

Is Astrology Divination - and Does it Matter?

by Geoffrey Cornelius

This article is based on a lecture given at the United Astrology Congress, Atlanta, Georgia on May 22, 1998.

It was published in *The Mountain Astrologer* Issue 81: Oct-Nov 1998 pp. 38 – 45.

Geoffrey Cornelius subsequently made some minor changes and in 2000 it was published on Patrice Guinard's CURA website - <http://cura.free.fr/quinq/01gfcor.html>

The text in the present version is the same as appears on the CURA website; two illustrations and a diagram that appeared in the original talk and in *The Mountain Astrologer* have been restored.

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My subject today is the subtle question of whether astrology is divination. I assume most of you saw Thomas Moore give the keynote address yesterday.¹ Moore surprised many in the audience when he expressed praise for the divinatory aspect of astrology. He said that astrologers should realize that we divine, and should not proceed in the direction of using astrology as a type of reading or inference from cosmic influences. Perhaps only someone with some distance from astrology, someone who loves its symbols but isn't a horoscopic artist, is able to see our practice clearly. Many of us, however, do not like the suggestion of divination because that would undermine the objectivity of our practice. In my view, it's that very objectification of the experience of astrology that binds us - and blinds us.

Divination is a word that is often loosely used to mean a type of intuition. The highest processes of what we do in any art or science involve this wonderful intuitive capacity. Put that way, we could all agree, "Fine, astrology is divination, but so what?" My purpose here today is to raise the "so what?" You might not like some of the things I have to say. This is still useful because it's important that you think this through and are able to say why you don't like it; then we'll get more clarity on the nature of our astrology.

I came into astrology directly through the *I Ching* and a love of divination. I had, therefore, already come with a particular attitude toward the practice of astrology, viewing it within the context of other divinatory practices. That means I was already comparing the horoscope with the random cut of the Tarot deck, the throw of the coins, or the division of the yarrow stalks. For many people, however, astrology is the first form of symbolic thinking they have explored, making their experience somewhat different. For them, astrology seems to be evidence of a universal and impersonal pattern, at work at all times and places, lawful and not random at all, and certainly not in any way dependent on a diviner's decision to take a divination.

Because of my avid interest in divination and symbol systems, in my early years in astrology I eagerly attended astrology lectures and read astrology books for illumination on the topic. Lecture after lecture and book after book, I almost never encountered the word 'divination' in relation to astrology, except in the general sense already mentioned, that astrology allows us to intuit some higher reality. But never in the sense that the formal practice of astrology - its methods, techniques, and its mode of interpretation - is a divinatory system that can be studied in the light of what we know about the *I Ching*, Tarot, tea leaves, that whole gamut of practices called divination.

It is my understanding that the core of our practice has omen reading at its origins. Astral omen reading goes back at least to the civilization of Mesopotamia, to a truly archaic mode of consciousness that observed the omen as significant. This idea is intimately bound up with the ancient conception that the whole universe is filled with spiritual being and intelligence of all grades and levels both close to us and far from us. These conceptions have come from societies with the polytheistic and pagan understanding that the planets, the stars, and all things of nature are innately divine. The work of the diviner and the stargazer is to divine, or know, the will or movement of these spirit beings and how they relate to us.

In what way does the diviner know these things? He or she seeks a showing, a sign given by the god or spirit and addressed directly to the diviner or to the tribe or nation for whom the diviner divines. Note the word directly - the god or spirit speaks in the first person (*I*) and addresses in the second person the one who divines (*thou*). The god responds to our concern and our desire and to our question, and speaks to us through the omen. This is the root and origin of what we astrologers do.

When relocated in the context of the classical model of astrology, the I-thou dialogue of the omen is lost. The later construction of astrology establishes an abstracted, universal, and rationalized model of heavenly influences, in place of the chaotic and intimate showing of an omen 'here and now.' I suggest that in this move of abstraction something absolutely essential about the practice of astrology is overlaid and forgotten. Forgetting it leads to a conceptual and spiritual void.

