

## **21st Century Astrology: Judgement Without Consideration**

**By Bernard Eccles**

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***Abstract:** Just as the rise of rational science in the 17th century changed the definition of what was considered valid knowledge, simultaneously rendering everything that had gone before not only obsolete but to some extent incomprehensible, the digital revolution is doing the same again, re-shaping everything in its own image. Astrology was excluded from the first revolution in thinking because it could not fit into a science of demonstrable cause and effect; in the 21st century it is failing again because it works through a process of analogy, and in the digital world there is no place for that. To say that A is like B, which astrology does all the time, is incomprehensible in a digital society, where A either equals B, or it does not. Is there a place for astrology in this new paradigm? And if it manages to adapt, as it has in the past, by sacrificing a part of itself, what will be left?*

In 2004, as part of the very first intake of the Sophia Project MA course, I wrote a dissertation entitled 'Astrology in England in the 21st Century'. In this, I examined what I saw as the decline of astrology in all its forms at the very end of the twentieth century, in stark contrast to the boom period it had enjoyed just a few decades previously. I looked at a similar assessment of astrology from Patrick Curry, written in 1986, which had correctly anticipated this decline, and I came to the conclusion, along with Curry, that astrology would have a hard time restoring itself to its former prominence.

It is difficult to write a balanced view of events which are so recent; historians can usually rely on distance and hindsight to give perspective and clarity to their thinking. It is even harder when the events discussed are part of the author's experience: again, the perspective is too close, and there is the danger that what is intended as a history can become simply a memoir. To look forwards is even riskier, and is of course not even history at all. I apologise for this. Nonetheless, there are grounds to believe that even after a single decade, it is time to re-assess the position of astrology in England in the 21st century, simply because so much has happened in those intervening years.

What has happened, in a word, is the introduction of the i-Phone. This apparently simple yet hugely powerful device is more than just a modern convenience, or an addictive toy for those who like to play games; it has become an indispensable part - perhaps *the* indispensable part - of everyday life for millions of people. It is the window through which they engage with the world, and access those things which they wish to know. And in doing that, it has changed what people regard as knowledge. For the man or woman in the street, and certainly for the coming generation of schoolchildren, knowledge is not found in books, but on their phones; and, as every means of communication superimposes its own form on that which it communicates, then knowledge itself will change to fit the means of its expression. Eventually, the whole paradigm of what is considered knowledge, or what is deemed fit to know, will shift.

This may seem an absurd accusation to throw at a mere mobile phone, but the speed of its adoption has been phenomenal, and its influence enormous. And for the

purposes of this argument, it is the most visible manifestation of something much larger - the creation of the digital society, a transformation whose significance cannot be overestimated.

As this transformation takes place, it becomes possible to divide human history - and the way knowledge is defined within it - into three different phases, with the digital as the third. Examining each in turn will give a clearer view of their distinctive character, and examining the transition periods between them will allow identification of what was gained and lost on each occasion. And since astrology has a history long enough to embrace all three, it should be possible to make some conjectures about its role in this new third era based on the way it survived the transition from the first to the second.



*God the Creator*

So, the first phase. 'In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth,' as the book of Genesis says in its opening sentence. In this cosmology, Creation is complete, and perfect. It has all that it needs to have, put there already by its Creator. All human knowledge, therefore, is simply a process of uncovering what was already there: a dis-discovery in every sense, taking off the cover to see what lies within, unveiling its true nature. If anything previously unknown is found, it is simply seen as the first uncovering of something that was there from the beginning. Even the word 'invention' comes from Latin *invenire*, meaning to find, or come across; the idea of making something new, that wasn't there before, isn't in it at all.

Any moral, philosophical or transcendent knowledge in this world is communicated directly by the divine entity, either by visions, or on tablets of stone, as with Moses. In short, knowledge in this worldview is not discovered, in a modern sense, but *revealed*.



*Moses, Doré engraving*

Transmission of this divinely-inspired knowledge is largely oral. Knowledge that is passed on orally has to be recited and practised until it is known by heart; and the method itself adds an extra dimension to the knowledge, involving teacher and pupil, speaking and listening, apprenticeship and practice before mastery, and respect and reverence for both the knowledge and its source. Although not necessarily part of the knowledge itself, these extra qualities are usually seen as beneficial. The medium of transmission thus helps to shape the content.



Astrology fits into this paradigm of knowledge very easily. Formed from the numbers and ratios of the planetary cycles, it appears to express the inner harmonies of Creation, and to offer insights into the will of the Creator through its celestially-derived vocabulary of signs and omens.

