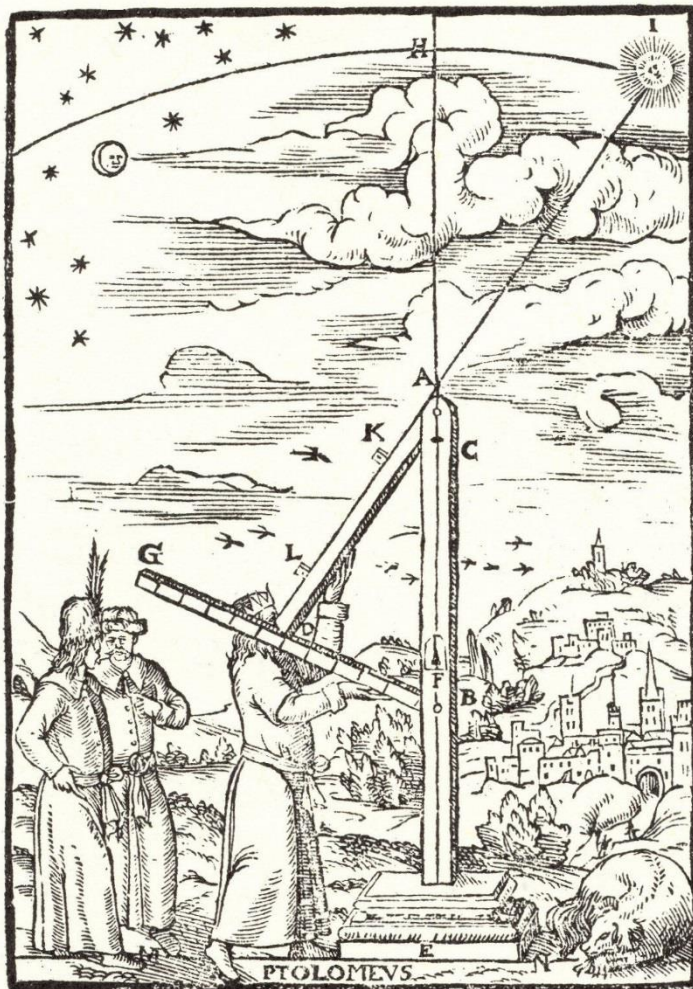


# All Roads Lead to Rome

## Evaluating the Objective and Subjective Knowledge Claims in Astrology



It is made of 3. peaces, beyng 4. square:  
As in the Picture  
where A. F. is the  
first peace or rule.  
A. D. The seconde.  
G. D. the third rule.  
E. The Foote of the  
Staffe.  
C. F. The Plumrule.  
C. B. The ioyntes, in  
which the second &  
third Rulers are mo-  
ued.  
K. L. The sighte ho-  
les.  
I. The Sonne.  
H. The Zenit, or ver-  
ticall pointe.  
M. N. The Noone-  
stead Lyne.

*Ptolemy's triquetrum or 'parallaxic instrument' (London: John Day, 1559)*

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## Evaluating the Objective and Subjective Knowledge Claims in Astrology

Ben Rovers

### Abstract

The history of astrology shows a rich palette of theories on how the starry sky is linked to events on planet earth. Underlying these theories we find two basic notions of knowing about reality and sharing knowledge: an objective and subjective one. Both approaches are described and evaluated in this essay. It is concluded that the practice of astrology has some inevitable and also desirable objective properties, but a mere objective approach to knowing about astrological reality is in more than one way inadequate. A subjective approach better describes and explains how astrological truths are obtained. However, within this perspective at least some notion of social objectivity is needed to be able to share knowledge. Astrology itself, specifically the theory of elements, informs us on the various epistemological possibilities. The essay ends with a plea for allowing all these epistemologies a place at the table.

