

The Ascent of Humanity: The Age of Separation, the Age of Reunion, and the Convergence of Crises that Is Birthing the Transition, by Charles Eisenstein. Harrisburg, PA: Panentheia Productions, 2007. 604 pp. \$25.00 (paper). ISBN 0977622207.

This is a vast work that would require a much more lengthy review than this to address each of the many topics. There are 600 pages with seven chapters and 71 subchapters each of which is a lengthy essay in itself. This review attempts to hit on at least the principal themes.

First of all this is a grand and visionary concept, of a living, evolving universe where design and purpose are inherent in reality, and the evolution of man is the unfolding of a continual though stumbling process of transformation. It must have been a long labor of love for its author, and deserves a very thoughtful examination. He is obviously a man of great idealism and intellectual depth, who also has a great faith in nature and human nature. *The Ascent of Humanity* is a hugely ambitious attempt to view the history and future of civilization as arising from the evolution of the human sense of self. The pervasive alienation and shallowness of modern society and the impending world crises and possible collapse caused by mindless exploitation of the earth and its biosphere are seen as resulting from a basically distorted sense of self - "the discrete and separate self". In Eisenstein's view this collapse is the most likely way the next stage in the evolution of man will come about, "a revolution in human beingness whose stirrings we already begin to feel."

This work displays an encyclopedic knowledge of multiple subjects and a great scope of vision covering many scientific disciplines, religion, spirituality, technology, economics, medicine, education, and more. The range and depth of vision displayed in this work is stunning. It contains many fascinating insights in every chapter.

Eisenstein begins by insightfully analyzing how the limits of growth, environmental destruction and the law of diminishing returns are inevitably and drastically affecting modern society to the point of crisis. He well describes the folly of always expecting to be rescued by a quick technological fix. In the following massive series of essays he lays out in detail his view on how this has come about and how it will be transformed. He feels the beginning of man's "Fall from Eden" started with the invention of agriculture, envisioning primitive hunter-gatherer societies as a sort of Edenic existence without the pervasive anxiety, alienation, greed and boredom of modern society, albeit supporting this view with some anthropological accounts.

He then explores and analyzes a number of related, supporting topics. The rise of science and the scientific method is analyzed from the same perspective. He well describes the deadening spiritual emptiness of modern scientific reductionism (especially Darwinism). This is part of an extensively worked out analysis of the follies of over application of scientific reductionism in modern technological civilization. He describes the increasing failures of

modern reductionist medicine despite its many successes, and cites anthropological accounts on how some primitive societies have little of the endemic diseases of modern society like cancer and heart disease. He views the very foundations of modern medicine in the desire to eliminate suffering as at least partially misguided in that it is ultimately impossible to prevent all suffering and that most suffering is caused by resistance and fear. A brilliant analysis looks at the development of the concepts of money and property, and on the bad consequences of the conversion of all kinds of wealth including intangible values into money.

He then presents his thesis that he had alluded to in many places previously in the book: the only solution is to "abandon the program of (technological) insulation and control, and the conception of the separate self on which it rests". He believes this is now culminating in a transformation to a new humanity. As I will explain, this idealism and optimism and the philosophy underlying it are where I most part company with Eisenstein.

He fully recognizes all the multitudinous ways in which the modern world is heading toward catastrophe, but he feels that when there is no choice, options that formerly were unthinkable will suddenly be the only way to go, and with that forced change in attitude a new age will usher in in which there is an entirely different sense of self.

A major part of this would be the replacement of present technology with a one much more friendly to nature and even more importantly, friendly to the basic nature of humanity. He discusses some examples, such as biodynamic agriculture. He considers that much of this great change will be to a vastly transformed way of thinking about work and play. The following quote seems to summarize much of this conception: "The concept of profiting by giving it away (rather than selling for a profit) is part of a larger shift in the nature of work. Instead of working for money, money becomes a side-effect of doing good work. No longer slave to money, work serves other goals: beauty, service, fun, or self-expression."

In the final chapter, he presents a grand coda. The current travail and impending probable death of billions in a partial collapse of technological civilization is seen as a sort of "Gaian Birthing". All the inconceivable suffering of humanity leading up to this is seen as tragic but necessary that a revitalized humanity attain its birthright in the evolution of the cosmos.

For all the excellencies of many of these essays, I thoroughly disagree with the philosophical foundations of this work, and therefore I must question its basic thesis. The reasons for my disagreement are mainly empirical: the world does not work that way, as shown in very numerous experiments and human experiences. Of course it is much easier to critique than to create, but to point these out (in the opinion of the reviewer) is a major purpose of review.

