoffman's 'User Interface Theory' (Hoffman, 2008), and Tononi's 'Integrated Information Theory' (Oizumi, Albantakis, & Tononi, 2014), to mention just a few of those presently most popular. (For a review, see (Seth & Bayne, 2022) or, for a more extensive review that includes some non-physicalist theoretical frameworks, see (Kuhn, 2024).)

However, the attempt to explain the nature of consciousness starting from a naturalistic approach based on mechanistic materialism didn't lead to tangible progress. The conceptual gap between the physical properties of the neural correlates and our phenomenological dimension remains wide open. This was something that impelled a look beyond physicalism (Kelly, 2015). Metaphysical speculations positing consciousness rather than matter as the fundamental primitive received renewed attention. Panpsychism made a comeback with T. Nagel, G. Strawson, D. Chalmers, W. Seager (Seager, 2006), and P. Goff ((Goff, 2017), (Goff, 2019), (Goff, 2023)). (For a modern review, see also (Seager, 2020), (Skrbina, 2017).) More recently, attempts have been made to unite panentheism and panpsychism in the contemporary philosophy of mind ((Brüntrup et al., 2020), (Schipper, 2021)). New arguments in favor of modern substance dualism that conceives of mind and matter as two ontologically distinct realities have become vocal as well (e.g., (Rickabaugh & Moreland, 2023), (Moran, 2024)).

Another interesting alternative to conventional panpsychist and idealist views (though not necessarily at odds with them) is dual-aspect monism, which considers mind and matter not as fundamental but, rather, as complementary aspects or different configurations of a neutral

[2] Chalmer's explanatory gap isn't a new insight either. It is a more elaborate and modern version of 'Leibniz's gap.'

psychophysical substance from which both derive. The 20th-century modern variant of dual-aspect monism was revived by W. Pauli and C. Jung and is nowadays defended by H. Atmanspacher ((Atmanspacher, 2012), (Atmanspacher, 2022)).

Integrated holistic approaches, sometimes inspired by Eastern philosophies, have also been considered, such as M. Velmans' 'reflexive monism' that tries to combine neutral monism with dual-aspect monism (Velmans, 2012), I. Shani's variant of panpsychism, 'cosmopsychism' ((Shani I., 2015), (Shani & Keppler, 2018)), B. Kastrup's modern version of Schopenhauer's idealism, 'analytic idealism' (Kastrup, 2018), C. Taylor's idea of a pervasive spirit in all things, 'panspiritism' (Taylor, 2020), and other models inspired by the Asian tradition, such as Albahari's mystical solution to the mind-body problem (Albahari, 2019) and investigations on the parallel between panpsychism or cosmopsychism and Advaita Vedanta (e.g., (Gasparri, 2019), (Vaidya, 2020)). For an account of these non-physicalist theories of consciousness, see (Mørch, 2024).

Moreover, it is noteworthy to point out how, while panentheistic theologies aren't new, having more or less implicit roots throughout all cultures and times, they received renewed attention in the scholarly literature as well (e.g., (Cooper, 2006), (Biernacki, 2013)), (Biernacki, 2023), (Murphy, 2015), (Main, 2017), (Brüntrup, 2020), (Valera and Vidal, 2022), (Culp, 2023)).

This variety of frameworks, spanning the philosophy of mind, consciousness studies, cognitive sciences, neuroscience, and psychology, constitutes an impressive trend toward old and new metaphysical ontologies. Each has its strengths and addresses some explanatory gap more or less effectively. However, they are also affected by other fundamental weaknesses and shortcomings. Examples are physicalism being unable to account for the experiential dimension of phenomenal consciousness, dualism being prone to the objection of the interaction problem of mental causation[3], and panpsychism (at least in its micropsychist version) having to deal with the combination problem[4]. Meanwhile, theories of universal consciousness are affected by the opposite conundrum, namely, that of the decombination problem[5], to mention just a few of the conceptual complications that plague the contemporary philosophy of mind.

I submit that these apparent inconsistencies emerge because we fail to see them integrally as the diverse but complementary aspects of a vaster cosmology that contains and synthesizes them into a coherent integral theory of consciousness.

[3] The challenge of explaining how a putatively unphysical mind can cause physical effects in the body without violating the principles of physical causality.

[4] The difficulty of explaining how individual micro-level conscious experiences combine to form unified, higher-level consciousness, such as that of a unified human subjective experience.

[5] The opposite of the combination problem, namely the challenge of explaining how the unified cosmic consciousness could give rise to distinct, individual conscious experiences like those of humans.

To capture the integral structure underlying these diverse theoretical frameworks, we must recognize some of their common shortcomings.

First, the coarse-grained metaphysical paradigms that assume a purely physical, or purely mental, or, at best, mind-matter dual-substance stance, together with the conflation of the mind and consciousness categories, will be questioned.

Second, in panpsychism or the diverse forms of idealism where reality's foundation has a mind-like or consciousness-like foundation, the nature of their universalization as 'cosmic Mind,' or 'universal Mind,' or a 'Mind at large,' as A. Huxley called it (Huxley, 1954), remains mostly unaddressed. Mind is identified with a too-anthropomorph rational and analytic mind. Whereas, the present paper considers a trans-rational mind and the existence of a supraconscious besides the subconscious domains.

Third, the above-mentioned frameworks scarcely address the evolutionary perspective, if not omit it entirely. What is evolution, and what is its function and reason seen from a metaphysical perspective? Once we accept evolution as a physical fact of natural history, while also embracing a non-physical substrate inherent in the material universe, we still need a paradigm that explains the relationship between the two. The emergence of a supposedly trans-physical consciousness and immaterial mind in the physical evolutionary context has been contemplated only by a few thinkers, such as in T. de Chardin's cosmic theology (Chardin, 1955) and J. Gebser's historical view of the emergence of the 'structures of consciousness' (Gebser, 1985).[6]

The present theoretical framework has been largely inspired by the metaphysics of the Indian mystic, poet, and philosopher Sri Aurobindo ((Aurobindo, [1919] 2010), (Aurobindo, [1919] 1970)), who developed one of the most comprehensive first-person mystical accounts of reality that includes the evolutionary process from a trans-rational perspective. Only recently have attempts been made to connect Aurobindo's spiritual emergentism to the Western philosophy of mind, such as Medhananda's evolutionary and opaque cosmopsychism ((Medhananda, 2022) (Medhananda, 2024),) and I. Shani's search for a connection between cosmopsychism and non-dualism (Shani, 2022). While the only comprehensive attempt of which the author is aware is by Masi (Masi, 2023a). However, Aurobindo's spiritual cosmology is expressed in terms of an Indian spiritual legacy and occultist language to which the Western philosophy of mind, especially that rooted in the analytic tradition, might struggle to relate. One can, nonetheless, capture some of the few essential traits of Aurobindo's 'integral cosmology' and see the contemporary Western philosophical approaches from a new perspective[7], furnishing a conceptual platform that can enrich and enlarge them to a new synthesis. The present work should not be considered representative or exhaustive of Aurobindo's vision; it should be regarded as an

[6] The seed-idea was already present among some German idealists, like Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. For a historical account of what Murphy called an 'evolutionary panentheism,' see (Murphy, 2015).

