



THE KNOWLEDGE CLAIM OF ASTROLOGERS: A PLEA FOR THE SUBJECTIVE APPROACH

The ancient debate

On the weekend of 15/16 February 2020, the serious Dutch newspaper, NRC-Handelsblad, covered astrology. The author claiming, amongst other things, that astrology is extremely popular among young, educated women. The reactions to the article were easy to guess: how can it be that rational people believe such irrational, unscientific nonsense! A good question indeed, but what about the answer?

That astrology is not scientific is an all-time criticism. The reaction to this by astrologers is, in my opinion, twofold. One group of astrologers tries to fight this criticism by working as scientifically as possible. Another group doesn't care about the criticism, because they experience in themselves the value or truth of astrology. The first group could be called the objectivists, the second group the subjectivists. At the most fundamental level, they differ in their view of reality and how it can be known. Philosophers talk about questions of ontology and epistemology: what is the reality of astrology and how can we know it?

In this article, I will explore both approaches and argue that the objective approach to astrology is a problematic one. Many astrologers adopt this perspective, often without realising it. The subjectivists hold better cards when it comes to the knowledge claim of astrology. However, their 'weakness' is that they seem less inclined than objectivists to examine and problematise the foundations of their experience.

Objective versus subjective approaches

Objective approaches to astrology assume that there is a reality outside the knowing subject -in our case: the astrologer-, about which we can make truth statements. In the case of astrology, the object to be known concerns the cycles of planets and stars in the sky, their mutual relationships and their relation to events on earth. About this object, astrologers can make all kinds of statements that can be shared as truth with other astrologers. For example, the statement "in this horoscope, the planet Mars is two

degrees away from the Sun" is such a statement. Characteristic of this approach is that the test of truth lies in the object about which a statement is made.

Subjective approaches to astrology use a different premise, namely that the truth of an object can only be established in/through the subject. Suppose I make the statement, "blueberry ice cream is the best ice cream there is". This statement is true, at least for me. And who knows for a whole slew more people. However, there will be lots of people for whom this statement is not true, for instance all the people who don't like ice cream. The fundamental difference between this subjective truth and the aforementioned objective truth is that the truth here cannot be established outside the knowing subject.

Philosophical basis

Both approaches can be traced back to basic philosophical principles. The objective approach can be traced back to the Aristotelian model of knowledge: knowledge arises by making observations in the material world and discovering regularities in it. This has subsequently become the dominant model of knowledge, hence it is also called the scientific model. The subjective approach is based (among other things) on Plato's way of thinking. This approach holds that knowledge of material reality is subordinate to knowledge of spiritual reality. After all, this approach argues, material reality is characterised by impermanence: birth, growth, decay and death, while eternal truths can be found in spiritual reality. The cycle in which the aforementioned phenomena of impermanence occur is an example of such a spiritual, eternal truth.

Spiritual reality can only be known by humans, because only they possess (or have access to) consciousness with which it can be known. Thus, according to Plato and other thinkers within this tradition, on the spiritual plane there is no knowledge outside the knowing subject, in our case the astrologer.

Both approaches to astrology were already present in antiquity and have always co-existed. Claudius Ptolemy, the multi-scholar astronomer-astrologer who lived in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, is an example of someone who adhered to the objective approach. The focus of his work was on establishing empirical regularities in the movements of planets and stars and linking them as precisely as possible to consequences that could be observed on earth (i.e. a focus on prediction). He was averse to astrology that does not find a basis in the positions, movements and proportions of visible planets and stars. In his standard work *Tetrabiblos*, he literally speaks of 'nonsense' in this regard.[1]

However, at the time Ptolemy lived, Hermetic thought was also popular among astrologers. In this body of thought, the emphasis is not on phenomena in matter, but rather on the nature of spiritual reality. The idea that all material manifestations stem from one spiritual reality is a typical Hermetic idea. Consider, for instance, the Hermetic adage familiar to every astrologer: 'As the cosmos is above, so is the world below' (taken from the Emerald Table). The Hermetic approach can eminently be called a subjective one, as the focus here is on spiritual reality and how humans can come to know it. Indeed, in Hermetic thought, man is the only animate being who can learn about the spiritual world, through consciousness.[2]

Let us take a closer look at both approaches. In the elaboration below, I present them as ideal types, in order to outline the distinction between the two as sharply as possible.