I have felt for many years that there is a hollowness at the heart of this practice of astrology that I love and that I think is so revealing. I have friends who have taken the vows of the Buddhist dharma and friends who seriously practice Christianity and mysticism, and they ask the question genuinely and earnestly: "To what *good* is this practice of yours? Why are you doing this?" It's a very challenging question. In the whole history of Western astrology I believe it has not been adequately addressed or answered. The question of the spiritual nature of astrology, of believing that we may relate ourselves to something called divine, is brushed aside in our classical tradition.

Early on in the attack of the church fathers against all forms of paganism, astrologers soon learned that they should not directly say that their art gave them knowledge of supernatural things. An astrologer in Islamic or Christian culture was under immediate pain of heresy, and perhaps death. The fact that what we do may be supernatural and involve gods or spirits is simply not an allowable thought in the classical tradition of astrology. It can't be an allowable thought in the face of the overwhelming power of both monotheism and the rational philosophy of the Greeks.

There is no place for an old astrology of omen reading, with its oracles and its connection with augury and lots. There is only room for a rationalized astrology of spiritual influences that works on the seeds of things at the birth moment - a type of spiritual-scientific causation. This is the great model given to us from Ptolemy onward. It is the model sustained through Islamic astrology and in the whole Western tradition.

Intelligent critics of astrology maintain that astrologers have always managed to use the prevailing culture and ethos of the times in which they live (the science and philosophy of their period) to disguise themselves and cunningly continue with their practices. This is absolutely true. That is how our extraordinary form of symbolic consciousness has survived. We disguised ourselves as Aristotelian science for the better part of two millennia. Then we tacked ourselves onto modern science in the revival of two centuries ago when astrology disguised itself as magnetism and electricity, and later as radio waves. Depth psychology is just the latest disguise. Perhaps we can do nothing else, for how can this form of symbolism survive without being in the corrupt position of lying about itself in some way in order to get by? This is something the occultists have always known - one does not speak about certain things.

We usually try to forget about the critics and just get on with our astrology. This is understandable, yet our opponents are truly educational for us. One of the greatest attacks on astrology happened about 500 years ago, in late 15th-century Italy, when Marsilio Ficino, a superb astrologer himself, and his pupil, Pico della Mirandola, dubbed by his friends as the most learned man of his age, *laughed* at the astrologers of Florence, the "petty ogres" who believed that, through their oracles, they had the power from the heavens to define man's fate. Pico's *Disputations against Divinatory Astrology* (1493-4) became the model for other decisive attacks well into the 17th century. It marks a turning point in the historical decline of astrology. These Renaissance magicians have been called *humanists* because they loathed any form of determinism, including above all the determinism of the stars, which could demean the dignity and freedom of the human soul. They practiced magic in the true sense of the word - the magic of imagery, invocation, Kabbala, Christianity itself. At that point in our history the imaginative consciousness called magic and the craft of horoscope judgments parted company. At the same time, Pico easily deconstructed the false rationale derived from Aristotle and Ptolemy, underpinning astrology's theory. So what appears at first to be a rupture between astrology and magical-religious Renaissance humanism turns out at one and the same time to be the rupture between astrology and science, and foreshadows the near terminal decline of our art that was to come in the scientific enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries. After Pico, craft horoscopy never had a serious intellectual case.

It is important for us to understand that this attack from magicians and symbolists was a protest against the crass, materialistic doctrines of astrologers of their day. And where does that materialism come from? In my opinion, it comes from the false pseudo-causal, pseudo-rational structure that astrologers have long adopted to disguise their art.

So where do we now stand on the question of astrology as science? It seems to me that in recent times, and certainly in the U.S., our pursuit of scientific credibility for

astrology has gone on the back burner. It was big a few years back, mainly because of Gauquelin's work, but we seem to be backing off from it now. It is not my intention to speak against scientific research, but I don't see that it has much to offer astrology. Our practice is not rooted in observations that are pertinent to the science of our age. That's why most astrologers are completely unmoved by the results of all the research findings and statistics.

