

Why Astrology Works

by Brad Kochunas

I recently read two marvelous articles written by Ivan Kelly, a professor in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Saskatchewan, appearing in *Psychological Reports*, a respected journal in the field of professional psychology.¹ In them, Kelly quite astutely, I believe, dismantles modern astrology with the assurance of a seasoned academician. He notes a wide variety of claims made by astrologers and, to my mind, convincingly raises arguments that are perhaps unassailable by those practicing and believing in astrology as a discipline that literally and accurately describes and predicts human personality. I submit that it would be folly to attempt a point-by-point rebuttal to his arguments. He has us; the jig is up for an astrology conceived as an empirical discipline. I urge every astrologer and believer in astrology to read and contemplate what Kelly has to say about this ancient discipline. What follows is a rhetorical response to Kelly's position.

For many years now, I have promoted the notion that astrology is more closely related to myth and religion than to scientific method, more in line with drama and poetry than with postulate and theorem, more fictive than empirical.² Kelly titles his 1998 article, "Why Astrology Doesn't Work" and, by this, he means that astrology does not supply "new, relevant information about people that could not be obtained from competing theories" (p. 528). Additionally, he asserts that astrology's claims have not stood up to empirical testing. As I know enough about research to say that I have no expertise in it, I can neither fully agree nor disagree with Kelly's claims, though I suspect that he is right. Noting that "works" is an ambiguous term, he writes that astrology works in "the sense that clients are satisfied with astrological readings just as clients of palm readers, phrenologists, or aura readers are satisfied" (p. 528). I might add, just as clients of physicians, psychotherapists, and hair stylists are satisfied. Kelly admits early in his article that his arguments bear little relevance to the acceptance of astrology by others. He believes that astrologers are unable, unwilling, or unlikely to be able to think critically about their discipline in which they've invested so much time and energy.

The Value of Myth

Astrology works, not because of its factual validity (the literal truth of things) but because of its functional validity (its usefulness in providing a satisfying aesthetic). The pertinent question is: does it work within the client's experience? Does it have the capacity to add value, depth, richness, and/or meaning to our lives? Astrology works in the fashion of great drama, lyric, narrative, or religious experience. Who among us has not been deeply moved by dramatic presentation, enriched by poetry, caught up in musical ecstasy, entranced by art, or enchanted by ritual? To suggest that these experiences have little value because they are not amenable to empirical testing or because they don't demonstrate a literal truth is simply specious. The late psychologist, Rollo May, writing about science's failure to realize that astrology has a different basis from that of science, notes that astrology "is a myth and requires the language of myth. It has both the shortcomings and the positive effects of myths." The word "myth" is used by May not to denote falsehood (perhaps the popular understanding), but rather to speak of that category of human experience in which value, significance, and meaning reside. He further writes that myths are "essential to the process of keeping our souls alive and bringing us new meaning in a difficult and often meaningless world."³

Professor of philosophy and critic of astrology, Robert Carroll, comments about my own position in his online book, *The Skeptic's Dictionary*, saying that my message "seems to be very simple and straightforward: If you can find satisfied customers, you have a valid myth."⁴ I believe this is correct in the sense that whether one is talking about astrology, the notions of democracy, the tenets of Christianity, or theories of self, cosmology, or evolution, if an individual or group is persuaded of the

rightness of a position, either through research, rhetoric, or experience, the system to which they adhere works.

In an era of specializations within specialties and hierarchies of experts, it's difficult for people to value their subjectivity against the overwhelming press of the objective protocols of a culture's science. We typically turn to experts for solutions and have been taught to distrust our own experience. I suspect that one of the hallmarks of a transition into an Aquarian-Age dynamic is an increasing decentralization of power and authority such that the masses become their own experts. We see glimpses of this already in the movement toward well-informed patients, self-care, and the whole field of alternative medicine. It is a turn toward becoming one's own authority in one's own life. Often it seems that experts frown upon this notion, but the power of our own subjectivity can be a mighty thing. Ivan Kelly quotes astrologer Maritha Pottenger (as cited in Kelly, 1998, p. 543):

"To change my mind [about astrology] would require an ironclad, irrefutable proof that materialism is a completely correct description of reality, followed by a proof that physical science has fully described all forces and interactions possible in that material reality and that none of these forces could let planetary motions affect individuals on Earth."

