

A Brief Review of *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas that Have Shaped Our World View* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991) by Richard Tarnas. 544pp.

In Tarnas' own words, the book's aim is to present "a coherent account of the evolution of the Western Mind and its changing conception of reality" "from the ancient Greek to the postmodern". It asks and proceeds to answer in an enjoyably readable, narrative form, "How did the modern world come to its present condition? How did the modern mind arrive at those fundamental ideas and working principles that so profoundly influence the world today?" (*Ibid.*) Despite the alleged suspicion among so-called "post-moderns" toward metanarratives, the larger story, the big picture, as no longer credible, Tarnas' book is prime evidence to the contrary. In my judgment, it is one of the very best available single-volume (and inexpensive!) histories of Western philosophy.

While there are many good books which present the history of Western philosophical ideas, most tend to be written out of an attempt to be objective and from a more or less settled, systematic perspective, reflecting what I would call an Aristotelian frame of reference. Rarely do they bring out the latent dynamism, dialectical tension, live questioning, and ongoing pursuit of philosophical discovery that has characterized the *passion* of the Western mind, which is Tarnas' central thread. So also, almost never do the former group of books treat Platonist or Platonist-leaning philosophers with empathy and care, if they recognize them at all. Tarnas' book is unique in that respect, rare in its deep appreciation for the ongoing tradition of Platonic philosophers and Platonic ideas on up to the present, while nevertheless giving the more sober Aristotelian of philosophers and philosophical ideas their proper due.

In my judgment, this account of Western philosophy is particularly useful for persons interested in situating the post-critical philosophy of Michael Polanyi within its larger historical context, going back to ancient Greece. In addition and specifically, this book provides a basic understanding of:

- The amazing coherence of the ancient Greek Worldview, despite its diversity of different voices, giving recognition above all to intellectually apprehensible form and order.
- Plato's central emphasis upon the quest to discern intellectual order amidst apparent disorder that set the Western Mind on its philosophical and scientific quest. Of special significance is his setting for posterity (and eventually Copernicus and Kepler) to solve the 'problem' of planetary disorder in a well ordered Cosmos.
- The impact of Christian ideas (especially Augustine) on this synthesis and the antinomies in which it results. His account of Medieval philosophy's further development of this process is unmatched in a book of this size.
- The Revolution of the Modern, which for Tarnas hinges upon the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the rise of Modern Science, starting with Copernicus, rather than Descartes and the Enlightenment.
- The ensuing Transformation of the Modern Era resulting in the Self-Critique of the Modern Mind, the Two Cultures of Romanticism vs. Critical Reason, and ultimately the metaphysical nihilism of Post-Modernism at the turn of the millennium. The reader at the end of the book is left in flux, uncertainty, and despair, yet also fraught with the possibility of a new intellectual synthesis.
- In his Epilogue, Tarnas explores what he takes to be a recovery of Archetypal Thinking via Depth Psychology as possibly indicating the direction in which such a new synthesis might be found.

By Dale Cannon, Western Oregon University