

# Astrology: From Pagan to Postmodern?

by Patrick Curry

In August 1993 I was invited to speak to the Cambridge University History Summer School about astrology, as part of a series entitled "Beyond Reason?" The printed handout summarized its theme as how "historians approach aspects of human behavior and belief which cannot be explained in purely rational or material ways." Such a focus leaves out very little in human history, so it encouraged me likewise to enlist some undefended initial assumptions and several sweeping generalizations, plus a time-span of a few thousand years, in order to keep matters short and simple.

Whether astrology is pagan *or* postmodern, of course, it would in either case (according to the most correct authorities) be irrational. Now, themes for lecture series have to be stated briefly. But I don't think it is unfair to ask whether *anything* can be explained in a "purely rational or material way", and also (leaving aside that rather provocative "purely") what exactly is meant by "rational" here. That is a very big and controversial subject among philosophers, so let us again stick to the basics. My dictionary defines "rational" in two ways: firstly, the process by which conclusions are drawn from premises, and secondly, sensible, sane, moderate, not foolish or absurd or extreme. But logic has absolutely nothing to say about premises, so the most insane programmes can be (and have been) quite logical - the Third Reich's Final Solution, for example. There is also the awkward historical fact that what was perfectly sensible and moderate at one time - such as the proposition that the Sun goes around the Earth - became equally foolish and absurd a little later. And we have no trans-historical way of knowing which of our current beliefs will be so revised in the future.

I am not suggesting that we can proceed as if we had no beliefs, or as if they didn't matter; or as if we can do without a concept of truth. Neither as human beings nor as historians is that possible. But in the light of what I've just said, it seems only rational, or at least sensible, to suspend any too-firm opinions about what is "really" rational; to avoid loaded and simplistic pejoratives like "irrational"; and to take a closer look instead at the historical processes whereby certain human behaviours and beliefs came to be *taken*, by and large, as either one or the other.

Some historians of science have been doing this very well in recent years, showing clearly how modern science became the paradigm of rationality. My subject, however, has been that much-despised (but strangely persistent) example of irrationality, astrology. So in keeping with the strategy I have just advocated, let us ask: who, exactly, says so?

Astrology has a very, even bizarrely, long history. The word has not always meant exactly the same thing, of course; but it cannot be denied that people have been using it in a few relatively definite ways - within the broad meaning of interpreting the human or terrestrial meaning of the stars, and within a self-conscious tradition of others doing the same - for over two thousand years.

Criticism of astrology too shows an astounding continuity. In the years A.D., it has been led in the West by roughly three successive and powerful movements. First, and for longest, the Christian Church; second, modern science and its supporters, beginning in the late seventeenth century; and third, professional intellectuals taking

their mandate (broadly speaking) from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. I must also draw attention to the Platonic and neo-Platonic critique of Astrology from Carneades (c.213-129 BC), head of the Platonic Academy in Athens, down to Pico della Mirandola in the 15th century. However, I will not be dealing with that in the current paper.

The Church was bitterly hostile to astrology from its earliest days in the first century A.D. St. Augustine devoted no less than nine chapters of his *City of God* to refuting it, and the initial terms of condemnation (especially Isidore of Seville's "superstitio") received a tremendous new boost in the campaign of the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation, beginning in the sixteenth-century, against superstition and idolatry. These critics had no doubt that astrology was a kind of pagan divination, and was irrational in that it fell outside the allotted place of reason for man. Some of them granted a limited legitimacy to "natural" astrology, concerning weather, crops, plagues and other general phenomena, as opposed to "judicial" astrology, so called because it involved making judgements as to the individual and particular; but this distinction was closely policed.

We are used to thinking of science in opposition to religion, but it is typical of this subject that when natural philosophers started attacking astrologers in the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth, it was often in the name of both concerns, and in terms that were virtually interchangeable. When Thomas Sprat called astrology "a disgrace to the Reason, and honor of mankind", he was speaking as both the leading publicist for the Royal Society *and* the soon-to-be Bishop of Rochester. Isaac Newton's hatred of "astrologers, augurs, aurspicers &c.", we now know, was driven principally by his religious Arianism, his particular form of Protestantism.

