

Determinism in Ancient and Medieval Astrology

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Mesopotamia

The priority in Mesopotamian astrology was to match each omen prediction with a possible action which was intended to enhance desirable outcomes and avoid undesirable ones. The belief that destiny can be altered at any moment is made clear in tablet known as the *Advice to a Prince*, probably written between 1,000 and 700 BCE. The first three lines read 'If a king does not heed justice, his people will be thrown into chaos, and his land will be devastated. If he does not heed the justice of his land, Ea, king of destinies, will alter his destiny and will not cease from hostilely pursuing him'.¹ The result, the foundation, in part of the theory of monarchy down to modern times, implied that, if the king failed to fulfil his duty, to look after his subjects, the gods' children – they would be justified in rebellion. An unjust king will break the link between people and the divine, his subjects will rebel and the gods will not come to his rescue. That's why the best omen possible was that the king would 'stay in his truth', 'widen his understanding' or 'stay in his righteousness'.² If the king was wise, the country would prosper. There was, though, an endless paradox in Mesopotamian thought, and that was that the actions which were themselves to be undertaken to manipulate the world possessed their own auspicious and inauspicious times. The negotiation of destiny was a two-way process, but one in which humanity was always a supplicant, appealing to the divine council as a higher authority. The reconciliation of the duty to obey divine orders, while taking an active stance, meant that the problem of free-will was a delicate and rather slippery one. The timing was crucial and, if a namburbi was performed on an inauspicious day, it might be ineffective. As one astrologer insisted,

Concerning the apotropaic ritual against evil of any kind, about which the king write to me "Perform it tomorrow - the day is not propitious. We shall prepare it on the 25th and perform it on the 26th."³

There's an inference here that time is the organising principle, a notion which presents us with certain problems for our understanding of Mesopotamian astrology. The issue is this: if the pertinent god or goddess was genuinely in control, and their vanity, pride or compassion could be appealed to as if they were genuinely anthropomorphic deities, then the ritual could have been performed at any moment. Yet this appears not to be the case.

1 Lambert, W.G., *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 113.

2 Hunger, Hermann, *Astrological Reports to Assyrian Kings*, Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1992, 95, p. 55; Parpola, Simo, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal*, part 1, texts, Verlag Butzon & Bercker Kevelaer, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1970, 326

3 Parpola, Simo, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1993, 278, p. 217.

Divinity is clearly constrained by time which itself seems almost to be deified; some times are inherently more favourable than others.

The kind of 'pertinent' ritual, with its attendant actions and incantations, which would have been required is set out in great deal in a Hittite tablet, probably from the mid-second millennium. The text provides instructions on the necessary action in the case of an evil omen from the moon and success depends on the moon god accepting a substitute. The text described a solution to the problem of evil:

The king goes up the sanctuary [and speaks as follows: "That] omen which thou gavest, I Moon-god - if thou foundest fault with me [and] wishedst to behold with thine own eyes [the sinner's] *abasement*, [see, I the king,] have come in person [to thy *sanctuary*] and have [given] thee these substitutes. Consider the [substitu]tion! Let these die! But let them die!"⁴

The substitute, though, does not always have to be killed. In another version, the substitute for the moon-god's wrath, the tablet tells us, must be a healthy slave, who is subject to a full coronation ceremony, anointed with oil, clad in the royal robes, given a royal name and crowned. The prisoner is then released while the king bathes at dawn or sacrifices a sheep under the open sky and appeals to the sun-god. The entire process, it seems, could stretch over two days. A letter from the astrologer Mar Istar suggested that a substitute be allowed to sit on the throne for 100 days before meeting his fate - his death.⁵ The question of the *namburbi* is a crucial one, for it goes to the heart of the question of whether Babylonian astrology possessed notions of causality and fate similar to those which supposedly characterised later Greek astrology. The standard view is expressed by Francesca Rochberg, who argues that the very existence of the *namburbi* tradition indicates that there was no concept of fate.⁶ However, the contrast with a supposedly deterministic Greek astrology can be a misleading one, for Greek views of fate came in different forms, but generally suggested that it could be negotiated. Negotiation of the future, then, doesn't deny concepts either of fate or causality; if there is to be a dialogue with destiny, there has to be a destiny with which one can engage. Did the Mesopotamians possess a theoretical concept of fate? If they did, it was subtle and complex, and is little understood.⁷ Leo Oppenheim has suggested that there may have

4 From the Hittite 'Removal of the Threat Implied in an Evil Omen' in Pritchard, James B. (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969, p. 355.

5 Parpola, Simo, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal*, part 1, texts, Verlag Butzon & Bercker Kevelaer, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1970, 292.

6 Rochberg-Halton, Francesca, 'Aspects of Babylonian Celestial Divination: The Lunar Tablets of Enuma Anu Enlil', *Archiv für Orientforschung*, 22, p. 15.

7 For this discussion see Kramer, Samuel, Noah, *The Sumerians, Their History, Culture and Character*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963, p. 123; Kramer, Samuel Noah and Diane Wolkstein, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer*, New York: Harper and Rowe, 1983, pp. 15-19; Lawson, Jack N., *The Concept of Fate in Ancient Mesopotamia: Of the First Millennium, Towards an Understanding of 'Simtu'*, Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 1994; Oppenheim, A. Leo, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilisation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977, pp. 201-8.

been an underlying unifying principle at work expressed in the Sumerian words *nam* (Akkadian *simtu*) and *me*, through the idea is not popular with scholars in the field. We cannot be sure of these words' exact meaning, or even if they were distinctive, and we should be extremely cautious about either interpreting them or assuming any relationship between them. *Nam* may have equated with 'destiny' or 'essence', thought not necessarily in a fixed, predetermined sense. *Me* may have been the activating feature appropriate for each *nam* and required for its proper functioning but in the absence of definitive statements from the cuneiform texts themselves, it may be misleading to assume that the Mesopotamians conceptualised and categorised fate as the Greeks were to do. Yet they still had some idea that not only were they subject to an order defined by the gods, but that the gods were also subject to the same order by virtue of their manifestation in the natural order. In the Sumerian hymn, 'Inanna and the God of Wisdom' the goddess lists the *me* conferred on her by Enlil. Oppenheim sees these as essentially these include all her physical and psychological characteristics, the qualities which make her who she is and determine what she is able to do, Kramer as protective powers, more like talismans than inherent qualities.⁸ Yet the meaning is still not clear. The epic of Inna's descent records that 'she gathered together the seven *me*' as if they were powers or objects one could possess, but that, having received the '*me* of the underworld', she could not return, as if in acquiring the *me*, her destiny had changed.⁹

The important point though, is not whether we can find an exact modern translation for Mesopotamian terminology, but that the Sumerians may have possessed a concept of 'fate' which was all-embracing, and was bound up with the concept of purpose, and a belief that the future had to be fulfilled, or we may say, negotiated, through a separate active principle. Destiny derived from a dialogue between heaven and humanity, between ideal and earthly realms and passivity in the face of the future was not an option. As Henri Frankfort said, for the ancient Mesopotamians, 'to live meant to act'.¹⁰ And then, of course, astrology as a system of reading the sky, cannot be separated from the calendar rituals, which were a means of living in conformity with the sky.

Plato and Greek concepts of Fate

Plato's political theology has certain essential features. Firstly, if the universe is governed by mathematical laws, then it functions like a vast machine which, like Newton's some two thousand years later, is essentially deterministic. Freedom, then, is essentially a state of mind. It's for this reason that Karl Popper, in the latter part of the twentieth-century, berated Plato as the intellectual ancestor of modern authoritarianism, especially Marxism.

8 Kramer, Samuel Noah and Diane Wolkstein, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer*, New York: Harper and Rowe 1983, p. 157.

9 'From the Great Above to the Great Below', in Kramer, Samuel Noah and Diane Wolkstein, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer*, New York: Harper and Rowe 1983 pp. 53, 61.

