



JANET ATKINSON/VEER

# Romancing the Cosmos

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**I**MAGINE FOR A MOMENT THAT YOU ARE THE UNIVERSE. But for the purposes of this thought experiment, let us imagine that you are not the disenchanting mechanistic universe of conventional modern cosmology, but rather a deep-souled, subtly mysterious cosmos of great spiritual beauty and creative intelligence. And imagine that you are being approached by two different epistemologies—two suitors, as it were, who seek to know you. To whom would you open your deepest secrets? To which approach would you be most likely to reveal your authentic nature? Would you open most deeply to the suitor—the epistemology, the way of knowing—who approached you as though you were essentially lacking in intelligence or purpose, as though you had no interior dimension to speak of, no spiritual capacity or value; who thus saw you as fundamentally inferior to himself (let us give the two suitors, not entirely arbitrarily, the traditional masculine gender); who related to you as though your existence were valuable primarily to the extent that he could develop and exploit your resources to satisfy his various needs; and whose motivation for knowing you was ultimately driven by a desire for increased intellectual mastery, predictive certainty, and efficient control over you for his own self-enhancement?

Or would you, the cosmos, open yourself most deeply to that suitor who viewed you as being at least as intelligent and noble, as worthy a being, as permeated with mind and soul, as imbued with moral aspiration and purpose, as endowed with spiritual depths and mystery, as he? This suitor seeks to know you not that he might

better exploit you, but rather to unite with you and thereby bring forth something new, a creative synthesis emerging from both of your depths. He desires to liberate that which has been hidden by the separation between knower and known. His ultimate goal of knowledge is not increased mastery, prediction, and control, but rather a more richly responsive and empowered participation in a cocreative unfolding of new realities. He seeks an intellectual fulfillment that is intimately linked with imaginative vision, moral transformation, empathic understanding, aesthetic delight. His act of knowledge is essentially an act of love and intelligence combined, of wonder as well as discernment, of opening to a process of mutual discovery. To whom would you be more likely to reveal your deepest truths?

This is not to say that you, the universe, would reveal nothing to the first suitor under the duress of his objectifying, disenchanting approach. That suitor would undoubtedly elicit, filter, and constellate a certain “reality” that he would naturally regard as authentic knowledge of the actual universe: objective knowledge, “the facts,” as compared with the subjective delusions of everyone else’s approach. But we might allow ourselves to doubt just how profound a truth, how genuinely reflective of the universe’s deeper reality, this approach might be capable of providing. Such knowledge might prove to be deeply misleading. And if this disenchanting vision were elevated to the status of being the only legitimate vision of the nature of the cosmos upheld by an entire civilization, what an incalculable loss, an impoverishment, a tragic deformation, a grief, would ultimately be suffered by both knower and known. <

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## OPENING TO THE MYSTERY

I believe that the disenchantment of the modern universe is the direct result of a simplistic epistemology and moral posture spectacularly inadequate for the depths, complexity, and grandeur of the cosmos. To assume *a priori* that the entire universe is ultimately a soulless void within which our multidimensional consciousness is an anomalous accident, and that purpose, meaning, conscious intelligence, moral aspiration, and spiritual depth are solely attributes of the human being reflects a long-invisible inflation on the part of the modern self. And heroic hubris is still indissolubly linked, as it was in ancient Greek tragedy, to heroic fall.

The disenchanting strategy can be said to have served well the purposes of its time: to differentiate the self, to empower the human subject, to liberate human experience of the world from unquestioned pre-given structures of meaning and purpose inherited from tradition and enforced by external authority. It provided a powerful new basis for criticism and defiance of established belief systems that often inhibited human autonomy. It also at least partly succeeded in disciplining the human tendency to project onto the world subjective needs and wishes. But this differentiation and empowerment of the human being has been striven for so single-mindedly as to now be pathologically exaggerated. In its austere universal reductionism, the objectifying stance of the modern mind has become a kind of tyrant. The knowledge it renders is literally narrow-minded. Such knowledge is at once extremely potent and deeply deficient. A little knowledge may be a dangerous thing, but a massive amount of knowledge based on a limited and self-isolating set of assumptions

may be very dangerous indeed.

