

WORLDVIEW, RESPONSIBILITY, AND THE WILL TO ACTION*

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“Planetary democracy does not yet exist, but our global civilization is already preparing a place for it: It is the very Earth we inhabit, linked with Heaven above us. Only in this setting can the mutuality and commonality of the human race be newly created, with reverence and gratitude for that which transcends each of us, and all of us together. The authority of a world democratic order simply cannot be built on anything else but the revitalized authority of the universe.”

Vaclav Havel

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Science’s view of the universe is changing; cutting-edge scientists are coming to a new insight. The universe, with all things in it, is an organic whole; it is not a collection of separate things and events, the stage where external spectators watch an impersonal spectacle. All that happens in one place also happens in other places; all that happened at one time happens at all other times. Nothing is “local,” limited to where and when it is happening; nothing is evanescent, here today and vanished tomorrow. Unlike the disenchanted world of classical physics, the world as cutting-edge scientists come to know it, is not even material. Matter—the kind of “stuff” that makes up particles joined in atoms joined in molecules joined in cells joined in organisms—is not a separate kind of thing, and it does not have a reality of its own. In the last count matter is energy bound in quantized wave-packets and these packets can be further bound together in the vast and harmonious architecture that makes up the reality of the world we know. The widespread idea, that all there is in the world is matter, and that all matter was created in the Big Bang and will disappear either in black holes or in a Big Crunch, is a colossal mistake. And the

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belief that when we know how matter behaves we know everything—a belief shared by classical physics and Marxist ideology – is but sophistry. Such views have been definitively superseded. The wholeness of this universe is deeper and more thorough than classical scientists, engineers, and Marxists realized.

The concept of the cosmos as an organic whole comes from the latest discoveries in the natural sciences, and it is documented by observation and experiment. But the basic concept is not new; indeed, it is as old as human civilization. In ages past the wholeness of the cosmos was known to seers and sages, and to all people who had the sensitivity to see what lies beyond their immediate surroundings and everyday concerns. Theirs, however, was insight born of mystical, religious and esthetic experience and it was private and unverifiable. Now scientists at the frontiers of the empirical sciences are rediscovering the organic cosmos, lifting the private experiences that speak to it out of the domain of unverifiable personal intuition.

The worldview emerging at the cutting edge of the sciences lends meaning to the universe, and to the human being in the universe. Meaning is an important element in the human experience of the world; the search for it is as old as civilization. For as long as people looked at the sun, the moon, and the starry sky above, and at the seas, the rivers, the hills, and the forests below, they wondered where it all came from, where it all is going, and what it all means.

Meaning is an important element in science as well, even if it is sometimes neglected. Science is not only a collection of abstract formulas and not just the wellspring of technology; it is also a source of insight into the way things are in the world. Some scientists are dedicated mathematicians and many are technical specialists, but some among them recognize the importance of meaning in their theories and accept the challenge of finding it.

“What is the nature of the universe and what is our position in it? What does the universe mean? What is its purpose? Who are we and what is the meaning of our

lives?” asks physicist David Peat in his book *Synchronicity*. Science, Peat affirms, attempts to answer these questions, since it has always been the province of the scientist to discover how the universe is constituted, how matter was first created, and how life began.

There are also scientists who do not think that contemporary science has much to do with meaning, and some of them hold that the world disclosed in scientific theories is basically meaningless. The cosmological physicist Steven Weinberg maintains that the universe as a physical process has no meaning; the laws of physics offer no discernible purpose for human beings. “I believe there is no point that can be discovered by the methods of science,” he said in an interview. “I believe that what we have found so far—an impersonal universe which is not particularly directed towards human beings—is what we are going to continue to find. And that when we find the ultimate laws of nature they will have a chilling, cold, impersonal quality about them.”

This split in the scientists’ view about meaning has deep cultural roots. According to Richard Tarnas, the civilization of the Western world has two faces. One face is that of progress, the other, of fall. The more familiar face is the account of a long and heroic journey from a primitive world of dark ignorance, suffering, and limitation to the bright modern world of ever-increasing knowledge, freedom, and well-being, made possible by the sustained development of human reason and, above all, of scientific knowledge and technological skill. The other face is the story of humanity’s fall and separation from the original state of oneness with nature and cosmos. While in their primordial condition humans possessed an instinctive knowledge of the sacred unity and profound interconnectedness of the world, but with the ascendance of the rational mind a deep schism arose between humankind and the rest of reality. The nadir of this development is ecological disaster, moral disorientation, and spiritual emptiness.

Modern civilization displays both the positive and the negative faces. Its duality is reflected in the attitude scientists adopt toward the question of meaning. Some, like Weinberg, express the negative face of Western civilization. For them, meaning resides in the human mind alone: the world itself is impersonal, without purpose or intention. Finding meaning in the universe, they claim, is to make the error of projecting one's own mind and personality into it. Others, like Peat, insist that though the universe has been disenchanting by science, it is reenchanted in light of the latest findings.

A meaningful concept of the world fills a growing need in today's society. This is evident in the renewed popularity of esoteric literature and the more serious kind of science fiction, as well as of books, articles, and films that straddle the gap between science and mysticism. The need goes beyond the psychological need of individuals. It is also a need when it comes to taking action in the contemporary world.

The disenchanting universe made us strangers in the world in which we find ourselves. If mind, consciousness, and meaning were uniquely human phenomena, we would live in a world devoid of the very qualities we ourselves possess. Our alienation could open the way to the blind exploitation of nature. If we arrogate all mind to ourselves, said Gregory Bateson, we see the world as mindless and therefore as not entitled to moral or ethical consideration. "If this is your estimate of your relation to nature and you have an advanced technology," he added, "your likelihood of survival will be that of a snowball in hell."

A view of the world is a major component in the realization of every plan and project of action. If the contemporary world is to be changed for the better, made more sustainable, peaceful, and equitable, we need not only plans and projects for action, but also the will and the motivation to undertake action. This calls for finding ourselves part of the world in which we live. A mindless universe is a

desolate universe. It is well pictured in a celebrated passage by Bertrand Russell: “no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; ... all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and the whole temple of man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins.” In a world of which we are not a part, where our personal destiny is to vanish and the destiny of the universe is to end in ruin, we do not have motivation to act. Without a view that inserts the acting subject in the universe in which he acts, the best conceived plan remains on paper.

The emerging concept of a dynamic and interconnected cosmos is an important element of the human situation in the world. It validates a sense of belonging. It tells us that we are an organic part of an organic reality; no more and no less so than a particle, a star, and a galaxy. But we are a *conscious* part, a being through which the cosmos comes to know itself. This recognition is a sound basis for recovering a deeper sense of meaning in our life, and it is also the basis for perceiving the “authority of the universe” which, Vaclav Havel said, is the sole foundation on which a democratic world order could be built.

If we live up to our potentials as conscious beings and come to know the interconnected nature of reality, we shall apprehend the “authority of the universe” and know that we are an organic part of it. And, as conscious parts of a quasi-living universe, we shall be more ready to engage in action to make our corner of it a better place to live. However, if we fail to live up to our potentials to know the world, and ourselves in the world, we shall remain strangers in a mechanistic, impersonal universe. Our chances of creating peace and sustainability on this Earth will not be more than the chances of a snowball in hell.

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