

Verity and the Question of Primary and Secondary Scholarship in Astrology

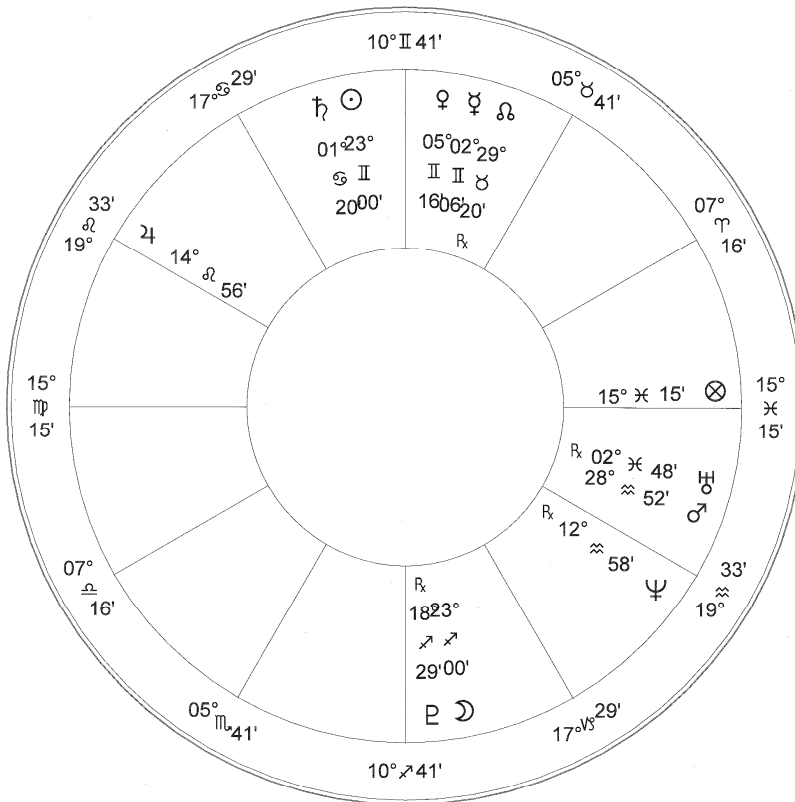
From the paper originally titled 'Perils of the Occult Mentality'

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The type of thinking employed in astrology is at root non-positivistic and metaphorical, a combination which, as a study in-itself, is academically acceptable only as a literary, poetic or imaginative exercise. Treated as a mode of knowledge this thinking is usually denigrated as a leftover remnant of naive idealism or worse still, occultism. There therefore exists an abyss between the prevailing epistemology and astrologers who understand that their practice concerns real knowledge of the world. Can – and should – the academy bridge the gap, or will the astrologers tumble into it?

In order to introduce the problematic relationship between astrology and the academy I will offer something that may seem untoward, but is in fact fully relevant to our discussion – a horoscope. The proposition that astrological symbolism, in and of itself, could yield insight into our academic proceedings constellates the very issue we are considering. It also raises the question, for which the astrologers must begin to account, of what order of knowing this is, and what place such knowledge might have in a university. But let me put these considerations aside for a moment and take up the astrological question of an appropriate horoscope for our debate. The horoscope for the inception of the conference, for 10:00am 13th June, is remarkable for the strong placing of Uranus, exactly on the western horizon. We might even suspect the guiding hand of election in this matter. Whether or not elected, this is a lively signature for our subject. However, bearing in mind the old dictum that 'the lights bring to light', I suggest that the major zodiacal event maturing over the weekend, the Full Moon, fully reveals the exact nature and the consequences of the challenge of Uranus, which is at the same time the challenge of this conference. It is to the Full Moon of 14th June that I will therefore turn.

There are two levels to the symbolism. The first is given in the



Horoscope for the Full Moon
14 June 2003, 12:16:27 pm GMD, Bath, England.

universal symbolism of the Full Moon, with the Sun in Gemini and the Moon in Sagittarius, The Gemini-Sagittarius polarity is an image of education and enlightenment, the journey of body, soul and intellect, the field of discourse and wisdom. The Full Moon brings to light and displays in the heavens the theme of our conference, *Astrology and the Academy*. So the timing of this event is a fortuitous election, bringing us together under this Full Moon, here, now. Observe also the Moon's separation from Pluto, in the depths of the fourth house: here is Plato's allegory of the cave, the metaphor for the academy. The Moon shows the shadow-play of figures at the back of the cave, the light of the Moon reflecting the Sun.

