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# Archetypal Cosmology: Past and Present

*by Richard Tarnas*

Since a recent issue of *The Mountain Astrologer* was devoted to matters archetypal, I was asked by the editors and a number of its readers to consider writing a brief overview of the history of archetypal cosmology. So, in this essay, I would like to describe, first, the key individuals and influences that contributed to the academic discipline and philosophical perspective called archetypal cosmology, and then its longer ancestry, the centuries-old traditions out of which it emerged.

It could be argued that the emergence of archetypal cosmology was in some sense inevitable, as scholars and researchers working in late 20th-century academia recognized the larger implications of the evidence for planetary correlations with the patterns of human experience. Given the extraordinary nature of these correlations, the obvious task was to pursue the research in a more systematic way, think deeply about the resulting evidence, then integrate this with the relevant ideas and conceptual frameworks from both the admired past, such as the Platonic–Pythagorean tradition or the work of Johannes Kepler, and the cutting-edge present, from depth psychology to the new paradigm sciences.

But if the rise of archetypal cosmology was perhaps inevitable in principle, its specific character and even its name

reflect its emergence from a unique convergence of scholars and intellectual currents at two particular learning communities, Esalen Institute during the 1970s and '80s and the California Institute of Integral Studies from the 1990s to the present. Out of that creative commingling of people and ideas arose a distinctive vision of psyche and cosmos, of the human being's co-creative participation in an ensouled, evolving universe. This cosmological vision is grounded in a particular astrological research paradigm that has proved highly promising in the study of history and biography, psychology, philosophy, religion, mythology, culture, and the arts.

It often happens that the fresh winds of new ideas and spiritual impulses that enter into a culture and eventually transform it do not originate in the mainstream universities, but rather come from outlier institutions and learning communities that are more countercultural, adventurous, and visionary in character. Such was the case, for example, in 15th-century Europe, when the late medieval universities had become stagnant, and the crucial insights and scholarship that helped bring forth the Renaissance emerged from the Florentine Platonic Academy. In the second half of the 20th century, Esalen Institute in California

played a similar role in late modern culture, attracting countless scholars and visionaries, from Aldous Huxley, Alan Watts, and Arnold Toynbee to Abraham Maslow, R. D. Laing, and Lama Govinda. An overriding impulse toward exploration and transformation pervaded the institute community, as contemporary psychology and philosophy met esoteric traditions and practices in service of expanding the horizons of human experience and knowledge. Ancient and modern, East and West, body and soul, science and spirituality, shamanism and mysticism, quantum physics and the psychedelic revolution — all had a place at the table.

In astrology, the field at Esalen was seeded by Dane Rudhyar's lectures there in the 1960s. I had first encountered astrology in conversations with a Jungian faculty member at Harvard when I was an undergraduate in the late 1960s and early '70s, but it took the metaphysically wide-open, esoterically intensive atmosphere of Esalen to spur a more serious engagement with that perspective. In my early years at Esalen, I was working on my doctoral degree and taking seminars with a number of remarkable teachers, each of whom was carrying critical insights: Joseph Campbell, with his multicultural erudition deciphering the archetypal language of myth, "the secret opening

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through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation"; Gregory Bateson, with his polymath's recognition of an "ecology of mind" in nature and "the patterns which connect"; Huston Smith, with his ecumenical transmission of the world's religious and mystical traditions; and Stanislav Grof, with his radically expanded cartography of the psyche and powerful methods of psychospiritual transformation. While, in retrospect, one can see how these teachings helped shape the approach to astrology that would emerge at Esalen, initially astrology still seemed to me an unlikely candidate for being a key to the mystery of psyche and cosmos. Richly symbolic, yes, strangely helpful perhaps in framing imaginative reflections on one's psychological tendencies — but what could it really have to do with the actual vast universe of planets and galaxies?