[7] The present work should not be considered representative or exhaustive of Aurobindo's vision; it should be regarded as an independent construct inspired by his ontology.

independent construct inspired by his ontology. Nonetheless, while occasionally mentioning the Eastern perspective, I will maintain a largely Western philosophical and scientific approach.

The present paper clarifies what this implies in more detail. It is structured as follows.

Section II defends the first-person approach as having methodological and philosophical valence in acquiring knowledge, shortly characterizing consciousness and positing as the fundamental primitive of all there is.

Section III outlines the rationale and structure of a 'multi-dimensional'[8] cosmology: Beyond the matter- and mind-planes, the subconscious-, superconscious- and life-planes possess a distinct ontology in a universal vs. particular and personal vs. impersonal continuity.

Section IV introduces evolution and its function from the spiritual emergentist standpoint–an evolution preceded by an 'involution' of spirit in matter.

Section V develops a framework that subjects the individual soul to an evolutionary process.

Section VI argues in favor of a return to an archetypal understanding of Nature, the cosmos, and reality.

Section VII synthesizes the above aspects in an integral monism, highlighting with a few examples, how it could shed light on central questions of the philosophy of science, especially with regard to evolutionary biology, life, and cognition.

A conclusion ends with a few remarks.

II. The First-Person Approach and Consciousness as the Fundamental Primitive

From a strictly empirical standpoint, science should deny that living beings could possess an internal qualitative phenomenal conscious state. The only reason we take for granted that at least every human being is conscious relies on a shared inter-subjective first-person experience and knowledge, not due to external evidence. Science itself isn't purely third-person, either. Every scientific experiment begins with conceptual abstractions and quantifications, relying on the first-person sensory experience as well. Ultimately, we always know the phenomenon, never the noumenon.

Furthermore, contemplative and mystical experiences leading to deep insights into the nature of reality have been described throughout the ages, cross-culturally and across religions over millennia (e.g., 'illumination' in Christian mysticism, 'Ohr' in Jewish mysticism, 'ma'rifa' in Sufism, 'moksha' in Hinduism, or 'satori' in Buddhism). These also are first-person approaches that, at least when it comes to the philosophical quest of the nature of consciousness, could complement the scientific perspective. Many of these experiences that break down the barriers between subject and object, an inward vs. outward distinction, report a reality based on a oneness and interconnectedness that transcend

[8] In the present context, the word 'dimension' should not be confused with a spatial or geometric dimension. Its meaning will be outlined next.

intellectual consciousness. The ontological perspective derived from these experiences reveals the universe as being perceived as an alive and intelligent entity with consciousness as its foundation.

Nonetheless, science and much of analytic philosophy have attempted, but failed, to explain our conscious, experiential, and subjective dimension using third-person conceptual frameworks. Despite significant advancements in neuroscience, little or no progress has been made in almost four centuries since Descartes' Meditations in trying to unveil the deeper philosophical questions concerning the origin and nature of consciousness. Therefore, it may be time to approach this existential inquiry from the opposite first-person perspective.

T. Nagel famously defined consciousness as *"something that it is like to be"* for an organism having an experience. While beyond words, one could, nevertheless, identify consciousness with sentience, a sense of existence or beingness, or the ability to have subjective qualitative experiences (qualia)–a changeless, featureless, and undifferentiated 'witness' of the phenomenal world (phenomenal consciousness). The mystery of how the brain supposedly generates, according to the mainstream mind-brain identity theory, this ephemeral entity we call 'consciousness' continues to puzzle the best scientific and philosophical minds.

Given this lack of progress, we might consider the opposite hypothesis: Consciousness isn't 'generated' but rather 'filtered' or 'transmitted' from a non-material plane through the physical brain. This is the 'filter theory of consciousness,' which dates back to an original idea of William James, who stated: *"My thesis is now this: that, when we think of the law that thought is a function of the brain, we are not required to think of productive function only;* ***we are entitled also to consider permissive or transmissive function****. And the ordinary psycho-physiologist leaves this out of his account"* (emphasis in the original text) (James, 1898). On similar lines reasoned A. Huxley, who considered the brain to be a 'reducing valve' of a Mind at Large: *"To make survival possible biologically, Mind at Large has to be funneled through the reducing valve of the brain and nervous system"* (Huxley, 1954). The idea that the brain is an instrument rather than a generator of consciousness isn't at odds with modern neuroscientific evidence, as one might think. A long list of neurological aspects and its phenomenology suggest how several brain functions can be best accommodated inside a transmissive paradigm rather than a generative one[9].

The integral monist framework takes this hypothesis seriously. It posits consciousness as fundamentally primitive. Consciousness is the substance or fundamental feature of reality, making everything else its derivative manifestation. In a cosmopsychist context, this is extended from an organism to a universal consciousness. In line with cosmopsychism, or the universal mind of the idealist, or the undifferentiated self-sustaining one-substance of Spinoza, which exists in itself and is conceived through itself (causa sui), or the Brahman of the Vedas, the present framework also submits that

[9] For a couple of review articles, see (Masi, 2023b) and (Kofman & Levin, 2025). For an in-depth analysis, see (Masi, 2025b).

universal consciousness underlies all processes, interactions, and things in their being and becoming. Consciousness is all there is; it is pure existence and pure being. Its nature is to be conscious. It transcends the attributes of space, time, and matter, which are merely manifestations of itself. This is why it cannot be defined except in relation to our first-person subjective experience.

Integral monism is panentheistic. Matter and mind, space, time, and all the forces of the physical universe and its dynamics are manifestations internal to the One-Consciousness that includes, inhabits and expresses all things as an aspect of itself, but also transcends them.

Moreover, the above characterization of consciousness extends beyond the qualities or attributes of being, sentience, and experience. For example, in the Indian tradition, Brahman is Sat-Chit-Ananada–that is, Existence-Consciousness and Bliss. Consciousness is one of the triune aspects of an ultimate reality but not the only one. That ultimate Reality is more than a passive awareness having phenomenal experiences; rather, it possesses qualities such as love, goodness, knowledge, truth, bliss, beauty, harmony, peace, joy, unity, and oneness, together with faculties of will, power, force, creativity, and agency. To use a metaphor, consciousness is like white light, with all the psychological qualities representing its colors. In this sense, the present paradigm incorporates the conventional understanding of consciousness as conceived of in the philosophy of mind but extends it to other qualities and attributes as well. Consciousness is understood as being much more than qualia, i.e., the subjective, felt qualities of conscious experience—such as what it's like to see red, taste coffee, or feel pain. Consciousness is, rather, something possessing a spectrum of active and dynamic psychological qualities that underlie each sentient being and, ultimately, all of reality.