The second level of this symbolism is horoscopic, and is revealed through traditional horary analysis. The moment of Full Moon at 12:16 this afternoon falls in the planetary hour of Mercury. Mercury rules the Ascendant, swift in motion, in its own sign and term, free of beams, almuten. Mercury is a classical significator for the occult arts and astrology; placed in the ninth, the house of higher learning and the university, and applying to the lady of the ninth, Venus – here we find repeated the metaphor for the theme, astrology and the academy.

What is the union that astrology seeks in the perfection of the Mercury-Venus conjunction? This pair is a favourite motif in renaissance philosophy and art, and is the marriage of intellect and Eros, intellect consumed in love, desire exalted in intelligence. We see this symbolism in Botticelli's *Primavera*, it is a guiding thread for Ficino, and it is the heart of the work of the Platonic Academy in Florence.

With such radicality of symbolism and with Mercury in great dignity, ruling both Ascendant and Midheaven, lord of the syzygy and receiving the Sun, then we know it will tell the truth about its subject: the use of astrology reveals the use of astrology. We realise that this horoscope not only invites us to contemplate what we already know, but that by being led out or educated by the symbolism, we infer and discriminate things that as yet we do not quite understand. So, just as we form a symbolic picture of the goal of our endeavours, the joining of astrology and the academy, our understanding is brought up with a jolt by the square of Uranus.

Uranus, the first of the new planets, was discovered by Herschel in Bath in 1781. It is appropriate to our theme, for this planet has been adopted by the majority of modern practitioners as a universal symbol for their art, and it is not surprising to find it configured in some shape or form. But it is all awry in this horoscope, because Uranus interposes

between Mercury and Venus by a powerful square, prohibiting the primary significators from perfecting their beautiful conjunction.

The traditionalist may be tempted to ignore Uranus and imagine that we could simply revert to an astrology of earlier times, but we have not been shown a symbol of this order just to wish it away. In an earlier age there was no impediment to astrology in the academy, but modern Uranus shows the condition we are in now, and that is what we are called to work with. The house placing of Uranus is significant, for the sixth shows the problem of *method* – what is the method of analysis and discrimination through which the question of astrology shall be raised? What actually does the ‘academic’ study of astrology mean, and what is the scope of this study? The importance of this concern is underscored by the conjunction of Mars with Uranus, with the Moon applying sextile as she begins her waning phase. In the struggle out of the cave, work must be done in search of an answer.

A creative move may be attempted, in the style of modern horary, applying the mutual reception by degree to Uranus and Neptune. This makes Uranus a friend rather than a foe, and this suggests a distinctive mode of theorising the question of astrology. Here is not the place to develop this line of interpretation, however, because nothing can come to fruit until we take up the message of Uranus in Pisces, and why it plays a pivotal and prohibiting role.

I suggest that we will approach an understanding only by taking on the signification of Uranus for the change in European and American culture and consciousness that we call the Enlightenment. From the philosophical watershed that is marked in time most exactly by Kant¹, we can demarcate an age when astrology was still possible from our age when, like every evocation of a poetic and enchanted universe, astrology has become absurd. A characteristic function of Uranus, as every astrologer knows, is splitting and dividing, a reflection of the primordial divide of Heaven and Earth, showing in tyrannical mastery over Nature, and in the exaltation of abstracted human reason. Uranus is a signifier of the subject-object split that has led to the objectification of scientific and literal reality as the ground of truth, with a whole mode of human-being cast into ‘subjectivity’ and secondary status. This symbolism is especially resonant with Uranus currently in the dual and slippery sign of Pisces. This placing reflects the epochal precessional movement ushering in the second fish of Pisces with the discovery of Uranus.

It is my interpretation of this horoscope that for astrology to have a genuine relationship with the academy, it is to be spoken *in* the academy.