I once had the good fortune, temerity, or stupidity to speak with Paul Kurtz, one of the key individuals responsible for the tremendous attack on astrology that was published in 1975 in the American journal, the *Humanist*.² I managed to trap him by a coffee machine during a skeptics' conference in London. The poor man was trying to get coffee out of the dispenser and I said, "I'm an astrologer. Nice to meet you. Now, look, I know it worries someone like you when an astrologer makes scientific claims, but if an astrologer were to say to you that what we do is a *poetic interpretation* of the heavens, what would you say?" He said, "That would be fine, just fine," and went back to his coffee. So Paul Kurtz and the Nobel Prize winners who proclaimed against astrology wouldn't care a damn if we said we were doing poetic astronomy. They have a problem when astrologers lay claim to the whole edifice and understanding of scientific thought and its power, using it as the basis for how astrology works. I don't blame Paul Kurtz for seeing red. Perhaps we astrologers have our wires crossed more than they have. If we continue to present our subject to them so poorly, we can expect these attacks in return. It's our karma, not theirs.

When there is an attack on astrology, it is particularly important that we realize what we ourselves are saying about our subject, rather than complaining about the stupidity of those people who attack us. I don't think we give a straight answer about what we do. It is disingenuous of astrologers to even hint at a scientific basis of the sort understood in physics or biology. We would be on *so* much stronger ground if we said, "What we do is a type of symbolic imagination. We believe it has real effect and real results. This is something you psychologists and parapsychologists ought to take a look at. What we do is actually about remarkable powers of human imagination that imply something very extraordinary about the nature of reality and the nature of mind." I believe this is something worthy of true science and true study. Otherwise, we hang ourselves up on divides and false battles.

There can be no doubt that, strangely and mysteriously, there is some type of response in the universe - captured in the old doctrine of correspondences - that is worthy of a spiritual-scientific endeavor, or of a science of the future. Equally, phenomena such as those produced by Gauquelin *cannot* be pushed aside; they definitely belong in this strange realm that is challenging at the corners of science. There's no reason for us astrologers to turn away from them, but neither is there any reason to claim them as the basis of our practice. There's the rub.

Given the paradoxes of our current understanding, I suggest we need to take on a 'double conception', a division of significance in astrology into two orders, which I have termed, respectively, Natural and Divinatory Astrology.³ By *Divinatory Astrology* I mean much the same as the old term *judicial astrology*, meaning the art of particular judgments, especially from the horoscope. Yes, astrology does have a physical and objective presence, an occult mystery of the natural order of things. It has some objective phenomena that are amenable even to our present-day science. All

of this belongs to an astrology of Nature. But when you or I judge a horoscope, our judgment isn't based on those components or categories. It's quite possible for something to have a genuine physical reference and connection to a mysteriously organized universe, in the way that astrologers over millennia have discovered, *and*, at the same time, for each of our acts of horoscope interpretation to be very purely subjective, an imaginative creation. It's possible for both to exist together.

Let's consider another divinatory form as an example: if you know the *I Ching*, the *Book of Changes*, you know it works. It offers - in its own way - an objective truth. The *I Ching* is based on trigrams that have natural affinities: wind, water, wood. When you make a divination with the *I Ching* by manipulating the trigrams, with their references to the natural world, it doesn't depend on any objective truth that you already know about the nature of wind or water or wood. These are images drawn from nature, with a genuine role in nature that can be studied. Yet we can immediately use these images in an act of creation to construct and see and reveal a meaning about a situation. They don't depend on any literal wood or literal wind. When dealing with other symbol systems, it's very obvious that we don't have to be literal, but we astrologers, despite all protest to the contrary, are so damned literal about it. And our literalness lies not in the beauty of the interpretations of planets, signs, and houses, but in the most basic fact of all: where we get the moment of astrology from. I refer to the birth moment. But I'll come back to this shortly.

