

The Crisis of the Western Mind

Julio Olalla



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WE LIVE IN A CHALLENGING TIME. As a result of the coming together of several significant factors, this moment in time is turning out to be especially consequential. Here in the West, after centuries of relative stability and consistency in our ways of thinking, we are beginning to look around and see other possibilities. This new openness is clearly related to a series of crises that have been emerging in Western culture.

The Crisis in Epistemology

Consider for a moment the paradigm of rationalism that has permeated Western culture ever since Plato. The far-reaching results of this paradigm, so clearly seen in the extraordinary achievements of science (and its sister disciplines of mathematics and logic), along with the use of the scientific method, are surely not debatable. However, the truly extraordinary evolution of Western science also carries with it two core, epistemological assumptions of great significance.

The first assumption is basically that

of scientism—the belief that science and scientific thinking alone can determine what is to be accepted as real, as well as determining the scope of what can be known. Under this presupposition, everything must either be subject to the laws of physics, chemistry, biology, and other scientific disciplines, or else not be considered an “objective” experience. Spirituality (long regarded with deep suspicion, if not contempt, by science) and even aesthetics, intuition, emotion, and morality have been reduced to the status of variable functions of brain chemistry interacting with certain macrobiological laws of human evolution.

Furthermore, in addition to telling us **what** can be known, science also dictates **how** this can be known. Either the acquisition of knowledge proceeds according to the well-established precepts of the scientific method, or, if not, it is to be regarded as being of secondary importance or even downright nonsense. The three central parameters of this method are: **objectivism** (the assumption that there is an objective universe that can be explored and known scientifically), **positivism** (the assumption that only what is physically observable counts as scientifically “real”), and **reductionism** (the assump-



tion that scientific explanation proceeds by explaining more complex phenomena in terms of more elementary ones, or, in other words, the whole in terms of its parts). Adhering to these principles results in whole realms of human experience being left out, or alternatively, in the belief that the systematic exploration of these realms can no longer lay claim to the official designation of “knowledge,” and that any prestige that naturally accompanies this scientific principle is lost. Meanwhile, as human beings, our deep desire for wisdom and wholeness remains unfulfilled.

The second epistemological assumption that underlies Western science is that knowledge is to be acquired primarily for the sake of manipulating the physical world, for dominating nature, as Francis Bacon, the father of the scientific method, insisted. The universe is seen simply as a resource to be exploited, and so our whole focus becomes one of figuring out how to accomplish this domination effectively. Paradoxically, our very obsession to dominate and control nature is leading to a situation that seems increasingly dangerous and out of control. We appear to be completely unable to restrain our tendency to pollute the atmosphere, poison our lakes and streams, destroy our forests, and decimate our rich inheritance of animal life. Tragically, we have almost completely lost the more primordial view of the world as a place of dwelling, a place we feel inherently connected to and at home in.

The Crisis of Capitalism

As a result of this manipulative stance toward the world, we have become very good at two things: acquiring new knowledge and acting effectively in order to put this knowledge to good use. It is scarcely surprising, then, that technology and business management have become two of the driving forces shaping our culture. As we move into the new century, we can see the impact of these forces pervading almost every aspect of our daily lives.

The success of technology-based economies—or in other words, modern capitalism—can seemingly no more be doubted than the success of the rationalistic/scientific paradigm that underlies them. Indeed, since the fall of

the Berlin Wall in 1989, signaling the end of Communism and the collapse of the Soviet empire, capitalism appears to have emerged triumphant as the virtually unchallengeable model—a model that most countries long to imitate, with the U.S. as the clear intellectual, political, technological, industrial, and military leader.

What has become inherent in modern capitalism is a deep commitment to growth for its own sake and for the ceaseless accumulation of wealth and power, often with little regard for other values. What we are witnessing now,

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as many commentators have remarked, is a gap between the well-off and the poor that is growing daily and may be approaching a dangerous point of instability. (Today, three percent of human population owns close to fifty percent of all human wealth.) Business organizations today are obsessed with a single concern: how to push the rate of growth and profit ever higher. Unlike nature, which appears to be governed by a law of dynamic homeostasis dictating when a process of growth or change should move forward, slow down, or stop altogether, present-day capitalism appears never to recognize a point of “this is enough.”

