

MA in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology
Introduction to Cultural Astronomy and Astrology
Week 3: Astrology and Culture
Weekly Introduction
Nick Campion

Purpose of the week

The purpose of this class is to become familiar with the various debates concerning the nature and definition of astrology. We will also introduce the polemics in astrology: arguments in western astrology between practitioners of astrology on the one hand, and between practitioner and their critics on the other. The course material focuses on western astrology because almost all the scholarship does. However, you are free to take other traditions into account.

Tasks this week

- Be prepared for the discussion based on Nick's powerpoint on astrology: please think about the question, what *is* astrology?
- Be prepared for the discussion on Book 1, parts 1 and 2 of the *Tetrabiblos* by Claudius Ptolemy.
- Be prepared for the discussion based on Bernadette's powerpoints on 'What is a Horoscope?' and the Polemics in Astrology
- Do the required reading, check some of the optional reading.
- Having chosen your two JSTOR papers for essay one, post some thoughts on the essay 1 Forum on the philosophical and/or methodological positions of the two papers (see the Compare and Contrast essay guide)
- Pace yourself and don't take on too much.

Preparation

Next week:

Write and submit essay 1.

Prepare for the discussions in week 5 seminar on 8 November

Read Nick's powerpoint on cosmology

Read Claude Levy Bruhl, *How Native's Think*, chapter 2.

Read Bernadette's powerpoint on cosmology

Skills this week

Read the Referencing Guidelines

Class Description

Nobody can agree exactly how astrology is defined. Loosely, it is the quest for meaning in the universe and the resulting practices. Most cultures have a version of it. The starting point for this week's class is a quote by Ann Geneva: '...it is first necessary to locate astrology within its own universe of discourse before

historians can attempt to compare it with other explanatory systems'.¹ So, the question before us is, what is 'astrology's universe of discourse'?

This week's material examines the narratives astrologers construct about the cosmos. Astrology has no single definition. It has been defined as a science (a word whose meaning varies), a religion, an art, a means of personal development and a form of divination. Some astrologers emphasise technique, others intuition, some see it as an essentially passive form of interpretation, others see it as a path to action; in the past, or in modern India, active uses of astrology might be considered magical or religious in nature, in the modern west the means for change might be psychotherapeutic. Some contrast 'esoteric' or 'inner' astrology, which deals with the soul, with 'exoteric' or 'outer' which concerns daily affairs. There is also a variety of explanations: the stars and planets are a form of celestial writing revealing divine or cosmic intention, or providing a means for human beings to reflect on their lives; they are links in a causal chain; they send influences, perhaps on behalf of the divine; they coincide or correlate with events on earth as different kinds of time cycles interact.

The course material for this week is designed to focus on the relationship of astrology to these discourses and thus how it has come to be defined. The variety of definitions gives rise to the possibility that there is no such thing as astrology, in the singular, but rather astrologies, in the plural. We will also consider such questions as whether its practice is a matter of reading or analysing external laws or influences, or whether the astrologer's subjective participation is essential, and whether it can be seen as a means of predicting the future, analysing character, or encouraging spiritual development. Other issues to consider include: what (if anything) do different astrologies have in common?; has astrology changed radically since its origins or later, or is it somehow the same practice as ever; and, if so, how has it maintained its identity across a long history which encompasses so many changes?

As an exercise you may wish to propose and justify a definition of astrology, drawing on evidence, whether historical or recent, literary, empirical or personal. It may be tempting to answer this from your personal experience alone ('In my opinion.....', 'I think.....'). Now, as we shall see next term, personal experience can be an important part of the academic process, but this term, try to stand back and focus on the evidence. For example, does Patrick Curry's definition stand scrutiny? If you were to read Dane Rudhyar, what would you think astrology is? You do not need to pretend you have no personal experience, but try to draw your ideas from evidence which may be outside your experience. Also, be critical. It might sound simple to say astrology is an art, a science, a psychological tool or a form of divination, but can such single definitions be sustained? Are there counter-examples?

¹ Geneva, Ann, *Astrology and the Seventeenth Century Mind: William Lilly and the Language of the Stars*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press 1995, p. xiv.

Remember from week 1 our introduction to the question of astrology's global diversity and hence whether its claims and procedures are culturally defined. We may bear in mind the heading of a page on the Astrodienst web site: 'How We View Life Is How We Read Charts'.² That is, from this point of view, one's astrology is derived from one's cosmology. Liz Greene amplified this view: 'Astrology cannot be explained by any single theoretical framework, but must be viewed within a specific religious, philosophical, social and political background and, equally importantly, from the perspective of individual practitioners working within a particular milieu'.³

As soon as we consider culture we may take a sociological perspective. For example, in western culture, why are most astrologers women, while most astronomers are men? Can we, also look at gender issues: One sociologist, Shoshaner Feher argued that New Age practises such as astrology offer women 'a voice' that is not available in mainstream culture.⁴ Another paper, by Sosis, argued that women tend to be superstitious, and that men then engage with astrology when they, more unusually, succumb to superstition: 'Males are probably not free of superstitious efforts to maximize reinforcement probability, as fans of professional sports know... [and] engage in some of the behaviors designed to increase astrological knowledge but be less likely to admit to it.'⁵ We may consider such academic work also part of our cultural study: we can ask what pressures and influences led to certain questions being asked and conclusions reached.

² Liz Greene, Astrodienst. "Liz Greene - Astrologers' Agendas: How We View Life Is How We Read Charts." http://www.astro.com/astrology/in_lifeview_e.htm.

³ Liz Greene, 'Is Astrology a Divinatory system?' in *Culture and Cosmos*, Vol.12, No,1, Spring/Summer (2008), pp. 3-29.

⁴ Wuthnow, p. 167; Feher, pp. 183-184.

⁵ Sosis et al, p. 70.