

# The Western Mind at the Threshold: Astrology and the Postmodern Crisis

by Richard Tarnas

*The following article was first presented in 1986 as a lecture for the Institute for the Study of Consciousness in Berkeley, and then in a longer plenary address given to the First International Cycles and Symbols Conference, a gathering of psychologists and astrologers held in San Francisco in 1990. Between the publications of his two books (The Passion of the Western Mind in 1991 and Cosmos and Psyche in 2006) Richard Tarnas wrote the talk up as an article for the Theosophical publication, Quest magazine, in 1993, summarizing some of the key philosophical points he was developing in those two books. We believe it represents a particularly succinct statement about astrology's broader implications in ways that continue to hold relevance for our times—perhaps even more today than thirty years ago. For that reason, we felt it was worth bringing to the public's attention again.*



Vastness of the cosmos

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For some time now it's been evident that we live in an extraordinarily pivotal era in human history, and in the last several years this impression has been reinforced dramatically. In the summer of 1989, just a few months before the "Velvet Revolution" took place in Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Havel wrote a remarkable speech which he gave in his acceptance of the German Booksellers Peace Prize. Havel wrote this:

*As we approach the end of the second millennium, the world...finds itself at a peculiar crossroads. It is a long time since there were so many grounds for hoping that everything will turn out well. At the same time, there have never been so many reasons for us to fear that if everything went wrong the catastrophe would be final.*

What Havel recognizes here is something I think we all have come to see in the course of our lifetime: namely, that seldom have the ideas and actions of thoughtful men and women counted for more in the history of our species. The critical condition of modern societies throughout the nations of the West, the collapse of communism in the nations of the East, the extreme distress of the nations of the South, the inexorably growing ecological crisis of the entire planet: all these have made unavoidably evident the need for a new vision, a new world view that could bring light and coherence to the contemporary human mind. In the absence of such a vision, the old assumptions remain blunderingly in force, dangerously inadequate to the challenges we all face. If humankind has ever needed an illuminating world view, it is now.

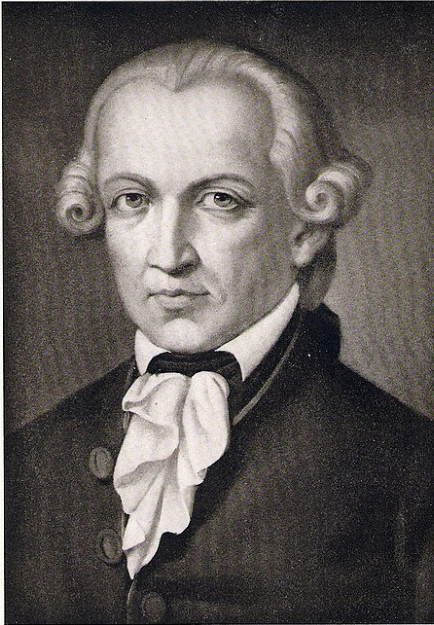
But if we are to move toward such a vision, we must clearly understand where we are now and how we got here. Or more precisely, we must understand where our culture is now, and how it got there. For us really to understand what intellectual assumptions reign in the larger cultural mind we have to step out of our own understanding for a moment. Then we can see more clearly what we may have to offer. Let me begin with a brief overview of the background to our present intellectual situation.

I believe we can distinguish three fundamental steps in the making of the modern world view. These basic steps can be associated with the figures of Copernicus, Descartes, and Kant.

With Copernicus, the modern mind recognized that the Earth was not the absolute fixed center of the universe. As a consequence, the modern mind came to realize that the human being is not the central focus of cosmic meaning, but is rather only a peripheral being in a vast centerless cosmos. In the modern universe, humankind is on its own.

The second step came with Descartes and his declaration of the *cogito*, "I think, therefore I am," and his establishing of a mechanistic universe for the Copernican revolution. It was Descartes who first fully grasped and articulated the experience of the autonomous modern self as being fundamentally distinct and separate from an objective external world that it seeks to understand and master. With Descartes, the modern mind had the insight that there is something fundamentally different between the subjective human consciousness and the objective external world. It perceived the world as something that is radically unlike the human being, as something that is impersonal and unconscious.

And finally the third great step came with Immanuel Kant, through whom the modern mind had the crucial insight that the world the human being knows is a world that to a significant extent is constituted by the structures of the human mind. As a consequence, there came the modern realization that the human mind cannot know the world as it is in itself. For if the human mind is in some sense fundamentally distinct and different from the external world, and if the only reality that the human mind has direct access to is its own experience, then the world apprehended by the mind is ultimately only the mind's interpretation of the world. Human knowledge of reality will by necessity be forever unable to achieve its goal, for



IMMANUEL KANT  
From a painting

**Immanuel Kant, 1724-1804**

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there is no guarantee that the human mind can ever accurately mirror a world with which its connection is so indirect and mediated. Instead, everything that this mind can perceive and judge will be to some undefined extent determined by its own character, its own subjective structures. The mind can experience only phenomena, not things-in-themselves; appearances, not an independent reality. In the modern universe, the human mind is on its own.