By the mid-eighteenth century, natural philosophers had given up trying to separate out and incorporate the rational part of astrology from its "superstition and paganism", as Robert Boyle called it. The whole subject was now judged irrational, with a slightly new twist: instead of meaning religiously heterodox, involving the assistance of demons and so on, that term now meant insusceptible to experimental demonstration or material explanation - that is, in modern parlance, "pseudoscience". And there matters basically stayed, throughout many bitter assaults in print in the nineteenth century and on into the present. A statement objecting to astrology and signed by 186 scientists in 1975, for example, firmly classed it with "magic and superstition" and "cults of irrationalism" - terms whose broad if imprecise usages would have been immediately recognisable to the Christian councils of 560 and 565.

Also interesting is the overlap with the third and most recent wave of critics, namely the metropolitan intellectuals, especially literary and social critics, who emerged as a professional class at the end of the seventeenth century and beginning of the eighteenth. These were men whose views became widely disseminated in encyclopedias and (in England) publications like *The Spectator*, *Tatler* and *Gentleman's Magazine*. And despite their anticlericalism and (later) secularism - and frequently their distrust of natural philosophy as anything more than part of a gentleman's education - they too were uniformly and uncompromisingly hostile to astrologers. Indeed, as perennial articles in today's quality press and periodicals show, they still are. There have been a few changes, of course. When your contemporary left-wing wit lacerates New Age astrology, for example, he invokes the rather more heavyweight authority of Theodor Adorno, leading theoretician of the Frankfurt School. Adorno, writing in 1950s Los Angeles, attacked astrology's

"pseudo-rationality" and "pseudo-individualism", describing occultism as "the metaphysic of the dopes". But how different is this, beneath its Marxist rigour, from Jonathan Swift's verdict in 1707, "that all the wise and learned, who alone can judge whether there be any truth in this science, do unanimously agree to laugh at and despise it, and that none but the ignorant vulgar give it any credit"?

So we need to ask: what do these otherwise very different and even mutually hostile groups have in common, which has enabled them to unite, and over such a long period, on the subject of astrology?

I think the answer is this: a profound commitment to *monism* and *universalism*. By the first term, I mean Christian monotheism - the belief in one and one only God, and therefore one Way, Truth and Life - and its secular version of one and only one objective reality, and therefore one way, truth and life. This, of course, is the origin of the so-called scientific method. By the second term, I mean the belief in not only a single but a universal order, ruled by a universal set of laws - whether divine or material - applying to everyone and everything. Seen in this light, the changeover from God to Truth, and from divine revelation to human reason as its proper realization, was momentous but not revolutionary. Nor was the Industrial Revolution, when it substituted - or rather, added - the worship of material and technological progress; neither were the beliefs of industrialism's Marxist critics, whose own faith in progress, productivity and one true way to a utopian future cannot be doubted.

By implication - or rather, deduction - let's assume that in opposition to this impressive millenia-long body of testimony, astrology is therefore *pluralist* and (as against universalist) *relativist*. That is, something essential to the historically-constituted identity of astrology is a commitment, firstly, to a multiplicity of gods or truths, and ways to realize them; and secondly, to the ineradicable importance of personal participation, perspective and context. I would also like to pay astrology's critics the compliment of assuming that they were not fools, but within their own terms and priorities, perceptively correct. In which case, the early Church Fathers, the scientific writers and the literary left were and are quite right - as a pluralist and relativist practice, astrology really *is* pagan, irrational and superstitious. But we are under absolutely no obligation to accept those terms and priorities as our own. (This point, by the way, is what the philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend calls "democratic relativism"; or as he puts it, "citizens, and not special interest groups, have the last word in deciding what is true or false, useful or useless for their society.")

