

Different Ways to Characterise Astrology

Some comments on Patrick Curry's new introduction to 'An Aporia for Astrology'

By James Brockbank

In [his new introduction](#) Patrick Curry says that psychological astrology "remains the most popular kind of astrological practice today, although psychological astrologers are more comfortable with the idea that what they do is 'also' divinatory." This made me wonder in what way these astrologers might think what they are doing is divinatory: do they mean that some form of divination underlies their practice, as astrologers might twenty-five years ago have referred to the hermetic maxim 'as above so below' to justify what they did, or do they mean they are using 'divination', as a form of intuition, to make an astrological judgment? Would one fall into the divinatory 'school' of astrology simply by believing that astrology is a form of divination? It is by no means clear that there are any astrological techniques which preclude divination so that would mean astrologers using very different techniques could be considered divinatory. It also made me wonder if an astrologer using seventeenth century techniques to provide psychological advice should be considered a traditional or psychological astrologer. Would we want to separate astrologers who use similar techniques but provide different sorts of advice? We might expect a psychological astrologer to provide psychological advice but what sort of advice would we expect from a traditional astrologer?

When thinking about schools of astrology it might be useful to consider three different aspects of astrological practice: first, what (if anything) an astrologer believes underlies that practice; second, the techniques actually used; and third, what those techniques are used for. In terms of what school of astrology an astrologer might belong to the second aspect is the most important but if one is not clear about which aspect one is referring to confusion is likely. Indeed, the first aspect is so problematical that one must be extremely careful when referring to it at all.

Broadly, when it comes to justifying their practice and providing an explanation of what underlies it, astrologers have argued for three different types of theory: first, for archetypes or some sort of neo-Platonic forms which underly the universe; second, the theory developed by Geoffrey Cornelius and the Company of Astrologers that astrology is a form of divination and that a divine or non-human agency is required; and third, that it is underpinned by a scientific law. However, even trying to categorise how astrologers have justified their practice into these categories causes problems.

There are several areas of confusion. There is confusion over the tradition of thinking that leads to the neo-Platonic theory and the divinatory theory and there is confusion over what is meant by divination. The scientific theories split into those that require empirical support, those that may not, and those which are trying to find support for a natural rather than judicial astrology. A further issue is that it is by no means clear how many of these positions are tenable positions to hold. If they do not stand up to scrutiny in what sense might they be called a 'school'?

Charles Harvey believed that neo-Platonic forms underlay astrological practice but he was critical of the divinatory 'school'. However, Geoffrey Cornelius traces his divinatory position back to the neo-Platonic Plotinus. Thus, different strands of the same tradition leads

to diametrically opposed understanding of how astrology works. It is possible, however, to accept the argument of Cornelius about the nature of astrology and not to hold a neo-Platonic position at all. Indeed, I argue in [my thesis, elsewhere on this website](#), that a theory for divinatory astrology is only consistent if it is placed outside the neo-Platonic tradition. Perhaps, none of this matters but one is going to have to be very clear about what one means if one refers to a neo-Platonic astrology.

It is not even clear what is meant by divination. Many different definitions have been suggested outside the field of astrology and one cannot assume that everyone is using the word in the same way. This can be illustrated by considering my opening paragraph in which I suggest that astrologers may think that when they make an astrological judgment they are 'using divination' in the sense of divination as a form of intuition. Within the astrological community this is quite a common understanding of divination and I believe that it underlies Geoffrey Dean's understanding of divinatory astrology. However, a considerable amount of work would have to be done before it could be shown to be an intelligible position to hold. Astrology does not consist of a rule which we can follow to reach a conclusion; it consists of weighing up a series of rules and making a judgment. The making of that judgment is no different than the making of any other judgment. I would argue that the divinatory aspect of astrology is in the coming together of astrology and context at a particular moment in time which enables the trained astrologer to make a pertinent astrological judgment. If the intuition, practical knowledge, or gut feeling that an astrologer uses to make such a judgment is divinatory in itself then one would have to show how it differs when making a similar judgment about what juice to order in a juice bar. Is the intuition or gut feeling one uses when ordering a particular juice a form of divination? Perhaps it is but it is a position which will require some arguments to support it.

