Astrology

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31

ASTROLOGY

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1 Introduction: Astrology Defined

Astrology (from Greek, "science of the stars") belongs to the oldest cultural phenomena of humankind. Its persistence from antiquity to modernity – despite many transformations and various developments – is remarkable. If we want to define this phenomenon, we can say that, most generally, astrology engages the supposed relationship and correspondences between the heavenly realm (the stars, planets, zodiacal signs, etc.) and the earthly realm. To interpret these correspondences and interrelationships, astrology developed different and often conflicting strategies. On the one hand, astrologers asserted a *causal* influence of heavenly bodies on the sublunar world, which consequently seems to lead to a deterministic or even fatalistic worldview. Ancient Greek philosophers – particularly the Stoics – spoke of the cosmos as a complex network of correspondences and influences, governed by a hidden power. On the other hand, astrologers argued that the stars do not exert influence themselves but that they are mere "signs" or "symbols" of powers that are active throughout the cosmos. The intellectual, religious, and ethical issues that are linked to these alternatives have been part of astrological discussion ever since. Are the heavenly signs simply accompanying the mundane events, or are they responsible for them? And if there is a sympathetic correspondence between the celestial sphere and the earth, does this necessarily imply a deterministic or fatalistic influence?

The answers to these questions evidently challenge philosophical and religious convictions. Particularly in Western scriptural religions, a deterministic interpretation of astrology was often seen as problematic because it seems to eliminate freedom, the prerequisite of moral action and the precondition of redemption, punishment, and sin. Not surprisingly, then, it was the second alternative that gained the upper hand in Western cultural history:

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The stars were deprived of their divine power and were seen as mere "instruments of God," their path interpreted as "God's handwriting" (already in Origen's *Philocalia*).[1]

The search for underlying principles in the correspondence between heavenly and earthly realms brought forth several fields of interest that can be distinguished as different areas of astrological practice. Already at an early stage, the prediction of agricultural matters and weather conditions was made on an astrological basis. This could mean that eclipses of the sun and moon, conjunctions of planets, or the paths of individual planets were correlated with climatic conditions. In addition, an astrological theory was developed that purported to predict the outcome of an initiative (a war, business venture, foundation of a city, etc.) on the basis of the horoscope cast for the moment the initiative was undertaken.

The reading of an individual birth chart was a relatively late development (after the fourth century BCE), although in antiquity there already was a complex theory available concerning this field of astrological practice. Usually the individual was the king or another high-ranking person, whose horoscope thus represented not only a forecast of an individual's life course but also that of the political or religious community as well. Although today the main focus of astrological practice is on the interpretation of individual nativities, we should not forget that the move from "mundane astrology" to "individual astrology" happened only after the Renaissance and was further fostered by the development of "psychological astrology" in the twentieth century. I will explain this in more detail when I present a historical overview. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to discuss the relationship between astrology and what is usually referred to as "Western esotericism."

2 Astrology and Esoteric Discourse

When we look at publications in the field of Western esotericism, it is striking that despite their different approaches there seems to be little doubt among scholars that astrology is an important part or "discipline" of esotericism. This, however, is by no means self-evident. Why would scholars choose to disconnect astrology from the history of science and philosophy, or from disciplines such as medicine and politics? Questions such as these lead us directly into historical developments that are of quite recent origin. It may

[1] See Kocku von Stuckrad, *Das Ringen um die Astrologie: Jüdische und christliche Beiträge zum antiken Zeitverständnis* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), 771–782; Tamson Barton, *Ancient Astrology* (London: Routledge, 1994), 75–76.

even be argued that the lumping together of astrology and esotericism is itself characteristic of a cultural dynamic that came to full fruition after the Enlightenment. In the service of that ideology, astrology was pushed away to the margins of science and reason, a development that served the modern view of Western identity as enlightened, rational, and immune from its religious and mythical past.[2]

In general, the discourses of inclusion and exclusion that have accompanied the process of forming the modern identity have affected the way in which scholars describe the status of astrology. Besides labels such as "pseudo-science" or "superstition," astrology has often been called an "occult science." This term probably originated in the sixteenth century, along with notions of *occulta philosophia*. "Occult," in this context, refers to hidden or secret powers that inform a substantial part of the disciplines lumped together under the rubric "occult sciences" – notably astrology, alchemy, and magic.[3] Twentieth-century scholars turned this rubric from an *emic* (an "insider's") into an *etic* (an "outsider's") category, positing a unity to these various disciplines. While Keith Thomas believed that astrology formed the basis of the occult sciences – and that consequently the "decline" of astrology would inevitably lead to the decline of magic and alchemy – Brian Vickers encouraged this interpretive trend by arguing that all "occult sciences" share a common mentality that is clearly distinguishable from a rational, "scientific" mentality.[4]

However, such a distinction is problematic for several reasons. First, although these disciplines overlap in varied and complex ways, all of them have distinct histories with quite different and complex intersecting trajectories. As William R. Newman and Anthony Grafton put it, "Even during the heyday of Renaissance neoplatonism, astrology and alchemy lived independent lives, despite the vast inkwells devoted to the rhetorical embellishment of occult philosophy."[5] Second, other disciplines and practices had

[2] See Charles Zika, *Exorcising Our Demons: Magic, Witchcraft, and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 4.