That perception rapidly changed when Grof and I, pursuing research together in the field of consciousness studies and following a suggestion by Arne Trettevik, were surprised to discover an extraordinarily consistent and symbolically nuanced correlation between the timing of individuals' major psychological transformations and the planetary transits to their natal charts. Esalen offered many intensive techniques and practices for catalyzing psychological transformation, and many hundreds of individuals came there in the course of their life journeys specifically to undergo profound transformative experiences, so Esalen proved to be a superb laboratory for conducting this research. Suddenly, we had a method of illuminating both the archetypal character and the timing of such experiences, including non-ordinary states of consciousness such as those mediated by powerful psychoactive plants and compounds — something Grof and his colleagues at psychiatric research clinics in Prague and Maryland had sought fruitlessly for many years. To be able to better understand the sudden onset of a psychological crisis or a spiritual breakthrough, to schedule sessions of LSD therapy or shamanic sacred medi-

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cine rituals with greater awareness of the psychological dynamics active for that person and that time, to gain insight into certain cyclical activations of particular complexes in an individual's inner world and outer-life circumstances — astrology seemed to represent, as Grof put it, a kind of "Rosetta stone" for understanding the human psyche. I was reminded of Bruno Schulz's words:

So it comes to pass that, when we pursue an inquiry into a character beyond a certain depth, we step out of the field of psychological categories and enter the sphere of the ultimate mysteries of life. The floorboards of the soul, to which we try to penetrate, fan open and reveal the starry firmament.<sup>1</sup>

This particular context and pragmatic motivation for our astrological research had another unexpected consequence. The unusually profound encounters with the deep unconscious that we were studying frequently involved direct experiences of an archetypal dimension of reality — whether in the form of mythic figures and narratives from various cultures, gods and goddesses, transcendent Platonic Ideas, or Jungian archetypes. These numinous essences and forces were experienced as informing the wide range of biographical memories, psychological complexes, transpersonal experiences, and other vivid emotional and somatic content activated during the sessions. Such encounters gave us a vivid experiential ground for understanding astrological factors and allowed us to have a more precise grasp of the multivalent character of the archetypal principles connected to the planetary alignments, as

we witnessed the various ways a transit involving Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, or Pluto to the natal chart could be embodied in experience. We were also able to assess with greater experimental precision which astrological factors tended to be most significant and what were the orbs (the range of degrees before and after exact) within which planetary aspects were archetypally operative.

We found that by far the principal factors in understanding these experiences were the major planetary aspects in natal charts, personal transits and progressions, and world transits. The astrological approach that emerged as most illuminating was thus essentially equivalent to that of Kepler, with his emphasis on the planetary aspects as the dominant indicators of astrological meaning, an unfolding cosmic geometry of archetypal meaning centered on the moving Earth. The evidence also suggested the importance of recognizing larger orbs than have generally been used in traditional astrology. We came to see aspects not as acting like isolated on-and-off light switches, but rather as indicating archetypal wave forms that enter into the individual or collective psychic field and interact with the larger complex whole of archetypal dynamics cumulatively operative in the field. These are then shaped and inflected by the specific circumstances and creative responses of the individuals and communities in question, and expressed as concrete events and experiences. From 1976 onward, we expanded the compass of the research to include a systematic study of the biographies of hundreds of prominent historical and cultural figures, as well as the archetypal dynamics of the collective psyche evident in major historical phenomena and cultural epochs.

In essence, the research was driven by a synthesis of two traditions that had been evolving rapidly during the 20th century: the depth psychology of Jung, Freud, and William James, developed further by Rank, Reich, Klein, von Franz, Edinger, and many others; and what we might call depth astrology, coming from Rudhyar, with Leo, Carter, Addey, and Ebertin among others contributing to the lineage. In the later 1960s and '70s, both these traditions

received a fresh creative infusion, on the one hand with the rise of transpersonal psychology led by Grof and of archetypal psychology led by James Hillman, and on the other hand with a new generation of psychologically informed astrologers led by Robert Hand, Stephen Arroyo, Liz Greene, and Charles Harvey — most of them coming to Esalen at this time for public seminars as well as private discussions. Hillman's magnum opus of 1975, *Re-Visioning Psychology*, was an eloquent manifesto of the archetypal perspective reaching back from Jung to the Renaissance and the Greeks that deeply informed our astrological analyses, while Grof's *Realms of the Human Unconscious* in the same year provided a radically expanded map of the psyche adequate to the emerging vision.

