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Astrology

Robert Boucheron · Wednesday, September 21st, 2016

Astrology nearly died in the seventeenth century, thanks to scientific discoveries by Galileo, Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton. They devised a model of the universe which removed the earth from the center. Constellations do not exist in space. The sun, moon and planets only appear to cross the sky. Stars exert no influence other than gravity and radiation.

Yet astrology revived in the twentieth century. Today, you can read your horoscope online, a mashup of ancient belief and modern wizardry. If astrology is nonsense, why does it persist? Reasons are plentiful and dark, but first, what is astrology?

On my desk is a large paperback titled *The Only Astrology Book You'll Ever Need*, by Joanna Martine Woolfolk. A popular book, it was first published in 1982 and updated three times to 2012. An encyclopedia of all things astrological, weighing in at two pounds and 461 pages, it includes sun signs, moon signs, planetary influences, how to cast your own horoscope, a lexicon, astrological tables for the years 1900-2100, and a bibliography. Illustrations are copious—diagrams, antique woodcuts, and celebrity photos.

Woolfolk wrote horoscopes and columns for the magazines *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and others, and she appeared on television and radio. Sun signs, she explains, are what people mean when they ask “What sign are you?” Six thousand years ago, these signs were constellations that marked sectors of the night sky. The alignment has shifted with the precession of the equinoxes. In the chapter “Astrology in History and Legend,” Woolfolk explains this shift, the “Great Year” of 25,800 years, and what the “Age of Aquarius” really means.

In this guise, astrology is ancient astronomy, a milestone in the history of science, a fossil on exhibit. Based on observations with the naked eye of the movement of celestial objects, it led to advances in mathematics, inventions in notation, and attempts to relate natural phenomena. It fascinates in the way that dead languages and cave paintings do.

As a catch-all of ancient belief, astrology has a better claim to paganism than the wicca and neopagan cults invented in the twentieth century. It is the authentic record of a rich symbolism invented thousands of years ago and revised ever since, the treasury of ancient myth. Planets are equated with deities like Venus and Mars, with abstractions like love and war, with organs of the human body, and so on. The power of these symbols is undeniable—they show up in dreams, in the arts, and in figures of speech.

The skeptic Michael Shermer notes that science and its way of thinking are harder than using the evidence of our senses and intuition. By perpetuating the geocentric model of the universe, astrology feels more natural than the scientific model. It shrinks the universe, and distant objects in space move close enough to touch.

Astrology simplifies life in another way: it sorts the billions of our fellow human beings, with their complex and varied makeup, into just twelve types. This is a striking feature in the way people talk

about each other using a kind of astrological shorthand. Rather than observe, ask questions, and weigh the facts, they jump to conclusions. Is this behavior self-defeating, or is it a first approximation until they get to know a person better? Social interactions depend on cues, which can be hard to read. Knowing someone's birth date banishes doubt.

In this respect, astrology means horoscopes. And the most popular type of horoscope is a paragraph printed in a newspaper or magazine, arranged under the twelve signs of the zodiac. A sign is now defined as a 30-degree arc of sky through which the sun passes in a year. Here is a typical horoscope profile written by Woolfolk:

As an Aries person you gravitate toward the center of action. You are audacious and intent on getting your own way. Since your nature is to express power, you treat opposition as an annoyance to be brushed out of the way. Happily, you are also generous about helping others in a crisis. You are an openhearted friend who shares ideas and advice, and likes to pick up the check.

Woolfolk mentions the “four temperaments” as a source for astrological profiles. The sanguine, choleric, melancholy and phlegmatic temperaments were thought to result from excess bodily fluids or “humors.” Hence the medieval practice of bleeding, to reduce the sanguine humor. Another precedent is the *Characters*, by the ancient Greek writer Theophrastus. The “characters” or personality types derive from ancient stage comedy. The stock characters of the Italian *commedia dell’arte* grew out of this tradition, which lives on in the form of television sitcoms. In the audience, we love to see ourselves reflected on the stage or screen. Something similar happens when we read a horoscope.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is another popular way to sort personalities. Based on the theories of Carl Jung in his 1921 book *Psychological Types*, the MBTI uses a “psychometric questionnaire” of preferences to assign a person to a type. The preferences fall into four “dichotomies” that recall the four temperaments. Attempts to verify results in job performance, repeat testing, and statistical analysis have been inconclusive. Yet a believer cites his Myers-Briggs type, expressed as initials, much as another person cites his astrological sign. The same person may cite both, with no sense of contradiction.



Zodiac Signs

Woolfolk has more on Aries, on the other eleven signs, on ten-day spans within each sign, on cusps (the changeover dates between signs), and so on. In addition to the position of the sun at the time of a person's birth, the moon and planets also influence his or her destiny. She shows that astrology is capable of interpretation. She never mentions her peers, but as they interpret the welter of information, two astrologers can and do differ. How do you verify a horoscope?

In fact, astrology is not science at all. It is a method of divination, in the sense of predicting the future. Despite mathematical charts and celestial observation, it has more in common with religion. It is easy to debunk. St. Augustine (354-430 AD) did so by observing that twins behave differently though born at the same time. Likewise, of the thousands of people born every day, each has a distinct personality and destiny.