10 Frankfort, Henri, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978, p. 189.

He identified Political Platonism, the belief in the benevolent dictatorship of the philosopher, as the source of tyranny in the modern world. There are ambiguities in Plato's thought, though, and his counter statement, drawn from his teacher, Socrates, that we are all responsible for our own lives, exists alongside the predetermined universe as a permanent paradox which Popper termed historicism; most theories that the future is broadly predetermined, Popper noticed, require the believer to actively strive to create that future, a philosophy which he termed activism. As the Marxist prepares for the inevitable revolution by forming a revolutionary vanguard, he argued, the Platonic philosopher rides the predetermined cycles of politics and history by administering the state in perfect accord with celestial harmonies. The astrologer, having predicted the future, can influence its outcome; 'all astrology', Popper wrote (meaning Platonic astrology), 'involves the apparently somewhat contradictory conception that the knowledge of our fate may help us influence this fate'.¹¹ From Plato onwards, the Babylonian notion of an astrology of signs, in which the onus is on the astrologer to read divine messages, can be distinguished from an astrology of celestial order, in which astrology becomes a means of describing the processes to which all people, from kings to the lowliest peasant, are subject. Although their ideologies differ, both approaches to astrology were designed to manage the state. Plato would not necessarily have recognised the two as distinct, for he regarded oracles as a vital means of reading the divine will. But the distinction between the two theoretical models was later to be increasingly important in arguments over astrology's validity. The Platonic model, with its assumption of universal order, was no more nor less free than the conventional Greek cosmos, with its pantheon of competing gods and goddesses, and the astrology it spawned was to allow for human participation as did the Babylonian. As Popper argued, Platonism made human participation in the cosmic drama a necessity. The Platonic cosmos actually enhanced human freedom in that one's destiny was to be influenced by one's own actions rather than by the whims of deities who were under no obligation to accept the sacrifices and offerings made to them.

In the *Timaeus* we read that, when, God made the stars he fashioned a soul for each one and so the eighth sphere, that of the stars, is the natural home of humanity in its original, perfect condition. When the cosmos was created God had made a soul for each star - there were the same number of souls as stars and each soul was linked to one star; 'he showed them [the souls] the nature of the Universe, and declared unto them the laws of destiny'.¹² When each soul was implanted in a star it grew into the most god-fearing of living creatures, but, when implanted into a human body, a struggle began in which each soul was tasked to overcome the body's physical passions.

The Myth of Er fleshes out this model. Before birth, Plato tells us, each soul is paraded before Lachesis to choose from a number of lots, or 'patterns of lives', which are taken from her lap and scattered on the ground. Each soul then chooses a life and it's in this act

¹¹.Popper, Karl, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, 2 Vols., London and New York: Routledge, 1945 Vol. 1., p. 244, n. 1; see also p. 210, n. 5; *The Poverty of Historicism*, London and New York: Routledge, 1986,

¹² Plato, *Timaeus* 41E-42A.

that all future responsibility lies; once the life has been chosen, nobody and nothing else, neither the gods nor any fate, can be blamed for any misfortune that the individual suffers. The souls are then taken before Lachesis again, where each chose its 'genius' or 'daimon', defined as 'the guardian of his life and the fulfiller of his choice'.¹³ Guardian angel might be a modern equivalent. But, we have to understand, the element of choice was crucial; no matter how far life's circumstances might seem to be fated, they were the consequence of a voluntary act.

Plato was issuing a direct challenge to the view, common in literal readings of Homer, that individuals often cannot be held responsible for what they do, that whatever goes right or wrong is ultimately the fault of some god or goddess who is toying with them for their own amusement.¹⁴ Now, the daimon is a spiritual entity but, in the myth of Er it becomes bound up with the choice of one's life on earth, which explains the word's translation as 'personal destiny'.¹⁵ If the daimon determined the individual character, then we do have some control over our moral choices, independent of external, and often capricious powers, acting through chance or fate. Whereas the heroic mentality, as conventionally portrayed by Homer, was morally helpless and often the architect of its own tragedy, for Plato, moral or prudent behaviour might lead to a fortunate future. The two positions are not mutually exclusive, but we can discern a difference of emphasis. The Platonic view embedded into the emerging cosmological discourse a philosophical basis for the view that, in the astrological universe, the future depends on the individual's successful negotiation with the universe rather than as in Mesopotamia, one's obedience to individual deities. The notion was found much later in the words Shakespeare put into the mouth of Julius Caesar; 'The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings'.¹⁶ Although the gods had been removed from the equation, the principle was Babylonian. As Heraclitus had said of the greatest oracle in the Greek world, that 'The lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither speaks out nor conceals, but gives a sign'.¹⁷ That is, there is no direct instruction to be followed but a sign to read. The Babylonian hypothesis is maintained – the wise individual can read the signs and steer themselves to a successful future – but the cosmos itself, rather than Marduk, say, or Ishtar, becomes the 'thou', the entity with whom individual dialogue takes place.

13 Plato, *Republic* X.620 D-E. For a very useful discussion of the daimon see Betz, Hans Dieter, 'The Delphic Maxim "Know Yourself" in the Greek Magical Papyri', *History of Religions*, Vol. 21 no 2 (Nov 1981) pp. 156-171.

14 This is not a view which would have been held by the Neoplatonic Philosophers of the third century CE onwards, who read Homer allegorically and referred to him as the 'divine theologian'. See Addey, Crystal, 'Oracles and Divination in Late Antiquity: the development and integration of religious phenomena in Late Platonist Philosophy', PhD Thesis, University of Bristol, 2008.

15 Kirk, G.S, J.E., Raven, M.Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983, fr. 247, p. 211.

16 *Julius Caesar*, I, ii, 140-141.

17 Kirk, G.S, J.E., Raven, M.Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983p. 209, fragment 93.

Back to the Myth of Er, the daemon then leads the soul to Clotho, who ratifies the chosen life, and finally to Atropos, who spins the web of the chosen destiny. And, when its destiny has been finally sealed, the soul passes under the throne of Necessity and is escorted to the arid heat of the Plain of Oblivion, where it drinks the water of the River of Forgetfulness and promptly falls asleep. Then, in the middle of the night, each soul wafts upward to its birth, falling to earth like a shooting star. It followed that each soul had to descend to the earth through the planets, a point of immense significance for both the astrology and religion of the classical world. As Er's journey showed, the route back to the stars was also through the planetary spheres. Now, Plato never developed the implication of this but if, as he argued, the soul travelled to and from heaven via the planetary spheres, the position of the planets at such moments, should indicate the nature of the enterprise. This was to be the model developed by his successors.

Plato's ideas on the soul changed in his various writings. However, as with his cosmology, we can generalise. The human being consisted of four different parts, the body and a soul divided into three; the divine unfolded in stages, first through soul and mind, and finally through its self-realisation in physical form. In the *Phaedrus* Plato attributed to Socrates a three-fold structure metaphorically represented by a charioteer and his two horses.¹⁸ The highest part was the rational soul, mind or intellect, which discerns what is true, judges what is real and makes rational decisions. Next was the spirited soul, the active part, the will, whose function was to carry out what reason has decided. Last, and lowest, was the appetitive soul, the seat of emotion and desire, which needed to be restrained by the higher, rational soul. The division of the soul into different functions was to have immense consequences for the future of classical and medieval cosmology for, it was concluded by Plato's successors, if the soul came from the stars, and was ultimately, like all things in the cosmos, divine, then different types of soul would have distinct relationships both with God and the stars. Later forms of Platonic philosophy generally held that there were two types of soul, but the question about their connection with the stars remained. Again, without making any statements of detail, Plato argued that, in general, if the body and all three parts of the soul are balanced in each individual, then the state will function smoothly.¹⁹ For the Platonic astrologer, political stability therefore follows on directly from individual harmony which, in turn, might in theory be deduced from knowledge of the heavens. Plato's theory of soul takes us to the heart of the development of astrology in the Greek world.²⁰ The concept of the entire universe as alive and resting in soul, or psyche, enabled Plato to see the cosmos as psychological in the modern sense, as having personality, driven by manners, habits,

18 Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans H.N. Fowler (Cambridge Mass., London: Harvard University Press 1914) 246A, 253 C-D..

19 Plato, *Republic* 443D.

20 See Van der Waerden, Bartel, *Science Awakening*, Vol II, The Birth of Astronomy, Leyden and New York: Oxford University Press, 1974, p. 147; 'It seems to me that we are here touching upon the deepest religious root of horoscope astrology. The soul comes from the heavens, where it partook of the circulation of the stars. It unites itself with a body and forms with it a living being. This explains how human character comes to be determined by the heavens'

opinions, desires, pleasures, pains or fears.²¹ But then this, of course, was how the megalith builders or Palaeolithic calendar makers would also have understood it.

Plato himself was deeply concerned by the whole question of what he called 'better' and 'worse' births. He believed that children born at the appropriate season and phase of the planetary cycles would be 'better' and more likely to grow into upright, virtuous citizens and hinted that it would be possible to breed such people, a matter which could be achieved if couples married and hence conceived at the right time.²² Those who weren't would be more likely to grow into selfish, decadent adults and, as their number grew, society would slip into terminal decline. However, he never actually specified when children should be born and when they shouldn't. He set out a theoretical framework, but made no steps to elaborate it.

Every human being both contains something of the divine, is made of the same stuff as the rest of the universe, and is linked to a star. The task of the incarnated soul is then to lead a just and righteous life. Those who succumb to the passions of the flesh, to greed, jealousy, lust and anger are condemned to be reincarnated as women. And, if they still give in to their baser instincts, they will be reincarnated as whatever sort of animal best reflects their bestial behaviour.