As I mentioned, the first and most important problem is the foundational philosophy of this work and which underlies much of the thought therein. I believe that this is seriously flawed. Because of the importance of this issue to the basic message of this book, I will devote much of the space of the review to

this area. This is the assumption that dualism, the notion that both spirit and matter separately exist and have fundamentally different natures, is dead. This has been assumed by the intellectual elite of our society for a long time and is part of the prevailing reductionist materialist scientific world view. Eisenstein describes dualism as impossible primarily because of the old argument that an "immaterial" thing can not affect or interact with a "material" thing. The problem here is with this philosophical reasoning, which should conform to reality rather than trying to force reality to conform to this particular philosophy.

To the contrary, dualism is very much alive and kicking. A number of phenomena established as real for a certainty in the view of many open minded thinkers and researchers clearly imply some form of dualism. Despite this it is "common wisdom" in the intelligentsia to deny that such evidence exists, or even possibly can exist. Examples of such phenomena having a mountain of evidence that they undoubtedly do exist are telepathy, clairvoyance, psychokinesis and precognition. Other examples include many veridical cases of mediumistic communication with the dead (or at least where this is the best explanation), at death appearances (ADAs), NDEs, and evidence best interpretable through reincarnation. Whether it can be conceptualized or not, human consciousness behaves very much like it is an immaterial something that still interacts with matter, using the physical brain as a means to operate in the physical world. This physical brain is indeed computer-like in many ways and intimately involved with the expression of consciousness and personality through thought, memory and emotion, but ultimately it is controlled by an entity that is partly outside the body or interpenetrates the body. Experimental evidence and very many veridical experiences establish this with near certainty. These areas constitute an entire dimension of data including human experience that is conveniently dismissed in the common belief system of our intellectual elite. Whatever the nature of consciousness, it is ultimately not (just) the body and brain. In that sense it is of a fundamentally different nature. Evidence also shows that dualism should include all living organisms, which down to the smallest cell seem to have a "life force" or engage in a life energy field which has some aspects of consciousness (intentionality). This is shown by numerous experiments demonstrating human intentional effects on living organisms from single cells to animals to other humans.

This book proposes instead a philosophy of materialistic emergence. A quote from chapter 3 expresses this quite clearly: "This book proposes a conception of self that is not a discrete, separate entity but an emergent property of complex interactions encompassing not just the brain but the entire body and the environment too, both physical and social." Another quote, from Chapter 6: "But my dear reader, when I say "life is more than a collection of enzymes, fatty acids. . ." please don't think I am proposing to add yet one more ingredient, an immaterial spirit to inhabit and animate the body. The truth is far more marvelous. I do not believe in an immaterial spirit, but I do believe in a material spirit! Spirit is not separate from matter, it is an emergent property of matter."

This philosophy is closely related to the materialistic epiphenomenalism theory of mind that it is an evolutionary accident emerging from the increasing complexity of brains as an "epiphenomenon" or side effect of neural complexity. In this view mental phenomena are entirely caused by physical phenomena, and cannot themselves cause anything.

Eisenstein appears to accept the reality of some psychic phenomena, but interprets these as manifestations of the intrinsic inseparability of observer and observed in a world where "all is one". He does not appear to include NDEs, OBEs, reincarnation evidence and mediumistic communications (whatever their interpretation) in his world view. However he does appear to accept the notion of the soul, though this seems in conflict with his main concept of materialistic emergence.

As has been shown above, the "emergence from matter" philosophy of this work conflicts with the evidence, for an emergent property of matter is inherently limited by the properties of matter. The paranormal phenomena discussed briefly above demand a model of man which has both a physical body and an immaterial entity (soul, spirit or some other conceptualization) which can communicate, sense and manipulate beyond the brain without the mediation of fields and forces known to physics, and which also can leave the body.

It should be pointed out that mystical visionaries in moments of "cosmic consciousness" and NDEers have often reported intimations of some sort of oneness of all things, sometimes interpreted as a "nonlocality" of consciousness. However, this does not imply the sort of view expounded in this book, which seems to be a form of panpsychism.

I will now describe some other, lesser, problems I find with this book.

Our self-conception as "discrete and separate beings in an objective universe of others" is described as distorted and limiting. I agree, but I view this as a necessary consequence of living in an inherently constricted and limiting physical world, where as a practical reality you should not meditate on railway tracks. As a practical reality we must deal with other human beings as separate beings. "Me" and "Thou" are for all practical purposes in truth separate while in this world, although undoubtedly there is in some sense an ultimate "oneness" encompassing all things. Mystical visionaries in moments of "cosmic consciousness" and NDEers have often reported intimations of some sort of oneness, sometimes interpreted as a "nonlocality" of consciousness. These experiences should be taken very seriously as glimpses of a higher reality. However, they do not imply the sort of panpsychism expounded in this work.

The negative human qualities and behaviors of cruelty, selfishness, greed, etc. are claimed to not be part of inherent human nature (and therefore do not need to be prevented through early upbringing and fear of punishment). Rather, these are due to "... human nature denied, human nature contorted by our misconception of who we are". This "human nature denied" is supposedly a sort of inborn natural goodness, which Eisenstein has decided we "really are". It seems to me that this ignores a mass of observations and other data that show to the contrary that these negative behaviors, thoughts and emotions are a natural result of

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man's animal heritage, and that children do in fact need to be educated starting at early age into having things like conscience and empathy.

