

**Excerpt from *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction,
Superhero Comics and the Paranormal***
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Down in Big Sur, well before the mutant hippies, in the fall of 1962, two young Stanford graduates, Michael Murphy (b. 1930) and Richard Price (1930-86), cofounded a little community of visionaries in a transformed spa motel on a cliff. They soon named their little enterprise the Esalen Institute, after a Native America tribal group (the Esselen) that once populated the area. The place quickly became both the original home of the human potential movement and a countercultural mecca.

Murphy and Price adapted the key idea of “human potential” from the British American writer Aldous Huxley, who had spoken of something he called “human potentialities.” Much indebted to his famous experiments with psychedelics (another keyword that he helped coin and another countercultural subject that was quickly linked to Mutation, in both highly negative and highly positive ways), Huxley used the expression “human potentialities” to argue that human consciousness and the human body possess vast untapped resources of Mind and energy. Consciousness, Huxley thought, is not something produced without remainder by the brain. It is something more likely *filtered through* and *reduced by* the brain, much as a television set or radio receives a distant signal that is not really in the box (or the brain). Think Ray Palmer’s storehouse of knowledge or Gopi Krishna’s Cosmic Mind filtering into the brain. Consciousness in its true nature, then, is something to capitalize for Huxley. It is essentially transcendent and ultimately cosmic in nature and scope. He called it Mind at Large.

Drawing on such altered states and altered words (and Frederic Myers), Murphy would go on to suggest that the human potential includes all sorts of extraordinary powers that are “supernormal,” from psychical abilities like clairvoyance and telepathy, to extraordinary physical phenomena like dramatic healings, to, in a few rare cases (like Teresa of Avila, Joseph of Copertino, and Daniel D. Home), apparent levitation or flight. All of these things, of course, have been exaggerated in religious literature, folklore, and modern fantasy as supernatural, but, according to authors like Murphy, they are better understood as foreshadowings or intuitions of the hidden potentials of evolution. Seen in this light, pop-cultural genres are essentially human-potential genres in disguise, genres that “might prefigure luminous knowings and powers that can be realized by the human race,” as Murphy put it in his 1992 magnum opus, *The Future of the Body*.”

So, too, Murphy sees modern sports as a kind of paranormal theater in which supernormal capacities and altered states of energy are commonly evoked and experienced “in the zone.” Here he echoes the ancient martial arts traditions of East Asia (tai’ chi, karate, aikido, chi kung, kung fu, etc.), in which sport, subtle energies, and paranormal powers are profoundly linked. These, I must add, played a major role in the various 1970s martial arts titles of the superhero comics, thus constituting yet another line of Orientation. Hence one of my own favorites, the Iron Fist story arc of Roy Thomas and Gil Kane. Some of the stranger moments of sports lore that Murphy has documented in great detail also bear a distant relationship to one of the crazier genres of comic books that I adored as a kid: the occult sports genre.

Much like the martial arts masters and the athletes, Murphy most of all wanted a *practice* to actualize the evolutionary potentials. So too did the institute. Esalen imagined itself from the very beginning as a kind of alternative private academy for this evolving future of the body, that is, as a place where the human potentialities hinted at in psychedelic, psychical, and mystical experiences could be supported, nurtured, and developed further through consistent transformative practices and a stable institutional structure.

Consider, for example, the case of George Leonard, *Look* journalist, education reformer, and later aikido master who coined the phrase “the human potential movement” with Murphy in 1965. Leonard was well known in the late 1960s for his radical models of education reform. One of the opening scenes of his widely popular *Education of Ecstasy* (1968) has Leonard entering a classroom and sensing a young witch whose psychic powers, he realizes, are laced with an obvious and dangerous eroticism. He can feel his skin tingling as he exits the room and wonders about the young girl’s fate in a superficial and uncomprehending world. In Leonard’s model of ecstatic education, the typical American high school classroom is a place where occult talents are first manifested (often around puberty and the appearance of the sexual powers) and then cruelly crushed under the weight social control, disbelief, and pure neglect. The young woman will forget about her own human potential, about her own magico-erotic superpowers. She *must* forget them to survive in this particular social world.

If this is beginning to sound like the base mythology of the X-Men, that is, if Esalen sounds more than a little like Professor Xavier’s school for mutants, well, then you have some idea of where this is all going. If you also already know that the language of actualizing human potential is omnipresent in the X-Men stories, as my opening epigraph makes clear, you are even closer. If you imagine, however, that our story goes back to New York City in 1963 with Lee and Kirby, or even to Big Sur in 1962 with Murphy and Price, you are quite mistaken. As we have seen already with the mythemes of Alienation and Radiation, it is my central intention to demonstrate that the mytheme of Mutation possesses a “secret life,” that is, that the superhero mythologies involving mutation are deeply indebted to the earlier Spiritualist, psychical research, and metaphysical traditions.

