

Rationality and revolution in Western astrology

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. In this paper, I draw attention to a revolution in the metaphysical commitments of Western astrology. Although I do not wish to promote astrology, I propose a rational route to this revolution. But there is a strong argument, from a Popperian perspective, that my proposal fails to establish rationality. I then consider whether we should say that astrology is either false or unfalsifiable, drawing attention to some surprising findings from schizophrenia research. Also, in a footnote I present “Tompkins’ paradox.”

1. A simple portrait. In the first decade of this century, I often went to a certain bookshop, with a large philosophy section, and read books with titles that featured such words as “Mind” and “Metaphysics.” They were published by reputable university presses. Then I took some interest in the neighbouring section, which looked far less reputable. The section was called “Mind, Body, and Spirit.” What are the books in this section about, I wondered. After browsing in this section, I browsed online for related material. I found reports of a revolution in Western astrology. I have some inclination not to refer to these investigations, probably from fear of never being admitted to “the big leagues” (Tompkins 2001),¹ but the revolution is an important transformation for historians of astrology and I think for philosophers of science as well. My paper is primarily addressed to the latter group of researchers. When discussing what distinguishes science from pseudo-science, astrology is a textbook example of a pseudo-science, but unlike various sciences, it has not benefitted from the trend in recent decades of greater attention to actual practices. Below is only a step

¹ But maybe this is a better topic than economics! I call the following Tompkins’ paradox, though that may not be the best term: “How do we get into the big leagues?” discussed in prestigious journal *New Literary History*.

towards filling this gap. I am going to work with a simple representation of what happened, which is more suited to addressing some themes from this area of research, in particular whether a revolution in this field could ever be rational. As history it is probably a distorted representation, such as might be given by a crude supporter of the revolution.²

According to the simple portrait I have in mind, there is a harsh old astrology and a gentle new one, which emerged in the twentieth century.³ The harsh old astrology had at least two commitments:

- (i) Some transits are good and others bad, and an astrologer is justified in describing them in this way.
- (ii) It is possible, by means of astrology, to predict specific events in a person's life.

Regarding proposition (i), the idea is this. "There are relationships between astronomical bodies: where they appear or will appear, and where they appeared at the time of a person's birth – angles are formed. If a type of relationship correlates with much stress or some fatal event, then it is a bad one. If it correlates with happiness, then it is a good one. There are such correlations. An astrologer draws charts and observes the relationships. Some of these relationships the old-fashioned astrologer classifies as good and others as bad, saying such things as, 'Your projects at work will bear fruit in three months time' or 'You will have a very frustrating period in your personal relationships in a year's time.' If they apply the Western system correctly, then they are justified in making their claims." Regarding proposition (ii), the idea is that the information available to the astrologer sometimes enables them to make, with justification, even more specific claims, such as "You will die by

² One can find a more balanced account from an astrological site:
https://www.astro.com/astrowiki/en/Modern_Astrology

³ It is more accurate to speak of a variety of related astrological systems, but for the purpose of this paper I am going to work with a simplified conception, featuring an old and a new system. Also nobody denies that the old astrology still goes on.

drowning in twelve months time.” I don’t know how to be more specific about “specific” than by means of examples like this.⁴

The revolution involved rejecting both of these propositions. To illustrate the new astrology, let us imagine that a person goes to an astrologer and provides information about his date, time, and location of birth. On the basis of this information, an old-fashioned astrologer says, “In two years from now, you will suffer from a brain disorder, which will prevent you from being able to communicate.” This is bad news.⁵ However, the way of practising astrology which is recommended in various Western texts today does not involve making predictions that would conventionally be regarded as bad news. The astrologer who follows these recommendations instead says, “In two years from now, Pluto, planet of death, will stand in opposition to Mercury in your natal chart, planet of communication. There is a certain energy that must manifest itself. One way in which it could manifest itself is by your suffering a brain disorder, which prevents you from being able to communicate. But there are other ways. Another way is by being threatened with death, each night, unless you tell an enchanting story. If you survive, you will become a world famous storyteller.” There are always other ways in which the same energy can manifest itself, rather than in a way that amounts to bad news, or so it is said (Hand, quoted in Phillipson 2002; Hampar 2007: 165; Orion 2007: 251).⁶

Below is an example of an astrologer expressing this thought:

Whatever the aspects between planets, there is always the potential to work with the energies in a positive way. Aspects are termed *harmonious* or *stressful*, but this is only terminology. (Hampar 2007: 165)

⁴ It makes sense to ask “Can you be more specific about specific?” expecting an answer that does not question the question, but it also makes sense to respond “Can you be?”