The question, then was how the individual could avoid this fate. Plato explained this clearly. The Universe had come into existence as a compound of 'Reason', the attribute of God, and 'Necessity', the attribute of physical existence.²³ To give in to physical passion is to be subject to Necessity. To control such passions helps the individual return to Reason. It's clear the incarnated souls choose their own lives and therefore cannot blame God, fortune or the gods for their misfortunes: 'The blame is he who chooses: God is blameless.'²⁴ Those who care for their souls and turn their backs on the demands of the body gain communion with the gods after death.²⁵

For the Babylonians what we would understand as fate, as an external ordering principle, appears to have been expressed primarily through the needs and desires of the gods and goddesses, though we may, perhaps, perceive a hint of a sense of personal destiny in *nam* and *šimtu*.²⁶ In Greece, in spite of the continued importance attached to the dialogue with

21 Plato, *Symposium*, trans. W.R.M.Lamb, Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press 1914, 207E.

22 Plato *Republic* VIII, 546 A.

23 *Timaeus* 47E-48A.

24 *Republic* X.617E; see also 619D; Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans H.N.Fowler, Cambridge Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1914, 249 B.

25 Plato, *Phaedo*, trans H.N.Fowler, Cambridge Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1914, 82B-D.

26 *Nam* has been compared to Necessity, although it has been suggested that the Greek words *moira* and *physis* are the only natural equivalents. For this discussion see Oppenheim, A. Leo, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilisation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977, pp. 201-8.

the divine through oracles, the balance tilted towards the sense of fate as an organising principle - although in different forms. The concept first appears with Hesiod, who personified *Moirai* as a goddess and the word could mean one's share or portion; after a battle, for example, a soldier would receive his *moira* of the booty. It might also mean one's life-span, and hence the individual's relationship with fate as a metaphysical concept in which one life might be fortunate, another less so. Typically a temple of Zeus would have two urns outside it, one with good *moira* and one with bad. Only the gods were entitled to a life of exclusively good *moira*, while humans were dealt good and bad in arbitrary mixtures. The three *moirai* appeared at a child's birth and an adult's marriage and death and, in that even the gods were subject to *moira*, the decrees of the three *moirai* were more powerful than those of Zeus himself.

All living creatures are subject to *ananke*, or Necessity, broadly speaking the unavoidable laws of physical existence. How far this extends into the events of our lives though, is another matter. *Ananke* may oblige us to eat and drink, but does it force us to go to war? This is where *pronoia*, or foreknowledge, comes in, for if we are capable of perceiving the future then we can negotiate with it. The key was to avoid *agnoia*, or ignorance. From a Platonic perspective, divination was a means of breaking through the confusion inherent in Becoming, and perceiving the truths contained within Being. By the first century BCE, and perhaps earlier, degrees of the zodiac were known as *moirai*, so the world which had formerly denoted one's fate as in one's share or portion of land, one's physical circumstances, described one's share of the heavens - or the share that the heavens had in the individual's fate. The virtue of astrology is that, if the planets are recognised as the agents both of providence, *heimarmene*, and *ananke*, as they become when the soul descends through the planetary spheres, then knowledge of their movements naturally enables the astrologer to anticipate future possibilities and evade or enhance them, depending on preference. Only the third form of fate, *tyche* or chance, was unpredictable, a wild card in the pack. Greek astrology may have been more complex technically than Babylonian but the negotiation with destiny remained its primary ideological inspiration.

The Platonic cosmos was considered to be in itself intelligent, as a manifestation of the divine mind. Thus, while the existence of a fate determined before birth could not be denied, one's relationship to it might be modified precisely because the entire edifice is rational. This model of human affairs was to pervade Hellenistic thought. The complications were spelt out by Julius Firmicus Maternus in the fourth century, almost eight hundred years after Plato, as the classical world was drawing to its close.

But there are some who agree with us to a certain extent and admit that Fate and Fortune have a certain power, which they call *heimarmene*. But they attribute to it a different character which contradicts the law of the necessity of Fate. Thus they appear to maintain which is possible and not possible at the same time.

They claim that this thing which they call *heimarmene* is connected to mankind and all living things by a certain relationship...They claim that we are subject to Fate, that is, to Chance, for attaining the end of life. Thus by the law of Fate they claim one end -- that is, dissolution -- destroys us and all living beings. But all the things that pertain to our daily lives they say are in our power. What we do while we are alive belongs to us; only our death belongs to Chance or Fate.²⁷

The critical and self-conscious qualities of Greek science from the fourth-century century onwards, including its astronomy and astrology, has been attributed, at least in part, to the traditions of radical debate in Greek city-state politics.²⁸ Scientific thought may have imitated political behaviour, or perhaps politics provided a framework for intellectual inquiry to develop. But, given the importance of the oracular tradition to political decision making, we may also identify a process in which astrology gradually assumed greater significance, alongside oracles, as an instrument of state, as in Mesopotamia. It is these very traditions though, which make it difficult to generalise about Greek astrology. One distinction, identified by Jim Tester, relied on different approaches to the extent to which Necessity could be evaded or negotiated, and suggests a contrast between a 'hard' deterministic astrology, as opposed to a 'soft' version, in which individual freedom of action was much greater.²⁹ Tester assumed that 'hard' astrology, characterised by chains of cause and effect, was fundamentally Greek, and 'soft', as a matter of celestial signs, was characteristically Babylonian. However, there is no essential reason why instructions from the gods should allow any more room for manoeuvre than should natural forces.

The Stoics

While Plato and Aristotle provided all the philosophical rationale that astrology required if it was to function independently of Babylonian religion and capricious planetary deities, their work was refined by Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism. While he taught at Athens, Zeno was a prime example of the interrelationship between Greek and non-Greek worlds in the formulation of the west's philosophical foundations. Reputedly a Phoenician from the city of Citium in Cyprus, he moved to Athens around 311 BCE and, at first, studied at the Platonic Academy, but was to be heavily influenced by Cynicism. The Cynics, who had much in common with Platonism's more puritanical inclinations and devout cosmic piety, argued that only virtuous action leads to happiness, most pleasures therefore being useless. Zeno adopted from Plato the notion that Nature, the entire universe, is controlled by *logos*, reason, which is itself identified with God and

²⁷ Maternus, Julius Firmicus, *Mathesis*, translated as *Ancient Astrology: Theory and Practice*, Jean Rhys Bram, Park Ridge, New Jersey: Noyes Press 1975, I.VIII.2-3.

²⁸ Lloyd, G.E.R., *Magic, Reason and Experience: Studies in the origins and Development of Greek Science*, Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1979, p. 266.

²⁹ Tester, Jim, *A History of Western Astrology*, Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press 1987, p. 70. See also the analysis of 'strong' and 'weak' astrology in Hankinson, R. J., 'Stoicism, Science and Divination', in R. J. Hankinson, ed., *Method, Medicine and Metaphysics: Studies in the Philosophy of Ancient Science* (*Apeiron* 21, no. 2), 1988, pp. 123-60.

is manifested through fate, described as Necessity and/or Providence.³⁰ A number of conclusions flow from this simple proposition. The first, and most important, is that whatever occurs in this world must take place in accord with divine reason. As Zeno reasoned, in the divine, organic, interdependent Platonic world, nothing can take possibly place independent of divine reason. The wise man understands this and therefore, knowing that events are unavoidable, realises that the only solution is to live in harmony with nature, accept what happens and lead a virtuous life. As the first century Astrologer Manilius wrote, 'Yet this too is the gift of fate; the will to learn fate's laws'.³¹ There is no point in wishing the world is other than it is, because this is impossible and the virtuous man is not only wise, but noble and brave, for he knows that pain and death are not evils. The second is that all things are linked. The Stoics are often thought to be responsible for the doctrine of sympathy by which connected through similar essences; through the links of such networks with planets, astrology was given a new rationale. The notion of such associations between stars, stone, plans, people, periods of time – and everything – was, though, an essential part of Mesopotamian magic.³²

Stoicism is not exactly passive, for the self-discipline involved in leading a virtuous life and avoiding the pleasures of ordinary men is considerable. The well-known aphorism, 'the wise man rules his stars' is the classic statement of the Stoic position. Strictly speaking, freedom, for the Stoic, was a strictly internal affair - the freedom to accept Necessity. But Necessity was not a crude force, but a means of activating a sequence of connections, or sympathies between things, a world-controlling breath.³³ And, Necessity was to carry a number of Stoics to positions of extraordinary power. The Roman scholar Seneca the Younger (4 BCE - 65 CE), for example, was political advisor to the emperor Nero from 54 - 62, a period, before Nero's personal rule, which is remembered as one of particularly good government, while Marcus Aurelius, author of the famous *Meditations*, was actually emperor himself from 161-180. For Marcus, inspired by Plato, there were various ways to cope with the flood of events which flowed from the 'Primal Cause' – to contemplate the heavens: 'Survey the circling stars', he wrote, 'as though yourself were in mid-course with them. Often picture the changing and re-changing dance of the elements. Visions of this kind purge away the dross of our earth-bound life'.³⁴ One's soul could be cleansed by an imaginative union with the stars. Seneca issued the classic prescription for the Stoic lifestyle when he write that we should live every day as if it were our last but, if God grants us another day we should live it joyfully. He quoted from Virgil's Aeneid 'I have lived; I have completed now the course that fortune long ago

³⁰ Sandbach, F.H., *The Stoics*, Bristol: The Bristol Press 1975, esp. pp. 101-8.