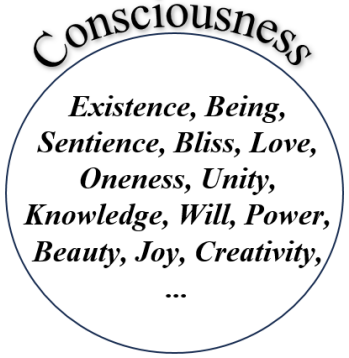

Fig. 1 The integral monistic view of consciousness: the different psychological qualities are modes of the undifferentiated consciousness.

Here, however, we carefully avoid identifying consciousness with anything labeled as 'mental.' I will avoid any conflation between mind and consciousness or any reference to consciousness as a mental state. Consciousness is the formless Absolute, the all-pervading substrate, while mind is only one attribute of its being, in a sense outlined next.

III. The Planes and Parts of Consciousness

With his laws of dimensional ontology, Viktor Frankl pointed out how projecting a phenomenon into lower dimensions could result in unaware inconsistencies (e.g., mistaking the 2D disk shadow projected by a sphere for the sphere itself). Likewise, by reducing human psychology to exclusively material and biological dimensions, we also prevent ourselves from seeing the full picture (Frankl, [1946] 2014). We must extend these dimensions to other domains if we want to gain a better comprehension of human nature and psychology.

Likewise, the present theoretical framework introduces three dimensional extensions.

The first dimensional extension expands the mind-matter duality to what I will call a 'multi-dimensional ontology of consciousness.' The conventional coarse-grained philosophy of mind limited to the material and/or mental dimensions is extended to a multi-dimensional ontology with greater explanatory power. This worldview, dating back to Spinoza's substance monism, doesn't conceive of mind and matter as separate but rather as two of the infinitely possible 'attributes' of an underlying 'substance.' In this view, the one and only existing substance consists of an infinity of attributes, each of which constitutes an eternal essence and manifests itself by an infinite number of 'modes'–that is, changing states of substance.

Also noteworthy is how some Eastern philosophies, in particular the Yoga philosophy, conceive of five different 'layers,' 'sheets,' or 'bodies.' Besides the material body (annamaya-kośa) and the mental body (manomaya-kośa), a 'life-body' (prāṇamaya-kośa), the 'body of wisdom' or higher knowledge (Vijñānamaya-kośa), and the 'body of bliss' (ānandamaya-kośa) are described.

Moreover, substance monism aligns closely with contemporary physics. In quantum field theory, everything that exists is reducible to excitations of fundamental quantum fields. Currently, quantum field theory conceives of many fields, such as the electron field, the quark field, and the electromagnetic field. However, it is likely that a future unified quantum field theory—quantum gravity—will unify these as different aspects of a single universal quantum field.

Thus, it appears to me that the metaphysical ontology that is most coherent with modern science and contemporary consciousness studies and has the most promising contradiction-free explanatory power is substance monism. I will partially follow Spinoza's footsteps by presenting a monism that doesn't limit itself to a Cartesian mind (res cogitans) and matter (res extensa), but also specifies other attributes of the one substance—that is, consciousness.[10] Besides the universal Mind and universal 'Physis,' other fundamental and universal ontological categories, hereafter referred to as universal 'planes' of consciousness, will be introduced.

However, it is important to remember that this categorization describes only the different forms of 'densification' of the same ontological primitive: consciousness. When we distinguish between matter, mind, and consciousness, we create an intellectual division that is useful for our conceptual system, but it merely indicates the different states of aggregation of the same substance (a useful analogy is to think of the three aggregation states of the same substance we call 'water,' 'vapor,' and 'ice'). A first-person intuitive understanding of this is to recognize that all material and physical phenomena we experience ultimately occur within our 'field of awareness.' We never perceive matter outside of our conscious experience. Matter always presents itself as a 'wave' or 'perturbation' within consciousness, not the other

[10] Nonetheless, the contemporary metaphysical framework that might be most closely related to this multi-dimensional monism is dual-aspect monism. Another notable sort of dual-aspect monism is David Bohm's theory of the 'implicate and explicate order' of an undivided wholeness (Bohm, 1980). Here, we follow a similar rationale but extend it to a 'many-order' ontology.

way around. The same applies to all other planes of consciousness. Emotions are experienced in our "field of awareness"; they represent a specific qualitative form of manifestation of and within consciousness. Similarly, thoughts are temporary "waves" or "shadows on the screen of consciousness" as well. Ultimately, none of these can be known as separate from our consciousness itself. They are also expressions of the same universal consciousness that views itself from an individualized mind from different perspectives. These perspectives are what we, from the standpoint of our individualized and limited ordinary state of consciousness, distinguish and abstract as matter, life, mind, etc. That said, we will refer to these distinctions only for linguistic convenience, without intending to imply that they are literally separate entities. We cannot do otherwise due to the inherent limits of language when attempting to describe what lies beyond language, matter, life, mind, space and time.

The second dimensional extension expands a limited binary conscious vs. unconscious notion to a plurality of states of consciousness. We can find ourselves in different states of consciousness, such as a waking and dreaming consciousness, hypnotic state, deep mediation and trance, psychoactive induced altered state, deep sleep, sleepwalking, vegetative state, or coma state of consciousness, etc. Other living beings might have different states of consciousness that aren't human-like, yet they might retain elements of subjective experience with different degree and kind. A fly, a worm, or even a single cell might possess some form of proto-consciousness that isn't the complete obnubilation of consciousness. Consciousness isn't an on/off or all/nothing state but, rather, a continuous spectrum.

The third dimensional extension expands a universal vs. particular polarity to a principle of continuity as well. While immanence and transcendence exemplify the panentheistic aspect of the all-pervading consciousness, its coexisting universal and personal aspects reflect its unity in multiplicity. The personality of all beings is the individuation of the one universal Being. Every individual consciousness, mind, and body emerge due to a 'principio individuationis,' or an 'emanation,' or an 'exclusive self-concentration,' respectively, of the cosmic consciousness, cosmic mind, and cosmic physical into themselves. Schopenhauer described the individuation principle as the source of the illusion of multiplicity within the One-Will, which self-differentiates into many wills. This notion has been adopted and refined in the analytic philosophy of B. Kastrup, who frames individual minds as "dissociated alters" of a larger Mind (Kastrup, 2018). However, in integral monism, this concept of 'individuation' or 'decombination' is not limited to the coarse-grained mind-matter dualism; it extends to a spectrum of layers of consciousness. To each universal plane of consciousness, universal mind, and universal matter corresponds a localized individuation or a 'part' of the respective plane of consciousness that we call 'soul,' 'ego-mind,' and 'body,' respectively. There is no contradiction or contraposition between the individual and the collective, the one and the many, unity and multiplicity. Separation and unity are the two manifest aspects of the transcendent beyond polarities, dualities, or personality and impersonality. However, between these two poles–that is, the chasm separating the atomic existence and the universal One–a deeper principle of continuity exists and operates, from the particle, atom, and molecule to the

object, organism, and large-scale structure or from the individual to its collection and association into groups, collectives, communities, societies, and nations.