But, from the fifteenth century onwards, everything changes, and with it not just the prevailing worldview, but also the way in which knowledge of any kind is viewed. The Italian Renaissance, with its emphasis on humanism rather than scholasticism and its rediscovery of Classical literature and philosophy, is already under way by this time; but the technology that really makes it a pan-European movement is that of the printed book. Then as now, wider dissemination of ideas in a readily available and accessible format widens the debate and promotes both the spread, and the uptake, of new ideas. But the medium, that of the book, makes knowledge into something found on paper, and not something that comes from contact with the outside world, or from the slow distillation of wisdom gained from years of hands-on experience. Knowledge becomes thinner, in every sense; reading about it is not the same as doing it, and although a book may give better information, there are other truths, not easily put into words, which are not found in the printed word. The eventual outcome of this shift in thinking is the rise of rational thought; a thought that is deliberately detached from the old continuum of Creator and Creation.



*Coat of arms of the Royal Society*

The coat of arms of the Royal Society, the first learned society formed to promote the new rational and experimental science, makes as good a declaration of the new thinking as could be wished for.

The empty shield - apart from the superimposed quarter of England, showing the

sponsorship of the monarch - is in every way a *tabula rasa*, an empty slate, with all previous writings removed. A new start, a clear workbench for experimentation and discovery. The motto, *nullius in verbo*, 'of nobody in word', or in modern speech 'take nobody's word for it', shows a rejection of all previous opinion and knowledge, seeking instead to prove truth by experimental means only. The oral tradition, it says, is dead.

The transition was a long one, lasting more or less from when Columbus discovered one New World until Herschel discovered another. By the end of it, the heavens themselves had been re-arranged, and knowledge was something entirely material, objective, and rational. Those are not three random adjectives: each one of them is hurtful to astrology in a different way. Let us quickly examine each one in turn.

The 'material' test demands that astrology be physically demonstrable, and that any such proof be replicable in identical test conditions on any future occasion. Astrology has never been physically demonstrable; its best practitioners have always held, even from the days of the Neoplatonists, that the planets themselves are not agents of change, but merely indicators of change, as all parts of Creation move in accordance with some higher guiding intelligence. Nor can its proof or disproof be replicated: astrology attests that every moment is individual and different in its qualities, and so identical test conditions can never happen, a factor which rational science frequently ignores. Astrology is not a cause-and-effect science; it is not merely some form of engineering. To test it as such, and to assume that because it fails it is nonsense, simply points out that whatever it is, it is not made of anything that can be physically measured. As the old line goes, to take a ruler to a painting will ascertain its dimensions, but not measure its art. Yet the cause-and-effect paradigm has been so successful, and is now so universally practised, that those who seek to understand astrology frequently fall into the trap of assuming that there must be some sort of hidden mechanism, some invisible influence like magnetism or gravity by which to explain it. The viewpoint of rational science has made it almost impossible for us to imagine anything in any other terms: thus, the adoption of the rational mindset has defined what is, and is not knowledge. Anything which cannot be made to fit the requirements is excluded.

The 'objective' test means that the observer must stand apart from the process he is observing. Astrology, on the other hand, assumes that the observer and the observed are part of the same world, and move together. Some forms of astrology, such as horary, make explicit and extensive provision for this. Yet to pass the 'objective' test, this too must be abandoned.

The 'rational' test is the hardest of all. Astrology, although it has an internal rationale and a set of rules, is supremely ir-rational. In the earlier worldview, its inexplicability was seen as proof of its ineffable qualities, its weirdness a clear indication of some strange interface between this world and the next where deeper revelations might be obtained. But in a worldview where there are no other dimensions than the everyday, the irrational nature of astrology can only be labelled as delusion. Thus astrology, which is non-material, non-objective, and non-rational, failed every test of the eighteenth century, and could not be admitted to the new knowledge.

From this point on, astrology becomes de-legitimised, and introspective. Since the new science had converted the planets into mere chunks of rock or balls of gas, and

had removed entirely the idea of Heaven as a divine realm, the world is no longer seen as sentient, and so one of the most important features of astrology, which is to enable dialogue between the creature and his Creator, simply ceases to exist. Along with it goes the practice of mundane astrology, which looked at Creation on a large scale, and the twin techniques of horary and electional astrology, which boldly play with perceived patterns of events in the hope of pre-empting their result.