³¹ Manilius, Marcus, *Astronomica*, trans. G.P.Goold, Cambridge Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1977, 2.148-9.

³² Dalley, Stephanie (ed.), *The Legacy of Mesopotamia*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1998, pp. 108-9; Livingstone, Alasdair, *Mystical and Mythological Explanatory Works of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986, pp. 71-9.

³³ Sandbach, F.H., *The Stoics*, Bristol: The Bristol Press 1975, esp. p. 82.

³⁴ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1964, V.47, p. 112; see also IX.29, p. 144. See Plato, *Republic*, 2 Vols, trans. Paul Shorey, Cambridge Mass., London: Harvard University Press 1937, 516B.

allotted me'.³⁵ Popperian historicism, with its reconciliation of predetermination and with the pressing need for individual action is the best way to understand the Stoic position, so Seneca or Marcus Aurelius were obliged to actively rule in a fair and just manner because this was what Necessity required. Seneca, for good measure, added, 'Superstition is an idiotic heresy; it fears those it should love: it dishonours those it worships. For what different does it make whether you deny the gods or bring them into disrepute'.³⁶

The Stoic attitude to astrology, though, shared the same complex attitude as the Platonic, which is natural considering that Zeno owed so much to Plato. Although, like Platonists, some Stoics argued that true knowledge could be achieved if one had a clear enough mind, others were also influenced by the same sceptical tendencies. The sceptical Platonist Carneades, head of the Academy until his death in 129 BCE, launched the first major philosophical attack on astrology. His arguments, though lost, were repeated by the Stoic Cicero (106-43 BCE) and formed the basis of all critiques of astrology down to the present day. He was the first to raise the twins problem: if two babies are born at the same time, how can they have different destinies? Yet most Stoics found astrology to be a reliable guide to the dictates of Necessity. Along with Platonism, Stoicism was the main philosophical host which carried astrology throughout the classical world, giving it an intelligent, rational voice. Cicero's own teacher, Posidonius (135-50 BCE) is reputed to have been largely responsible for introducing astrology to the Roman world, although his work is almost entirely lost and no astrological fragments from his extensive writings survive. Although the Stoic school in Athens itself appears to have closed sometime around the year 216 CE, its assumptions had by then already proved amenable to many Christian theologians as part of their general acceptance of Platonic teachings, and whose writings carried then into medieval Europe where they gave meaning to notions of cosmological order. Already, though, Antiochus of Ascalon, head of the Platonic Academy from 86-68 BCE, taught a philosophy based on the agreement between Plato, Aristotle and Zeno. If Stoicism contributed one teaching in favour of astrology to this mix of teachings, it was that everything in the universe obeys the same set of laws, whether planets or people, in contrast to the Platonic-Aristotelian idea that life on earth was fundamentally corrupt and lacking in the perfection which was such a feature of the planetary and stellar realms. It was therefore, in theory, a simple matter to use the planets to comment on the human condition. There is a comparison to be made between this essentially egalitarian view of the cosmos and astronomical developments in Babylon, particularly the evidence from the ephemerides, the mathematical tables, which suggests that the astrologers had acquired the ability to predict solar and lunar eclipses and upcoming planetary positions according to reliable formulae.

Claudius Ptolemy – the 2nd century CE

³⁵ Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1969, XII, II, pp. 58-9.

³⁶ Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1969, CXXIII.17, p. 231.

Ptolemy is frequently described as a Stoic, the very embodiment of determinism. And to an extent he was, though in a diluted form; he was deeply influenced by the combined Platonic-Aristotelian-Stoic philosophy advocated by Antiochus of Ascalon, lead of the Academy in the first century. While all change on earth might be explained in terms of natural forces, higher up the causal chain the planets' movements, he claimed 'were' eternally performed in accordance with divine unchangeable destiny'.³⁷ Yet in an absolutely fated world astrology had no purpose, so or any astrologer Stoic determinism had to be tempered by at least some Platonic belief that the future was negotiable.

Ptolemy's exposition of the correct procedures for reading horoscopes was complex, devoid of practical examples and, in spite of clear attempt to be encyclopaedic, apparently lacking any section on *katarche*, the use of astrology to select auspicious moments for new initiatives (although the rules he set out could easily be adapted to the management of the future). Neither did he include interrogations but, as we have seen, there are suggestions that their use may not have been current in the second century. But, considering that selection of auspicious moments was one of the principle appeals of astrology to its most powerful political patrons, certainly from Antiochus of Commagene onwards, perhaps much earlier, it is not entirely clear why he omitted explicit instructions on its use. After all, the whole notion of manipulating the natural world by harmonising with celestial influences and order, fits perfectly with the Aristotelian, naturalistic dimension of Ptolemy's world view. One explanation might be that he was too much of a Stoic to regard astrology as anything other than a means of reading a pre-ordained future. This is true – in part. He did write that foreknowledge of predetermined events calms the soul; by knowing that the future is inevitable, one accepts it with grace. However, in the same passage, he also argued that the only point in forecasting the future was to change it and that, in any case, some events were due to chance.³⁸ So, in his discussion of Egyptian medical astrology he argued that 'they would never have devised certain means of averting or warding off...the universal and particular conditions that come or are present by reason of the ambient, if they had any idea that the future cannot be moved and changed'.³⁹ There was no point in astrology unless the future could be changed. It remained managerial, participatory and the astrologer adopted the role of co-creator, but the locus of participation had changed. No longer was the astrologer a supplicant pleading a case before capricious gods and goddesses before whom he was relatively powerless. Instead he was participating, as a humanist, in the creation of the future. Ptolemy's divinatory act did not involve talking to divinities. But, as in Babylon, it allowed an act of will which might, it was hoped, control the cosmos.⁴⁰ There were, to be

37 Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, I.3.

38 Ptolemy, Claudius, *Tetrabiblos*, trans. F.E. Robbins, Cambridge Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1940, I.3.11.

39 Ptolemy, Claudius, *Tetrabiblos*, trans. F.E. Robbins, Cambridge Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1940, I.3, pp. 32-3.

40 See Curry, Patrick, 'Divination, Enchantment and Platonism', in Voss, Angela and Jean Hinson Lall, (eds.), *The Imaginal Cosmos: Astrology, divination and the sacred*, Canterbury: University of Kent 2007, pp. 35-46.

sure, astrologers who accepted complete Stoic determinism, down to the merest detail. In fact, most of Ptolemy's contemporaries, including Vettius Valens. One was Julius Firmicus Maternus in the early fourth century, but in his defence of his position, he made it clear that others, perhaps the majority, believed that only death was subject to Fate, leaving the rest of life as negotiable.⁴¹

But Ptolemy does seem to have made a deliberate attempt to mitigate the Pythagorean determinism of much of the astrology of his time, in which the mathematical movement of astrological factors trapped the individual not just in a clockwork cosmos, but a vast series of cogs, the existential prison envisioned by Hermetic pessimists. The Aristotelian in Ptolemy sought a path to freedom. He naturalised the *katarche* as a 'seed' moment, in which all origins can be understood on their own terms - as natural.⁴² He was not the first to use this metaphor. The seed in the Hermetic texts was sown by Destiny and gave rise to all succeeding events, while Manilius spoke of the construction of the universe from its component seeds.⁴³ Again he straddled the boundary between Plato and Aristotle. He took Aristotle's formal cause – that a thing can only be, or grow into, what it is – and final cause – that a thing is already what it is to grow into - and spoke of the process if he was a farmer.