With these three-dimensional extensions in mind, the universal planes of consciousness can be delineated. In integral monism, the planes are organized in ascending (descending) order from the most subconscious (conscious) plane to the most conscious (subconscious) plane. Here, I mention them starting from the bottom up.

The physical universal plane is the plane that appears to our ordinary physical sensory experience. It is the physical universe, the world of matter, space-time, and physical forces, ruled by the laws of physics. It is the layer of existence that science studies, the realm of Descartes' res extensa. It is the most subconscious and inert mode, a limited expression of the self-limiting One-consciousness.

The subconscious universal plane is reflected in the psychological dimension existing below our ordinary access awareness. It is a non-metacognitive plane of existence that is subconscious but not completely unconscious either. The subconscious reflects the universal consciousness almost but not entirely forgetful of itself. It expresses rudimentary and basal forms of cognition and primal instincts. It is the psychological dimension ruled by instinctive urges, automatisms, mechanical thoughts and reactions, disordered dreams that register traumatic experiences in a subconscious memory inaccessible to the surface-mind, etc. However, in this integral monistic perspective, the subconscious is more than an aspect of the individual consciousness; it is also a subconscious universal plane that subsumes the group and collective consciousness.[11]

On the universal 'life-plane' or 'vital plane' awakens the first dynamical self-expression of the subconscious in the form of a life instinct. It is the plane of the basal agency, impelled by urges, will and intentionality we call desires, passions, emotions, etc. What is frequently overlooked regarding our own subjective existence is that we are aware of more than a body and a mind. The first-person perspective reveals the intrinsic qualitative property of our emotional and intentional dimensions. Our life is also determined by a willful and goal-directed agency driven by emotional instincts and desires, feelings and passions, moods and cravings that have a different quality than a physical perception or a mental abstraction. Every living being is driven by a will and longing that inert matter doesn't possess. This emotional and volitional aspect of our phenomenal consciousness is a dimension proper to life.

Here also, the individual organism, the living being, is an individuation of the universal life-plane. Life is not seen as a more or less accidental epiphenomenon emerging from the material and mental universe by means of an evolutionary process; rather, it *is* a universal ontological level of existence, no less than the cosmic mind and the physical universe.

This standpoint might suggest some form of neo-vitalism that conceives of a creative 'life-force' in the sense of a Bergsonian' élan vital' (Bergson, 1907), or Schelling's "original productivity of Nature"

[11] For this reason, I prefer not to resort to a Jungian terminology of the "collective unconscious." Nothing is completely unconscious, as everything is an individuation of and in consciousness.

(Schelling, 2004, p. 202), or Spinoza's modes as 'affection of substance' (Schmidt, 2010), or Whitehead's 'prehension' of actual entities interacting with the environment and perceiving each other into their own being by a process of becoming in an interconnected and dynamic nature of reality (Whitehead, 1978). In fact, it should be pointed out that in modern biology, vitalism is not a falsified conjecture or something irreconcilable with self-organization, biological process, morphogenesis, mind, and matter but is simply ignored as an unnecessary hypothesis. (For a more in-depth analysis of this aspect, see (Masi, 2022).) As we will see next, this methodological approach also led to several explanatory gaps in the philosophy of biology. However, the neo-vitalistic approach presented here distinguishes itself from classical forms of vitalism in that life is not merely an 'ineffable fluid' associated with biological functions; rather, it is a universal plane of consciousness that is immanent to the physical yet transcends it as well.

The mental universal plane is the cosmic intelligence inherent in the previously mentioned planes. While matter, the subconscious, and life are the infra-rational universal planes of consciousness, in the universal mind, rational powers appear. Mind stands for reason, thought, and the power of analytic, rational, logical, deductive, and inductive reasoning backed by a 'semantic awareness'[12] of things and phenomena. A universal or cosmic mind pervades all there is, while the human mind, the Cartesian res cogitations, is a part, or 'selection,' of the universal mind. Einstein's famous statement, "The fact that the world is comprehensible is a miracle" (Einstein, 1936), or what Wigner called "the unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics in the natural sciences" (Wigner, 1959), appears in a new light. Because our mind is an individuation of the cosmic mind, it naturally must comprehend something of the workings of the very same Mind it is a part of.

Notice that in the present context one distinguishes between consciousness and mind. Mind is an attribute of consciousness, not its synonym. This isn't a theoretical conjecture but an experiential fact we can realize by an introspective first-person inward turn. The stream of thoughts in our mind are phenomenal events that come and go, comprising part of a differentiated, mutable, and plural phenomenal world. Meanwhile, the undifferentiated, immutable, and immobile background witness, the receptive ground to whom and in whom phenomena are disclosed, is the conscious substrate. Consciousness is being, while mind is becoming. There can't be mind without consciousness, but consciousness doesn't require a mind to exist. In this sense, we don't conflate mind with consciousness, as it is, unfortunately, quite common in modern philosophy of mind.

The universal and individual physical, subconscious, life, and mental planes do not exhaust the full experiential spectrum of the planes of consciousness. Still, there remains a domain that we perceive to exist even though it is not always directly accessible in the ordinary waking state of consciousness.

[12] Whether semantic awareness–that is, the apprehension of meaning–requires consciousness is an interesting topic. Here, it may only be said that it is suggested by contemplative practices (Masi, 2025a).

The supraconscious universal plane is the layer of the transrational gnosis, the Logos–something that mystics throughout all ages and cultures report. However, we don't need to be mystics to know, from our daily first-person experience, of the existence of a trans-rational domain. Artists, poets, musicians, and scientists report of the intuitive, creative, and inspiring cognitive processes that, like flashes of light in the night, suddenly present themselves in our field of awareness. We don't know how those deep insights formed and where they come from, but they have neither a subconscious character nor analytical and rational quality of mere information processing. Rather, they possess a trans-rational character. We refer to 'intuition' as some cognitive activity in which the surface aspects of the world are presented to our innermost essence. It is a knowledge that comes not from deductive reasoning but from a direct and spontaneous 'seeing.' It is a form of mystical or gnostic cognition that operates beyond the mind and our ordinary waking consciousness but that is also diametrically opposed to a subconscious rudimentary comprehension and reactivity. It is a luminous discernment bearing no resemblance to the subconscious primal instinct. The distinction between infra-rational, rational, and trans-rational is not just a philosophical extrapolation; it is an unmistakable experiential fact. A dimension that is rarely, if ever, considered in other pantheistic or panentheistic frameworks that view the universal Mind as merely an expanded version of an all-too human-like 'Mind at large.

Thus, it is plausible to conjecture that a supraconscious universal plane exists–a plane of consciousness possessing a closer perception of truth or fact beyond the ordinary reasoning process and intellectual conception and that the ordinary human intellect can't grasp. On the supraconscious universal plane resides a vaster creative and all-inclusive consciousness containing all the opposites within itself, a divine Mind or, to put it into neo-Platonic language, a Logos or a Nous–that is, the ultimate principle of Knowledge, the architect and designer of all there is.