The remarkable modern capacity for differentiation and discernment that has been so painstakingly forged must be preserved, but our [challenge] now is to develop and subsume that discipline in a more encompassing, more magnanimous intellectual and spiritual engagement with the mystery of the universe. Above all, we must awaken to and overcome the great hidden anthropocentric projection that has virtually defined the modern mind: the pervasive projection of soullessness onto the cosmos by the modern self's own will to power.

## THE POWER OF DIALOGUE

What is the cure for hubristic vision? It is, perhaps, to listen: to listen more subtly, more perceptively, more deeply.

If our intellectual self-awareness now requires a further evolution, perhaps the first step is to recognize that our engagement with the universe would be more deeply fruitful if it more resembled a genuine dialogue. When the cosmos is assumed to be incapable of purposeful communication, of depth and complexity of meaning, then no communication at that level can possibly take place. Such communication is excluded at the very outset of the inquiry. Yet in any authentic relationship—that is, in a relationship of true reciprocity—the potential communication of meaning and purpose must be able to move in both directions, in this instance between self and world. For this to occur, a patiently developed sense of intellectual and imaginative empathy—of receptive, respectful, trusting observation and analysis, inward and outward—is essential. Awareness of this need has moved our age to turn with new

respect to those eras, traditions, and cultures in which such epistemologies have long been cultivated: ancient, indigenous, shamanic, mystical, esoteric.

Compared with the modern stance of systematic self-distancing and objectification, it appears that our present task is to cultivate a capacity for opening ourselves more fully to “the other” in all its forms: to listen with more keenly discerning ears to other voices and perspectives, other ways of being and knowing, other cultures and other ages, other forms of life, other modes of the universe’s self-disclosure. As in any genuine dialogue, we must be willing to enter into that which we seek to know, not keep it distanced as a silent object imprisoned by the framework of our limiting assumptions. We need to allow that which we seek to know to enter into our own being.

## CHOOSING TRUST OVER SUSPICION

[A] larger engagement with the cosmos will require of us a profound shift in what we regard as legitimate knowledge. It will demand an initial act of trust in the possible reality of an ensouled cosmos of transformative beauty and purposeful intelligence. In the inner politics of the modern mind, a “hermeneutics of suspicion” has completely overpowered and eclipsed a “hermeneutics of trust.” That suspicion has been directed toward nature, toward the universe, toward other cultures and other worldviews, toward the spiritual dimension of life, even toward the human being in its embodied and ensouled wholeness. From Bacon and Descartes on, the modern mind directed its suspicion at everything except its own stance of skeptical objectification.

In the course of the modern and postmodern periods, the necessary balance between the two basic intellectual postures of suspicion and trust, that essential creative tension of opposites, was lost. The consequences of this loss and imbalance have been immense. The fundamental skepticism of the modern and postmodern mind, which once served a larger purpose, has become a permanently confining end in itself, an armored state of intellectual constraint and spiritual unfulfillment. The strategy of skeptical self-distancing from the world has impelled and shaped the modern self—differentiating it, empowering it, but eventually so

isolating it that it has come to dwell inside a solipsistic prison of its own assumptions. Worse, in its inflation and increasingly manic desperation, the civilization that is possessed by that objectifying stance has now become a centrifugal force of destruction and self-destruction in a world too intimately interconnected to accommodate such a titanic juggernaut so out of balance with the whole.

Humanity’s “progress of knowledge” and the “evolution of consciousness” have too often been characterized as if our task were simply to ascend a very tall cognitive ladder with graded hierarchical steps that represent successive developmental stages in which we solve increasingly challenging mental riddles, like advanced problems in a graduate exam in biochemistry or logic. But to understand life and the cosmos better, perhaps we are required to transform not only our minds but also our hearts. For our whole being—body and soul, mind and spirit—is implicated. Perhaps we must go not only high and far but also down and deep.

Our worldview and cosmology, which define the context for everything else, are profoundly affected by the degree to which all our faculties—intellectual, imaginative, aesthetic, moral, emotional, somatic, spiritual, relational—enter the process of our knowing. How we approach “the other” and how we approach each other will shape everything, including our own evolving self and the cosmos in which we participate. Not only our personal lives but also the very nature of the universe may demand of us now a new capacity for self-transcendence, both intellectual and moral, so that we may experience a new dimension of beauty and intelligence in the world—not a projection of our own desire for beauty and intellectual mastery, but an encounter with the actual unpredictably unfolding beauty and intelligence of the whole. 🌐

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