

Power Lines and Fault Lines in the Astrology World

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The most recent *NCGR Research Journal* brings together ten prominent astrologers of traditional and contemporary orientations; six introduce astrology from different historical eras and the remaining four address current trends. The journal came out of a symposium that was part of an NCGR conference in February 2009 in Cambridge, MA. The symposium was entitled *Moving Forward, Looking Back: Future Direction in Post-Modern Astrology*. Chris Brennan, who edited this issue, also wrote its introduction and afterward, and helped organize the original conference. Brennan feels that astrology is at a crossroads today and anticipates a future era of astrology, one brings together traditional and modern approaches into a discipline with a solid foundation but also flexible in light of future possibilities and challenges.

These articles display many areas of influence in astrology's world as well as some very large disagreements among astrologers. Although these ten writers are not all on the same page, their differences point to important questions for astrologers to consider. This is the intent of this review.

Anybody who reads this journal already comes to it with his or her own ideas about astrology and will respond to some of them positively, some negatively. Even though the quality of these essays varies, together they may help you clarify some important issues about the nature of astrology and criteria for best practices. Even unsuccessful essays can raise important issues.

I'm particularly interested in how we determine a previous astrological tradition, how we ascertain validity for astrology's features and specific techniques, how astrologers think of freedom and free will, how we sort extra-planetary bodies and arrive at their meanings, and basic issues of human freedom and astrologically depicting inner and outer human life. Because there is so much conceptual territory covered in this journal, my presentation is closer to a "critique" or "reaction" than a standard book review.

I come to these articles as a consulting astrologer who began working with traditional astrology about fifteen years ago from a background teaching and practicing modern astrology.

Most of these ten essays begin with a historical introduction and present their distinct techniques and their “philosophy” – the concepts from the broader culture that influenced concept and application of astrology. Most articles end with a discussion of future possibilities. All but one article contains endnotes with references.

This volume would have been more complete with the addition of a few articles. I would have liked to see an article on the Egyptian contribution to astrology, the trend toward astrological magic in the Renaissance, and developments in spiritual astrology from the past century.

The first article, on Mesopotamian astrology, is by Rob Hand. This is an unexpected contribution, since the author is most recently a medieval historian. Hand’s article is clear and informative as we have come to expect from him. He also practices a scholar’s parsimony, refraining from drawing conclusions without adequate justification from facts and corroborating scholarship. Hand summarizes the general history of the times as they relate to the origins of Western astrology. He shows that much of our astrology, including a proto-tropical zodiac, the planetary deities, divisions and groupings of the signs, and declination, have Mesopotamian origins. He also gives an example of an individual delineation that contains planets’ positions and purported outcomes in life.

What was the purpose of astrology in Mesopotamian culture what was the purpose of astrology and what was the role of the astrologer? It was not to tell a determined future but to help negotiate the outcome with the gods through ritual. At astrology’s beginnings the stars and planets were not causes but cosmic language, and astrology was part of an ongoing interaction between the human and the divine.

Next Chris Brennan introduces Hellenistic astrology. His article contains an interesting list of astrological techniques that the Hellenistic tradition inherited and what was developed by the tradition. Toward the end of his article he focuses on this tradition’s tendency toward outer events in life within a Stoic justification of necessity.

There are a few omissions that I feel detract from his article. I regret the lack of information about the important contributors to the Hellenistic tradition. Brennan mentions many several astrologers from the Hellenistic time from which we have writings, but only in endnotes astrologers. I would have liked to have read more about the Hellenistic origins of modern vocational and relationship astrology and the astrology of personality. The omission of available primary sources plus the lack of a bibliography may hinder an interested reader from learning more about the Hellenistic tradition.

Brennan devotes much of his article on the origins and course of Hellenistic astrology. I would like consider this matter more fully, for it raises some important general concerns.

Did ancient western astrology begin gradually from many sources or did this tradition come to us fully formed from one or a few individuals? Some assert that Hellenistic astrology appeared suddenly from a single source and maintained consistency through many centuries; others consider astrology as having developed more gradually. Considering the scarcity of historical records about that era's astrology, an assertion about astrology's sudden emergence seems more speculative than factual. As we know from the *Corpus Hermeticum* that was so highly valued in the Renaissance, neither attribution to the wise ones (plural) of the past nor a foundational *Urtext* supports a single origin of a tradition.