⁵ Or at least it would be regarded as bad news by believers of astrology, if they are conventional about classifying news into good, bad, or neither

⁶ I am elaborating on material I have covered before, in a brief paper (Edward 2016).

How do we understand this talk of an energy that can manifest itself in different ways? An analogy may be helpful. Consider a person who has a desire for activity involving a lot of exercise. That desire can be satisfied in various ways. It can be satisfied by running; by mountain-climbing; by moving furniture into their house; and so on. The astrologer in my example does not talk of a desire that can be satisfied in various ways, but they do talk about an energy that can manifest itself in various ways. Like all analogies, there are limits to this one. Apart from the difference that the astrologer is talking about energy, another difference is that the energy is probably not attributed to the person. The astrologer in our example may well attribute it to the universe in general, while thinking of it as something that must manifest itself in the person's life.

2. A rational revolution. Why did this revolution in the metaphysical commitments of Western astrology occur? Explanations by historians are likely to emphasize multiple factors. Again I am going to work with a simplified portrait, probably a misleading one, because it leads to an argument that revolutions in the commitments of astrology can be rational.

At some point in the early twentieth century, someone schooled in the old-fashioned astrology was struck by troubling questions that certain predictions give rise to. For example, is the following combination possible or not? The old-fashioned system predicts that a certain person will drown. But on being told that, the person avoids all travel by boat or ship, all visits to the beach, and so forth, and thereby reduces the risk of drowning to near zero. (It is not a time when they are likely to be forcibly drowned by a suspicious community.) More broadly, there is the question of how, if at all, you can reconcile astrology with the experience of free will. Must the astrologer dismiss this experience as an illusion or is there some other

way of coherently reconciling the two? The new astrology provides a non-dismissive solution.⁷

Can there be rational revolutions in astrology? From the ground we have covered so far, there can be a revolution in which astrologers seek to reconcile their field with the experience of free will. There is a reason for revolution, a reason which is about achieving consistency with or better incorporating data provided by experience. So it seems that there can be revolutions which are not irrational *given a prior commitment to astrology*.⁸ (But note that less revolutionary paths may also have reasons in their favour. We can say that there is a reason but, from what has been said so far, it remains an open question whether there is one which is superior to the reasons for pursuing rival paths.) Of course, the commitment to astrology itself will probably be judged by many to be irrational, in light of the findings of the natural sciences. I shall address this concern in the final section of the paper. Before that I wish to consider a way of undermining my example of a rational revolution which focuses more on the content of this example.

3. Unfalsifiable new astrology. The revolution came at an enormous cost, even if it better incorporates the experience free will. Karl Popper famously proposes a condition that a theory must meet in order to be scientific. By “science,” he is not interested in any rational inquiry, rather in rational inquiry which involves testing theories by observation through the senses (1974: 33). He means empirical science. Popper proposes that in order for a certain theory to be a scientific theory, it must be falsifiable (1974: 37). What is it for a theory to be falsifiable? We must be able to deduce a prediction from it and the prediction must be falsifiable. But what is it for a prediction to be falsifiable? To be falsifiable does not mean

⁷ I believe some old-fashioned astrologers will say that they have ways of incorporating free will to some extent as well.

⁸ More precisely, there is nothing in the very concept of astrology combined with the laws of nature which rules this out.

that the prediction is false. Rather it means that if the prediction is false, it is possible for us to observe this using our senses. The theory that heavier objects fall to Earth at a faster speed meets the condition for being falsifiable. If the predictions it entails are false, we can observe this to be so.