One might wonder if this distinction I have made between the astrologer who believes divination underlies astrological practice and the astrologer who thinks they are using divination as a form of intuition to make a judgment is valid because if one is using divination to make a judgment it must, one would have thought, underlie astrological practice. However, even this seemingly obvious point is not universally agreed. There are astrologers - Mark McDonough comes to mind - who believe they are using a combination of 'science' and 'divination': there are empirical laws, which underlie astrology, but then they use divination to choose between them. This position can not and does not stand up to scrutiny but some astrologers believe this is what they are doing.

The category of science is no clearer. Astrologers have at times claimed that empirical evidence underlying their practice exists - for example, Julia Parker - but this claim has so little substance that few astrologers still argue for it. But what about those who believe that empirical evidence could be found if only we could design more sophisticated experiments? One can argue that their position is incoherent but that is more complicated argument to make. And whatever argument one makes is unlikely to be relevant for those astrologers who are searching for evidence, along the lines of the Gauquelin results, to underpin a natural astrology rather than an all encompassing set of rules which would underpin judicial astrology. However, if this is what some astrologers are searching for, or believe is possible, it is not practising astrology: it is a scientific endeavour. Then there are the new scientific theories - chaos for example - which try to show that astrological practice is underpinned by a science which does not require the sort of empirical evidence which would demonstrate causal astrological laws. Unless one wants to reform astrology this can only be achieved by showing either that the techniques astrologers use are an expression of this law or that the law works, as I have suggested divination works, by

bringing context and astrological configuration together at the same time so that no astrological technique is precluded. No one has managed to show that astrological techniques as varied as the Hellenistic techniques of Vettius Valens and those of Howard Sasportas can be an expression of one scientific law: indeed, astrological techniques are so varied and contradictory it is unlikely that can ever be done. But if the scientific law is simply the bringing together of context and astrological configuration so that an astrologer can make a pertinent astrological judgment then the theory is no different to the divinatory theory. In effect, all that one would be adding to the divinatory theory is that astrology exists in a chaotic world but that by itself is not of much interest. Astrology exists: if the world is chaotic it exists in a chaotic world.

These different beliefs of what underlies astrology are liable to confusion but other than the divinatory position I am by no means clear that any of them are tenable positions to hold. Without empirical support to show that objective archetypes or Platonic forms exist then they have to be assumed; that assumption is essentially the same as assuming a non-human agency so the archetypal position collapses into the divinatory position. One might assume that the evidence of one's own practice - that astrology and context does come together at a particular moment in time - is sufficient to justify what one does but without objective empirical laws to show there is a causal relationship between the astrological configuration and the context then something must be bringing them together or one would not experience that astrology 'works'. That something is the hidden assumption of a non-human agency so that position also collapses into the divinatory theory. There might be enough empirical evidence for a limited natural astrology but that is quite separate to judicial astrology. Similarly, one might be able to build a type of astrology on a scientific theory which does not require empirical support for causal astrological laws but it would be a reformed astrology quite unlike judicial astrology as it is currently practised. No astrologer could seriously hold such a position unless they were prepared to reform their astrology accordingly. Michel Gauquelin was prepared to attempt this in *Neo-Astrology: A Copernican Revolution* but most astrologers prefer to continue to use what 'works' for them. If these different positions are untenable, or are positions which have yet to be argued for in sufficient detail, or if all astrologers are actually practising a form of divinatory astrology, even if they believe they are not, then the category of a 'school' based on belief will be problematic: astrologers will rarely believe exactly the same thing; often what they believe will be difficult to justify and if we try to put astrological belief into broad 'schools' we will soon find those 'schools' are not as coherent as we might hope.