[3] In an influential work, Wayne Shumaker also adds witchcraft to this mélange; see his *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance: A Study in Intellectual Patterns* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

[4] Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1971), 631–632; Brian Vickers, "On the Function of Analogy in the Occult," in *Hermeticism in the Renaissance*, ed. A. G. Debus and Ingrid Merkel (Washington, DC: Folger Books, 1988), 265–292, at p. 286; see also *Occult and Scientific Mentalities in the Renaissance*, ed. Brian Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

[5] William R. Newman and Anthony Grafton, "Introduction: The Problematic Status of Astrology and Alchemy in Premodern Europe," in *Secrets of Nature: Astrology and Alchemy*

direct and long-standing links to astrology, especially mathematics, philosophy (natural and moral), medicine, historiography, theology, and politics. Configuring astrology with the other so-called occult sciences tends strongly to distort our understanding of its relationship with these other areas of knowledge. Third, the heuristic notion of "hidden powers" continues to remain important within the more "legitimate" sciences, from the scientific revolution to the present. Fourth, it is difficult to demonstrate that astrology is "irrationalism," given that astrology (Latin *ars mathematica*) was part of the curriculum taught in universities until the seventeenth century and that it was based on empirical and rational methods of argumentation.[6]

Indeed, it is important to note that until the eighteenth century, astrology had been intrinsically linked to astronomy, mathematics, natural philosophy, and medicine.[7] Thus, the fact that astrology was subsumed under the artificial category of occult sciences has to do, again, with the formation of a modern self-understanding that seeks to distance itself from these disciplines. But it is precisely in terms of the interface of science, philosophy, religion, and other cultural phenomena that the role of astrology in the West must be understood.

Why then, one might ask, should astrology be studied as part of Western esotericism, mysticism, or Hermeticism? If astrology is closely linked to the history of science, to natural philosophy, and to other cultural domains, it is difficult to escape the impression that connecting it to esotericism is nothing more than a prolongation of the Enlightenment agenda of marginalizing astrology. In fact, as I have argued elsewhere,[8] the entire scholarly field of esotericism should be integrated or even dissolved into an analysis of the dynamics that are operative in European history of culture. Notwithstanding

in Early Modern Europe, ed. Newman and Grafton (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2001), 26.

[6] I deal with this topic in more detail in *Geschichte der Astrologie: Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, 2nd ed. (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2007); see the index for "Empirie" and "Astrologie und wissenschaftliche Methode." Cf. Lynn Thorndike, "The True Place of Astrology in the History of Science," *Isis* 46:3 (1955), 273–278.

[7] See, for instance, H. Darrel Rutkin, "Astrology, Natural Philosophy and the History of Science, ca. 1250–1700: Studies toward an Interpretation of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem" (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, Bloomington, 2002); Monica Azzolini, "Reading Health in the Stars: Politics and Medical Astrology in Renaissance Milan," in *Horoscopes and Public Spheres: Essays on the History of Astrology*, ed. Günther Oestmann, H. Darrel Rutkin, and Kocku von Stuckrad (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 183–205.

[8] Kocku von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), particularly chaps. 1–3.

this methodological caution, let us see whether there is more to say about astrology, esotericism, and Hermeticism.

If we conceptualize esotericism as a discourse of "perfect knowledge" involving a dialectic of concealment and revelation, astrology is seen as a means to unlock hidden knowledge of the universe and to grant human beings perfect understanding of the ultimate meaning of existence and of human history. As an example of this, we may consider the concept of the so-called Great Conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn elaborated by Abū Maʿshar in the ninth century, and subsequently applied to Shi'ite, Jewish, and Christian apocalyptic speculation. But even here, we should not forget that the best astrologers have never claimed that astrology offers perfect understanding or knowledge; rather, astrology has usually been understood to be conjectural or probable knowledge.