This, as Kelly states, sets up an argument that can neither be confirmed nor refuted; however, I believe the crucial aspect of Pottenger's statement is that she is saying that all of her subjective experience of the validity of astrology simply cannot be invalidated, any more than the reader can be convinced that he or she is not presently reading this page. Hers is a statement of faith, not conducive to empirical validation. Similarly, I daily experience the sun rise and set, though science tells me that it is not actually occurring. My sensations of 60 degrees Fahrenheit outdoors in January and in July are entirely different experiences, though an empiricist will tell me that it is still 60 degrees outside. Though I can accept my experience of these as illusory because I have been taught to believe the empirical facts, no one is likely to convince me that I did not experience what I experienced.

Are we fooling ourselves with this aesthetic understanding of astrology and of the sunset? Empirically, yes, but in terms of our experience being aesthetically satisfying, no. We do not believe the magician "really" saws the woman in half or makes the elephant disappear, but we situate ourselves "as if" what is happening is true. We derive great pleasure within the elegance of the mystery. It may be incumbent upon us to develop what the poet John Keats termed "Negative Capability," that gift of being "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."⁵

Mystery, Magic, and the Truth

Astrology is a form of imagination, an imaginal poetics that is better placed in the humanities than the sciences. We do not argue the truth of art and literature but rather indicate that they are vehicles for conveying, suggesting, or disclosing truth, and so it is with astrology. In the same fashion that portraiture painting reveals, evokes, or presents a particular view of its subject, likewise the drawing up of a natal chart allows the astrologer to construct a rough draft of the person, which becomes increasingly refined through dialogue with the client.

Kelly's assertion that astrology does not provide new, relevant information about a person that could not be obtained via competing theories seems insufficient. Kelly may be suggesting that various psychological models and methods provide more accurate representations of human personality. If this is the case, however, surely he would not denounce portraiture painting and replace it with photography because it provides more accurate reflections of the physical facts.

Nothing could be more absurd. No, despite several centuries of scientific discrediting, we seem to need astrology, myth, and magic. Some veiled part of the soul yearns for mystery, for the abracadabra of life.

First, astrology evokes the fantasy⁶ of belongingness and connection. It provides a framework for imagining a profound intimacy between ourselves and our world in ways that mainstream psychology does not address. Astrology functions within a larger meta-story in which every human being is an integral part of a living cosmos. This organismic view allows for the possibility of communication between the living whole and its parts in a way that a lifeless clockwork universe cannot. Second, astrological clients tend to be imagined in less pathological ways than in traditional clinical perspectives. The use of astrological symbolism provides glimpses into the complexities of human personality and considers a wide range of human expression as acceptable. Psychopathology is less a label than an excessive or inhibited aspect of natural functioning. Third, as all people are constellated from a finite pool of elements uniquely configured in the birth chart, a person can preserve a sense of individuality without feeling alienated from the larger human community. Fourth, astrology suggests that a client's situation is not simply the result of random and chaotic processes. The whole of the astrological perspective reflects a world that is orderly and potentially understandable. This can help return to a client a sense of control in life, a sense that their own developmental process includes the apparent chaos as a part of their larger life pattern. Because life may feel out of our control does not mean that it is out of control. Larger guiding factors may occasionally wreak havoc with the ego's plans, challenging us to maintain a certain fluidity and adaptability to life's ever turning circumstances. This flexibility is necessary for the survival of the fittest, as those who best adapt to fit into the changing environment tend to thrive.

Where are we left then? Perhaps science has moved beyond its identity as a methodology and become a grand ideology seducing us to accept that if some belief, event, thing, or system does not meet its criteria for truth, then whatever anomaly may be under its examination has little or no real value or relevance to living. How have matters gotten to the point where the champions of reason find it necessary to attack astrology? My sense is that, in some manner, they too feel under attack by what they perceive as a cultural turn toward irrationality. There appears to be a serious concern among many scientists that science itself may be facing an impending dissolution.⁷ It is not hard to understand then that, in the face of this fear, the devotees of the ideology of science would contract, close in, circle the wagons, and shoot at anything that does not fit neatly into their camp. Science suffers a kind of xenophobia, denouncing that which does not live within its own province.

