

What's Wrong with Astrology?

This somewhat provocative piece by me is offered to the class for discussion.

One of the advantages of attending a course of lectures in science over the study of textbooks is the experience of direct personal communication from the lecturer: hearing personal asides, anecdotes, views and, hopefully, some accumulated personal wisdom on the subject. This kind of personal background seldom finds its way into textbooks. In the astronomy course I mention how astrology motivated people to observe the heavens quite carefully. Astronomy can quite rightly be said to have some of its roots in astrology, just as modern chemistry has some of its roots in alchemy. Chemists have long since abandoned the view that lead can be transmuted to gold by chemical means and the international community of astronomers have likewise abandoned astrology. Why?

Many folk think the horoscopes that appear in our newspapers and magazines are a harmless piece of fun. If everyone thought that, then no harm done. However, when not so long ago there were serious reports that the President of the US consulted an astrologer before making decisions, then the fun becomes scary. In my younger days, reading the pattern of tea leaves left at the bottom of a teacup was an equally amusing past-time. Teabags have put paid to that in this part of the world. Astrology is no better than reading tea leaves and, in my opinion should be thrown out with the tea leaves, consigned to the tip of ideas that were believed at one time but are now considered completely wrong. Think of the flat Earth, Bishop Ussher's notion that creation happened in 4004 BC, the Ptolemaic epicyclic model of planetary motion, the belief that the stars are made of quintessence and a host of other wrong ideas. So why the reluctance to throw out another idea that has been superseded?

What have I got against astrology? Some astrologers say that newspaper horoscopes are not real astrology. Maybe so. I'm against it all. Sometimes when you look into a viewpoint that's not your own you gain a respect for it that wasn't there before. That hasn't happened with me and astrology. Perhaps I haven't met the right people. What I have against it is that it seems to me to be based upon a misconception, the misconception that human personality is influenced by the position of the planets in the heavens, the lie that the outcome of human actions depends directly on where the planets are in the sky. Astrology is a relic of the times when the Earth was thought to be at the centre of the Universe and the planets all rotated around the Earth. It was natural then to think there must be a connection between the Earth and the planets, and astrology had some sort of intellectual excuse. We now know better. Here are some of my gripes against astrology:

- Astrology seeks to 'explain' human personality, behaviour and events. The 'explanation' is in terms of the location of the planets in relation to the stars and to the rotation of the Earth. Such an explanation is completely hollow and contrary to all that has been discovered about the alleged causes, namely the planets, stars and Earth.
- Astrology seems to take no account of the tremendous discoveries made by mankind over the past 300 years on every relevant front, from how humans work to what planets are. Mankind has learnt an immense amount about how

human beings function, about human behaviour and about the Earth and the planets. Not one iota of this knowledge supports the tenets of astrology. Indeed, as human behaviour is gradually better understood, what emerges is a story infinitely more complex and fascinating than astrology. As planets are explored, we find places marvellously different from the bodies our predecessors imagined. What notice does astrology take of this hard won knowledge? None.

- Astrology seeks to label personality according to the positions of the planets in the sky at the moment of a person's birth. By doing so it diverts attention from our real inheritance at birth, namely our genetic make-up and to some extent our social surroundings. We would be much better to appreciate what we really arrive on Earth with, namely our inherited skills and talents, and put effort into trying to overcome the deficits in genetic inheritance we all have.
- Astrology doesn't work. Many studies have been made to see if it does and the results show no more accuracy in astrological predictions than the vagueness of the wording and chance allow. I don't pretend to have looked over all the studies but I've looked at a few. If it really worked we'd all believe it since the benefits of being able to predict the behaviour of ourselves and others is so great.
- Astrology is a deception that both gives people false hope and removes from us some sense of being in control of ourselves. By implying that our actions are determined by the planets, it removes the incentive for people to take responsibility for their own lives. The committed horoscope believers can shrug their shoulders when asked to account for their actions and say "it was in the stars".
- Astrology is a relic of past ignorance. Humans and human behaviour is immensely complex. It is no crime to invent a story that helps us to try to understand such complexity. It is a crime, or at least a great shame, that when the old story is found to be wrong, the new knowledge is not taken up. I'm told that an Open University survey showed that 70% of the respondents didn't know that the Earth orbited the Sun and didn't know the difference between a planet and a star. Astrology is doing the public a great disservice by thrusting a pretence on them when there is so much real knowledge to be had.
- Astrology is a set of arbitrary rules virtually disconnected from all other knowledge we have. Yet it claims to deal with the same objects that modern knowledge deals with. Basically, either modern knowledge is wrong or astrology is wrong. I know where my money is going.
- Astrology is not a useful theory of knowledge. A useful theory allows you to test whether the theory itself is right or wrong and will make predictions that can be tested. If the predictions are found wrong then a useful theory will have to adapt and evolve. Astrology scarcely evolves or adapts, in spite of evidence that it fails.

- Finally, you might like to ponder one faction's view that astrology keeps the population naïve. Its message is that we, the astrologers, know what's happening. You don't. Listen to us. Believe us. In any case, you'll never achieve total control of your life because control lies in the stars and planets. This of course is the get-out for the astrologers when they give demonstrably wrong advice. The fault, Dear Brutus, lies not in ourselves but in our stars. Astrology served a function at one time of allowing a self-styled elite to have influence over large numbers of people. It's time that we as an educated population with critical faculties threw astrology into the wastepaper basket of ideas that have passed their time. Knowledge should be about empowerment. Let the people use it. We want columns in the tabloids on astronomy and real knowledge, not on astrology.

Why have I been quite assertive about ditching astrology? Because science isn't just about filling up lab books and field notes with observations of Nature. It's about forming a cohesive structure of knowledge and throwing out ideas that are seen as wrong. At the very heart of the working of science is the need to make decisions based on evidence. 'Survival of the fittest' is a phrase that has come to us from Darwinian theory of evolution. It is equally appropriate as a phrase to describe the evolution of knowledge generated by the scientific method. Astrology, quite simply, does not pass the test of matching the evidence.

My view is that astrology is at best a game, like chess, bridge or dungeons & dragons. For some people, the game becomes the faith. That doesn't make it any less a game. If anyone in the class can show me evidence that astrology is based upon real knowledge and works, then I'll gladly look at it. They may even be in line for international recognition. Perhaps I should add a final word, before the hate mail starts arriving from committed astrologers. Most of the views above are my views, at the moment. Make up your own mind.

JSR