In Ptolemy's scheme of causation, the divine manifests successfully through the stars, planets, climate, geography and culture.⁴⁴ In other words, the promise of one's natal horoscope might vary if one lived in a mountainous climate or a coastal plain, in the cold north or the tropics. This is common sense. Ptolemy set out the causal position comprehensively, arguing that,

The stars likewise (as well the fixed stars as the planets), in performing their revolutions, produce many impressions on the Ambient. They cause heats, winds, and storms, to the influence of which earthly things are conformably subjected. And, further, the mutual configurations of all these heavenly bodies, by commingling the influence with which each is separately invested, produce a multiplicity of changes.⁴⁵

41 Maternus, Julius Firmicus, *Mathesis*, translated as *Ancient Astrology: Theory and Practice*, Jean Rhys Bram, Park Ridge, New Jersey: Noyes Press 1975, I.VII.1-6.

42 Ptolemy, Claudius, *Tetrabiblos*, trans. F.E. Robbins, Cambridge Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1940, 1.2. 4, 8.

43 Asclepius III.39, in Scott, *Hermetica*, Vol. 1, p. 365; Manilius, *Astronomica*, 880-1. I am not suggesting that the writer of the Asclepius, Manilius and Ptolemy all shared the same idea of 'seed' but that there were common themes being developed in different ways.

44 Ptolemy, Claudius, *Tetrabiblos*, trans. F.E. Robbins, Cambridge Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1940, I.3.12.

45 Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*. 1.2, trans. Ashmand.

However causality does not actually reduce the level of human intervention, for human action itself becomes another cause:

it must not be imagined that all things happen to mankind, as though every individual circumstance were ordained by divine decree and some indissoluble supernal cause; nor is it to be thought that all events are shown to proceed from one single inevitable fate, without being influenced by the interposition of any other agency.⁴⁶

That the stars move along mathematically-defined paths should not lead to the mistaken conclusion that human life is similarly determined. Ptolemy explicitly rejects any assumption that human beings have no control over their lives and triumphantly asserts, as a classical humanist should, a spirit of freedom. He was not so far from the consensus on such matters. Manilius, for example, wrote that, 'Now nature holds no mysteries for us; we have surveyed it in its entirety and are masters of the conquered sky'⁴⁷

Ptolemy's task in Claude Lévy-Bruhl's terms, was to restore some of the initiative in the participation-mystique to humanity, to locate humanity in nature and qualify the Stoic position that participation lay in adjusting one's attitude to a world that was beyond one's control. Ptolemy attempted to straddle the gap that Cicero had opened between divination by nature and by art. Although he succeeded in the sense that the *Tetrabiblos*' naturalism and absence of any religious doctrines was to make it the ideal foundational text for the astrology which flourished alongside Christian theology in medieval Europe, the difficulty of reconciling his theoretical divinatory structure with a cosmology based on observable influences has been the cause of much subsequent criticism of astrology. Many critics could accept the notion of a *kosmos* bound together by physical influences which might form the basis of general forecasts without accepting that astrologers might then go on to make detailed statements about such matters as length of life.

While Ptolemy's naturalism is seductive, it only tells part of the picture. Matter was still intimately connected to soul and he was clearly exploring the numinous, the realm of psyche. His naturalistic rationale for astrology was embedded in a Platonic view of the cosmos as ensouled. Divinity stood at the heart of Ptolemy's cosmology. What he imagined, in his cautious way, as divinity, was the 'first cause of the first motion of the universe', impersonal and remote, like an 'invisible and motionless deity'.⁴⁸ His goal, he wrote, was to 'strive for a noble and disciplined disposition...to devote most of our time to intellectual matters, and especially those to which the epithet "mathematical" is particularly applied'.⁴⁹ He

46 Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*. 1.3, trans. Ashmand.

47 Manilius, *Astronomica*, trans. G.P.Goold, Cambridge Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1977, IV. 883-5.

48 Ptolemy, Claudius, *Almagest*, trans. G.J. Toomer, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1998, I.1.

49 Ptolemy, Claudius, *Almagest*, trans. G.J. Toomer, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1998, I.1.

wholeheartedly accepted Plato's sceptical theory of knowledge, that the material world is unreliable and only abstract thought could be a certain guide to truth, and saw the end of astronomy as a love of contemplation of the eternal. Prediction on a material basis had to be uncertain due to changes in the natural sphere. Whatever the configuration of the stars might indicate, any prediction had to take into account whether a person was young or old, lived in a cold climate or warm – or was even a person, rather than an animal. This, to Ptolemy, was simple common-sense.

Astrology, he maintained, is therefore conjectural and inherently unreliable, at least when compared to astronomy. And, in this, he was simply facing the same problem that had troubled the Babylonian astrologers in their correspondence with the Assyrian emperors. But, even when astrology was wrong, Ptolemy maintained, it still reveals the beauty of the universe.⁵⁰ That he was not averse to putting forth evidence from observation does not lessen his Platonic credentials. For example, Plato said that the world was spherical because the sphere was the most perfect shape. But Ptolemy needed simple observation to confirm Plato's logic. The stars, he reasoned, rose in the west, moved overhead in a vast arc, set in the west and then began the process again the next evening.⁵¹

The Middle Ages- the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries

Aristotelian mechanics, with its planetary causes and influences, added a set of laws which, although God was still nominally in charge as the First Mover, implied both a sort of autonomy and a set of processes which could threaten humanity's ability to make moral choices. If one removed magic from the astrologer's work, and one has to if God's omnipotence was not to be undermined, then one was left with the sometimes negative fate acquired at birth. So could Scot's poor, mean individual, born under Draco, ever have a chance of achieving salvation? Humanity's relationship with God therefore became correspondingly more complicated. For the Aristotelian, it was no longer enough for men and women to live through faith alone. Christian reason and logic were as important as paths to salvation as were prayer and meditation on the Holy scriptures. Worse, at least as far as traditionalists were concerned, the revived notion of planetary influence once again brought the soul under the possible sway of the stars, threatening the individual's duty to make free moral decisions, to choose the law of God over the devil. Even if the soul could be excused from celestial influence, the planets' impact on the physical body might still stir up lust and other vices, threatening one's soul with eternal damnation. The question of astrology, settled once and for all by Augustine, was once again central to the theological agenda. The church could hardly ignore the wide circulation of apocalyptic forecasts. The multiple conjunction of planets in Libra in 1186 which had so preoccupied Manuel was mentioned by the English chronicler Roger of Hovedon not just in respect of

50 Ptolemy, Claudius, *Tetrabiblos*, trans. F.E.Robbins, Cambridge Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1940, 1.2. 7, 9.

51 Ptolemy, Claudius, *Almagest*, trans. G.J. Toomer, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1998. I.3.

the expected storms, but the hope that the Crusaders would defeat the Saracens and the fears that prompted people in Germany to build caves to hide in and attend special church services to ward off threatened disaster.⁵² That the forecasts were wrong discredited astrologers amongst those who were already hostile to it, while sympathisers, such as John, bishop of Toledo saw the fault not in astrology but in the astrologers - who had made inaccurate calculations. For the sympathisers, the solution was obvious. One should strive for a more accurate mathematical astronomy and refine one's astrological interpretation.

Astrology became part of the curriculum of the rapidly spreading network of cathedral schools and the universities which were emerging at such centres as Paris and, around 1167, Oxford. The character of the Liberal Arts curriculum was derived from the convenient relationship between two meanings of the Latin word, *liber*, the root of such modern terms as library and liberate: to read was the attribute of the classical freeman, to the medieval mind to read was to set one's self free. The medieval version of the Roman educational system was known from its codification by Martianus Capella of Carthage around 410 to 439 in his *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*,⁵³ which was to become the most widely read textbook of the European middle ages. The scholarly quest for astrological texts was the logical consequence of astronomy's inclusion in the as a liberal art and astrology, with its rational premises, its naturalism and its exclusion of pagan gods, talismans, incantations and magic, then became a standard part of the medieval world view, carried on the back of Martianus and Aristotle.

The fatalistic, Stoic tone with which astrological rules were often composed, even when the notion of an astrologically precise fate was explicitly denied,⁵⁴ presented an implied challenge to each individual's need to freely seek salvation in Christ. This was especially so in his section on the qualities of the soul in which, adding detail to Plato's myth of Er, he documented the consequences if one's soul was ruled, by say, Saturn (austere and thoughtful but mean) or Jupiter (generous, god-fearing and affectionate).⁵⁵ Life was surely unfair if the jovial man stood a better chance of salvation than the saturnine of account of his divinely ordained fear of God. True, concepts of the elect, who were bound to be saved, were never far from theological discussion, and were eventually to surface strongly in Calvinism, but to consider an astrologically-selected elect was to lead into dangerous territory, even if the planets were doing God's work. If this were not enough, though, the popularity of Macrobius' commentary on Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* preserved the notion of the Platonic ascent of the soul as a commonplace. From one perspective this was perfectly logical. God ruled in Heaven, and Heaven was in the sky so it was obvious

52 Wedel T. *The Medieval Attitude to Astrology, Especially in England*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1920, p. 92.