In terms of the present, one only need point to Michael Murphy’s *The Future of the Body*, an eight-hundred page masterwork that is without peer in the history of the literature on the mystical and occult potentials of evolution. Put mythically, this is something that Professor Xavier could have written for his private school for the gifted—a kind of textbook for educating mutants in the theory, history, and practice of their Fortean wild talents. Murphy, however, was hardly the first to propose that evolution may hide within its mysterious processes much more than pure chance and nonmeaning. Indeed, Murphy’s own primary inspiration was none other than the Indian philosopher and spiritual teacher Sri Aurobindo, who, as we noted in chapter 2, developed an elaborate visionary metaphysics pointing toward a highly evolved spiritual Superman in the second decade of the twentieth century. But there were others still.

We have already seen, with respect to both the ancient-astronaut thesis and Carl Sagan (Alienation) and the mystical implications of quantum physics and Niels Bohr (Radiation), how the lines between “popular” and “elite” theories are not always so clear, and how what many assume to be popular or “pseudoscientific” ideas in fact have deep and distinguished prehistories. We can see the same patterns here again in Mutation, and with no less a scientist than Francis Crick, the codiscoverer of the DNA molecule. In 1973, Crick wrote a paper with Leslie Orgel on directed panspermia, “the theory that organisms were deliberately transmitted to the earth by intelligent beings on another planet.” What they actually had in mind here was early life as a kind of “infection” of microorganisms stabilized and carried for millions of years in a “special long-range unmanned spaceship.” After recognizing just how similar this sounds to science fiction, the two authors even cite another scientist who had speculated that “we might have evolved from the microorganisms inadvertently left behind by some previous visitors from another planet (for example, in their garbage).”

Now there’s a twist.

Closer to Murphy’s own evolutionary vision was the famous biologist and science activist Julian Huxley, who happen to be both the grandson of T. H. Huxley

(who gave us the word “agnosticism”), and the brother of Aldous Huxley (who gave us the word “neurotheologian” and answered his distinguished grandfather’s agnosticism with his own search for a new Gnosticism). In 1942, in his classic *Evolution: The Modern Synthesis*, Julian encouraged his readers to own their own role in determining the “purpose of the future of man” and to cease putting human responsibilities “on to the shoulders of mythical gods or metaphysical absolutes.” In short, in a stunning example of Authorization, he suggested that we must now evolve ourselves. More radically still, well within the mytheme of Mutation this time, he wrote openly about how “there are other faculties, the bare existence of which is as yet scarcely established: and these too might be developed until they were as commonly distributed as, say musical or mathematical gifts are today. I refer to telepathy and other extra-sensory activities of mind.”

Closer still was the great French philosopher, Henri Bergson. Bergson held a prestigious chair at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, worked with President Woodrow Wilson to help found the League of Nations, and won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1928. During his prime, Bergson was as famous as Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein. He was also the president of the London Society for Psychical Research in 1913. Mystics, for the philosopher, were forerunners of human evolution, and psychical powers were hints of what we might all still someday become in the future. Thus, in *Creative Evolution* (1907), he wrote beautifully of what he called the *élan vital*, a cosmic evolutionary force that reveals the universe to be, as he put it in 1932 in the very last lines of his very last book, “a machine for the making of gods.”

Well before Bergson, the Canadian doctor Richard Maurice Bucke (1837-1901) wrote an eccentric and rather erratic tome about evolution as a mystical force creating spiritual, cultural, and literary geniuses just before he died- his 1901 classic, *Cosmic Consciousness*. Despite its obvious flaws and historical naiveté, the book is just as obviously inspired. Accordingly, it would have a significant impact on later readers, including both of our case studies in chapter 6, fantasy artist Barry Windsor-Smith and sci-fi writer Philip K. Dick. Given this, and Bucke’s obvious dissent from the essential randomness of accepted Darwinian biology, it seems wise to spend a bit more time on the author.

By birth, Bucke was a farm boy, by training an accomplished medical doctor and psychologist. The original inspiration for his mysticism was literary and, to be more precise, poetic. In 1867, a visitor read some Walt Whitman to him. He was stunned. Five years later, in the spring of 1872, this poetic inspiration resulted in a dramatic mystical opening in London. Bucke and two friends had just spent the evening reading the Romantic poets: Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Browning, and above all, Whitman. On the carriage ride home just after midnight, it happened:

All at once, without warning of any kind, he found himself wrapped around, as it were, by a flame-colored cloud. For an instant he thought of fire—some sudden conflagration in the great city. The next (instant) he knew that the light was within himself. Directly after there came upon him a sense of exultation, or immense joyousness, accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination quite impossible to describe. Into his brain streamed one momentary lightning-flash of the Brahmic splendor which ever since lightened his life. Upon his heart fell one drop of the Brahmic bliss, leaving thenceforward for always an aftertaste of heaven.