Something of the excitement felt at this time, almost like a Platonic epiphany, is conveyed in a letter written to me by Charles Harvey, then president of the British Astrological Association: "Astrology has kept the archetypes alive, we have all worked with them, but how flat, abstract, remote, dry this all now seems ... Like breaking through into the world of real living ideas after watching the shadow show ... A living astrology is being born again."<sup>2</sup>

During the ten years of research at Esalen (where I stayed on as director of programs and education for several years), our astrological reflections were shaped by one other important factor. Educated within the cosmological assumptions of a modern scientific world view that made astrology more or less impossible in principle, Grof and I naturally sought to develop a new frame of reference that could bring these findings into a larger coherence. Although the evidence for planetary correlations sharply contradicted the mainstream Newtonian–Cartesian scientific paradigm, we noticed many parallels with the concepts coming from the new sciences — quantum physics, systems theory, morphogenetic fields, the impenetrable order, the holonomic universe — and from innovative thinkers whom we in turn invited to Esalen for numerous seminars and discussions: David Bohm, Fritjof Capra, Rupert Sheldrake, Karl Pribram, Theodore Roszak, and Ervin

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Laszlo among them. All these thinkers and influences provided a fertile matrix shaping the ideas and research that were developing into an archetypal cosmology.

In important respects, however, the astrological evidence pointed to the metaphysical intuitions of the past. The word "archetype" comes from Platonism, and indeed the archetypal cosmos was first articulated by Plato. Here was the philosophical vision of the universe as pervasively ensouled, informed by transcendent archetypal principles, and ordered in its complex celestial movements by a sovereign divine intelligence. There were yet earlier roots to this perspective: the ancient pantheon of Greek myth (gods as archetypes), the ritual illuminations of the mystery religions (cosmos as divine revelation), and the Pythagorean disclosure of a universe whose unitive order was at once mathematical and numinous. For the Platonic–Pythagorean tradition, to align with the archetypal order of the cosmos was to realize one's essential being. To know the cosmos was to know oneself. To study the numinous order of the heavens was to be spiritually and philosophically elevated, to break free from the cave of ephemeral shadows, to know the Good and the Beautiful.

I had been drawn to the concept of archetypes since studying classical Greek and Latin at my Jesuit high school, where Plato's and Aristotle's differing views of transcendent and immanent universal forms had made a deep impression. Years before I encountered the astrological correlations, I had proposed as my doctoral dissertation topic "A History of Archetypes from Plato to Jung," since even then it seemed to me that this concept provided a central

organizing principle for understanding not only psychological phenomena but much of the history of Western thought, from antiquity to the modern age. The differences between Platonic archetypes and Jungian archetypes as usually understood — the former seen as the essential structures of reality; the latter, as the essential structures of the human psyche — represented an enormous metaphysical and cosmological evolution in the Western world view, with the Copernican revolution as the turning point in shifting the locus of archetypal meaning from the cosmos to the human psyche, which were now sharply differentiated from each other.

By 1980, an enormous body of evidence had emerged suggesting a systematic correlation between planetary alignments and the archetypal patterns of human experience — in the clinical therapeutic setting, in individual biographies, and on the collective level in historical and cultural phenomena. The question then became how best to introduce this evidence and perspective to the larger educated public, to the intelligent general reader who is astrologically uninitiated and whose very sense of rationality presumes astrology's falsehood. While Grof and I had already begun lecturing on the material, developing a synthesis of transpersonal psychology and archetypal astrology, I decided for the longer term on a two-stage strategy. Before introducing the astrological evidence, I would first write a history of the Western world view, from the ancient Greek to the postmodern, that would set out the necessary concepts and contexts for understanding the significance of the archetypal planetary correlations. Over the next ten years, in researching and writing the book that became *The Passion of the Western Mind*, I traced the evolution of the archetypal perspective from Plato and Aristotle onward, the development of planetary astronomy through the Copernican revolution, the crucial role of Christianity and Judaism, the complex interaction between religion and science and philosophy, the rise of the autonomous modern self during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, the emergence of depth psychology, and finally our own postmodern age of



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extraordinary metaphysical pluralism and creative fluidity.

Ideally, I hoped that this book could prepare the reader for the astrological evidence and in some sense serve as a credible foundation for what was to come. The second stage would be a book setting out a body of planetary correlations sufficiently robust and extensive that the rigorous, open-minded reader could come to his or her own assessment of the potential validity and value of astrology. This became *Cosmos and Psyche: Intimations of a New World View*. But although most of the research and the basic framework had been completed by the later 1980s, another step would intervene.