We can hardly imagine Mercury in Gemini keeping quiet, can we? It is only Uranus in Pisces that might be tempted to throttle it. On the other hand, if Mercury is spoken, there is a demand that we take on the paradoxical task of laying out, understanding, and critically discoursing on the actual theory and method of astrology. I do not underestimate the intellectual problem involved. Not only is Uranus a symbol of division, but Mercury in Gemini delights in splits and polarities, and it can hardly help engineering them.

The paradox of the subject-object split is exposed the moment we use allegory. Allegory as a mode of analysis is usually denigrated as depending on an arbitrary and essentially mistaken mix of subjective and properly objective observations, and was entirely discounted by the scientific enlightenment. It is the supposed subjectivity of its operation that renders it opaque or occult to transparent and democratic rationalism. It is a commonplace for the historian of science to suggest that shaking off this earlier form of reasoning is a condition of entry to modern rational thought.² Hence any attempt to reintroduce consideration of this form, and to advance its truth-claim, can only be seen as regressive. It is allowable for allegory to be encompassed in the study of Shakespeare or Dante, and it is not a problem for the academy to take on the 'as if' of this mode of interpretation with respect to literary and artistic production. But do not forget that the Cartesian split has cast the *geisteswissenschaften*, the 'human sciences' wholly into the status of secondary knowledge, with the final arbitration of truth and method reserved for, and imitated from, the methods of logic, mathematics, and the natural sciences.³

So where do we locate astrology in this divide? Like all the inferential arts of divination, and despite its long-continued attempts to disguise itself as natural science, astrology is a *divinatory allegoric*. A liberal-minded attitude might allow it to belong to the humanities, where it can be humanely dealt with and not taken too seriously. However, astrology will not be put back in its box so easily, precisely because we cannot avoid the fact that its practitioners understand it to make a primary truth-claim.

When we probe closely the nature of the truth-claim made for astrology, then I suggest that a still more fundamental epistemological issue is uncovered. This has already been raised in this conference by Angela Voss; it is in the nature of the Full Moon in Gemini-Sagittarius and it concerns the distinction between knowledge and what we may call 'wisdom'. This term is almost a banal platitude when we use it today, so

far has it fallen. Yet we can hardly avoid the fact that prior to our modern period the academy's quest for knowledge subserved the quest for wisdom. Plato's allegory is not about information theory – the people who are tied down in the cave and can only see the shadow-play at the back do not lack data. They have plenty enough information, they have all their horizontal and linear logic on one level, but they lack the wisdom to *see*.

This is problematic because the seeing is not, on the face of things, given to all; we reach issues of illumination, initiation, and elite knowledge. Here is the perilous question of the occult mentality, which can be located right the way back to that original allegory of western philosophy, Plato's cave. We astrologers are heirs to this way of understanding whether we like it or not. This is so out of keeping with our time that it is wise for us to be modest on entering the portals of the academy and not imagine that we are going to storm the barricades. There are too many barricades for us to take them all at once, and in any case they lie deep within our own imagination just as much as they exist in some sceptical world outside.

The question of a primary truth claim is pivotal and so far as the astrologer is concerned cannot be avoided. The attempt to avoid it would leave us with the academy studying astrology as some sort of belief-system, to be sympathetically annotated, dissected, and put up for comparison with various other belief-systems. That places it on a par with the way in which the sociologist or anthropologist chooses to study the belief-system of the ancient Celts, of west-coast New-Agers, or of the Ndembu, or any of countless other tribes and cultural groupings. Nothing wrong in that, one may say, and indeed such studies have their own particular lights of illumination. However, the various social sciences do all share a common avoidance strategy, which is to avoid allowing the material to touch the observer as *truth for the observer*. The actual meaning of things for the Ndembu is not supposed to become the meaning of things for the anthropologist, because that would undermine the fundamental category-logic implicit in the endeavour of what we call science. If this undermining were to occur then he or she has committed the cardinal error of 'going native'.