The Crisis of Disconnection

The Copernican revolution, despite its brilliant impact in both science and philosophy, ended up leaving us inhabiting a cold, purposeless universe in which the appearance of humankind shows up only as a cosmological accident, an epiphenomenon of matter. Far from being at the very center of a divinely ordained and ordered cosmos, which was then believed,

we found ourselves radically de-centered, condemned to exist as the sole beings that are endowed with intelligence and purpose, yet in a silent, mindless, aimless, mechanical universe.

In many preceding eras and cultures, human beings have felt a deep sense of **connection** with the world, seen, for example, in their willingness to listen to the various ways that nature spoke to them. Even in medieval Christian times, the natural world was regarded as an expression of God's glory and benevolence. In our post-Copernican world, however, we experience a profound, cosmic loneliness. Nature no longer has anything to say and remains silent in the face of our analytical probings. Adrift in a boundary-less realm of space and time, devoid of a spiritual dimension to our lives, we find it increasingly hard to make sense of ourselves or our reason for existing. The universe has become "disenchanted."

This sense of deep and seemingly ineradicable loneliness and disconnection is beginning to seep into our bones. We can see it at a very practical level, for example, in the epidemic of depression now sweeping much of the Western world. We also recognize its symptoms in our loss of community life and even in our relationships with one another. In the U.S., there are a growing number of people choosing to live alone. In our business organizations, we are failing to find opportunities to pursue fulfilling lives. Instead, we have become obsessed with a single game called "More, Faster, and Short-term Profits," regardless of the cost in terms of the impoverishment of human relationships and the loss of the dignity of work.

Even medicine and some schools of psychology have contributed to our sense of disconnectedness and alienation from the universe by stripping human beings of any spiritual dimension. We no longer sense our dependence on one another and on the universe, which used to be seen as our fundamentally benevolent source. Our whole understanding of ourselves has, as a consequence, been profoundly affected. We are losing the balance between our individuality, our community, and nature, a loss that goes right along with the reductionism of Western science, which raises the status of the parts over that of the whole.

Blind to our multiple connections with the world,

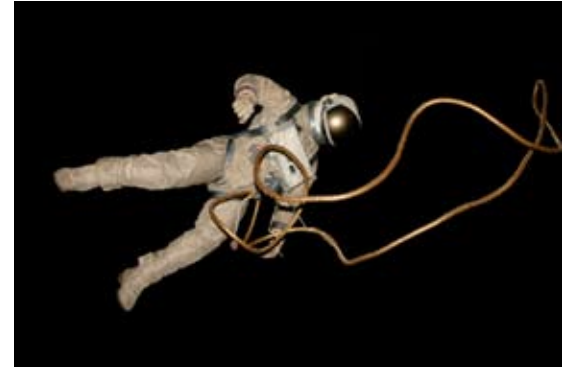
instead of seeing life as an opportunity to serve, we fall into a mood of ingratitude. We consider ourselves to be primarily the worthy recipient, while failing to engage in any kind of reciprocity, let alone generosity.

Just as we become disconnected from nature and society, so we also become alienated from ourselves, particularly in regard to our emotions and our bodies.

This may at first seem puzzling in this age of psychotherapy. Perhaps we should see the growing demand for psychotherapy as itself a measure of the degree of our emotional and physical malaise. What has arisen in response to our sense of alienation, of course, is the pervasive "self-help" movement. As anyone who buys books knows, the self-help section of most bookstores is usually one of the largest. At the Barnes and Noble in Santa Monica, California, for example, there are no less than seventy-five shelves, or two hundred and twenty-five feet of books devoted to this topic.