In the years after it was published in 1991, *The Passion of the Western Mind* became widely adopted as a text in philosophy, humanities, and history of science departments. I was invited to join the faculty at the California Institute of Integral Studies, a graduate school in San Francisco focused especially on psychology, religion, and philosophy. To my surprise, both the faculty and the students requested that I teach not only the history of philosophy and Western thought but also the results of our astrological research, which Grof and I began to do in large graduate seminars, the most highly enrolled courses in the school. At the same time, joined by cosmologist Brian Swimme, philosopher Robert McDermott, ecofeminist Charlene Spretnak, scholar of ancient religions David Ulansey, and others, I founded in 1994 a multidisciplinary master's and Ph.D. program called Philosophy, Cosmology, and Consciousness (PCC). The program essentially represented our ideal of the graduate program that we ourselves would want to attend. As the institute catalog described the program:

This course of study is designed for students who wish to engage the intellectual challenge, in our post-modern age, of exploring new understandings of the cosmos and the human being's place in it ... Areas of inquiry include cosmology, epis-

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temology, metaphysics and meta-psychology, as well as archetypal studies (Platonic, Romantic, esoteric), mythology, history of ideas, evolution of consciousness, ecofeminist thought, new paradigm studies, and the changing relationship between science and spirituality.

Over the next 17 years, hundreds of highly committed and often brilliant students enrolled in the PCC program. Again to my surprise, the language of archetypal astrology became a kind of lingua franca (or lingua astra) within the community: an integral part of its discourse and evolving world view and a uniquely valuable tool for not only psychological self-understanding but historical analysis and philosophical insight. Many master's and Ph.D. courses have been taught applying archetypal astrological analysis to psychology, history, philosophy, music, and film — even to comedic creativity and the cultural role of comedy (in a course co-taught by John Cleese).

Especially helpful for these astrological studies was the larger multidisciplinary dialogue that was an essential ongoing aspect of the PCC program. By bringing astrology into direct engagement with the thinking of pioneers in other disciplines — contemporary physics and evolutionary cosmology, ecology, feminism, history of ideas, postmodern philosophy, religious studies — the school provided a nourishing matrix for the critical self-reflection and refinement of astrological thought in a philosophically rigorous, open-minded academic setting. An example of the kind of dialogue and synthesis developing during these years was the “Return of Soul to the Cosmos” conference in San Francisco in 1997, with more than

a thousand people in attendance. Organized by Barbara Winkler and myself, participants included psychologists James Hillman and Stan Grof, physicists Victor Mansfield and Will Keepin, and many leading astrologers: Robert Hand, Charles and Suzi Harvey, Stephen Arroyo, Caroline Casey, Demetra George, Steven Forrest, Glenn Perry, Greg Bogart, Karen Hamaker-Zondag, Laurence Hillman, Ray Grasse, and Gerry Goddard.

Cosmology is the encompassing container within which take place all our activities, both collectively and individually. It is the largest frame of reference within which a civilization implicitly operates. Yet, conversely, our cosmology is deeply influenced by our psychology, which shapes our cognitive perceptions and collective paradigms. Thus, the dialogue between cosmology and psychology is especially critical, with astrology as a meeting point. Particularly in discussions during the past decade between Brian Swimme and myself — representing, as it were, the two poles within the PCC program: cosmos moving toward psyche, and psyche moving toward cosmos — the term “archetypal cosmology” began to be used as a more comprehensive term bridging our multiple disciplines. The ideas of Alfred North Whitehead and Teilhard de Chardin were recognized as especially relevant, as were parallels between Swimme's concept of cosmological powers and the cosmic archetypes evident in astrology. A public “Dialogue on Archetypal Cosmology” took place at Esalen in 2004, followed by a doctoral seminar at CIIS co-taught by Swimme and myself, “Archetypal Process: Whitehead, Jung, and the Meeting of Psychology and Cosmology.” It was at this time that I began supervising the first doctoral dissertations in the field, beginning with Rod O'Neal's “Seasons of Agony and Grace: An Archetypal History of New England Puritanism,” which applied the research methodology of *Cosmos and Psyche* to a single cultural movement — developing an approach to the study of history that O'Neal calls *archetypal historiography*. This was followed by Keiron Le Grice's dissertation, “Foundations of an Archetypal Cosmology: A Theoretical

Synthesis of Jungian Depth Psychology and the New Paradigm Sciences.”