I have mentioned several times that astrology makes a primary truth claim. In order to bring out what is meant by primary truth with respect to astrology, I will adopt as a synonym the somewhat archaic term 'verity'. I take my cue from the weight given by William Lilly to this concept in the context of his lengthy judgment 'If Presbytery shall stand?', which is

the most important single demonstration of astrology in his *Christian Astrology*.⁴ This is a prophecy which falls within a wider pattern of mundane astrology predictions. However, taken in its own right it is an exquisite exercise in craft and a spell-binding interpretation where Lilly, writing in the spring of 1647, correctly predicts the execution of Charles I in 1649 and the rise to power of Oliver Cromwell. Beyond the circumstances of the prophecy Lilly has a further purpose:

From these configurations we shall naturally frame our judgment, not positive or affirmative, but conjecturall, onely out of a desire that posterity may see there's some verity in Astrology, and the Clergies just cause to carp at the Art, if I lye [...]

The success of this prediction is therefore intended to demonstrate the 'verity' of astrology on the canvas of the greatest possible concerns of Church and State.

However, before Lilly could demonstrate astrology to others he first had to prove it for himself. Here is how he describes his passage into the art in 1633:

I apply'd myself to study those Books I had obtain'd, many times twelve, or fifteen, or eighteen Hours Day and Night; I was curious to discover, whether there was any Verity in the Art or not.⁵

So what are we to understand by the word 'verity'? The Concise Oxford English Dictionary offers the following definition:

verity n. truth (of statement etc); true statement, esp one of fundamental import; really existent thing [...]

Nearly all astrologers will affirm that their practice is rooted in something of fundamental import, and that knowledge of astrology is knowledge of a 'really existent thing'. Verity is for our purposes a preferable term to the more obvious word 'truth', because truth is usually also thought of as *the* Truth, and becomes abstracted as an absolute quality. All that is sought is the relative truthfulness of astrology in and of itself. Lilly seeks to demonstrate that there is *some* verity in astrology. This is the ground on which it stands or falls, its own *raison d'être*; and

this is worthy of the most searching investigation.

The nettle to be grasped is that it is wholly insufficient to treat astrology as a belief-system that people have had in the past and sometimes have today, to be studied as an item of cultural history, or as a subject of sociological or anthropological analysis. The astrologer claims and knows that astrology has verity as a way in which reality shows itself. That is what is meant by a primary truth claim. Accepting this leads us to distinguish the study of the belief-system and the claim of astrologers from the issue of the verity that may lie behind their claim. Laying out the conditions of astrology's putative truth – and not simply analysing the cultural circumstances of its claim – is properly the work of the academy.

There is an ethical demand upon the academy with respect to verity in astrology, as in all other things, and it bears upon the individual choice we each make in studying anything or in undertaking the practice of anything. Verity goes to the heart of the matter. If I am going to spend a lifetime on astrology, then like Lilly I require to see whether there is any verity in it. I am not going to waste my time on something that does not in itself have verity, when some other discourse or practice, such as cognitive psychology and neurophysiology, or psychoanalysis and counselling technique, or solar flares and electromagnetic fields, will get to the heart of the results claimed by astrology, and when understood will be capable of achieving more reliable and truthful results. Where else is there a greater requirement to see and educe verity than in the academy? What else is a university for?

This brings us to consider the relative status of the intellectual pursuits that cluster under the umbrella of astrology in the academy, in the necessary distinction between *primary* and *secondary* scholarship. This is easily understood, at least in an approximate sense, and I can best exemplify the distinction in an anecdote from my experience. Many years ago, along with several other astrologers, I had the good fortune to meet a notable scholar concerned with our field who can be taken as standing for the whole genus of such scholars. He was an eminent authority on an astrologer of antiquity who is a major figure in intellectual history, and our scholar was concerned to advance the argument for the importance and influence of this historical figure. It was a delight and also a puzzlement for our scholar to meet studious modern individuals who were in some measure in the direct lineage of astrological practice of said intellectual hero: 'astrologists', he called us, using the archaic term. He was charming with us and we asked him interesting questions. It is a

wonderful thing to ask questions of a scholar, and there was even a possibility that things we might say could illuminate some tiny corner of his own studies.

In the conversation, one of our party asked whether our scholar had looked at the methods of the hero from the past and seen what light they might throw on his own natal horoscope. We rather took it for granted that our scholar would have made some little experiment, if only out of passing curiosity. But this was a question too far. A momentary look of blank incomprehension passed across his brow. Why should he do *that*? Why should he for one moment take seriously the core of the life work and attempt at meaning – the verity – of the very figure he is studying?