Now in the subsequent evolution of the modern mind, each of the fundamental shifts which I am associating here symbolically with the figures of Copernicus, Descartes, and Kant has been sustained, elaborated, and pressed to its extreme. Thus Copernicus's radical displacement of the human being from the cosmic center was emphatically reinforced and extended to its logical conclusion by Darwin's theory of evolution in which the human being was recognized as being but one more species caught in the evolutionary flux—no longer divinely ordained, no longer absolute and secure, no longer the crown of creation, the favored child of the universe, but rather just one more ephemeral species. The Darwinian revolution simply extended the Copernican picture. Just as the Earth is only another planet, so now with Darwin the human being is only another animal. Placed in the vastly expanded cosmos of modern astronomy, the human being now spins adrift, once the noble center of the cosmos, now an insignificant inhabitant of a tiny planet revolving around an undistinguished star—you know the familiar litany—at the edge of one galaxy amongst billions, in an indifferent and ultimately hostile universe.

In the same way, Descartes's schism between the personal and conscious human subject and the impersonal and unconscious material universe was ratified and augmented by subsequent scientific developments, from Newtonian physics all the way to contemporary big-bang cosmology, black holes, quarks, W and Z particles, and grand unified superforce theories. The world revealed by modern science has been a world devoid of spiritual purpose, opaque, ruled by chance and necessity, without intrinsic meaning. The human soul has not felt at home in the modern cosmos: the soul can hold dear its poetry and its music, its private metaphysics and religion, but these find no certain foundation in the empirical universe.

And so too with the third of this trinity of modern alienation, the great epistemological schism established by Kant—and here we see the pivot of the shift from the modern mind to the postmodern mind. For Kant's recognition of the human intellect's subjective ordering of reality, and thus ultimately the relative and unrooted nature of human knowledge, has been extended and deepened by a host of subsequent developments, from anthropology, linguistics, sociology of knowledge, and quantum physics to cognitive psychology, semiotics, literary theory, and philosophy of science; from Marx, Nietzsche, Weber, and Freud to Heisenberg, Wittgenstein, Kuhn, and Foucault. The consensus is decisive: the world is in some essential sense a construct. Human knowledge is radically interpretive. There are no perspective-independent facts. Every act of perception and cognition is mediated, situated, contextual, theory-soaked. Meaning is rendered by the mind and cannot be assumed to inhere in the object, in the world beyond the mind, for that world can never be contacted without having already been saturated by the mind's own nature. That world cannot even be justifiably postulated. Radical uncertainty prevails, for in the end what one knows and experiences is to an indeterminate extent a projection.

Thus, to sum up the picture sketched so far: the cosmological estrangement of modern consciousness initiated by Copernicus, and the ontological estrangement initiated by Descartes, were completed by the epistemological estrangement initiated by Kant: a threefold mutually enforced prison of modern alienation.



**Double bind**

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Now I would like to point out to you here the striking resemblance between this state of affairs and the condition that Gregory Bateson famously described as the "double bind": the impossibly problematic situation in which mutually contradictory demands eventually lead a person to become schizophrenic. In Bateson's formulation, there were four basic premises necessary to constitute a double bind situation between a child and a "schizophrenogenic" mother: 1) The child's relationship to the mother is one of vital dependency, thereby making it critical for the child to assess communications from the mother accurately. 2) The child receives contradictory or incompatible information from the mother at different levels, whereby for example her explicit verbal communication is fundamentally denied by the "metacommunication," the nonverbal context in which the explicit message is conveyed (thus the mother who says to her child with hostile eyes and a rigid body, "Darling, you know I love you so much"). The two sets of signals cannot be understood as coherent. 3) The child is not given any opportunity to ask questions of the mother that would clarify the communication or resolve the contradiction. And 4) the child cannot leave the field, i.e., the relationship. In such circumstances, Bateson found, the child is forced to distort his or her perception of both outer and inner realities, with serious psychopathological consequences.

Now if we substitute in these four premises "world" for mother and "human being" for child we have the modern double bind in a nutshell:

1. The human being's relationship to the world is one of vital dependency, thereby making it critical for the human being to assess the nature of that world accurately.
2. The human mind receives contradictory or incompatible information about its situation with respect to the world, whereby its inner psychological and spiritual sense of things is incoherent with the scientific metacommunication.
3. Epistemologically the human mind cannot achieve direct communication with the world.
4. And existentially the human being cannot leave the field.

