

Symbolic Connections: The Role of Esoteric Disciplines in the New Worldview

A central thesis of this website is that the cosmos is enchanted—that it is infused with consciousness at every level where any kind of “organized whole” exists, from atoms all the way up to galaxies. What we consider subjective, the meaningful context of human experience, is not confined to human consciousness but extends throughout—and beyond—the physical world we observe with our senses. Indigenous cultures have always understood this. Most have approached the “subjectivity” or interiority of nature through pantheons of deities that had a governing or overseeing role in the course of natural events.

In short, human consciousness is embedded in and inextricably linked with a much larger consciousness of the universe. This is a concept quite foreign to the contemporary scientific-materialistic worldview that regards the universe as neutral and meaningless. Throughout much of the twentieth century, only a few innovative thinkers went outside the box imposed by mainstream science. One of these was Carl Jung, who in his later years developed the concept of *synchronicity* (1973).

Synchronicity is an acausal correspondence that connects the human psyche with the cosmos. A synchronicity is a meaningful correspondence between an outer event in the objective world and an inner, psychological theme within a person or group’s consciousness. There is no sharp distinction between subject and object. Instead, inner meanings are

connected seamlessly with outer events. The bridging concept that accounts for the correspondence between inner and outer is Jung's idea of *archetypes*. An archetype is an innate symbolic form that unconsciously structures human experience and behavior at both the personal and collective level. In the context of synchronicity, Jung proposed that archetypes were autonomous patterns of meaning that operate simultaneously in the psyche and in the external world, bridging inner and outer. The subject-object distinction is transcended: archetypes are meaningful patterns within the soul or psyche of the cosmos itself, of which our personal consciousnesses are merely a small part. For example, you might be undecided on whether to pursue a new job opportunity. Then, while driving to work, you spot a personalized license plate that says "Go for it." At that moment something clicks deep within that resonates with this 'sign,' and you decides to apply for the job. Or someone is thinking about researching a particular topic, and then a friend calls and mentions a new book he just discovered that exactly pertains to that topic. Many of us are familiar with such everyday coincidences that do not seem to be "just coincidences."

Synchronicity and the Cosmos

The concepts of synchronicity and archetypal correspondence are taken to a new level by Richard Tarnas in his 2006 book *Cosmos and Psyche*. A cultural historian and philosopher, Tarnas is best known for his first book, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, considered by many to be one of the most compelling and insightful histories of Western thought ever written. The

newer book takes a radical step forward in making a case for a symbolically (archetypally) meaningful cosmos. Building on the work of Jung, Tarnas expands archetypal psychology by presenting evidence for *synchronistic correlations of historical events with astrological alignments of transiting outer planets*, particularly Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. The sheer volume and uncanny consistency of such correlations across several historical periods may open the minds of many previous skeptics of astrology.

Astrology has come into disrepute for much of the last 300 years. The whole aim of the scientific revolution over the past three centuries has been to divest nature of any shred of inherent meaning beyond that ascribed to it by the laws of science. All systems of human thought that invest the cosmos with symbolic meaning are said to be prescientific, mere “projections” of human fantasy onto a physical universe that is fundamentally neutral to human affairs. As recently as 1988, more than 100 Nobel laureates signed a petition condemning astrology as totally superstitious and unscientific.

Much of this skepticism is based on the false view that astrology believes that the planets and their positions have a *causal* effect on human personality or the course of world events. Since there is no known force or emanation from the planets that could affect the course of worldly events, astrology is thought to be nonsense. Any serious student of astrology knows, however, that astrology has never claimed *causation* between the planets and personal and social patterns of events. Instead, it claims *synchronistic correspondence*. The universe is viewed as *an integrated whole*

in which patterns are replicated at multiple levels: where the microcosm of human personality and life events (at the time of birth) can meaningfully correspond with the positions of planets in the solar system (at that same historic time). However, "planets" are understood not in their outer aspect but in regard to their *symbolic, archetypal meanings*, what astrology has focused on for over 2,000 years.

Tarnas articulates this idea well: "A more plausible and comprehensive explanation of the available evidence would rest on a conception of the universe as a fundamentally and irreducibly interconnected whole, informed by creative intelligence and pervaded by patterns of meaning and order that extend though every level, and that are expressed through a constant correspondence between astronomical events and human events."

This point is simply stated in the Hermetic axiom "As above, so below." Planetary positions do not *cause* any meaningful patterns of events; instead their alignments are *reflective* of the condition of cosmic archetypal dynamics at any given time. The validity of astrology implies a potent extension of Jung's concept of synchronicity: psyche and cosmos (specifically, in this case, the solar system) are integrally related in a way that has not been appreciated by the modern scientific mind. The significance of astrology, and its ability to symbolize human experience, has been understood by many great minds, including Plato, Aristotle, Ptolemy, Plotinus, Aquinas, Dante, Kepler, and Goethe, prior to the advent of modern science. In modern times, Jung relied on astrology extensively in his practice with patients, although he prudently left this out of his published works.