What is the nature of astrological reality and how can it be known?

Both approaches are concerned with the relationship between the night sky and events on Earth, however, the way they look at this differs fundamentally.

In the objective approach, the emphasis is on studying the physical reality of the celestial bodies, their placement in the sky, their movements and the relationships between them. This reality is objective, because it is sensory perceptible, and therefore sharable. Through observation and reasoning (using reason), it is possible to discover patterns and establish how the celestial bodies influence events on earth. Causality is usually assumed between phenomena in the cosmos and events on earth.

Astrological truth is established by predicting events on earth as accurately as possible based on astronomical constellations. As Bernadette Brady put it somewhere: 'astrologers are fundamentally forecasters, whether they like it or not'. In this approach, astrological research involves finding patterns and regularities in empirical data. For example, the astrologer collects horoscopes of people with medical conditions or people who are serial killers, and then looks for astrological constellations they share.

In the subjective approach, the focus is not on the physical reality of the night sky but on the spiritual reality of astrological symbolism. In this approach, we see more emphasis on working with myths, which also express a spiritual reality. Observation and reasoning are not the most appropriate ways to learn about the reality of symbols. However, humans possess two alternative forms of knowing that are often referred to in modern parlance as feeling and intuition. (As an aside, recognise in this foursome - observation, reasoning, feeling and intuitive knowing- the four elements earth, air, water and fire. In ancient times, the notion of intuition as we know it did not exist. Rather, it was then a 'direct knowing' caused by Gods whispering to man. Intuition is thus a spiritual form of knowing par excellence.)

English astrologer and philosopher Geoffrey Cornelius emphasises the role of imagination in knowing astrological symbolism.[3] It is not about fantasising, but imagination as a form of perception through which spiritual realities, such as astrological symbolism, can be known. Intuition and imagination have traditionally been regarded as forms of perception that give insight into spiritual realities. After the enlightenment, however, they fell into the background because the knowledge derived from them is tied to the person, i.e. subjective.

Since the emphasis within the subjective approach is on spiritual rather than physical reality, the central mechanism of astrology is not causality but analogy. An analogy indicates a uniform spiritual reality that simultaneously manifests itself in a variety of material forms. Truth cannot be objectively established in this approach, as it is tied to the astrologer who interprets the signs and 'sees' the analogy. In other words, establishing an astrological fact requires spiritual activity. Without this activity, astrology does not exist. Astrological research as mentioned above under the objective approach lacks this aspect.

Advantages and disadvantages of the objective approach

The objective approach is attractive for a number of reasons. Objectivity allows astrologers to reach consensus on how to arrive at reliable knowledge and what constitutes good astrology. It makes knowledge testable and shareable. Some practitioners like objectivity because it gives astrology a scientific cachet.

Against these advantages, the objective approach also has significant problems. For instance, astrology is bursting with symbolic, i.e. non-physical realities. Think, for instance, of the tropical zodiac with its neat thirty-degree parts, diverse house systems, symbolic directions, et cetera. There is no room for all these symbolic realities in an astrology practice that takes only physical, astronomical reality as its starting point.

A second limitation of this approach is that it is unable to arrive at objective, unambiguous criteria for the interpretation of astrological symbolism.[4] An objective approach does purport to do this. On the contrary, the reality of astrology practice is that there are a large number of traditions, old and new, all with their own rules and systems, with little or no communication between them. In any case, there is no consensus among astrologers on how to arrive at astrological knowledge, quite the contrary.

A third, important limitation of this approach is, that astrology as a discipline has failed to live up to its objective knowledge claim over the past two thousand years. If there is one constant in the history of astrology, it is this: that critics from Cicero in the 1st century to Geoffrey Dean in the 20th century have demonstrated time and again that astrology cannot produce empirical predictions that hold up in critical empirical testing. There is much more to say on this subject than is possible in the scope of this article, but anyone who takes a critical look at all available knowledge must conclude: the empirical status of astrology is not great, and that is an understatement.[5]

Pros and cons of the subjective approach

A major advantage of the subjective approach is that it seems to match the experience of astrologers better than the objective approach: there is often an inner knowing about the workings and truth of astrological symbolism.