But it is important to observe that there are gains for astrology in this transition as well as losses. More accurate planetary data became available, and printed almanacs and ephemerides, which should theoretically have made prediction easier and further-reaching; but without mundane astrology to use it on, and no dialogue with the Creator, in hindsight it seems a poor deal. All that is left to astrology at this point is its rich vocabulary of symbol and analogy, now used merely to describe individual character and personality.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were kind to astrology, as has been well documented; but although natal astrology thrived, mundane and horary were very late in reviving, and did so only to a limited extent. Now, at the start of the twenty-first century, astrology faces another shift in the paradigm of what is and is not knowledge, which threatens to strip it even further, removing even that which survived the eighteenth.

As before, at the start of the new era the advantages of its new technology are warmly welcomed, and it is not until after it has become universally accepted that there is an understanding of what has been lost, by which time it may be too late to repair the damage.

In the digital society, which is not so much unfolding as enveloping us, the currency of knowledge is no longer facts, although many still believe it to be so, but data. Data can be made to look like fact, of course, just as it can be made to look like anything else: but the stuff of which our world is now made is data. It is a miracle, in every sense; something to behold, as the word itself implies. But it is also a simulacrum. To use that most apt of oxymorons, it is only *virtual* reality.

Down at the very bottom, at the heart of the chip, every instruction, and every piece of code, comes down to just two values: 0 and 1. On or off. Alive or dead. There are no halves or other fractions. It is not possible to be half-on.



zeroes and ones

This is the absolute basis of the new knowledge, just as absolute belief in the divine was the basis of earlier eras; and, as before, that basis shapes the whole of the society which uses it, whether consciously or not. Everything is now quantified - made into a number, a value, or a statistic. Secondary schools are now required to focus more on the percentage of their students gaining specific grades than on the joy of learning itself. Numbers are all. It is entirely possible that the gap between the have's and the have-not's in society, which presently concerns many commentators, will get wider and wider until one side will have everything and the other side will have nothing: zero and one, again. And in political terms, the freedoms of the individual may be gradually reduced by clever legislation until society reaches the state once envisaged by TH White in his Arthurian fantasy *The Once and Future King*, where everything is either forbidden or compulsory. In other words, zero and one. Society comes to resemble the form of its core belief, in the same way that churches are usually cruciform in shape, or the belief in some mythologies that the cosmos itself is shaped like a man, the Creator making all of Creation in his own image.

For astrology, this is a disaster. Astrology is not digital, not exact. It is analogue. It is arguably the greatest analogue symbol set ever created, an entire language devised to show the relationship between things of similar quality but different quantity. Astrology finds it perfectly easy - and insightful - to say that A is like B, though not the same; but in the digital world, A is either equal to B, or it is not. Again, astrology seems to have failed the test.

To digitise astrology is to lose its essence. Astrology's smoky values are what makes it special - shadows and highlights, tones and nuances of interpretation that light bright sparks of illumination in those that use it. These make astrology marvellous, and they are not digitisable, quantifiable, or even reproducible from one instance to another. Nor should they be, of course; but in the world of zero and one, they have no place.

There is something else that astrology has, too. It is contemplative. It rewards long and individual thought, allowing the mind to move between insight and inference, or to try different paths before making a final choice. Those who practice astrology are well aware of this process, which is often referred to as 'consideration before judgement', taking the phrase from Lilly. Meditation of this kind may be of value to the astrologer, but to the digital user they are simply too long, too complex, and too unpredictable in their outcome.

It is at this point the preferred medium of the new age makes its presence felt. Not only must the contemplation, consideration and judgement of the heavens be digitised, but it must also present its conclusions, instantaneously, on a space just two inches by four - an i-phone screen. In the twenty-first century, there is so much knowledge, and all of it available simultaneously, that the average person has neither the time nor the expertise to follow its arguments or understand its complexities: he only wants the answer, in either a very few words, or, better still, a picture. If astrology is to thrive in this third age of knowledge, it seems, it must shed even more of itself, to squeeze itself down to the size of a text - or a tweet. All its rich vocabulary and symbolism, and all its gentle and contemplative insight, will vanish. Unless great care is taken, by those who understand it, to preserve its unique cultural content, very little will remain.

There is a definite downward gradient discernible in all this, which will dismay anyone with a metaphysical turn of mind.