Astrology as an Imaginal Discipline

Without a doubt, astrologers have contributed to these harangues against them by dressing astrology up as science, often making provocative claims that give the appearance of being empirically testable by standard research protocols, but which, in reality, would not stand up to verification. Astrology must drop its pretensions to be an empirical discipline. I encourage astrologers to abandon hope of empirical validity and move their discipline where it belongs, into the realm of the imaginal. We don't evaluate poetry by the criteria of proper contract writing nor describe a Beethoven sonata in terms of sonic disturbances in a gaseous medium. These are the wrong tools for the job. As long as astrology portrays itself as scientific, it will be judged scientifically. A discipline does not have to be scientific in order to carry value. For many astrologers, it seems that it is the aesthetics of the practice that keep them involved in the discipline. Kelly (1998) states, "And so it is throughout astrology: Lectures, conferences, and entire books are judged not by empirical evidence but by the beauty and insight of the symbolism" (p. 532). I sense he lodges this as a shortcoming rather than a celebrative declaration, but this is a wonderful statement of recognition of the aesthetic value of astrology. In our culture, we have lost the fantasy of the healing power of

beauty and tend toward engaging only the medical fantasy of healing. Astrology is simply a way of imagining the world differently, an alternative model for understanding human reality. Practiced imaginatively, its subject matter is soul-making. As such, it can stand without shame alongside archetypal psychology in its rejection of scientific, experimental, and research-oriented approaches to its subject.⁸

As a culture, we have been so indoctrinated into the view that science is the last resort, the ultimate authority, the final arbiter of human experience, that to stand aside from it, to be in the margins and work, is seen as folly. When we wish to dismiss or demean an area of human experience, we call it unscientific or pseudo science, believing then that no one should take the subject seriously any more. How naïve do we have to be to accept that? I imagine the conflict as one of different archetypal groundings. Empiricism may reside within Saturn's perspective, maintaining a highly disciplined, formally structured, tightly controlled, reality-principled approach to the world. Astrology, as a discipline of the imaginal, speaks in Neptune's voice, in hints and whispers, nuanced meanings, vague allusions, poetic metaphor, all expressing a Romantic understanding of the world. There is room for both and, in fact, more; all of the archetypal gods have a place in human experience.

There are deep mysteries to our existence that science is not likely to effectively plumb, nor should it necessarily do so. It is not the be-all and end-all of human inquiry. In the end, we find ourselves not so much in the continued traditions of Kepler, Newton, and Galileo, which lead lockstep down the road to rationalism, empiricism, and positivism, but rather we dance along the footpaths of Ficino, Paracelsus, Goethe, Blake, and Emerson, and, standing with Keats, declare, "I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination – What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not – for I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty."⁹ What better and nobler a task for astrologers than spiraling beauty back into the world!

I believe that we go to astrologers, seeking not the facts of our existence but rather the truth of it. Like beachcombers walking the morning shores at low tide, we seek a revelation from the larger mystery out of which we all originate, yearning to bring to the foreground of our lives a hint of a greater order to sustain us, if only for a brief moment, in the ground of our being. My position in this article has been a series of faith statements not likely amenable to empirical review. People tend to think that they know why they believe what they believe, but I'm not sure that is the case. They may offer such reasons as, "research indicates the truth of the matter" or "science has proven this is so." I do not know why I believe what I believe, as it comes from the heart and not the head. After 25 years of experiencing astrology, my faith in it rivals the empiricist's faith in reason. I can offer words like elegance, beauty, mystery, but, in the end, I can only borrow from Martin Luther by saying, "Here I stand, I can do no other."

References and Notes

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2. B. W. Kochunas, *Cosmic Symbolism in the Era of Modernity*, unpublished master's thesis, Miami University, Oxford, OH, 1985; Kochunas, "Reimagining Astrology," *The Astrotherapy Newsletter*, Vol. 2, No. 2, April 1989, (available from the Association for Astrological Psychology, 360 Quietwood Dr., San Raphael, CA 94903); Kochunas, "Returning Soul to

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3. Rollo May, *The Cry for Myth*, New York, NY: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1991, pp. 22, 20.
4. R. T. Carroll, "Astrotherapy," in *The Skeptic's Dictionary*, 1994-1999 [Online]. Available at web site: <http://www.skeptdic.com/astrotherapy.html>
5. J. Keats, *Selected letters of John Keats* (R. Pack, ed.), New York, NY: New American Library, 1974, p. 55.
6. The use of the word "fantasy" denotes those constructions of understanding that we engage to make sense of our world. The "facts" of a situation are simply the shared fantasy that we have agreed upon to be real.
7. T. Schick, Jr., "The End of Science?" *The Skeptical Inquirer*, 1997/199. Available: Online.
8. C. Boer and P.Kugler, "Archetypal Psychology Is Mythical Realism" Spring, 1977, p. 142.
9. Keats, *Selected letters*, p. 52.

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