Another advantage is that this approach also fits better with astrological practices that do not use astronomical facts, such as working with astrological symbol cards or dice. Indeed, interpreting astrological symbolism here is separate from concrete constellations in the sky. Geoffrey Cornelius made a similar point regarding the interpretation of horary, where the phenomenon of 'birth time' is detached from its objective, physical dimension. The phenomenon of meaningfully interpreting a 'wrong' horoscope (e.g. the birth time is not correct afterwards) also belongs to this list.

However, the subjective approach also has problems. The emphasis on subjective truths removes the possibility of external testing of the astrologer's knowledge claim. After all, it is his/her truth. This is no small problem. The project of enlightenment, in the 17th and 18th centuries, focused on replacing the church's exclusive claim to truth with a truth that can be discussed, debated and shared. From this perspective, the subjective knowledge claim of the astrologer can be seen as a step back in time: after all, we just have to trust his or her self-proclaimed authority (again).

A related problem is that astrologers have no common frame of reference to distinguish good from not so good astrology, to have an astrological discourse at all. Astrologers form random collections of people who hold the same ice cream for the tastiest, to quote the image used earlier. Exchange between lovers of different tastes is not possible, and even within groups that have (roughly) the same preference, exchange is problematic, because subjective knowledge cannot be disputed. It can be done, but it is -in this perspective- pointless. Everyone has his own truth.

Only a subjective approach offers a meaningful perspective for astrologers

There are many astrologers who advocate an objective, scientific practice of astrology, or practise it consciously or unconsciously, for instance when they prescribe guidelines for the interpretation ('one should only use the equal house system', 'for the interpretation of an aspect one uses a maximum orb of 10 degrees', et cetera) or when they consider their interpretation of astrological symbolism to be more correct than an alternative one. Standard interpretations of symbolism -in astrological cookbooks, for instance- that pursue empirical concreteness or computer interpretations of astrological symbolism can also be considered objective approaches to astrology.[6] Finally, astrologers who do correlational astrological research and try to find empirical regularities based on astrological symbolism can also be placed within this approach.

The appeal of objectivity is easy to understand. After all, it seems to be a necessary condition to arrive at something like an astrological discipline. It provides criteria for good and not so good astrology and for how to arrive at astrological knowledge. It makes exchange about astrology possible.

Nevertheless, I think this approach to astrology is of little use for the reasons mentioned above: the generous presence of symbolic realities in astrology, the lack, to date, of any consensus on how to apply astrological symbolism, and the continuing lack of a sound, empirical basis after two millennia.

In response, astrologers sometimes opt for a mix of objectivity and subjectivity. For instance, these astrologers may agree with the Hermetic paradigm of analogy ('so above, so below'), but additionally apply all kinds of objective criteria for astrology practice and/or they conduct astrological research in the objective tradition. Philosophically, this is a matter of mixing water and fire, because the object perspective is diametrically opposed to the subject perspective: the two are mutually exclusive on logical grounds. In other words, astrologers have to choose, there is no other option.

In my opinion, the subjective approach holds the better cards. Many astrologers feel this too, but as the historian of astrology, Jim Tester, once said: astrologers, despite the often fierce criticism of their profession, as a group do not seem very interested in thinking about the foundations of their profession.[7]

In the next section, using a concrete example, I show why, in my opinion, a subjective approach to astrology is more appropriate than an objective one.

The indeterminate relationship between astrological symbol and empirical phenomenon

When considering the relationship between astrological symbol and empirical phenomenon, we encounter the peculiarity that this relationship is characterised by indeterminacy. That is, it is not possible to arrive at the determination of specific empirical phenomena from an astrological symbol. Just as the reverse is not possible, to determine from a specific empirical phenomenon (as an outsider) what astrological symbolism is involved. As an example, the symbol Saturn is empirically indicated by a planet, time, death, father, lead, et cetera. The reverse is also true. For example, death -as an empirical

phenomenon- can indicate loss (neptune), the end (Saturn), impotence (Pluto) and, where appropriate, hope or joy (Jupiter/Venus).

