

## Grounding the Stars: Towards an Ecological Astrology

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In this paper I will try to sketch out an astrology which is consciously part of, and at home in, the Earth. I do not mean a putatively purely material, passive and inanimate Earth which attains its apotheosis in the psychotic fantasies of modernist science. Nor, by 'astrology', do I mean a cosmic "Machine of Destiny"<sup>1</sup> which putatively produces human beings: the corresponding fantasy of many modern astrologers. I mean astrology as something (just like science, art and religion) which human beings do, and something in which the Earth – where we have evolved, of which we are made, and which makes everything we are, do and know possible – is restored to its rightful place at the centre. And that 'everything' includes the spiritual.

Since this enterprise will involve considering astrology in relation to nature and religion, it is necessary to start with some further clarification of terms. I would like to briefly suggest a way of approaching the latter two concepts which is helpful for framing any such discussion. Concerning religion, I shall simply suggest that Emile Durkheim was right that along with its emphasis on the sacred, including ultimate values, an indispensable element of religion is social collectivity. This emphasis is also one which allows, even requires, an important distinction – as Max Weber independently suggested – between religion and spirituality, in which the institutionalised concerns of the former do not exhaust those, both more ineffable and more personal, of the latter.

### Nature

'Nature' has been described as the most complex word in the English language.<sup>2</sup> The point to be stressed in this context is the one made by Tim Ingold in an important paper, namely that it is no longer defensible to assume that nature can be exhaustively or essentially be defined in opposition to culture, reserving subjectivity and agency for the latter while attributing objectivity and passivity to the former.<sup>3</sup> Such a view, of course, has long been dominant in 'Western' culture, whether in Platonic, Christian and Cartesian incarnations, but it suffers, *qua* view (so setting aside its disastrous consequences in practice) from two serious flaws. One is the fact that in hunter-gatherer societies, present as well as past, it is not only absent but often incomprehensible. It is therefore contingent rather than necessary, and its correctness can only be maintained by a teleological narrative of 'Western' superiority which is question-begging as well as unpleasantly triumphalist. The other problem is that this view suffers from a disabling internal inconsistency; as Ingold makes clear, such an understanding of 'culture' is required to be both necessary – as in, "all 'natures' are culturally constructed" – *and* contingent: some cultures do construct nature culturally but some don't.

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Cornelius, *The Moment of Astrology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Bournemouth: Wessex, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> Tim Ingold, "Hunting and Gathering as Ways of Perceiving the Environment", pp. 40-60 in *The Perception of the Environment* (London: Routledge, 2000).

The only solution with any intellectual integrity is to abandon cultural constructionism as necessary or foundational.<sup>4</sup> It follows, as a corollary, that nature *can* involve just as much agency and subjectivity as the human species' claimed burden, culture. Conversely, culture is fully natural. The latter word should not be understood as 'naturalized', however; what we are left with is rather, as Bruno Latour puts it, "nature-cultures".<sup>5</sup>

Although this is not the place to do so, there are various ways that this point could be developed. With no attempt to be exhaustive (and other than highly schematic), they include Latour's actor-network theory, in terms of which agency is a property not confined to human individuals but can manifest anywhere in the network – which might include, collective institutions, animals, inanimate objects, etc. – of which they are a part;<sup>6</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, according to which any distinction between active agent and passive subject is purely analytical and/or conventional but impossible to sustain for an accurate account of embodied human experience;<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy, with its emphasis upon knowing as a function of "forms of life" rather than of belief which are supposedly representationally truthful or not;<sup>8</sup> and the hermeneutics of both Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer, with their rich explorations of metaphor, interpretation and perspective as the inalienable mode of human experience.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, the relationships between nature and religion constitute yet another vast and intricate domain, so I shall content myself with noting that there is no religion which has not, to a significant extent, defined itself either against and in accord with nature, or else both, in different respects. Similarly, a spiritual if not religious apprehension of nature is common throughout human history. (Indeed, the modernist determination to apprehend nature in a non- or anti-spiritual way might be seen as a backhanded compliment to the power of that perception.) To this extent, at least, it could defensibly be argued that no consideration of either term is adequate without reference to the other.

## **Astrology**

Then there is astrology. On the one hand, it will probably be the least familiar concept to readers; on the other, I have already set out a view of the subject at some length. Let me compromise by briefly summarizing that view before turning to the subject of astrology in relation to nature and religion, and especially the common ground these two share.

