

MA in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology
Introduction to Cultural Astronomy and Astrology
Fate and Determinism
Weekly Introduction
Nick Campion and Bernadette Brady

This week considers issues arising from debates concerning determinism, especially their application to astrology. The problem of the extent to which the future is predetermined runs to the heart of many debates about the nature of the universe. The assumption that, if the present is mathematically determined, the future must already exist as a projection of such mathematical processes, is central to some modern thinking in physics. The problem arises from the question of whether an event, for example, is the result of the coming together of a series of mathematically-determined laws of physics, or the probable result of a combination of circumstances which are individually unpredictable.¹

The strict determinist position – that all things are predetermined – was formulated by the Stoics in the third century BCE. Within classical Stoic philosophy the only part of one's life that one could change is one's state of mind and attitude reflected in Marx's aphorism that 'Freedom is the recognition of necessity'.

The Platonic position was softer, holding that, although material life brings strong deterministic features – one is born, grows older and dies in an unavoidable process – but held that the individual has considerable scope to affect their lives through the cultivation of correct wisdom and a proper lifestyle.

Christian attitudes then generated a still unresolved paradox as follows: on the one hand individual choice is necessary if forgiveness from sin and salvation is to be achieved but, on the other, if God is omnipotent he knows the future, if he knows the future the future must already be written, and individual salvation is also predetermined. This was the Calvinist position and is still found amongst many evangelical and apocalyptic Christian groups.

The Stoic view has interesting implications when it comes to legal matters. According to the geneticist Steve Jones,

So fine is the balance between free will and determinism raised by the Stoics and their descendants that the legal system remains uncertain about nature and nurture as a cause of crime. Often, it treats them as separate entities, balancing one against the other. This reflects a common – and to geneticists baffling – delusion that if a trait is influenced by genes it is somehow insulated from the environment. In fact, nature and nurture are not exclusive. Every attribute, criminality included, is influenced by both.²

¹ Bird, Alexander, *Philosophy of Science*, London: Routledge 2002, p. 77.

² Jones, Alexander, *In the Blood: God, Genes and Destiny*, London: Harper Collins, 1996, p. 214.

The modern debate was largely initiated by the English philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) points out that in law, the level of blame for criminal action which is undertaken in haste is less than for the same action done with premeditation. He asks us why? ³ On this point he demonstrates our acceptance of the idea of free will (liberty), and suggests that free will not only exists in the presence of determinism (necessity) but that it actually requires determinism for its existence – we can only freely choose if there is a level of determinism in the world around us. Hume is famous for his billiard ball analogy: if ball Y hits ball X it causes it to move, but we cannot demonstrate any necessary relationship between the two balls, of the kind that was suggested by Stoic ‘sympathy’. ⁴ All we ever see are events, and any idea of a connection between them is the result of our own misplaced assumptions.

William James (1842-1910) extended Hume’s thinking by defining levels of determinism. His scale ranged from the softest of soft determinism to the hard determinism of causal determinism. ⁵ He also developed the terms compatibilism, in which free will and determinism are compatible, and incompatibilism, in which they are not.

Astrology uses the language of ‘cause’ and ‘influence’ and is often accused of Stoic-style universal determinism by its critics. However, the Platonic view is highly influential, and may be dominant, amongst astrologers. In *Laws*, when discussing the need for the maintaining the perfect order of the universe and the need for a individual soul to return to this perfect order, Plato wrote: ⁶

With this grand purpose in view he [god] has worked out what sort of position, in what regions, should be assigned to a soul to match its changes of character; but he left it to the individual’s acts of will to determine the *direction* of these changes. You see, the way we react to particular circumstances is almost invariably determined by our desires and our psychological state.

So all things that contain soul change, the cause of their change lying within themselves and as they change they move according to the ordinance and law of destiny.

Plato, Hume and James all seem to be presenting similar ideas on determinism which is that of a compatibilist position – free will existing within determinism.

3 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Eric Steinberg (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1977; reprint, 2nd), p.66.

4 See the discussion in Ladyman, James, *Understanding Philosophy of Science*, London: Routledge 2002, pp. 32-40

5 See William James, "The Dilemma of Determinism," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays* (New York: Longman, 1909).

6 Plato, "Laws," in *Plato, Complete Works* (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 904 b-c.

Forum

Is freedom of action necessary in an astrological cosmos?

A note on this week's reading

You will see a considerable reduction the reading this week. My notes provide a fairly comprehensive introduction to the problem in ancient astrology, Bernadette Brady provides a discussion which shows the way that her PhD thesis is evolving and there's a piece from Liz Greene which explores the implications in modern astrology of discussions over fate.

Reading

Nick's notes on Astrological Determinism

Brady, Bernadette, 'Some Philosophical Roots of Determinism in Astrology', paper presented at Bath Spa University Graduate School seminar, 18 February 2008.

Greene, Liz, 'A Psychological Approach to Transits and Progressions', in *The Horoscope in Manifestation: Psychology and Prediction*, part 2, pp 131-152, London, CPA Press 2004 [1997].

James, William, 'The Dilemma of Determinism', in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*. New York: Longman, 1909.

Williams, Raymond, *Keywords*, London: Fontana 1983, pp. 87-91.

Other Reading

Adorno, Theodor, W., 'The Stars Down to Earth: The Los Angeles Times Astrology Column', in *The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, edited by Stephen Crook, pp. 34-127. London: Routledge, 1994.

Dawkins, Richard, *The Blind Watchmaker*, London: Penguin 1991, Chap 1

Hawking, Stephen, *Black Holes and Baby Universes*, London: Bantam 1994, chap 12 ('Is Everything Determined?')

Hume, David, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Eric Steinberg. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1977, Reprint, 2nd. pp 53-69 (Section VIII Of Liberty and Necessity).

Velmans, Max, *Understanding Consciousness*, London: Routledge, 2000. pp. 236-262.