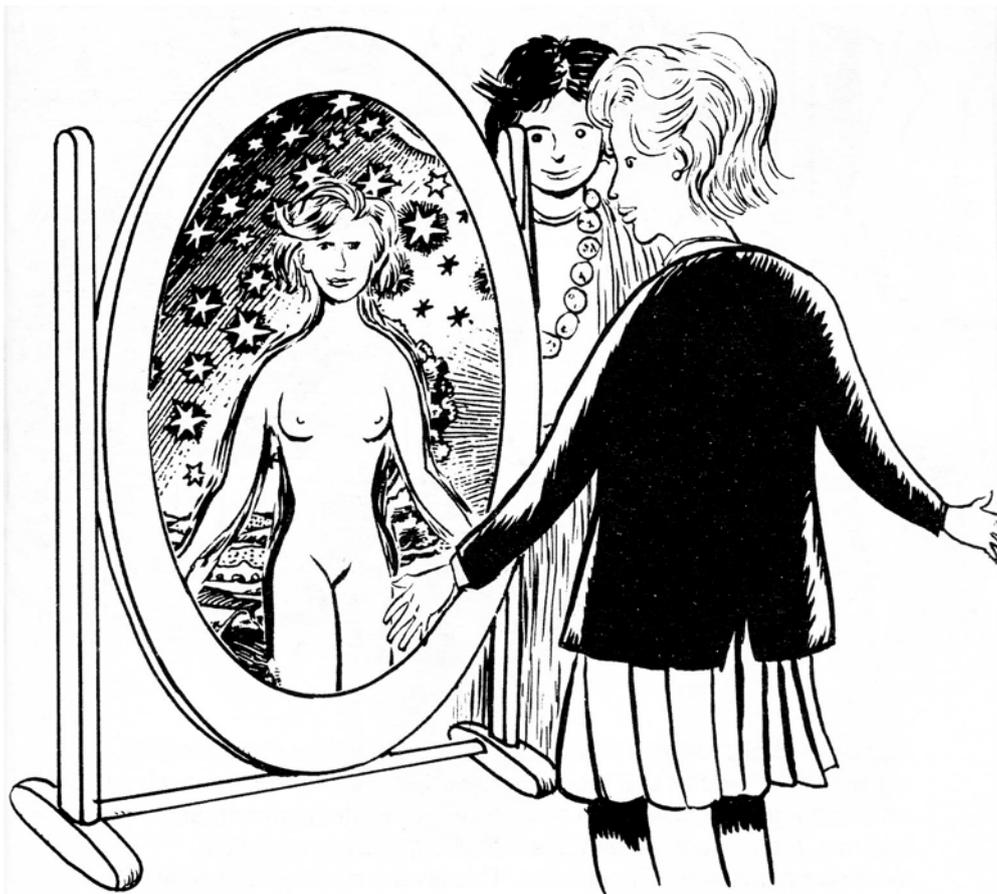
Some astrologers cannot bear the thought that a considerable degree of the inference drawn from symbols is a type of subjective, creative process of the astrologer, and is not dependent on a physical process in the natural world. Indeed, the whole of our Ptolemaic, Aristotelian background does not allow us to take that line, and brings us back to real-time planets with real-time influences.

We can call it synchronicity if we like, but we're still talking about physical planets and physical positions noted in the ephemeris: "My God, the planet Uranus really is there; I'm not just making this up." But, of course, there's that link that allows us to see Uranus manifesting in the world, and, the question is, where does that link come from? This piece of creation, this consciousness-event, sees Uranus there in the solar system, sees an event there as well, and knows there's a connection. Where does that come from?

Perhaps Carl Jung can help us. He is probably the most important single, intellectual influence for astrologers in the 20th century. Whatever you make of him, the bottom line is that if anyone has given a conception of astrology that is workable for the modern age - one we can fall back on and use to justify ourselves at parties when we're arguing with hard-nosed rationalists - it is Jung. His discussion of astrology as synchronicity - an 'a-causal connecting principle' - is the key here. His discussion prefigures the question I have raised with you. Is astrology a divination practice (like Tarot cards or tea leaves), and, therefore, dependent on an act of imaginative creation rather than objective facts that are established in nature (tables and chairs; atoms and molecules)? If so, should it be considered *subjective*? In other words, are the understandings I get through astrology actually my own subjective creations?

Jung could have given a very pat explanation of astrology on these lines, i.e., any results occurring in astrology are due to the nonrational breakthrough of archetypes at certain moments - pure synchronicity. However, as his letter to the French astrologer André Barbault makes clear, although much that occurs in astrology can be classed as synchronicity, it would be misleading to approach all of its phenomena in this way. Our categories of causality, synchronicity, and symbol are only our mental categories of such things; "nature is not so simple," says Jung.⁴ The way things actually *are* defeats any conclusive attempt to catch Nature in our boxes and categories. I think you will see why I quote these views of Jung in support of my suggestion that as a realistic way of proceeding we should allow a double conception of astrological reality, rather than trying to unify the whole thing and find a single perspective or 'explanation' to cover all its phenomena. However, remember the thrust of my argument, which is that our practice of judgment from horoscopes, and the results we get when we make those judgments, constitutes divination, and involves a profound dimension of psychic creativity.