53 See Stahl, William Harris; Johnson, Richard and Bruce. E.L., *Martianus Capella and the Seven Liberal Arts*, Vol. 1, New York: Columbia University Press 1971.

54 See for example, Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* I.3, esp. 11-12, pp 23-5.

55 Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* III.13, 158, 161, pp. 341, 447.

that, to get there, one had to travel through the planetary spheres. However, while Ptolemy and Macrobius might, perhaps, be theologically acceptable by themselves, taken together they represented an explosive mix, threatening the very basis of Church power - its ability to lay down universal moral laws which applied to everyone, regardless of individual disposition. In the astrological religions of the classical world one's character, read in the stars, could chart the appropriate path to salvation. For Christianity, that character might act as a bar to salvation - and that was clearly unacceptable.

Although Michael Scot himself appears to have favoured an elaborate Neoplatonic cosmos, packed with living intelligences, Averroës, who he introduced to the Latin world, set out to purify Aristotle from the Neoplatonism which had come to dominate it in Islamic thought. He therefore reasserted the importance of the knowledge of nature itself through natural observation. As a consequence he argued, in direct opposition to both Islamic and Christian orthodoxy, that there were two equally respectable paths to knowledge, faith, or revelation on the one hand, and reason on the other. This idea appears to have enthused the earliest of the translators. Adelard of Bath, who was active before 1150, asserted the superiority of reason over faith. The use of the word reason here, it has to be said, needs some clarification. There is a distinction to be made between Platonic reason, which emphasises the construction of ideal abstract models to which the cosmos is supposed to conform and reason as it was now being used in an Aristotelian sense - rational investigation of nature in its own terms. This is not to say that Aristotelianism did not have its own theoretical structures. After all the four elements, the notion of planetary influences and a cosmos presided over by the Prime Mover all provided a scheme within which natural phenomena might be interpreted. Even so, the arrival of Aristotelianism in twelfth century represents a decisive shift towards scepticism of authority and a willingness to experiment with new ideas.

Although Averroism as such was not taught until 1266 at the conservative, Augustinian confines of Paris until 1266, when Siger of Brabant started classes there, the idea of reason as equivalent to faith attracted high profile supporters, notably two Dominicans, Albertus Magnus (1193-1280) and Thomas Aquinas (c.1224/7-1274). The Dominicans appear to have been interested in astrology so both men were in line with the general direction of thought in their order, if not the Church as a whole. In 1267 a special comet caught the attention of John of Vercelli, the Order's Master General and, in view of the various well-known Scriptural prophecies of celestial signs and wonders, it was exceedingly important to understand exactly what it might mean.⁵⁶ Initially, various learned members of the order put questions directly to Thomas but, in the spring of 1271 John himself intervened and sent forty-three questions concerning issues of astral influence to Albertus and Thomas, together with a third member of the order, Robert Kilwardby. Ptolemy, the three scholars knew, had discussed comets briefly but made it clear that they had to be interpreted in terms of their shape, direction and accompanying planetary configurations,⁵⁷ although they were generally regarded as ominous: later

⁵⁶ See Zambelli, Paola, *The Speculum Astronomiae and its Enigma*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers 1992, p. 53.

⁵⁷ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, II.9, pp. 191-5.

Albertus discussed their significance in terms of war and the death of kings.⁵⁸ For the Dominicans, there was no easy solution to a matter of pressing theological concern. Europe had just experienced one unsettling wave of apocalyptic fervour, prompted to the Franciscan Joachim of Flores' prediction that the current world would come to an end, to be replaced by the spiritual Age of the Holy Ghost, in 1260.⁵⁹ The scholarly Dominicans were generally averse to such wild notions, but knew as well as anyone that Christ might return at any moment; to imagine otherwise was to deny God's power to act at will, whenever he chose.

Albertus' stature in the thirteenth-century is indicated in the fact that he was given the appellation Magus while he was still alive; every scholar in the Latin west acknowledged his greatness. Born in Lauingen, in Germany, he studied briefly at Padua, where he first encountered Arab Aristotelianism. He joined the Dominicans in 1223 and became a regent master at Paris from 1242 to 8, where Aquinas was his most accomplished student. Albertus was deeply influenced by Avicenna, especially by his particularly articulate advocacy of the standard Platonic cosmology of emanation from the One down through levels of reality, including the planetary spheres, down to the earth; each stage was dependent on the one above it and superior to the one below. Aesthetically pleasing as this model was, it set up certain acute cosmological problems; if planetary influences were real, even if subordinate to higher levels of reality, including God, then to what extent did these translate into a workable astrology and, if so, how exact were the judgements that could be made and what were the implications for the human ability to make moral choices? The problem became critical when it extended to the issue of whether Christ himself, through his physical body, was also subject to fate and fortune.⁶⁰ Such questions were contained within the bigger and pressing problem of reconciling Aristotelian natural philosophy with Christian theology in order to deal with the schism between conservative and progressive theologians. Indeed, European thought did seem to be moving in two directions. Some scholars have identified an Aristotelian naturalism in the courtly love tradition and its great literary masterpiece, the *Romane la Rose*.

As far as Albert was concerned, there was little problem with the rediscovered classical learning, at least none that couldn't be explained. Neoplatonism, with its doctrine of a living cosmos solved the problem of celestial movement in a perfectly Christian manner. Planets, like people, move because they are animated by soul, a theory which only reinforced his faith in a Christian cosmos.⁶¹ His attitude to astrology was strongly favourable - he regarded it as demonstrably true - but he was loathe to accept anything

58 See Thorndike, *Magic*, Vol. 2, p. 483.

59 Campion, *The Great Year*, pp 372-9.

60 See the discussion in Zambelli, Paola, *The Speculum Astronomiae and its Enigma*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers 1992, p. 31.

61 Zambelli, Paola, *The Speculum Astronomiae and its Enigma*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers 1992, pp. 9.

which might impinge on human freedom. Interrogations, with their tendency to seek definitive answers to questions about the future, were therefore suspect. 'The stars', he wrote, 'have the power to alter the elements, to change the complexion of men, to affect human mutations, and moreover, to provoke and inclination to action and even to determine the issue of battles'; to which he later added, 'the stars are never the causes of out actions, indeed we have been made free agents by the Creator and are the masters of our acts'.⁶² In defence of Ptolemy and all Aristotelians he insisted that (in spite of Ptolemy's own words in the *Tetrabiblos*), they never placed the soul under the stars. He also adopted the notion of influences as the principle mean by which astrology worked, but they transmit the influence of the First Mover, the planets being only instruments or deaf and dumb executors of God's will.⁶³ The effect of an influence, though, depends on the nature of the object receiving it. In a sense this is quite obvious: a cold object should react differently to a cold influence than would a hot object. No precise predictions are possible precisely because all contingent things, that is objects and beings lower down the celestial hierarchy, are necessarily uncertain, the evidence for which he found in the *Centiloquium* which, of course, he believed had been written by Ptolemy. This was useful for, even though the *Tetrabiblos* discusses the length of life, Albertus could now argue that spiritual factors and free will had to be taken into account alongside the astrological data.⁶⁴ He argued that human beings contain a two-fold principle of action', nature and will, the former being ruled by the stars, the latter free from it unless, like children we have not matured, or, as adults, we surrender to our instincts.

Albertus' writing on astrology was almost entirely theoretical. Scot and Bonatti set out the details of horoscope interpretation but Albertus contented himself with setting out the general principles of the science, mainly in his major work on the subject, the *Speculum Astronomiae*.⁶⁵ He discussed planetary conjunctions and their impact, and how the cause a fluctuation in the four elements, resulting in a major accidents and the appearance of prodigies, and how such general indications could be made specific when the influences acted through particular planets and zodiac signs: a conjunction of Mars and Jupiter in Gemini would be responsible for pestilential winds and plague. He was also keen to find rational explanations for pagan superstitions, explaining how the idea that the god Jupiter hurled thunderbolts was a mistake which arose from the fact that the planet of the same name can cause thunder storms by disturbing the atmosphere. Life is so lavish in equatorial zones, he argued, because the stars' rays fall perpendicularly and more directly, and are therefore more concentrated. Astrology, though was more than a matter of divination or study of the natural world, it was operational, a means of managing the

62 Zambelli, Paola, *The Speculum Astronomiae and its Enigma*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers 1992, pp. 67.

63 Zambelli, Paola, *The Speculum Astronomiae and its Enigma*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers 1992, pp. 62.