*“The ancient sages who have spoken of the occult sciences and magic in their books wrote them as obscurely as they could, so that no one would be able to gain any benefit from them, except by means of wisdom and continual study and practice in them.” (from the Picatrix, book 3, ch. 4 – Greer & Warnock 2010-2011).*

### 1. What’s the problem?

Picture a group of astrologers discussing some issue, for example the symbolism of a planet. There is disagreement on whether this planet, in this case venus, has something to do with survival instinct. Most agree this quality is not the first thing they think of regarding venus. A few others stress that this should definitely be considered a (darker) part of venus’ symbolism. The discussion remains unresolved.

This hypothetical situation is descriptive of the practice of astrology.<sup>1</sup> Astrologers discussing their field are probably all familiar with it. It points to the knowledge claim of astrologers and what they consider truth. Basically the question is this: does astrology produce truths that can be generalized, shared and discussed or are astrologers producing private truths?

The German philologist and historian of astrology Franz Boll once wrote ‘Astrology wants to be religion and science at the same time; that marks its essence’ (Boll, Bezold & Gundel 1931: 72). Today this picture is still quite descriptive of the main lines of thought in the

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<sup>1</sup> Here astrology is defined as the study of the relative positions and movements of celestial bodies interpreted as having some relation with human affairs and the natural world. We will not distinguish between different types of astrology. See for example Allen (1966; p. 148) for a discussion on the difference between natural (scientific) and judicial (forecasting) astrology.

epistemological debate on astrology. On the one hand there are those who believe astrology is or can be a science that produces objective knowledge about reality. On the other hand we find those who stress the individual, subjective and esoterical aspects of astrological knowing.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout history critics have been stressing the fact that astrology can not produce objective knowledge of reality.<sup>3</sup> Also amongst astrologers themselves we find very different claims in this regard. The epistemological question is fundamental, because many other arguments in the discourse on astrology (on theory, on methodology and on the empirical status of the discipline) depend on the answer to this question.

This essay describes the epistemological approaches in astrology and discusses their strenghts and weaknesses. We arrange these approaches into the perspective of objective and subjective knowledge claims. It is argued that astrology should allow for more than one perspective.

In paragraph 2 a few basic ideas on ontology, epistemology, objectivism and subjectivism are discussed. The two basic epistemological viewpoints in astrology are reviewed in paragraph 3. Subsequently, in paragraph 4, the strenghts and weaknesses of these approaches are discussed. The essay concludes with a plea for 'epistemological richness'. (par. 5).

## 2. Ontology and epistemology, objectivism and subjectivism

In general ontology refers to the *study of being*, the ideas we have about reality (what 'is'), what its general features are and how they are organized and related to each other.<sup>4</sup> 'Does God exist?' is an example of an ontological question. Epistemology refers to the *study of knowing*. Here the discussion focuses on the ways valid knowledge can be gained or beliefs about reality can be justified.<sup>5</sup>

From these brief (and simplified) descriptions it is clear ontology and epistemology pose very different questions, basically 'what is?' versus 'how can we know about it?'. It is also clear

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<sup>2</sup> James Brockbanck presents an overview of different perspectives in his PhD-thesis (Brockbanck 2011).

<sup>3</sup> To give just a few examples: in Cicero's *De Divinatione* (Concerning divination, 44 BC) we find the academic Marcus (Cicero himself) attacking astrology -and other divinatory practices- in the most forceful way, considering it 'inconceivable madness' and 'utterly devoid of reason' (Cicero 1923, book 2: 473). In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Italian scholar Pico Della Mirandola wrote *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem* (Disputations against Divinatory Astrology, 1493), a 12-volume attack against astrology. He speaks of 'a cheat of mercenary liars', 'it corrupts a philosophy', 'begets or strengthens superstition'(Campion 2009:103). More recently Dean and associates have formulated many philosophical, theoretical and empirical objections to astrology (a collection of this work, mainly reprints from articles that appeared earlier in *Correlation*, can be found on <http://www.astrology-and-science.com/index.htm>). For an historic overview of critiques leveled against astrology, see Tester (1987) and Campion (2008, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> This is the most popular use of the term, the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy also mentions other dimensions of the concept, but these are not important to our discussion.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logic-ontology/#Ont>

<sup>5</sup> <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology/>

the two are related. Epistemology inevitably follows ontology. The question 'How can we know about God?' is meaningless if one's ontology does not take into account a God reality.