I'd like to follow Jung a little further on the implications of seeing our practical astrology as divination. I'll do this by taking up the idea of astrology as a 'metaphoric mirror.' I'm sure many modern astrologers would agree that the whole system of stars and planets is an elaborate metaphor or allegory by which to describe another situation in reality. We bring this mirror of symbols to a situation, read in the mirror, and then infer back to the actual reality.



This is one way to describe divinatory and symbol systems. Astrologers will say, "Of course, it's metaphoric. Mars isn't physically, in the ordinary sense, doing anything to us; we use a metaphor of Mars to help us reveal in a poetic way the truth of human life." But we have to ask, *who* is doing the seeing here? It is the psyche, but first and foremost it is the psyche of the *astrologer*. Of course, for many astrologers, their goal is to get a client to look into the metaphoric mirror. But without the astrologer's intervention, the creation of the space of astrology, there would be no mirror and no seeing. The astrologer's intervention is a type of mediumship. We have to say as a matter of principle that astrology *by definition* implies an observer, but further, the astrologer is fundamentally implicated in the act of seeing the symbol. Such a seeing is totally distinct from the possibility and method of modern science, which must attempt to divorce the observer from the material observed. But then we encounter a mystery. Is the image seen in the symbols of astrology *subjective* or *objective*? Nature is not so simple. The image in the metaphoric mirror steps out into the world.



The notion of the horoscope as a metaphoric mirror goes a long way to providing a working approach to astrology-as-divination, but it is not in itself quite enough to finally shake natal astrology away from its shadowy pseudo-causal and deterministic foundations. This is because of the extraordinary power of the *literal* interpretation of the birth moment. The objective moment in clock time is given an absolute status, not as *metaphor* but as a species of celestial causation, implanting the 'metaphoric' pattern at an actual clock-time moment of birth. Yet if we stop to think about it, this significance of the birth moment has been assigned its significance by the various human actors and, of course, by the astrologer. In other words, the moment of birth is

being treated by the astrologer as a biological event that is somehow seeing a metaphoric pattern, when instead the moment of birth is a dramatic and emotional fact of human significance, and the planets are being referred to as a means of symbolizing that significance. But until there is someone to 'see' that significance in the metaphoric mirror, there *is* no significance. *We* assign significance, not the stars.

The view I have been enunciating here may seem highly mysterious, but it does begin to blossom in practice. A perception I've had in teaching is that once students do much astrology *other* than natal, their attitude toward it begins to shift and break open. When people get into horary, for instance, and see horary really working, they realize it does have an objectivity to it. However, all of our existing rational categories are completely challenged by this practice. That's because horary is not mediated by any causal or temporal origin, e.g., the birth moment. A genuine horary will show directly a description given by the heavens of a situation in human life. This is here and now for you, for the person, and for whatever situation you are looking at, as if the heavens suddenly mirrored in detail just this moment. This genuine moment can happen also in an inceptional chart, and it is impossible to explain by any rational means how there could be - physically and objectively - such a correspondence.

Classical astrology, on the whole, has had a lot of trouble with horary and usually tries to repress it. You can see why it is quite clearly seen by any thoughtful astrologer, and any philosopher who has looked at astrology over the centuries, as *directly* suggesting divination. But horary also poses the question to the astrologer: Is the whole of astrology, even birth astrology, which appears to be working from influences at birth, *actually* of the same order? I suggest that it is.

Another way to raise the question of astrology as divination is the problem of wrong maps. Most astrologers who have practiced client work will have had the experience of producing a chart that works excellently, better even than the norm, but upon checking, it is found that the Daylight Savings time is wrong by one hour. You've done precise progressions and transits to angles, and they work, but you've got the chart wrong! I do not think there are many astrologers with any degree of experience who have not had this happen, and it throws them. A thoughtful astrologer, given our existing theory and model of astrology, is left with *no* position except that of a quasi-skeptic: "Oh well, I suppose we can read anything into symbols, etc." This is a poor position for us to take.