Of course, it was the continuing support from and collaboration with the international astrological community that provided the essential context for archetypal cosmology’s emergence: the World Astrology Congresses in Switzerland overseen by Claude Weiss, the Astrological Association conferences in the U.K., Liz Greene’s Centre for Psychological Astrology in London, the Faculty of Astrological Studies summer schools in Oxford, and the UAC, NCGR, and ISAR conferences. With this foundation among the astrologically initiated, there could be a fruitful dialogue with other intellectual communities working at the frontiers of contemporary thought. After *Cosmos and Psyche* was published in 2006, a sign of astrology’s increasing rapprochement with such communities was the book’s being awarded the Book of the Year prize from the Scientific and Medical Network in the U.K., an international association of innovative, spiritually engaged scientists and scholars (whose members include Sheldrake, Pribram, Laszlo, and David Lorimer and, in earlier years, Bohm and Schumacher). Until that time, no astrological work had received the award, nor had astrology played a role in the Network’s conferences or public lectures. Similarly, in the Jungian world, Grof and I presented our astrological research at Eranos in Ascona, Switzerland — where, half a century earlier, Jung had presented his paper on synchronicity, his final annual lecture at Eranos.

In 2007, a group of about 70 scholars, researchers, and practitioners in the San Francisco Bay Area — most of them faculty and graduates of the Philosophy, Cosmology, and Consciousness program at CIIS — formed the Archetypal Research Collective, with monthly meetings, presentations, and discussions. In 2008, *Archai: The Journal of Archetypal Cosmology* was begun under the editorship of Keiron Le Grice and Rod O’Neal, its Web site established, and the field’s principles articulated. It was at this time that the term “archetypal cosmology,” suggested by Le Grice for the journal, was chosen by the community as the name of the emerging academic field, with archetypal astrology and the

study of planetary correlations in psychology, history, culture, and biography as the empirical foundation of a wider, multidisciplinary inquiry into their philosophical implications and cosmological context. In 2010, two major books were published that addressed archetypal astrology in a multidisciplinary context: *Coming Home: The Birth and Transformation of the Planetary Era*, by CIIS professor and Hegel scholar Sean Kelly, provided an insightful analysis of the teleological, evolutionary dimension of history as it unfolds through the archetypal planetary cycles described in *Cosmos and Psyche*. And *The Archetypal Cosmos: Rediscovering the Gods in Myth, Science, and Astrology* by Le Grice addressed the theoretical basis for the relationship between the archetypal dynamics of the human psyche and the planetary order of the solar system, in a comprehensive synthesis of Jungian psychology, Campbell’s work in myth, and many of the new paradigm perspectives mentioned above.

Most recently, several leading teachers of archetypal astrology — Le Grice, Jessica Garfield-Kabbara, Chad Harris, Matthew Stelzner, O’Neal, Bill Streett, and Grant Maxwell, along with Grof and myself — founded the Institute of Archetypal Cosmology in San Francisco, to offer dedicated instruction to students in archetypal astrological theory and practice, to provide a forum to pursue and share research, and to help disseminate ideas to a wider audience. The first foundational series of lectures (later to be streamed as online videos) took place in early 2011. Another recent expression of the vitality of the field is *Correlations*, a series of lively, accessible podcasts on archetypal astrology hosted by Stelzner, with Delia Shargel, Garfield-Kabbara, Harris, and other leading archetypal astrologers in conversation.

I believe that the astonishingly consistent and nuanced reality of the planetary correlations with the archetypal dynamics of human life is one of the most compelling intimations we have that we live in a meaning-laden and purposeful universe — a cosmos that is coherent with our deepest spiritual and moral aspirations. Recognition of these

correlations can help us to become more consciously co-creative participants in a cosmic unfolding. All of this points to yet another level of archetypal understanding: what Plato would call the Idea of the Good informing the cosmos, what Hegel would call the World Spirit realizing itself through history, and what Jung might describe as the Self archetype operating within the collective evolution of humankind itself.

Much like a life-changing spiritual awakening produced by a powerful synchronicity, it is possible that a collective encounter with the growing body of rigorously researched and skillfully presented astrological correlations could help to awaken the modern mind from its disenchanting cosmological condition. Astrology could then serve as a great catalyst of humanity’s evolution of consciousness at this pivotal moment in our history, reframing the larger Copernican revolution as part of a long, birth-panged initiation of humanity and the Earth into the larger cosmic community of being. In this sense, astrology itself might be seen mythically as a form of Promethean fire bestowed from the heavens, helping to liberate humankind from the collapsing modern matrix it has clearly outgrown.

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2. Letter from Charles Harvey to Richard Tarnas, March 1, 1979. (Charles wrote to me after reading my early essay on archetypal astrology, “Prometheus the Awakener,” which set forth the beginning outlines of a conjoined archetypal cosmology and psychology.)

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