Here we see immediately our mytheme of Orientation (“Brahmic Bliss”) and at least a hint of Radiation (“a flame-colored cloud,” like a “sudden conflagration”). But it

was the mytheme of Mutation that would carry the “intellectual illuminations quite impossible to describe” for him and finally result in the appearance of *Cosmic Consciousness* almost thirty years later.

Cosmic Consciousness, as its name implies, is defined as a “consciousness of the cosmos, that is, of the life and order of the universe.” It is not some vague emotional experience. It comes with a definite intellectual enlightenment or illumination- *it teaches things*, even if these things far exceed the present cognitive development of the brain (hence the “quite impossible to describe” part). Cosmic Consciousness also transforms the human being, whom it wraps in living flame, rendering him or her “almost of a member of a new species.” The experience also morally elevates the individual, providing a “sense of immortality, a consciousness of eternal life, not a conviction that he shall have this, but the consciousness that he has it already.

Bucke is convinced the human race as a whole will eventually evolve into this Cosmic Consciousness, that “this step in evolution is even now being made,” and that such individuals are becoming more and more common (this is where his argument gets really dicey, and statistically wacky.) In any case, he clearly understands studying the history of such experiences as a key component to this awakening, and he approaches the writing of his book as a means to “aid men and women in making the almost infinitely important step” of making conscious contact with this Cosmic Consciousness. Which is all to say that *Bucke understands his book as itself a force of mystical mutation: in essence, Cosmic Consciousness can catalyze Cosmic Consciousness. And why not? Had Bucke himself not been changed, in an instant, after reading the Romantic poets?*

Writing such a book-as-mutation involved hard intellectual labor. Thus, Bucke reports how in correspondence with the British writer and interpreter of Hinduism Edward Carpenter (yet another early evolutionary mystic), his speculations were deepened and disciplined until he arrived at his “germinal concept,” namely, the idea “that there exists a family springing from, living among, but scarcely forming a part of ordinary humanity, whose members are spread abroad throughout the advanced races of mankind and throughout the last forty centuries of the world’s history.” In short, the X-Men before the X-men.

But even Bucke at the turn of the century was hardly the origin point of the mytheme of Mutation. In chapter 1, we looked, for example, at John Uri Lloyd’s 1895 novel *Etidorhpa*, whose hallow-earth themes, particularly in the mouth of the gray, alienlike guide, are positively filled with references to superhuman powers and latent faculties that “further evolutions” will actualize in the race as telepathy or “mind language,” telekinesis, cosmic spirit, and so on.

We have also already encountered the real historical origins of two absolutely key terms in the X-Men mythology: magnetism and telepathy. It is not much of an exaggeration to suggest that, without these two key concepts, there could be no recognizable X-Men series. These, after all, are the superpowers of the mythology’s main villain (Magneto) and its founding teacher (Professor Xavier), respectively, both of which, moreover, appeared in that very first issue.

As the sensitive reader may now guess, Magneto’s magnetic powers stem back to the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth- century movement of animal magnetism around the figure of Anton Mesmer. The same reader might also now realize that Professor X’s central superpower of telepathy can be definitively traced back to the London Society for Psychical Research (the S.P.R.) and a single man whom we have already met numerous times, Frederic Myers. Recall that Myers coined the term “telepathy” in 1882 and linked it directly to the spiritual forces of evolution, that is, he saw it as evidence of our evolving “extraterrene” supernatural nature.

Attending the first official meeting of the Society for Psychical Research that same winter of 1882 was none other than Alfred Russel Wallace, the co-originator with

Charles Darwin of the theory of biological evolution. Fame aside, Wallace cared little for the orthodoxies of religion or science. He attended séances, performed Mesmeric experiments on his students, asserted the postmortem survival of our mental and spiritual natures, and speculated, with his S.P.R. colleagues, that “there yet seems to be evidence of a Power which has guided the action of those (evolutionary) laws in definite directions and for special ends.

In other words, the mytheme of Mutation, the idea of mystical mutations that produce various supernormal powers, is not a countercultural invention or some superficial fancy, and it certainly did not begin with the Lee and Kirby’s X-Men in 1963. It has been in the air for 150 years now and has flourished among some of Western culture’s most distinguished intellectuals, philosophers, and scientists. Indeed, it goes back to the very origins, and to one of the two historical founders, of evolutionary biology itself.