Basic notions about ontology and epistemology define and demarcate the way the scientific endeavor, or more generally the process of obtaining knowledge, takes place. If these basic notions are very different, it is impossible to have a meaningful exchange of ideas about basic concepts, theories and empirical evidence. Philosophers of science have labeled this the 'incommensurability' problem. Thomas Kuhn describes the basic notions as a (scientific) paradigm and explains that the proponents of different paradigms cannot discuss their truths, because they live, so to say, in different worlds (Kuhn 1962).<sup>6</sup>

The problem of incommensurability also characterizes many of the discussions between astrologers and scientists attacking astrology, as discussed in the previous paragraph: they disagree on fundamental ontological and epistemological assumptions. In this essay the focus will be on perspectives that allow for some sort of 'astrological reality'.

Within these perspectives we find two main lines of epistemological thought that we will label objective and subjective. Objectivity is a complex concept that is used to describe very different phenomena (Douglas 2004).<sup>7</sup> In this context we limit ourselves to two dimensions:

- 1) the way humans relate to the world around them and make claims about reality and
- 2) the way humans agree on reality.

Concerning the latter: this dimension of objectivity refers to the social process involved in obtaining knowledge. Basically the question is how objective knowledge is established in a community. Douglas sees three possibilities:<sup>8</sup>

- ❖ *Procedural objectivity*
  - The same outcome is produced regardless of who is performing it. Individual differences are excluded, anyone following the procedure produces the same result.
- ❖ *Concordant subjectivity*
  - If participants agree on an outcome it is labeled objective. If they don't agree, there is no objective result. (this is a descriptive quality of objectivity, there is no discussion needed)
- ❖ *Interactive objectivity*
  - If participants agree on an outcome it is labeled objective, but the result can only be reached after extensive discussion between participants who 'ferret out the sources of their disagreement'.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The basic notions on ontology and epistemology are generally considered conjectures, assumptions that cannot be empirically proven or disproven (Scotland 2012:9).

<sup>7</sup> Douglas distinguishes between three modes of objectivity: 1) objectivity in the way humans interact with the world around them (often called product objectivity; what makes a claim about reality objective?), 2) objectivity in individual thought processes of humans (what makes thoughts objective?) and 3) objectivity in social processes (how is objectivity established between participants in a discussion?). Within these three modes she distinguishes in total 8 forms of objectivity that cannot be reduced to each other.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas 2004: 461-465.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p 463.

The latter two modes of objectivity are generally referred to as intersubjectivity. The last one is considered the scientific ideal. It calls for extensive exchange of ideas, theories, data et cetera. Douglas points to an inherent weakness of this mode: how to decide on who may enter the discussion? If everybody within the group is in agreement, they may all share the same problematic bias. If the group is too diverse, they may not be able to reach consensus at all (p. 464). Here the incommensurability problem shows its face again.

The first dimension of objectivity refers to the way humans can know about reality. On a practical level Douglas differentiates between different strategies to make objective claims about reality,<sup>10</sup> but beneath the surface of this practical level we find fundamentally different approaches to ontological and epistemological issues.<sup>11</sup> This is not the place to delve into these debates, but it helps our understanding of astrological thinking to illustrate it with a quick sketch of two models of knowing that have also influenced astrological thinking: the (neo-)Platonic and the Aristotelian model.

Aristotle and Plato differ in their views on what constitutes knowledge and how it can be obtained: Aristotle stresses the importance of the natural, material world, systematic observation, logic and empirical evidence to test ideas about reality.<sup>12</sup> According to Plato the senses do not produce knowledge, because the natural world is not the real world, it is only a reflection of it.<sup>13</sup> Real knowledge comes from the world of forms (ideas). This world is eternal and unchanging, while the natural world is unstable and changing all the time. In the dialogue *Thaetetus* Socrates says at some point: 'But the original aim of our discussion was to find out rather what knowledge is than what it is not; at the same time we have made some progress, for we no longer seek for knowledge in perception at all, but in that other process, *however called* (BR italics added), in which the mind is alone and engaged with being'.<sup>14</sup>