Another problem is that I believe this work idealizes the non-technological and pre-agricultural past. The "separation from nature" is viewed as fundamentally misguided and leading to much of the modern dilemma. Hunter-gatherer societies seem to be idealized for their supposed freedom from any form of slavery to the necessities of survival. Quotes from Chapter 2: "...The division of labor introduced a new kind of anxiety into human life rooted in the idea that "You have to work in order to survive," a concept apparent today in the locution "to make a living." ... "food was always there for the taking, readily available regardless of prior planning or its lack." He cites several anthropological studies, and traveler's reports from the nineteenth century, that seem to support his thesis. I still think this is a combination of selection and idealistic preconception. Of course there were some primitive societies where living was generally easy, but I do not think this applied to even the majority. I believe that in reality, before modern technology and medicine inevitably separated us from nature in many ways, the "human condition" or life in general was generally short, physically miserable and brutish. This especially contrasts with modern life in "developed" countries of the Western world. This modern way of life may be shallow, anxiety-ridden, unsustainable and have many other problems, but it is still preferable to preindustrial and preagricultural conditions. Of course Eisenstein completely disagrees with me on this. It seems to me the "separation from nature" regretted by Eisenstein is one of the inevitable tradeoffs to achieve a civilized way of life with sufficient leisure to contemplate these very cosmic issues.

The conception of man and the world unfolded in this book is assumed to be an inspiring vision. This quote from Chapter 7 seems to encapsulate this: "That force (life) is the immanent purpose of an intelligent universe seeking always higher and higher levels of fulfillment. It is the emergent order that arises from organic complexity and that is fulfilled only in relationship to the Other, the environment, the planet, the cosmos." That this is actually inspiring is questionable because its system of thought does not deal with the question of whether such a wonderful understanding of human evolution really has any relevance to individual human beings. This is an inconsistency that of course does not relate to the ultimate truth of this vision, but is important nevertheless. It would be most relevant if it supplied something to assuage human existential fears of annihilation, if it would say something about the ancient theological problem of suffering. But it doesn't seem to. This book seems to go along with modern scientific materialism to reject any notion of a spiritual metaphysical reality, and with it any possibility of human personal survival of death and of the reality of human notions of love, good, etc. Perhaps the author would contend that these very concerns are symptoms of the ancient separation from nature. To be fair, of course many of the related aspects of the belief system of this work do have much relevance.

Further, the work begs the question of where this incredible manifestation of intelligence came from in the first place by deliberately refusing to implicate either a supernatural Source behind the Big Bang or any other concept of origins. Intelligence is simply implicit in the universe, no need to explain why or how. This is an incompleteness, a loose end left dangling - accepting as real the incredible (apparent) design and overall purpose of life and the universe, but not answering the first question that common sense would ask. This is: since in our experience complicated designed things with purpose are always the product of intelligence (namely our own), what is the intelligent source behind nature that would make sense of a human process of evolutionary transformation? If man is "meant" to progress to a new stage of consciousness and society, what is the teleological cause behind this? How can it be conceptualized if it is simply the matter and energy of the physical universe?

Lastly, it is apparently hoped that a near future collapse of world technological civilization will bring on a major transformation in world consciousness. This is similar to messianic and apocalyptic views often expounded by various New Age metaphysical movements. It is an idealistic assumption that ignores the realities of human (animal) nature, not realizing that necessity, the pressures for survival, have a strong tendency naturally to reduce man to a "survival of the fittest" law of the jungle. In order to survive, those with superior strength and intelligence will almost certainly subjugate or exterminate the weaker survivors. In a general social collapse there is little possibility for a transformation of consciousness.

Eisenstein states in his introduction, "More than anything, *The Ascent of Humanity* is about how to create the more beautiful world our hearts tell us is possible. I have long found most prescriptions for "what you can do" to reverse humanity's trajectory of ruin quite empty. . . . This book offers an entirely different approach that begins with the reconception of our very selves." I agree with his opinion of the existing literature, but unfortunately, for the reasons explained in this review, I find his new concept also sadly wanting. I greatly respect his idealism and attempt to find a better vision, but a "true believer" I am not. I too feel that a more beautiful world is at least possible, but I do not think we really know enough to propound a valid synthesis of this scope. It is noble nevertheless to strive, but if we still try, any conception needs to encompass all the data, not just selectively a part of it. Despite all our modern sophistication, Shakespeare's famous words from *Hamlet*, Act I scene 5 are still very much the truth: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

A minor point about the writing style. It is eloquent in many ways, but overly wordy and somewhat repetitive. Overall, this work could have been condensed down considerably, which would have made it easier to read and digest.

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