64 Following, Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* I.3.

65 See Thorndike, *Magic*, Vol. 2, pp. 577-592 for discussion and the text in Zambelli, *The Speculum Astronomiae and its Enigma*.

world. Albertus spoke approvingly of elections, repeating the old story that the astrologer Nectanebus who, according to legend, was Alexander the Great's real father, chose a moment to impregnate Alexander's mother when the sun was entering Leo and Saturn (????? Jupiter) in Taurus. And, if Alexander had conquered most of the known world, this was surely evidence of astrology's power. He only held back from conceding that Christ, as a physical man, was influenced by the stars. Instead he possessed grace and knowledge which released him from their power, while the star of Bethlehem was a sign, not a source of influence.

In a shorter work, 'A Short Discourse on the Nature, and Qualities of the Seven Planets',⁶⁶ Albertus set out the qualities of the planets, their herbs and stones, diseases, days and hours. The Moon, for example, ruled Monday, a man's brain and right eye, a woman's left eye and sexual organs, and all cold, wet plants, places and people. The astrological cosmos, though, linked all things in the great chain of being. One could focus on the planets - or on another level of existence completely. One could, for example, work with stones, and Albertus summarised the knowledge of the time on their multifarious uses. One can be rendered invisible, he reported, by wrapping a piece of Ophthalmus in a laurel or bay leaf, Memphites mixed with water relieves pain while a crystal, held in front of the sun, can be used to start fire.⁶⁷ The last example reveals the rationale: a magnifying glass can set paper alight because it concentrates the fire which is found in the sun. There was a logic in such ideas which belies their modern description as magic, with all that words perjorative connotations. The Aristotelian cosmos was above all rational - it was the product of reason. The significance of Albertus' argument, in terms of the ongoing dialogue between astrology and conservative theology was that, he extended Abelard's limited view of what was and was not astrologically acceptable. The single statement that permitted this to happen was Augustine's acceptance of celestial influences and first Abelard and then Albertus justified moved more of astrological practice according to natural influences rather than divination. Whereas for Abelard most astrology was still divination, for Albertus it was almost all a matter of influence. Judicial astrology as a whole could therefore be classified as non-demonic and its practice legitimised in a Christian context.

Albertus' student Aquinas, took up his master's cosmology and converted it into the foundation of Catholic philosophy until the seventeenth-century. An aristocratic Italian, Aquinas was born in the castle of Roccasecca in the Kingdom of Naples, into the family of the counts of Aquino, although he was actually brought up in the famous Benedictine monastery at Monte Casino. At the age of fourteen he enrolled at the university of Naples, a progressive institution and one of the few universities of the time where a full range of Aristotelian studies were on the curriculum. He joined the Dominicans as a friar, probably when he was twenty. According to one account, he was apparently kidnapped and imprisoned by his brothers, who were in Frederick II's army and objected to their

66 Albertus Magnus, *The Book of Secrets of Albertus Magnus*, ed. Michael R. Best and Frank H. Brightman, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1973, pp. 62-73.

67 Albertus Magnus, *The Book of Secrets of Albertus Magnus*, ed. Michael R. Best and Frank H. Brightman, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1973, 3, 9, 19 pp. 26, 30, 35.

brother's religious vocation. Their plan backfired and, while in prison, Thomas studied Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, as well as the theological classic, Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, and emerged as an expert in the field. He studied in Paris, then in Cologne under Albertus Magnus and returned to Paris in 1251/2. He also taught and debated the new Aristotelian physics in some of the greatest centres of European culture - Orvieto, Rome, Viterbo and Naples - and became the most important evangelist for the revolutionary new world view. His work, along with the whole Catholic-Aristotelian programme was condemned by the Augustinian dominated university of Paris in 1277, in a comprehensive attack on 219 individual items, but in the power-politics of the twelfth-century church Aquinas had the natural support of his own order. In 1278, four years after his death, the Dominican General Chapter officially imposed his teachings upon the order. Eventually Aristotelianism, like all radical creeds, lost its revolutionary edge and in 1323 he was canonised. There was one slight problem - he had never performed any miracles. The Pope, John XXII, got around this small problem by arguing that every answer Aquinas gave to every theological problem was, in effect, a miracle.

Aquinas was profoundly influenced by Avicenna's Neoplatonism but was also exposed directly to its late classical version by his admiration for Dionysius the Areopagite. Plus, of course the Aristotelian works which arrived in the Latin world did so with commentaries which had, to a greater or less extent, Platonic influences. While Plato's monism and emphasis on the soul rather than the body, suited a conservative Christian temperament, other doctrines caused problems. Teachings concerning the soul, such as reincarnation directly undermined ideas of a once-and-for all salvation. Serious suggestions that, after death, the soul was reabsorbed into some cosmic world-soul had to be refuted if Catholic doctrine was to survive, and if the Church was even to maintain a useful role in the spiritual life of the thirteenth century. Aquinas' theology was set out in two huge works. The earlier was the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (*Against the Errors of the Infidels*), which set out which classical doctrines were acceptable and which were not. He followed this with *Summa Theologiae*, the definitive statement of Catholic belief, which he began writing in 1266. Thomas was asked to write the *Summa Contra Gentiles* in order to tackle the growing problem of Aristotelianism and the threat, from the ecclesiastical authorities' point of view, that reason might come to be regarded as a more important path to truth than faith. The church was split and some sort of resolution was needed in the face of a philosophy which challenged over a thousand years of Christian teaching that faith was the only true way to knowledge. If scholars were to use reason to make pronouncements on the nature of God's universe then the church urgently needed a means of accommodating such free-thought under its doctrinal umbrella. Thomas' response was a forty-five volume study of all existing knowledge viewed through an Aristotelian perspective, and was a deliberate attempt to reach an accommodation between it and Christianity.

His major concern was to defend a 'naturalistic', Aristotelian Christianity in opposition both to sceptics and to the Neoplatonic Christianity derived from Augustine and recently given a boost by the translation of Avicenna's work from Arabic. He had to walk an ideological tight rope for astrology still came with the baggage of paganism. Everyone who had read Augustine knew that much. For some the doctrine of influence remained

unconvincing. The physical arguments by which astrologers tried to make plausible the influence of the planets and zodiac signs were disguises, concealing the Babylonian idea, kept alive by Neoplatonic Intelligences, that they were Divine Powers.

The key theological problem, which made Aristotelian cosmology and astrology such a thorny issue for Catholic theologians was found in Avicenna's *Metaphysics*. As Thomas said, 'we should note that Avicenna maintains that the motions of the celestial bodies are also the causes of our acts of choice, not simply as occasions, as was said above, but directly'.⁶⁸

The *Summa Contra Gentiles* was also intended as a text book for missionaries so that they could adequately answer exaggerated claims on behalf of Aristotle. It was particularly important to answer Abu Ma'shar, who argued that the stars could influence the intellect, threatening the need for salvation to depend on the individual's ability to make free moral choices. It was also vital that Averroes' separation of Reason from Faith, on the other, be reconciled with the Augustinian Platonism which remained the dominant ideology in the Church. Thomas managed this delicate task by retaining Reason as an important path to truth while making it always subordinate to Faith. Reason, he argued, operated according to its own laws but only within the context provided by Faith. He then justified the use of reason within a Christian context by stating simply that the mystery of God is incarnate in everything, including language. It was therefore perfectly acceptable to question the nature of the cosmos without challenging God, potentially a major breakthrough in our understanding of the universe. At the very least, Thomas made such a breakthrough possible. The immediate consequence was to legitimise the study of astrology and, even though there were still strong theological objections to it, these could now be authoritatively answered. In the long run this spirit of inquiry was to encourage Copernicus and the other pioneers of the new astronomy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The new teaching of celestial influence also eroded the distance that had crept into the relationship between humanity and the physical universe. The cosmos was still a vehicle for God's divine work, but now he applied himself through nature, through the physical world. The question of the incarnation of the soul in the body, and how both related to the stars, was therefore central to Thomas; reconciliation of Aristotle with traditional church teaching. He argued that that self-knowledge is an achievement, not a given and that, being corporeal beings, humans must understand themselves partly through the experience of the senses. Thomas followed Francis of Assisi's optimistic theology, in which the material world was seen as a positive part of God's creation, reflecting His perfection, rather than a dismal result of the Fall. There was no room in his cosmology for pessimistic Gnostic notions of the planets as gaolers of the soul. In this positive context, faith may therefore remain a valid route to knowledge if one is discussing the Trinity or the Incarnation, but otherwise reason - and the study of nature - is essential. There are limits to knowledge gained through the study of nature, though. For example, what God reveals of himself through nature is not actually himself, it is just an image in the physical world. Divine truths can therefore only be known by analogy, never through study of the natural world. This was, of course, the standard Platonic formula.

68 Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 87.1.