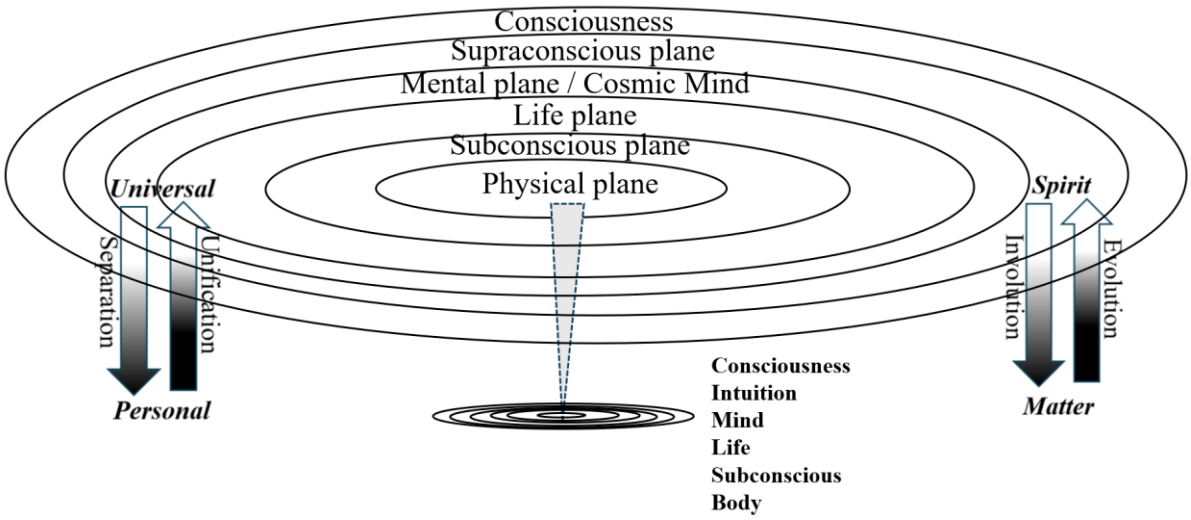

Fig. 2 The universal and personal planes of consciousness in integral cosmology.

The next sections will show how this supraconscious universal plane is key in building a coherent metaphysical picture of reality, especially for evolution and the emergence of life.

These were the five universal planes constituting the basis of integral monism. The supraconscious universal plane is the primal originating creatrix, while the other planes are contained or 'nested' in a hierarchical order as the mental, vital, subconscious and physical planes. In a sense, their number and demarcation lines aren't fixed, and we may even think of them as intersecting in continuity, like the transition and demarcation between day, twilight, and night. These are intellectual categorizations that, nonetheless, reflect a deeper truth and that can help us look upon the world and life with a different eye than that of a low-dimensional ontology.

IV. Evolution as the Emergence of the Spirit

An integral cosmology positing the transcendent and immanent spirit in all planes of existence and, in its individuated aspect, in each part of our being must address the question of the role and significance of the evolutionary process on the physical plane. The mechanistic physical plane of matter is ruled by a physical causal determinism that seems to leave no space for sentience, volition, cognition, will, goal-directedness, or purpose.[13] Yet it led to an evolutionary process marked by the appearance of sentient and cognitive agents with desire, will, and goal-directed behavior. There is an explanatory gap that neither biology nor neuroscience could close.

From the perspective of a multidimensional panentheistic spiritual emergentism, evolution acquires its full significance and relation to life, mind, and consciousness. Already, the etymology of the word 'evolution' betrays a lost wisdom. In Latin, the word 'evolvere' means 'to roll out,' 'to unfold,' or, more literally, 'to open from the inside out.' But what is supposed to be 'rolled out'?

From the metaphysical perspective that this article presents, Darwinian evolution, governed by natural selection, genetic drift, and inheritance, is seen as the expression of a process from the inside of matter of an immanent spirit expressing the unfolding divinity. It is a process of emergence and self-unfolding of consciousness that finds its way from the inside out in the physical plane. Life, mind, and consciousness aren't an epiphenomenon of material machinery; rather, they are the outer appearance of the process of 'infusion' of spirit in matter. This contrasts with the conventional idealist, panpsychist, or cosmopsychist perspectives, which often abstract biological evolution from any metaphysical significance, if it addresses the topic at all.

Integral monism doesn't deny evolution and its underlying material principles. On the contrary, it enlarges the view into a wider perspective. However, while Darwinian evolution abhors any teleological innuendos and posits the blind mechanistic bottom-up process as its starting point, integral monism complements the very same process, seeing it also from the opposite viewpoint, namely, as a top-down manifestation of spirit in and through matter–that is, as a supraconscious action through the mental, vital, subconscious, and, finally, physical planes.

[13] This is true only on a meso- or macroscopic scale. I omit the whole topic of quantum indeterminism. For a detailed analysis of this aspect, see (Masi, 2023c) and (Masi, 2024).

This implies that an 'involution' of the universal consciousness must have preceded the evolutionary process on the physical universal plane. The universal plane of mind, life, the subconscious, and matter are the 'lower' aspects of the superconscious plane–a 'plunge of the omniscient,' unitary, blissful spirit into the night of self-forgetful duality, separation, and sufferance, or 'avidya,' to use an ancient Sanskrit term. It is what the human collective consciousness vaguely remembers and translates into myths, like in the biblical interpretation of the Fall of man as a descent of humanity from a state of presence of God to a sinful world of misery and death. It is an involution that allows the superconscious One to experience itself in a universe of subconscient multiplicity, or a descent of God into a self-imposed sleep of consciousness by an involution first, followed by a process of progressive self-finding that we call evolution.

Matter is the last rung of a descending ladder of consciousness. The mechanistic, deterministic, and atomistic aspect of the physical universe is the outward appearance of the self-veiling and self-obnubilating all-free and self-determining One-Spirit by a self-limitation and exclusive self-concentration in itself.

Life, coextensive with desires, feelings, instincts, and purposeful agency, is the inside-out emergence of the life plane in the physical and subconscious planes. The living organism is the emergence of the life-plane in the physical plane in the form of an individuated physical body. The (more or less developed) mind of the living organism, with its cognition, comprehension, and discerning awareness of the world, is the emergence of the mental plane in the physical plane in the form of an individuated brain. The subconscious and life planes are the interface that connects matter with mind.

This means that the modern biological and Darwinian perspective is inverted. Life did not arise from matter, nor did mind arise from life. Instead, life precedes matter, as matter is a concealed form of life, and mind precedes life, since life is a concealed form of mind.[14]

Evolution is a stepwise growth of consciousness from fragmentation and ignorance toward its original unity and knowledge. On the physical plane, from the utmost individuation of the particle to its associations in atoms, molecules, cells, and organisms. On the vital and mental planes, from the individual living being toward a collective of tribes, communities, and nations, perhaps leading to a future coalescence into a collective intelligence, like T. de Chardin's noosphere. Deep down, it is the same principle: a bottom-up process starting from the unintelligent and subconscious domain of duality and separation that progressively finds its way back to the lost superconscious oneness that always stood behind the phenomenal world and oversaw its cosmic play by a top-down action.