To give one example, the conjunction (co-occurrence in the same position in the sky relative to Earth) of the planets Uranus and Pluto* has throughout history been associated with periods of social ferment and revolution. Such a conjunction occurred during the era of the French Revolution in the 1780s and 1790s. It also occurred during the decade of the 1960s, a time of widespread social and political change and often destructive upheaval. Tarnas's book compiles a considerable amount of evidence that the conjunction or opposition (planets 180 degrees opposite of each other in the sky) of these two planets is consistently accompanied by historical periods characterized by revolution and rapid social change.

Conjunction and opposition alignments between other outer planets are associated with historical periods that bear a different archetypal stamp. For example, the conjunction between the planets Uranus and Neptune that occurred between 1985 and 2000 was associated with a historical period that reflected a synthesis of the two archetypal meanings that astrology understands these planets to represent. Uranus is associated with the principle of change, rebellion, freedom, liberation, and technological innovation. Neptune is associated with the transcendent, spiritual, ideal, symbolic, and imaginative dimensions of life; with the timeless and infinite; and with the dissolving of boundaries and dissolution of control and ego structures. One of the many indications of the Neptune-Uranus conjunction in the 1990s, according to Tarnas, was the pervasive shift toward global

*The demotion of the planet Pluto to a "dwarf planet" by astronomers does not affect its symbolic, archetypal meaning within astrology.

consciousness—the breakdown of barriers to communication throughout the world—fostered particularly by the technical invention of the Internet. His book cites scores of other developments toward the end of the century that reflect a synthesis of the Neptune and Uranus archetypes in a way that is very distinct from the Pluto-Uranus synthesis that occurred during the 1960s.

What are we to make of Tarnas's extensive documentation of correspondences between a specific planetary alignments and the "archetypal flavor" of culture, politics, and society that occurs during the time of that alignment? Any serious reading of his book leaves one with the strong impression that these correspondences are valid, and that astrological alignments and meaningful planetary events do appear to mutually implicate one another *on an archetypal level*.

Archetypal Knowledge

The trick in appreciating the relevance of astrology to understanding human and societal behavior is that one needs to develop a mode of knowing that is different from the linear, rational approach of science. Seeing astrological correspondences requires a more holistic, intuitive mode of knowing that can discern a symbolic consistency among a variety of superficially different characteristics or events. One might simply call this "archetypal perception" or "archetypal knowing." Jung's student James Hillman has referred to this as developing an "archetypal eye": the capacity to recognize archetypal patterns in the complexity of one's own

life experience or the great events of history and culture. Those who cannot or will not develop this more global, intuitive mode of knowing-- who remain confined to the linear, deductive reasoning characteristic of science-- will have difficulty comprehending and ultimately accepting the deeply symbolic nature of astrological correspondences. Thus Tarnas's portrait of a deeply symbolic cosmos requires *an expanded epistemology that honors intuitive modes of knowledge*. As discussed elsewhere in this website, this implies granting equal credibility to both sensory modes of knowledge on which science is based as well as to intuitive, participatory forms of knowledge that grasp intuitively self-evident truths found in paranormal studies and spiritual domains of knowledge

Once such a broader epistemology becomes more widely accepted, then all of the esoteric, divinatory arts may regain the credibility they once had in the hermetic traditions of ancient Greece and the Middle Ages. Not just astrology but also numerology, the I Ching, and Tarot will all be seen as vehicles for revealing the archetypal or symbolic meaning of any given instant in time. The throw of the coins in the I Ching, or the layout of cards of the Tarot, reveals the archetypal dynamics (synchronistically) of that very moment in time which that act is performed. The meaning revealed is not literal but highly symbolic. It needs to be appreciated as suggesting *archetypal potentials* available at a given moment in time rather than concretely predicting specific future events. Jung (who was interested in all of the divinatory arts) conveyed this in his statement "Whatever is born or done at this particular moment of time has the quality of this moment of time."

Conclusion

To conclude, esoteric systems such as astrology, the I Ching, and the Tarot have their place in a broad epistemology that fully embraces the total Cosmos. However, one can only comprehend and appreciate their “validity” by developing a highly intuitive mode of knowing that is able to “see” the archetypal patterns of meaning that these systems reveal. As such, the esoteric systems can be very useful tools for understanding both individual traits as well as societal trends, and in revealing the way an individual or society’s destiny will unfold based on the way the “archetypal stage is set” from the moment the chart is cast, the coins are thrown, or the cards are laid out. The Cosmos has a unique symbolic configuration in each moment, which can be profoundly revealed by these long-practiced arts.