Does this portrait of astrology stand up historically? Most of the internal history of Western astrology seems to have been taken up with arguments of the "we're more rational (or scientific) than you" variety. Almost as old as the tradition itself has been the urge among astrologers to proclaim their practice a true science. Of course this proclamation is highly vulnerable to the kind of remark that Mandy Rice-Davies made when her good friend the cabinet minister denied everything: they would say that, wouldn't they? But there's no need to be quite that cynical. Ever since Ptolemy in the first century A.D., astrologers themselves have subscribed to the universalism and monism of the mainstream -sincerely, as well as for protection. By the late seventeenth century, the main argument was between neo-Aristotelian rationalist astrologers and early scientific astrologers, with both sides condemning the vulgar popular astrologer. When magical astrology did have a renaissance in Victorian England, it too adopted the language of universal laws of nature, albeit occult ones. And these days, astrologers' organizations tend to favour descriptions like

"cosmobiology" and "geocosmic research".

But it was not just the simple superstitions (as astrologers saw it) of the common people - for whom, as one complained in 1648, "Ptolemy may be something to eat for aught they know" - that stood condemned. There was a specific practice, often used by astrologers plying their trade among and for such people, who frequently didn't know their own precise time of birth; though it was also resorted to, albeit quietly and privately, by the not-so-common. This was horary astrology, whereby the answer to a question is sought on the basis of a map of the heavens drawn up for the moment the question was asked (or received). Its roots lie in ancient Greek divinatory practice. And that is the point about horary: it is, plainly and beyond question, a kind of astral divination.

Now when we were considering astrology's critics, we paid special attention to what they all agreed upon, in order to deduce something about the object of their unaccustomed unanimity. Applying the same strategy within astrology itself, we find a parallel sort of agreement on the subject of horary among astrologers who otherwise wouldn't share the time of day, so to speak. And not only that: the language used - superstitious, irrational, absurd and so on - is exactly the same as that applied to astrology as a whole by the mainstream.

In his profoundly influential *Tetrabiblos*, with its emphasis on the causal importance of the moment of birth or beginning, Ptolemy deliberately excluded horary or "interrogations". The Arab astrologer Al-Biruni (973-1051?) disowned them as belonging to "a field of omens and divinations which has nothing to do with astrology, although the stars may be referred to in connection with them." Ptolemy's great advocate Placidus (1603-68) excluded them as signs but not causes, which therefore "have no place in nature", and virtually all leading English astrologers after the mid-seventeenth century denied horary (despite Al-Biruni) as Arabic (ie. foreign), corrupt and unnatural. In the nineteenth century, the leading "scientific" astrologer, A.J. Pearce, described horary as "absurd and unwarrantable". His life-long opponent Alan Leo, of the magical-Theosophical school, went one better, calling it "the curse of the science and the ruin of the astrologer." And in modern times, Jeff Mayo, the author of one of the most influential textbooks dismissed it as sheer nonsense. "Horary astrology," he wrote, "makes a mockery of a serious subject."

What is the explanation of this remarkable and indeed suspicious degree of solidarity? I think it is that horary - as a practice that is plainly divinatory and strongly resists any reduction to a rational or realist model, yet that cannot (without an inordinate amount of special pleading) be denied to be also astrological - lets an embarrassing cat out of the bag: namely the fact that part of astrology, or perhaps astrology as a whole in some way, defies the monist universalism that has characterized our institutions of spiritual, intellectual and cultural power for the past two millennia. Its practitioners are therefore regarded by astrologers (still hoping against hope for the keys to the kingdom) as they themselves are treated by those who are really in possession of those keys: as heretics, apostates, renegades.