Later Plotinus, in his *Enneads*, discriminates between discursive knowledge (imperfect) and pure knowledge (of the intelligence). The soul, comprised of a lower and higher part, has two faculties of learning about reality. The lower soul learns through sensations about all that is in the corporeal realm (producing opinions). The higher soul learns of the higher, more primal realities (producing gnosis).<sup>15</sup>

Aristotle's model has become the basis for (modern) science. This model is or tries to be objective in any way considered by Douglas (2004). That's why we will refer to this as the objective model of knowing. The (neo)Platonist model deviates from it in its claim that truth

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<sup>10</sup> Objectivity is achieved by experimentation/manipulation of realities or by convergence of outcomes using different methodologies.

<sup>11</sup> For example the realism versus anti-realism debate in philosophy, see <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/scientific-realism/>

<sup>12</sup> This summary description is based on the Plato and Aristotle entries of the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato/>, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle/>.

<sup>13</sup> This is vividly expressed in the allegory of the Cave (Plato 2008a).

<sup>14</sup> Plato (2008b).

<sup>15</sup> Plotinus (1991), *Enneads* 4 and 6, different tractates. Also: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/plotinus/#H5>

is not found in the (observed) object, but in the subject producing the object or creating the truth. That's why we refer to this as the subjective model of knowing.

### 3. Knowledge claims in astrology

Philosophical issues are not at the core of all (classical) astrological texts, the focus is on practical interpretation and sometimes on theory (how star and planetary positions are related to earthly phenomena). If philosophical issues are discussed they mostly refer to ontological issues –the nature of the cosmos- and less to epistemological ones.<sup>16</sup> The epistemology is often very implicit. Nevertheless it is possible to distinguish between approaches that focus on objective versus subjective modes of knowing about astrological truths.

#### *Objective approaches*

Claudius Ptolemy (AD. 90-168) was one of the first to systematize existing astrological knowledge in his *Tetrabiblos*.<sup>17</sup> Tester shows he did more than just summarize existing knowledge: he left stuff out and added (philosophical) insights of his own.<sup>18</sup> Ptolemy was (mainly) following an Aristotelian route to obtaining astrological knowledge. He takes astronomy as the basis for astrological study: the observation of the physical phenomena in the sky is considered the basis for astrological knowing.<sup>19</sup> His focus on observation of physical (general) phenomena and on proper reasoning, and his critique against more subjectivist approaches in astrology are clearly shown in book III of *Tetrabiblos*, where he states:

*"... as for the nonsense on which many waste their labour and of which not even a plausible account can be given, this we shall dismiss in favour of the primary natural cause. What, however, admits of prediction we shall investigate, not by means of Lots and numbers of which no reasonable explanation can be given, but merely through the science of the aspects of the stars to the places with which they have familiarity, in general terms, however, which are applicable to absolutely all cases, that we may avoid the repetition involved in the discussion of particular cases. (Tetrabiblos, book III:3).*

Ptolemy mixed stoic views on the one cosmos (with natural sympathies connecting the different worlds), with a rationalized idea of divination, in which the physical planets are considered active causal agents bringing about effects on earth.<sup>20</sup> One can learn about this reality by combining the Aristotelian notions of sound thinking and observation of the skies,

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<sup>16</sup> Jim Tester's introduction to Western astrology illustrates this. According to him Ptolemaeus is one of the few who explains what he is doing (Tester 1987:67).

<sup>17</sup> Ptolemaeus (1940).

<sup>18</sup> Tester (1987:60-70).

<sup>19</sup> Ptolemaeus (1940, book I, ch. 1).