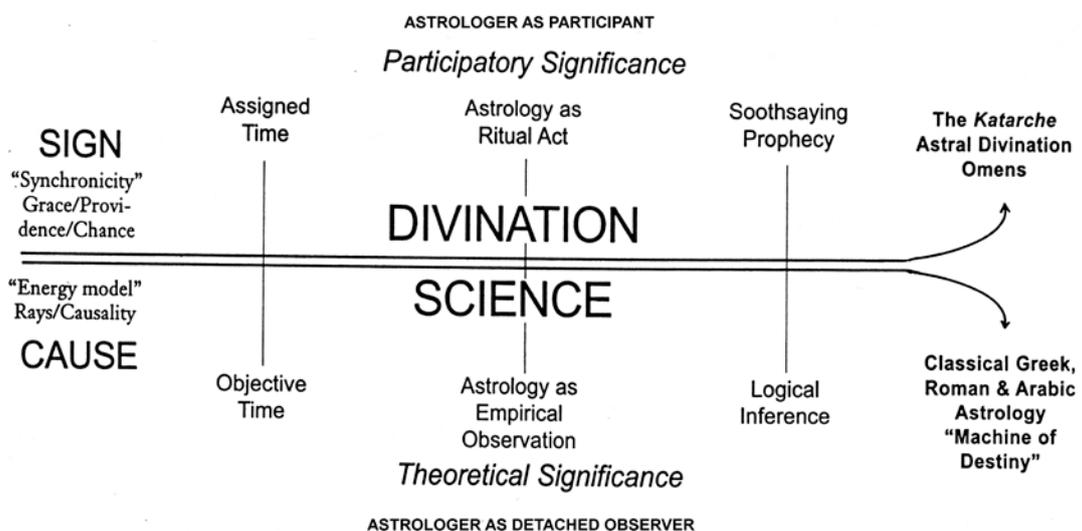
Geoffrey Dean's book, *Recent Advances in Natal Astrology*, quotes with relish the casebooks of astrologers who have reported this phenomenon.⁵ Obviously, to a scientific critic of astrology, this appears to push astrology out of the window entirely; there's no objectivity there at all. And it is true, *if* natal astrology depended on the physiologically objective time of birth, then wrong maps working would be almost impossible to rationalize and explain. But, as I have already suggested, from the divinatory and metaphoric point of view, what counts is the horoscope that actually presents itself or 'comes up'. Where psyche is concerned, time is almost infinitely flexible. This mysterious state of affairs cannot be justified by saying that maps work because the heavens are influencing things at a certain moment in real time. That isn't how maps work. Horoscopes work because psyche and emotion are brought into a symbolic equation through some device. The normal and correct device for the astrologer, as a matter of *ritual*, not technique, is to absolutely strive to find the

correct birth moment. That, however, is a ritual procedure of the 6th house and not a technical procedure of the 6th house.

To state it again: The efficacy of astrology may not be dependent on the right or wrong map, but on a process of the psyche by which an astrologer *mysteriously* brings himself or herself into line with the person and the material. Certainly there is enough evidence to at least make us question whether the basis of correct understanding in astrology is actually properly given by an objective moment of physical time.

It is one of the roads to folly, for example, to study patterns of airline accidents. Most horoscopes of catastrophic events are actually *meaningless* charts. Any search for midpoints, harmonics, or other subtleties in the chart in order to try and scrape a meaning out of it is simply not fruitful. Why expect a particular moment in clock time to yield a particular pattern? A moment does not have significance until there is *somebody* there for whom it is significant. From the perspective of astrology-as-divination, psychic engagement is the key to the meaningful symbol.