In *Astrology, Science and Culture*, co-authored with Roy Willis (2004), I argued that a fruitful way to understand astrology starts with its origins in and as astral divination, and continues by grasping the way astrology still functions in an

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<sup>4</sup> See my discussion in Patrick Curry, "Re-Thinking Nature: Towards an Eco-Pluralism", *Environmental Values* 12:3 (2003): 337-360, and "Nature Post-Nature" forthcoming in *New Formations* (2006).

<sup>5</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, transl. Catherine Porter (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Latour, *Modern*.

<sup>7</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, transl. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962).

<sup>8</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, transl. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

effectively divinatory way, especially when considered not simply as an abstract theory but as a physically embodied, socially embedded and ecologically earthed practice. Further research into divination as such – including astrological – reveals a form of life in which, both ontologically and epistemologically, truth is uncompromisingly contextual, situated and perspectival.<sup>10</sup>

What the history of astrology then shows is a series of compromises with a dominant mainstream version of truth which is objectivist or realist (whether in a spiritually idealist or scientifically materialist vein) and which, as such, is hostile to the ‘relativism’ it detects in astrological practice. These include (first and most influentially) the arrangement with Aristotelian naturalism engineered by Ptolemy and later refined by Aquinas to accord with Christian theology, as well as the modern one with popular spiritual psychology struck at the beginning of the twentieth century by Alan Leo and subsequently further developed by interpreters of Carl Jung. These bargains arguably enabled astrology to survive, as well as offering hope of more mainstream acceptance and influence. But it seems to me they came at a cost: disguising not so much astrology’s true or essential nature (an objectivist claim and thus, in this context, a trap) as the nature of its actual practice.

Most recently this search led many leading astrologers into claiming scientific sanction which, after twenty-five years of research, has almost completely failed to materialize. This result has left them facing the only choice realist/objectivist scientism offers: either continuing to protest, ever more implausibly, astrology’s scientific probity, or concluding that there is nothing really to it. They can renounce science, of course; but having already signed up, to do so looks very like a case of sour grapes.

The best overall intellectual context for this process is, in my view, Max Weber’s analysis of the millennia-long process characterized by “rationalisation and intellectualisation and, above all, by the ‘disenchantment of the world.’” Weber enables us to recognize astrology as precisely an instance of enchantment or “concrete magic”. As such, it was left increasingly adrift by the sharpening and hardening split into subjective, spiritual, etc., and objective, material, etc. that resulted from the deepening adherence to monism and the accompanying belief that, given as single master truth or value, “one can, in principle, master all things by calculation.”<sup>11</sup> The consequence is disenchantment.

Weber’s ideas on this subject were further developed in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (especially Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno),<sup>12</sup> the sociology of Zygmunt Bauman, and the work of Michel Foucault (although without much direct influence).<sup>13</sup> Mention should also be made of James C. Scott’s *Seeing Like a State* (1998). All these related perspectives offer rich insights into the condition of astrology.

There is no need to rehearse my analysis in the book with Roy Willis of the ways in which “researchers”, representing the latest and most powerfully

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<sup>10</sup> See Roy Willis and Patrick Curry, *Astrology, Science and Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), ch. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Max Weber, *From Max Weber*, ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.) (London: Routledge, 1991), 155, 282, 139.

<sup>12</sup> But not, note, Jurgen Habermas, whose philosophy is fundamentally antipathetic.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1994); Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1992); and Szakolczai Arpad, *Max Weber and Michel Foucault: Parallel Life-Works* (London: Routledge, 1998). On enchantment see my “Magic Vs. Enchantment”, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 9 (1999) 401-12.

disenchanted discourse, modern science, deal with astrology; it can be summed up as the announcement that the operation was a success, although the patient died.

### **Between Heaven and Earth**

What are the implications for astrology in relation to nature and religion? Taking religion first, it seems clear that the nature of the relationship between astrology as it is practised – or perhaps one should say, after later Wittgenstein, lived – and religion is effectively a function of the extent to where the particular religion in question falls on a spectrum from aboriginal animism at one end to strict monotheism or, arguably the crypto-religious monism of scientism, at the other. (I am not suggesting that astrology can be either practised or apprehended directly, in the sense of non-discursively; only that a construal of astrology that tries to remain true to its actual practice, approached through both phenomenological and close sociological study, is intellectually and ethically desirable.)