There is, however, one distinction I believe would be useful. A key part of the Cornelius theory of divinatory astrology is that for a moment of astrology to occur it is neither necessary nor sufficient that there is a particular planetary correlation in the sky at that moment. This is diametrically opposed to the Ptolemaic understanding of astrology in which the planetary configuration at a particular moment influences the sub-lunar world at that moment. It is the Ptolemaic position which underlies so much of our astrological tradition so whether or not an astrologer accepts Cornelius on this point will tell us much about how what that astrologer thinks about their practice and if they have not thought about this point, are not even aware of it, then it will tell us that they have not thought much about their astrology at all. It is such a fundamental issue which goes to the heart of the nature of astrology that it is surprising that those astrologers who disagree with it do not attempt to refute it. Indeed, other than Charles Harvey in his review of the original edition of *The Moment of Astrology* I cannot think off hand of any astrologer who has even discussed it. But it is not an issue that can be easily ignored, at least not by astrologers who want to produce a universal theory of astrology, or want to say that they practice archetypal astrol-

ogy, or neo-Ptolemaic astrology, or something similar. If it is no longer universally accepted that there is a necessary connection between the moment of astrology and the sky at that moment then a new theory of astrology - archetypes, chaos etc - can only be a universal theory if it can be shown that an astrologer who on occasion finds that a 'wrong' chart 'works' has made an error. If it is not a universal theory of astrology then it can only be a theory for a reformed astrology with a set of astrological rules for that reformed astrology. As mentioned above, the only astrologer who has actually tried to undertake this task of developing a reformed astrology is Gauquelin and no astrologers have followed him. If they had one might be able to talk of a 'Gauquelin Copernican' school of astrology but that school would be distinguished by following a set of rules particular to that school.

When we consider schools of astrology it would be clearer to think in terms of the second and third aspects - techniques used and what those techniques are used for. The second and third aspects are closely tied together because the techniques that an astrologer uses will influence the type of advice that they provide. If one primarily uses the outer planets in one's astrological judgments one will not be able to answer specific questions in a precise way as one would hope to do using the techniques of William Lilly. However, astrologers use a mixture of techniques many of which they will adapt for their own use and will provide many different types of advice. There would be nothing unusual about providing both psychological consultations and business advice. One could imagine astrological judgments on a scale: at one end influences and tendencies might predominate which would provide some sort of psychological insight to a client or understanding of planetary cycles which may impact on mundane matters and at the other end a precise yes or no answer without any psychological insight at all or reference to planetary cycles. The confusion comes when an astrologer who largely uses psychological techniques provides advice which is not psychological or an astrologer uses the techniques of Lilly to provide psychological advice. It will never be possible to fit astrology and astrologers into neat boxes.

If one keeps these three aspects in mind it will, I think, help to clarify what one is saying. Usually one will mean by a traditional astrologer an astrologer who uses astrological techniques from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century. In contrast a Medieval astrologer would be one who uses the techniques of Bonatti and others of the Medieval period while a Hellenistic astrologer might focus on the techniques of Valens and others. Given that horary techniques are used to answer specifically horary questions one would expect someone described as a horary astrologer to do just that, whereas a traditional astrologer might do much more because techniques from the traditional periods are not only concerned with horary questions. It is probably the case that entailed in our understanding of a psychological school is both that techniques drawn from Alan Leo to Liz Greene are being used and that predominantly psychological matters are being considered. It is unlikely we would label an astrologer using these techniques primarily for non-psychological purposes psychological - they might be a business astrologer - and we would want to distinguish between an astrologer using traditional techniques for psychological purposes from an astrologer using techniques from a Liz Greene book.

If we want to refer to a stoic astrologer, a neo-Ptolemaic astrologer, a divinatory astrologer, or to anything else which may refer to the underlying justification of that astrology, then it will be necessary to be clear exactly what is meant by that term to avoid confusion. If one wants to refer to a 'school' of astrology it is probably the case that we will have to refer to a series of techniques which will distinguish that school from others.

5th April 2016