The differences between Bateson's psychiatric double bind and the modern existential condition are more in degree than in kind: the modern condition is an extraordinarily encompassing and fundamental double bind, made less immediately conspicuous simply because it is so pervasive in our time. We have the post-Copernican dilemma of being a peripheral and insignificant inhabitant of a vast cosmos, and the post-Cartesian dilemma of

being a conscious, purposeful, and personal subject confronting an unconscious, purposeless, and impersonal universe, with these compounded by the post-Kantian dilemma of there being no possible means by which the human subject can know the actual universe in its essence. We are evolved from, embedded in, and defined by a reality that is radically alien to our own, and, moreover, cannot ever be directly contacted in cognition.

This double bind of modern consciousness has been recognized in one form or another since at least Pascal, the great seventeenth-century mathematician and religious thinker, when he said:



I am terrified by the eternal silence of these infinite spaces.

Our psychological and spiritual predispositions are absurdly at variance with the world revealed by our scientific method. We seem to receive two messages from our existential situation: on the one hand, strive, give oneself to the quest for meaning and spiritual fulfillment; but on the other hand, know that the universe, of whose substance we are derived, is entirely indifferent to that quest, soulless in character, and nullifying in its effects. We are at once aroused and crushed. For inexplicably, absurdly, the cosmos is inhuman, yet we are not. The situation is profoundly unintelligible.



**Double bind**

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Now if we follow Bateson's diagnosis and apply it to the larger modern condition, it should not be surprising what kinds of response the modern psyche has made to this situation as it attempts to escape the double bind's inherent contradictions. Either inner or outer realities tend to be distorted: inner feelings are repressed and denied, as in apathy and psychic numbing, or they are inflated in compensation, as in narcissism and egocentrism; or the outer world is slavishly submitted to as the only reality, or it is aggressively objectified and exploited. There is also the strategy of flight, through various kinds of escapism: compulsive economic consumption, absorption in the mass media, faddism, cults, ideologies, nationalistic fervor, alcoholism, drug addiction. When avoidance mechanisms cannot be sustained, there is anxiety, paranoia, chronic hostility, a feeling of helpless victimization, a tendency to suspect all meanings, an impulse toward self-negation, a sense of purposelessness and absurdity, of irresolvable inner contradiction, a fragmenting of consciousness. And at the extreme there are the full-blown psychopathological reactions of the schizophrenic: self-destructive violence, delusional states, massive amnesia, catatonia, automatism, mania, nihilism. The modern world knows each of these different reactions in various combinations and compromise formations, and its social and political life is

notoriously so determined.

Nor should it be surprising that twentieth-century philosophy finds itself in the condition we now see. Of course modern philosophy has brought forth some courageous intellectual responses to the post-Copernican situation, but by and large the philosophy that has dominated our century and our universities resembles nothing so much as a severe obsessive-compulsive sitting on his bed repeatedly tying and untying his shoes because he never quite gets it right—while in the meantime Socrates and Hegel and Aquinas are already high up the mountain on their hike, breathing the bracing alpine air, seeing new and unexpected vistas.

But there is one crucial way in which the modern situation is not identical to the psychiatric double bind, and this is the fact that the modern human being has not simply been a helpless child, but has actively engaged the world and pursued a specific strategy and mode of activity—a Promethean project of freeing itself from and controlling nature. The modern mind has demanded a specific type of interpretation of the world: its scientific method has required explanations of phenomena that are concretely predictive, and thus impersonal, mechanistic, structural. To fulfill their purposes, these explanations of the universe have been systematically "cleansed" of all spiritual and human qualities. Of course we cannot be certain that the world is in fact what these explanations suggest. We can only be certain that the world is to an indeterminate extent susceptible to this way of interpretation. Kant's insight is a sword that cuts two ways. Although on the one hand it appears to place the world beyond the grasp of the human mind, on the other hand it recognizes that the impersonal and soulless world of modern scientific cognition is not necessarily the whole story. Rather, that world is the only kind of story that for the past three centuries the Western mind has considered intellectually justifiable. In Ernest Gellner's words,

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*It was Kant's merit to see that this compulsion (for mechanistic impersonal explanations) is in us, not in things. (And) it was Weber's to see that it is historically a specific kind of mind, not human mind as such, that is subject to this compulsion.*

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So one crucial part of the modern double bind is not airtight. In the case of Bateson's schizophrenogenic mother and child, the mother more or less holds all the cards, for she unilaterally controls the communication. But the lesson of Kant is that the locus of the communication problem—i.e. the problem of human knowledge of the world—must first be viewed as centering in the human mind, not in the world as such. Thus it is theoretically possible that the human mind has more cards than it has been playing.