If we see, from this perspective, not only Spinoza's Natura Naturata, the created Nature, and the flow of the Natura Naturans, the creative natural evolution of life upon Earth, but also the psychological,

[14] Louis Pasteur once noted: *"You place matter before life and you decide that matter has existed for all eternity. How do you know that the incessant progress of science will not compel scientists to consider that life has existed for all eternity, and not matter? You pass from matter to life because your intelligence of today cannot conceive things otherwise. How do you know that in ten thousand years, one will not consider it more likely that matter has emerged from Eternal Life?"* (Pinet, 2004)

cultural, and social development of humankind, we arrive at an evolutionary view of natural and human history reminiscent of J. Gebser's, T. de Chardin's, or R. Steiner's vision. The future evolution of humans will be toward emergence in the superconscious plane, where the contraposition between the individual and the collective will dissolve into a unity in diversity. Homo sapiens is a transitional being that will be surpassed by a trans-rational species and, ultimately, by a superconscious collective. Mind is only transitional. Above the mental plane, a superconscious plane of 'gnosis' awaits us on our evolutionary journey.

V. The Evolution of the Soul

In this involutionary and evolutionary drama, one must consider the universal vs. personal polarity. The universal consciousness is transcendent and immanent on all the universal planes. In a certain sense, there is no evolution of consciousness because the transcendent "One without a Second," as the Indian Vedic tradition calls it, is beyond space and time and, thereby, can't be subjected to any evolutionary process. Evolution can take place only in the spatio-temporal manifestation where the infinite, timeless, and non-local Oneness can manifest as the timebound many. In the multiplicity realized with a plurality of exclusive concentrations in itself, the Supreme expresses itself in a multitude of spatio-temporal relations embodying the multiple personalities that all living beings are. This fragmentation or 'decombination' from the unlimited cosmic consciousness into the limited personal body, ego-mind, and individuated life is the projection of the One-Spirit, the 'unus mundus' into the multitude of souls, or 'dissociated alters,' as Kastrup put it (Kastrup 2018). Self-individuation is also part of the involution, in which each soul enters the manifestation as a 'divine spark,' or, to use Plotinus' language, a 'psyche' emanating from the Nous. The soul is a transcendent entity not to be confused with what determines our desires, appetites and vital instincts, which are proper to our ego-personality on the plane of life.

However, in an evolving context, the soul isn't a static and immutable entity. The soul also undergoes a process of self-finding and growth by assimilating experiences in cycles of death and rebirth. This distinguishes integral monism from both Eastern and Western religious, spiritual, philosophical or psychological conceptions. There is no evolution of the soul in Advaita Vedanta, and cosmopsychism or analytic idealism scarcely, if at all, address it. Even among those few forms of psychological theories and practices that acknowledge a soul entity (for example, the transpersonal psychology of Ken Wilber or the psychosynthesis of Roberto Assagioli), the soul remains a passive recipient, not a participating and determining factor in one's life-history.[15] In this metaphysical framework, the soul is the emanation of a transcendent and immutable Self that, nevertheless, in its individuation on the mutable physical plane, becomes a changing and dynamic self, embedded in its material, subconscious,

[15] For an interesting review of this aspect, see (Teklinski, 2018). The only exception of which the author is aware is the Integral Psychology (Banerji, 2020) based on Aurobindo's Integral Yoga (Aurobindo, [1919] 2010).

vital, and mental universal parts. It is what we call a 'living organism' evolving by an accumulation of experiences in the process of transmigrations. Or, conversely, evolution *is* the emergence of a multiplicity of evolving spirits in and through matter, that originate from within the first prokaryotic cell to the human organism and beyond.

In the integral paradigm, while a soul starts from the basis of the material nescience, it nevertheless has a divine origin and must thereby retain the divine qualities of the Soul from which it came. Its inherent true nature is that of the supreme consciousness, namely, those of love, knowledge, wisdom, truth, bliss, beauty[16], sense of unity, etc. If we aren't aware of these transcendent qualities and even behave contrary to them, this is due to the 'veil of Maya.' Our inmost soul is still not sufficiently developed and has not grown enough on the evolutionary stage of the physical plane to impose itself on the more crude and less conscious or subconscious planes of existence. However, our yearning and inherent attraction toward the good come from there and, despite all odds, will reemerge sooner or later.

VI. Beyond the Archetype

"The archetypes are the great decisive factors, they bring about the real events [..] the archetypes determine the fate of man." -C.G. Jung

Thus, from the perspective of the integral monist, all phenomena, from the most material and apparently mechanistic process of matter to the behavior of a self-aware organism, originate from a gnostic and all-knowing universal divine substrate. Plato's theory of Forms, the neoplatonic idea that the world we experience is a reflection of an ideal world, or the Jungian archetypes, were not human fancy philosophical fantasies but, rather, the intuitive perception of the archetypal nature of reality.

Jung defined archetypes by describing them as patterns of behavior that emerge from the collective unconscious consisting of innate psychic structures and predispositions—essentially instinctive blueprints for the human psyche. The Jungian archetypes are considered structural templates that manifest in response to biological instincts and become evident in common myths, dreams, religious symbols, and artistic expressions.

Less well-known, but equally interesting in the present context, is that Jung proposed an acausal all-interconnecting synchronicity principle jointly related to archetypal patterns of the meaning of psychic events as a complementary aspect of causality (Jung, [1952] 1969). Reality is ultimately made of symbols as the outer expression of something only partly known and immanent and partly unknown and transcendent (Jung, [1921] 1971, 814-829). The Jungian synchronicity Wolfgang Pauli preferred to designate as 'meaningful correspondence' ("Sinn-korrespondenzen") under the influence of an acausal ordering (Atmanspacher, 2012). Physics Nobel laureate Bernard d'Espagnat, starting from the non-separable aspect of quantum mechanics, conceives of an underlying independent reality that acts from

[16] An intuition that Plotinus famously wrote about in the Ennead ("On Beauty" - Ennead I.6).

a non-local quantum ‘extended causality’ in our separate and local space-time empirical reality–something he named ‘the Real’ (d’Espagnat, 2006).

This understanding of reality as the manifestation of a deeper Platonic realm, expressing itself through archetypes and symbols on the physical plane, has received renewed attention lately. More recently, biosemiotics merged biology and semiotics—the study of signs and meaning-making, emphasizing the role of communication and meaning in the living world. Living organisms generate and interpret signs conveying information, and interactions mediated by signs, such as chemical signals, visual cues, sounds, environmental cues, symbols, codes, interpretation, representation, and communication processes, or even behavioral patterns, and not only attribute meaning to signs and symbols but also create and alter sign relations (for an introduction, see (Emmeche et al., 2011).) The study of semiosis in biology spans from the cellular and molecular level—such as in cell signaling or sign-mediated interactions in bacterial communities with quorum sensing—to the investigation of animal forms of knowledge, including human behavior. One could assert that semiosis and information processing are intrinsic to life. Undoubtedly, human language and abstract symbolic thought are the most prominent examples of semiotic communication. The connection between biosemiotics and language hasn't gone unnoticed. (For a review, see (Velmezova et al., 2015).) The genetic code and its translation serve as the most common example illustrating the biological significance of non-human code and sign processing. DNA conveys functional information by using symbols—specifically, genes represented by a sequence of nucleotide bases in the DNA that code for proteins. Biosemiotics appears to intuit a hidden underlying “Idea” within life. It aims at a comprehensive vision in which signs, ‘words’, language, and symbols hold universal significance. Modern biosemiotics naturally discovers this universality and the relationship between signs and meaning in Nature.

