

Astrology, Fate and Causation

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward, University of Manchester.

Abstract. Some philosophers assert that astrology is a false theory. The simplest way to argue against all astrology is to identify a proposition that any kind of astrology must be committed to and then show that this proposition is false. In this paper I draw attention to some misconceptions about which propositions are essential to astrology.

For some time now there have been philosophers who reject astrology as a false theory (e.g. Voltaire 1764; Russell 1932; Daly 2010). These philosophers are not opposed to just one kind of astrology, for instance Western astrology or Chinese astrology. They are opposed to astrology of all kinds. The simplest way to argue against all kinds of astrology is to argue that there is a certain proposition which any kind of astrology must be committed to and then argue that this proposition is false. Of course, this line of argument will only work if one correctly identifies a proposition that is essential to any astrological system. In this paper I object to an effort to do this.

In his very useful book *An Introduction to Philosophical Methods*, Chris Daly writes as if there is more than one proposition that a system of astrology must be committed to. One of the supposedly essential propositions is implied in the following quotation:

Astrology says that every event that is fated has to happen, and it re-describes every event of every type as a fated event. (2010: 167)

In this quotation, Daly implies that a system of astrology must be committed to the proposition that everything that happens was fated to happen. I do not think that a system of astrology must be committed to this proposition. An astrologer may say that at the time of the

full moon people's emotions are more intense and that they have less ability to maintain self-control. But the astrologer may not think that the details for how these general tendencies will manifest themselves are predetermined. You might have a heated argument with someone, you might have a nightmare, you might watch a moving documentary, and so on.

Not only is it possible for there to be astrology which is not completely fatalistic, I have found books recommending such astrology (Hampar 2007: 165; Orion 2007: 251). Readers are asked to think in terms of energies that can manifest themselves in different ways, rather than specific fated events. A certain alignment of astronomical bodies means that a certain energy will manifest itself, but there are a variety of ways in which it might do so and, for any affected individual, none of these ways is fated. (This thought is often combined with a rejection of the view that some alignments are inevitably negative, inevitably meaning misfortune for those affected. No alignments are inevitably negative, because there are ways in which the same energy might manifest itself without misfortune.)

Another proposition that Daly treats as essential to astrology is implied in the following quotation:

In addition, it has no explanation of how the supposed causes (the movements of the stars) can produce the effects they are said to explain. (2010: 167)

The other proposition is that the movements of the stars cause events within the human realm. There are multiple reasons for rejecting the view that a system of astrology must be committed to this proposition. I shall present three.

A. Astrology is committed to correspondences between celestial events and human behaviour (Lawrence 2005: 1a). But I cannot see that it is committed to any account of why there are these correspondences. True, it is incompatible with the proposal that people believing in astrology and acting on this belief is the answer, but it need not involve any account of what the answer is, given that it is not people's astrological beliefs. (If there is

enough evidence of such correspondences, then astrologers would have inductive grounds for making their predictions, even if they declare the phenomenon to be a mystery.)

B. There is an alternative account of why there are these correspondences that religious astrologers may pursue: that the correspondences are there because God has provided signs of the future through the stars, and other astronomical bodies, rather than because the movements of the stars are causing things to happen within the human realm. Whether or not this view is correct, astrology itself does not exclude it.

C. I doubt that much current astrology is even committed to the stars moving. Present-day astrologers make claims about where astronomical bodies appear, if you are at a given location on Earth. They are mostly neutral on the issue of whether, when the stars appear to move if you observe them from this location, they actually are moving.

References

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