
Book Reviews

Csikszentmihalyi, M. 1993. *The Evolving Self: A Psychology for the Third Millennium*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, ISBN 0-06-016677-0, \$25.00, hardcover, pp. 358.

"What happens in the third millennium depends on what is in human consciousness now: on the ideas you and I believe in, the values we endorse, the actions we take." (p. 11)

". . . unless a person learns to control consciousness, he or she cannot achieve harmony with the cosmos, but will forever remain prey to the random forces of biology and society." (p. 170)

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's *The Evolving Self: A Psychology for the Third Millennium* is an ingenuous, thought provoking book aimed at helping us better understand and direct that small voice within each of us called the "self." *The Evolving Self* is a manifesto for human survival written in the format of a textbook complete with questions at the end of each chapter.

Part I is titled "The Lure of the Past." It is enjoyable and gives the reader a good account of our animalistic origins. Csikszentmihalyi points out that we human beings are not as far removed from the animal world as we would like to believe. (Indeed, 94% of our genetic materials overlap those of the chimpanzee.) Our evolutionary past is indelibly imprinted on the neurophysiological processes, the circuitry of the brain which motivates and directs our energies. However, the very genetic information which once insured our continued survival now threatens to destroy us. As Csikszentmihalyi says, "The genes don't really care about us at all, and if it helped their reproduction, they would just as soon have us live in ignorance and misery. Genes are not our little helpers; it is we who are their servants." (p. 65)

According to Csikszentmihalyi, dysfunctional genes are part of a larger problem. Existing cultures, it seems, place too much importance on the acquisition of artifacts and goods that have no real survival value. The overemphasis on the acquisition of these material "things" have resulted in a society that, ". . . looks up to the likes of Donald Trump, Ivan Boesky, and Michael Milken because they have amassed large herds of dollars; worships General Norman Schwarzkopf because he bombed the enemy into submission; pays millions to a basketball player because he jumps higher than anyone else; and swoons at the feet of entertainers who serve as symbols of youth, beauty, and a happy life, even though the person behind the smiling mask is more often than not a confused and unhappy wretch." (p. 73)

Doomed by eternal bondage to amoral genes we now find ourselves living in a fatuous culture characterized by waste and greed. Wait, there is more. There is consciousness. . . there is the *self*.

Csikszentmihalyi tells us that we are threatened by our own consciousness, our evolving self. At some point in evolutionary time he says that we

became aware of the fact that we had thoughts. That is to say we realized we were thinking. At that point, “. . .it was possible for people to emancipate themselves from the rule of genes and of culture. A person could now have unique dreams, and take an individual stance based on personal goals.” (p. 77)

In essence, we gradually developed and finally recognized the non-physical “entity” or reflective consciousness that we have come to call the self. Csikszentmihalyi defines consciousness as, “. . .like a magnetic field, an aura, or a harmonic tone resulting from the myriad of separate sensations collecting in the brain.” (pp. 22-23) This non-physical reflective consciousness or reflective self seems to literally inhabit our brain, directing our thoughts, interpreting our emotions, while all of the time selectively storing and retrieving information without explanation or justification.

However, as Csikszentmihalyi again points out, the self that freed us soon fell prey to selfishness and the illusion of an ego. Once the ego is present it will act to preserve itself at all costs. The self, as it turns out, is controlled by the same principles of evolution that control our genes. Like our genes, our self also seeks energy from its environment to stop entropy and survive. The self constantly struggles to obtain those things the culture and society have chosen to value. Csikszentmihalyi says, quoting William James, “A man’s Self is the sum-total of all that he can call his, not only his body, and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his land and horse and yacht and bank account.” (p. 79)

Part II, “The Power of the Future,” then goes on to address the possibilities for an evolving self. While it contains some interesting and thought provoking reading, it will likely be more illuminating to readers not yet familiar with the concept of flow. In this section, Csikszentmihalyi posits a wide range of theoretical principles and ideas related to such diverse topics as evolution, population control, morality, education, wisdom, transcendence, spirituality, and even the fear of death.

Also in Part II we are called on to establish revolutionary groups (cells) which ostensibly, “. . .make it possible to experience flow while working for the most ambitious goal available to the human imagination: to blend our individual voice in the cosmic harmony, to join our unique consciousness with the emerging consciousness of the universe, to fold our momentary center of psychic energy into the current that tends toward increasing complexity and order.” (p. 293)

Those familiar with Csikszentmihalyi’s body of work will agree that few people have contributed more to our understanding of intrinsic motivation. For this reason alone, leisure scholars should continue to respect and give serious consideration to his theories and ideas. In the end, however, I do not think *The Evolving Self* measures up to Csikszentmihalyi’s earlier works. While the essential message is important—the human capacity for self direction and growth—the pace and style of the writing compromise the integrity of the content. I also think the Introduction and most of Part I promised much more than was delivered. At some point the book became redundant

and hard to follow. Even worse, at times I felt Csikszentmihalyi was preaching to me.

As I indicated earlier, at the end of each chapter there is a series of questions that prompt the reader to reflect on ideas presented in that chapter. Educators may find this approach useful, but others will find that the questions tend to trivialize the material.

From what we know about the activity of the brain, Csikszentmihalyi is right to theorize that consciousness, in all probability, can only occur as a result of brain activity. It is, however, a theoretical position, not a given. It is one thing to theorize what a "self" might be. It is quite another to proclaim what the self "is."

Finally, it should be noted that in the first few pages Csikszentmihalyi advises religious fundamentalists and adamant materialists to seek other reading. It is sound advice. The book is atheistic in tone and content. It may be offensive to some religious fundamentalists, just as it is likely to affront many who believe in the possibility of the metaphysical. Many people believe that it is possible, even probable, that there are things that human beings, trapped as we are by our limited physiology, can never know, never experience, or never imagine. They call this belief "faith."

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Osborne, D. and Gaebler, T. 1992. *Reinventing Government*. New York, NY: Penguin Press, ISBN 0-452-26942-3, \$13.00 softcover, 405 pp.

Are you disturbed and exasperated by the way government operates? If your answer is "yes" and you seek to change the system, this book is for you. After four years of concerted effort analyzing governmental entities "doing more with less," Osborne and Gaebler have produced a "snapshot" of emerging government and an outline of a new style of doing the public's business. The authors suggest that government's problems are rooted in "hierarchical centralized bureaucracies designed in the 1930s or 1940s [which] simply do not function well in the rapidly changing, information-rich, knowledge intensive society and economy of the 1990s." (p. 12) They argue for a paradigm shift to ensure continued service in a world of budget reductions, increasing diversity and social challenges. In this regard, the book provides a fresh look at the options open to a government in crisis.

Reinventing Government is organized around ten fundamental principles of entrepreneurship with introductory and concluding sections. Beginning with a description of the economic and social inadequacies of current governmental practices, the authors offer a choice different from changing tax structures or spending habits; that of changing and hopefully improving governance itself. Acknowledging the importance of government and realizing that civilization cannot function effectively without it, Osborne and Gaebler