There was, though, an additional problem, that of Aristotle's Active Intellect, as strengthened and revised by Alexander of Aphrodisias, Plotinus and the Islamic philosophers. Thomas himself confronted the idea in Averroës. In a Christian context the Active Intellect was identified with the Holy Ghost and could be aroused by baptism. Thomas argued that, while all people have Active Intellect but only a few people develop it through Christian work and study. The crucial cosmological issue was whether the stars might influence both the Active and Passive Intellect, just the Passive, or neither.

Thomas also faced a problem with the Islamic Neoplatonic doctrine of 'occasionalism'. Essentially this stated that all causality is essentially an expression of God's will, which was, in itself, quite acceptable, but the reduction of humanity to the role of spectator in the Platonic cosmic machine, was less so. Such a view could be perfectly acceptable if one is the sort of Christian who inclines to predestination but not if the ability to achieve salvation through moral choice is at the heart of the human relationship with God. Like Aristotle Aquinas believed that it was vital to preserve the notion of humanity's responsibility for its own actions. He rejected the implicitly Platonic notion that the soul and body were separate, with the former somehow trapped in the latter at birth. Instead, he pointed out, in line with the Hermetic doctrine of sympathies, that 'the wax and the shape given to it by the stamp are one'.⁶⁹ Such a view, though, opens the way directly to the use of magic, particularly the creation of talismans, even though he denied the power of astrological images.⁷⁰

Aquinas' opinions on astrology were expounded in both the *Summa Contra Gentiles* and the *Summa Theologiae*. His views were strongly influenced by Albertus', and it is actually difficult to find any difference between them, but it was his monumental work rather than Albertus' that became the basis of Catholic thinking. *The Summa Theologiae* repeated the standard condemnation of astrology, defined as divination, as demonic, inherited from Augustine and, through him, to the Patristic tradition going back to Justin and Tatian. To this still forms at least part of the basis of official Catholic hostility to astrology.⁷¹ He had particular contempt for the concept of an astrology of signs, as if signs could be distinguished from the Aristotelian cosmos of causes and effects. Yet the *Summa Contra Gentiles* gives a very different picture. His starting point there is not Augustine's condemnation of astrology as demonic but rather his concession that the existence of celestial influences in the physical world is undeniable. As Albertus had pointed out, Augustine had conceded that, 'it is not utterly absurd to say that certain influences of the stars are able to produce differences in body only'.⁷² He finds further evidence from the influential eighth-century Greek Theologian St. John of Damascus

69 Aristotle *De Anima* 412 b 6

70 Thorndike, *Magic*, Vol. 2, p. 610.

71 See the New Advent Calendar at <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/309505.htm>

72 Augustine, *City of God*, Book V chapter 6 in Aquinas *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III.85.14. See also Thorndike, *Magic*, Vol. 2, p 590 for Albertus.

who wrote in his *De Fide* that 'different planets establish in us diverse temperaments, habits and dispositions'.⁷³ So, Aquinas concludes,

So, the celestial bodies work indirectly on the good condition of understanding. Thus, just as physicians may judge the goodness of an intellect from the condition of its body, as from a proximate disposition, so also may an astronomer judge from the celestial motions as the remote cause of such dispositions. In this way, then, it is possible that there is some truth in what Ptolemy says in his *Centiloquium*: 'When, at the time of a man's birth, Mercury is in conjunction with Saturn and is itself in a strong condition, it gives inwardly to things the goodness of understanding.'⁷⁴

The reference to Ptolemy is remarkable: the classical astrologer is welcomed into Thomas' Christian fold, in what is as close to a statement of official Catholic doctrine on the matter as possible. Thomas then set out to justify an astrology which could work on the body, though not the mind, and make general predictions, though not specific ones.

In his causal chain Thomas dealt with the pressing problem of Alexander of Aphrodisias' two intellects. The will, corresponding to Alexander's Active Intellect, was controlled by God, intellectual knowledge, corresponding to Alexander's Passive Intellect, was controlled by angels and the physical body was controlled by the celestial bodies. In this ingenious model moral choice, via the will, was a matter of the direct relationship between humanity and God, but angels can act as persuaders via the mind and the stars and planets 'dispose' by working on the body. 'Man', he wrote, 'is ordered in regard to his body under the celestial bodies, in regard to his intellect under the angels, and in regard to his will under God'.⁷⁵ Had Aquinas read Plotinus he would have known that this was in line with orthodox classical Neoplatonic thought - that the part of the soul outside the body is free to ascend to God. The difference, of course, was that for Plotinus the soul ascended through the planetary spheres while for Aquinas it moved direct to God.

If there was any doubt that the stars might influence the will or intellect then Aquinas cleared it up by pointing out, perfectly logically that, as the stars are physical bodies, they can only exert an influence on other physical bodies, and nothing else.⁷⁶ Also, if human choices were influenced by the stars they would be part of the natural world and that, his logic continued, would make humans no different to animals. Humans are quite clearly not animals and therefore the stars cannot influence human choices. This was the logic which Pope John XXII would later declare to be miraculous. There was, though a qualification. If one gave way to one's physical desires then the stars would exert an

⁷³ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III.84.14, citing St. John of Damascus, *De fide* II, 7 (PG 94, col., 893)

⁷⁴ Ptolemy, *Centiloquium* 38.

⁷⁵ *Summa Contra Gentiles* III.91.2.

⁷⁶ *Summa Contra Gentiles* III. 85.2.

indirect effect on one's choices. It was precisely to avoid such an outcome that a virtuous Christian life was so necessary.

Also, even celestial influences were not 'necessary', by which he meant that there was no reason why a particular celestial motion should result in a specified terrestrial result.⁷⁷ The reason was quite simply that there was a chain of intermediate causes between the stars and the earth which could moderate, change or deflect celestial influences such that an influence might never actually be experienced. Simple observation confirmed this fact of Aristotelian physics. After all, he reasoned, celestial motions are ordered and repetitive but life on earth is subject to endless variety. It follows that stellar and planetary influences are competing with all the other causes impressing themselves in humanity. The way is left open though, for a natal astrology which deals with physical conditions - especially medical. He goes on to explain how being favoured or ill-favoured by nature occurs when celestial bodies leave an 'impression' on us and 'cause natural dispositions of our bodies within us'.⁷⁸

Thus any form of astrology which dealt with the consequences of natural disorder or physical passion was permissible. Medical astrology was acceptable, as was the prediction of war and peace. The election of auspicious astronomical moments to inaugurate new enterprises was deemed unacceptable because it impinged on God's providential right to dictate the outcome of events, as was the use of interrogations, the casting of horoscopes to answer precise questions about the future. Natal astrology, which dealt with individual lives, was acceptable inasmuch as it dealt with physical existence but not if it denied moral choice. Stated in simple terms, the formula that Thomas - and Albertus - devised held that the stars (though on God's behalf) rule the body but not the soul, which remains directly answerable to God.

A succession of major Aristotelian philosophers behaved as if there was no question of astrology's truth. Robert Grosseteste (c.1168-1253), bishop of Lincoln, one of the first chancellors of Oxford University and a Council Father at the First General Council of Lyons in 1245, regarded astrology and astronomy as a single discipline, as the 'supreme science', necessary for the understanding of very natural process in the world.⁷⁹ His original contribution was to set out an ingenious theory to explain why comets are signs of looming disaster. What happens is this: a position of terrestrial fire is separated from its original location and carried up the celestial spheres, attracted by the virtue of one particular star or planet. The evidence for attraction was found in magnetism, so the theory did have some basis in observation. Now, as the star or planet which has attracted the cometary fire also rules people and objects on the earth, this is a sign of a more general release of spiritual nature and corruption of terrestrial objects. A breakdown in cosmic harmony will therefore be manifested in war, plague and famine in human

⁷⁷ *Summa Contra Gentiles* III.86.2-7.

⁷⁸ *Summa Contra Gentiles* III.92.3:

⁷⁹ See Thorndike, *Magic*, Vol. II, pp. 444-7. For Grosseteste's thought see also McEvoy, James, *Robert Grosseteste*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000.

society. Like Abelard, in fact like all cosmologists, Grosseteste had to reconcile the notion of external influences with the freedom to choose salvation through Christ. Humanity, he argued, a microcosm, a model in miniature of the cosmos, but he follows Augustine in the *City of God* in proposing that the rational soul is more sublime than the stars and therefore that human beings are not necessarily subject to a celestially ordained fate. Humanity has the ability, as the *Centiloquium* insists, to rise above the stars.

Judgment must be regulated by thyself, as well as by the science; for it is not possible that particular forms of events should be declared by any one person, however scientific; since the understanding conceives only a certain general idea of some sensible event, and not its particular form. It is, therefore, necessary for him who practices herein to adopt inference. They only who are inspired by the deity can predict particulars.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ The Centiloquy of Claudius Ptolemy in the *Tetrabiblos*, trans. Ashmand, Aphorism 1.