Basically, the closer the religion is to the monist pole, the greater its tension with astrological practice. And the fact that just that kind of religion contributed most to the view of nature as objectified, inanimate and ultimately commodified is very significant. So too is the corresponding point that animist religion (if it can be so called), in which the Earth and humanity's fellow-creatures partake equally, at least potentially, in animate agency, exists in closest congruence with astrology.<sup>14</sup> In this context, astrological divination, like its other forms, is just an ongoing dialogue with other non-human agents in order to discern their will and negotiate an outcome in relation to one's own desires.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, starting with nature, the nature in which astrology *qua* divination makes sense is precisely not the desanctified and demythologised nature of modernism but the sensuous, plural experience of a living nature which monism, theistic and especially secular modernist, "had tried hard to disenchant. . . . [The] world had to be de-spiritualised, de-animated: denied the capacity of the subject."<sup>16</sup> And such a world is, of course, religious – or, better, spiritual, although decidedly not in the Cartesian sense of supernatural, but as Weber's definition of enchantment suggests, an existential and experiential order which is simultaneously 'subjective' and 'objective', or "concrete magic".

By the same token, in an obvious, almost banal sense, the planets and stars are natural objects. However, they have by now been so thoroughly naturalized in a *scientific* sense, as purely material and lifeless bodies moving mechanically through space, that it is very difficult to recapture the sense in which they have been 'natural' for most of astrology's history: a sense in which the natural doesn't preclude the spiritual. So this part of astrology's natural dimension has been mostly captured by a very particular and limited modern version thereof.

### **Grounding Astrology**

I have suggested that many astrologers have long suffered from bad faith, if not false consciousness, in relation to what they actually do when they practice astrology, or what is actually happening when astrology 'works'. (I do not, of course, mean

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<sup>14</sup> See Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> See Willis and Curry, ch. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Bauman, *Intimations*, x.

‘actually’ in a realist-objectivist-universalist sense, but rather contextually and phenomenologically.) Its origins almost certainly lie in the way Platonic philosophy construed the heavens as ontologically ‘perfect’, and thus epistemologically the way to universal ‘truth’, as compared with the, in every sense, inferior Earth. The influence of Aristotelian natural philosophy – in this case, incorporating the Platonic hypervaluation of the cosmic but augmented by an emphasis on the power of the motion of the planetary spheres as causes of time and motion – has been almost equally enormous, and much the same emphasis has been carried over into modern science. Despite the departure from perfect Platonic circles initiated by Kepler, it was also immensely boosted by the Copernican revolution displacing the Earth from the centre of the solar system, thus deepening and hardening the split between what we ‘know’ and what we experience – and between a hypervalued faculty thinking on the one hand (already morphing into scientific rationality) and feeling and sensing on the other.

This process not only facilitated a transition from original wonder to prediction and, by implication, control; it endowed whoever could successfully claim to interpret the meaning of the heavens with enormous rhetorical power. Not surprisingly, then, given the cosmic pole of their subject-matter, astrologers were seduced by the *prima facie* plausibility of making such a claim themselves.

To put it another way, in dominant mainstream intellectual discourse time has progressively replaced moment and space has replaced place.<sup>17</sup> This is perceptible, in astrology, in the way it has retained the overarching concern with time while dispensing with place almost completely. (But note that it has not been able to do away with qualitative time, i.e. moments.)

The overall effect has been to severely obscure the centrality of the Earth to astrology. Once again, I do not mean ‘the Earth’ as abstract, homogenous, quantitative, modernist space but specific, plural, qualitative places. A horoscope involves, by definition, by a division of space proceeding from the intersection of the celestial equator (extending out from the Earth’s equator) and the ecliptic (the path the Earth travels around the Sun); to put it another way, it is a map of the heavens, usually the planets, in relation to a particular place on Earth as well as moment of time. Without the Earth there could be no astrology, at least as we know it.

Yet the real importance of place in astrology is not a merely formal or methodological one. What astrology offers is the wonder of being part of an intrinsically meaningful place and moment on Earth that specifically *includes* the cosmos, especially insofar as it can be directly experienced (e.g., the Sun, Moon, visible planets and stars) as well as oneself, right down to the precise desire that initiated the inquiry to which the heavens have responded. It is thus an experience at once chthonic, cosmic and intimately personal. To quote the neo-Confucian philosopher Chang Tsai, “Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I find an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body, and that which directs the universe I regard as my nature.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See George Ritzer, *The Globalization of Nothing* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> Wing Tsit-Chan, *A Source-Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963) 497.