I do not underestimate the fact that these are difficult arguments for some of my fellow astrologers to accept. I would like to re-focus on the main theme of this discussion, and draw it to a conclusion, by putting again the main question with the help of a diagram. I have suggested that some part of the phenomenon of astrology belongs to the natural world and is in principle amenable to scientific investigation. Nevertheless, the main part of what we do is the interpretation of symbols to arrive at particular inferences and judgments, whether about character or about events in life. And this practice is divination, not science. If we believe that astrology is about science, either in the modern materialist sense, or in the more subtle spiritual-scientific sense of the medieval model given by Aristotle, then we will find our terminology and discussion below the dividing line on the diagram. Either type of science, medieval or modern, will actually take us to an energy model of astrology, perhaps involving planetary rays, and some type of causation (however 'spiritual'), or a pseudo-causation disguised (and misunderstood) as synchronicity.



This diagram illustrates the divide between *sign* (or 'symbol') and *cause*. It is my belief that from the time of Greek astrology our classical tradition has never

successfully distinguished these two possibilities, and has perpetually confused them. St. Augustine, perhaps the most formidable and perceptive of all of our opponents, saw our dilemma clearly. He knew pagan practices and studied astrology in his youth. In his great attack on our art, he observed that astrologers (when it suits them) will say, "Mars caused the action of violence in that man," and, if then pressed on that point, they will say "Mars was a symbol," *but* catch them another moment and they're back to talking as if Mars caused the thing. Augustine said that the astrologers' language *always* slipped and was never clear between this causation versus symbolizing process. Yes, we actually do rely on a causal model - especially with our classical medieval model - and because it depends on objective time, clock time, it depends on this illusion of objectivity to secure it. Astrology of this kind is a form of empirical observation, and the significance derived appears to be a theoretical significance with the astrologer as an observer. This is science. The correct procedure in reading this is a type of logical inference from symbols. This is the model of Greek, Roman, and Arabic astrology, and, ultimately, it cannot disengage astrology from fatalism.

Humanistic astrology in the 20th century - a noble project - has attempted to disengage the classical model from fatalism by saying that the birth chart shows *potential*, rather than actuality. It makes that distinction in order to escape the old problem. If you're born, says this school of thought, with a very powerful Saturn, you have the *potential* for certain experiences of a Saturnine nature. Remember, however, that this is a velvet glove fatalism because you're still *fated* to have been born with a Saturn potential! It hasn't actually escaped the problem.

A much more radical move is needed: to recognize that the very structure of what we do in interpreting horoscopes depends not upon the influence of the heavens upon the seed, nor upon some objective 'time-quality' stamped out by the heavens, not even by synchronistic co-occurrence in objective time. It depends on *the significant presentation of the symbol to consciousness*.⁶ The moment doesn't determine significance for us - we assign significance to the moment. Then we see that astrology is about chaotic and irrational signs and omens of things that are unplanned and can't be predicted - *if* and *when* a sign occurs, we read it. There is no technique to make signs and omens occur, but there is a ritual we make to invite the gods and spirits, and create the space wherein their sign may occur - the sacred space of the horoscope. Then we just *see* what comes up. The time of astrology is no longer Aristotelian objective time. It is the time assigned, given by the intentionality of consciousness, and that which shows in response comes by grace or providence or chance.

Looking at astrology this way raises more questions than it answers. What I have touched on here just skims the surface. But divination is at the heart of the issue, and how each of us answers that question matters very much.

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Notes:

¹ This refers to the keynote address given by Thomas Moore to the United Astrology Conference on May 21st 1998. The address was titled 'Ecology of the Stars: The Astrological Imagination and The Care of Human Life'.

² Bart Bok, Paul Kurtz, and Lawrence Jerome, 'Objections to Astrology: A Statement by 186 Leading Scientists' *Humanist*, September/October, 1975.

³ Geoffrey Cornelius, *The Moment of Astrology*, London, England: Penguin Arkana, 1994, pp. 72-3, 85, and Appendix 6 'Orders of Significance - A Summary' pp. 348-349. Revised edition, 2003, pp. 74-5, 78-9. Appendix 6 does not appear in the revised edition.

⁴ C. G. Jung, *Letters*, Vol. 2 (1951 - 61), edited by G. Adler & A. Jaffe, Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975, pp. 175 - 177.

⁵ Geoffrey Dean, *Recent Advances in Natal Astrology*, Subiaco, Australia: Analogic, 1977, pp. 19-20, 30-32.

⁶ Geoffrey Cornelius, *The Moment of Astrology*, London, England: Penguin Arkana, 1994, p. 41.