<sup>20</sup> Tester (1987: 68,69).

thus arriving at general truths. According to Tester this philosophy was in line with the materialistic Stoic viewpoints in Ptolemy's time.<sup>21</sup>

This line of thought is confirmed or maybe reinforced in the age of enlightenment, when philosophers like Descartes, Kant and Newton were stressing the importance of individual values, reason and democracy. Tester describes how those still involved in astrology tried to (re-)objectify astrology in this period. For example the Italian astrologer Campanella, who stressed the importance of an astrology based on physical principles: 'The stars work in lower things by heat, light, motion and aspect'. He calls this the scientific approach, which is to be separated from the superstitious.<sup>22</sup>

Even one of the 'flagships' of enlightenment, Francis Bacon, did not reject astrology altogether. But in his view it had to be purified from all that is 'not based on reason or physical speculations'.<sup>23</sup> One arrives at 'sane' astrology by 'conducting experiments in the future, by checking on past experience, by sifting traditions and by the use of physical reasons'.<sup>24</sup>

Tester mentions John Dee and other prominent scientists of this age who were also still practising astrologers, many of them trying to objectify and improve astrology.<sup>25</sup> They (re)confirmed Ptolemy's approach. As they were also influenced by the new insights in physics and astronomy (Copernican cosmology), it is likely that their world views became even more materialistic than that of Ptolemy.

The objective approach to astrology is still very much alive. Two important proponents in the twentieth century are French statistician Michel Gauquelin and British astrologer John Addey. Both were interested in finding and demonstrating lawlike regularities in astrology. Gauquelin tried to prove astrology by finding empirical correlates between planetary positions and human behaviour. Addey followed a more theoretical route, with his theory of Harmonics (Addey 1977).

Gauquelin was trying to establish an empirical correlation between success in society and planets rising or culminating in the birth chart. His most influential research concerned the position of Mars in the birth charts of athletes. He found that they had Mars more often than expected rising over the horizon or culminating (Gauquelin 1994:89-103). Campion describes how this result was later verified by other researchers and how difficult it was for the scientific community (and probably still is) to accept this result (Campion 2009: p. 271-275).

With his theory of harmonics Addey tried to reconcile a mystical and scientific approach to astrology, stating as his fundamental law: "All astrological effects can be understood in terms of the harmonics of cosmic periods" (Addey 1996:3). Although his theory is rooted in Platonic thinking, Addey is ultimately interested in finding patterns in natural cycles using

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.: 52. Tester explains that this was not plain materialism, but it follows from the cosmological idea of oneness, which makes it possible to focus on the material reality to know the other (spirit) realities.

<sup>22</sup> Tester (1987: 213)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid: 220.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.:222.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.:227-229.

rational and empirical means. He is very critical of astrology as a discipline, because in his view, it is too disinclined to a scientific approach.

Gauquelin's and Addey's work can be considered scientific in the modern sense of the word: truth can be found in empirical regularities of physical phenomena. In this endeavour Gauquelin basically limited himself to finding empirical correlates, Addey made use of a cosmology based on Platonic notions of time.

### *Subjective approaches*

The subjective knowledge claim emanates from the idea of astrology as a magical or divinatory practice of some sort, whereby divination is roughly defined as an intuitive or inspired kind of knowledge. Cicero distinguishes between natural and artificial divination, the first being 'dependent on nature, the second on art'.<sup>26</sup> Divine excitement and inspiration are considered natural powers that allow (some) people to make prophetic announcements of the future. The forewarnings of dreams and prophecies based on frenzy are examples of this. In natural divination there is a divine power outside the human soul that intervenes and speaks directly through the person.

Cicero places astrology in the category of artificial divination, because there is conjecture involved, deduction from previously observed and recorded events and the interpretation of signs, in the case of astrology: the positions and movements of heavenly bodies.<sup>27</sup> He makes a further distinction between artificial divination based on 'records and usage' and artificial divination 'on the spur of the moment'.<sup>28</sup> In artificial divination observation and reason become part of the truth claim. According to Cicero the artificial divinatory practice might eventually even do without the divine (and note that this interpretation of divination is tending towards objectivism):

'But in every field of inquiry great length of time employed in continued observation begets an extraordinary fund of knowledge, which may be acquired even without the intervention or inspiration of the gods, since repeated observation makes it clear what effect follows any given cause, and what sign precedes any given event.'(Cicero 1923: book I: 242-243).