## Modernism vs. Animism

It is extremely instructive to compare this kind of experience of the cosmic with the kind championed by the leading contemporary representative of scientism, Richard Dawkins. In the latter, a constellation “is of no more significance than a patch of curiously shaped damp on the bathroom ceiling.” (Note his choice of metaphors; it would be interesting to hear a scientific justification for them.) Together, constellations – Dawkins’s chosen object of contempt on account of their special significance, he supposes, for astrology – “constitute a (meaningless) pattern when seen from a certain (not particularly special) place in the galaxy (here).”<sup>19</sup> A more concise summation of Weberian rationalization resulting in disenchantment would be difficult to imagine. More precisely, note that (1) humanly perceived patterns are meaningless unless they have received the imprimatur of physical science; and that (2) abstract cosmic space is used to render sensuous place, that is, *here* – all here’s! – “not particularly special”. Thus is the way prepared for the ultimate scientific triumph, which is also its ultimate hypocrisy: “the view from nowhere”,<sup>20</sup> which thus permits its interpreters (for that is what they are) not only to require all truth-claims of whatever sort to pass the test of science but to claim the authority of Truth without requiring them to take any personal responsibility, whether intellectual, ethical or political, for its assertion.

What kind of astrology does such a worldview, or way of life, offer? At very best, it is one of cosmic physical forces – from quantum and sub-atomic through to biochemical – and their effects on life on Earth, knowledge and insofar as possible control of which is, potentially if not yet actually, entirely controlled by scientists. Astrology would remain as, at most, despised handmaiden: a superstitious forerunner, fortuitously blessed only with a few sound if blind intuitions, to the Truth of the men in white coats. Normative considerations are never absent from even the most purely descriptive enterprises, so I offer no apology for asserting that for astrology to accept this fate would be to lose not only its soul but the world too.

Compare the naturalized cosmos (or rather, universe) with what Sean Kane notes about the centrality of place in myth:

Wisdom about nature, that wisdom heard and told in animated pattern, that pattern rendered in such a way as to preserve a place whole and sacred, safe from human meddling: these are the concepts with which to begin an exploration of myth. Of these, the notion of the sanctity of place is vital. It anchors the other concepts.... Once the power of the place is lost to memory, myth is uprooted; knowledge of the earth's processes becomes a different kind of knowledge, manipulated and applied by man.<sup>21</sup>

The key point here is that mythic place *includes the cosmos*, not – as the exponents of scientism would have it, the other way around. Divinatory astrology is thus ecological; it is an experience of concrete (at a particular moment in a particular place) magic (the inexhaustible mystery of meaning: not least, by our little words and concepts). It entails,

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<sup>19</sup> “The Real Romance of the Stars”, *Independent on Sunday*, 31.12.95, much of way found its way into his *Unweaving the Rainbow* (London: Allen Lane, 1998); for an insightful analysis of the latter, see Luke Davidson, “Fragilities of Scientism: Richard Dawkins and the Paranoiac Idealization of Science”, *Science as Culture* (2000) 9:2, 167-99.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>21</sup> Sean Kane, *Wisdom of the Mythtellers* (Peterborough: Broadview, 1998), p. 50.

as Ingold, puts it, not “making a view *of* the world but...taking up a view *in* it.”<sup>22</sup> And this realization – that you are in and of the world and its profound and subtle meanings – entails an experience of enchantment (which word means, literally, to be inside a song).

Of course, most modern urban astrologers’ experience of the cosmos is largely mediated by pixels and pieces of paper; and it could certainly be argued, in line with David Abrams,<sup>23</sup> that the transferral of animating magic from the directly experienced cosmos to its visual representations constitutes an overall dilution, even loss. On the other hand, it is also evident from the experience of astrologers and their consultants that phenomenologically, the stars can still ‘speak’ through those representations.

Probably both points are true. The more fundamental one is that an astrological chart may be a map of the sky-space, but that is only a ritual prerequisite to its divinatory heart: an experience of a place (not space) and moment (not time) that is animate, whole and sacred. This experience is subjective and objective, spiritual and material, personal and cosmic. So astrology has the potential is to remind us that our home (*ecos*) includes a cosmic dimension; and that the cosmos need not be “the eternal silence of infinite space” that so terrified Pascal, but rather a home.

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<sup>22</sup> Ingold, “Hunting”, 42.

<sup>23</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).