How do new kinds of astrology develop? In an article later in this journal, Gary Christen presents the origins of Uranian Astrology. This may serve as an example of how a new school of astrology could begin within a small group: although acknowledged to be founded by one individual, its development occurred over decades and included many variations.

At this time, especially if modern astrologers like Gary Christen or researchers like Ken Irving were reading this, they might be thinking, *who cares about origins?* Are not modern criteria of validity are far more important than the historical record of a tradition? Yet for astrologers who work with material from the ancient and medieval worlds, it is necessary to have historical precedent for the astrology they apply. This is standard for the practice of traditional astrology. As many modern astrologers don't trust naively relying on precedent, traditional astrologers don't trust the modern tendency to improvise.

Traditional astrology's criteria of historical accuracy carry a hidden risk, especially if records of the tradition are incomplete. There may be is a tendency to focus on the original

formulation or its most complete expression as the most real and most wise. This implies that variations and further developments are secondary and even deviant. I do not want future historians of our contemporary astrology to consider Reinhold Ebertin the “original tradition” and Liz Green “deviant”, or the other way around.

Brennan cites a systematic nature of Hellenistic astrology. In my view there is indeed an orderly relationship between signs and house position (in whole sign houses), domicile rulership and triplicity, lots, aspects between signs, yearly profections and some planetary period systems. I also see areas of substantial difference from the beginning and over time.

How does astrology change – are changes progressive as we may see in science or, like cultural and intellectual developments, are there fluctuations that can go back and forth? There are different trends within the six hundred years of Hellenistic astrology. Some reflect the overwhelming influence of Ptolemy from the second century and a division between a divinatory and a natural astrology, what Ken Irving calls “mantic” and “metric” dimensions of astrology. There were fundamental disagreements among astrologers, at least theoretical astrologers, about the nature of their art – just as in modern times.

Another question arises from Brennan’s article. Would a modern astrologer apply Hellenistic (or medieval) techniques as its astrological literature reads or use them in a more modern setting? In my view, the Hellenistic and medieval traditions were flexible enough to address all dimensions of human experience, not simply outer events.

The NCGR Research Journal follows with an introduction to Indian Astrology by Ronnie Gale Dreyer. Her depictions of the origins of the Indian tradition are based on what scholarship is available on the subject. From what we already know, there had been an astrological tradition in India that incorporated lunar mansions, and to this there were added many later contributions from Hellenistic astrology. This occurred in the centuries after Alexander’s conquest of neighboring regions. Dreyer notes that much is unclear about the transmission of astrology to India from the west and what we have exists in many variations.

Dreyer’s depiction of the philosophical and religious connections to astrology was the most interesting part of her article. The horoscope, she states, can show the status of a person’s spiritual development along the lines of three kinds of karma: that from previous lifetimes, from the habitual patterns of this lifetime, and future conditions based on our insights of this lifetime.

This strikingly corresponds to various depictions of “fate” from the ancient world and presages modern contributions by Alice Bailey and others. I would like to know much more about this, especially how they may relate to different features of a horoscope. Fortunately Dreyer gives sources for these important ideas.

I was struck by Dreyer’s depiction of the role of the astrologer in traditional Indian astrology. As with modern western astrology, timing for life events is important, as are specific ways to work with problems in life that are called “remedies.” Yet the purpose of all this is for us to be less distracted by our personal issues “and more dedicated to acts that are driven by faith and compassion” (p. 27). In the context of this astrological tradition, human freedom consists of working directly with your life by applying remedies for difficulties, and to learn how to live a happier and more virtuous life.

Benjamin Dykes’ introduction to *Medieval Astrology* follows. Like Hand and Dreyer, Dykes also demonstrates a scholar’s parsimony; he presents a broad outline of the development of medieval astrology from what we call the Middle East to medieval Europe. I would have liked more information about the factors that contributed to the transmission of astrology to Europe. This article’s bibliography indicates that Dykes has translated many works that were part of this transmission; his work will surely contribute to our understanding over time.

Dykes lists important contributions of the medieval era that include a fully-formed horary, mundane, and medical astrology, several quadrant house systems and the development of the almuten or combined planetary lord of a position or several positions. He attempts to uncover the origins of the point system for essential dignities that is found in much astrological software. It might be useful for today’s traditional astrologers to assume this doctrine less and scrutinize it more.