When it comes to Hermeticism, a similar observation can be made. There is no reason to assume that astrology as such is hermetic, or that there exist intrinsic links between astrology and Hermeticism.[9] On the other hand, the figure of Hermes Trismegistus has featured prominently in the legitimization of astrological doctrines from antiquity through the twentieth century. Early on, Mercury, Hermes, and Hermes-Thot were credited as significant representatives of astral knowledge. Subsequently, Jews combined this tradition with their understanding of Enoch and Metatron as revelatory entities that knew "the secrets of the heavens." Muslims, for their part, blended this idea with the figure of Idris. The result is a rich and complex literary, iconographic,[10] and magical tradition centering on the figure of Hermes as the revealer of astrological knowledge. Interestingly enough, the authority of Hermes Trismegistus was so strong that leading scholars of the scientific revolution still legitimated their new astronomical models with reference to him. Nicholas Copernicus, for instance, in the tenth chapter of his *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (1543), justified the importance of the sun as

[9] The only exception perhaps is the doctrine of correspondences that is a basic component of astrology (even if a causal relationship between objects is assumed, see von Stuckrad, *Geschichte der Astrologie*, 16) and at the same time is reminiscent of the alleged Hermetic doctrine of "as above, so below."

[10] The iconographic tradition of the zodiac in the Muslim Middle Ages has been studied by Anna Caiozzo, *Images du ciel d'Orient au Moyen Âge: Une histoire du zodiaque et de ses représentations dans les manuscrits du Proche-Orient musulman* (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2003), with many references to Hermes. An important publication is also Jean-Patrice Boudet, *Entre science et nigromance: Astrologie, divination et magie dans l'Occident médiéval (XIIe–Xve siècle)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2006).

the center of the universe with the assertion of the "Thrice Greatest" that the sun was a "visible god."[11]

The example of Copernicus shows how problematic it is to approach esotericism and Hermeticism as "marginal" or "suppressed" parts of Western culture. When scholars today conceptualize Western esotericism with reference to traditions that have been neglected or marginalized by mainstream culture, they are – unwittingly, to be sure – part of a discursive formation that has taken shape during the past three hundred years. This discourse is characterized by what may be called a "strategy of distancing," or a "process of disjunction." These disjunctive strategies artificially distinguished astrology from astronomy, alchemy from chemistry, magic from science, and so on. Self-evident as these disjunctions may seem to the modern reader, they are in fact of quite recent origin. As scholars, we should not apply the rhetoric of synecdoche here and take relatively recent phenomena as representing the West in all its history.[12]

Astrology should be studied as part of the history of science, philosophy, mathematics, medicine, politics, historiography, art, and religion. Only when it comes to the revelation of hidden, perfect knowledge by means of astrological methods does it make sense to speak of esoteric astrology.

3 The History of Astrology in Western Culture: An Overview

The origins of Western astrology lie in the Mesopotamian cultures of the third millennium BCE. From the fifth century BCE onward, both the zodiacal scheme – with twelve zodiacal signs of equal size – and horoscopic astrology were developed. In this process, the influence of Greek mathematics and astronomy played an important role. Later, some elements of Egyptian tradition were adopted, as well. In Imperial Rome, a full-blown astronomical and astrological science was available that is usually referred to as "classical astrology."[13] This tradition was canonized by Claudius Ptolemy (ca. 100–178 CE) in his *Syntaxis mathematica* (for astronomy) and *Tetrabiblos* (for astrology).

Despite the fact that ancient scholars differentiated the calculating and the interpreting branch of the science of the stars, the utter devaluation of

[11] See von Stuckrad, *Geschichte der Astrologie*, 255.

[12] For a critique of these approaches to Western esotericism, see von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge*, chap. 3.

[13] As important works on ancient astrology, see Auguste Bouché-Leclercq, *L"astrologie Grecque* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1899); Wilhelm Gundel and Hans Georg Gundel, *Astrologumena: Die astrologische Literatur in der Antike und ihre Geschichte* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1966); Tamsyn Barton, *Ancient Astrology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

astrology vis-à-vis astronomy is a modern phenomenon that led – in the aftermath of the scientific revolution – to the dismantling of astrology from the accepted sciences. In antiquity, however, astrology held a key position among the reputable sciences. As *ars mathematica* closely connected with astronomy, it made its way into the highest political and philosophical orders of the Roman Empire and became the standard model of interpreting past, present, and future events.[14]

In the Middle Ages, astrological theory – both calculative and interpretative – was expanded on, particularly by Muslim scholars. While Christian astrologers usually clung to a few Latin sources of late antiquity seen as compatible with Christian theology, Muslim and Jewish scholars absorbed theories of Indian astrology, combined them with the Greek and Latin sources of Roman times, and developed complex and mathematically more exact hermeneutical systems. From the ninth century onward, Christian circles increasingly felt the need to catch up with Muslim and Jewish science, and in many monasteries translations of Arabic texts were provided. The interaction between scholars of different religious backgrounds was particularly fruitful in Spain and Italy, leading to a shared astrological field of discourse in the High Middle Ages.