The indeterminacy of this relationship is problematic for objective approaches to astrology. This is also why empirical research into astrology rarely produces results that can satisfy scientists. The underlying problem is that these astrologers -mostly implicitly- adopt a worldview that disregards the spiritual reality of astrological symbolism. Indeed, empirical research is limited to (regularities in) material reality. The question, however, is whether astrological symbolism refers fundamentally to the physical reality of planets and stars in the visible sky or to a spiritual reality hidden behind this 'physical façade'.

Cornelius illustrates this distinction when he points out the difference between an empirical correlation and an analogy. A correlation refers to an objectively established connection between empirical phenomena, preferably substantiated by statistics. An analogy refers to a spiritual process ('within' an astrologer) in which symbolic and empirical phenomena are meaningfully linked.[8] Consider the synchronicity concept of Jung, who discovered this concept after his empirical-statistical study of astrology had failed.[9] Many an astrologer thoughtlessly substitutes analogy for correlation in astrological research, thus substituting a spiritual reality for a physical one.

Within subjective approaches to astrology, the existence of a spiritual astrological reality is explicitly assumed. Within Hermetism, for example, it is argued that it correlates with an infinite number of potential manifestations in matter. Subjective approaches additionally make it clear that phenomena in matter derive their meaning only from the spiritual dimension of reality. In other words, subjective approaches provide us with a perspective, or at least the beginnings of a perspective, on the indeterminate relationship between astrological symbol and empirical phenomenon. Objective approaches fail a priori, because they lack any room for a spiritual reality hidden behind the empirical manifestations. As we have seen, the physical façade of astrological symbolism is not a necessary condition for practising astrology: after all, numerous astrologers work with astrological symbolism that has no physical counterpart in the form of planets and stars visible in the sky.

Different paths to the 'Participation mystique'

Crucial in the subjective approach is the astrologer, the 'knowing subject' who makes a meaningful connection between symbol and empirical reality. Omit the spiritual dimension and the astrologer's access to it and the theoretical as well as empirical foundation under astrology falls away.

The question that then arises is: how does this process work, how does the astrologer do it? After all, we cannot rely on empirical laws to understand the application of astrology. To date, Jung is one of the few who has 'theorised' about this. He uses a term by the French scientist, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, to describe this mystery of astrological interpretation. He speaks of a Participation mystique: a mystical connection between man and cosmos that lies deep in the unconscious. The symbols of astrology provide the astrologer with access to this unconscious (spiritual) world.[10]

The concrete way astrologers access this spiritual world can vary greatly. Classical element theory provides us with a handle to understand this. Some astrologers gain access mainly through perception (earth), others through feeling (water), thinking (air) or intuition (fire). It is obvious to assume that objective-oriented astrologers approach astrology more through the air and earth element. They are the

'scientists' among astrologers. The subjective-oriented astrologers will arrive at their knowledge of astrology more via the water and fire element. This fact explains why there are such different approaches to astrology. Note that these differences refer to epistemology (the way astrologers arrive at their knowledge of astrology) and not ontology (how we perceive astrological reality).

Final reflection: rediscovering a breeding ground for astrology

Surveying the above, I think astrologers should be able to agree on the ontological status of astrological reality. Namely that there is a spiritual reality, that astrological symbolism is part of it and that this symbolism is in a meaningful connection with phenomena in matter that we can perceive. Those who subscribe to this will (have to) renounce the objective knowledge claim in astrology, as it is at odds with these principles.

The fundamental criticism of the subjective approach is that verification of knowledge and exchange are problematic because each astrologer experiences his/her own reality and truth. Questions such as: is this astrological interpretation correct? And which of these two divergent interpretations is preferable? cannot be properly answered within this approach. It simply lacks a shared frame of reference. It also raises questions about how astrology is transmitted and taught. Clearly, in this view, knowledge transfer of astrology cannot be solely through the mind and sensory perception. How this is then done is yet another question awaiting a proper answer. It is these kinds of tricky questions that have led astrologers over the centuries to seek refuge in objective astrological knowledge.

