

**Cosmos and Psyche: Intimations of a New World View**

**Richard Tarnas**

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## **Book Summary**

Review: This is not a book that I would have ever picked up on my own. It came up in multiple podcasts I was listening to, so I grabbed a copy and I'm glad I did. It focuses largely on synchronicities between the outer planets and world events (mundane astrology), with foundational information about the ebbs and flows of Western astrology.

Difficulty: Advanced - not because the content is dense, but because the writing style is very academic, yet poetic.

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## **I: The Transformation of the Cosmos**

### **The Birth of the Modern Self**

*“From this instant, the human self, the known world, the cosmos, heaven and earth were all radically and irrevocably transformed. All this happened within a period of time briefer than that which has passed since Woodstock and the Moon landing.”*

This introductory chapter asserts that the explosion of ideas and human creativity that occurred in the period from 1486 to about 1687 is the foundation from which the concept of the “modern self” in Western society emerged.

Foundational texts and figures cited include:

- *Oration on the Dignity of Man* by Pico della Mirandola (1486)
- *Discourse on Method* by René Descartes (1637)
- *Principia* by Sir Isaac Newton (1687)
- High Renaissance artists: Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni (Michelangelo), Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino (Raphael)
- Explorers and conquerors: Christopher Columbus, Vasco de Gama, Ferdinand Magellan
- *Ninety-five Theses* by Martin Luther spurring on The Protestant Reformation
- Nicolaus Copernicus developing the theory of heliocentricity, thus sparking the Scientific Revolution

### **The Dawn of a New Universe**

*“The nature of the Copernican revolution was so fundamental that what had to be rethought was not only all the conventional scientific theories but the entire established hierarchy of humanity’s place in the universal scheme of things. . .”*

In this chapter Tarnas cites that, prior to Copernicus’ revelation that Earth orbits the Sun, what happened in the heavens was determined to be beyond human comprehension. The theory of heliocentricity and other early scientific discoveries were inextricably linked to spiritual triumphs. Tarnas also notes that Copernicus was dismissed by all the most educated and acclaimed thinkers of the time because it conflicted with common knowledge and religious convention. It took generations before his remarkable feat of human intelligence was recognized and integrated as common sense.

## Two Paradigms of History

*“The same cultural tradition and historical trajectory that brought forth such noble achievements has also caused immense suffering and loss, for many other cultures and peoples, for many people within Western culture itself and for many other forms of life on the Earth.”*

Western history is built on two paradoxical perspectives:

1. The greatest human achievements have been realized by the West
2. Western industrial society is oppressive and exploitative

Tarnas argues that these perspectives, though exaggerated for the sake of comparison, are true and cannot exist without one another. Both paradigms undergird Western values and mores and they underscore the importance of cultivating the capacity to hold multiple truths at once.

Tarnas notes a third viewpoint for the reader’s consideration: no patterns in human history exist except those that the human mind projects onto it. This postmodern perspective sees itself as objective truth but, in the author’s view, fails to recognize that it is also human projection and foundational to the disillusionment of the modern mind.

## Forging the Self, Disenchanting the World

*“The systematic recognition that the exclusive source of meaning and purpose in the world is the human mind, and that it is a fundamental fallacy to project what is human onto the nonhuman is one of the most basic presuppositions - perhaps the basic presupposition - of modern scientific method.”*

Tarnas articulates three worldviews:

- In the Primal World View the world is imbued with an intrinsic sense of intelligence, meaning, and purpose that permeates everything human and nonhuman on the planet. Humans are fully part of and participate in the *anima mundi*, or soul of the world, both consciously and unconsciously.
- In the Western Religious World View, any meaning in the world is assigned by divinity to which humans have a unique relationship and which grants them sovereignty in the world.
- In the Modern World View, conscious and purposeful intelligence is seen as the exclusive ability of humans, so any sense of meaning and purpose in the world comes from the human mind only. In this view, humans are separate and distinct from the rest of the world.

By the author's reckoning, the Modern World View is a key principle of all scientific discovery since the 1700s. This perspective has fostered a sense of disenchantment within society that has enabled humans to objectify and exploit the world's resources and spurred the ongoing ecological crisis.

### **The Cosmological Situation Today**

*“What does it do to the human self, year after year, century after century, to experience existence as a conscious, purposeful being in an unconscious, purposeless universe?”*

In this chapter Tarnas walks through the themes and characteristics of the ideological and theological shifts of the postmodern era. For example, he counts among the shifts an emphasis on the importance of the imagination and the unconscious mind, respect for multiplicity and syncretism, and recognition of interconnectedness.

Tarnas once again cites the Copernican Revolution as the cornerstone of the Modern World View, a discovery that has ultimately led to a stark division between Enlightenment, which rules our academic and scientific values, and Romanticism, which governs our humanities and spiritual inclinations. The inability to integrate these two facets of the modern mind leads many people to participate in a form of “psychological compartmentalization and denial” that leads to cosmological disenchantment and a dominant culture that objectifies and commodifies the planet.

This belief has led to another Late Modern World View in which the universe is vast and without purpose and any sense of human-created meaning is ultimately inconsequential and pointless. Tarnas argues that this viewpoint, which assumes that any source of meaning and purpose comes merely from the human mind, is not only isolating but hubristic. He encourages readers to reconsider this view point and look to the cosmos to imbue existence with meaning once more.

### **Part I Discussion & Study Questions**

- What are some of the ideas that Tarnas states are cornerstones of “modern” Western thought? List three references and their key ideas.
- What is the theory of heliocentricity?
- The Copernican Revolution made the modern self possible according to the author. True or False?
- What are the paradigms of history according to Tarnas?
- What is the *anima mundi*?
- Name three shifts Tarnas mentions as characteristic of postmodernism.