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No doubt such a flood of advice regarding how to live is not all misguided. Clearly, many people are genuinely helped by this trend. But much of this guidance appears to be aimed at learning to manipulate ourselves, just as we have dedicated ourselves to acquire knowledge in order to manipulate and control nature. Unfortunately, this is not a very effective approach to the learning that appears to be needed, precisely because it focuses attention on the isolated self. It is true that we are individuals born with particular predispositions. But we tend to forget that culture, society, and nature are also dimensions of self. One clear sign of this radical impoverishment of our sources is a pervasive lack of passion in our personal and professional lives. We hold passion as an opposite of intelligence. It is a common occurrence to encounter people who consider us foolish or naïve if we dare to show



passion for anything. Passion can be understood as a mystical act, constituting nothing less than a predisposition to fuse with the world. Whether we lose ourselves in a task that we are deeply engaged in or melt together with another person in the act of making love, passion shows up as an experience of merging with our surroundings.

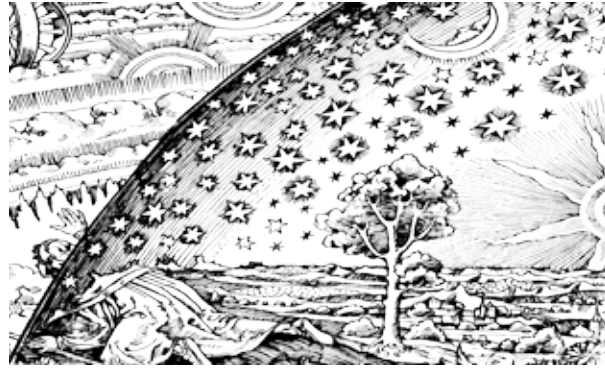
Service may also engender passion, as we are drawn to become ourselves in the act of aiding and supporting others. Passion, then, is the emotion of connectedness *par excellence*.

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We unquestionably need moments of passion in order to lead healthy, fulfilling, satisfying lives. But how can we experience passion when we find ourselves living disconnectedly in a meaningless world? What we are left with all too often is passion limited to the physical act of sex and little else, a situation that renders our lives dry and deeply unsatisfying.

The Crisis in Learning

This sense of disconnectedness also spills over into the realm of education. Our view of learning is deeply affected by the pervasiveness of this rationalistic/scientific worldview. Just as knowledge is about acquisition, manipulation, and consumption, so learning, as currently organized in our schools and colleges, has come to be centered on accumulating and utilizing information. But learning is not just about gathering and applying information to produce ever more effective action in the world. This reductionist view of schooling is quite antagonistic to the broader, traditional ideal of education as a means to learn how to live both wisely and well in our world. Is it any wonder, then, that our children are completely turned off by school, seeing it as more or less irrelevant to their future beyond the acquisition of a certain set of credentials?



The crises that have arisen from the progressive outworking of these dominant factors in Western culture we are here discussing, together with the general lack of balance they have generated, produce breakdowns that we encounter again and again in our workshops and programs. While the experience of an ontological coach cannot necessarily claim some privileged status in the examination of this present human condition, it nevertheless represents a perspective that has been almost wholly absent from past and present reflections on the nature and scope of human suffering, its causes, and, above all, possible ways of alleviating it.

We are embarking on an extended effort to transcend these highly unwelcome aspects of the present human condition. Our task is to embrace our difficulties in a mood of complete honesty, openness, and acceptance. Let us remind ourselves that the seeds of change are contained in the difficulties themselves.

The Opening of the Western Mind

We are not alone in seeing the possibility of a new path leading us out of the crises and breakdowns we are now facing. There are many signs that a major shift in consciousness is already under way, pointing to what we might call the **opening of the Western mind**.

Provoked by thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Willis Harman, and, lately, the extraordinary ideas of Ken Wilber, a new brand of thinking is emerging. This trend is starting to openly reject rationalism's characteristic reductionism, opposing its inherent homogenizing tendencies by seeking to restore to human experience some of its richness, variety, depth, and multiplicity. These

ideas represent, in many ways, the first serious challenge that rationalistic thinking has faced since the death of Socrates.