In my view, alternative answers can be formulated to these kinds of questions, provided we (re)orientate ourselves to thought that fits astrology, that can adequately describe and explain astrological reality, such as Hermetism. Texts from this tradition show us, for instance, that there is a distinction to be made between "seeing"-i.e. knowing-with the eyes and "seeing" with the mind (or heart, the observer of the spiritual):

"The mind sees everything, the eyes see all bodily things. And yet the mind does not become an observer for the eyes, but the eyes become this for the mind." [11]

That seeing in the mind or knowing of the heart produces intrinsically subjective truths, but these truths are alive, i.e. it is knowledge that moves people. This could be called the highest potential of Hermes/Mercury: knowledge that changes us profoundly and expands our consciousness. Knowledge also that is received and recognised rather than learned. Because Hermetics also teaches us this: this spiritual knowledge is already present in us. It only needs to be dis-covered. Astrological knowledge, in my opinion, is of this nature. It opens itself to the longing soul, which recognises the truth of this knowledge. And this applies to the astrologer, to the client as well as to the outsider. In other words, even this subjective knowledge can produce a shared experience, so it is not "anything goes". There is a statement in the New Testament by Jesus that refers to this way of finding truth, freely translated:

'by the fruit, one recognises the tree' (Matthew 7: 15-20).

Before this, I wrote that astrologers should 'reorient' themselves to their foundations, because in my observation, much contemporary astrology practice has become disconnected from its philosophical-

religious breeding ground. Rationalism and empiricism cannot provide this breeding ground. The worldview underpinning it, ontology, is inadequate. For me, the natural breeding ground of astrology is Hermetism. The thinking that gave us the insight that everything below is equal to what is above. However, it has much more to offer the astrologer. This body of thought informs us about what astrology is, how it is taught, how it works and, in addition, it provides its practitioners with a moral compass. Indeed, astrological knowledge serves a purpose: to promote spiritual enlightenment or knowledge of God and creation through the increase of self-knowledge. Within Hermetism, (true) self-knowledge equals knowledge of God.

Endnotes

- [1] Ptolemy, C. (1940). *Tetrabiblos* (Book III:3). Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge MA/London UK: Harvard University Press.
- [2] See, e.g., Broek, R. van den & G. Quispel. (2016). *Hermetic writings*. Amsterdam: In the Pelican.
- [3] Cornelius G. (2013) *Astrology, Imagination and the Imaginal*. Canterbury, UK: Canterbury Christ Church University.
- [4] See, e.g., Kelly IW. (2005) *The Concepts of Modern Astrology; A Critique* (update from article in *Psychological Reports*, 2001: 81, 1035-1066). Available at: <http://www.astrology-and-science.com/Aconc2.htm/>.
- [5] The work of French statistician Michel Gauquelin is always cited as the exception to the rule. He showed statistical links between planetary positions and the life courses of people. Most famous is his 'Mars effect': in athletes' horoscopes, you find the planet Mars on the Ascendant (in the 12th house!) or the MC more often than chance. Incidentally, even this result is questioned by statisticians. See: Gauquelin M. (1994) *Cosmic Influences on Human Behavior; The planetary factors in personality*, Santa Fe, N.M.: Aurora.
- [6] It should be noted that standard interpretations, i.e. interpretations of the type 'if you see this astrological symbol, then it means that', can vary greatly in the extent to which they pursue empirical concreteness. The greater the empirical concreteness pursued, the more objective the approach.
- [7] Tester SJ. (1987) *A History of Western Astrology*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press.
- [8] Cornelius, G. (2013). *Ibid*.
- [9] Jung, C.G. (1960). *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle*. Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- [10] Jung, C.G. ([1921] 1971). *Psychological Types, Collected Works, Volume 6*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. More recently, US cultural anthropologist Barbara Tedlock has also made an attempt to map the process of divination (divination art). See: Tedlock, B. (2006). *Toward a Theory of Divinatory Practice. Anthropology of Consciousness*, vol. 17, no. 2, 62-77.
- [11] Retrieved from: Broek, R. van den & G. Quispel. (2016). *Ibid*.

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