Perhaps there are other conditions that a theory must meet in order to be scientific, but here we need not concern ourselves with them. Popper denies that astrology is a scientific theory, even a bad one, because it does not generate falsifiable predictions (1974: 37). But old-fashioned astrology does lead to falsifiable predictions. If anything, it is the new Western astrology that is unfalsifiable, because of its open-ended predictions.

At this point, one might propose that the new Western astrology can be formulated in a scientific way, even by the lights of Popper, by giving general criteria for when the proposed energy manifests itself. Then, even if an astrologer gives a series of examples of how the criteria could be met and none of the example cases arise, we can look at what did happen and consider whether actual events nevertheless meet the general criteria. However, it does not seem that the astrologer can give criteria in a way which fulfils the requirements of Popperian science. When they draw a chart, they represent where astronomical bodies appear, will appear, or once appeared. Each of these bodies has a meaning for the astrologer, as do certain angles at which the bodies relate to one another within the chart. For example, one astronomical body might be associated with communication and another with death. The second stands at an angle of opposition (180 degrees) to the first body. The new astrologer is then looking for events which fit with this “symbolism”: the opposition between communication and death. They cannot give more precise general criteria than this, only some examples of events that would fit.⁹

⁹ This approach to astrology challenges the distinction between the natural sciences and the interpretive disciplines. Like the interpreter of certain poems or passages from plays, the astrologer must interpret symbolism; it is just that the symbolism is there in nature.

Below is an astrologer writing about avoiding very stressful occurrences and referring to symbolism in his explanation:

The virtue of this is that you can reasonably attempt to alter the impact of a transit or indication – by consciously putting the symbolism into your life in a benign way. I used to call it *astrological alchemy*; where you give the symbolism all the room it needs but in some way that it is not harmful, difficult, or whatever. (Hand, quoted in Phillipson 2002)

Popper's claim that astrology is unfalsifiable is wrong about some kinds of astrology, but astrology which is practiced in accordance with the trend I have identified does carry a strong risk of being unfalsifiable. (Perhaps there is some way of regimenting its claims to make them more amenable to falsifiability tests, at a cost of ignoring some ways in which the symbolism might manifest itself. Without a regimentation right now, I anticipate that some philosophers of science will say that my example of a possible rational revolution in astrology fails: "a rational revolution cannot sacrifice falsifiability." At this stage, I can only say that my hunch is that a regimentation is doable.)

4. False or unfalsifiable? Given what has been said in the previous section, I would expect most philosophers of science to hold that astrological claims are either false or unfalsifiable. I have no commitment to rejecting this position but I do not hold it myself, because of some peculiar findings from empirical research. I shall draw attention to one claim from this research: that people born in winter or spring are more likely to develop schizophrenia than people born in other times. A review of the literature on this phenomenon notes some remarks by past scientists (Fuller Torrey et al. 1997: 1). A scientist, in the late 1960s, remarked that research correlating season of birth with psychiatric disorders is slightly disreputable to many scientists. Another scientist, in the early 1970s, remarked that it smacks

of magical thinking. But the review goes on to say that there has been serious scientific research into correlations between season of birth and psychiatric disorders since 1929. The review I refer to is more than two decades old. A more recent paper describes the correlation as one of the most replicated findings in schizophrenia research (Schwartz 2011: 785). Much of the evidence comes from Western countries, but an even more recent study in China supports the presence of an association between season of birth and risk of schizophrenia (Wang and Zhang 2017).

It seems to me that one can develop a system of astrology just by positing correlations, though it will lack some of the frills of established systems. It need not involve an explanation of the correlations it posits. An astrologer may well say that these are a mystery. Given the scientific findings so far, I think we should be open to the view that some astrological claims are neither false nor unfalsifiable, although there are concerns about the political significance of these findings.¹⁰

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¹⁰ Some people think that astrology requires a certain causal commitment which is untenable given modern science (e.g. Daly 2010: 167), but I don't know what the argument for that interpretation of its commitments is. Also that thought leads to a puzzle over why there is more recent scientific testing of astrology. Is it because some other objection is deemed better to silence this persistent discourse, or because testers have some other interpretation of the commitments of astrology, or another reason?

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