Elsewhere, other large cracks are beginning to appear in the facade of Western culture. Many people now are beginning to turn elsewhere, opening themselves to the rich spiritual traditions of the East, such as Buddhism and Hinduism. Similarly, the East has also become a source of inspiration for the broadening of our understanding of health, healing, and medicine.

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The last three decades have also witnessed the rise of two movements that are without precedent. Following the radical critiques of Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, and a host of others, feminists have successfully denounced the repression of the feminine archetype that has pervaded practically all cultures for the last five thousand years. As the philosopher Richard Tarnas points out in the epilogue to his magisterial work, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, the crisis of the modern mind has resulted largely from more than two millennia of essentially masculine thinking, beginning with Socrates and continuing down the ages through Augustine, Aquinas, Copernicus, Descartes, Kant, Darwin, Nietzsche, Freud, and a host of twentieth-century physicists, chemists, and biologists. Now, Tarnas suggests, there are many signs of the emergence of more feminine-oriented values and forms of thought. Prominent among these are a new focus on gender issues in colleges and universities, greater emphasis on intuition and creativity in business as more and more women move into the workplace, and the growing discourses relating to the Gaia hypothesis and the feminine aspects of deity (goddess).

Tarnas suggests that we are, in fact, moving into a tremendously significant period of initiation. In addition to the turn toward yin values, we see a renewed interest in archetypal forces that transcend scientific reductionism, particularly in the renewed importance that we are giving to the great mother archetype.

A similar tectonic shift, initiated by Rachel Carson and given an extraordinary boost by the pictures of Earth taken from outer space, has also taken place in our whole orientation toward nature. There are

also changes currently at work whose effects we can at present only guess at, such as the connecting up of millions of people via the Internet, a technology-driven development without precedent in the history of humankind.

Like any birth, this shift to more openness can be painful at first, but we should not allow ourselves to fall into a mood of hopelessness. We must be courageous. We cannot necessarily tell where all this is leading. Like Jonah, that great biblical exemplar of transformation, we are now in the belly of the whale, unsure of just where we will end up. We need to have faith that, caught up in a series of unfolding developments over which we have little direct control, we are at least moving in the right direction.

A New Path

If there is one overarching way to describe the global process of transformation now underway, it is perhaps to suggest that we are now witnessing the emergence of a new discourse, or set of discourses, grounded in the integration of Eastern and Western ontologies. Traditionally, Eastern thinking and practice have centered on pursuing wisdom and the art of living through contemplation, meditation, closeness to nature, and, more generally, a mystical approach to consciousness aimed ultimately at merging with the Absolute.

In the West, we have for centuries focused on separating ourselves from the world, accumulating knowledge for the sake of better understanding and exploiting its resources (including what, in the business world, we now call human resources). This has been carried out using rationalistic/scientific modes of thinking that have proved extraordinarily powerful in accomplishing this task.

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Our foregoing critique of Western thinking is not intended in any way as an outright rejection. That would be absurd. Rather, we prefer to adopt the move advocated by Ken Wilber of **including and transcending** current modes of thought and practice. What we are aiming for here is to achieve a better balance by integrating the Eastern emphasis on contemplation and merging with the Western focus on analytical understanding and effective action. Such an integration would overcome the historical but unnecessary antagonism between these two diverging paths, taking hold of the best of each tradition.

To be more precise, what we are proposing here is a recognition that the process of fusion and separation constitutes the dynamic aspect of what it is to be human in this world. When we merge, we connect, but the very nature of fusing means that we are often unaware of the intrinsic nature of the connection. Correspondingly, when we become observers, we step away from the world for the sake of understanding and of generating effective action. Addressing the pressing issues of today's world requires that we master both dimensions of this dynamic. We need to bring them into balance, while at the same time acknowledging the mystery that ultimately underlies them both. 🍷