If I am right, it would seem worth examining this cat more closely. And since time is short, I shall go straight to the point. The claim that divination predicts the future - and by implication, a fixed and inexorable future - is overwhelmingly made by two kinds of people: its enemies, who mostly find it distasteful even to mention let alone consider deeply; and the less delicate among its professional advocates, whose chief desire is to impress the punters. But it doesn't stand up to close

examination. As Jean Bottero recently wrote of divination in Mesopotamia, the birthplace of Western astrology, it "involved reading *in* events or objects . . . divine decisions that touched upon the future of the interested party . . . this future was not a 'real' future, an absolute future which would take place inevitably. It was a future that the gods had decreed *hic et nunc* [here and now], and just as the ruler was free to revoke his decisions . . . the gods also remained merciful."

Another recent study of northern European paganism by Alby Stone shows very clearly that "fate was perceived as a steady, ongoing process, only fully completed at the end of a lifetime", within which "there is room for personal liberty and choice, limited indeed, but still available for use." Divination, then, was not the foretelling of the future but rather, by the diviner assuming the mantle of the Fates, an intervention that re-created it. "In this way," the author continues, "the constant process of creation is maintained, and although the future has already been written, its shape is constantly being redrawn."

Much of this was probably clear to the first Christian authorities to ban astrology. They were in no doubt that as divination, it was inseparable from the worship of divine beings - the pantheon of gods, goddesses and spirits whose will the diviner tried to discern and consult. For the quintessential divinatory question is: I want to do (or obtain, or discover) such-and-such; do I have the blessing of the gods in this? It is invariably a highly practical and concrete question, *not* an abstract or theoretical one. And horary astrology uses the planets (whose names after the old gods and goddesses is no coincidence) to seek the answer.

Let's note a couple of other things about it too. The act of divination is not arbitrary; it takes place in the context of a body of rules of interpretation (in other words, a tradition), and a training (often a lengthy and rigorous one) in the use of those rules. It thus embodies a divinatory logic, and in that sense is certainly not irrational.

More broadly, it expresses the intuition that all human action, to a greater or lesser degree, takes place in a context of unavoidable fallibility, limitation and indeed mystery. So much is not under our control, and so rarely can the ends of our actions be foreseen; arguably, never. So in making a decision, when the factors to be taken into consideration are too many, too complex or too ineffable to be evaluated algorithmically or mechanically - and how many important decisions in life are *not* like this? - is it irrational, after going as far as our own thought can take us, to throw the matter open to the cosmos and see what answer returns? I don't think so. The recipient of such advice, after all, is under no obligation whatsoever to accept or act upon it; democratic relativism applies here too.

But divination *is* irrational in another sense - the one which has earned it, and by implication astrology as a whole, such opprobrium over the centuries. The act of divining is also highly contextual in that it depends crucially on the unique situation in which the question is asked. It simply cannot *occur* without a diviner (who may or may not also be the questioner) in the precise circumstances of asking. And even with the same diviner and/or questioner and same question, the same circumstances cannot be repeated. All three will have changed, even if only by virtue of already having asked the question once; the heavens too will have moved on; and as we have already heard, the will of the gods likewise can change. I repeat: divination is an act of intervention, not prediction. It therefore implies (as one modern practitioner puts it) that "destiny is negotiable". And since each such act is situated, local and

participatory, they produce not one big Truth but many little truths.

To those who believe in a single reality, ruled by a set of universal laws (to which there is of course no appeal), and therefore approachable only by eliminating (or reducing to an insignificant residue) the merely personal, unique and "subjective", this is indeed anathema...and undoubtedly irrational. But I would like to point out that this pragmatic definition of rational and irrational doesn't leave secular rationalists, Marxists and scientists on the opposite side of the fence from contemporary religious believers, as most people would have it. It puts that entire family - believers in a single determining reality all - in opposition to polytheistic pagans and relativistic postmodernists. A motley crew, it is true, but those who prefer the side of the underdog should have no trouble deciding their allegiance!