Now I have to say that admirable though this scholar's scholarship is in his chosen area, it is entirely secondary to the question of astrology. This mode of scholarship does indeed bring many materials of significance before the astrologer, and it may incidentally assist the astrologer, but its whole project is secondary with respect to its subject matter. Scholarship that is primary with respect to the subject matter bears upon or offers a critique of, challenges, educes or brings forward, the verity of the thing, and if it does not aim to do that then it is secondary to the field.

The distinction between primary and secondary scholarship involves qualifications and considerations that go beyond the scope of this current paper, but for present purposes it is sufficient to establish a simple criterion, which is that primary scholarship treats of the verity of that discipline. This means that for astrology, primary academic scholarship treats of the verity of astrology as a discipline *in its own right*. An important qualification is that the distinction is not between different nominal discourses and disciplines, as if we were to say that 'history' can never be primary with respect to any other discipline outside of itself. The distinction is created by the intention of scholarship, not by its nominal form, and therefore it is possible to treat the history of astrology in the light of its bearing on the verity of astrology, in which case it becomes primary to the field.

Having said this, such an equation between disciplines is all too rarely achieved. We could name various of the current generation of intellects at work in historical studies in astrology who do not see the wood for the trees. It seems to be generally the case that the more a scholar can see of texts and transmissions and translations and mis-translations, the less they will see of astrology. If such scholars have not started off with the basic symbolic perception that makes an astrologer

then there is no chance at all of them properly understanding their subject-matter. Such scholarship, however valuable elements of its discovery may be, is effectively dead with respect to astrology's verity.

It follows that in commencing the difficult task of laying out the material of astrology for the academy, we need to be especially clear in the distinction of primary and secondary. A discourse that has its own primary method and is treating of its own verity cannot be brought on as a substitute for primary method in another discipline. Sociology is not a substitute for jurisprudence in the field of legal studies. History is not a substitute for differential diagnosis in medicine. Likewise, porting in 'theories and methods' from social sciences is wholly inadequate as a means of providing theory and method for the academic study of astrology.

At the point that the academy engages in primary scholarship then it is fully engaged in the discourse, development and transmission of its subject matter. This means, however, that we astrologers should not for a moment imagine that what transpires will be a comfortable endorsement or rubber stamp for everything we do. The reverse is likely to be the case. As an illustration of the issues we might face, take the case of the interface that has occurred in recent times between orthodox astrology and modern science. Surprising as this statement might at first seem to most astrologers, the scientific and statistical researches into astrology that have occurred mainly in the last fifty years represent a genuine – if wholly misguided – attempt at primary scholarship in our field, precisely because they have taken fully seriously and then tested within their own methods the possibility of verity in the claims of astrologers. We all know what has happened to those claims, put to those particular tests – a dismal failure for astrology. Do not therefore for a moment imagine that the status quo will be endorsed by the critical gaze of the academy. The end result may well be that astrologers have to rethink much that they do, if not everything that they do. But if that is the truth of the matter, then the academy will have served its purpose for us all. This means that far from holding to a model of the objective observer, the academy will begin to shape and lead thinking within the subject area of astrology itself. Anything short of this is an abnegation of the responsibility of the academy. That, I suggest, is what is indicated in our conference's Full Moon in Sagittarius.

Endnotes

1. See Kant's condemnation of astrology in his description of 'the starry heavens above and the moral law within': see the Foreword to the *Critique of Practical Reason* transl. Lewis White Beck (Bobbs Merrill, New York, 1956).
2. Brian Vickers 'Analogy versus Identity: the rejection of occult symbolism 1580-1680' in Brian Vickers ed. *Occult and Scientific Mentalities in the Renaissance* (Cambridge University Press, 1984).
3. Hans Georg Gadamer *Truth and Method*, transl. revised by J.Weinsheimer & D.G.Marshall (Sheed and Ward, London, 1989).
4. William Lilly *Christian Astrology* (London 1647; reprinted Regulus, London 1985) pp. 439-42.
5. Katharine Briggs ed. *The Last of the Astrologers* (English Folklore Society, 1974) p. 23.