Shawn Carlson, in a 1985 article in *Nature* magazine, described a double blind test of a birth horoscope, in which twenty-eight astrologers made “predictions” whose accuracy was no better than chance. Psychologists cite the Forer Effect, named for Bertram R. Forer in 1948. Several students took a fake personality test, and Forer showed that they gave a high accuracy rating to

vague and general descriptions of themselves. In 1956, Paul Meehl called this trait the Barnum Effect, for the American showman and hoaxer P. T. Barnum, who is supposed to have said: “There’s a sucker born every minute.”

Fear is a basic emotion, along with love, rage and a few others. Consciously or not, fear motivates much of what we think and do. Millennial panic, doomsday cults, and predictions of natural catastrophe all spring from fear. The Mayan Calendar scare on December 21, 2012, based on a garbled reading of ancient Mayan texts, was an example. Fear may even be part of our biological inheritance, our instinct.

Astrology and other methods of predicting the future are a natural response to fear. No amount of result-based testing or analysis will make us abandon them. They fulfill a social function, too—the need to boss other people. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says:

All forms of divination are to be rejected, practices falsely supposed to unveil the future. Consulting horoscopes, astrology, palm reading, interpretation of omens and lots, the phenomena of clairvoyance, and recourse to mediums all conceal a desire for power over time, history, and in the last analysis, other human beings.

Along with fear, humans have an urge to tell stories. Call it the narrative imperative. On one level, we are born liars, eager to deceive each other in pursuit of our own ends. Small children tell stories spontaneously, before they know the difference between truth and fiction.

As adults, we continue to invent stories about our lives. We tell these stories to others and to ourselves as a way to explain what looks random. The story may include a claim of ethnic heritage, such as “I am half Irish,” or a statement like: “I grew up without all those gadgets.” Blighted ambition, stern parents, unrequited love, leaving home, the death of a loved one—these are frequent story elements. By middle age, the narrative often turns to medical history—a heart attack, a diagnosis of diabetes, a bout with cancer.

Astrology and horoscopes provide a set of ready-made “facts” for such personal storytelling. Profiles provide reasons why we behave as we do. They teem with story suggestions, plot outlines that the reader can fill in. They possess the seductive power of good fiction. Written in the second person, they often flatter the reader, make her attractive, or give him an excusable flaw. There are no bores in horoscopes, no mousey types or pathetic weaklings. You are the hero of your own life. Woolfolk is adept at this sort of writing. She leads into a story, as in “you are generous about helping others in a crisis.” Ah, you think, like the time X fell and was hospitalized for a week and needed help with the rent. Before you know it, you have picked up the thread and begun weaving a plotline.

For all the pleasures of putting people in their place, predicting disaster, and talking about ourselves, there is a human need that goes deeper. In the search for what distinguishes homo sapiens from other species, the best answer is our ability to make and use symbols. Other animals have opposable thumbs, make tools, wage war, practice monogamy, feel sad, and so on, but man is the only animal that can perform this mental trick. As early as 1942, Suzanne K. Langer wrote in *Philosophy in a New Key*: “Not higher sensitivity, not longer memory or even quicker association sets man so far above other animals . . . it is the power of using symbols—the power of speech—that makes him lord of the earth.”

Inspired by the philosophers Ernst Cassirer and Alfred North Whitehead, who was her professor at Harvard, Langer develops an argument that all the arts proceed from this starting point. Language is the essential art. Boiled down to its essence, language is sound as symbol. A word is a symbol for a thing, and a thing may be an image, another kind of symbol. “Image-making is, then, the

mode of our untutored thinking, and stories are its earliest product.”

Langer goes farther. In the debate over the origin of religion, she locates it in this symbol-making habit. Two of her chapter titles are “Life-Symbols: the Roots of Sacrament” and “Life-Symbols: the Roots of Myth.” Drawing on studies of primitive culture, dream analysis, and ancient religious practice, she hypothesizes a step-by-step development of gods and ideas. Sacred things and rituals, she says, come first. Loaded with meaning and emotion, they are symbols that the conscious mind does not yet recognize. They give rise to stories, which is to say fantasy and myth. From these, more general ideas of deity develop.

Opposed to Langer’s argument on religion is a utilitarian theory expressed in Voltaire’s quip: “If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.” Summarizing recent work, Nicholas Wade writes in his 2006 book, *Before the Dawn: Recovering the Lost History of Our Ancestors*, that religion arose from the need for primitive social groups to stick together and to expel “freeloaders.” Wade notes the intensely social nature of *Homo sapiens*, and he compares observed social behavior in our nearest relatives—chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas, orangutans, and other primates. Freeloaders are individuals who lie and cheat, who take but do not give, endangering the survival of the group. When language was invented, it offered new opportunities to deceive. Religion, Wade says, was the antidote: “Those who committed themselves in public ritual to the sacred truth were armed against the lie by knowing that they could trust one another.”

Langer and Wade are both speculative, with few points that can be tested. Both assume that spirituality is learned, not inborn, an assumption that theologians dispute. The origin of belief systems is worth investigating, and writers from Émile Durkheim onward have done so. Most of us continue to believe despite their efforts.

When we share belief, as Wade says, we forge a bond of trust, and we join a tribe. We long to belong. It is in our nature. We admire loyalty, and we respect the long-time member. Atheists and anarchists are suspect precisely because they do not belong.

The tribe can be ethnic, religious, or political. Most of us belong to several: a church or mosque, a fraternal group like Rotary Club or the Knights of Columbus, a self-help group like cancer survivors or Alcoholics Anonymous, a helping-hand group like the Friends of the Library. And some belong to the tribe that believes in astrology.

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