Tedlock labels these two forms of divination intuitive and inductive. She adds a third, intermediate form: interpretative divination, in which inductive procedure is combined with 'the special intuitive gift that sets the diviner apart' (Tedlock 2001:191).<sup>29</sup>

Note that this definition illuminates again this special feature of the subjective knowledge claim: In the objectivist approach subject and object (the astrologer and his knowledge claim) are radically separated, here the two are considered part of the same reality.

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<sup>26</sup> Cicero (1923, book I:236).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.: 304.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Interpretative divination comes close to Cicero's artificial divination on the spur of the moment, which seems also positioned between direct inspiration and following rules and routine.



According to this line of thought the knowledge that comes out of astrology is considered a consequence of some form of aligning of the astrologer with the cosmos. Based on hermetic, stoic or (neo-)Platonic notions of the undivided cosmos and the correspondence of the human soul with all other parts, astrologers are able to tune into other levels of reality through the symbols of the heaven.<sup>30</sup> The notion of analogy, as opposed to causation, is therefore at the core of this approach.

Different notions exist of the human faculty making this connection. In the quote above Tedlock speaks of 'a special intuitive gift' the astrologer employs. It is not clear whether this notion presupposes psychic abilities, but that could be an option. In the renaissance the magi astrologers were considered wise men, 'masters and possessors of nature'.<sup>31</sup> This idea presupposes the notion of increased consciousness or gnosis. Cornelius considers imagination to be the key faculty, as it is the perception mode of the soul. He refers to the work of Henry Corbin to illustrate that the imaginal (as opposed to the imaginary) has its own epistemological status, which suits astrology very well.<sup>32</sup>

In the more subjective approaches of astrology the epistemological question (how do we know about reality?) seems less problematized than in the objective approach to astrology. It is often considered some kind of mystery, something that is outside the realm of knowing. Cornelius even points to the fact that many astrological theories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though 'at a far remove from the tunnel vision of contemporary scientific astrology', still use an objective approach to astrological data and knowledge. He illustrates this with the 'subtle' difference between the notions of analogy (intrinsically subjective) and empirical correlation (intrinsically objective) which are sometimes used in the same approach.<sup>33</sup>

This mixture of subjective and objective knowledge claims seems prominent throughout the history of astrology. Take for example Jung's concept of synchronicity, which is very popular in contemporary astrology. On the one hand this concept refers to the subjective notion of meaningful coincidence, which can only be established in the eye of the beholder. On the other hand it refers to an objective acausal connecting principle that can be found by looking for patterns in astrological data (Jung 1973).

There are few astrologers taking a completely subjective approach to astrology. Cornelius is one of them. He rejects the objectivity claim, arguing that astrology does not have laws that produce empirical regularities. Even if these are found in empirical research, as with Gauquelin's Mars and career effects, they are useless in individual chart interpretation, because the statistical truth cannot be translated to the individual case. A clear illustration of his anti-objectivism is found in his claim that time as an objective quality is not relevant to astrology. He underpins this with the example of horary astrology, where time is disconnected from the event to be interpreted, and with the example of a meaningful chart reading based on an incorrectly calculated map. These examples show that so called

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<sup>30</sup> See Voss (2000: 34-35).

<sup>31</sup> Tester (1987: 215).

<sup>32</sup> Cornelius (2013:6).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 2-4.

objective properties of nature, like time, may play a role in astrology, but they are void without an interpreter giving meaning to them (Cornelius, 1994, 1998).

#### 4. The strengths and weaknesses discussed

##### *The impossible objective knowledge claim*

One can easily understand the inclination to look for objectivity in astrology. It all starts from an objective reality: the positions and movements of the heavenly bodies. That this reality is mainly interpreted in a symbolical way, doesn't change this fact. Without the starry sky there is no astrology. This objective quality also sets astrology apart from other modes of divination like tarot reading, throwing of bones, stones, et cetera. The symbolism of the latter methods has always this instantaneous quality ('on the spur of the moment'). In astrology the planetary positions thousand years from now are already known and fixed.