Characterized by a new interest in Platonism and the availability of rediscovered Greek Hermetic texts in Latin translation, the period between 1450 and 1650 can be seen as the pinnacle of astrological research in Europe. Astrology played a decisive role in religious controversies and discussions both intra-faith and interfaith. One example of this is the debate about the cycles of historical development that were interpreted with reference to the cycle of Great Conjunctions between Jupiter and Saturn, a theory mentioned earlier. Already a part of ancient discourse, the theory of the cyclical succession of religions, kingdoms, and powers on the basis of Great Conjunctions was developed by medieval Muslim astrologers. Shi'ite scholars interpreted these events as indications of the return of the "hidden Imam." Jews joined this debate with prognostications of messianic events, and Christians referred to the Great Conjunctions as signs for the second coming of Christ. The interconfessional debate about Luther's horoscope, for instance, was strongly informed by speculations about the messianic impact of Great Conjunctions.

[14] On the political influence of astrologers in Rome, see Frederic H. Cramer, *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1954). On the dramatic change with regard to the legal status of astrology under the impact of Christian emperors, see Marie Theres Fögen, *Die Enteignung der Wahrsager: Studien zum kaiserlichen Wissensmonopol in der Spätantike* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993).

Within an apocalyptic and millennialist mindset, astrology was a key factor in the legitimation of identity and power.[15]

The scientific revolution changed the position of astrology in scholarly discourse. It is often argued that the crisis of astrology was due to the victory of the Copernican heliocentric model of the cosmos, while astrologers still clung to the geocentric Ptolemaic model. This is too simplistic, however.[16] Kepler, for instance, argued in several treatises that the heliocentric model would pose no problem for astrologers, because for astrology it makes no differences *how* the paths of the planets are to be explained. More important for the crisis of astrology, in fact, was that from the seventeenth century onward, radical empiricism gained the upper hand in scientific research. Empiricism led to a rejection of theories involving invisible (occult) powers in nature, and astrologers had serious problems in justifying their concepts of "sympathy" and "correspondences."

In the eighteenth century, astrology in Europe had completely lost its status as a scientific discipline – with the exception of England, where a continuous development of astrology is attested.[17] It was no longer part of university programs, a critical factor of the so-called decline of astrology. The result, however, was not that astrology vanished from intellectual discourse, but that it shifted from the realm of science to that of art and literature. Even before the era of Romanticism, astrology entered those cultural areas, for instance, in the writings of Schiller and Goethe, who made use of astrological symbolism to establish an alternative to Christian monotheism.[18] In the nineteenth century, then, astrology played a role in Romantic concepts of "living nature," concepts that challenged the then-dominant mechanistic materialism.

However, it was the Theosophical Society, founded in 1875, that was chiefly responsible for reawakening interest in astrology on the Continent.

[15] See Paola Zambelli, ed., *"Astrologi halluzinati": Stars and the End of the World in Luther's Time* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1986); Anthony Grafton, *Cardano's Cosmos: The Worlds and Works of a Renaissance Astrologer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

[16] Aside from the impact of the new scientific paradigms, it is important to note the influence of Pico della Mirandola's harsh refutation of astrology – or certain aspects of astrological theory that he refuted. On the response to Pico's critique, see Steven vanden Broecke, *The Limits of Influence: Pico, Louvain, and the Crisis of Renaissance Astrology* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003).

[17] See Patrick Curry, *Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989); and his *A Confusion of Prophets: Victorian and Edwardian Astrology* (London: Collins and Brown, 1992).

[18] See Kocku von Stuckrad, "The Function of Horoscopes in Biographical Narrative: Cardano and After," in *Horoscopes and Public Spheres*, 225–240; von Stuckrad, *Geschichte der Astrologie*, 281–286.

The Theosophists developed mystical and karmic readings of astrological concepts that ran counter to the prognostic emphasis of older astrological currents. In the twentieth century, the growth of psychology provided a second major influence on the new appreciation, and reconfiguration of astrology. Now, it was the individual and the inner qualities of the human psyche that came to the fore. Certainly, without C. G. Jung's psychology and its adaptation in New Age culture, the history of astrology in the twentieth century would have been completely different.[19]

Today, the majority of professional astrologers cling to a non-deterministic, psychological concept of astrology. In all Western countries, societies have been founded that strive for the advancement of what they see as serious astrology, in a culture ambivalent about the science of the stars. While astrology is mostly neglected and ridiculed by scholars and scientists today, a significant percentage of the population in Europe and North America nonetheless still believes it can provide guidance in life. It is the task of the scholar of religion to analyze the underlying polemical structures and the discourses of modern identity formation that have led to this state of affairs, rather than taking sides for or against astrology.

[19] On modern astrology, see the overview in von Stuckrad, *Geschichte der Astrologie*, 287–368.