On similar lines, some scholars highlighted parallels between code biology and analytic psychology where Jungian archetypes symbolize universal emotional responses and, thereby, may not be something merely metaphorical but an ontological phylogenetic fact (Major, 2021), (Goodwyn, 2024).

While, on the biological front, inspired by experimental evidence, Michael Levin theorized the existence of a relationship between morphogenesis and a Platonic space—that is, a latent space of potential forms or pre-existing possibilities that have not yet been actualized (Levin, 2025). Levin challenges the conventional paradigm that living beings are solely products of genetics and environment and proposes a framework in which evolution favors forms that exploit mathematical and computational truths. He argues that the relationship between mind and brain is similar to the relationship between mathematical patterns and morphogenetic outcomes, suggesting that cognitive patterns “ingress” from a Platonic space. Based on his findings on ‘biobots’–motile biological but synthetic structures constructed from living cells that can perform tasks–the hypothesis is that instances of embodied cognition ingress from a Platonic space containing both low-agency patterns (like facts about triangles) and higher-agency ones (like mental properties). Morphogenesis is a problem-solving process guided by bioelectric pattern memories. According to Levin, these patterns are derived not solely from genetic

information but also from a structured Platonic space of forms. At least some patterns arise from mathematical causes, independent of physical or historical explanations, and are beyond genetics and the environmental constraints, which do not reduce to facts of physics but, instead, exhibit emergent goal-directedness and problem-solving capabilities.

Coming from the complementary pole of the mystical experience, Sri Aurobindo describes the superconscious as a 'Truth-consciousness' or 'Real-Idea' *by which the conscious force of the transcendent and universal Existence conceives, forms and governs the universe, the order, the cosmos of its manifested delight of being* (Aurobindo, [1919] 1970, p. 171). The universe of forms has been created in and as part of the working of this divine Real-Idea. All the physical forms and phenomena we perceive with our sense-mind and physical mind are still surface appearances–that is, symbols–of a universal power of superconscious knowledge. While ultimately of transcendent nature and beyond manifestation, this Knowledge nevertheless expresses itself in the manifestation of matter, force, space, and time after plunging itself into this world of duality and separation, that still retains and reflects something of an original gnostic Real-Idea. An Idea of the Spirit that already exists beyond mind and matter in the form of a primordial archetype. In matter, it is expressed in forms with properties—that is, what Locke categorized as primary and secondary qualities–manifested to our subjectivity as images, meanings, and semantic representations on the physical plane. On this plane of ignorance and self-oblivion, these assume only an archetypal appearance that dimly reflects a mute and involved original idea. Yet they express something of the quintessential Real-Idea as an automatic intelligence blindly seeing and seeking with a dumb and suppressed feeling while retaining the infallible act of the supraconscious, which effectuates all that must be effectuated.

There is an archetypal world, the 'Mundus Imaginalis' that figures so prominently in mystical Islamic cosmology and that the Islamic scholar Henry Corbin named the 'imaginal plane,' which is an ontological reality of an intermediate, invisible realm of causality. A world between the physical world of space and time and the timeless Self. A plane where the real changes are born first in the form of Real-Ideas and archetypal patterns that determine the decisive force of change on the surface physical plane. They can remain under the surface for a long time, waiting to become name and form in the physical world in order to enact that change at the right time and in the right way.

To our surface intellectual, rational, and analytic mind, still based on a physical sensory perception and conception of reality, the universe seems to be ruled by blind chance, coincidences, random mutations, or 'mistakes.' What appears to be 'random,' 'coincidental,' or an 'aimless' and 'purposeless' sequence of processes is the activity of a purposeful intelligence whose idea, plan, and purpose we can't see because our cognition is limited to the mental plane.[17] It is a higher level of archetypal reality

[17] A common fallacy is that of mistaking the notion of randomness for lack of purposeful agency, and that quantum randomness rules out any form of free will or divine intervention in Nature. However, it can be shown that indeterminacy is perfectly compatible with free agency and might even represent a necessary condition for it. For an in-depth analysis, see (Masi, 2023c) and (Masi, 2024).

structuring and informing the physical plane–that is, not beyond but behind the physical universe–not Plato's eternal Ideas in the mind of an unchanging transcendent intelligence but a living dynamic Force of higher order operating according to a superconscious logic and also working through the collective patterns of evolution and human social history.

From this perspective, evolution appears as a universal consciousness expressing itself toward increasingly self-conscious representations, forms, images, and symbols of itself in matter, life, and mind.

VII. Teleology of Cognition, Desire, and Will

In this last section, I would like to show how the application of the integral monist paradigm can close several explanatory gaps in the modern philosophy of science and metaphysics or at least how it can help us see them from a different perspective. Two examples are chosen: The first addresses the dichotomy between the divine and the physical, the second the emergence of cognition in life forms without a neural substrate.

If the cosmos is the result of a creative process the natural question arises why this creation seems to be devoid of all those qualities, we associate with a superconscious and almighty creator. Several answers are possible. As a starting point I would like to highlight Spinoza's and Schopenhauer's views.

Spinoza's God is devoid of teleology and free will. There is no personal God acting by purpose or intervening in world affairs; there is only an impersonal divine substance moved by necessity, whose modes are affections expressed by the determinism of its nature. Ultimately, God is reduced to the laws of Nature. Not very dissimilar is Schopenhauer's standpoint, which sees a spaceless, timeless, and undifferentiated will lying beneath the workings of the world. It is due to the 'principio individuationis' leading from unity to multiplicity and separation that suffering and a will to live in organic matter arise. However, there is no plan, design, self-awareness or intelligence in the blind and irrational will striving for its existence. Spinoza and Schopenhauer couldn't see any omniscient divinity at work in an apparently mechanistic and purposeless world and 'downgraded' it to an impersonal and instinctive cosmic will.

If so, another question arises: If this universal or cosmic consciousness is a blind, aimless form of volition without knowledge, we must explain how this almost comatose Being supposedly brought into existence such an amazingly complex and ordered universe, even leading to something opposite to itself by the emergence of intelligent and purposefully driven living organisms.