However, there are some major problems approaching astrology in an objective way. One problem is that astrology heavily depends on symbolical realities as well. Very often these both realities are mixed in chart reading. For example, western astrologers will use a symbolical (tropical) zodiac but interpret the objective angles between the planets in the sky. Another example is the combined use of objective and subjective (symbolical) progressed realities: transits are based on objective movements of the planets in the sky, other progressions techniques are based on symbolical keys. So the astrological reality is objective in some ways and symbolical in many other ways, often at the same time.

Another problem concerns the interpretation of astrological realities. For example, what does it mean when moon is in the sign of gemini? Again we see this combination of objectivity and subjectivity in the practice of astrology. There is at least some agreement on basic meanings in astrology, which can be considered an objective quality. On the other hand astrologers disagree on many issues and there is no 'objective procedure' to arrive at consensus. So the agreement we perceive between astrologers may as well be an accidental side effect of the pooling of private truths, instead of a negotiated objective truth following principles of induction and reasoning, as Cicero puts it. Agreement in astrology does not necessarily constitute what Douglas (2004) calls interactive objectivity.

A third problem for the objective approach of astrology is that the discipline has not been able to produce a proper set of predictions about reality that passes empirical testing.<sup>34</sup> If astrology is referring to an objective reality in which phenomena behave according to laws, these laws have not been discovered yet.<sup>35</sup> For a discipline that has been around for so long, this is quite a meager result. Especially if one takes into consideration the fact that the quality and precision of astrological data have improved greatly over the last few hundred years.

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<sup>34</sup> See for example Dean & Mather (1977, 1995) and Dean et al. (1996).

<sup>35</sup> Despite the large number of available theories. See Dean et al. (1996) and Brockbank (2011).

Despite these problems one can understand why the notion of objectivity is still around. It provides us with tools to decide on truth claims. A fundamental criticism against astrology, from outsiders and insiders together, is the lack of standards or criteria guiding the progress of knowledge. Anything goes, so it seems.<sup>36</sup> This situation also effects learning astrology: how is one to decide on all the different approaches and techniques around? Without the notion of objectivity the crucial question becomes: how to build an astrological discipline at all?

### *The logical subjective knowledge claim*

It is a possibility to defend the subjective knowledge claim in astrology by rejecting the objective claim and using the arguments from the previous paragraph. Scientists as well as some astrologers seem to walk down this path, the basic argument being that if astrology cannot be objective it must therefore be subjective.<sup>37</sup> However, this constitutes a rather powerless reverse epistemology (if we cannot know by way of A, it must be by way of B).

A much stronger argument is that subjective or private truth does exist as a separate (and undisputed!) ontological and empirical reality. The answer to the question 'what is the best flavor of ice cream?' is an example of it. This answer refers to the subject *in relation to* the object. This is different from the objective knowledge claim, where truth relates to the isolated object and the subject is out of the equation.

Subjective truth is epistemologically different from objective truth, but it is not possible to value one over the other. For an individual a private truth (of whatever nature or origin) can be more profound than any objective (socially negotiated) truth.

The notion of subjective or private truth will ring bells with astrologers and is implicitly or explicitly part of many astrological theories, whether they treat astrology as a practice of natural, daimonic or divine magic. The origin of the knowledge is of less importance here, this is a matter of (astrological) theory, not of epistemology.

How can be determined whether the subjective truth has any value outside the person of the astrologer?<sup>38</sup> Main stream science will answer that it has no objective value outside the person of the astrologer. This of course, is true: within the subjective approach there can be no knowledge of an object outside the subject. That's why the discussion for those who seek objective knowledge ends here.

However, we can still ask ourselves whether a subjective, private truth can be transferred from one person to another, for example from an astrologer to a client or from one

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<sup>36</sup> Kelly (2005), Phillipson (2000).

<sup>37</sup> Most of the scientific critique against astrology is of this nature (Dean 1991-1992, Dean & Mather 1995, Dean et al. 1996, Kelly 2005).

