

The Wisdom Page

Evolutionaries: Unlocking the Spiritual and Cultural Potential of Science's Greatest Idea by Carter Phipps

Reviewed by Tom Lombardo

Evolutionaries is an interesting and informative book--I read through it in a flash. The writing style flows; it held my attention from the opening; I learned a lot, thought a lot along the way; and the book significantly helped me to pull lots of themes together in my mind. The book weaves together narrative and theory, introducing different evolutionary thinkers through stories about them and then describing the essence of their theories. Through the book Phipps delves into the lives and key ideas of around forty or fifty different evolutionary thinkers, from scientists and psychologists to philosophers and spiritual leaders. He includes discussions of Darwin, Teilhard de Chardin, Lynn Margulis, Howard Bloom, Sri Aurobindo, Alfred North Whitehead, Ken Wilber, Barbara Marx Hubbard, Robert Wright, and Ray Kurzweil, among others --a rich and wide array of personalities and perspectives.

Phipps' basic argument is that evolution is a cosmic, interdisciplinary world view, including but not limited to the natural or biological sciences. All of existence, from the metaphysical and cosmological to the social, psychological, and spiritual can be subsumed under the framework of evolutionary thought. There are diverse individuals, from diverse disciplines, cultures, and ways of life, actively working toward this integrative (or integral) perspective. That indeed is the main point of the book: To show how evolutionary thinking is being applied across the board to nature, society and culture, technology, human psychology and creativity, and theology and spirituality.

Furthermore, evolution, as a world view, not only informs us regarding the nature of things, it also provides a basis for ethics and morality--a "moral imperative," as Phipps identifies it, to consciously and purposefully further facilitate the ongoing evolution of humanity and the cosmos. Though grounded in a story of our origins, evolution, both factually and ethically, points toward a vision of the future and inspires us on our journey through time.

In fact, as Phipps points out, the evolutionary world view is still in evolution--the pieces of this grand narrative are just coming together; the insights are still arising and taking form. As some have argued, evolution as a natural process is evolving, and our understanding of it likewise is in a state of ongoing development. As Chardin stated, "We are moving," and this applies both to our ontological reality and our evolving knowledge of the world around us.

Where, I believe, the book suffers is in its treatment of evolutionary theory within the physical and cosmological sciences. It is light and highly selective relative to more humanistic and spiritual evolutionary perspectives. Phipps does include scientific thinkers such as Walter Kauffman, Kevin Kelly, and Elizabeth Sahtouris, but there is little, if nothing, on physical and biological evolutionary thought as represented in the works of Lee Smolin, Eric Chaisson, Murray Gell-Mann, David Loye, Paul Davies, Stephen Jay Gould, Richard Dawkins, and Frank Tipler, among others. The evolutionary perspective on physical cosmology and the biological sciences is simply not sufficiently developed.

I also found that though Phipps attempts to provide the big picture of evolutionary thinking, generally he describes each evolutionary thinker and then moves on to the next. He doesn't

integrate the ideas and major themes of all the different individuals anywhere near as much as he could.

Yet all in all, I highly recommend this book, especially for readers who have a rather limited biological conception of the idea of evolution. Clearly the book provides an expansive vision of evolutionary thought that goes far beyond biology.