Dykes raises some conceptual issues that have been and are important in how astrologers understand their work. He gives an account of different philosophical schools and their ideas, beginning with the Ptolemaic/Aristotelian depiction of stellar and planetary causation. I feel this is a rather complex matter. Until the time of Kepler and Newton it was assumed that the heavens obeyed a different (and more perfect) set of principles than our elemental life down here. Throughout late antiquity and the medieval era, efficient causation was blended in different ways with the more Platonic metaphysical and hierarchical view of the universe. Issues of astrological

“causation” are very much alive for astrologers today and modern astrology contains many Neoplatonic and Aristotelian strands.

This brings me to Dykes’ assertion that Christianity’s primary influence was its doctrine of “an indeterminate free will” (p. 37). It seems that he is right. However, a major difficulty is that it was not clear in medieval or in modern times what we is meant by “freedom” and by “free will” and its relationship with influences of stars and planets.

The theoretical medieval approach, best known from Thomas Aquinas, was to acknowledge that the stars and planets cause physical effects on earth, including our bodies and our lower natures, but not our “higher” intellectual soul that is inherently free. This presupposes the ancient concept of personal freedom.

In the ancient world freedom was defined as our capacity to adopt attitudes and activity based on intellect and right perspective, to control our bodily impulses and emotions. This may also include our ability to cooperate with God’s will or the divine order of the universe or our “cosmic blueprint” as shown by our astrological chart. This kind of freedom can be enhanced through developing positive habits of activity and mind. When we choose differently the result is that we are unhappy and unfulfilled.

The Judeo-Christian concept of “free will” is different: for it is our ability to decide and be responsible for our moral decisions, to freely choose good or evil, happiness or misery. This is an inherent quality of human beings who are not mentally incapacitated. This kind of “indeterminate free will” was emphasized later in the medieval tradition and has long legs in the history of modern philosophy and literature, ranging from Kantian rationalism to Kierkegaard’s psychologized theology to postwar existentialism, but is generally outside the realm of astrological delineation, psychological or otherwise. This reflects in modern astrology’s assertion that we can choose different ways to manifest our natures as shown by the astrological chart; to use modern theosophical language, the chart itself does not tell how “evolved” one is. That part is up to us.

J. Lee Lehman, whose article follows Dykes and is concerned with the later medieval tradition, notes that astrologers tended to give the concept of free will lip service while ignoring it in practice. This seems also true of most modern practicing astrologers, for whom this is a non-issue.

J. Lee Lehman's introduction to Late Traditional Astrology spans the early fourteenth century to the late seventeenth. Her article attends to medical astrology and its conceptual system, and discusses historical developments (e.g., the invention of the printing press, the establishment of universities to teach medicine, political upheavals in the 17th century) that impacted astrological practice.

Lehman notes intersections between astrology and culture and addresses some issues that others do not address. I am particularly intrigued by a circumstance that periodically afflicts astrology that I call "the seduction of respectability". By becoming allied with a more mainstream discipline, astrology temporarily attains a new popularity, one that lasts just as long as the discipline it has become allied with. Lehman's example is the medical practice of the late medieval era that gave once astrology great influence. Yet when modern medical theory began to replace that of the previous era astrology was left an orphan. Although many kings and princes had their own astrologers, in the 17th century astrology was allied with political reform movements. When those reform movements ended, astrology was orphaned again.

May we also see this within today's astrology? Everybody knows that the psychological work of C.G. Jung has been enormously influential to some modern astrology, yet Jungian studies and psychotherapy itself have declined over the last twenty years. One may say the same for the "New Age" movement that astrology has been allied with these days. In the future astrology may find itself in alliance with something completely different and attain new respectability – for some time.

Lehman, a veteran of American astrology's culture wars of the past few decades, gives us a rousing defense of using traditional astrology in modern times. To think that our concerns as humans have outgrown of the same interests from the past – to think we have "evolved in ways that make old forms of knowledge obsolete is merely a blind form of egotism" (p. 47). She concludes by waving the flag of traditional astrology, asserting that it "illuminates how people have succeeded, time and again, in finding creative solutions to their problems" (p. 47)." And all this was without the outer planets.

The journal follows with "Twentieth Century Astrology" by Keiron Le Grice, although the original talk from the NCGR conference was given by Richard Tarnas. From time to time every traditional astrologer has had to counter charges that traditional astrology is inherently

fatalistic, closed-minded, and basically un-evolved. In the first paragraph Le Grice writes, “Previously astrology’s language was somewhat antiquated, fatalistic and moralistic in tone, it gave the sense of destiny that was set in stone, with personality descriptions more befitting the Victorian era” (p. 49). Bravely I continued. I discovered that Le Grice’s article describes not “Twentieth Century Astrology” but something more like “Astrology from Marin County to Palo Alto” and thereby misses much.

