

MA in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology
Introduction to Cultural Astronomy and Astrology
Fate and Determinism
Weekly Introduction
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Purpose of the Week

The sense that the future is somehow preordained occurs in many cultures and in astronomy and astrology is connected to the observation that the motions of the stars and planets can be predicted in advance: if life is connected to these motions then life can also be predicted in advance. This week considers the varieties of belief in fate and determinism and their relevance to astronomy and astrology.

Tasks

Do the required reading for the week. If you run out of time, download anything you haven't read for later.

Check through the optional reading.

Work on essay 2

Prepare for next week

Read the notes and powerpoints from Bernadette and Nick

Class Description

This week considers issues arising from debates concerning fate and determinism, especially their application to astrology. The problem is a huge one for, experientially (in terms of inner experience) and phenomenologically (in terms of experience of the phenomena of the world), most people feel that sometimes they take free choices while at others their lives seem to be part of wider patterns in which they may have little choice. The question as to whether choice is free or not, or somewhere in between, is ultimately unresolvable. The cosmological evidence, as found in the regularity of solar and lunar cycles (and other astronomical cycles once they are measured) tends to point to an order to which all life is subject. The question, then, which all human cultures seem to face, is to what extent the details of human life conform to this cosmological order and to what extent human beings can attain a degree of control over their lives by engaging with this cosmological order. This is one basis of magic and a, if not the, basis of astrology in most, if not all, cultures.

Philosophers have struggled with these problems and developed different formulae for solving the 'fate-free will' problem. The reading will introduce discussion of forms of determinism such as 'soft' and 'hard' determinism and 'compatibilism' (in which free will and determinism are compatible) and 'incompatibilism' (in which free will and fate are not compatible), which cast the usual 'free will' versus 'fate' debate in a much more nuanced form.

The problem of the extent to which the future is predetermined runs to the heart of many discussions about the nature of the universe. For example, the assumption that, if the

present is mathematically determined, then 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 even a fire, 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.

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

The Platonic position allowed for a different form of free will, 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. Thus Plato introduces the concept of 'moral determinism' which is the concept that what befalls a person is based on their state of their moral integrity rather than the laws of physics. Plato, then allocated this concept to the notion of the cultivation of the soul, but later philosophers, such as the Dutch philosopher, Spinoza (1632 – 1677) would define what Plato considered was the soul's work as the conscious seeking of one's own free will.

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 therefore also predetermined. This paradox opened up questions around whether individuals can be held morally responsible for their actions. There have been different solutions posed to this paradox and one such solution was put forward by the Stoic Boethius in the 5th century CE, who suggested the idea that God existed in eternal time rather than what is now called 'flow time'. In eternal time the past, present and future all exist simultaneously and therefore all things are known, but this eternal time still requires the unfolding of events in flow time. Eternal time could be equivalent to the Platonic 'Being' and flow time to Platonic 'Becoming'. Another argument was put forward by Calcidius a 4th century Christian who created a Platonist model of determinism to challenge the dominate Stoic position. His solution was to suggest that God only knew 'universals' but not 'contingencies', defined as variations that happened within the wider concepts of universals. However God's Providence as a form of hard determinism is still the Calvinist position and is also 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’.

The modern debate on determinism was largely initiated by the English philosopher David Hume (1711-1776), who pointed 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? 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’. 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. His work led to the development of 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:

‘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.’ *Laws* 904 b-c.

Plato, and Hume both seem to be presenting similar ideas on determinism which is that of a compatibilist position – free will existing within determinism. Although Plato was promoting moral determinism with free will only be found in the soul’s work, while Hume saw our access to free will not through our morality but rather through indifference, what he defined as ‘Liberty of spontaneity’ – we are truly free when we make choices with little regard to the outcome. William James however rejected the ‘truth’ of determinism and moved towards what is now defined as a libertarianism where one believes that free will is not compatible with determinism and because we have free will (James used the idea that we do have regrets and/or guilt thus we could have acted otherwise in a

previous situation) therefore determinism does not exist.

Thought for the week

How free is human will in an astrological cosmos?