But what about the postmodern part? Max Beerbohm once introduced a radio talk by saying that since his subject was an exciting one, and he didn't like excitement, he was going to approach it in a gentle, timid, roundabout way. I agree, so I shall take my cue from the simple fact that my description of divination just now - *and* the dominant critical reaction to it - applies equally and fully as well to another but more recent bogeyman, namely the set of ideas that has come to be known as postmodernism. I am thinking, for example, of Richard Rorty - perhaps its leading philosopher - whose "liberal irony" rejects the obsession with objective truth beginning with Plato, and admits the contingency of its own as well as competing ideals. Or the post-Marxists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, whose goal of "radical and plural democracy" proceeds by "a logic of articulation" - that is, the ways in which old meanings are connected to each other in order to create new ones - "and contingency". Or the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, whose acceptance of the new "pluralism, variety, contingency and ambivalence" includes the necessary admission that these contain and limit any analyses of them, rather than pretending the reverse.

These positions mark a radical break from the attributes of modernity: its love affair with all-encompassing 'grand narratives' and worship of Progress, its restless search for 'foundations', and its contempt for the local, personal and particular. We can now see how universalism requires enforcing, when dissenters see things differently; and how objectivism and rationalism are the particular points of view of a relatively privileged and powerful few. With the fall of European communism came the end of the ultimate modernist dream become nightmare. Nothing, it now seems clear, necessarily or automatically means anything; and no longer can any one thing be seen as the key to everything.

I am suspicious, as any historian should be, of facile periodization. Indeed, one of the lessons of the history of astrology is that almost nothing human ever really dies and disappears; it becomes overlaid, as it were, but continues (albeit changed), and from time to time even re-emerges. The point about postmodernism, therefore, is not that it has replaced modernism but that the fundamental premises of modernism have been transformed, by a subtle but powerful sea-change, into assumptions. The keynote of postmodernism is not a new consensus but a new *lack* of consensus.

That change has specific consequences for historians. I can't really take up here the semi-hysterical reaction of the old-guard such as Lawrence Stone or Gertrude Himmelfarb. The proper response is that of the French historian Paul Veyne, when he wrote that "In this world, we do not play chess with eternal figures like the king and the bishop . . ." - or human nature, or the mode of production, or indeed reason - "the figures are what the successive configurations on the playing-board make of

them." (In other words, articulation and contingency.)

Let's turn instead to the more neglected implications for the history of the so-called irrational. One is that Feyerabend, for example, is right that we should "either call gods and quarks equally real, but tied to different sets of circumstances, or we altogether cease talking about the 'reality' of things and use more complex ordering schemes instead." Another is that as Bauman has pointed out, the modernist "war against mystery and magic" - when in order to win the stakes for undisputed reason, "the world had to be *de-spiritualized*, de-animated: denied the capacity of subject" - in now in retreat.

I don't need to belabour the precise relevance of these two points alone - picked out of many possible postmodern candidates - to what I have just been discussing. There seems to be a profound resemblance (or perhaps resonance would be a better word) between ancient pagan and contemporary postmodern epistemologies. One might even say that a neo-pagan polytheism is the natural religion of postmodernism. And its kinship with ecologism, animal rights and eco-feminism is not coincidental.

In any case, astrology was there at the "beginning", and is here at the "end", ie. where we are now. And throughout, like the irritating grain of sand in the oyster, it has provoked highly revealing pearls from its historical (and contemporary) opponents. That alone makes it a rare and precious thing for historians, or should do.

Nor should historians and their readers be deterred by the charges of *necessary* irrationalism, whether old or new. As I have tried to show, that charge against paganism was made by the vanguards of a particular ideology and world-view whose very tenets call for the attempt to crush any alternative positions (and especially ones that imply, as paganism did, a world of many truths). The same accusation against postmodernism now is led, it seems to me, by a band of institutionalised intellectuals chiefly frustrated by their loss of legitimacy as truth-legislators. In both instances such self-interest does not mean that their views are necessarily wrong or distorted - especially if there is no universal and disinterested point-of-view against which to measure them - but it does mean deciding the truth of the matter, both historically and now, on a case-by-case basis; and deciding it for ourselves.