<sup>38</sup> One can also ask about the integrity or objectivity of the truth process within the astrologer. How can we know he is not 'fooling' himself? Douglas (2004) refers to this as 'sound thinking'. I will not go into this question and focus on the social establishment of truth instead.

astrologer to another? The answer to this question, as many astrologers and their clients will be able to confirm, is that this is certainly possible.

So, one of the major criticisms against the subjective knowledge approach is that there is no way of objectively establishing or testing the truth claim. Although this is the case, it can be shown that subjective truth can be transferred between persons. At least in theory and very likely also empirically. We have to find out when (and under which conditions) this transfer takes place, and how we can know that it actually happens. Can astrologer and client both fool themselves in this process, as the objectivist would argue? Or are these concepts not valid in this perspective? Whatever the answers to these questions, it is already clear that the subjective approach cannot produce empirical regularities. Subjective truths may not always be present in the astrologer and they may not always be transferred to the client. Cornelius' notion of the speculative versus the realized chart interpretation clarifies this very distinction (Cornelius 1994: 292-293).

Another criticism against the subjective approach relates to the disregard of objective realities. This mirrors the criticism leveled against the objective approach. In this case the relationship between objective phenomena and subjective and symbolical truths is problematized: if the cosmos works according to analogies, why are astrologers not able to produce empirical regularities from planetary positions and movement? (As we have seen this criticism has only relevance within an objectivist approach of reality).

## **5. Conclusion: plea for a rich epistemology**

In this essay the knowledge claims in astrology were investigated, distinguishing between objective and subjective approaches. We focused on two notions of objectivity and subjectivity: the way the astrologer relates to reality and the way astrologers socially agree on truth.

Objective truth is often related to some kind of aggregated reality, in which empirical patterns and regularities are established on the basis of individual data. Subjective truth is often related to the one off experience, for example the chart reading for an individual person. According to 'subjectivist' Cornelius the aggregated reality has no meaning for the individual chart reading,<sup>39</sup> the 'objectivist' would turn this argument around and argue that if individual chart readings do not add up to a patterned reality of any kind, there is probably no reality at all.

Objectivity is an unavoidable part of astrology as long as astrologers use physical, objective information about planets to draw up their charts and as long as they want to discuss their methods and outcomes. But objectivity alone does not bring astrological knowledge. There are too many problems with this approach in astrology. A subjective approach is asked for. This approach describes and explains astrological reality far better. However, the consequence of this choice is that general statements about truth are no longer possible and other guidelines are needed to establish truth. According to Cornelius the process of

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<sup>39</sup> Cornelius (1994: ch. 10).

establishing truth becomes intrinsically personal and subjective as well: 'by their fruits you shall know them'.<sup>40</sup>

The epistemological discussion in astrology seems quite dichotomized: is astrological knowledge obtained through observation and empirical regularities or is it based on personal knowledge (of whatever origin and nature)? This reveals a tendency to decide on a single framework with which astrology can be approached. In my opinion this will never be possible. The objectivists face severe problems in their approach to astrology and can't do without a subjectivist perspective. The subjectivists on the other side cannot do without at least some notion of social objectivity, because without it, there is no astrology.

Astrology itself may provide an answer to the epistemological problem. The building blocks of traditional cosmology and astrology, the elements, show that each of the elements is associated with his own way of knowing: fire with intuition, air with rational thinking, water with feeling/imagining and earth with sensory perception.<sup>41</sup> This suggests that instead of asking ourselves 'does this or that mode of knowing provide superior knowledge?', the better question to ask would be: how do these modes work together to create a meaningful reality?

From an astrological perspective the objective knowledge claim leans heavily on the air and earth elements. The subjectivist knowledge claim leans on the fire and water elements. The practice of astrology shows that all four modes are an indelible part of reality. A subjective approach would allow for different routes to be taken, because astrologers differ in the way they relate to these elements.

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<sup>40</sup> Cornelius (2013:5).

<sup>41</sup> I'm using Jung's words here (Jung 1974: 510-511, 531-532), but variations on this theme can be found throughout history (see for example Lehman 1996).

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