Le Grice mentions some important technical contributions from modern psychological astrology: Sabian symbols developed by Jones and Rudhyar, a reformulation of astrology’s symbols into phases of cycles, developed by Rudhyar. I would have included aspect configurations, chart patterns, and the “12-letter alphabet.” Le Grice is right about the important contributions by Stephen Arroyo, although it seems that Arroyo’s enduring legacy is his psychological application of the four elements to the astrological chart. Many astrologers do not know how recent all these developments have been.

Le Grice is somewhat misleading in his section on astrology’s technical advances. Because he focuses on psychological astrology and the theory of astrological archetypes, he does not acknowledge different agendas for some technical advances. He invokes Ebertin’s *Combinations of Stellar Influences* and *Working with Astrology* by Harvey and Harding, ignoring the fact that both works show astrology’s usefulness in interpreting outer circumstances and may even have features one might call “fatalistic”. I will say the same for astrology’s use of the modern planets Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto; most contemporary astrologers comfortably use these planets in a variety of settings that differ from an exclusively psychological approach. Le Grice does not mention important work in the 20th century by western siderealists, by proponents of heliocentric astrology, and on eclipses and declination. Indeed, the twentieth century has added much wealth to astrology.

Le Grice addresses one important concern about psychological astrology: does its emphasis on inner experience inadvertently perpetuate the same Cartesian dualism it prefers to move beyond? Le Grice rightly cites this as “intrapsychic reductionism”: if you use astrological symbolism solely to describe inner dynamics, this can isolate the person from the outer world and even his or her own body.

For a solution, Le Grice lauds Richard Tarnas’ *Cosmos and Psyche* (2006). Tarnas advocates using astrological archetypes to allow astrology’s symbolism to be multivalent and

flexible. (I prefer Dennis Elwell's *The Cosmic Loom* (1987) that has the added advantages of having stood a longer test of time and being far shorter.) Taking a point from Elwell, the universe need not speak the language of differences between inner experience and outer world, nor need our astrology. As in the areas of freedom and free will, most practicing astrologers tend to get this one right.

Kenneth Irving's following article "Science and Astrology" gives us something completely different: the future of astrology lies not in recovering the past but applying modern scientific criteria to validate astrology's methods, eventually utilizing only those that can be shown to work. If this results in throwing out the bathwater of houses and signs and idealized circles, astrology will then have a firmer foundation and be more acceptable to modern culture.

I found Irving's article challenging, since I, like many practicing astrologers, do not spend much energy on matters of scientific validation. However, reading his article is timely because of recent studies correlating between season of birth and personality in life. How might we understand this kind of research?

In his first paragraph Irving makes an interesting distinction between astrology's "mantic" and "metric" layers. The "mantic" layer is the unobservable realities of the tropical zodiac, houses, rulerships, and most things practicing astrologers rely upon. Statistical studies seem not to validate this layer. The "metric" or "measurable" layer is the celestial sphere and the planets as physical observable entities. The Gauquelin findings fall under a metric dimension. Recent research on season of birth and personality also confines itself to the metric layer. Irving's purpose is to find and promote proven connections between celestial conditions and human characteristics that occur without recourse to the interpretative dimension provided by the astrologer.

Irving persuasively argues that valid scientific research has great potential to contribute to a workable astrology in the future, as the Gauquelin studies and other studies have done already. Taking traditional methods "as revealed truth in the face of challenging evidence is like treading water in a shifting sea" (p. 62). To the criticism that this cannot result in a workable astrology, Irving feels that openness to new creative possibilities will bear fruit – if you "think outside the circles (i.e., the zodiac and houses)".

Possibly. Irving's discussion brings up a fundamental question about the nature of astrology – is it a “geocosmic science”, or interpretative art, or is it both? If astrology is a geocosmic science, will better software replace even the best of astrologers like the computer “Deep Blue” now defeats the world's greatest chess players? On the other hand, if astrology is primarily an interpretative art, what must “reality” be like in order to render the astrologer's interpretations accurate?