Era	Source	Critical?	Contemplative?	How communicated	Medium of communicat'n	Satisfies...
Ancient World	God(s)	no	yes	revealed	oral	soul
Renaissance/ Enlightenment	rationality	yes	no	discovered	printed book	intellect
Digital	web	no	no	presented/ consumed	on screen	emotions/ appetites

*three forms of knowledge chart*

We have identified three phases of knowledge:

In the first, knowledge is seen as emanating from the divine, and is *revealed*. Its purpose is to satisfy the soul.

In the second, knowledge is something postulated by rational argument and conjecture, then *discovered* and confirmed by experiment. Its purpose is to satisfy the intellect.

In the third, knowledge is *presented*, and consumed, without further thought. The questioning attitude of the second form has been lost, and there is an uncritical acceptance of whatever is offered, often in the form of statistics or other numerical data. Knowledge is presented in a highly simplified manner, without subtlety or perspective, and in a way which either discourages or prevents a wider view being taken. It is the knowledge system of a teenager: highly emotionally charged, and dealing only in extremes, best and worst, black and white, all or nothing. Or zero and one. It lacks the universal vision and the long timescale of the first era, and it does not have the clear logic of the second. This one is driven by sentiment, and its purpose is to satisfy the emotions.

In astrological vocabulary, this might be expressed as follows: knowledge in a form associated with the qualities of Jupiter, then that of Mercury, and finally that of the Moon. Soul, intellect, and emotion are familiar components from the hermeticist's theory of four worlds; sadly, the direction of progress seems to be downwards through the planetary spheres towards the earth, rather than ascending upwards to reach the realms beyond the fixed stars and the primum mobile.





*celestial spheres*

But away from metaphysical speculation, where does astrology go now?

Strangely, the likeliest outcome is that it will turn full circle and go back to its origins. If it sheds its symbols and contemplative practices, all that is left is simple fortune-telling. Patrick Curry has often suggested that the essential question in all divination is 'Will my intended venture have a favourable outcome?' and all that is required is a simple yes or no answer.

I am sure that if not now, then in the very near future, there will be an app for that. Imagine it: the phone, which already knows your birth data from your medical records, plus the time and your present location from a satellite, will perform horoscopic calculations and apply a rigid set of horary rules to determine whether this moment is indeed favourable for you or not. If it is, the screen display will turn green, as in 'go' from traffic lights; if not, it will turn red. All that is needed to set this in motion is a swipe of the thumb. It will soon become an indispensable part of the user's daily routine: as he wakes to his phone's alarm each morning, he already has his traffic signal for the day. It will become a ritual, and may even be, in some way, a sort of religion.

But the mechanism behind it, the planetary theory and the celestial philosophy, not to mention the coding and programming, is invisible to him, and of no interest. What he wants is the result. This is how knowledge is presented in the digital age: in easily consumable form, without need for further thought - or, more significantly, deeper thought. Or balance. It is, in fact, judgement without consideration.

In many ways, it is simple omen-reading, which takes the whole process back to the days of Babylonian astrology. Full circle - which is what astrology is all about.

So at each transition stage, as the paradigm of knowledge shifts, astrology has had to abandon parts of itself in order to remain alive; and if those parts of itself are not to be lost forever, they must be preserved. It is useful in any era, and under any philosophy, to have an alternative to the prevailing orthodoxy available, to provide contrast and perspective, and to prevent progress grinding to a halt under the weight of an inflexible dogma. For this reason, the analogue thinking of astrology is particularly valuable in an age of increasing digitisation, as is its cyclical worldview in the face of a very linear concept of progress.

But the initiative to preserve the complexities of astrological thought can not now come from the consumer. He may enjoy the result, but he does not know how it was produced, and even horoscope-calculating software will not help. It may give the numbers, the positions, and even the diagram, but the essence of astrology lies beyond that, and it is very difficult to capture or understand without being taught. Therefore the onus must fall on the present astrological community, those who have worked with astrology for many years. And time is pressing. The consultant astrologers of the late twentieth century are aging; they should look not for new clients, but for apprentices, before it is too late.

In 2004 I concluded that the best chance of astrology's survival in all its forms was by embedding itself in some sort of ecologically-minded neo-pagan movement, and that's still possible, although to my knowledge none have become prominent so far. But now it seems that for most people, the future of astrology will be as an app, functioning as simple divination again. In 2004 I also suggested that astrology and its related lore would be extinct by 2050; but given the speed of the digital revolution, it would seem prudent to revise that figure downwards.

A final summary...



*Steve Jobs cartoon*

[End]