One must keep in mind how both Spinoza and Schopenhauer developed their philosophical frameworks before Darwin published his 'On the Origin of the Species' in 1859. Evolutionary conceptions in philosophical and scientific debate had still to come. While, in the involutionary and evolutionary integral monism comprising the superconscious plane, the apparent paradox disappears. As we have seen, a 'polar teleology' is at work: There exists a deterministic physical plane dominated by apparently blind processes, but this is the end point of the involution of a supreme intelligence that

dimmed out its own consciousness. It is the starting point for an ascending process of its own self-finding, a bottom-up causation proceeding by mechanisms of Darwinian evolution in the self-forgetful ignorance of matter. This is what expresses the protozoa's instinct, impelled by a proto-experience and an environmental proto-cognition and sense-making. On the other side, a top-down supreme Thought intends an end in the very same material aggregate, enabling the fully automatic and perfect actions proper to the physical plane in form of a subconscient omniscience. The apparently blind determinism of the physical world appears so only to the limited human mental lens; it isn't inherent to Nature or the World's will.

Meanwhile, God itself is personal and impersonal and beyond this polarity as well. Personality and impersonality are the two aspects of the same Being. The human idea of a contraposition between a personal vs. impersonal God arises due to our limited mind, which works by contrasts, dualities, and distinctions. Giving up this apparent dichotomy, we can look at the Whole with a more comprehensive view via this omnipresent underlying duality manifested on all planes of consciousness.

Another aspect with which modern science struggles is the emergence of a basal cognition that has already started in the simplest life forms–that is, in unicellular organisms such as bacteria, and multicellular organisms without a nervous system, like plants. Research in the last couple of decades has confirmed that life doesn't need a brain to be at least proto-cognitive. Single cells and plants possess basal cognitive skills, allowing them to learn associatively, remember past stimuli, adapt to the environment, hunt prey, and even collaborate collectively. Purposeful agency, with its instinct of survival and self-preservation, self-assertion, and possession, is inherently present in all life forms. Spinoza's 'conatus' as the striving inherent in their essence to preserve their being is already present from the start. Life's sentient behavior, with its 'life-desire' craving for pleasure, satisfaction, and egoistic self-assertion in search of enjoyment that mimics a lost delight, with its will to act, will to reproduce, and will to move, is already present in the prokaryotic cell. To be cognitive, life doesn't need some unknown generative power of a neural network. At least a proto-cognitive substrate preexists the emergence of the nervous system.

This also came as a surprise to naturalistic neuronal-centered biology and cognitive science, which now tries to fit the new data inside a framework that resorts to a variety of theories of complex nonlinear self-organizing dynamical systems, autopoiesis, enactivism, non-neural forms of computation, etc. However, like theories of consciousness that try to account for the emergence of the subjective experience inside the conventional frame of material monism, these interpretative models, hypotheses, and conjectures fail to close the explanatory gap between a dimension of reality dominated by supposedly inert, insentient, and mindless matter with that of cognitive living systems. The emergence of cognition remains unexplained.

Therefore, we have the right to start from the opposite assumption.

This assumption is that cognition, like consciousness and life, isn't an epiphenomenon emerging from a complex material machinery; rather, the cognitive dimension of life–that is, mind, intelligence,

and the ability to know–predates matter and is inherent to reality. The largely instinctive form of cognizing visible in simple forms of life, or Whitehead's 'prehension' involving the way actual entities interact, perceive, and relate to and with each other by conscious and cognitive activities in their own process of becoming, can also be seen as a surface appearance of an involved and concealed superconscious and self-conscious gnosis. From the standpoint of integral monism, there must be a form of proto-intelligence or basal cognition since the start of life, as embodied life itself is the workings of an involved superconscience in the physical and subconscious planes of ignorance, through which the life and mind planes and, ultimately, the superconscious universal plane, express themselves. The basal cognition that modern biology discovered is the surface appearance in the form of a subconscious mind that, nevertheless, is an imitation and pale reflection of a supreme Mind working behind the veil of matter and life. The physical senses of hearing, seeing, touching, etc., are a projection of the inherent faculties of knowledge of a supreme Consciousness now reaching the surface. The instinct of survival, every desire and intentional agency present in all life forms originates from within, and reflects on a lower plane what on the highest planes are its inherent powers and qualities of existence, bliss, and will.

VIII. Conclusion

This article outlined a metaphysical model that extends some of the contemporary theories of universal consciousness to a multi-dimensional, involutionary, and evolutionary spiritual emergentism. Integral monism conceives of life, mind, and the sub- and superconscious not as emerging epiphenomena of matter (material monism) or a mind-matter dualism (substance dualism or dual-aspect monism) but, rather, as distinct universal planes of the same universal consciousness. The physical plane is the last layer of fragmentation of the Undifferentiated that involved itself from a state of gnostic knowledge to a polar state of almost insentient ignorance. Each universal plane of consciousness is reflected in a personal individuation–that is, by an exclusive concentration of the One-Consciousness into a multiplicity of conscious centers, our souls. Each of these souls undergoes an individual evolution by a process of self-finding and rebirth. A being, a soul, is a divine spark that, thereby, naturally recognizes in the world the inherent qualities of beauty, harmony, and love inherent to its source. Conversely, by the process of involution, these metaphysical qualities of the One-Consciousness become oblivious and, thereby, are turned into its opposite in the night of material atomization. Love becomes hate, knowledge becomes ignorance, bliss becomes sufferance, and beauty becomes ugliness.

This dangerous world of labor, battle, and death, where life, with its pain and precarious existence, can be crushed in an instant by Nature's destructive face or by a devouring enemy, is, ultimately, nothing other than the very same Godhead in one of its cosmic figures. This universal transcendent consciousness beyond space and time is searching for itself in its own dual manifestation where creation and destruction, good and evil, pleasure and pain, union and separation, joy and grief, peace and violence, or truth and falsehood coexist. The world is the subconscious mask of its own superconscious face–a mask necessary to shake up the involved and somnambulist consciousness on the physical plane.

Evolution is a play of polarities precisely because it aims to wake up our superconscious power, which, otherwise, without the turmoil, struggle, and torment induced by the clash of external forces, would remain forever enveloped in the night of matter. All that seems evil, wrong, or a mistake for the mental being finds its reason to be from the supraconscious truth-perspective.

I submit that if one adopts the standpoint of this integral monism of a monistic, panentheistic, teleological, spiritual evolutionary emergentism based on a multi-dimensional and trans-rational ontology of universal planes of existence, several questions of philosophical nature could be seen through new lenses offering a more coherent view, potentially closing several explanatory gaps more effectively than in other contexts. Integral monism could be applied to several other questions debated in science and philosophy, like the existence of free will or if and how some form of vitalism could be admissible in biology, whether a different and wider approach could shed more light on the mind body problem, or how it could be applied to develop a human integral psychology by conceiving of our human existence from a broader perspective that goes beyond a coarse-grained mind-body dualism, including a 'soul-factor.' Due to limitations on the available space, I can't discuss these aspects here. However, the aim of this article was, first and foremost, to propose a metaphysical theoretical framework that offered a wider perspective. It might not appeal to everyone's philosophical commitment, but nothing in our modern scientific understanding prevents us from taking this metaphysical perspective seriously. Its main purpose is to offer a working hypothesis—an interim exploratory model—and then see where it leads us. Historically, this approach has always been the path that brought us a step closer to the truth.

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