**Stanislov Grof**

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I believe there are two possible paths of resolution for this fundamental crisis in the Western world view: one esoteric, the other exoteric; and ultimately the two may require each other to be fulfilled. In the exoteric case, I would suggest that our path may take us through the extraordinary synthesis that is now emerging from the fields of psychology and philosophy—in particular, from the seminal development of twentieth-century depth psychology and its ever-deepening exploration of the unconscious, from Freud and Jung to James Hillman and Stanislov Grof; with this stream in turn joined to the participatory epistemology that has been developing from the Romantic philosophical tradition, rooted in the work of Goethe, Hegel, Coleridge, and Emerson, and finding new expression in recent philosophy of science and ecofeminist thinking. I have discussed this emerging synthesis in the epilogue to my book *The Passion of the Western Mind*, but in this article I would like briefly to set out another, more esoteric path toward resolving our current world-view crisis—an approach certainly related to that coming from psychology and philosophy, but one which in certain respects addresses and resolves even more precisely the nature of our current crisis of world view.

I have outlined the double bind of the modern world view as having three basic levels:

1. the cosmological prison from Copernicus—we live in a universe in which the Earth is not the fixed center and the human being is merely peripheral;
2. the ontological prison from Descartes—we live in a world that is impersonal and unconscious, fundamentally separate and different from human consciousness; and
3. the epistemological prison from Kant—we live in a world that cannot ultimately be known for what it is by the human mind.

These are the three basic elements of the modern world view that we might say underlie the modern prison of human alienation:

*Now what can possibly meet this three-fold challenge?*

I imagine that many people reading this article have witnessed the occurrence of certain coincidences between the events and experiences of their lives and the positions of the planets in the heavens. Many of us have observed that these coincidences occur in an astonishingly systematic manner. Now the existence of such astrological coincidences strongly suggests that the universe is a very different place than the one the modern

world view has assumed. Because astrological coincidences imply three things:

First, in answer to Copernicus, they suggest that the universe is patterned in a way that relates in time and space directly to the human species, that centers on this Earth, that centers even on individual human beings. They suggest that although this Earth is indeed not a fixed center, it is in fact a moving center of the cosmos, a focus of cosmic meaning even as the Earth rotates on its axis, revolves around the Sun, and spirals through the vast galaxy.

Second, in answer to Descartes, astrological coincidences suggest that the physical universe is patterned according to certain formal principles or archetypes that are not merely mechanistic but are vividly personal and humanly meaningful—i.e., Venus and Jupiter and Saturn and Mars and the rest of the pantheon from ancient mythology and modern archetypal depth psychology—and that therefore the world is not a machine (which after all is a man-made category) but rather is ensouled, an anima mundi. The cosmos appears to be structured in such a way as to suggest an extraordinary synthesis of mathematical astronomy and epic poetry.

And finally, in answer to Kant, these astrological coincidences suggest that the universe can indeed be known by the human mind, because the universe's operative principles are principles with which human experience is directly and intimately familiar from within—that is to say, the universe's operative principles are archetypes which are both subjective and objective, simultaneously informing not only human experience but also planetary motions. As the Platonic tradition affirmed, the categories of the human mind are also categories of a universal mind, the two minds being intimately connected.



Stars

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It is for these three reasons that I believe astrology represents such a unique, a cosmic, avenue to a new world view. Other "new paradigm" strategies either assume that one or more dimensions of the modern predicament do not exist, or they grapple with one or at most two of them. None grapples with all three of them, certainly not decisively. Only astrology provides the kind of evidence that suggests that all three components of the modern predicament can be transcended. If astrological correlations are real, then the underlying Copernican, Cartesian, and Kantian bases of the modern world view cannot be sustained. The whole modern world view is undermined at its very foundation.

It is exactly for that reason that I think certain scientists—or rather, scientific fundamentalists—regard astrology with such animosity, and that real scandals occur like that which destroyed the credibility of the American Committee for the Scientific Investigation of the Claims of the Paranormal. They realize that the whole ballgame is at stake, perhaps much in the same way that the Catholic Church thought that its whole ballgame was at stake with Galileo. I think it is for the exact same reason, though with opposite motivations, that increasing numbers of what might be called countercultural intellectuals are so positively drawn to astrology. They also know the whole ballgame is at stake—and likely in their favor.

For astrology provides the one category of evidence that confronts all three dimensions of the modern prison of alienation right at their core—the epistemological, the ontological, and the cosmological. Only astrology so totally threatens the Bastille of the *ancien régime*. It is testable. And every one of us can test it in our own lives—and, if the evidence proves persuasive, every one of us can glimpse a new universe.

There is a legendary object called the philosopher's stone, something that alchemists believed could turn base matter into gold. More broadly, it was something that could bring illumination to the great philosophical riddles. I believe that many people are now drawn so strongly to astrology because they suspect that astrology itself may be the philosopher's stone.