Next is Gary Christen's introduction to Uranian Astrology. After going through a history of Uranian astrology's development, he discusses its many technical contributions to astrology. Its various uses of symmetry have roots in many of astrology's traditions and appeal to the orderly arithmetical mind; unfortunately, Christen's description of sums and differences on p. 66 is comprehensible only to the initiate. Those familiar with Ebertin's *Combination of Cosmic Influences* will appreciate Christen's depictions of the six personal sensitive points, although he seems a bit touchy in his defense of the Transneptunian Planets or TNP's.

Although Dane Rudhyar famously conceived astrology to be an “algebra of life”, Uranian astrology really looks like algebra – and acts like physics. The modern mind has a good intuitive understanding of this kind of thinking: those of us who have taught predictive astrology know how easily people understand and use transits and solar arc directions but they wince at secondary progressed charts and solar returns, to say nothing of ancient planetary period systems. Christen is right to say that the Uranian approach approximates some features of modern thinking, although I disagree that our minds have somehow evolved into it. My attempts to learn more about the Uranian approach are thwarted, since Christen gives neither bibliography nor endnotes to his article.

Next is an article by Frank Clifford on data collection. For most of astrology's history we have not had reliable birth records. After great neglect in the past, only in the past few centuries have countries issued standardized birth certificates with birth times on them. Decades ago the Gauquelins collected many of these timed charts for his research.

The patron saint of the data collection movement was Lois Rodden: with great effort over time, she eventually prevailed on most of the astrological community to account for sources of

birth information in a standardized manner. Her own collections of charts helped bring about Astrodatabank and other important sources of natal information for astrologers.

Consequently our modern era better accounts for its charts, and this has made our astrological work more confident and fruitful. Clifford stresses the necessity of accurate natal charts for purposes of statistical research but I have a more immediate concern: without being confident in a chart's reliability the quality of my interpretative work diminishes.

The journal closes with an interesting article by Demetra George on asteroids and mythology. At first glance these two issues seem unconnected but both raise important questions about astrology in the modern era.

1. How do we admit newly discovered heavenly bodies into astrology? Beginning in 1781 we discovered Uranus, then some asteroids, then Neptune and Pluto, finally hundreds of bodies in the asteroid belt, Chiron and other "centaurs," and other bodies outside Pluto's orbit large enough to cause tiny Pluto to be decertified as a planet by them. Daily we are finding other planets that orbit nearby stars. How does contemporary astrology deal with this new mass of astronomical information? If there is a limit to inclusion, what is it?
2. The visible planets were once named for Mesopotamian deities and later those names were translated into those of Roman deities. Before that, Greeks and other cultures named constellations from their own mythologies. Beginning with the discovery of outer planets and then asteroids, astrologers connected their names with motifs in ancient myth to help derive astrological significance for them. Are there criteria for appropriate or inappropriate connections to mythical motif? Do we confine ourselves to the myths of some cultures and not others? And, ultimately, what's in an object's name that gives it a mythic dimension?

One difficulty I had with George's presentation is that she never defines exactly what she means by "myth". The word itself means "story", yet her historical account seems to merge stories of ancient deities (and others) for whom there is a literary account and the abstract divine Beings we see in ancient Platonism and medieval Christianity. One may also argue that mythical

motifs may show up in literature but not in a culture's religious practices – should this make a difference? Her lack of specificity about myth made her essay confusing to me.

If, as George says, the discovery of a new heavenly body stirs a new center of mass consciousness, then its knowledge can be awakened more fully through an investigation of the myth associated with the name of the new body discovered (p. 84). This presupposes, for example, that the discoveries of Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto corresponded with major changes of planetary consciousness. Many astrologers take this as a matter of faith but I am no longer so sure. As a group we tend to cherry-pick our history.

In our Jungian age we interpret ancient myths in the light of modern concerns but usually not from the perspective of the cultures that gave rise to them, although that kind of scholarship is increasingly available to us. Is this a problem or not? Are we being carelessly anachronistic or are we uncovering universal motifs of our common humanity?

Although she clearly has her mind made up and I have not, Demetra George' essay brings up some important issues about heavenly bodies and myth and this helps make her article a very interesting read.

In conclusion, these essays from the *NCGR Research Journal 2010* have provoked a number of responses in this reviewer as they will to whoever reads this journal. Unlike the standard of our Internet age where people tend only to read what they think they will agree with, I recommend that you read *all* its articles. Some will inspire, others will irritate and one or two may even infuriate. There are some fundamental disagreements among some very smart and influential astrologers and though they opened up some areas of fundamental disagreement, I also found myself provoked by these ten articles and I have learned a lot from them. If they raise important questions for you, as they have with me, this is a very good thing.

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